

EVE Online

Chronicles

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Part One

Chronicles

Fedo

A Fedo is a fairly small (ca. 30-50 cm long, 20-40 cm high) animal originating in underground caves on the planet Palpis. The planet was settled by the Amarrians long ago, and the Fedo has spread with Amarr vessels throughout the galaxy cluster ever since.

The Fedo is an omnivorous, sponge-like creature. It has reddish skin and numerous small claw-like tentacles which it uses to move around and protect itself. A primitive being, the Fedo's method of eating and absorbing nutrition is slow and inefficient. This means that food stays for a long time in the Fedo's body, and will most often have rotted or turned foul before the animal passes it out of its system. The Fedos eject fumes from their body which, for the reasons explained above, have a most horrible odor. The Fedos possess a fantastic sense of smell and so use these fumes to communicate with each other; they are however both blind and deaf, having no eyes or ears. The mouth is located on the underside of the beast, and the Fedo feeds by positioning itself over the food and lowering itself down on it.

Fedos are an incredibly strong and resilient species. They can live in total vacuum for several hours before succumbing to the cold and lack of oxygen. Some Matari have used this fact to their advantage, employing Fedos on many of their ships for cleaning and garbage disposal. The Fedos are especially useful in that they can clean the ship on the outside as well as the inside; they can get to hard-to-reach areas on the ship and, most importantly, will exterminate many of the pesky bacteria commonly found on space ships. The Matari feed the Fedos with every scrap of waste produced on the ship, letting the beasts roam free around the vessel and even outside it. This saves money, but the downside is the foul stench produced by the Fedos, something which discourages most everybody from using them.

There is a distinct difference between male and female Fedos. The female is slightly larger and has redder skin. It has a point-like tail or sting, approx. 10 cm long. The female Fedo can emit highly toxic fumes from a small opening at the end of the tail, which can cause intense skin irritation and discomfort for a human. For this reason, only male Fedos are used as ship cleaners. Most ships employing Fedos have a special nursery room where female Fedos are kept to replenish the on-board Fedo stock. This is necessary as the Fedo's life cycle is only a few weeks long.

Mind Clash

Mind Clash is a very popular sport throughout known space. It is as enthusiastically played in the royal court on Amarr Prime as in the gambling halls of the Caldari. The Clash Masters – the best players from around the worlds – are superstars, awed and adored equally among Gallentean yuppies and Minmatar punks.

The game itself evolved from a simple computer game called Clash of Wits, where two participants played the roles of puppet masters, using various kinds of creatures and forces to attack each other until either one of them caved in. The game was fairly popular among teenagers and young adolescents, but not a phenomenon in any sense of the word.

The extensive advances made in neural- and cyber-technology through the years then paved the way for a new version of the game, where the players didn't control a computer-generated puppet master, but rather stepped into the role of puppet-master themselves. The illusions – fantastical creatures, monsters, phenomena – were still only bits and bytes in a computer, but due to the strength of the connection between the mind and the machine, this didn't make them any less dangerous to a puppet master made of flesh and blood. Even if participants couldn't be ripped to pieces in the literal sense, the potential psycho-trauma caused by the constant barrage on the brain could easily reduce a stout man to a whimpering wreck in mere moments.

Actually, the illusory creatures and phenomena are only there for the show – doing nothing by themselves, they simply portray in visual terms what actually is going on behind the scenes in the minds of the participants. The actions and state of the illusion give ample indication of the actual events of the struggle to the spectators. These illusions are, in modern arenas, often

projected as holograms above the participants. All the stars of the game have their own exclusive repertoire of personally trademarked illusions. This, coupled with flashy outfits and catchy nicknames, makes each of the major stars easily distinguishable to the fans. In addition to the illusions huge screens dot the arenas where duels are held, broadcasting images and information to the masses ogling the match. These consist mainly of things like facial close-ups of the sweating contestants, or detailed data-charts on the status of their mental and bodily state.

The new version of the game was called Mind Clash. Since its release over a century ago the game has grown into a full-fledged sport, with billions of fans and billions in revenue generated. The inevitable development has been that Mind Clash is now one of the biggest entertainment forms around – with all the stardom, hangers-on, aspiration dreams, gambling and showmanship that goes with it. For many, the Worlds Championship is the major event of each calendar year. During that massive event, the sixteen best players from all around the star cluster gather to slug it out. Although rumors of fixed matches and rigged results have somewhat tainted the image of the event (and the sport as a whole), it remains a huge attraction for more or less everybody, and Mind Clash betting is one of the favorite pastimes of billions of people.

The current Mind Clash Worlds Champion is Joelyn Donalokos, a Gallentean of Intaki ancestry. Donalokos, a 7-year veteran Clash Master, is the Worlds Champion of the last two contests and has for the last three years topped the Clash Masters' income list. Donalokos' specialty is his Blue Tiger illusion, something which has become one of the most widely-recognized symbols in the whole world.

Dam-Torsad

Dam-Torsad - the Imperial City of the Amarr Empire - marked me. It marked me even though I consciously tried to fight its corrupted presence. It is built on memories - nightmares, really - and you can't stop them from perverting your mind in the end. For fifty long years I've struggled to rid myself of those haunted memories, memories of a human society turned sour and bitter. I may have escaped the oppressive walls of the city, but the vivid memories will always remain. Memories of a city more like a monument than a thriving metropolis; of people saturated with its sluggish nature, their minds weighed down with traditions and customs so strong, so dominant, that it was like their ancestors of a thousand years ago were living their lives through them.

I couldn't fail to notice - almost immediately - the injustice entrenched in the society. The Holders tread on the Commoners, which in turn tread on the slaves. Talent means nothing; people are judged solely by their social position. The only merits nurtured are backstabbing and back-nagging. The twisted old Holders are deeply envious of zealous young upstarts and find sick pleasure in squashing them. And yet the Commoners look with awe up to the Holders, craving their position and power, but bound still by tradition more sturdy than any iron shackle.

Progress is a term alien to the Amarrians. It's almost like this huge empire was built on pure coincidence and luck. But once you get to know their intricate system you get the feeling that they're like this great big beast trudging heedlessly onwards, trampling any opposition. Their advancements are not by leaps and bounds, but rather through deliberate and articulate planning that can span decades, even centuries. Getting caught in the finely woven spider-webs of a Holder can trap more than just

you - it can trap your children and your children's children. Getting out is not a problem. It's getting out alive that's troublesome.

My years in Dam-Torsad made me loathe and despise the Amarrians. Their society is in so many ways radically different from the Gallentean one. But I also learned never to underestimate the Amarrians. In their own way they're ruthlessly efficient, and I cannot help but feel in awe of all their accomplishments through the ages.

*Excerpt from the autobiography of Yanou Lautere,
First Gallente ambassador to the Amarrians*

Society of Conscious Thought

The Society of Conscious Thought, or SCT, was founded three centuries ago by the Jovian Ior Labron. As a rule, Jovians are not very spiritually inclined, but those Jovians that are take to their spirituality with the same vigor and zeal as to everything else. The SCT has, through the ages, acted as the outlet for the spiritual needs of the Jovians, although that role is only a secondary one today.

The Society's story is a long and complex one. Starting out as a cult created to explore humanity's spiritual and religious feelings and needs (with the primary aim of discovering the meaning of life, no less), it later expanded into the realm of politics and, for a little while, effectively became Jovian society's shadow government. This, however, did not last for long; other political factions joined together to break their power, with the result that the Society was banned for a considerable period of time. Yet they still lurked in obscurity, reverting back to their mystical past. As the years passed the Society again began to exert itself, but wisely and carefully this time, making sure to just skirt the borders of the hostile political arena.

Once again, the search for spiritual enlightenment became the focus of the SCT. They embarked on a journey of frenzied technological research on the matter, resulting in some very interesting theories and facts on the nature of man and his connection to the universe.

The SCT had, in the traditional way of secluded spiritual sects, sought refuge in remote areas, building their residences there. Even while the Society was most active in politics, they still maintained their homes far away from large human settlements, favoring isolated regions planet-side or in deep space. Only in recent years has the SCT become a little less

reclusive, setting up offices in urban settlements in order to increase their visibility to the general public.

In their remote abodes the Society has built up mini-societies emphasizing self-sufficiency; a trait strong among the Jovians. These sprawling places, often resembling huge fortresses, house everything from living quarters and food-growing facilities to laboratories and libraries. Each enclave, called a kitz, is a separate entity, but communication between kitzes is frequent.

Each kitz maintains a school for educating their members in the scholarly or scientific fields. At first, all the students were children of SCT members, but a few decades ago the Society started admitting, each year, a small number of children from 'outside,' even non-Jovian ones. The applicants are chosen by the Society and their choices seem to many to be almost random, because there is no visible pattern as to who gets in: neither race, gender, social standing, nor even talent and intelligence by themselves seem to play instrumental roles. Many wealthy parents have tried to increase their child's chances by donating large sums of money to the SCT, but statistics have shown that this has little or no effect.

In any case, most people agree that the education the children receive within the Society's walls is first-class and every graduate is a sought-after employee anywhere he or she goes. An astonishing proportion of SCT graduates reach a prominent position later in life, becoming presidents of multi-stellar corporations or governmental ministers. Little wonder, then, that people regard the SCT schools as breeding grounds for world leaders.

Vitoc

A fair proportion of the Amarr Empire still consists today of slaves, mainly of Minmatar origin. Through the ages the Amarrians have employed various methods of keeping the slaves in line. Many of them are deemed, by the standards of the Gallenteans and others, to be highly immoral and cruel. One of the more recent and controversial methods is called after the antidote drug involved - Vitoc.

With the Vitoc method, slaves are injected with a toxic chemical substance that is fatal unless the recipient receives a constant supply of an antidote. The method first appeared a few centuries ago when the Amarrians started manning some of their space ships with slaves. As space crew the slaves had to be cajoled into doing complex, often independent work, making older methods of slave control undesirable. Although the more conventional ways of subduing slaves with force (actual or threat of) are still widely used in other forced labor areas, the Vitoc method has proven itself admirably for the fleet.

There are two major downsides to the Vitoc method: the method works only as long as the toxic substances remain in the body, and as long as there is no alternative way for a slave to receive the antidote. If either applies, a slave can obviously not be forced to do anything.

For the past decades a fierce R&D battle has taken place between the Amarr Empire on one hand and the Minmatar Republic and the Gallente Federation on the other. The Amarrians are constantly upgrading and altering the toxic chemicals they use on the slaves, while the others are struggling to research and manufacture a permanent remedy. For many years this battle waxed and waned, with the Amarrians releasing a new

version every few years, but the others managing to discover a remedy shortly thereafter.

But then, a little more than a decade ago, the Amarrians introduced a new and revolutionary toxic drug, which resembles a virus in many ways, and no cure has yet been found for it. This is mainly due to the erratic nature of the drug, which constantly changes its appearance and behavior on a regular basis. These changes seem to be either controlled, or at least predicted by the Amarrians, as they always seem to have the right antidote for their own use out in time before the toxin changes again. Thus, the Minmatars and the Gallenteans are constantly chasing a ghost - a toxic virus that shifts into something completely different just when they think they've finally nailed it down.

There are more novel features about this new toxic chemical, letting many believe that either an Amarrian scientist genius suddenly appeared or the Amarrians got some crucial help from the outside; the Caldari and even the Jovians have been mentioned in this regard. One of the additional features in the new virus is that the resulting death is much more horrifying now; those that fail to get antidote will suffer excruciating pain that can last for days before death finally comes. With the older versions, death by lack of antidote was never so horrible, sometimes even peaceful. This led to mass-suicides at times when slave crews refused to take the antidote; preferring death over humiliating slavery. Now, although still an option, few people are brave enough to dare it. Another new feature is the very pleasurable side-effect created by the antidote: for the first few hours after injection the receiver gets a very powerful euphoric sensation - as long as he is affected by the toxic virus. Both these extra features have helped bind the slaves to the drug, and thus to their slave-masters.

The transformation of the struggle this past decade has been like a god's gift for the pirate and smuggling industry. Not only is it much easier for this industry to quickly and repeatedly adapt to the ever-changing products (the

antidote in this case) than for conventional industries, but the fact that no permanent cure for the new drug had been found means that the ever-increasing number of newly freed Minmatar slaves still need the antidote to survive - hence creating a thriving business outside the Amarr Empire for the antidote for the first time. A lot of people have made fortune beyond their dreams by dealing in the Vitoc antidote, but just as many have been ruined when all their expensive antidote stock became obsolete due to a sudden change in the toxic virus.

Quafe

Quafe is the name of the most popular soft drink in the universe, manufactured by a Gallentean company bearing the same name. It first appeared two centuries ago and, like so many soft drinks, was initially intended as medicine for indigestion and a tender stomach. The refreshing effects of the drink appealed to everyone, however, and the drink fast became hugely popular.

Quafe is one of the most widely recognized brands in the whole universe and can be found virtually everywhere. The marketing gurus at the Quafe Company have often joked that the drink was the best Gallente ambassador there ever was, and an incident between the Gallente Federation and the Amarr Empire ten years ago showed these claims to be more than just amusing hype. At the time, the Federation and the Empire clashed over ownership of the mineral rich system Girani-Fa, located close to both their borders. After the Empire discontinued negotiations with the Federation delegation, the dispute seemed to be headed straight for all-out war.

But a few days later an extraordinary thing happened. The Amarrians declared that while they were ready to continue negotiations, they would only conduct them with representatives from the Quafe Company, claiming the latter were the only group within the Gallente Federation with enough vested interest on both sides of the border to be able to look at the matter from a neutral perspective. The Gallente government, looking to avoid war, agreed to these requests and so a delegation made up of top Quafe Company executives was sent to meet with the Amarrian delegation. A few weeks later an agreement was reached: the system was to come under Gallentean control, but a fixed amount of minerals was to be sold to the Amarrians each year at cost price.

The Girani-Fa incident, as it has become known, clearly demonstrates the respect consumers have for the Quafe name and how strongly the company has managed to penetrate into every market. A further indication of this is the fact that the Quafe Company is the only Gallentean company that's been given corporation status within the Caldari State.

This amazing success, which has mostly come about in the last three decades or so, can be largely accredited to one man: Poire Viladillet, CEO of the Quafe Company for the past 35 years. Under his leadership the company has ascended from a position as one of several leading soft drink manufacturers into clear and undisputed market supremacy.

Fatal and the Rabbit

Jirai Laitanen and Korako Kosakami, today better known by the nicknames they gave themselves: Fatal and the Rabbit, began their careers as promising space ship captains in the 37th (Octopus) Squadron of the Caldari Navy. Laitanen was a shrewd and gifted captain, with a glib tongue and charismatic smile. Many expected him to reach a position of authority in the end. But he was also vain and greedy; traits that led to his eventual desertion. Kosakami was much more introvert than his friend Laitanen, but he had a brilliant mind and was a technical wizard.

When, in the space of one week, Laitanen was passed over for promotion and Kosakami was blamed for a lethal crash landing, the two friends decided to desert. They stole a couple of Condor-class frigates, the same they still use today, and set off to a pirate-infested sector between Caldari and Gallente space. This took place in YC 86.

It didn't take long for them to establish themselves among the criminal society and few months after their arrival they'd set up their own criminal organization, called the Guristas, which is an amalgamation of two Caldari words meaning 'naughty people' and is also a slang term for 'gang'.

The Guristas are famous for their raids into civilized territory, something that very few pirate clans are willing or able to do. The mission of these raids is most often simply to steal cargo or passengers (for ransom) from freighters, but on numerous occasions their main intention seems to be to sabotage empire installations (mining facilities, sentry guns, and the like). This has led to speculations that some unscrupulous empire companies or even governments are hiring the Guristas to take out property of the competition.

But by far the most celebrated of the Gurista raids was when they kidnapped the Gallentean ambassador to the Caldari State and received an enormous ransom from his family. The kidnapping itself was a brilliant feat and clearly demonstrated that Fatal and the Rabbit were far from being the stereotypical brainless brats that most people regarded pirates to be.

Ambassador Luecin Rileau, son of the diamond-king Darouen Rileau, had only one noticeable vice, and that was gambling. His gambling fascination was probably the main reason why he had sought to become the Gallentean ambassador to the Caldari State, a notoriously tricky position. Ambassador Rileau frequented the Grand Tiegjon Casino in the Echelon Entertainment Studio station in the Caldari system of Vellaine. It was there that Fatal and the Rabbit struck.

The two of them docked at the station under in disguise. The Rabbit (Kosakami) stayed behind in the ship while Fatal (Laitanen) entered the casino. Fatal involved himself in a game of Pettokori, a popular electro-board gambling game, which Rileau was participating in. In the course of the game, Fatal deliberately lost money to the ambassador and finally, when he'd run out of money, Fatal offered his ship to the ambassador. The ambassador accepted and proceeded to win the game. Fatal offered to show the ambassador his newly won ship and Rileau, accompanied by several bulky bodyguards, accepted.

But while the game was underway the Rabbit had been busy. He rigged the boarding ramp to the ship with tanks filled with sleeping gas. Needless to say, when the ambassador and his bodyguards entered the boarding ramp, they were promptly put to sleep. Ambassador Rileau was then carried into the ship and Fatal and the Rabbit innocently left the station. It was only when another ship docked in the same berth an hour later and discovered the boarding ramp full of snoring bodyguards that the alarm was raised, but by then the kidnappers were long gone.

The Gallente Federation was unable to apprehend the culprits and in the end the ambassador's family paid a huge ransom in uncut diamonds to the Guristas. All this drama received a great deal of media attention and even if Fatal and the Rabbit relished the attention for a time, in the end it only hampered them. Being the most notorious criminal in the world of EVE has a downside, mainly that traveling around is not as easy as it used to be. This has forced the Guristas to lay low for the past few months.

War Tattoos

For most of the Minmatar tribes the act of painting one's face before going into battle is an age-old tradition. In days past, some of the more warlike tribes took this a step further by tattooing their faces in the same style, giving them what effectively amounted to permanent war paint. The main disadvantage of these facial war tattoos was obviously that they were a permanent feature. This made their usage quite a bit less common -- after all, portraying as aggressive a state to others as the war paints represented did not lend itself equally well to all forms of interpersonal communication.

But high-tech developments have opened up a new way of expressing one's aggressive intentions. The latest fad in tattooing is so-called nano-tattooing. The nano-tattoos are very small microchips, surgically implanted between the epidermal and dermal layers of the skin. These microchips are connected to the nervous system via the hair and sweat glands' paravertebral ganglia, and are activated when the host becomes emotionally upset or excited. When active, the microchips emit dark or light color (depending on the person's skin color), resulting in patterns appearing on the face.

These nano-technology war tattoos come in various versions. The most common ones link the microchips' activation directly to the host's emotional state, making it necessary for the host to control their own feelings if they want to influence the appearance and disappearance of the war tattoos. Other versions allow the person direct conscious control over activation, but Matari tend to frown upon those, the general consensus being that these more user-friendly chips suggest a lack of self-discipline in the host.

Since they first arrived on the open market a decade ago, the nano war tattoos have taken Minmatar society by storm. They are especially popular

among the younger generation of aviation and space faring personnel. While the custom has spread to other races, most notably the Gallenteans, it is still almost exclusively confined to the Matari.

Outer Ring Excavations

Nocxium is one of the most sought-after materials around, as it's one of the vital ingredients for capsule production. Due to the fact that this strange matter forms only during supernovas, it can only be found in a few exclusive regions. As the nocxium breaks down when under intense heat and pressure, it only exists in asteroid fields and not in larger stellar objects. A few years ago numerous asteroids containing nocxium were discovered in the extensive Miennue cloud ring just outside the jurisdiction of the Gallente Federation, propelling the otherwise desolate cloud ring into the international political limelight.

Thousands of prospectors have flocked to Miennue since nocxium was first discovered there, but as always only a handful reap the rewards of their efforts. Yani Sar Arteu was one of the few to hit the jackpot big time. He and his small company named Outer Ring Excavations recently stumbled across an asteroid reportedly containing the biggest nocxium deposit ever found in this region. Although rumors abound nothing has been confirmed, as only Arteu and his companions have seen this alleged super-asteroid and are not about to disclose its location. In fact, they only spend the minority of their time actually mining the asteroid, hunting it down on weekly excavation expeditions. This is because they don't want to flood the market with nocxium, thus bringing down the price. In between, they spend their energy playing elaborate games of hide-and-seek with jealous competitors eager to get their hands on the asteroid.

The empires monitor the goings-on in Miennue closely and all of them have made both overt and covert proposals to Outer Ring Excavations, offering security for a stake in the company. Outer Ring Excavations have rejected all these offers, but ever-increasing pressure from competitors is making it harder and harder for them to keep their secret safe much longer. Sooner

or later, one of the numerous methods employed by those pursuing the asteroid -- bribes, threats, tracking devices, bugs -- is bound to unveil the secret that Arteu has so meticulously kept concealed. In the meantime, Arteu and Outer Ring Excavations are getting richer -- fantastically so -- by the minute.

Egonics Inc.

The Gallentean entertainment industry is highly competitive and show biz companies are willing to do anything to gain an edge over their competitors. The size of the entertainment industry means that a mere 1% shift in market share means billions in extra revenue. This has led many companies to employ questionable methods, such as espionage and sabotage, while others engage in a constant technological race. An example of the latter is Egonics.

Egonics Incorporated is a fifty year old company that today specializes in making and distributing music that fits each and everyone's personal taste. There are a few essential steps in this process.

First of all, Egonics runs and maintains a huge database, containing personal profiles of billions of people. The Egonics database is arguably the largest database of personal information owned by a non-governmental company. At first, Egonics planned to use this database for numerous products, but only the musical one became truly successful. Early on, conservatives within the Gallentean government vehemently opposed the data gathering of Egonics, but the company ingeniously used this opposition to their advantage by rallying the young people to their cause, advocating personal freedom of all things. This was one of the major factors in the subsequent growth of the company and the 'Egone' became a symbol of liberty among young people everywhere.

The information in the Egonics database is extremely detailed, it lists both the social status of a person: job, education, marital status and so on, but also very thorough genealogical and biological data, including DNA samples. Egonics uses every method possible to enlarge their database and keep it up to date. Some of these methods are frowned upon by many,

but others find it good how dedicated the company is in making sure the customer gets exactly what he likes and there are some that thrive on selling Egonics DNA samples from people not in their vast database.

Secondly, Egonics employ thousands of sound engineers and musicians that are constantly creating music according to the specs of a certain group of customers. Egonics recognizes hundreds of distinct taste patterns in the populace and they make sure that everybody can find music that caters to their very special preferences, thus Egonics publish thousands of songs every single day. Although the musicians employed by Egonics are total non-entities while in its service, they gain invaluable experience during their stay and a number of them have gone onto fame after their stint there.

And finally, Egonics use a unique method in distributing their music to their customers. The Egone may look like a head ornament instead of a headphone. This is because it doesn't broadcast sound to the ears as normal headphones do, but instead it projects the music directly to the zones in the brain that govern hearing, bypassing the ear altogether. This has many obvious advantages, both for Egonics and the customer. Most importantly, there is no danger of illegal copying and distribution, as there is no actual sound to record. Also, there is no noise pollution and people can easily converse with each other as the ears are clear.

Music is broadcasted to the Egone over wavelength, similar to radio, so in effect every Egonics customer is listening to his own personal radio station, playing only those songs he likes and has paid for.

All in all, Egonics is steadily increasing their popularity, although there are many that find the ruthless data gathering and intrusive broadcasting methods to their disliking. The Amarr Empire has for instance forbidden Egonics to operate within their boundaries.

Language Translators

The most obvious problem in inter-racial communication is the language difference. All the major races in EVE speak their own language and all attempts to make one the lingua franca have failed because of stubbornness over accepting any one language as the dominant one. Amarish, the language of the largest empire, is obviously the most common language, especially as most Minmatars also speak the language. But the Gallenteans refuse to acknowledge Amarish as the official language in inter-racial communications as they don't want to give the Amarr Empire the political prestige that would follow. On the other hand, the language of the Gallente Federation (Gallentean) is by far the most common second language, largely because of their very influential entertainment industry. But the Caldari absolutely refuse to speak Gallentean and the Amarrians are also not too keen on it for the same reason that the Gallenteans won't speak Amarish.

This means that most high-profile discussions between representatives of the empires, such as in the numerous inter-racial organizations, rely heavily on interpreters. But in one field the language a person knows has become irrelevant and the field is that of a space captain.

The unique nature of the capsule with its sophisticated neural rigging gives ship captains the option to link their minds to all kinds of computer systems, which they can use to their advantage. One of these devices that is today a standard feature in all capsules is the translator module.

The translator module is a software module that is a part of the communication system of the ship. It intercepts all incoming communications and translates them into the language preferred by the captain. The first translators were pretty lousy by today's standard, they

could only translate written communications and frequently messed up the text. But the latest versions are able to translate voice as well as text and have become very good at projecting mood-swings, slang, weird accents and such, for a near perfect translation. With the steady increase in cyber-implants these translators have begun appearing outside the capsule as well and many predict that within a few years translators will make the debate over which language should prevail in inter-racial communication a futile one.

The Hanging Long-Limb

In a mass manufacturing and marketing society like that in the world of EVE, everything that is for one reason or another only found in short supply tends to become more sought after because of the rarity factor alone. This is especially true in the field of gourmet cooking, where the finest restaurants compete in offering the most exotic food there is.

The eggs of the Hanging Long-limb are among the most sought after delicacies in these fancy restaurants. This is because the Hanging Long-limb is only found on one planet, Theruesse IV in the Theruesse system, located within the borders of the Gallente Federation. The Hanging Long-limb belongs to the Long-limb family of species, which are also only found there. The planet is almost entirely covered with inhospitable marshy jungles and the methane filled atmosphere is unbreathable by humans. The Hanging Long-limb gets its name from its habit of hanging by its hooked tail from branches that slope over water. It then uses its long claws to catch small fish and other amphibian animals.

The Hanging Long-limb lays its eggs in thousands at a time in a cluster, usually attached beneath a branch. It is this egg-cluster, or roe, that humans so eagerly seek. The main reason why the roe of the Hanging Long-limb is so rare is because no one has succeeded in breeding the species outside their natural habitat. Many individuals and companies have through the years attempted to simulate the environment on the planet in order to mass breed the Hanging Long-limb, but without success. Similarly, all attempts to artificially generate or clone the eggs have only met with very limited success and such products are regarded as vastly inferior to the real thing.

Most of the restaurants offering Hanging Long-limb roe are situated within the Gallente Federation, as the demand for exotic food is highest there. These restaurants are frequented by the upper strata of Gallentean society: industrial tycoons, celebrities and the idle rich. Capsuleers, always rich though rarely idle, are also apt to be seen at these places.

The Truth Serum

*What if Truth was like a tiny speck of sand?
A speck that has been washed and weighed, polished, smoothed and
curbed into one shiny point, the Universal Truth.*

*What if we could take this grain of sand and collect it into a book? We
would treasure the book like our own life. We would lock it with the purpose
of our mind.*

*And when we craved the truth we would open it up and let the grains wash
over us. We would soak ourselves in its depth and bask in its radiance.*

*But the book is flawed. We can take more truth from it than we have
earned. And soon we would be turning empty pages.*

*Thus the search begins. The search for the truth; the truth we crave; the
truth that has the only meaningful value in an otherwise meaningless world.*

*The search continues, it goes on and on. In this search for the ultimate
truth everything is allowed. We learn to lie and cheat in hope of progress.
We see no success, no breakthrough of any kind.*

*We're flooded by substitute truth, made up truth, whose only purpose is to
sooth us and lull us.*

*Absolute truth loses its meaning. There is no absolute truth, only greater
and lesser truth. We've lost our standards, we've lost our talent to
distinguish what is real from what is deception. We no longer know the
difference between the right truth and the wrong truth. All we care for is*

truth in any form and any guise; corrupted, filthy truth, we want it all, need it all.

So this truth can make us free, like any other truth. Maybe this substitute truth suffices? Maybe.

But when we've become enslaved to this freedom, then it is freedom no longer.

It is the worst kind of prison.

A prison with no walls and no chains. We cannot break free for we cannot see what binds us.

We talk of freedom like it was something to hope for. I hope real freedom never finds us, because we wouldn't know what to do with it.

Yet we continue the search, for the searching has become a way of life for us. We know no other. It is what we've become.

Let us only hope the search never ends, that the Absolute Truth stays hidden forever. For if the search ends, we end.

Then we become nothing more than dust, specks of sand on the shore of universal lie.

And maybe, just maybe, this has already happened.

The author of this prose is Gorda Hoje, a Jovian philanthropist that died more than 300 years ago. Hoje was a novelty in his time and age, and his works, which ranged from cryptic philosophical texts to meticulous science papers, were generally regarded as too eccentric and absurd to have any real value. In his lifetime, Hoje acted as a mentor to many of the greatest

Jovian minds of the younger generation, among them Ior Labron, the founder of the Society of Conscious Thought. After Hoje's death, his followers started to promote his works in earnest and Hoje is today regarded as one of the most profound and influential of Jovian intellectuals.

Directive Enforcement Department

Soon after the empires initiated contact with each other they recognized the need for independent institutions, jointly run by all the empires, to handle the numerous issues regarding the relationships between them, such as trade, monetary policies, crime-fighting, and so on. The earliest forms of these organizations were established decades ago and now there are a few dozen that exist of various size. All of the organizations are controlled by a central organization, called Consolidated Cooperation and Relations Command, or CONCORD.

One of the largest and most powerful branches of CONCORD is the Directive Enforcement Department (DED). DED is the police force of CONCORD and is by far the strongest armed force in the world of EVE that doesn't pledge fealty to any one empire. The main responsibility of the DED is to track high-profile criminals. For this they often hire independent contractors (better known as bounty hunters). The DED handles the licenses and legal issues of all bounty hunters for the empires, although some of the empires have been known to bypass the DED in special circumstances. Also, the most notorious criminals are marked as free-for-all targets by the DED.

Among the other responsibilities of the DED is aiding customs officials in patrolling areas where smuggling is rife. The DED ships are usually equipped with the latest and greatest in surveillance technology, so their service is always a great support for customs patrols, especially because they are incorruptible. In addition, the DED takes care of all kinds of security issues regarding meetings and conferences between the empires, they lend ships for operations by the other branches of the CONCORD, and they often support local law enforcement in dealing with large-scale crime activity or similar matters. For this the DED often uses their special

force unit, named Special Affairs for Regulations & Order, or SARO. The SARO is one of the toughest police units around and are notorious for their brutal, but efficient, methods. They're mostly used in hostage situations, for the assault of heavily armed pirate havens, and similar tasks.

The DED's jurisdiction is limited to space and this has often put severe limits on their operations. However, in recent years, the DED has increasingly been authorized to operate in stations and on planets, and the result is a much more effective fight against organized crime. But even if the DED is getting more and more efficient in dealing with criminals within empire borders, they have yet to gain any significant foothold in the outer regions where empire presence is almost nonexistent. Also, the power of DED, and in fact the whole of CONCORD, differs widely between the various empires, or even between different regions of any one empire, as local governments or magnates often oppose strong DED presence for one reason or another.

Kyonoke Pit

In the deep recesses of the Taisy system lies a lonely mining station called Kyonoke Pit. The station, built 40 years ago by a Caldari mining company owned by the Hyasyoda Corporation, was at that time the largest mining and refining station of tasc (twin atomic superconductor crystal), the core component of inter-stellar communication devices.

For years the mining operation went smoothly and Kyonoke Pit soon became one of the most profitable mining stations of the Hyasyoda Corporation. Kyonoke Pit is located on a huge asteroid and as the years went by the mining shafts dug ever deeper into the heart of the asteroid.

Five years ago the space tower orbiting Taisy Prime received an emergency signal from Kyonoke Pit. An epidemic of some sort had broken out on the mining station and the crew was dying rapidly. The tower personnel lost contact with the Pit a few minutes later and were unable to re-establish it.

A scout ship was sent out to investigate. On its arrival at the Pit, no lights were visible on the station and no life-signs were detected. An emergency team, clothed in protective suits, that was dispatched into the station was greeted by the horrific sight of the station's crew strewn all over the place dead and decaying. The mask of agony on the men's faces spoke volumes about their last terrible ordeal and the garish red spots on their bloated bodies clearly indicated that the cause of their death was by poisoning or some sort of a plague. It was clear that the infliction had surfaced suddenly and slain the crew in a matter of minutes.

The emergency team reported their findings to the scout ship docked outside and then continued exploring. Some two hours later members of

the emergency team started complaining about discomfort and the captain of the scout ship ordered them back to the ship. But on their way back the team-members collapsed in agony - it was clear they had caught the deadly malady despite their protective suits. The captain, fearful for the safety of himself and the rest of the crew, detached the ship from the Pit and left the station while the rest of the emergency team died on the docking ledge.

Thus began the story of the Kyonoke Infection - one of the most deadly and mysterious pestilences man has come into contact with. The Caldari authorities sealed Kyonoke Pit off a few hours after the incident described above. Further research was made with great care and the results were not heartening. A biological speck resembling a protein causes the plague. It enters the body through the respiration system and then enters the blood stream. From there it moves to the brain, where it germinates. In its advanced state, the protein speck enters the medulla oblongata, where it infects the nerve cells very rapidly. The host quickly loses control over all bodily functions, accompanied by a great amount of pain, finally resulting in heart- and lung failure within the space of a few minutes. The specks can survive in an advanced state for a few days; they can leave a dead host and enter another living being close by, in such cases the new host dies within a few hours once the speck has reached the brain.

The speck can also be found in a basic state. As such, it can lie dormant for years and it can survive in extreme environments and conditions. When it enters a living being it usually starts developing to its advanced state, but this is not always the case; it can also lie dormant within a person for a long period of time. It can also enter the brain and start infecting proteins there, slowly but steadily killing the host by eating up its brain over a course of few months. This dual nature of the bio-speck makes it even more of an enigma, not to mention more dangerous.

It can be safely deduced that the biological speck was accidentally uncovered in the bowels of the asteroid Kyonoke Pit is on, but whether it originated there or not is impossible to tell. It is virtually impossible to detect the speck in a person, due to the fact it resembles normal proteins to such a high degree. This has led to speculations that the speck evolved in humans or was even manmade a long time ago, but these speculations have never been substantiated. In any case, because of the difficulties in detecting and tracing the bio-speck and because it has 100% fatality rate, the bio-speck has fascinated both military researchers and terrorist groups, both of which are eager to get their hands on the speck.

The space tower of Taisy Prime has today been converted into a huge research facility, where the Caldari are fervently trying to get to know everything there is about this curious biological speck. Kyonoke Pit itself has been sealed off and remains in a permanent quarantine. Caldari police vessels guarding the mining station make sure that no one without the proper authorization is allowed near it. Some two years ago an unknown group managed to infiltrate the security parameter around the Pit on two ships and entered the station. In addition to acquiring samples of the bio-speck, the group loaded their cargo holds with the highly valuable tasc from the station's vast storage vaults. But on their way out the bandits started showing the symptoms of being infected by the deadly protein. One of the ships crashed back into the Pit after disembarking, severely damaging the station and completely destroying the ship. The other ship managed to escape the investigating Caldari vessels, but it disappeared without a trace in an asteroid field and has not been heard from since. Today, debris and dead bodies from the Pit float around it, making it even more hazardous for ships to approach the crumbling mining installation. This, and tighter security measures by the Caldari, have prevented anyone else from making a raid on the Pit.

Slaver

The vast Amarr plantations on Syrikos V have used slaves as workforce for centuries. Scores of Ealurians, Minmatars, Ni-Kunnis and criminals or political dissenters of Amarrian origin have worked, bred and died by the millions through the ages.

The droves of slaves needed to work the fields coupled with the high mortality rate means that elaborate methods of keeping the slaves in check, such as Vitoc, are not cost efficient enough to warrant their usage. Instead, the Amarrians employ slaver, sometimes referred to as slave-dog.

Slaver is a native animal of Syrikos V and has been bred by the Amarrians from the time they first settled the planet more than a millennium ago. It's a vertebrate with four elongated feet and a slender, fur-clad body. A fully grown slaver can stand more than a meter tall from its shoulder-blades to the soles of its front legs. But the most noticeable feature of the slaver are its massive jaws and teeth, constantly slobbering in anticipation for something to chew on - hence the old name of the slaver before its role as slave keeper: Drooler. The slaver can run very fast and is able to jump vast distances, making this carnivorous beast a deadly foe against unarmed humans.

Slavers are extremely vicious and blood-thirsty, but they can be tamed as long as the training starts while they're still small cubs. The slavers are allowed to roam free outside the barbed parameters of the acres of the plantations. The agile slavers are quick to see or smell slaves that have ventured outside the fences and few can escape the slavers quick, merciless attacks. A preferred tactic of the slaver is to attack from above; for this it often lurks in high places, even trees, or by simply jumping many meters into the air and landing on their unsuspecting prey.

The favorable experience of employing the slaver as a guard animal has led to it being exported from Syrikos V to most other Amarrian agricultural planets and even some industrial and mining ones as well. In recent years, the slaver has become fashionable among Amarrians as pet for those willing to risk its often murderous nature; slavers can become extremely loyal and devoted to their owners if handled with care.

Amarr Succession

Amarr Emperors can expect to live for at least 500 years through the use of implants and other life-prolonging technology. Since the Amarrians believe royal flesh to be sacred, cloning it is seen as blasphemy and therefore strictly forbidden.

The emperor's position is not hereditary. When the emperor dies, a new one must be selected from among the Five Heirs. The Five Heirs are the heads of the five royal families (the most powerful families in the Amarr Empire) and descendants of the original members of the Privy Council. The Council was a staunch supporter of the Emperor during the turbulent times known as the Moral Reforms, a struggle between the Emperor and the Council of Apostles which took place 1500 years ago. Since that time, although the Privy Council has today evolved into a fifteen-member council composed of representatives from the Empire's various non-royal power blocs and institutions, it still represents, at its core, the five royal families vying for the throne.

When the Emperor dies, an elaborate ritual for selecting a new Emperor is put into action. These rituals are performed in strict order and take a few weeks to complete. The rituals are always undergoing modification to better reflect the state of contemporary society and to fix problems encountered in earlier successor bids. The rituals mainly involve various ways in which the Five Heirs prove their loyalty to the Empire and their ability to run it. As should be expected, most of the rituals involve the Heirs directly, though some of them have changed through the ages to allow another person, chosen by the Heir, to perform in his or her place. In recent times, the successful selection of personal champions has been increasingly viewed as one of the strongest indicators of an Heir's ability and prestige.

One of the most distinctive aspects of the succession process is that once a new Emperor has been chosen, the remaining four Heirs must commit ritual suicide. This is done to minimize the risk of conflict between the new Emperor and the old Privy Council; by removing all the old Heirs and replacing the Privy Council with those next in line within the five royal families, the slate is wiped clean.

Only twice has this tradition been broken since it first came into being more than a millennium ago. The first time was when Emperor Heideran VII of the Kador Family was selected just over 300 years ago. One of the remaining Heirs at the time was a young man named Khanid II, who had only recently become the head of his family. Khanid refused to uphold the ancient tradition and fled the royal court. In the vast regions of his family estate he founded a separate nation and called it the Khanid Kingdom. Needless to say the two states did not start off on good terms, and while their diplomatic history has seen its share of ups and downs, they are on good terms today. A minor new family, the Tash-Murkons, took the place of Khanid's family in the royal court, and remains one of the five royal families to this day.

The second time the succession tradition was broken was in the year YC 110, when Jamyl Sarum – previously thought dead in the YC 105 ritual where her predecessor, Doriam, became Emperor – ascended to power in an Empire that had been floundering for over a year under the command of a ruthless and self-serving usurper named Dochuta Karsoth. Wielding an immensely powerful weapon of mysterious origin, Sarum stymied a massive invasion of the Minmatar into Amarr space and rode the wave of adulation directly to the Imperial throne, in the process sidestepping completely the traditions of imperial succession.

Tyma Raitaru

The name of Tyma Raitaru will forever be associated with the term freelance research. Raitaru, a Caldari by birth, pioneered what has today become a popular profession among rogue scientists and scholars around the world of EVE - that of the knowledge nomad, selling his work to the highest bidder.

Raitaru began his career working in the R&D department at a company owned by the Ishukone Corporation. He became increasingly frustrated about the fact that Ishukone took all his work and inventions and made them their own, giving scant credit to the creator. In the end he left and set up his own laboratory under his sole control. There he struggled for some years, constantly on the brink of financial ruin. It was only when he turned his focus toward the most practical of all inventions - that of weaponry - that his career really took off. Forty years ago Raitaru offered the blueprints for the Achilles missile for sale on the open market. The Achilles missile was at that time the best missile available and every empire and every faction wanted it. The Achilles missile didn't employ any revolutionary new technology, but instead it combined many solid concepts and designs to make it extremely reliable and powerful for a small price. In the design of Achilles Raitaru combined the innovative approach of the researcher with the practical mindset of the craftsman. Ever since, those that have followed in Raitaru's footsteps have been most successful when they take existing technologies and products and combine them to invent some superior product. Most of today's freelance researchers work predominantly in the fields of weapons and ship equipment, and they frequently operate out of space stations or lone research outposts.

Lady Phanca's Pet Furrier

The planet Radonis lies deep within the Amarr Empire in the fiefdom of Ardishapur, one of the five royal families. Radonis is the capital of Ardishapur's domain and is considered one of the leading places of theological scholarship within the Amarr Empire.

The current head of the family and one of the Five Heirs, Yonis Ardishapur, had his right hand amputated at birth and replaced by a cybernetic silver one. It's the same for all male members of the Ardishapur family. For more than 700 years an imperial law has decreed that every male born into the Ardishapur family would have his right hand amputated at the wrist right after birth. The laws do not forbid them from replacing it with a cyber-hand and today the silver hand is the unofficial symbol of the Ardishapur family.

The circumstances which led to this imperial law are as bizarre as the law itself. As it happened, Lady Phanca, the mother of the emperor at the time, was visiting Radonis and staying at the Ardishapur's royal palace. Lady Phanca was a legend in her time; a strict, extremely ambitious woman, in many ways ruthless but still charismatic in her dealings with people. Many thought she had unnaturally strong influence on her son, the emperor, and many cases can be cited where the actions of the emperor can be directly linked to the wishes of his mother. The Ardishapur decree, as it became known as, is one of them.

Lady Phanca had a pet furrier, a small furry animal commonly found as pet among the Amarrian higher class. It was a well-known quirk that the otherwise severe and dispassionate lady loved her pet lavishly. When young Uri Ardishapur, son of the Ardishapur royal heir, killed the twittering creature at the dinner table, the fury of the old lady left no doubt in the minds of those present that the repercussions would be terrible.

Persuading her son to pass the fore mentioned laws, Uri Ardishapur became the first of the Ardishapurs to lose his right hand, the hand that had slain lady Phanca's pet furrier.

Imperial laws are extremely strong within the Amarr Empire and are almost regarded as the written will of god. It is very rare for any of them to be changed or revoked. The Ardishapurs may at one time have wanted the law to be revoked, but today they revel in this old tradition and consider it one of their most important family heirlooms.

Myth of a Salesman

Aeron Assis. Niques S. Leutre. Niemar Kokolen. Are any of these names the real name of the man who uses them? His best known alias is not even a name, the Broker. Mention the Broker to any governmental agent anywhere within the world of EVE and you'll be sure to get a response. The only thing more numerous than the number of aliases he is known by is the number of speculations on his background. There are precious few concrete facts known about this elusive spy, negotiator, informant, arms dealer and manipulator of men and states. As a master of disguise, who utilizes the latest in cloning and DNA technology to keep his appearance a secret, such basic details as race, height or hair-color are unknown. However, he's most often considered to be of either Amarrian or Gallentean ancestry, of average height and build, with no apparent quirks or physical marks of notice.

For more than 50 years the Broker has directly or indirectly been involved in various dealings between states, prominent warlords or intelligence agencies. Most of these dealings include exchange of information, weapon selling and espionage. In addition, various accounts of criminal activity and even terrorism have sometimes been credited to the Broker, but none of them are based on any solid facts. What is known is that the Broker operates a vast information net, mainly within the higher strata of the society. He uses this net to gain advantageous business deals, but he also uses the information garnered to blackmail, bribe or manipulate people or even whole governments. In these operations he's often working under contract from a third party, invariably a political or economical rival of the victims.

As befits the secretive and shadowy endeavors of the Broker, few of his deeds have reached the public eye. In the inner circles of the espionage

world, everyone has a story of their own about him, often offering a glimpse of a piece of much grander scheme the Broker has undertaken. One of his more celebrated feats took place early in his career, almost half a century ago and is known among intelligence agents as the Omicron Incident.

At that time two feudal Amarrian lords ruling adjacent domains at the fringes of the Amarr Empire were clashing over the privilege to extend their domains to include that of another feudal lord, recently deceased. The Broker, going by the name Aeron Assis, had just concluded a contract to buy a large quantity of Caldari and Gallente manufactured weapons. He was looking for prospective buyers and decided the two Amarrian lords to be ideal. The problem was that the two lords were just about to reach an agreement on dividing the disputed territories between them. The Broker acted fast and produced documents claiming that one of the lords, Hurid-Akan, had been conspiring to have the other lord, Kirion, assassinated. The news infuriated Kirion and made him break off all negotiations with Hurid-Akan. Determined to strike the iron while still hot the Broker set out for Hurid-Akan's domain and leaked (false) information to Hurid-Akan's intelligence arm that Kirion had broken off the negotiations because he intended to invade and occupy the disputed territories with the aid of an undisclosed ally. Hurid-Akan was hesitant to take up arms he considered his army too ill-equipped to be an efficient fighting force. But to his immense relief he learned that a Caldari arms dealer was visiting his capital (this was of course the Broker in yet another disguise). The Broker sold Hurid-Akan top-of-the-line Caldari weapons and then left, again heading for Kirion's domain. Meanwhile, Hurid-Akan hurriedly began mobilizing his armed forces.

Kirion, alarmed by the mobilization of Hurid-Akan's forces, began his own preparations for war. The Broker leaked the information about the advanced Caldari weapons Hurid-Akan had bought to Kirion and then proceeded to sell him Gallentean weaponry as counter measures.

For days, the Broker played the two lords against each other, employing a combination of falsified surveillance data, forged documents describing imaginary plots and plans and his net of agents and double-agents within both domains to increase the paranoia of the lords so they'd buy more of his weapons. In the end, the Amarr Emperor, notified of the increased tension in the region, was forced to send a royal arbitrator to calm things down. By that time the two lords spent their entire fortune buying all of the Broker's weapons and the Broker himself had quietly disappeared from the Empire. This was not to be the last time that the Broker ingeniously played factions against each other for his own benefit.

As the years have passed the Broker himself has become increasingly paranoid of keeping his identity and whereabouts hidden. His vast information net and accumulated wealth has made this relatively easy for him and today he works almost entirely through middlemen in his wheeling and dealing in the outer world. He is still considered to be very active, but the extent of his operation is for anybody to guess.

The Day of Darkness

The Day of Darkness was properly named. That day saw one of the worst storms ever on the biggest continent on Matar, laying incredible amount of destruction in few short hours. But greater danger loomed, because that same day six giant slave vessels entered the Pator system. From there each ship set out for a different Minmatar planet, escorted by heavily armed military ships. Once in orbit the Amarrians descended onto the surface and started rounding up people. The Minmatars put up a brave resistance, but to no avail, the superior Amarr technology swept all Minmatar armed forces away, then plundered the populace at will. In addition, the Amarrians took great care of destroying every Minmatar space ship and installation they encountered, with the intent of making it very difficult for the Minmatars to gain strong space presence.

The Amarrians enslaved hundreds of millions of Minmatar in that first raid. Over the next millennium they would repeat their slave raids with regularity, capturing hundreds of millions more and throwing the Minmatar nation into a state of confusion, sorrow and insecurity.

The Prophecy of Macaper

A century ago a Gallentean astrologer named Damella Macaper prophesized the end of the world in a book called 'The Seven Events of the Apocalypse'. Considered a hack and a nutcase by her contemporaries, the book was largely ignored outside the small circle of her cult following. A short while later Macaper died and her cult died with her as her followers dwindled rapidly.

The book describes seven calamities that will befall the world, culminating in the "return of the dark light from the heart of the mother", as Macaper described it. The book is written in a stylized prose and even if the general course of events can be followed, any detailed information is lacking. It can be deduced that the calamities will occur within a space of few months or years at the most, but when or where this will happen is not mentioned, decreasing the credibility of the prophecy as a whole.

For decades 'The Seven Events of the Apocalypse' had been all but forgotten by everyone except a handful of scholars. But in recent months the eyes of the world have increasingly turned towards this old tome for explanations. A series of strange natural occurrences around the world seem oddly similar to the first calamitous events described in Macaper's prophecy a century ago. Although few believe that the actual end of the world is near people is still wary and extensive studies are being carried out into the prophecy and other surviving Macaper texts for more clues on what the future holds for the world of EVE.

The first event in Macaper's prophecy she described as "the cosmetic kiss of the comets" and this is exactly what happened in a remote Caldari system almost a year ago, when two large comets collided head on. The clash occurred within the boundaries of the solar system, but not close

enough to any of the planets to cause any drastic effects. Debris from the comets disturbed space traffic for a while, but that was all. Albeit a very rare event, the comet collision was not connected to the prophecy at this time.

The second event occurred a few months later when the planet Fricoure in the Gallente Federation was literally flooded with rains that lasted for weeks. Scientists could easily explain this by citing shifts in the weather patterns in the upper atmosphere and it wasn't until a diligent astrology student pointed out the similarities between this downpour and the second event of Macaper's prophecy that people began taking notice.

The third calamity is described by Macaper as being a "roaring stone that silences the world." A week ago a huge asteroid entered the atmosphere of the Amarrian planet Rumida at a low angle. It cut across the surface of the planet for hundred of kilometers with a thunderous roar before finally slamming into the ocean. In its wake lay the ruins of thousands of homes; destroyed by the powerful shockwaves created by the asteroid, the shockwaves plowing the earth along a path several kilometers wide. Casualties numbered a few thousand; fortunately the asteroid's impact wasn't close to settled territories. But Macaper's prophecy came true in a very striking manner; dozens of thousands were left deaf by the meteor, as the sound waves streaming around it had exploded the eardrums of people many kilometers away from the meteor. The roaring stone had silenced the world for all those people and the name of Damella Macaper became renowned throughout the world.

Four more events are to take place according to the prophecy and speculations about their nature abound. Many claim expertise in the prophecies, but none can inform us with any certainty about what is to transpire. The fourth event is described by Macaper as "the appetite of nothing expands over the world"; the fifth is described as "the little brother makes the final sorrowful steps home; he is not welcome"; the sixth is

described as “what was many now becomes one when one becomes four”; the seventh is mentioned above.

What this means is for anyone to guess, but the majority of people agree that Macaper’s prophecy has put the fate of humans into perspective for the public and the next few months or years should be interesting indeed to watch.

Heaven

The Heaven constellation is a group of seven systems on the fringes of known space. In the middle of the constellation lies the Utopia system, where the headquarters of the Angel pirate clan are located.

The Angels are today one of the oldest and most powerful of the criminal organization found in the world of EVE. They established themselves in Utopia system a century ago and soon had the whole Heaven constellation under their control. At first they mainly acted as 'muscle-for-hire' for other criminal factions, but soon they started expanding their activities. They slowly but steadily increased their influence in the underworld and today DED consider them the most dangerous criminal faction around. The Angels' area of operation is much larger than that of most other crime syndicates. Due to this, the Cartel is divided into many smaller operational groups, each of which is prefixed with a specific name hinting at their role (Guardian Angels, Dark Angels).

But many believe that there is another reason behind the power of the Angels. The Heaven constellation is the former habitat of the Jovians. The ancestors of the Jovians settled in Utopia while the EVE gate was still open. The Heaven constellation was the home of the First and Second Jovian Empires, both larger and grander than their current Third Empire.

The Third Empire was founded half a millennium ago amidst the devastation of the Jovian Disease, which threatened to disintegrate Jovian society. In a desperate attempt to escape the wrath of the mysterious epidemic, the Jovians decided to relocate to another part of the world. Three huge vessels were built, termed Motherships; they were the first Titan-class ships ever built. The majority of the Jovian population relocated

in the Motherships. Those showing any sign of the Disease were left behind to die.

Some couple of centuries later, when space traveling had become a common thing, the constellation was entered by migrating scavenger groups. Many of those groups set themselves up within the constellation and eventually they evolved into criminal organizations. The strongest of those was the Angel cartel. They took over the abandoned but still intact Jovian space stations scattered around the constellation and rumors abound that some hidden secrets the Angels unlocked in these old stations is the real reason for the Angels' rise to power.

Gallente-Caldari War: The Early Days

By the time the Gallente Federation was founded two centuries ago the Caldari Corporations were already well established in Caldari society. Although not nearly as powerful as they are today, they were still preeminent in Caldari economic life.

Shortly after jump gate technology was jointly discovered by the Gallente and the Caldari a little over five hundred years before the Federation formed, the Caldari corporations had started their own interstellar surveying and colonization, separate from that conducted by the Gallente. It was these colonies, kept as a secret from the Gallenteans, that became the source of friction between the Gallenteans and the Caldari, culminating in the latter's defection from the Federation and an ensuing war between the two races.

It all started when a Gallente exploration ship happened upon one of the hidden Caldari colonies. When the Federation Senate learned of this they demanded a full-scale investigation into the matter and that all hidden Caldari colonies should immediately be put under Federation authority. This was too much for the Caldari Corporations, which were already grumbling over increasing Federation interference into their affairs. For the Caldari it was a simple question of losing their autonomy forever by caving in or making a stand right then and there. They decided to make a stand.

What made the situation so tense right from the start was the situation on Caldari Prime. Being located in the same solar system as Gallente Prime made the Gallenteans very nervous and, more importantly, a sizeable Gallentean population was living on Caldari Prime. Right after the Caldari defected from the Federation they focused on securing the jump gates leading to their (once) hidden bases, as those bases provided the

backbone to the Caldari military infrastructure at that time. At the same time the Gallenteans moved their fleet into orbit around Caldari Prime and started blocking the planet.

For the next few days nothing much happened. The Caldari were content to sit by the jump gates, while the Gallenteans were debating how to best negotiate a peace agreement. But the Caldari on Caldari Prime were restless. They found the Gallente blockade intolerable and soon small-scale guerrilla activities escalated into all out hostilities. In the end the Gallente population on the planet had to pay the price for the Federation's indecisiveness.

The turning point came when Caldari partisans sabotaged the glass dome of the Gallente-inhabited underwater city Nouvelle Rouvenor. More than half a million perished. From then on a lengthy, bloody war between the two races was all but inevitable – the Federation retaliated at once by sending an invasion force down to Caldari Prime and began a systematic orbital bombardment of the planet. Soon, the Caldari population had been driven to the mountains and the forests; their resistance getting weaker by the day. The only question was: how would the newly formed Caldari State respond?

The Elite

In the time since all the races came into contact with each other about 150 years ago interstellar trading has steadily increased, especially in the time since the races began cooperating more closely through institutes such as CONCORD.

Today a certain number of ships are equipped with a capsule, which makes control of the ship much more easy and efficient for the pilot (known as a 'capsuleer'). Not just anybody can become a capsuleer. Captains need special kind of neural riggings and the training is extremely rigorous and taxing, with only a small fraction of students actually making it through. This makes able capsuleers a unique breed that possesses special status within society. Capsuleers are regarded by the empires as objects of huge prestige, since the number of interstellar traders an empire has in many ways reflects the economic vitality of the empire.

Despite the desire of the empires to keep their capsuleers on a leash, however, things have developed differently. Because of the capsuleers' exalted status, they've managed as the years have passed to make themselves ever more independent from the empires that spawned them. While many capsuleers are still employees of an empire company or organization, the work they do is largely self-controlled. The ever-increasing number of capsuleers entering the market alleviates this problem for the empires and has allowed them to increase the number of capsuleers working for them despite the fact that proportionally more and more of these individuals are going totally independent. The independent ones, however, are setting up their own alliances and nation-states out on the fringe, slowly increasing their power and influence.

The prestige enjoyed by the capsuleer is enormous. Apart from the celebrity status many of them enjoy they receive a number of other privileges. The most important of these is their access to cloning, which is strictly supervised in all the empires. Although some rogue cloning stations are in operation the vast majority of cloning facilities are owned and run by the empires and the requirements for clone ownership are strict and rigorous. Capsuleers are one of very few professions that, due to the nature of their job, possess more or less unrestricted access to clones, although any special clone types must be paid for out of their own pockets.

CONCORD

CONCORD (Consolidated Cooperation and Relations Command) is an international assembly of regulating bodies founded over a century ago, not long after the five empires had established contact with each other. Relations between the five were strained right from the beginning, and one of the primary aims of CONCORD was to ease the pervasive tension and create a foundation for the empires to work their differences out peacefully.

The organization is branched into numerous divisions, each of which handles a certain aspect of the empires' relations. Of these divisions the CAD (Commerce Assessment Department), which oversees interstellar trade agreements and regulations, and the DED (Directive Enforcement Department), which oversees policing in space, are by far the largest and most influential. Most spacefarers will only ever deal with these two departments on any regular basis; to millions of people, these two represent the actual face of CONCORD.

The inner workings of CONCORD are democratic in nature, with each of the five empires technically possessing equal say in all matters (though a nation's actual pull more often than not will come down to the persuasiveness of its representatives on the debating floor). Early on, the Amarrians were adamant that the Minmatar Republic would not gain admission to the assembly, but they later reluctantly agreed.

For the first few years of its existence, CONCORD wielded limited power. The fledgling organization had little diplomatic sway, and regulation enforcement would time and time again prove difficult for its agents. It was not until 18 years after its founding that CONCORD gained the respect of the international community. After the battle of Iyen-Oursta – the bloodiest and most costly engagement the Gallente-Caldari War had seen in

decades – both sides were tired of fighting, though long-entrenched hatred and pride prevented either side from asking for a ceasefire. CONCORD took the initiative, and in just under six months managed to negotiate a peace accord between these two bitter enemies, one that would endure for almost a century.

In the last two decades the organization's authority increased further, particularly as interstellar trade grew into the cornerstone of New Eden's economy that it is today. The growing power of CONCORD often raised concern within the empires that the organization could begin to exercise leverage in areas up until then regarded as the nations' internal affairs. No longer simply a neutral ground for the empires to hammer out diplomatic agreements, CONCORD had become an independent institution that set its own rules and regulations, ones which it was both willing and able to uphold. The organization's ever-expanding bureaucracy had subtly severed its cords over time, so that it swore fealty to no nation. The only hold the empires had historically possessed over the organization – that of financial support – had in addition been almost completely erased, as revenues garnered through customs, confiscation of illegal goods, license sales and the like were (and still are) more than enough to keep the organization in the black.

On several occasions throughout CONCORD's history relations between the empires deteriorated to within an inch of all-out war but were nursed back to health through the organization's diplomacy and deterrence. Such was not to be the case in late YC 110, when a fleet belonging to the Minmatar Elders and the Thukker Tribe conducted a strike against the organization's core communications hub, crippling its rapid response teams and enabling the Elders to mount a large-scale offensive against the Amarr Empire. This marked the beginning of what would become known as the Elder War.

CONCORD was back to a semblance of functionality in short order, but the damage was already done; tensions had boiled over into conflict. While CONCORD imposed peace enough to maintain the status quo and keep New Eden from slipping into anarchy, the hostilities already invoked would not be quelled. Using auxiliary forces composed of capsuleer paramilitaries, the nations of New Eden today fight a war under the watchful gaze of CONCORD, which still struggles to rebuild and redefine itself in the blood-red dawn of the Empyrean age. It remains to be seen how – or, indeed, whether – this one-time pillar of New Eden will restore its tarnished reputation.

Gallente-Caldari War: The Breakout

Following the attack on Nouvelle Rouvenor an extreme right-wing government grabbed the power reigns in the Gallente Federation and advocated a harsh response: bombing Caldari Prime and sending in troops to take control of the planet. Those within the Federation believing that peace talks should be initiated instead of an invasion didn't dare speak up for fear of being branded cowards or, worse, traitors; the Gallente war machine grinded into gear.

It soon became obvious that it was a question of when, not if, the Gallenteans would take full control of the planet. The newly formed Caldari government, led by the heads of the Corporations, was far from being in full agreement as to what the correct course of action was. This disagreement, which severely hampered the Caldari State in following a coherent strategy, was only settled after the Morning of Reasoning, when the six most militant Corporations jointly ousted the other CEO's from power. The Caldari saw that it was impossible to try to fight the much larger Gallente Federation for control of Caldari Prime. Instead, they started devising a plan to evacuate the Caldari population on the planet.

For the plan to work an evacuation window of at least one month had to be created by the Caldari Navy; it had to keep the Gallente fleet occupied and away from the planet for this period of time to allow the thousands of civilian and cargo vessels gathered for the evacuation to operate safely. The Caldari high command knew their fleet was heavily outnumbered and outgunned by the Gallente fleet, but they put their faith in several advantages: first, the surprise factor would help them in the initial stages; secondly, the ferocity of the Caldari personnel, fighting for their home and their families, would carry them through a lot of hardship; and thirdly, the Gallente ships orbiting Caldari Prime were large and cumbersome, little

more than shooting platforms ideal for orbital bombardment. The Caldari hoped their small, fast one-man fighters would run circles around the Gallente ships.

It is doubtful whether the above-mentioned advantages had sufficed for the Caldari, but they enjoyed one further advantage that they knew nothing about. The extreme right-wing faction that held the reigns of power in the Federation was getting paranoid. They saw conspirators in every corner and started firing prominent figures from the administration and army, replacing them with eager yes-men with little experience and even less initiative. The result was total chaos in the Gallente war-effort. This chaos was not enough to completely halt the military operations on and around Caldari Prime, but it made the Gallente fleet and army ill-prepared for any drastic changes.

It was thus with a relative ease that the Caldari fleet managed to take control of the orbital zones of Caldari Prime and drive the Gallente fleet back. Even the most optimistic of the Caldari were taken by surprise and there were even talks that the Caldari fleet should continue to Gallente Prime and repay the Gallenteans by bombing their home planet. But the more level-headed of the Caldari knew that decisively defeating the Gallente home fleet was impossible, indeed it would be hard enough to defend against it once it arrived to reclaim the space around Caldari Prime. So instead, the Caldari high command quickly set into motion their evacuation program and soon millions of Caldari were leaving the planet for their new homes.

Two weeks passed. More than half the Caldari population was still on the planet. Both sides employed dozens of scout ships to gauge the strength and intentions of the other. It was becoming obvious to the Caldari that the Gallenteans were preparing a massive assault on Caldari Prime to drive the Caldari out and resume their military conquest of the planet. A new plan

was needed. Days passed and desperation began seeping in; the Gallente attack was imminent.

Finally, the Caldari admiral Yakiya Tovil-Toba took matters into his own hands. He led the few dozen ships he commanded and jumped to Gallente Prime. Before the stunned Gallenteans could respond he had attacked and destroyed a few stray Gallente ships. But the Gallenteans were quick to recover and before long admiral Tovil-Toba was on the run. But he managed to beat the advancing Gallente ships off and retreat to the moon of Floreau. The Gallenteans stop their pursuit to gather their forces and lick their wounds. The two fleets clashed again the next day and again admiral Tovil-Toba showed his remarkable tactical skills and managed to withdraw relatively unscathed. Tovil-Toba played this game of cat-and-mouse with the Gallenteans for a whole week, except that he was in the role of the mouse. Eventually only one of his ships remained, a badly damaged fighter-carrier. In his dying breaths Tovil-Toba directed the huge vessel down towards Gallente Prime.

On entering the atmosphere the ship broke into several burning pieces, killing all aboard. But the largest of these pieces reached the ground and one of them hit the city of Hueromont, killing roughly two million people. Admiral Tovil-Toba and his crew sacrificed themselves in order for millions more Caldari to escape. To this day he is revered as a national hero and his name is one of the first things every Caldari child learns.

The turmoil in the Federation created by the Hueromont Incident, as the Gallenteans knew it, toppled the government and a new one took over, this one more willing to listen to those wishing for peace. The week bought by Tovil-Toba and the ensuing confusion following in the wake of the new government gave the Caldari enough time to finish the evacuation of Caldari Prime. Only a small fighting force remained, acting as a guerilla force.

One would imagine that peace would now be settled, but it wasn't to be. A large faction of the Gallente Federation was neither willing to forgive or forget Nouvelle Rouvenor or Hueromont and the Caldari, elated by their success and their belief in superior fighting power with their small one-man fighters, dreamed of returning one day to their home planet. The war was to rage for years yet and some stunning military victories by the Caldari following their Breakout soon led the Gallenteans in a desperate search for an answer against the highly trained one-man fighters that lay at the core of the Caldari victories.

Rebel with a Cause

Ten years ago security forces in the Caldari system of Suroken destroyed a civilian ship. The headquarters of Hyasyoda, a Caldari Corporation, are located in the system. The ship was found trespassing and refused to change course despite numerous warnings and was blown up in the end.

Aboard the ship where numerous radicals, both Caldari and Gallenteans, demonstrating against recently exposed information about dubious drug experiments the Corporation was undertaking, involving for instance slaves provided by the Amarrians.

All but one of the radicals were killed when the ship blew up, the only survivor was the ship captain Aki Onikori, protected by his capsule. Amongst the dead was his wife. Onikori swore that the death of his wife and his compatriots would be avenged and in the decade since the incident he has made his vow come true through several terrorist acts.

Onikori seldom goes by his real name and is best known to the public by the name Fiend, a play on words of his name in Caldari. In the past few years his twisted ideology has mutated from one of innocent anarchy to a bloody crusade against authority in every form. Early on his focus was first and foremost on the pharmaceuticals industry, but in recent years he has started targeting more diverse targets and seems especially fond of governmental institutions. Onikori is very persuasive and extremely driven and these traits have helped him secure support from various sources sympathetic to his cause. With these funds the Fiend has created a small, tight unit of experienced and dedicated terrorists. It goes without saying that the Fiend and his friends are high on the wanted list of almost every police and military organization there is. The SARO is particularly keen on

getting its hands on him, after he blew up a SARO ship recently. This embarrassment is something SARO wants to rectify as soon as possible.

But the Fiend is not only cunning, but also paranoid. He never stays long in any one place and even his closest associates are often in the dark about his whereabouts or future plans. This extreme paranoia has served the Fiend well in his on-going crusade against the pharmaceutical industry and other “totalitarian institutes with no regard for human life” as he himself phrases it. Even if he’s a hunted man the Fiend still finds time to plan and execute his terrorist acts that have made him famous. The Fiend is indiscriminating in the selection of his targets, a clear sign that he holds few customs or creeds dear, something that his critics have pointed out as a serious contradiction – on one hand he claims to be fighting against those that hold human life in contempt, while on the other he frequently kills innocent bystanders in his attacks.

The fact that many of his attacks have killed or injured civilian bystanders, often children, means that he is highly unpopular almost everywhere and that few people will be sorry when his reign of terrorism comes to an end.

The Khanid Kingdom

The Khanid Kingdom stretches over some dozen constellations near the fringe of the Amarr Empire. The kingdom was founded some 300 years ago and is in every respect a sovereign state, even if the connections with the Amarr Empire itself are strong. It is still ruled by the man who founded the kingdom and whose name it bears - Khanid II, often called the Sixth Heir. Once one of the Five Heirs he defied the Amarrian succession rituals and split himself and his estates from the empire. The reasons were his fierce ambition and love of life, traits that later helped keep his kingdom intact through numerous upheavals. At the time of the succession Khanid was commander-in-chief of the military forces of the empire. After having refused to commit suicide he promptly confiscated one of the two Titans the Amarrians owned at the time, both of them personal property of the Emperor himself. Khanid escaped to his estates on the Titan, escorted by a portion of the Amarr fleet, claimed by Khanid by the power of his position.

For the first few years following the split the newly-founded kingdom faced grave dangers time and again. The greatest threat did not come directly from the Amarr Empire itself - the new emperor and heirs were still getting themselves acquainted to their new positions - but from the brother of Khanid II. This brother, named Dakos, was in the forefront of those relatives of Khanid that opposed his actions and wished to remain as one of the Heir families. Soon after Khanid was crowned as king Dakos rebelled against him and the infant kingdom witnessed its first civil war. The struggle raged for a few months, in that time the Amarr Empire had joined the fray, naturally casting their support for Dakos. For some weeks the survival of the Khanid kingdom hung in the balance, but when Khanid managed through trickery to have his brother assassinated, the opposition fizzled to nothing. Khanid lost some of the isolated regions of the kingdom, but the core of it remained intact.

This was not the first time that Khanid's own family acted against him. Khanid has always managed to smother all rebellion attempts, each time tightening the leash on his family. Today all women and children belonging to the family spend their time in the royal palace on Khanid Prime. Although they live in luxury and comfort they're still hostages, kept to keep their husbands and fathers in line. As for the men they must spend at least quarter of each year in the royal palace on Khanid Prime and there are strict restrictions as to what arms they can own or bear.

The Khanid Kingdom in many ways resembles the Amarr Empire. The caste system is intact - the Holders still reign as the social elite. The governmental structure and administration are all but identical, the only difference being the lack of checks-and-balances that many entrenched institutions and local barons exercise within the empire. Just as for the Amarr Emperor Khanid II is in name undisputed ruler of his realm, but in practice a number of powerful magnates share or dilute the power. In the empire's case it's the Heirs that compete with the Emperor for power, in the kingdom's case it's the members of the minor families that supported Khanid during his rift with the empire. Other features, such as the importance of religion and slavery, are also very much alike in the two states. In fact, the kingdom takes slavery even further than the empire. The Amarr Empire uses almost exclusively Minmatar and Ealur slaves, but the kingdom, denied many of their traditional slave sources, take slaves wherever they can find them. Khanid himself has a Gallentean - a former pop-star - as his personal slave, something he finds highly amusing but makes the Gallenteans frothing at their mouths.

But even if Khanid has tried to build his kingdom to mirror the empire he once belonged to, there are many discreet differences. The biggest of these are the way the Dark Amarrians - so called for the color schemes on their ships - conduct their trade and business. The Khanid Kingdom is not nearly as rigid and stale in their governing of inter-stellar trade, for the very

simple reason that the kingdom absolutely needs outside trade to survive, which is not the case for the empire. Since the Amarr Empire seized their attempts to reconcile with the separatists decades ago trade has started to flourish between the two. The result is that today the kingdom acts in many ways like a window to the outside world for the reclusive empire. Trade goods that can't be directly transported into or out of the empire are carried through kingdom because of the much more lenient trade policies the empire has for them. Many Dark Amarrians have grown fat acting as intermediaries for Amarr traders and outsiders.

Many other notable differences can be seen between the kingdom and the empire - the Dark Amarrians embrace technology, including cloning, much more willingly than the Amarr brethrens and even if most Amarrian traditions and customs still exist within the kingdom, they've been modified so that Dark Amarrian society is much more dynamic and robust than that of the Amarr Empire.

Gallente-Caldari War: The War Drones On

The bitter ferocity of the first stages of the war fueled the animosity and ill will between the two races, killing all hope for peace for years to come. The Caldari were getting stronger by the day as the refugees from Caldari Prime started to settle in, while the Gallenteans were still in a state of confusion following the fall of the fascist regime. The Caldari mounted a series of raids into Federation territory, which the Gallenteans in their slow and cumbersome ships were ill equipped to meet. But the might of the Federation was too much for the Caldari to overcome and their raids, even if successful military wise, had little impact beside draining the morale of the Gallenteans and bolstering their own.

After a while the Caldari agenda became clear - they were willing to sign peace if the Federation would return Caldari Prime and acknowledge the newly formed Caldari state. But the Gallenteans couldn't agree to these demands for two reasons: one, they were loath to admit a sovereign state into their midst; close to their own home planet and were unwilling to uproot the sizeable Gallente population on Caldari Prime, and second, the Gallenteans were not alone in the Federation and if they allowed the Caldari to leave the Intakis and Mannars, both of them starting to flex their economical and political muscles, might be tempted to follow, thus throwing the whole society into turmoil. The Gallenteans were forced to regard the Caldari as rebels and renegades and had to try to get them back into the Federation, with good or evil.

For a while the Federation could do little else than watch the Caldari play havoc upon the Gallentean fleet and the outermost provinces of the Federation. The Caldari were getting ever bolder and every few months they seemed to have a new and improved version of their nimble solo-fighters, which the Federation had few answers against. To many

Gallenteans it seemed inevitable that, unless their demands were met, the Caldari would sooner or later overrun the whole Federation. Everything the Gallenteans tried failed - their attempts for their own solo-fighters were utter failure and stationary defenses such as mines and sentry guns could only go so far in protecting space facilities for long. It seemed like every time the Gallenteans came up with something sleek and speedy and powerful the Caldari would soon respond with something even sleeker and more powerful.

Finally, the solution evolved from the stationary defenses of all things. The Gallenteans had employed mines for a long time with so-so results, but with the massive advances in robotics technology taking place at this time the mines were slowly transformed into a far deadlier object. The first drones were little more than mines with proximity detonators and some limited moving capabilities, but soon they had advanced to the level that a single drone almost rivaled a solo-fighter's capabilities. The fact that drones were many times cheaper to build than fighters and didn't require a highly trained pilot meant that the days of the solo-fighters were numbered. The drones reversed the tide of the war and now the Caldari were scrambling to come up with a solution against these new weapons. It didn't take them that long - they simply upgraded their fighters a bit, added some shields and extra weapons and called the new vessels frigates. Some extra crew was also needed at first, but then the Caldari obtained capsule technology from the Jovians some years later and could again reduce the crew to one on most frigates.

The climatic battle of the war was fought near the system of Iyen-Oursta. Both sides - the Gallenteans with their drones and Caldari with their new frigates - were confident of victory and thus were willing to throw everything they had into the battle. The result was the second-largest space battle ever fought in the world of New Eden, second only to the Battle of Vak-Atioth fought during the Amarr-Jove War. The Battle of Iyen-Oursta raged for a whole day. During a lapse in the action after almost 15 hour constant

fighting the Caldari withdrew in a stately fashion, leaving the battlefield to the Gallenteans. The Gallenteans claimed victory as the side retaining the battlefield, but the Caldari also claimed victory as they had inflicted considerably more losses and casualties on the Gallenteans than they'd received themselves. In any case, the battle gave neither side the decisive victory they'd sought and it was becoming obvious to everyone that such a victory would never be scored.

With frigates the Caldari managed the stem the tide of the advancing Federation and before long stalemate again ensued. Slowly, normal life returned for most people, the war became a distant thunderstorm that only occasionally rattled the populace as a whole. Neither side was willing to offer peace for fear of it being taken as a sign of weakness, but the new generation growing up on both sides was willing to sacrifice itself for such an uncertain cause, so the war slowly faded into small-scale border skirmishes and raids. The matter was finally settled when CONCORD, at that point a relatively new entity that had yet to truly establish itself, decided that the war, posing as it did a threat to New Eden's diplomatic and economic stability, had gone on long enough. Sensing tiredness on both sides after the Iyen-Oursta battle, they used the opportunity to open peace talks between the two obstinate adversaries and were, within six months, able to broker a ceasefire agreement acceptable to both sides. The Federation acknowledged the Caldari state as sovereign and both sides were to retain their original outposts and settlements, except for Caldari Prime, which remained under Federation control.

The Blood Raiders

‘Every seat in the passenger cabin was occupied, the occupants sitting so peacefully one could believe they were napping, if it weren’t for the fact that each and every one had been completely drained of their blood. The same fate had befallen the rest of the crew, even the captain in his capsule was now only a dry husk...’ News like this can now be heard almost every week from some remote region near or within Amarr space. The perpetrators are commonly called the Blood Raiders, aptly named for their habit of draining their victims of blood and taking it with them.

The Blood Raiders are part of an ancient cultist faction called Sani Sabik, meaning Bloodfriends. The cult first appeared thousands of years ago on Amarr Prime, long before space travel came into being. The cult was based on schismatic sect of the Amarr state religion, which advocated that some people were born for greatness and other people only lived to feed and breed these geniuses. To this the cult added the obsession of the Amarr elite - the Holders - about eternal life so the result was a cult so pervasive and destructive that the Amarr authorities immediately stamped down on it. But the cult lived on in the shadows, every so often mutating itself anew. At one time in their history they started using blood in their gruesome rituals, until then they’d had only used blood in the initiation ritual, but now it became the focal point of their supposed search for eternal youth.

Today the cult exists in numerous more or less independent sects throughout the Amarr Empire, and some have even moved their business to other empires or neutral space. Each of the different sects of the Sani Sabik cult vary in their rituals and doctrine, some are inoffensive and almost inactive while a few have taken ‘blooding’ - as they call the draining of blood from a body - to new heights. There are stories of ‘blood farms’, where people are kept against their will and blooded regularly; other stories

tell of sects that engage in necrophilic and even cannibalistic activities. As little is known of the inner works of most of the sects it is difficult to say whether these stories are true or just urban legends.

The most notorious of the sects is the one under the leadership of Omir Sarikusa, an Amarrian with some Caldari ancestry. Before Omir took over, the sect was already infamous for killing children as they were considered to have 'purer' blood. Omir has abandoned that practice, but instead his sect has started targeting cloned people, as they believe blood from clones is better suited for their freakish blood rituals. In their search for cloned people, Omir's sect has taken to space and in few short years their frequent attacks on passenger ships and other space vessels have made them feared throughout Amarr space and far beyond.

Sisters of EVE

Space outside the realms of the empires gives home to more than just brigands and pirates, it is also the home of those at the other end of the spectrum - those that dedicate their lives to aiding the needy. The Sisters of EVE is one of these organizations, perhaps the one best known. But the Sisters are about more than just aid relief. The foundation of the organization is firmly based in religion and science, a strange combination that has still gained much social ground in all the empires.

The Sisters were originally founded as a neutral aid organization during the Gallente-Caldari War. It later served the same purpose during the Amarr-Jove War and the Minmatar Rebellion and firmly established itself as the main humanitarian relief agency in the world of EVE. The Sisters have a number of bases scattered around, almost all of them are located near popular trade routes, yet outside empire borders.

But the Sisters do more than just come to the aid of those in need. They are also devoted practitioners of their religious beliefs, which center around the EVE-gate. The Sisters believe that this 'relic from god', as they call it, holds the key to the universe and are determined to unlock it, in order to bring 'everlasting peace under god's guidance and guardianship' to the world of EVE. The Sisters maintain that god resides at the other side of the gate and from his domain he guides the lives of those that believe in him and keeps them out of harm's way. The Sisters have large followings in all the empires (even some Jovians) and the organization is mostly run on donations from those followers, as well as from some limited commercial enterprises and tariffs levied on those visiting their stations.

In recent years the Sisters have become more methodical in their approach to 'unlocking' the EVE-gate and have undertaken numerous scientific

experiments on the matter. The instigator of these scientific approaches is the current high priestess of the Sisters, Harna Durado. She claims it is 'god's will' that the EVE-gate is studied thoroughly, with the intent of determining once and for all what forces are at work in and around it. As of yet the research being performed by the Sisters has not uncovered any stunning revelations, but the millions of believers belonging to the Sisters's faith are fervently praying for a breakthrough in the near future.

The InterBus

One of the numerous operations jointly run and organized by the empires is the InterBus. The InterBus is a transportation organization responsible for ferrying people between space stations. The company was formed three decades ago with the intent to support and facilitate passenger transportation in space. At that time such a company was sorely needed, but the huge initial cost of entering the field made it hard for private companies to move into the field. Today, this has changed; there are now a number of independent companies engaged in ferrying people between space stations, the biggest of them is the Gallente-run OmniBus company.

But InterBus still enjoys the largest market share by a fair margin, something the private companies are not all that happy about; grumbling about unhealthy state-intrusion that makes competition very lopsided. The InterBus may be child of its time but it still serves a vital role - that is to link even the smallest and most remote stations into their vast network. As stated in InterBus' charter:

"...Interbus must offer service to all stations, placed in solar-systems that have a stargate leading to a solar-system that is a part of the program. Exempt to this rule are systems that exceed a graph distance of 13 jumps from the Interbus headquarters..."

In order to do this efficiently InterBus has had to tread a fine line between serving their governments faithfully while at the same time establishing trust with all the motley assortment of stations appearing all over the place. The board of the InterBus has successfully managed to stay clear of any quarrels and conflicts that regularly emerge between the empires or other factions. The result is that even if InterBus isn't exactly welcomed with open

arms everywhere, they're still perceived as useful and neutral enough to be allowed to operate.

The InterBus system, spanning almost the whole of the known world, is both a cheap, reliable transportation method for those without access to other space ships and a safety net for all space travelers that get in trouble - many careless explorers or unlucky merchants would never have made it home if it weren't for the service of the InterBus.

The Armageddon Project

Even if peace has reigned in the world of EVE for a number of years this does not mean that the empires are sitting at ease when it comes to military technology. Each one of them is spending huge sums of money on R&D every year, as well as supporting independent research facilities and scientists. All of them have the same dream of discovering the ultimate weapon, something that just the threat of using would make the rest of the empires fall in line. Such weapons have been discovered before and each time their existence gave a new dimension of the game of power politics, but counter-measures have always been discovered sooner or later, returning equilibrium once again.

Many have commented on how relieving it is that none of the empires has developed anything resembling a super-weapon that would surely upset the fragile peace existing between the empires. Even the Jovians with all their technological advances have never produced anything of the sort. But recent rumors might suggest otherwise. These rumors tell of a revolutionary new weapon developed in secret by the Jovians, a weapon capable of even destroying a whole planet. The Jovians are as elusive and tightlipped as always and have neither denied nor confirmed the rumors. Surveillance and covert operations made by other empires have not met with much success as the Jovians are masters of concealment. But the fragments of data that has been gathered have poured fuel on the fire of speculations and many fear that the Jovians are either waiting for the right opportunity for displaying the power of their new gadget, or they are secretly negotiating to sell it to the highest bidder.

The Scope

News travel quickly in the world of EVE, and none quicker than those provided by the Scope. The Scope is a Gallente-based media firm that is widely regarded as the most far-reaching, depth delving public news agency there is.

An eccentric but fabulously rich entrepreneur named Lous Chavol founded the Scope a century and a half ago. Chavol had made his fortune with one of the more successful communication companies that sprang up after FTL communications were discovered. Through his communication company Chavol had access to massive amount of information and it was a logical step for him to use this as a basis for a media company.

As most modern news agencies the Scope offers its service in many forms, such as through the traditional HoloVision, in order to cater to as many as possible. The most recent addition to this is to send news, even images, directly into the mind of the consumer through the use of headsets provided by Egonics Inc. This new service has already become very popular and the collaboration of the Scope and Egonics promises to be highly profitable for the two companies.

The Scope has always set its standard for a fast and reliable news service. It has never descended into tabloid status, but always set its stock in being as truthful as possible, and this is the image it has managed to cultivate in the minds of people since its foundation. However, its critics point out that even if the news are true this tells only half the story. Just as important as a reliable news coverage is how the news are presented, how much time and space are allocated to each piece of news, how it's presented and, most importantly, what news are omitted or played down. In this way, it is easy to

influence and steer the public opinion because the perceived importance of events is more important than actual facts.

As a prime example of this the critics of Scope mention the case of the Caldari pharmaceuticals giants Zainou, owned by the Ishukone Corporation, and one of the largest sponsors and advertisers of the Scope. Some years ago they got into trouble when accused of bad business ethics involving deals within the Minmatar Republic. The Scope gave these news very little coverage, but all the more to a piece of news of a new wonder-drug that Zainou was working on. Although there is no clear indication that Zainou itself interfered in this matter, many believe that the editors of the Scope decided by themselves to help their important supporters in this way.

Konrakas

In the early days of space flight ages ago it served no other purpose than being the means of travel between two planets. But in the last decades space travel has become much more. Thousands of people now live most of their lives solely in space, calling some space station their home instead of a planet, or a country. Space stations have increased in size, having grown into full-fledged habitats with food production units and factories able to satisfy every need of the populace.

Naturally, these cities in space require huge amount of materials and minerals to sustain and support themselves. If they're lucky enough to orbit a populated planet they are seldom in want of anything, but others must fend for themselves. Planetary mining of uninhabited planets and moons is vitally important for any manufacturing station that wants to compete on equal footing. Although such stations do exist without the support of a mineral rich stellar body below it, such station must rely on minerals being transported to them, which is always more cumbersome and expensive. This has made uninhabited but mineral rich planets gold mines often in the literal sense for anyone aspiring to large-scale manufacturing.

One such mineral-rich planet is Konrakas in the system of Shintaht. The system, originally surveyed and named by the Caldari, lies close to Amarr space and has been claimed by both the Caldari and the Amarrians, although neither has yet settled the system. Konrakas has an extremely chaotic climate. The seasons vary greatly, ranging from icy cold to scorching heat. Ocean tides are dramatic and floods are very common. Winds howl constantly over the landscape, frequently reaching hurricane speed. The gravitational forces also cause earthquakes regularly, as well as volcanic eruptions.

The planet is, not surprisingly, completely lifeless. The natural forces shaking the planet have also caused many rare and valuable minerals to shift close to the surface, making the planet a mineral heaven. These same natural forces, however, make it extremely difficult to mine these minerals, and neither the Caldari nor the Amarrians have yet found the willingness to make the heavy investment needed to start a planetary mining operation on Konrakas.

The Right Man, The Right Place

In the competitive space trader community the only thing that often stands between riches and bankruptcy is knowing the right people in the right places. On many stations only some basic trade goods are available unless the trader knows the right person on the station to deal with, in case some special goods would become available. If this person happens to have underworld connections these goods could be of illegal nature; if the person has connections with the military it might offer prototype equipment, and so on. There are even whole areas of space that are only accessible to those with the right contacts.

Like in any lone of business states and companies try their best to keep a close tab on space commerce in order to maintain what monopolies they may enjoy. The few windows this leaves for outsiders are thus highly coveted and fought over. For even if there's plenty of trade deals to be made on the free market it is only through contacts that traders can expect to gain access to the those rare and expensive items that pave the road to riches.

These contacts come in every shape and form, some are sought for the information and access to higher levels they present, others for their exotic or powerful items they proffer, and others still for some trade concessions or interesting missions they provide.

One of the big company employees who is known for his willingness to dabble a little on the side with freelancers is Pekki Matakken, a sector manager for the Kaalakiota Corporation. Residing in the Saatuban system, an economic nexus for the surrounding systems, he has established a reputation for offering fair and prosperous trade deals to those close with the KK. And those that find favor with the shrewd Caldari can expect to be

offered a chance to link up with people even higher in the corps' hierarchy. But in the same vein, those who deal unfairly with him quickly lose his favor and find themselves out in the cold.

The Peralles Incident

The theory and technology behind jump gates opened up a whole new era in the history of mankind and is readily accepted as being one of the most important discoveries of all times. Jump gates have now been in usage for centuries and new versions appear regularly that make them more sophisticated and safe. Even if the functions of jump gates are well known from a theoretical point of view, there still remain a lot of unanswered questions about the fundamentals of dimensional inter-connections. Naturally, many theories exist on the subject, but none are comprehensive enough to fully explain how the universe is divided into many dimensions and the connections between them, some also touch upon the subject of hyperspace, an alternative plain in another dimension. About the only statement these theories agree upon is that these issues are definitely not as simple as they seem on the surface.

Every now and then some unexplained events have occurred when a ship jumps through a jump gate, but these have been so few and far between that they've always been put down to accidents or faulty data. In recent months strange incidents in the barren and unpopulated systems near the hub of the known world have had people starting to question the reliability of jump gates and wonder whether humans opened Pandora's box when they started using them.

What finally caught the attention of the media and, hence, the public, was the disappearance of the Gallentean Senator Hubert Caissor along with his family and his fortune in the ship Peralles en route to a new post as ambassador to the Amarrians. The Peralles entered a jump gate in the Dom-Aphis system between Amarr and Gallente space. Its destination was the jump gate in the Iderion system close by, but it never re-appeared there. What makes this even more of a puzzle is that the control station at

Ilderion jump gate received notification that a ship was incoming, showing all the right signs, yet no ship exited the jump gate. What is more, this notification is received at the exact same time every day, with the same result: no ship appearing even if all the signs indicate that a ship is about to come through the jump gate.

Since the Peralles incident stories of other similar incidents have surfaced, all within the same region. These stories, some no more than unsubstantiated rumors, all tell tales of disappearing ships, strange disturbances while jumping, ghostly echoes and images and unsettling time shifts in the vicinity of jump gates. The empires have started an inquiry into the matter, but still no rational explanation of the phenomenon has been offered.

The Encounter

What a stroke of luck! Burki 'Tiny' Trom relaxed as his cruiser made the last maneuvers through the docking bay doors of the Minmatar station. He had been looking for a training kit for Entwined Shield Systems for a week now and had finally found it here in this half-ass market zone deep within the Republic. If it weren't for his acquaintance in the Republic's ministry of trade he would have never thought of looking in this obscure service station in the Nifflung system. But once again this only proved that if you wanted to get your hands on those rare and precious items you had to be prepared to look in unorthodox places.

Tiny had already made the necessary preparations, last week he finished training Advanced Ocular ECM, the pre-requisite for ESS, and he had stocked up on stims specially designed to boost his memory faculties for faster training. Pity to have to come all this way just for an item stored in computer form. He had asked them to upload it to him as was the norm, but no, these primitive peasants demanded he came in person to collect it. Oh well, at least he was here now. Besides, Tiny knew of a rich mineral seam in a nearby asteroid field. Wasn't it ideal to spend the idle time while expanding his knowledge to search for the mother load of all mother loads?

Tiny didn't spend any more time on the station than absolutely necessary, so few minutes later he was back in space. And what do you know? It seemed three space cowboys were laying in wait for him, a cruiser and a couple of menacing frigates. Great. Tiny's communication device sputtered into action: 'OK, fella. We've got you covered. Now be a smart boy and jettison whatever you have in your cargo hold and no harm will come to your precious cruiser.' Tiny ran some profile scans on the three ships closing in on him. As he thought, pirate scum! Well, this wasn't their lucky day. Tiny sent a reply: 'Sorry, guys. No can do. I suggest you turn and

leave before I become inclined to inflict some serious unpleasantries on your sorry asses.' Tiny imagined the sneers his reply was getting from the gung-ho gangsters and smiled when his radar registered what he knew all along was out there. Three small dots blinked into existence, cordoned around the cowboys. All cruisers. With cloaking devices. It didn't take long until the only sign left of the pirates' presence was the residue from their warp drives as they fled. Before they'd warped Tiny sent them one final farewell message: 'Heavily armed amigos, never to leave home without them!' Then he laughed and paged his comrades: 'Lets go!'

The Spider Miner

The Spider Miner drone is the most common mining drone in use today. It is manufactured by the Caldari industry giant Ishukone and is readily available throughout the world of EVE. It is not the best mining drone out there, but it is cheap and reliable, which explains its success. The Spider Miner uses cheap laser technology to accomplish its task. The laser beam fulfills three essential tasks: extraction, transport and classification of minerals. First of all it vaporizes the minerals on the surface of the asteroids where they form a charged plasma gas. Secondly, the laser beam itself is shaped as a cylindrical beam. By pulsating the laser amplitude, a rotating magnetic field is induced on the cylindrical surface. This acts as a 'screw' shaped magnet on the plasma particles, that get sucked up inside the cylindrical laser tube. Due to the different mass/charge ratio of the atoms, the particle beam is diffused, like a ray of light through a prism. This enables the drone to sort and accumulate the different minerals. Obviously, a lot of the vaporized minerals actually fall outside the beam and are thus wasted, but the benefits and ease of use of the drone outweighs this waste for most practical purposes.

The spider miner is agile and has a good range, allowing the controller to travel up to a few kilometers (depending on the density of the asteroid field) and still recall it. Experienced miners frequently use two or more mining drone teams at once, allowing them to leapfrog from one asteroid to the next, constantly scanning for suitable asteroids to mine while his teams are busy carving up another one somewhere else.

The Ammatars

The Ammatars are descendants of Minmatars that collaborated with the Amarrians during the latter occupation of the Minmatar worlds. When the Amarrians were thrown out during the Minmatar Rebellion their collaborators fled with them. The Amarrians helped their Minmatar allies to settle in a few systems not far from the newly formed Minmatar Republic. The Ammatars regard themselves as the true rulers of the Minmatars, mainly based around the fact that a fair proportion of the old Minmatar aristocracy, or tribal leaders, were among them. In this vein they named their domain San Matar, meaning 'true home'.

The term Ammatar was first used by the Gallenteans to distinguish between the two groups. Out of convenience even the Ammatars themselves started using it, stating that, with the help of the Amarrians, they've progressed beyond the old social structure of the Minmatar tribes. Indeed, the Ammatars have very deliberately abolished many age-old traditions of the Minmatar tribal society and embraced some Amarrian ones instead.

The Ammatar domain, San Matar, is semi-autonomous. The Ammatar rulers have full domestic control, but their foreign policies must have the consent of the Amarrians and their military forces are, nominally, under the authority of the Amarrians. The relationship of the two has been remarkably smooth in the past, with no serious quarrels.

The San Matar government is structured the same way as any other province of the Amarr Empire, with a governor at the head and district officials beneath him prescribing over the various departments of state. These heads of state are always Ammatar, although the governor himself traditionally is an Amarrian, and acts as the supreme representative of the

Amarr Empire. As is to be expected not all Ammatars are eager for constant warfare with the Minmatar Republic. Those who are the most belligerent of them often feel that the Ammatar state is doing too little so they have formed a group of their own to fight the Minmatars. In a sense this group is a direct response to the independent rebel groups the Minmatar have and the guerilla tactics employed by either side are similar.

Since its inauguration San Matar has been in a constant struggle with the Minmatar Republic. Both states have expanded considerably in the last decades and now border on each other in numerous places. The Republic, backed by the Gallente Federation, had the upper hand for a while, forcing the Amarr Empire to repeatedly come to the aid of their allies, but in recent years the tables have been turning and the Ammatars have managed to set up military installations and space stations right under the Republic's nose

Broad speculation existed for many years on where the Ammatars got the support for these conquests, as the Amarr traditionally were only willing to aid the Ammatars when the latter were under direct threat. Though nothing has been conclusively proven, it is widely whispered that for decades the Caldari provided clandestine support to the Ammatars in exchange for the promise of mineral rights to the rich territories being battled over. These allegations were a frequent diplomatic sticking point between the Caldari and the Minmatar, and the mere mention of them rankles both sides to this day.

Sansha's Nation

Anyone who travels for a while around the world of EVE will sooner rather than later run into strange-looking ships that more likely than not will prove hostile. These ships with their aggressive spikes and multi-toned metal shine are the not-so-old relics of a mad scheme hatched to conquer the world. Today, this once glorious fleet is left to guard the ruins of a dynamic empire, the marvel of the world a century ago. Hailed as the perfect Utopian state it wasn't until the gruesome tales of its ethical transgressions surfaced that it was brought down through a joint effort by all the major empires.

It is the norm whenever breakthroughs occur in the technological or geographical knowledge that some people manage through luck or foresight to make a fortune on the new knowledge. This is exactly what happened in the heady days of space exploration and colonization in the first few decades after first contact, when anyone with the means and the motives could set himself up as a space baron in a pocket of space somewhere outside empire territory.

One of these early tycoons was Sansha Kuvakei, a wealthy industrial mogul of Caldari origin. His family had made its fortune in armament manufacturing during the war with the Gallente Federation. Sansha soon showed himself to be an eccentric megalomaniac that dreamt of world conquest, no less. He saw the free-for-all colonizing of space that the empires advocated at the time as an ideal vehicle for his schemes and set out to carve himself a sizeable chunk of the systems available to the public. Sansha saw himself as a visionary for the new order soon to come and he attracted thousands of followers, attracted by his charm and promises for a better future for everyone. Soon Sansha had built himself a sizeable domain extending over several systems, with smaller pockets scattered

around the known world. This foundation allowed Sansha to start his own armaments program, independent of all the other empires. For this he used the extensive knowledge his family had garnered throughout the years.

For years Sansha's build-up program continued, gaining ever more momentum as his fame and fortune increased. Being on the forefront of space mining and trading his realm prospered and soon people were talking about Sansha's Nation (as it was most commonly known as) as the new major player in galactic politics. Sansha used these resources ingeniously to create an image of himself as a new messiah and his domain as the Promised Land. But when Sansha himself started believing the hype heaped on him his already fragile mind conjured ever-stranger notions and plans.

One of these projects was to develop a method to amalgamate the recently introduced Jovian capsule technology with existing brain implants, most of them illegal, to create men with the thoroughness of a computer and the ingenuity of humans. People that would be completely loyal and dedicated, yet creative enough to handle complex and delicate situations. These inhuman researches naturally required test subjects, Sansha acquired these from the Amarr Empire in the form of Minmatar slaves. The Amarrians were eager to learn of any new techniques to be used to control their large slave population and gave Sansha whatever support he required. There has always been strong suspicion that Sansha received substantial support from others too, but if and who these shadowy allies were has never become public knowledge.

Sansha's dream was that these zombie-like creatures could be used as soldiers and guards, thus freeing humans to pursue more peaceful and productive lifestyles. He also experimented with ship crews and captains, as he regarded space ships to be both boring and dangerous, and thus ideally suited for his creatures. Soon, all armed forces and space ship personnel employed by Sansha's Nation had been replaced by an easily

controlled armada of True Slaves, as those that had been implanted with Sansha's technology became known as. In his warped mind Sansha believed his acts to be of the good for mankind.

It was only a matter of time before the truth of this new technology was revealed to the public. The reactions were immediate and intense. One by one the empires condemned Sansha, the Amarr Empire among them, as they didn't want to be ostracized by the other empires. But Sansha refused to see the error of his ways, declaring that the other empires were too narrow-minded and primitive to fathom what a great genius he was. Sansha continued to put his mind-curbing devices into people unabated and even started some even more outrageous projects in the same vein. In the end, the other empires, with the Gallente Federation at the forefront, decided not to stand idly by any longer and attacked Sansha's Nation.

Since the revelation of Sansha's twisted experiments came out into the open, the Nation had lost most of its inhabitants. Only the fanatics and the True Slaves remained. They managed to hold out for some months, but in the end Sansha's little empire crumbled. His forces were scattered to the wind and all his factories and space installations destroyed. Sansha himself was killed during the final assault on his stronghold. But even if the majority of his fleet had been defeated, many of them managed to slip away during the chaos and hide. These are the ships that still today attack unwary travelers in the vicinity of the old realm of Sansha's Nation. Steered by True Slaves they have never given up the fight that Sansha sent them out for, a disturbing tribute to their late master.

After Sansha was defeated the empires debated what to do with the systems he controlled. Finally, they were distributed between the empires, but it's attesting to the lasting effects of Sansha that almost none of them have been settled in the decades since his collapse.

As a final note, there are those that claim that Sansha is still alive and well. These conspiracy theorists say that before he died Sansha hid a number of clones of himself in secret locations the empires never discovered, and after he was killed he was resurrected in one of them. The same rumors also state that Sansha is still up to his old tricks creating True Slaves and building ships, hidden amongst the rubble in some remote corner of his old domain. They argue that the number of True Slave ships destroyed in recent years is far greater than the number of ships that remained at the time Sansha's empire collapsed. As with most good conspiracy theories, it is hard to prove or disprove any of these claims.

Time & The Astrologer

One of the many tasks facing the empires once they had established contact with each other was to set a universal time. Each of the empires naturally had their own calendar and clock, based more or less on the length of the day and year on their respective home planets. This made up for some serious confusion and it soon became apparent that some sort of a synchronized time keeping was needed so inter-racial communications could run smoothly.

Of course, basing this universal time on the calendar of one of the empires was out of the question, the other would never agree to it. So a new one had to be devised. The debates on the new calendar and clock soon boiled down to arguments between three main groups, the Arithmetics, the Traditionalists and the 25ers. The debate was initially conducted between scholars, which then put forth proposals for the politicians and the public to consider. The three main groups each drew their support from different fields of science and academics. The Arithmetics were mainly physicists and engineers, the Traditionalists were mostly historians and archeologists and the 25ers group consisted of biologists and sociologists.

The Arithmetics wanted the new calendar and clock to have nothing whatsoever to do with old planetary-based calendars, instead they wanted to base it entirely on mathematics. They claimed that the physics-oriented nature of the modern world demanded this. The Traditionalists said the only way to go was to base the new calendar as much as possible on the 24-hour, 365-day calendar favored by early post-collapse settlers. All the races, especially the Jovians and the Amarrians, had some data on the old calendar and by combining the data it could be remade more or less in its original form. Finally, the 25ers claimed that the only measurement worth considering in a space-faring age was that of the human body. The internal

body clock of humans is close to 25 hours, and thus they wanted to base the new clock on that measurement.

During the long and arduous discussions numerous factions rose, declaring themselves champions of one cause or another. One of them, identifying themselves with the 25ers, was a small Gallentean grass-root organization led by an energetic young man by the name of Cerb Rausolle, although he preferred the pseudonym the Astrologer. Through the efforts of the Astrologer the 25ers gained great public support, spurred on by the surprisingly big network put into place by the Astrologer.

Instead of going the public way as the 25ers the Traditionalists had focused on the politicians, correctly as it turned out to be as it was they that had the final saying. When the final decision was made aboard the Jovian cruiser Yoiul the Traditionalists won comfortably. A day would be divided into 24 hours and the year 365 days with an additional day every 4 years, the same as the calendar of the early settlers. The date was set as 0 YC. The Yoiul Conference was held 111 years ago, so the current year is 111 YC.

The Astrologer was not to let his large organization network go to waste and soon found a new cause worthy of his attention. At that time space ship owners were required to pay huge amounts of money each year for their ship license. This was something that all the empires enforced as it provided a good deal of income for them, plus it meant that only the cream of the society could afford to be in space business. But this of course also hampered space trade and made it difficult for the average Joe to get into the business. The Astrologer and his organization (still called the 25ers) started lobbying for a change in the legislation. Since CONCORD was responsible for issuing ship licenses and collecting the license fees, it became the target of the demonstrations organized by the 25ers.

At first CONCORD ignored the protests, but as they became more serious it began taking notice. As it had been recently formed, CONCORD was

concerned about the image it was projecting to the public and a committee was formed to handle the matter. As is often the case, things dragged on for months. All the while the Astrologer was planning more and more outrageous acts of protest, even going so far as to organize general strikes on some planets. The icing on the cake came during the first New Year celebration, celebrating 1 YC, at the headquarters of CONCORD. The Astrologer then managed to infiltrate the station's defense perimeter with a lone, unmanned cargo ship filled with explosives, which he then promptly detonated outside the station in plain view of many of New Eden's most prominent people. The Astrologer was careful not to blow the ship up so close as to injure any of the guests, but his message was heard loud and clear. Two months later new CONCORD legislation abolishing the license fees was passed by all the member states.

The Astrologer, now a fugitive after his stunt, quickly became a living legend. The 25ers organization was dismantled and the Astrologer lost his status as the champion of the people. But his name is not forgotten, nor that of the 25ers, and every now and then a new group is formed somewhere in the world of New Eden, proclaiming itself as the successor of the old 25ers, dreaming of reliving the times when the little men defeated the big guns.

Payday

The neural implant in Tiny's brain registered increased stress signals. He was running out of time. What should have been a run-of-the-mill mission was turning into a fiasco. How many times had he shuttled Tonic-12 to his buddy Karlo? At least a dozen times. And never a hitch. But now he was running late, very late. All because of those bloody cops for raiding his usual pick-up place. He had to go all the way into the Great Wildlands to fetch the precious substance and his delivery window was only half an hour away. Not to mention, he was without his escort buddies. The bloody fools had gone on a mercenary mission in the outer regions somewhere. Being all by himself made Tiny nervous, adding even more to his already high tension.

Tiny cursed silently as he maneuvered his ship towards the stargate. He waited impatiently while the control station processed his jump request. He contemplated taking his chance of going through the Du Annes system to make up some lost time, but decided against it. It was too risky. The Decon-Sharuveil route was a detour, but more or less safe from any prying eyes. Finally, his jump permission came through and he fired up the thrusters on his cruiser to align the ship for the jump sequence.

Once in the Decon system Tiny started by scanning nearby space to see if anyone was lying in wait to ambush him. Nothing. Then he started the trek towards the Decon star gate. En route he calculated how much he stood to lose if he didn't get the stuff to Karlo on time. Maybe 50 thousand. Not to mention that Karlo would get miffed, to say the least, and Karlo was his only agent within empire space that traded in smart drugs. It was a big loss, but he could cope. He would make it up to Karlo somehow and maybe he could find another buyer for the Tonic-12, though it was dangerous to

cruise around with illegal stuff for a long period. Maybe he should stash it somewhere...

Deep in thought, Tiny performed the necessary navigational adjustments to keep his ship on the move. He made the last warp to the star gate; next destination: Sharuveil system and then just one more jump. It took Tiny a few seconds to notice the radar signal - a ship on the edge of his radar range. It was also moving towards the star gate, from the opposite direction. Tiny ran a ship scan once in range, in case it was a stray custom official or a DED snoop.

Mother of all creation! It was Adira Habi, the Amarrian scumbag that pod-killed him a few weeks back! Tiny shook with glee; he'd been looking for Habi ever since that incident, how fortunate to find him here, all by himself. Suddenly, Habi's cruiser veered off course, obviously he had spotted Tiny. 'What a coward,' Tiny thought. Habi set the course for Decon IV and warped away before Tiny was in warp scrambler range. Tiny was about to warp after Habi when he remembered his Tonic-12 cargo and Karlo. 'Ah, bugger that!' he thought, turning away from the stargate to Sharuveil and prepared for a warp to Decon IV.

Secure Commerce Commission

The world of EVE is moving ever closer to a fully integrated market economy, where the thousands of inhabited planets, moons, asteroids and their accompanying space stations are able to do business on a galactic scale. Today the world is divided into numerous market regions, most spanning several constellations. Wares being sold or sought after within the market region are accessible for trade anywhere within the region. The cornerstone of the market economy is the inter-stellar communication method coupled with a reliable and efficient way for striking a deal over long distance.

Before instantaneous communication from one star to another came into being, trading over long distances (between solar systems) was hazardous and time-consuming. Frauds and swindlers were in abundance, making trades with strangers highly risky. The time it took to find out what stations in nearby solar systems had on offer or demanded, plus the time it then took to strike a deal and ship the products to and fro, stifled space commerce so much that it was almost non-existent. Only the adventures were willing to risk their assets and even their lives by pursuing space trading, but the potential riches involved urged people on and made them yearn for a quicker, easier way to do business between the stars. Thus, once inter-stellar communication devices arrived they spread out like an epidemic and inter-stellar commerce quickly followed in their wake.

At first, inter-stellar commerce was conducted in a haphazard sort of way, giving the frauds ample opportunities to cash in on the optimistic and naïve traders. It quickly became clear that instant communication between solar systems alone could not keep commerce clean. Every empire responded on their own, setting trade regulations, hiring special commerce inspectors

and setting up secure trade houses. These efforts managed to create a fairly safe trade environment.

But once constellations and other regions started to set up a regional market network, where traders were able to view everything for sale anywhere in the region and put their own items up for sale, there arose the need for a centralized agency responsible for inter-stellar commerce. This is where the SCC - Secure Commerce Committee - came into being. As a division within the CONCORD the SCC is jointly run by the empires and thus ensures a safe and universally regulated trade environment. A joint initiative of the Minmatar Republic and the Jovian Empire have also ensured that the SCC, although under the control of the empires through the CONCORD, acts under the strictest neutrality codes, the same as the InterBus and other empire-run institutions. This is to ensure that all dealings are not only secure, but also secret, with no chance of governmental interference. The unfortunate by-product of this is that those acting on the wrong side of the law can just as easily do business with each other as anyone else.

Prey Miner

Captain Ieris Hvik steered her small frigate into another loop, patiently waiting for the miner to disembark from Ethernity II station, a small blip on the edge of her radar. This particular miner promised some good yield, judging by his track record. He had great standings with the corporations around here – all the better for refining – and he was a fast and efficient miner.

At last the bronze colored Navitas-class frigate slid out of the station. The miner adjusted the course of his set, aligning it towards the asteroid belt between Ethernity II and Ethernity III. Few seconds later his warp drive kicked in and in a heartbeat he had disappeared in a bluish flash. Hvik counted to 30 before activating her own warp drive - no need to get the miner paranoid by getting too close on his tail.

Once in the asteroid belt Hvik quickly assessed the situation. She picked up the signal emanating from the tracking bug on the miner a few hundred kilometers off and adjusted her course accordingly. Once within scanning range she matched her speed to that of the miner. The miner was already scanning asteroids, but hadn't yet deployed his mining drones. This, and the fact that he was still heading full speed deeper into the asteroid belt, indicated that he was looking for some specific minerals, undoubtedly some rare ones. Hvik chuckled to herself, pleased with her selection. Now, all she had to do was wait and let the miner do her work for her.

Hvik had started out as a miner, but quickly found that she didn't have the patience for it. But before she quit she'd established some pretty good contacts in the mining industry and was able to off-load minerals at good prices. So it was natural that instead of becoming a mercenary for hire or a pirate chasing freighters, she would focus on miners - preying on them in

isolated areas and loot their minerals. It didn't take all that much combat skill as long as one refrained from attacking groups of miners. And there were always a lot of lone miners in the outer regions, dreaming of striking gold with no one to share with. Hvik was happy to oblige, the miners didn't have to share with her - she'd take it all.

Hvik's console beeped, dragging her from her reverie. The miner was deploying his drones. Hvik stretched in her cocoon, setting the ship on stand-by, preparing it to haul in the load of the day.

Leech Capital

The space industry is looming ever larger in the minds of those inhabiting the world of EVE. Not so many decades ago the industry provided a living for only a handful of people, but today the number has risen to tens or hundred of thousands. Every day sees new companies being formed in every corner of the world; companies that dream of taking space by storm. A typical company of this sort is DioCore.

Founded by two brothers some five years ago DioCore remained for some time a company bereft of funds, staff or future. But the brothers didn't sit idle during this time - they gained experience in operating space crafts, skills in dealing with people and established some important contacts. DioCore's main activity was in the field of blueprint research. The founding brothers had many revolutionary ideas regarding drones and wished to incorporate these ideas into blueprints.

In the end they managed to attract the attention of the investment firm MindChill, a Gallente-based venture capitalists company that focused on budding space companies. With the aid of MindChill, DioCore finally managed to get their operation into gear and finance their first research facility in space, with two more following. With the money from MindChill the DioCore brothers thought they were made. A few early blueprints were promising, but these failed to materialize into anything more substantial. Soon, lack of funds threatened the continued existence of the company. Yet the brothers were unwilling to give up, as they knew their breakthrough project was on the horizon. This breakthrough project attracted the attention of potential customers - some very big - and the DioCore directors managed to sign a deal with some of them, but all with the condition that DioCore finished researching their blueprint first.

Looking for venture capital to fund the company until the massive deal went through, a dark plot was being crafted in backrooms. MindChill, because of the earlier involvement in the company, had some first-hand knowledge about the problems facing DioCore and took on the task of leading the raising of new capital. All seemed well and the shareholders were at peace. Several weeks passed, and the DioCore directors put ever more pressure on MindChill to finish the funding. MindChill responded that major deals were being made and that capital would be just around the corner. But their real intentions were more sinister and predatory. Rumors started to spread that DioCore was having cash flow problems. Several investors wanted out and behind the curtains MindChill was buying DioCore stock at wholesale prices. The longer MindChill waited to finish the fund-raising deals, the better their position became for buying more shares. An emergency meeting was held at DioCore headquarters to get to the bottom of the situation and there the true intentions of MindChill became evident. As DioCore was now on the verge of bankruptcy, MindChill put forth an offer that DioCore was in no position to decline. It would give MindChill a majority in the corporation for a very small sum, but just enough to let them finish the research project and land the drone deal, but with MindChill then reaping the profit from it. Not giving up so easily, DioCore directors came up with a plan. Now that the offer from MindChill was at such an incredibly low price, it was easy to raise enough capital to counter it. A private investor, backed up by the directors at DioCore, came in with an alternative deal. The new deal would keep the shares within the company, but at the same time dilute MindChill share severely since the price was so low.

But the trouble was not over, as the board members at DioCore still had to vote between the two deals. The problem was that MindChill had a member on the board, Jon Mondo, a famous Gallentean venture capitalist. Mondo had been busy gathering support from other board members for his own deal and no one knew which deal would come out on top. This caused severe tension and the battle for DioCore was now reaching a dangerous level. Mercenaries were hired to guard major DioCore facilities from

possible sabotage and DioCore directors only moved between systems with highly trained fighter escorts acting as bodyguards. Every vote was now worth more than the life of the person behind it. The board meeting was finally held at DioCore headquarters under military style security. The vote went a close call 5-6 in favor of the private investor, and DioCore was no longer under the threat of takeover.

Three months passed, and DioCore struck gold with their highly developed drone product lines. Today DioCore is a prominent company and is frequently traded on the stock market, being considered a solid long-term investment.

Loser

Victor Sistré idly watched the traffic around Manatirid station on his radar. Most of the cargo freighters were Gallentean ones, but the police vessels were from the Amarr Empire. Manatirid station was located in one of the few Amarrian systems close to Gallente space, and as such acted as a trade post between the two empires. Victor was on a mission for his corporation, searching for rare minerals to use in the corporation's shields production.

A ship undocked from Manatirid station and Victor immediately noticed the radar signal depicting the newcomer as hostile. It was a ship from Jaasinen Inc., a rival company of Victor's Canout corporation. The two corporations were at war, their dispute revolving around a system far from Victor's current location. Even if the Amarrian system was a lawful place the fact that the two corporations were officially in a state of war meant that Victor was a free target for the Jaasinen frigate fast approaching.

Victor quickly activated his warp drive, having no intention of fighting the Caldari frigate on his lightly armed ship. But before he could finish selecting a destination for his warp he noticed that the Caldari had scrambled him, preventing him from entering warp. Victor veered his ship away from the Caldari vessel, the range still a good 10 kilometers. His ship computer registered a couple of missiles being launched, but their e.t.a. was still some seconds off. In the meantime Victor activated his anti-scrambling unit - due to the strength of the Caldari scrambler it would take a full minute to de-scramble the warp drive. Ruefully reflecting on frail defenses, Victor longed for his heavily battle-equipped Incursus frigate.

Just before the two Caldari missiles slammed into Victor's ship he launched a couple of salvos of his best counter-measures in response, hoping to foil

the missiles. One of the missiles was fooled into exploding its warhead some way from the hull, but the other stayed its course and smacked into Victor's ship. The shield managed to absorb a fair deal of the damage, but to Victor's dismay the powerful missile had still managed to breach the armored hull.

Two more missiles were launched from the Caldari ship and Victor wondered how many the Caldari captain had. He himself had already spent his best counter-measures and he had no anti-missile missiles or point-defense weapons to deal with the approaching menace. Victor resolved to dug deeply into his power reserves by boosting his shield a couple of times, hoping it could sustain the damage from the missiles. While waiting for the impact Victor zoomed his camera onto the missiles and noticed their brand - each of these missiles was almost as expensive as the whole of Victor's ship. It was obvious that the Caldari was out to destroy him for a bigger reason than just to loot his cargo hold.

The missiles crashed into Victor's ship, jolting it around. Victor could feel the impact in his own bones, a sure sign that the ship had received major damage. A quick survey of his ship computer revealed several hull breaches and some structural damage. The hydraulic system was out-of-order and his oxygen level was dropping fast, indicating a hole in an oxygen tank.

The Caldari ship, being considerably faster than Victor's ship after having activated its afterburner, was now close enough to open fire with its short-range lasers. The last missile impact had severely reduced the strength of Victor's shields and his power level was low. The anti-scrambler still needed 20 seconds to complete the de-scrambling and it was eating into Victor's remaining power supply. Victor forlornly realized that the Caldari had expended almost no power so far - only on the warp scrambler and a small amount on the afterburner. Only now was he using energy weapons against Victor.

As Victor's capsule was ejected from his disintegrating ship, Victor wondered whether skipping the anti-scrambling and burning for the station might have been a wiser choice in the situation.

The Titans

In the Amarr tongue, their name is Imud Hubrau, or "Beast of Heaven." To the Gallente, they are known as Soltueurs, or "Sun Slayers." The collective name for these behemoths is Titans, the largest spacefaring vessels ever constructed. The sheer cost in resources, manpower and time, as well as the necessary technological knowledge, makes construction of a Titan-class vessel a venture only empires can usually fathom. Some of these mammoth vessels have taken decades to assemble. Many are over a century old themselves (the three mammoth Jovian motherships, the first ships built on the scale of titans, have origins pre-dating modern space travel). They are maintained with constant upgrades, and at any given time, one of the three is out of commission while undergoing retrofits.

Their value is indescribable. Functioning for those who own them as a mobile base of operations as well as a flagship, Titans turn the tides of war with their mere presence. Aside from their blistering armament and many-metres-thick armour, they boast the ability to transport entire fleets within their hulks across entire star systems. Their mind-boggling mass can cause small ships to become trapped in the gravity bow-wave before them. A few of these vessels are massive enough that their presence affects planetary tidal patterns. One notable incident occurred on the small agricultural world of Goral, where a Gallente Titan moving into orbit caused an abrupt shift in tides, which flooded crop fields and farmland. The decrease in food production meant that the entire system, which depended on Goral for food stock, had to be supplied by merchants or face starvation. Since then, Titan navigation systems have been programmed with fail-safes to prevent them from approaching a planet so closely.

The construction of a Titan has, in recent years, become an option available to more than just the richest of empires. With the advent of

exploration, new resource-rich worlds have been discovered. For the construction of an Amarr corporation's newest fleet addition, a lush, tropical moon was decided as a prime source for resource extraction. After decades of aggressive strip-mining, the moon's surface had been mostly torn away. At the cost of tens of thousands of Minmatar slave lives, the Titan was complete, leaving the moon a devastated, tectonically unstable hell.

Camera Drones

After the Jovians introduced capsule technology to the empires several methods have been tried out regarding the visual presentation of the surroundings to the captain enclosed in his capsule. The first method tried, and the one the Jovians first used (and sometimes still do), was to use the data from wide range of scanners to paint a realistic view of the ship's surroundings in the mind of the captain. But after intensive experimentations it was discovered that this caused severe nausea and disorientation for most captains not of Jove origin. Other high-tech methods also had to be discarded for the same or similar reasons. In the end, the empires discovered that simple cameras directly connected to small screens inside the captain's helmet were the best solution. At first these cameras were mounted on the hull of the ship, but with the advent of electrical energy weapons these cameras became too vulnerable to damage from electrical charges.

The Gallenteans were the first to experiment with cameras mounted on drones hovering around the ship. They first developed this method when researching more efficient point-defense weapons. This hovering method later caught on with the other races and is now common practice, with all the empires manufacturing their own types of camera drones, all based on the same principle. At first only one camera drone was used, but today they are two, for stereoscopic vision. The camera drones are suspended some distance from the ship. They attach to the ship by using a combination of an attractive magnetic force and repulsive electromechanical force, this also allows them to orbit the ship at any desired position. This means that the drones never need replenishing or refueling.

The camera drone can be commanded through the captain's neural link. This gives the captain tremendous ability to get a clear view of his

environment in a quick and comprehensive manner. By stationing the camera drone some distance from the ship the drone is not as susceptible to weapon outbursts hitting the ship's hull. The drone can still be destroyed, either by accident, such as passing debris or stray shot, or on purpose. All ships have abundant supplies of spare camera drones stored away for such occasions and the captain has to be fairly clueless to run out of camera drones. The fact that the drones are stationed outside the ship's shield makes it impractical to try to protect them. Simply storing lots and lots of them is much easier, as they're very cheap.

When the ship uses a stargate the camera drone needs to move back into the ship when jumping. It re-emerges as soon as the ship exits the jump. This does not apply to warping, when the ship travels between planets within a solar system.

Although the camera drone serves as the main visual tool of the captain cameras have been used in more ways. Some missiles sport a camera in their nose, allowing the captain to see directly where the missile lands.

Timeout

The four ships registered as red dots on Maya Arikinnen's radar, but that didn't deter her from activating her cargo scanner on one of them. The four frigates were manned by outlaws - characters with a track record of crimes and misdemeanors. But Maya recognized their kind by their ships and style. They were not killers, but smugglers. This didn't make them harmless, but they were less likely to start some reckless action here in a medium secure system. At least Maya hoped so.

Torrinos system lay on the outskirts of Caldari space. Beyond there were increasingly less secure areas until one reached the Amarrian border zones some seven jumps distance. Although this route was not an official linkage point between the two empires it was still a popular path for smugglers or those wishing to travel outside the main routes. This was the reason why Maya had positioned herself here sporting her newly acquired cargo scanner, courtesy of the Custom license she'd bought from the Caldari state. Many of her friends had done this before her and all agreed that Torrinos system offered some good pickings. All she had to do was to sniff out some illegal or contraband goods and report her findings - she would then receive a part of the fine imposed on the offender by the authorities.

The cargo scanner aligned itself with the nearest of the four frigates and started its scanning process. But before it could finish it sputtered to a halt and reported a failed scan. At first Maya was sure she'd done something incorrectly, before realizing that the target ship had used an anti-scanning device on her to counter her scanning efforts. The four frigates suddenly veered off their course and now headed directly towards her. The menacing advance of the smugglers gave Maya the urge to panic and do something reckless, but she managed to get her emotions under control.

The smugglers had not opened fire on her yet. Maybe they were just trying to scare her off. The leading smuggler, the one that thwarted her scanning attempt, established a com-link to her, automatically creating a new channel for them to communicate over:

“Whaddya think yur doin’?” the uncouth voice of the smuggler crackled. “Try one more time to scan us and we’ll fry your ass!” the smuggler continued. Maya ran some background checks on him. Nori Yirikai. A member of a renowned criminal organization. He had an unimpressive track record of smuggling felonies, which maybe explained his current usage of a hi-tech anti-scanning device. ‘Obviously a man that learns from experience.’ Maya thought sardonically. It was also obvious that Yirikai and his cronies were only trying to scare her away, being sensible enough not to be willing to reduce their already sorry security standings by engaging in combat here. Yet they must be carrying illegal cargo, or they wouldn’t be so concerned about being scanned.

Just to be on the safe side Maya asked two of her friends in the custom business that she knew were close by to come and join her. She then turned her ship away from the smugglers and made as to leave.

“There’s a good girl,” came the voice of Yirikai. Maya noticed he was trying to sound scornful, but it sounded more like he was relieved. She began wondering what it was they were carrying that they were so anxious to keep a secret. It was tempting to provoke them by trying to scan them again once her friends got here, one of them might get through. As soon as she released that thought her friends had arrived. They quickly aligned themselves beside Maya’s ship, which she had promptly turned around.

The smugglers seemed to hesitate for a second. They were probably discussing this new turn of events among themselves. Maya and her friends formed a group, so they could retaliate in case one of them was attacked. The smugglers started aligning themselves in a combat

formation. Maya began sweating. She had fervently hoped it wouldn't have to come to this, but it was clear that the smugglers were willing to attack them to keep the identity of their cargo hidden. She began preparing her ship for the onslaught. But just as the two sides were about to let loose their weaponry a new ship appeared on the radar. A big ship. A DED ship. Maya sighed in relief.

The sudden appearance of the DED battleship quickly ended any thoughts of battle. Both sides disengaged and starting preparing to leave, all under the watchful eye of the DED ship. The channel-link with Yirikai came to live:

"You just watch it, custom officer Arikinnen. Next time, I won't hesitate to kill you." Yirikai said vengefully. 'Yeah,' Maya thought as she warped out, 'and I would very much like to find out what you are carrying in your cargo hold.'

The Sarpati Family

Once upon a time every nation had high hopes regarding the future of the neural boosters. Many believed they were the next natural step for humankind in improving itself. Each of the empires started their own booster research, dreaming of creating a wonder brew that would propel their subjects to greatness. These dreams came crashing down one day when it was discovered that neural boosters had some very unfortunate side-effects that turned them in a heartbeat into public health hazards.

One of the less well-known booster research firms was that owned and run by Igil Sarpati, a competent Gallente scientist. Sarpati's firm, simply named Sarpatis, was contracted by the Gallente Federation to lead booster research. When the Federation banned boosters following the discovery of the fatal side-effects the rug was pulled from beneath the company's feet and it quickly went under, sharing the fate of almost all other companies that built their operation on boosters. A few years after the company closure Igil Sarpati died. The Sarpati family passed into obscurity, seemingly destined to go down in history, alongside thousands of others, as failures.

Igil's adopted child, a Caldari named Virge Salvador Sarpati, became the head of the family after his father's death. He grew up in the shadow of his father's failure and this experience marked him for life. In time he founded his own company and called it Serpentis, an older form of the family name and a tribute to his late fathers' company. The only assets of Sarpati junior were the old booster formulas of his father, but as boosters were banned the formulas were worthless. So instead of going into the pharmaceutical business like his father V. Salvador Sarpati (as he likes to be called) instead focused on hi-tech R&D. Slowly, but surely, the company gained strength. Although it began nominally as a Gallente-based company it had

from early on a very cosmopolitan character, considering itself unattached to any government. Due to his past experience Salvador became increasingly antagonistic to the Gallente, to the point where he only allowed Caldari corporations and Caldari officials access to the higher echelons of his organization.

Three decades ago Sarpati bought a system in the Phoenix constellation and named it Serpentis. He built himself a magnificent space station orbiting Serpentis Prime and runs his company from there. As his power and wealth grew he has expanded the territory he owns and now runs a dozen space installations around the world of EVE. Although all the Serpentis stations are officially termed research stations they have in time grown into notorious pirate havens. Sarpati himself encouraged such development, hinting at a more sinister long-term strategy than offered by his innocent-looking company. Indeed, it has been rumored that once Sarpati had set himself up he dusted off his father's old formulas and turned his research facilities on them.

Opening one's stations to pirates and outlaws can easily become a double-edged sword, but Sarpati was smart enough to get himself a protection. He made a deal with the Angel cartel that it would provide protection for all Serpentis stations. In return the Angels would get a cut of all trade on these stations and access to any research breakthroughs the Serpentis corporation makes. This deal has been so lucrative for both parties that the Angels have devoted their entire Guardian Angels division to protecting Serpentis space and the Sarpati family lives in unprecedented luxury. The DED is not wholly unaware of the situation and has made numerous attempts to close some of Sarpati's establishments, but to no avail.

V. Salvador Sarpati has gathered a small retinue to dwell at his side in the Serpentis system. There they spend their days in idle games and frolics without a worry in the world. Sarpati himself is an active participant, although his boundless energy and ambition allows him to break out of it

every once in a while to take care of his small empire. The more frivolous of Sarpati's retinue live with him, while the more headstrong are scattered around the other Serpentis stations running things. Only one member of Sarpati's adopted family, his sister Santimona, has rejected both the indolent life at Serpentis Prime as well as Sarpati's close links to the underworld. She is now a member of the Sisters of EVE order and mocks her brother and his lifestyle at every opportunity, calling him King Serpent and Serpentis Prime his royal court.

Doppelganger

Warm, white, comfortable, nothing. This was all it knew. The concept of self did not yet exist for the thing floating in maturation tube 30316, nor did the concept of what was about to happen.

A flash, blinding and intense. Something new. Stimulus.

A flood of stimulus. Pain? It didn't know the meaning of pain yet. This was different from before. The sensation intensified. He felt it emanating from the back of his head, and wondered what a head was. Then it came to him, a vague idea of his form. He opened his mouth, and it filled with... something... that he inhaled. Something he shouldn't have inhaled. He felt himself choking, his mind flooded with things that weren't there before.

He reached out, and his hands touched glass. He pressed against it, and struggled, but his movements were dampened by something thick, gelatinous. He was in a liquid. Was he drowning? No, he was all right, and his name was Galen. How did he know this, he wondered. Where did this fact come from? His eyes opened for the first time, and he glanced about. The wet thing he was in stung his eyes slightly, but through it he could see, in blinding detail. A room... with someone in it, standing before him... behind the glass. A doctor. What's a doctor, he wondered briefly, before the relevant data arrived in his brain through the neural jack at the base of his skull.

Minutes later, Galen Doradoux knew who he was, and what was going on. His consciousness fully integrated, he floated patiently in the gelatinous biomimetic suspension. Obviously, the Vaarkota deal had fallen through with catastrophic consequences, he thought. The jelly began to recede as it drained down through the bottom of the maturation capsule. The glass slid

upwards, and he staggered out, disoriented, falling to his knees and vomiting a large quantity of the jelly he swallowed minutes earlier. The doctor helpfully put a robe over him and handed him a few towels. He gathered himself.

"Mr. Doradoux, as part of your replica contract, it is my solemn duty to inform you that your previous self was lost in a firefight in the Xygia system. The perpetrator, a member of the Vaarkota cartel, has been arrested, and there are numerous papers for you to sign regarding the incident", recited the doctor, and Galen nodded. This wasn't the first time, and it certainly wouldn't be the last. His line of work ensured that. He didn't mind the dying so much as the paperwork.

The doctor continued. "You'll be glad to know that the integration process went very well, and only slight synaptic degradation was encountered. We hope you will continue using the services of the Vivant Clone Repositories." Galen concentrated, and sighed with relief as he managed to quickly recollect the facts he absorbed after picking up the cruiser class pilot training pack a week before. The doctor thrust a data-pad in front of him, and Galen took it, placing his signature on the contract that ensured another clone to be ready for him when he next needed it.

He wrapped the bathrobe tightly around himself. "I know my way to the showers, doctor. Thank you for your assistance."

A Visit Worthwhile

The ship's sensors kicked in one by one once the ship exited the jump wormhole. Reigou Kiriyki scanned his surroundings with interest, this being his first visit to the Bersyrim system. In fact, none of Kiriyki's acquaintances had visited this system. Not that it was deserted, far from it: the Bersyrim system lies deep within Amarr space and has two large habitable planets, both teeming with life. No, Bersyrim, as most systems in the Shi-Karid sector, is a restricted area. A visa is needed to enter those systems and acquiring a visa is easier said than done. Kiriyki got his from a contact he knew within the huge Nurtura company and then only because his contact sorely needed someone to ferry vital agricultural machinery to Bersyrim III. As other large Amarrian companies, Nurtura had to depend on foreign traders for much of its trade, even within the Amarr Empire itself. Despite being the largest of the empires their trade fleet was not up to par and Caldari and Gallentean traders poured into the Amarr Empire in growing numbers, in spite of the many trade restrictions. Kiriyki set his course for Bersyrim III.

Bersyrim III, like the other inhabited planet Odra, was among the largest exporters of agricultural products in the whole Amarr Empire and Kiriyki was excited to get the change to do business there. Getting the visa not only presented additional business opportunities, but also gave his career in Jaasinen Inc. a big boost, now that he alone of all the corporation's members was able to travel to this restricted part of the Amarr Empire. Kiriyki had also been instrumental in getting Nurtura to buy the Caldari-made agricultural machinery in the first place, the very same machinery he was now carrying in his cargo hold to its final destination on Bersyrim III. Kiriyki dreamed of being made head of the Amarr trading branch. He had spent years gaining the trust of the Amarrians and building up a network of contacts and felt the time had come for some recognition for his efforts.

Kiriyki forced himself to start thinking about his current assignment, the future would take care of his endorsements. Right now the priority was to get the cargo safe and sound to Bersyrim III, collect the reward for a mission accomplished and then maybe he would engage in some trading on his own. Certainly, agricultural products were definitely cheaper here at their source than almost anywhere else and as long as he was willing to carry them around for awhile Kiriyki could make a killer deal here. No wonder the visas leading to the Amarr agricultural planets were regarded as gateways to fabulous riches.

While traveling here Kiriyki had made an effort to get as much information as he could on the Bersyrim system. He prided himself in being very thorough when it came to places and people connected to his business.

Bersyrim was an old system, colonized more than 500 years ago. It lay in the fief of the Kador-family and was the gem of the sector. Bersyrim III landmass was mainly vast plains, making it ideal for large-scale food production. The planet exported huge amounts of agricultural products each year, but only a handful of its inhabitants had any extra-terrestrial connections; most of the populace lived and bred and died totally oblivious to anything else but their own surroundings. Kiriyki knew that this wasn't a unique case - it applied to most planetary populations everywhere. After all, the space economy was only a fraction of the planetary economy.

Most of the urban settlements, which were not many, had developed around huge Holder citadels, the cornerstone of imperial control on the planet. The towns were a mish-mash of large stone buildings, tottering wooden huts and raggedy tent-houses, with every nook and cranny chock full of people. Most of the citizens were Ni-Kunni craftsmen, sprinkled with true Amarrian artisans and freed Minmatar slaves. Out on the plains the land was divided between a handful of Amarr Holders, each ruling over a vast estate of up to 100,000 acres or more. The land was worked by

slaves, mostly of Minmatar origin, who lived in small villages surrounded in all directions by an ocean of cornfields. All settlements, both the towns and the villages, were heavily fortified to keep the marauding Chikra nomads out. The Chikra people were descendants of a group of the first settlers on the planet that cut themselves off from the other settlers and headed out into the wilderness. They developed a nomadic lifestyle and still roam the planet in small packs, to the annoyance of the Amarrian authorities.

Yet even if Kiriyki, with his extensive experience and deep knowledge of the areas he did business in, he would be the first to admit that he knew only a tiny fraction of the history of the world of EVE. Sure, now he knew plenty about Bersyrim III, but it was only one world of many thousands, each with its own unique history, customs, stories and people.

While browsing the local news channel on Bersyrim III station as his ship was being loaded with newly-purchased products Kiriyki came across a small report about a discovery of a cache of cyber implants floating in space near Odra station but station workers, no doubt the remnants of a stubborn freighter unwilling to yield to pursuing pirates. When Kiriyki read the name of the cyber implants: Double-Edged Hydra Compartmentalizer, his heart missed a beat. No wonder the freighter had been stubborn, these implants were among the rarest and most sought after Amarrian artifacts in the Caldari State. Kiriyki fervently hoped the news was true: a horde of super-rare cyber implants for sale! While he waited impatiently for the loading procedure to finish he noticed his hands shaking. Odra station was just one warp away...

Ametat and Avetat

- 1 Now it came to pass in the third day of the first month of the tenth year of the rule of emperor Amash-Akura that the midday deliberations were abruptly brought to a halt when the day darkened in the sky.
- 2 And the sun went black as night and birds fell from the sky and flowers shriveled in the field and people fell sick in the streets and in the houses.
- 3 And in this moment of terrible distress the skies opened with a loud shriek and angels, bright as the sun was black, descended down to earth and their beauty soothed all the people and the animals alike.
- 4 And when the angels touched the ground with their feet the earth shook violently and fire engulfed those daring too near the divinities. Their power being mighty and their presence potent the people were wise not to look too closely upon them.
- 5 The emperor came from his high seat with his retinue to meet with the angels outside the city walls. And lo and behold! The moment the emperor passed below the city gates the sun cleared and shone as brightly as ever before, all in the glory of the emperor and the heavenly angels that called upon him.
- 6 The angels spoke the language of God and called themselves sefrim: those that guard the high seats of heaven. God ordered them here to protect the emperor against all evils that ever beset him.
- 7 The sefrim offered unto the emperor a present from God as one brother to another: Ametat the Scepter and Avetat the Crown, showing the great pleasure God had in the earthly work of the emperor.
- 8 And thus the sefrim came to serve the illustrious Amash-Akura, to stay by his side during the day and guard his sleep during the night. A great house of white stone and marble was built for the sefrim to

reside in and were tended by the best servants the empire had to offer.

- 9 For a hundred years while the sefrim watched over the empire no wars or epidemics or famines ruined the lands and the people were content and joyous.
- 10 From Isthia in the north and Melekel in the south and Edras in the east and from Iphria in the west people came to pray before the holy sefrim and receive a blessing to take home to their families.
- 11 The sefrim stood tall and beautiful, clad in their white and amber robes, with masks of gold and silver to protect people from being struck dead by their angelic beauty.
- 12 And all this time the emperor Amash-Akura did not age one day and was as healthy and strong as the day he came of age. The Scepter gave him vigor and the Crown gave him acumen and his rule was wise and fair.
- 13 Then Molok the Deceiver sundered the lands and the people suffered floods and plagues conjured by him. Molok turned the people against the sefrim and people who once sang their praise now abhorred them.
- 14 The emperor saw that all was not good and summoned the sefrim and said unto them, The people are in great distress, what remedies doest thee have?
- 15 And the sefrim answered, My Lord, the land has split against thou, thou must make war upon thy enemies to reclaim what is justly thine.
- 16 And the emperor asked, Will thee aid us in this perilous endeavor?
- 17 But the sefrim answered, No my Lord, we are here only to guide and guard, it is forbidden to us to aggress upon any man.
- 18 Then be gone! The emperor said in anger, for his foes were formidable.
- 19 And the sefrim, not longer in the emperor's favor returned to from whence they came that very day. And the moment they left the sun went black and people cried in anguish for this was an evil omen.

20 And that night God spake unto emperor Amash-Akura in his sleep,
Thy folly is great, Amash-Akura, thou hast rejected those I sent to
thee in thine hour of need. Thou must redeem thyself to me by thy
own merits.

21 And next day Amash-Akura had aged all his days and his hair was
white and his skin wrinkled. But his spirit was high and his will
resolute. God had charged him to take back his empire.

22 For five years Amash-Akura battled his enemies, wielding the Scepter
and the Crown, and triumphed in the end. The day after Molok the
Deceiver was brought before him in chains and sacrificed on the altar
of God; the emperor died in his bedchamber, his task fulfilled.

23 And that night the sky turned red and the people were again happy
that God was content with them and the new emperor.

- Chapter I of the Epitoth
in the Book of Scriptures

The above text found in the holy book of the Amarrians the Book of Scriptures (actually several volumes). It dates more than 6000 years back, to the time when the Amarrians were still a fledgling nation on the planet Athra (later renamed Amarr Prime, once the Amarrians had conquered it completely). The story of the sefrim and Ametat and Avetat has fascinated scholars for ages. The first chapter of the Epitoth is the oldest text containing information about the sefrim and is also in many ways the most detailed. It describes their arrival and departure, as well as their appearance. In later texts the sefrim are only mentioned as mythical creatures and servants of the Amarr God and emperor.

But there are in existence fragments of texts from various sources that speak of the gifts the sefrim (singular form: sef), the Ametat and the Avetat, or the Scepter and the Crown. These fragments not only support the truth of the story (at least up to a point), but they also contain information regarding what happened to the items. The Scepter and the Crown,

described as made of incredibly light-weight metal, yet also very strong. No surviving manuscripts give any exact info about their function other than they allowed the user to 'wield the power of God' and 'harvest the knowledge of creation'.

There are more facts that support the story. Astronomical data shows that two solar eclipses occurred in the space of 101 years in the same time period as the text was (accurately established) written in. Both of these eclipses were caused by the large planet Zorast, the next planet between Amarr Prime and the sun (none of the Amarr Prime moons are large enough to create anything more than hardly noticeable solar eclipses). The first of the Zorast solar eclipses created full umbra on Amarr Island, while in the latter the island was only in the penumbra of the eclipse. What is more, five years after the latter eclipse a huge asteroid hit the gaseous Zorast while the planet was well aligned with Amarr Prime, an event that was undoubtedly spotted on Amarr Island.

Going back to Ametat and Avetat, the two items remained in the emperor's family for four centuries, when they inexplicitly disappeared. In one of the last texts to mention it, a report made by the Amarr Court Chamberlain, it is stated that despite their age not one blemish or rust-spot is to be found on them. Despite numerous red herrings and fabrications through the ages, as well as many methodical searches, the real Scepter and the Crown have never been recovered.

Old Man Star

Those traveling within the Gallente Federation from the Peccanouette Circle to the Patrie Perimeter can make a shortcut midway through by traversing Ouperia - a cold and uninhabited white dwarf system. Few now remember the name Ouperia - most people only know it by what it is commonly called, Old Man Star.

Interstellar jump drive technology is fairly new. Until it came along, the only way for the empires to expand their territory was to send a ship to a solar system to build a stargate. The fastest versions of these construction ships managed a speed of ca. 30% of the speed of light. At this speed a system 10 light-years away could be reached in 33 years, or there about. The crew of the construction ships was put into cryogenic stasis for the duration of the trip, only to be revived once the destination was neared.

Later, after jump drive technology became available, several of these ships were retrofitted with jump drives. This meant that decades-long trips were a thing of the past. However, none of these older models had been built to handle the sort of technology found in these jump drives, and this meant that stories of fateful malfunctions circulated frequently. One such story was that of Old Man Darieux's construction ship.

In YC 11, when the Gallente-Caldari War was near its end, a Gallentean construction ship set out for the desolate system then known as Ouperia. There was little monetary gain to be had from the system's middling asteroid fields, but a stargate there would serve as a link between the Peccanouette Circle and the Patrie Perimeter, which made it a good long-term trade prospect. The construction ship departed from Villore system, some 12 light years distant. Estimated travel time was only a few minutes. The crew consisted of five people, a huge reduction from the old days

when dozens of crewmen were needed – with the technological advances made over the course of the war, swarms of drones and robots were by that point responsible for most of the actual construction, with the crew acting mostly as operators and technicians.

Shortly after the construction ship set out, disaster befell it. A miscalculation in the drive made the jump misfire, sending the ship several light years off course and planting it in the middle of an asteroid belt. Seconds later, a large asteroid hit the ship full force. The impact killed four of the ship's crew, but the fifth survived. His name was Ceul Darieux and he was the ship's drone operator.

Back home the authorities, still embroiled in the war, were facing great internal debate as they pondered CONCORD-mediated peace talks with the Caldari. Finding little incentive to lose another multi-million ISK ship on a system with no greater short-term value than Ouperia, they opted to shelve the project. Since the vessel's calculation error was evident to the station personnel who'd sent it off, and because its subspace beacon and comms arrays had been damaged in the impact, the ship was believed destroyed and written off.

Darieux's immediate problem was how to feed himself – to save space and weight no food was carried on the ship, but the greenhouse bulbs from the ship's earlier incarnation were still equipped to grow edible plants. This, however, required the proximity of a sun to provide the essential light and heat - in short, the greenhouse bulbs and the plant seeds were useless in deep space. Water was an equally pressing problem, as was the shortage of oxygen. The state of the ship did not make things any easier - the asteroid had ripped a huge gash into the side of the ship and destroyed many of the ship's vital systems. The cargo hold was hit especially hard - debris of destroyed equipment and pieces of the asteroid cluttered the small space.

Darieux put his engineering skills to good use to solve these problems. He began by tampering with the fuel tanks. The fuel tanks, filled with liquid hydrogen and liquid oxygen, served the propulsion system once the ship had to be slowed down once near the destination system. Fiddling with the fuel tanks was extremely dangerous, as the ingredients were highly flammable, but with patience and caution Darieux managed to get a controlled reaction out of the fuel, which gave him both water and oxygen. Then he welded together every piece of glass and metal plate he could muster in the ship to gather and store what little light he could from distant stars. This was sufficient for him to start food production in one greenhouse bulb - by linking the bulb into the ship's septic tank fertilizers for the plants were secured. The result was enough food for one man and later enough oxygen production as well. In other words, Darieux managed to create his own little ecological system.

Once Darieux had stabilized the conditions on the ship and provided for himself he next had to adjust the course of the ship. The impact had slightly altered the ship's course and in the vastness of space it meant the ship would bypass the Ouperia system by billions of kilometers. The propulsion system had been damaged beyond repair - the ship was out of control and heading into deep space for eternity. The more time spent on a solution the further adrift the ship would be, so a quick resolution was required. Instead of spending valuable time trying to build a new propulsion system Darieux opted for a more ingenious solution: The ship was equipped with a token force of combat missiles. Darieux fired the missiles and turned them around to explode against the strongest points of the ship's armor. By carefully calculating the impact points and controlling the size of the explosion Darieux managed to correctly align the ship to its original course. Darieux briefly contemplated trying to turn the ship completely around, but quickly realized that he neither had enough missiles for this, nor would the hull withstand such a brute way of turning around even if he had them.

Now the duller part of the journey began, as the ship was still decades from Ouperia system at its current speed. Darieux spent the time creating fantastic robots and designs using the scrap heap in the cargo hold. He discovered that the asteroid that hit the ship had been very rich with the super rare mineral megacyte - which has unique qualities that make it extremely valuable in advanced robotics and drone manufacturing. Having to live and work in zero gravity year in, year out gave Darieux a distinctive insight into hi-tech assembly and despite the limited resources and tools at his disposal, what he created during those long long years has never since been surpassed in originality or brilliance.

At long last the ship entered the Ouperia system, 44 years behind schedule due to the decreased speed caused by the impact and subsequent missile explosions. Over the years Darieux had invented several techniques for slowing the ship down, just for this occasion. His main method was to use the stellar bodies in the system to help him slow down. Even if the propulsion system itself was still out of order Darieux managed to get some of the directional thrusters to work, feeding them with the last drops of fuel. Now he began to zigzag between the system's planets, using the gravity to his advantage to stop the ship and even going so far as to enter the atmosphere at one point (protecting the ship with a handcrafted shield). Through these unorthodox methods Darieux managed to stop the ship from shooting out into deep space again.

By this time Darieux was an old man, his gaunt body in a bad state due to too much time in zero gravity. Yet his spirit was still strong and he was unwilling to give up now that he'd managed to reach his destination. Satisfying though it was to be in the Ouperia system his situation was still dire as the prospects for any kind of rescue were absolutely none at all. His fate lay entirely in his own hands and the only option was to try to construct the stargate all by himself.

All the equipment needed to construct the stargate was long since destroyed or altered beyond recognition. Darieux was forced to start from scratch devising and building innovative drones and robot factories. He centered his activity around a large asteroid that was conveniently close to the resonance point between the white main star and its tiny brown companion. There, on that asteroid, Darieux constructed a small assembly factory as well as his home and for five years he labored along with his robot friends to complete, single-handedly, a stargate. A feat that maybe a handful in the whole universe could pull off, Darieux performed at the age of 80 – white-haired, wrinkled face, shaky hands and all.

Imagine the surprise of the stargate controllers in the Villore system when a patched up construction ship limped through their stargate - the triumphant remains of a mission long since considered dead and lost. Darieux reveled in the media limelight for a while before launching his own company, CreoDron, centered on the blueprints created in an incredible voyage lasting almost half a century. He died a few years later, his frail body and failing internal organs too badly damaged for cloning. But his legacy remains strong to this day - CreoDron is the biggest drone manufacturing company in the universe of New Eden and the innovations of its founder still drive the drone industry. Renaming the Ouperia system the Old Man Star is the least an appreciative world can do.

The Vicious Cycle

And then it was all over. The capsule cracked open. The naked skin, exposed to direct sunlight, flared up. The body swelled, convulsing uncontrollably. Just as consciousness faded the saliva boiled on the tongue. Death came quickly thereafter. The body mingled with the debris of the former frigate. In the background police ships chased down the killer.

It all began so innocently. Two Gallentean frigates cruising along in Federation space. Chatting amiably. One a wide-eyed rookie; the other one acting the veteran part. Disaster: a war of words, followed by threats and insults. Then chat stopped and weapons talked. The rookie never stood a chance. But wait! Police ships approach. Too late to save the rookie. So they punish the offender. Justice is swift - an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The veteran's body joins the rookie in its graceful dance around the sun.

Yet both live. This very moment they wake to life in their brand new bodies. Maybe they will get a chance to dance again some other time - maybe then the rookie will have learned some new tricks.

This is not the end. The cycle of life saved the fallen two from oblivion. So too their cadavers are returned to the eternal circle one more time. Their frozen dance interrupted as soon as the horizon swallows the police ships. A non-descript ship sidles up. A couple of salvage drones fleetingly deployed. The lifeless bodies snatched up and hurriedly returned to the ship. Getting caught body mining by the Gallente police means serious, serious trouble. Then the ship warps away, wanting out of Federation space quickly with its very hot cargo. Searching for a cloning facility that doesn't mind a bit of ill-gotten A-grade biomass on the side. Life goes on, citizen. Nothing more for you here.

Silphy

Five hundred years ago the Intaki people lived a simple life on their home planet. For them the sky was a mystery they were only slowly unfolding with their pre-industrial technology. Then the Gallenteans arrived and swept them into the modern age in one swift stroke. The Intakis, initially overwhelmed, adapted quickly and within a century they had seasoned space travelers and active members of the Gallente governing body. They soon established their reputation as fair-minded humanists that excelled as deft negotiators and clever businessmen, fitting perfectly into the Gallentean way of life.

The social uproar following the Caldari departure from the Federation touched the Intakis deeply and many of them sympathized and even supported the Caldari - the yoke of the cumbersome Federation bureaucracy lay as heavily on the Intakis as the Caldari. Understandably the Gallenteans were forced to deal harshly with these elements to prevent a complete fragmentation of the young Federation.

Apart from a few minor uprisings the Federation quickly subdued the Intakis. Those deemed the biggest threat to the stability of the regime were arrested and exiled. Some of these went over to the Caldari side, but the majority of the exiles, some five thousand in total, went out into the great unknown at the outskirts of Federation space. There they built themselves new homes in the form of sprawling space stations - the Federation barring them from colonizing any planets or moons.

In time as the exiles became more organized and their power increased through asteroid mining and black market trading they formed a loosely connected organization and termed it the Intaki syndicate. The syndicate is not political in any sense - each member station enjoys complete autonomy

- but they share economical information and help each other in security matters.

The territories of the Intaki syndicate are open to everyone, no matter their race, political creed or legal stature. The syndicate is not vastly wealthy or powerful, but they serve an important function on the fringe of empire space - acting as the safe havens for anyone and everyone where everything can be bought and sold, no questions asked. While the Federation was still the Promised Land the syndicate territories received the residual immigrants that weren't allowed into the Federation for one reason or another, thus slowly growing in size and importance.

Each syndicate station has its own governor who has complete authority over their station and its surroundings. These governors are those that were instrumental in constructing the station all those years ago, or their descendants. The unofficial leader of the syndicate in years past was the governor of Poitot station, Dorn en Diabel. A charismatic and passionate leader he installed order in the chaos that reigned after the exile and set the foundation of the syndicate. Like so many prominent Intakis en Diabel was an albino, which lent his authority the strength needed to push his will through.

A decade ago en Diabel died in a freak accident, meaning his mind couldn't be transferred to his clone. His eldest son inherited his father's position as station manager of Poitot station. But trouble was brewing on the horizon. Syndicate rivals of the en Diabel family were gathering strength for a coup. Not possessing his father's shrewd political mind young Gare en Diabel was clearly out of his league and his equally weak siblings on Poitot were incapable of lending the kind of assistance needed.

But one child of Dorn en Diabel was not on Poitot, nor had been for more than five years. Silphy en Diabel, his youngest, had been sent off to the Sisters of EVE after one heated row too many with her father. Alone among

Dorn en Diabel's offspring Silphy had inherited her father's wits and passion, as well as her mother's fiery temper. Her stay with the Sisters, initially intended as a punishment, grew into enthusiasm for Silphy - for the first time she was free of her father's iron will and free to live as she liked. She struck a friendship with Santimona Sarpati - an influential Sister that also happened to be sister to the notorious V. Salvador Sarpati, head of the Serpentis Corporation. But just as Silphy's career with the Sisters seemed poised for rapid take off, she decided to heed the desperate calls of her family and head back home to Poitot.

Once there Silphy quickly assessed the situation and then in one swift stroke as cunning and brutal as any her father had deceived, she seized the initiative. First, she altered the station charter so that from now on the populace would elect the governor for life, this went unopposed as the family's enemies thought this a sign of weakness - their view confirmed a week later when one of their own was elected governor. But then Silphy put the next step of her plan into motion: she secretly arranged for attacks on all inbound food supply ships, thus slowly putting Poitot station in a state of starvation. Naturally, the enraged populace blamed the new governor. Silphy, using her Sisters of EVE influence, then had emergency food supplies brought in on vessels of the en Diabel family (which were of course left alone). Thus Silphy made herself champion of the people and when the governor was driven out of office Silphy won the next elections by a landslide. Having shattered the reputation of her enemies she started systematically ruining them financially until she was the undisputed leader of Poitot station. At the same time Silphy strengthened her position as the head of the en Diabel family - she sent her brothers abroad and kept a strict control of their monetary allowance to keep them dependant on her. She has also slowly asserted herself as supreme leader on Poitot station, the brief influence of the populace soon to fade to nothing.

In the years since Silphy en Diabel became governess she has regained her fathers prominence as the unofficial leader of the leaderless Intaki

syndicate. Her power has never been seriously tested, although she lost her connections with the Sisters of EVE once it was discovered that she'd collaborated with the Serpentis Corporation in her bid for black market dominance in and around the Federation. Santimona Sarpati, once her good and trusted friend and ally, has turned her back on her and just as she calls her brother King Sarpati she now mockingly calls Silphy Queen Silphy of the syndicate, stating that they compliment each other perfectly in their exploitation and contempt of their fellow humans.

Maleatu Shakor

One would be forgiven for assuming that with the countless billions of inhabitants in the world of EVE the acts of an individual count for little. Yet there are equally countless tales of individuals that through skill, perseverance or luck shaped the world around them and made their mark on history. Maybe most of these tales are only fables, kept alive with forlorn hope by the insignificant many. One of these tales is that of Maleatu Shakor.

Born a son of a Brutor Defiant, Shakor soon showed the signs of the eye disease that plague so many descendants of Defiants. The eye disease, a result of the harsh treatment the Defiants received at the hands of the Amarrians, is similar to glaucoma and invariably results in a complete loss of sight before the age of five. Unlike when under the yoke of the Amarrian occupation the Minmatars today have access to cures for the disease, but many decide against a cure as the white eyes associated with the disease have become a sign of respect amongst the Brutor clan. Shakor decided as a teenager not to undergo an operation to regain his sight. He did this not to gain respect from his fellow Brutors, but out of personal deference to those Defiants that lost their health and even their life as human guinea pigs in the gruesome Human Endurance Program of the Amarrians.

The Minmatar Rebellion was long over when Shakor came of age, but still he decided to take up the fight against the Amarrians. Joining a raggedy band of fighters (rebels in the eyes of the Amarrians), Shakor soon proved himself as an outstanding ship captain. Within a few months he had taken control of the rebel band and organized them into an expert combat squad. It was at this time that Shakor devised his infamous battle formation that bears his name: Shakor's Spiral - a daring close counter assault tactic that only the most skilled pilots can pull off.

Shakor's squadron operated on the borders of Minmatar and Amarr (actually Ammatar) space, like other rebel squads. Its notoriety grew in leaps and bounds, prompting the Amarrians to start targeting the squad with their elite forces. Pressure from other rebel leaders (who were taking a licking from the Amarrians) forced Shakor to leave the border regions with his squadron and set up his base of operation away from Minmatar space. Far from deterred, Shakor continued fighting the Amarrians from his isolated station hidden deep within the Great Wildlands. It was there that the strangest incident of his eventful life occurred.

Returning one day from the hunt, Shakor and his men were ambushed by the Amarr Royal Guard - universally regarded as the best fighting unit around. A fierce battle ensued. Shakor's men quickly formed a Spiral, the Royal Guard responded by forming an Arrow formation, designed to counter the Spiral. Despite their experience, Shakor's men panicked once their casualties began mounting and tried to retreat. They were hunted down and slaughtered to the last man by the Royal Guard. The Guardsmen wanted to make sure there were no survivors and systematically began destroying the escape pods of those pilots who'd managed to clamber aboard theirs before being destroyed. But when they locked their weapons on Shakor's escape pod a Jovian vessel uncloaked itself next to it. Jamming the Amarr vessels with ease, the Jovian ship leisurely moved Shakor's escape pod into its cargo hold before disappearing again. The Amarrians tried to track it down, but found no trace of it.

For two years nothing was heard of Maleatu Shakor. The Amarrians, initially vexed over the Jovian interference, assumed he was dead. Thus his return to the Minmatar Republic came as a total surprise. Where Shakor had once been fierce, driven and highly agitated he now seemed unusually calm and collected. Fearing some foul Jovian plot Shakor's family insisted on DNA tests; they confirmed his identity. Shakor himself has remained silent about his time with the Jovians. He assumed a political position with

the Republic and soon resumed his fight for freeing Minmatars still enslaved by the Amarrians, with the difference that his arsenal now consists of sharp words and political machinations instead of a fleet of space ships. Just as his ancestors defied the Amarr rule all those years ago Maleatu Shakor continues to this day defying the Amarrians at every opportunity in the halls of diplomacy all over the world of EVE.

Rogue Drones

The huge asteroid tumbled majestically through the void, dwarfing his asteroid brethren close by, some of which themselves measured hundreds of meters in diameter. Gabri Cichan had been working his way towards the behemoth for the better part of an hour now. He had even given the huge asteroid a girl's name, as was his want with asteroids he hoped would make his dreams come true and fill his pockets with cash - this one he called Theriese. His cargo hold was half-full of minerals by now, Cichan hoped to fill it completely by mining Theriese, preferably with some rarities. Approaching it was not easy - lesser asteroids seemed to swarm around it in great clusters, making it tricky to navigate through the maze of rock. Cichan kept his mining drones occupied on nearby asteroids while maneuvering closer to the big one. As soon as he was in range he sent some of them up ahead to start digging into Theriese. Getting closer Cichan noticed other drones mingling with his own. Thinking another miner was in the vicinity he started scanning his radar, but detected no ships - just those few extra drones and the asteroids rolling around his ship. Continuing his approach unabated Cichan squeezed between a couple of asteroids that formed a sort of a gateway to his objective. Finally entering the empty space around Theriese, Cichan was quickly unnerved by the sight that greeted him in the asylum beneath Theriese's shadow.

Clinging to the inner sides of the two gateway asteroids were sprawling rogue drone lairs - hundred of meters of dark metallic and menacing abode buried deep into the rock and housing hundreds of wild drones. Cichan had heard of these monstrosities, but never one so big as the one he was viewing now. The lair was not only cleverly hidden in every direction from prying eyes - it was also superbly located close to the mammoth asteroid that was sure to attract miners from miles away. As a prove to that point Cichan noticed the remains of several ships perched by the drone lairs,

being systematically taken apart by worker drones and incorporated into the ever-expanding drone complex. Fast approaching combat drones made Cichan fear his ship would share the same fate all-to-soon.

In a desperate attempt to escape the attacking drones Cichan slammed his ship into evasive maneuvers while trying to kick-start the warp drive at the same time. His only chance was to outmaneuver the drones long enough until his warp drive would activate.

The bulky combat drones were sluggish in their pursuit of the fleeing vessel, but more nimble assault drones surged ahead and quickly caught up. The assault drones were equipped with energy leech equipment and once in range they set out to disrupt the energy flow in Cichan's ship. The ship's power core could have coped with two or three of these little buggers, but the ship was soon swamped by them and the power supply drained rapidly. By the time the warp drive was online it was too late - Cichan no longer had the energy available to activate it. Then the combat drones arrived.

When Cichan was some minutes later being whisked away in his capsule he thought himself lucky to escape alive. His ship and everything in it was lost - it was now serving as fodder for the growing drone lairs of Theriese. Well, he thought, at least he had an interesting story to tell his friends.

Rogue drones and wild drones are the terms used over advanced drones that mutated out of control. A few years ago some ingenious Gallentean inventor had the idea of creating super-advanced drones that could think and act on their own - in essence acting in every sense like a regular space ship except being unmanned and computer controlled. First prototypes were encouraging, but then disaster struck. The drones became unruly, then unmanageable. Some of these were huge - the largest drones ever constructed, these drones were even equipped with warp drives and equipped with the latest advancements in artificial intelligence. These

mother drones, as they were called, along with several lesser drones soon managed to spread out, not only within the same system as the research facility that birthed them, but also to other systems. Only later men discovered exactly how - the drones attacked and took over space ships, then used them to jump to other systems, the drones themselves safely hidden within the ship. Needless to say the super-drone research was soon abandoned by the Gallenteans.

The rogue drones soon started behaving very much like other living beings. They constructed a home for themselves, usually deep in some remote asteroid field, and began plans for reproduction. This involved both the mining of asteroids and attacks on unsuspecting mining vessels - all with the intent of gathering the materials needed to expand their homes and to build their own drones. As the months passed drone lairs popped up in dozen different places and today they can be found in almost every corner of the world, harassing and killing space farers of every sort. As each drone lair is started by a separate mother drone they often evolve in quite different ways. Each new generation of rogue drones shows some new mutations, creating a huge diversity in the shape, size and power for rogue drones.

Recently a new type of drone lair has appeared, commonly called a hulk lair. It seems that when rogue drones manage to capture suitably large vessels, like freighters or carriers, they don't dismantle the ship completely, but instead start to incorporate their lair into the ship's hull. Eventually these hulks break free from the drone lair that captured them and start drifting out of the asteroid field under their own accord, still inhabited by drones. Hulks like these have often been found drifting in deep space

In areas where rogue drones are numerous and seen as deterrents to normal mining and trade operations, the local authorities have taken it upon themselves to employ armed forces to destroy rogue drone lairs, or at least keep them from spreading too heavily. Discussions have been held

between the empires and within CONCORD about a possible joint effort to rid the world of rogue drones, but these discussions have not led to any concrete deals being made. Thus, it is still up to the local authorities of any given place to deal with the drones as best they can.

Power Politics

When Souro Foiritan began his five year tenure as the President of the Gallente Federation, the first thing he did was to expel his main competitors from the Progressive Party; veto laws on food grants to the poor and needy; and then go on a two-day pleasure space cruise in the Rainbow zone, stating he needed a holiday after a hard-fought election campaign. This bizarre Presidential behavior has in the past three years become even more colorful, prompting scorn and contempt from Foiritan's political enemies and foreign ambassadors alike. Even more bizarrely, Souro Foiritan is the most popular President in the history of the Federation. Time and time again, after Foiritan's latest folly, public polls on his popularity show little or no effects on his immense popularity (85% of the latest poll). The reason for this is simple: for all his buffoonery President Foiritan is a shrewd and intelligent politician. He is charismatic, easy-going and honest, but at the same time he's a strict disciplinarian that drives himself and his staff hard to better the lives of Gallenteans and further the cause of the Federation. Whatever his political enemies may think of him they grudgingly admit that President Foiritan is infuriatingly good at his job.

Unlike so many Presidents before him Foiritan is very much his own man - although he was elected as the candidate of the Progressive Party (and is thus a Progressor) he has deliberately distanced himself from the party in recent years. Ousting his main rivals from the party on the very first day of his presidency was a clear sign that he was not going to be a puppet dancing on strings controlled by the party leaders and his latter conduct towards the lobby factions has made it very clear that Foiritan is the one in control. Despite all this Foiritan is very much aware that being the leader of a democratic state, especially one as volatile as the Federation with all its ethnic, religious and economic differences, is a position built on quicksand. Take one wrong step and you are up to your ears in trouble.

The democracy exercised by the Gallenteans is a very open one - it is common for major issues to go to a public vote instead of being solely decided by the senate or the President. This is something that the lobby factions pushed through a long time ago as a way to utilize public opinion (which can be much easier to sway by master propagandists than the mind of the President) for important matters. President Foiritan has been able, due to his ongoing popularity, to use this forum several times in the past to push through tough issues despite senate opposition. Foiritan knows his people very well. He knows that even if Gallente society can be called a capitalistic one, the capitalism followed by the Gallenteans is fundamentally different than the one found in the Caldari State. For Gallenteans, the accumulation of wealth is something that is done on an individual level and personal wealth only matters in comparison to the wealth of other individuals. For the Caldari the economic wheels of the state are controlled by huge corporations and for corporations competition, efficiency and market share is more important than accumulation of wealth (although the latter is often a happy by-product of the former) - business for the good of the individual rather than the good of the many is something totally alien to the Caldari. This Foiritan understands very well and he knows that greasing the palm of a few individuals will appeal more to the Gallenteans than some blanket solutions that really does not help anyone all that much. In these matters Foiritan is at odds with the Sociocrats, the second largest political bloc in the Federation. Their leader, Mentas Blaque, is a sworn enemy of Foiritan and uses every opportunity to mock him and his government. The Sociocrats (the name of the party is Social Democrats, Sociocrats is what they are usually called) advocate social equality on all levels and that the federal government should make it its highest priority to aid those in the lower strata of society. Mentas Blaque loathes the individualistic approach of President Foiritan and considers it to be vile favoritism and simply unjust.

The latest dispute is that regarding the legal ownership of planets in unpopulated systems. The President and the Progressors want to hand out

ownership on an individual basis, while the Sociocrats consider the planets to be the property of the Federation (as it was federal scout ships that discovered them and federal construction crews that built stargates linking the systems to the Federation) and the Federation should control colonization and development of the planets and allow the whole Federation to reap the rewards. The President is counting on the support of the Unionists (where Minmatar immigrants are very strong), while Mentas Blaque and the Sociocrats are counting on the potentially explosive pressure of the lower classes. The issue is currently being hotly debated in the governmental halls and many believe that sooner or later either party will call for a public vote on the matter. Many also believe that this issue, which is also hotly debated on every street corner of the Federation, could shatter the popularity of the President once and for all.

Mordu's Legion

The Caldari State, with its mega-corporations and millions of smaller companies forming the fabric of society, hasn't always posed as a united front as it does today. Several times in its history since the State was birthed following its break from the Gallente Federation, rival factions and companies have clashed, often with deadly intent. Most of the time, the cause of conflict is of an economical nature, but every now and then ideology or political differences are the cause.

One of these incidents was the Waschi Uprising, which took place a few decades ago in the Kamokor system. Then, a few radical Caldari attacked settlements of Intakis in the system and proclaimed that the Caldari State was solely for people of Caldari origin. The Caldari authority, as ever fearful that their finely woven social tapestry of corporatism would be torn asunder, sent in their best military units to quell the uprising before it could spread any further.

The Waschi Uprising did not leave any permanent marks on Caldari society. Still, it did leave one legacy that has carried on to this very day and that is Mordu's Legion.

When the Caldari broke from the Gallente Federation many Intakis that sympathized with their cause were exiled from the Federation. The most militant of those went over to the Caldari and asked to join them in their fight against the Federation. These were all experienced military personnel and thus very valuable in the early stages of the war when veterans were few and far between. The Intakis were all put into a separate squadron, with a Caldari officer. His name was Muryia Mordu. Mordu was a brilliant young officer and one of the more open-minded Caldari, who generally are extremely xenophobic. He immediately took to the Intakis and they to him

and together they formed one of the more revered fighting units in the Caldari Navy during the war with the Federation.

After the war ended the Intakis were offered cheap land and accommodations in Waschi City on the planet of Kamokor IV. For awhile the Intakis lived peacefully, slowly becoming part of the Waschi community. Yet the presence of the Intakis caused tension in the city and slowly radicals, feeding on the xenophobic tendencies of the Caldari, gained strength. In the end the radicals gained majority in the city and began seriously harassing the Intakis. When Caldari authorities tried to put an end to this the uprising started in earnest, with the radicals and their supporters demanding the exportation of all foreigners and the closure of the borders. The Intakis were driven out and, in desperation, they called on their old commander Mordu to help them defend themselves and get back what was rightfully theirs. Mordu, now retired, agreed to assist. The catch was that Mordu and the Intakis were no longer part of the Caldari Navy. Not deterred by this small fact, the group formed an independent mercenary corps to fight the radicals. This was the inception of Mordu's Legion.

The Legion, mostly consisting of old veterans from the war with the Federation and young hotheads eager for action, helped the Caldari Navy to tear the radicals' forces to pieces under the skillful direction of Mordu. The Caldari authorities were impressed by the fighting spirit of the Legion and offered to merge it with the Caldari Navy. Mordu and the other leaders of the Legion declined, deciding rather to focus on the mercenary nature of the Legion.

In the years since the uprising Mordu's Legion has grown in stature. Today it is the largest and most famous mercenary corps in the world of EVE. The Legion has always had close ties with the Caldari State and the two assist each other on many issues. At first the Legion accepted only citizens of the Caldari State, but today they accept members from any race, as long as they are not known enemies of the Caldari State. Still, the majority of the

members are of Caldari origin and the leaders are all Caldari. The Legion does not train its members, so they are expected to be experienced fighters before they apply for membership in the Legion. Members of the Legion get access to high-tech Caldari military equipment, even prototype weapons to test out, and are guaranteed plenty of employment if they so wish. Non-Caldari that have served in the Legion for a long time are offered Caldari citizenship on their retirement.

The Legion is often employed by governments to settle issues that are not directly under anyone's jurisdiction, especially when fast deployment and swift results are needed. Their reputation as combat experts as well as fair and honest warriors has never been tarnished.

Repair Man

The wreckage was still smoking; isolated fires still nurtured contently in hidden corners, flowing unnaturally in the zero gravity. Case Omnicron scrutinized the debris, focusing briefly on a promising crate or box before moving on. The assailants of the large cargo vessel hadn't left a lot behind. Normally, Case wouldn't stoop so low as to scavenge destroyed ships for scraps, but he made an exception this time as the cargo vessel was essentially a fresh carcass. Case had witnessed from afar the fierce battle between the cargo ship and the two frigates attacking it. The cargo ship put up a surprising amount of resistance, maiming one of the heavily armed frigates before going down itself, hinting at lucrative cargo on-board. Case had waited for the remaining frigate to finish rummaging through the wreckage, as the capsules of the destroyed vessels made their way to the nearest station. The reunion of the downed pirate with the crew of the cargo vessel on the station would undoubtedly be quite colorful.

Fifteen minutes later Case set his course away from the wreckage, his azure-colored ship streaking away from the smatter of asteroids that encircled the battle scene; he didn't want to spend too much time snooping around in case the pirates or the cargo vessel crew returned to the scene. Besides, he had just snatched a cargo container full of valuable trade goods and had no intention of getting caught with it. Case considered himself a lucky man. Ever since he first set out as the sole captain of a small space frigate some six months earlier, it seemed like fortune had smiled upon him. It was like he had an uncanny sense of being at the right place at the right time, without ever being able to explain this 'gift'. Yet he always had a nagging feeling that he was somehow wasting his time; that he was meant to be doing something far greater and nobler, but was never able to grasp what this elusive thing was. As Case aligned his ship towards the nearest stargate, this feeling of loss; of being the missing link in some

grand inter-stellar puzzle devised by an unseen but all-knowing being haunted his thoughts once again. As he was about to activate the warp drive, his mind went blank; his unconscious body slumped inside the ship's capsule.

The two tiny ships approached Case's blue vessel at a leisurely pace. Their hulls, if they'd been visible, were a multi-colored swirl, like an oil spill. The ships glided silently to either side of the larger frigate, complex arrays of sensors prying apart every detail about the man and the machine they were focusing on. A quiet conversation between the two captains ensued. 'Is this the man we want?' said one. 'This is him,' the other replied. 'I will start my work.'

The one stood guard, while the other worked in silence. His mind subtly instructed the sensors, sending data directly into the mind of the comatose captain within the blue ship. It only took a few minutes. 'Is it done?' one said. 'It is,' the other said. 'I will awake him now.'

The two captains watched as the slightly bewildered Case Omnicron, oblivious to those watching him, finally made his way to the stargate. 'Has the behavioral pattern been aligned correctly?' asked one. 'Yes, he will do much better now,' the other answered with pride. Then, the hunter and the repair man, activated their own warp drives and started their journey home.

New Horizons

Sometimes Runia Tamarik felt that all she did was travel. Constantly touring from one place to another, with as little time as possible spent at each destination before dashing to the next. Not that she could complain too much about her vocation - she was relatively well off and had an easy job. Her years as an inter-stellar trader had given her contacts and information that elevated her way above the basic traders. She was especially proud of her connections with the Caldari, as they were very lucrative for her personally and also for her nation, the Khanid Kingdom. The routes from the Kingdom to the State might prove long and hazardous, but the profits more than made up for that.

Today, Runia was especially excited as she was about to meet a Caldari trader she'd never met before. The man was supposed to have good connections to some top-level people in the Caldari corporate structure. If true, this meant Runia might be in for some big bucks. Yet she felt a little trepidation, not because of the high-level contacts the man had, but because he was Deteis. This was the first time she had done business with one. Until now her only contacts within the Caldari State were Civire - she was used to their mode of thinking; straightforward, above-board dealings where everything was planned and perfected. She never had any troubles with timetables or broken assurances. Deteis were supposed to be different - more cunning, more underhanded. These, at least were the rumors she had heard. But usually they came from people - Dark Amarrians - that had no first-hand knowledge of the Caldari. Other traders she knew said that although the Deteis were in many ways different they still shared all the basic Caldari traits with the Civire - duty, discipline and sincerity.

Runia didn't know much about the history of the Caldari; she knew that Caldari Prime - the old home of the Caldari - had several continents and

that the different Caldari bloodlines came from different continents. Back in the days when the Caldari still occupied Caldari Prime the difference between the bloodlines was profound, not only in physical appearance, but also culturally. Runia suspected that the beliefs that the Caldari bloodlines were very different from each other stemmed from these facts. But when the Caldari had to leave their home planet and the long and arduous war with the Gallente Federation erupted the Caldari race as a whole was uprooted and thrown into a melting pot where fighting for their survival was all that mattered. The frantic decades that followed altered the Caldari psyche forever. Traits such as discipline and loyalty came to the forefront and shaped - and continue to shape - Caldari society into something completely new. The corporate state came into being, an all-engulfing machine that both nurtured and dominated its citizens. All the different bloodlines, Deteis and Civire the two largest, were affected by these deep-rooted changes and molded to the norm.

The effect was that the Caldari thought of them as Caldari first, their corporation came second, with the bloodline they belonged to a distant third. None of the mega-corporations were structured around the bloodlines and they intermingled freely on every social level. Although the bloodlines were proud of their heritage they didn't feel it was an important aspect of their life. Inter-marriages are not common, but this has more to do with physical differences than anything else.

Runia was about to dock at her destination station - an industrial station belonging to the Wiyarkomi Corporation deep in Caldari space. She waited patiently while the docking sequence finished. As soon as she was able she contacted her new agent. There was no need to wait - she had already prepared herself many times over on the voyage over.

One hour later Runia undocked. Her new Deteis agent for the Wiyarkomi Corporation had been polite and to the point and shown no indication of being sly or untrustworthy. In essence, he was pretty much like every other

Caldari she had ever met. Yet there were slight differences, for instance he had inquired about her home back in the Kingdom and shown genuine interest in all things Dark Amarrian. An inquisitive mind was not something she was accustomed to with the Civire, who were usually dull conversationalists. This feel of more personal interest pleasantly surprised her.

Formalities aside, her new agent quickly established their working relationship. And he gave her a task to complete. A very unusual task from her usual trade-related one's. She was to track down a ship belonging to another Dark Amarrian and report her findings. Runia wondered again why the Caldari were so anxious to track down this ship. She'd been tempted to ask, but refrained from it - it was none of her business and the Caldari would have told her if it was important for her to know. The enormous reward further underlined the urgency. 'Now, how to find this bastard?' she mused. 'I better have a chat with my buddies in the royal navy.' As the chat link connection was being established she idly wondered how she could get them to help her without giving up too much of her reward.

The Vampire

Worlds, moons and asteroids slashed by at a terrifying velocity as the bulky Gallente cargo frigate hurtled across the Murethand system, its anxious pilot pushing every last bit of energy into the drives. Every muscle in Uragan Zelp's body tensed in apprehension. The unwieldy Maulus began to rattle violently as it made the transition from smooth warp-flight to sub-light speed. He realigned his cam-drones to peer behind his ship, panning frantically to-and-fro, wondering just how far behind him his pursuers were.

Nothing.

He had some breathing room at least, thought Uragan. Spending the last two hours playing cat-and-mouse around Murethand's many moons and belts meant the three Caldari raiders waiting for him at the entry point were likely still searching. He pulled up a comm-link to the home base. The face of Director Nestor Makhno appeared on a screen in his mind, painted with annoyance. "You're an hour behind schedule, Zelp, and we've been trying to contact you for twice that. The client is waiting," Nestor half-whispered while tilting his own screen slightly.

"There's been a little problem," spat Uragan, the exasperation in his voice speaking volumes of his emotional state. "I picked up three tails, I think we both know what they're after. I'm making for the Melmaniel gate now, but I need to be met - I can't outrun them forever." The Director's expression changed to one of fear and worry, and Uragan spoke up again, almost shouting. "Whose idiot idea was it to ship the Vampire without escort? Damn it, Nestor! You don't pay me well enough to buy the good clones!"

Nestor had just opened his mouth to protest, when the telltale snap of ships emerging from warp-transit caused Uragan's blood to ice over in his veins.

He abruptly cut off the comm, and again panned around his ship. There they were... three Condors, fifteen clicks aft of him and closing fast. Even at that distance he could make out the rabbit-skull motif stenciled upon their gunmetal hulls: The Guristas.

By now, Uragan was within activation range of the gate. He clenched his teeth as the fat frigate sank into the gate's periphery, and braced himself against the pod's inner wall, ready for a rough ride. The terrorists would be right behind him, and he knew what they wanted all too well; a blueprint for the Vampire, an assault drone the likes of which the universe could only dream of - and one fully functioning prototype. It cost more money than most fully loaded attack cruisers, and the manufacture process was a closely guarded secret. Some whispered that the drone used a biochemical CPU not unlike a living, artificially nourished brain. Uragan only wished he could unwrap it and set it loose on his attackers.

His stomach heaved upward in his abdominal cavity as the Maulus was belched forth from its wormhole. Uragan raced to find an escape route, scanning the planets and stations for an easy way out. He was about to start up the drive, when a soft impact caused the ship to lurch, and the electric crackle of energy, barely audible as it danced on its hull, made Uragan's heart sink in despair. The Guristas had used a warp-scrambler. He was at their mercy.

The mercurial terrorist's unshaven face swelled into view. He spoke in heavily accented Gallentean. "I think you know the drill, son. Eject the goods in a cargo container immediately or we erase you." Uragan's thoughts raced, and he stammered a reply. "It's not worth that much to me, I'll eject it! Just give me time, it's strapped down in the cargo hold!"

The Caldari thought for a moment. "You have five minutes, little man. After that, we'll peel you open and get the drone ourselves."

Panicking, he switched views to the frigate's cargo hold and brought the auto-loader crane online. Pistons wheezing, it swung to life, groping around like a blind man's arm in the dimly lit bay. After seconds that seemed to stretch into eternity, Uragan spotted it among the various containers: the drone, its bright red casing gleaming against the soft cargo bay lights, was lying unpacked on a grav-trolley. Beside it stood a metal briefcase containing its blueprint. Uragan considered letting the Guristas have it, but his attention drifted to the adjacent drone bay's loading ramp. He smiled inwardly. "Like I said... it's not worth that much to me."

The tiny red drone drifted serenely from the Maulus' bay. Uragan could hear the Guristas' curses and threats. The Maulus rocked briefly as their cannons smashed into its hull, but soon the firing stopped - they had much more to worry about.

The Vampire stirred, its arachnid eyes gleaming to crimson life. It bolted sideways, avoiding a salvo from the lead Condor. Dancing and pirouetting around streams of fire, it responded with its own. In less time than it takes to blink, one of the Condors was torn asunder, another peppered by the blood-red fusillade of the Vampire's pulse guns. Trailed by a crimson contrail, it engaged the last remaining Condor and stabbed at it as the terrorist turned to flee. The warp tunnel was beginning to form around it, and the Vampire's cannons fell silent, unable to maintain a lock. Instead it steered itself into the fleeing Condor, exploding in a hateful red fireball - the terrorist soon joining the tiny red drone in oblivion.

He took stock of the battlefield - debris strewn about his vicinity was a testament to the Vampire's effectiveness. Already, he could see the Director's ship approaching rapidly in the distance; no doubt he would soon get an ear full. He'd probably lose his courier job, he thought, but there would be more of those. For now, Uragan Zelp was glad to be alive.

Fait Accompli

Bix Arramida scrutinized the ship that lay motionless – lifeless – few kilometers away. It was a luxury yacht, made by the Viziam company. An old version; popular half a century ago. The numerous pockmarks on the hull and general metal wear indicated this ship had been floating here for as long. It was also immediately apparent that the yacht had not stopped here to allow the passengers to marvel at the view; deep scars not born by erosion crisscrossed the hull and the view here in deep space was far from spectacular. In fact, so far was the ship from any settlements or stellar objects that locating it without knowing its exact coordinates would be like searching for a grain of sand at the bottom of a worldwide ocean. But Arramida had the exact coordinates. His benefactor had given them to him.

Not knowing who his benefactor was still irked Arramida to no end. He only knew his first name, Norid, and that he was an Amarrian like himself. Other than that, nothing. A few months earlier Norid had approached him through underground channels. The job offer was simple – travel to certain coordinates in the Rethan system and retrieve all bodies from a derelict ship there. Then he was to take the bodies to a specific cloning facility on Rethan V and dump them there. That was all. No explanations. But for the amount of hard cash Norid offered, explanations became trivial.

Arramida's sensors indicated life-signs aboard the ship. Further scans revealed a total of 15 people – still lost in cryo-sleep after all this time. Arramida had to wonder who had attacked the ship all this time ago and why this same attacker hadn't bothered to finish the job once started. Arramida didn't have any equipment to enter the ship and fetch the bodies, but a few careful slashes with laser cannon carved the ship up nicely. Then it was just a matter of sending in a couple of salvage drones to pick up the cryo-caskets. The crude operation naturally killed the sleepers, but the job

didn't require him to bring back any survivors, so it didn't worry him all too much.

Arramida quickly scooped all the caskets into his own ship, taking care not to spoil any of the bodies. Norid had been very specific that none of the remains should be damaged. As an afterthought, Arramida scooped up some cargo containers floating out of the wreckage – nothing wrong with earning something a little extra on the side, he thought. Once finished, he set his course to Rethan V to turn in the bodies and collect his reward.

The moment Arramida had undocked from the clone station he sent a message to Norid, telling him the job was done. Then, chuckling over the fortune he's made for such an easy job, he made his way to the nearest leisure station.

Norid re-read the message from Arramida with glee. At last, the final part of his revenge was in motion! The sweet taste of it, after all these years of plotting and planning, shook his frail old body. Of course Norid wasn't his real name. He would never reveal that to an oaf like Arramida. But Norid was a good name, maybe he would continue to use it once it was over. Yes, that was a good idea, he decided. It nicely underlined the new beginning he would make after the deed was done, when he could finally throw off his shackles and rise like a Phoenix to his former glory.

Norid sent a quick message to the clone station, giving them the necessary DNA information to pinpoint the body he wanted sent to him. The rest they could use themselves as a form of payment for the services. The body he wanted should arrive within the next two days. Just as he finished sending the message, his master rang him. It was time for the master's tea.

Norid was a slave. He had been slave for almost a century. He was getting old, but the implants he had from the time when he was a Holder were still ticking along nicely. Norid certainly didn't feel two centuries old.

Occasionally his implants needed a little bit of maintenance, but his master was kind enough to allow them. If only he knew that by doing so he was aiding Norid in executing his revenge on him.

Norid scuttled along the corridor with the tea tray and entered the study. The master could have used service robots or android automatons, but like all Amarr Holders he wanted the respectability of having a slave serve upon him. Norid didn't blame him – soon he would have slaves of his own.

Norid scrutinized the master. He was old, even older than Norid, and once the two of them had been bitter rivals in Ardishapur's court. Even after all this time, Norid could still feel the hatred coursing through his veins – hatred towards this man for what he had done to him and his family. Crushed like little pegs in political machinations, they had been stripped of their titles, their wealth and their ancestry, then sold like common slaves. His wife and son hadn't survived long in the forced-labor camp. But he had survived, kept alive by his hatred for the man that was responsible for ruining him and killing the two people he loved.

For years Norid had nurtured his hatred, using it to drive him onwards – towards revenge. Slowly, but surely, he had inched closer to his nemesis, until he had entered his service as an attendant slave. The master didn't recognize Norid for who he was – he only knew he was a former Holder. Having a former Holder as his personal slave sustained the vanity of the master.

In the decades since Norid had plotted his master's downfall. Death wasn't good enough. Something more elaborate was needed – a poetic justice. And now, the plan was finally bearing fruit. The body of the master's son was on his way – rescued from the ship Norid had sabotaged long ago, waiting in his cold grave for the time when he became useful to Norid's plans.

Now that time had come. For years Norid had lurked in the shadows, gnawing at the political and financial strength of the master. All that was needed now was a slight push to crush the master's prestige once and for all, ruining him as completely as he had once ruined Norid. But that wasn't enough. Norid smiled at the thought of what was to come.

His master, sipping his tea, noticed it.

"Why are you smiling like a fool?" he asked sternly. Norid bowed his head slightly.

"Because I'm happy to report that I found a suitable replacement for your clone that was accidentally destroyed last week," he answered. "It will be ready in two days."

'Yes,' he thought. 'And then I will kill you and you will be cloned in your son's body, and then I will ruin you and take your place.' Norid started smiling again and served his master another cup of tea.

Kiss of the Soul

DAM-TORSAD

YC 105

The fifteen members of the extended Privy Council filed into the large room in the appropriate order of rank, the emperor leading them to an oval table in the middle of the lavishly decorated room. As duty required of him the court chamberlain presided over the meeting and read aloud the agenda. The council members listened, some intently, others indifferently. The emperor himself sat sunken in his seat, his frail head lying on his chest. It was difficult to say whether he was awake or not.

In theory, every member of the council apart from the chamberlain and the emperor himself was supposed to be a neutral aristocrat or civil servant whose only duty was serve the empire, but in reality each member had strong ties to some strong political group. This was generally accepted as long as no one group got too much influence in the council. In time, tradition had bound certain seats to a specific group, which nominated a new candidate at a time of vacancy. Even if this meant a fairly even distribution of power amongst the many political groups within the empire, actual power still fluctuated greatly depending on how persuasive a member was at the council table.

The first hour of the meeting was dedicated to the usual affairs of state. The chamberlain read out status reports from all over the empire and from embassies, then there was a discussion about foreign deals and agreements, fiscal matters and social issues. Once the formalities were over the talks turned to individual matters of concern. Predictably the most influential members dictated the discussions; the loud and dynamic Afrid

Sarkon, cousin of the empress; the sly Sin Callor, from the Ministry of Internal Order; the assertive High Deacon Moritok of the Theology Council and the sharp and quick-witted Zach Dormondan, deputy of the Imperial Chancellor.

One of the items being discussed was a report from a governor in the Semou constellation regarding increased Blood Raider activity in the area. The governor feared Semou would share the fate of the small settlements in the Bleak Lands and be taken over or be destroyed and wanted permission to recruit a space fighting force to deal with the crisis. The majority of the council agreed to allow him to take these extraordinary measures to deal with a difficult situation, but when Chamberlain Karsoth was closing the matter the emperor stunned all present by suddenly arousing himself from his reverie.

“This will not do.” The emperor said, his voice still strong despite his frail body. “I will not permit any military forces in space to be built or operated by anyone but the imperial navy. Allowing provincial governors to establish their own armed forces sets a very dangerous precedence that can only lead to future troubles.”

The council members sat uncomfortably for a moment, not knowing how to react. It was almost unheard of for the emperor to interfere in such a way. That he had the authority to do so was unquestionable, but the council members, used to being able to run the day-to-day matters of state on their own, were more concerned about the precedent this sudden intrusion by the emperor might have on future meetings. For decades the emperor had slumped more and more into his own world and the council members had been more than willing to fill the power gap. The question now on everyone’s mind was whether the power they had started to take for granted was now to be revoked by a revived emperor.

Finally, Chamberlain Karsoth, ventured a comment:

“But most exalted one, the situation in Semou is dire. Unless we take this drastic action thousands of people will suffer at the hands of the evil Blood Raiders.”

“The governors can have their ground forces, but I will not let them into space. The Amarr Navy will deal with this matter in due time. Need I remind you that the good of the whole empire comes before the individual lives of its inhabitants? Maybe I should make an example of one of you to refresh your memory.” He finished, letting the threat hang in the air. Chamberlain Karsoth blanched and stammered some excuse too low to hear.

The rest of the council exchanged furtive glances. The certainty that the emperor was back amongst the living was sinking in and the dread on their faces was there for all to see. On all but one face, actually. Sin Callor hid a smile behind his hand, his eyes fixed on the emperor. For a split second their eyes met and Callor then knew without doubt that the whispers were true. Despite himself, he shivered.

Serpent's Coil

The world of EVE has had its share of turmoil and grief in its long history. For centuries space travel has been the norm and in every nook and cranny extraordinary things can be found, each with its own rich background story for the whys and when it came into existence. One only has to know where to look to find them. The long treks through dark and empty space may seem lonely, but the oasis of life at the end of the line more than make up for it. Every city visited in this vast world, every country, every planet has its own unique customs and fables from some long lost past. And some from a more recent, violent one.

If you visit the Vilinon system in the Gallente Federation you may hear about the Serpent's Coil. The Coil is not something the locals are proud of and the Federation would rather know nothing of it. For in the Serpent's Coil agents of the notorious Serpentis Corporation have made themselves welcome. Once the Coil was known by a much simpler name - Lookout Post 7-0Z. Built during the Gallente-Caldari war it acted as a military outpost against marauding Caldari ships. When the war ended the purpose for manning the base ended, too. A token force was kept there for a few years, before the station was abandoned completely. At that time local authorities had hopes of turning the system into a mining haven, but those hopes were quickly dashed when the Serpentis Corporation occupied the now derelict military base. The move was a stunning effrontery to the Federation, but Serpentis had timed their move well. A new federal administration was coming into power and it took them several months to sort themselves out. By that time Serpentis was firmly entrenched and when a few half-hearted attempts to dislodge them failed, the Federation adopted a policy of ignoring the problem - the Vilinon system was too under-developed and insignificant in their eyes to warrant a large military operation. The Serpent's Coil was there to stay.

The location of the Coil is of great interest to astrophysicists. The military base is located close to some very peculiar rock formations floating in space. Rumors abound about their origin, equally divided between natural explanations for the phenomenon and the more intriguing ones - that the huge rock boulders are the result of some strange experiment now long forgotten. The truth about the strange rock formation may always remain on the rumor level while the Coil remains in the hands of the Serpentis Corporation, which uses the old military station as a distribution base for its illegal merchandise. Naturally, it is not very fond of scientists, sightseers or other space tourists. Some say it is because Serpentis discovered the secrets of the Coil and want to keep them for itself. Nothing strange about that. Trespassers beware.

City of God

Two thousand years ago, not long after the Amarrians ventured out into space, an emperor whose name now is known to few came into power. His legacy still reverberates throughout the Amarr Empire, a legacy born with his death, a legacy far different than the one he intended for himself. He was called Zaragram II and since his death his name has been a curse word for the Amarrians, for none more than the Ardishapur family that spawned him.

At that time, the status of the Amarr Emperor, though undoubtedly the head of state, was still subtly different. He was the leader of the Apostles, the first among equals, and his authority was channeled through the Apostle Council. But Zaragram hungered for more direct power; he wished to elevate himself above the common clergy into godhood itself. He regarded himself as the worldly manifestation of divinity. As soon as he came into power Zaragram started issuing decrees, most of them religious in nature. Many of these decrees directly usurped the Scriptures and many of the most sacred traditions of Amarr society were uprooted and eradicated.

Then Zaragram set out for his most ambitious project. He wanted to 'get in touch' with his supernatural self and to accomplish this he set out to construct the city of god - a place worthy of divine residence. The city was to be constructed in space, not bound to any earthly place, and was to be the eternal legacy of Zaragram's II greatness. Zaragram named his city Mezagorm, meaning Vision of god, though it was commonly known as City of god.

Things came about differently than Zaragram wished. Just when the construction of his glorious city, located in the system of Shastal, was completed emperor Zaragram was assassinated. Having accumulated so

many enemies by then, any one of dozens of groups could have been responsible. After his death the Apostle Council became all-powerful for a short while and they did their utmost to bury his memory. His decrees were reversed, all icons and pictures of him where either destroyed or his face and name scraped out, and his city was laid to waste. In a few generations his name was all but forgotten. Instead of the glorious legacy Zaragram envisioned for himself, his rule contributed to the power of the Apostles and the Moral Reform it brought about some 500 years later.

Deep space is a gentle resting place and the ruins of Zaragram's city are still there to be seen. The city was a sprawling place and it scattered remains are visible for miles around. Some say that Zaragram's spirit still haunts the place, gliding between the rubble of his city, but others say it's only the looters having a field day.

Heideran Gets the Aidonis

SCOPE AGENCY

July 2, YC 104

In a stunning announcement the Aidonis Foundation has revealed the recipient of this year's Aidonis Statue, the symbol of inter-stellar peace and harmony. Presented to individuals prominent in promoting galactic peace and co-operation, the nomination of Heideran VII, the Amarr Emperor, has taken many people by surprise.

The Aidonis Foundation is named after it's founder, the former president of the Gallente Federation Aidonis Elabon. To many, Aidonis is the greatest president the Federation has ever known. In his time the young and energetic president took the lead in bringing the empires together when to many it seemed the world was destined for bitter warfare for the foreseeable future. Under Aidonis's leadership the empires met at the historic Yoiul Conference, and he was one of the prime catalysts for the creation of CONCORD and its consequent brokering of the peace accord that ended the long war between the Gallente and the Caldari (though the final peace was only signed some years later, after his death). Upon his death his will called for a Foundation to be set up in his name, which was responsible for rewarding those persons that most upheld Aidonis vision for peace and prosperity in the world of EVE. In the spirit of friendship advocated by the former president, the committee that handles the nomination is populated by people from every race and culture, equally taking the views of everyone into account.

Heideran VII is the first Amarr Emperor to receive the award and the decision has turned out to be controversial. There is no denying the fact

that under Heideran's leadership the Amarr Empire has become much more amiable in its relations to the other empires. Relations between the empires have never been better and seem only poised to get even better in the near future and many contribute this fact directly to Heideran VII. In fact, those that have expressed outrage over the decision have grudgingly admitted that Heideran is a great leader that is undoubtedly one of the main reasons for the tranquil world we now live in. Their only gripe is with the Amarrian society itself, such as practices of slavery and other breaches of human rights.

These issues, while unquestionably important to any philanthropist, cannot deter from the overall picture: that if it wasn't for Heideran's personal interest in seeking compromises every time a potential political powder keg threatened to explode in the face of the world community we would now be living in a world of constant strife and warfare, with untold suffering that would encompass. Indeed, the praises and thanks that have rained in from every corner of the world of EVE since the announcement was made far outnumber the few critics. Heideran VII is the symbol of the peace and prosperity we have all come to love and cherish.

One Man Too Many

Pier Ancru slowly came to, relishing in the feeling of energy returning to his previously limp body. He flexed a few of his muscles, they felt familiar, yet he knew this was the first time they were under his direct control. Regaining his senses he took in the sterile environment of his surroundings - a small whitewashed, windowless room with the med-table he was lying on the only furniture. A somber looking servant waited on him. The room was located in his quarters on the Pend Insurance station in the Jolia system. Being the chairman and main stockholder of Pend Insurance gave him apartments in all their main stations, not to mention wealth and resources few men enjoyed.

A man in his position had easy access to the newest technology and, as the servant helped him put on a robe, he yet again marveled at this new mind-transfer technology. In the few short weeks since he started using it, it had transformed his life in more ways than he could imagine. No more tedious space travel, no more time wasting on idle journeys through volatile regions. All he had to do was set up clones of himself in places he frequented, hook them into the mind-transfer machine, and he could whiz halfway through the known world in a heartbeat. He could spend the morning in a dour board meeting on Alenia V, the afternoon sun-surfing in Maseera and the evening dining at Giraldi's on Archavoinet II. 'Ah, yes. Life is wonderful.' Ancru mused.

Entering his living quarters, Ancru had just finished dressing when his servant appeared, announcing the arrival of one Jilaine Garat, the Police Commissioner for the station. Ancru had met the middle-aged woman before and knew her to be a committed and capable officer. Ancru put the last touches to his appearance before heading for the anteroom.

"I'm sorry to bother you, sir," Garat started hesitantly after their formal greetings. "I rushed over here as soon as I heard you had... arrived," she finished, still a bit unsure about this new travel method that few understood or even knew about. "A grave matter has come up that needs your immediate attention. But first, can you answer me where you came from, sir?"

"From Sizamod system, I spent the night there," Ancru answered truthfully. "What is this all about?"

"Last night senator Papadour was assassinated in Palmon and it seems... it seems that it was you that killed him."

"Me?" Ancru laughed incredulously. "That's impossible! Why do you think that?"

"Well, the assassination took place at a banquet. We have hundreds of witnesses testifying that you were there, with the senator. Can someone confirm you being in Sizamod last evening?"

"No," Ancru said slowly. He was no stranger to smear-campaigns in business or politics, but this went way beyond anything he had experienced before. "No, I was alone last night. Tell me what happened at the banquet. How was the senator killed?" "DNA poisoning no doubt. The killer - you - coated his hand in poison that only a right DNA combination could activate. Senator Papadour's DNA, in this case. It's a common MO these days. I have here a holoreel from the banquet, if you care to see it." Ancru nodded his agreement.

The holoreel showed a large, glamorous hall, with at least 300 persons seated in their finest livery eating a lush dinner. The picture zoomed in on one of the tables, where senator Papadour and a man that looked identical to Ancru were seated, amongst others. The people at the table talked and

laughed, everything looking perfectly normal. Then suddenly the senator grabbed his throat with both hands, his face turning red, before he collapsed face-forward onto the table, his body raked by a few spasms before becoming totally still and lifeless. Commotion ensued, then Garat switched the holoreel off.

“Did you notice anything out of the ordinary?” Commissioner Garat asked. “That was undoubtedly you, right?” Ancru didn’t answer immediately, he was deep in thought. “It would seem so,” he finally said. “But there was something... Something not quite right. I just can’t put my finger on it. Can I see the reel again?”

The second viewing didn’t jolt his mind and Ancru saw that Garat was becoming impatient, watching him intently. Then suddenly it dawned on him.

“I’ve got it! The man - me - was eating left-handed. I’m left-handed, but I still eat righthanded.”

Garat smiled at Ancru’s words, seemingly pleased.

“That’s correct. Your... file states this little fact and we noticed it. There were other small peculiarities regarding speech pattern, hand movements and facial expressions. Taken together, we can only surmise this was a clone impostor. Very professionally done, but not quite good enough.”

“You knew this was an impostor before you came here?” Ancru asked.

“Of course, but I wanted to gauge your reactions before revealing that fact. If we thought it really had been you my... entry would have been more swift and violent. Now let me ask you, do you have any information about who’s behind this? Any idea who wanted senator Papadour dead and you in deep trouble?”

Ancru sat down, rubbing his temples, thinking hard. He and Papadour had not been close, but they had rubbed shoulders on that deal with the State... He let his mind wander. The stakes were getting higher. Now, if the rumors were true, then...

"I have no idea who did this, Commissioner," he replied at last. "But it will be fun finding out." He allowed a small smile to touch his lips before summoning his servant to see the Commissioner out. "Oh, yes. It will be fun finding out."

State Factionalism

To the outsider and the uninformed, the Caldari State seems a solid, unified entity. This has been true for brief periods of their history. The latest of those is now coming to an end. The eight Caldari mega corporations, like all great cynics, know the price of everything but the value of nothing and this is now tearing them apart.

Three blocks have formed around different ideologies, mainly in regard to foreign policies. While the forming of these blocks does not threaten the fabric of Caldari society it may very well move the Caldari State in a radical new direction in regards to their relations with the other empires.

Historians have pointed out parallels between the current situations and those found shortly after the Gallente-Caldari War started. Then, the mega corporations split into two groups, one that wanted to pursue peace negotiations with the Gallenteans and another that wanted all out war. The matter was solved during the Morning of Reasoning, when during a morning meeting of the Chief Executive Panel the warmonger corporations forced the CEOs of the other corporations to perform the Tea Maker Ceremony. The CEOs had to drink poisoned tea; if the Maker looked favorably upon them they would be saved, otherwise their crimes would be confirmed by their deaths. They all died and the warmonger corporations (the current mega corporations) split the assets of the fallen corporations between them and escalated to total war. Although the Caldari State is not currently at war, the political situation is similar in a number of ways and many fear that drastic events may be on the horizon, with the corporations busily drawing the battle lines.

The three factions that are becoming evermore apparent are each led by one of the large mega corporations with other mega corporations, as well

as lesser corporations, closing the ranks behind them. At this early stage it is impossible to tell which faction has the most strength as they seem equally poised.

Heading the self-proclaimed “practicals” faction is the huge Sukuuvestaa Corporation. The SuVee, as it is commonly known, is one of the oldest Caldari corporations, matched only by the Kaalakiota Corporation in size. The exploiters, which also include the CBD Corporation and NOH (Nugoeihuvi) Corporation, have practiced unethical business tactics for a long time, as well as being frequently associated with organized crime elements. The practicals see the other empires merely as naïve markets ready to be exploited by unrestricted and ruthless trade where everything goes. The recent Protein Delicacy episode serves as a good example of what kind of business these companies want. They care little about who is a friend with whom and even less about what long-term political ramifications their unscrupulous business practices can have. They are mercantilist in their views on trade, believing that profit for one always means loss for another.

The second faction is the liberals, whose views are completely the opposite of the practicals in regards to interstellar trade. The liberals believe in fostering improved relations with all the other empires, creating a world where there are no trade barriers and free-flow of goods. They believe in trade deals that mutually benefit the participants and the empires can come together in a peaceful, prosperous future world only through cooperation. The liberals are led by the Ishukone Corporation and also include the Hyasyoda mega corporation. Their strong position within CONCORD is accentuated by their belief that it is their main vehicle in promoting universal peace and stability so that trade can flow freely and cultures mingle peacefully.

The third faction is not all that concerned about trade, but more about the place the Caldari State enjoys versus the other empires in both military and

economical sense. These are the patriots and they are led by the Kaalakiota Corporation, but also include Lai Dai and Wiyrkomi. The patriots cultivate the Caldari heritage, reminisce about the great Raata Empire of old and weep for their lost home world, Caldari Prime. The most fanatical of them cry for a renewal of the war with the Federation, but they are a minority. The majority sees economical dominance in the world only as a tool to promote military power. The patriots are willing to negotiate alternative ways to acquire Caldari Prime other than through war, but they know that they can only see their dream come true by convincing the Federation of the economical and, most importantly, militaristic superiority of the Caldari State. This is what they strive for.

The Science of Never Again

The explosions were so powerful that the boy could feel them resonate in his chest. All around him people ran, some screaming, others offering assistance to those struck down as they tried to flee. Encircling him was the burning debris of shattered buildings as the skies continued to rain down fire and destruction. No matter how hard he willed himself to run faster, his legs became more and more sluggish, as if running neck-deep in water. Every single step forward seemed to take him several steps back. It was as if the universe was taunting him, diabolically laughing while conspiring against his will. His desperation reached a fevered pitch as he continued to struggle forward. The hell from above had claimed so many already; he had to reach his parents before the sky lashed out and took them as well.

The heat was searing, ruthless, yet onwards the boy ran, up the steps and into the home where all the memories of a truly happy childhood are, towards the center of every child's universe: His very own beloved parents. The child was so terrified, he had to warn them of the danger, to tell them they had to leave, that death was everywhere and coming for them, but the words wouldn't come out of his mouth. There they stood, the two of them, reaching out cheerfully as they always did when he came home from school, as if completely blind to the terror around them, to the fire inside of their home, to the flames now licking at their feet.

He wanted to leap towards them but lacked the strength. His legs were suddenly incapable of any movement at all, unwilling to obey his desperation. And so this child watched his parents writhe in agony, screaming in pain as they burned, as everything else in his world had burned, and he opened his mouth to scream in horror.

“Monsieur...” A woman’s voice called to him through the fire, from somewhere above him, away from the blackened silhouettes engulfed in flames, the very image that had destroyed the innocence of this child forever. The instant he looked up, the inferno vanished, and he suddenly found himself beholding the planet Caldari Prime as though in orbit around her, that beautiful pearl resting in the crimson velvet backdrop of the Luminaire system. The boy was with the others who had survived, and they were taking flight from the barbarians who had done this to them, each taking one last look before leaving their home planet forever.

“Trevor, please wake up...” He was pulled violently away from the image, as Caldari Prime shrunk and vanished from view when the transport they were aboard warped away. Trevor awoke with a gasp, his bloodshot eyes bulging, breathing quickly and clearly disoriented.

“Mon dieu, how long have you been having these dreams?” asked Orsetta Lexmoreau, a research agent with the Gallente mega-corporation CreoDron. “This is the second time this week!”

Trevor had fallen asleep while seated in the research lab of the CreoDron factory in Atlulle III. Before arriving, he had gone more than 48 hours without rest. He ran his hand through his hair and down the back of his neck, sore from having been asleep in an awkward position.

He blinked his eyes a few times and took a deep breath before speaking. “How long have I been out for?” He never looked up at Orsetta, who was standing beside him. His eyes began darting back and forth between the dozens of data sheets and the screens on the lab desk in front of him.

“I first noticed you were asleep a little more than 40 minutes ago,” she answered. “I do not know how long before then.” She sat down beside him and placed her hand gently on his back. She could feel the muscles underneath his shirt tighten up instantly. “Trevor, what happened to you?”

You shout these terrible things in your sleep, and it frightens me! What pain is this that you suffer so much from?”

She thought she saw his eyes glaze over for just a moment, but then the scowl that she was most familiar with returned. He turned his head slightly to his right, just enough so that his eyes could see her attractive features at the edge of his vision. “Get back to work, Orsetta,” he growled. “Now.”

He turned away and focused once again on the data sheets scattered across the desk. Orsetta had paused for just a moment to glare at him before getting up and leaving his side without saying a word. Trevor followed the sound of her hurried footsteps as they made their way to the lab’s exit. When he heard the door slide close, he leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk, rubbing the temples of his forehead and closing his eyes again. He knew he didn’t have to be so hard on her, but he had accepted long ago that it was better this way. He forbade himself from allowing any remorse or attachment towards the people he employed, least of all towards those responsible for the pain that Orsetta spoke of.

On paper, Trevor Kekkonen looked like the model CONCORD citizen. He appeared to be just one of countless others taking advantage of the economic opportunities that had emerged since the end of the Gallente-Caldari War. The two states were eager to put the dark memories of those years behind them and forge ahead on the promise of peace and mutual prosperity. Trevor had graduated at the top of his class from the School of Applied Science in Todaki and demonstrated remarkable natural talent for research and science. He overcame the cerebral deficiencies required for effective starship command through the use of cyber implants and eventually qualified to captain both Caldari and Gallente cruiser-class ships. His outstanding combat record against the Gurista and Serpentinis pirate organizations earned him high marks with both the Caldari and Gallente governments. And most importantly, he had developed extensive connections with quality personnel from some of the most powerful

corporations in both states, including Ishukone, Kaalakiota, CreoDron, and Duvolle Laboratories.

What isn't found on any of the dossiers written about Trevor Kekkonen is that he had witnessed firsthand the death of his parents during the Gallente surface bombardment of Caldari Prime. He was just 11 years old at the time. He had replayed those horrible moments over and over again in his young, hyper-analytical mind, searching in vain for the unanswerable question of "why". The transformation of grief to rage took him to the brink of madness. What prevented him—barely—from breaching that fine line was the pursuit of the question "how" instead. In this venture, the answers he was searching for became perfectly clear.

In Trevor's scarred mind, the notion that a failure of diplomacy had been the cause of the war and ultimately the death of his parents was completely unacceptable. The politics just shouldn't have mattered in the slightest. Instead, he concluded that the blame lay squarely on the lack of superior technology when it was needed most. Gallente warships had pummeled Caldari Prime cities from orbit uncontested for far too long; had planetary defense been in the forefront of the Caldari technological initiative at the time, things might have been different. Instead, the technology was reactive; it created a punch-for-punch battle of technological advances that could have been avoided. As evident by the fate of Trevor's parents and hundreds of thousands like them, the Caldari paid a terrible price for their lack of foresight. The Gallente had their orbital bombers; the Caldari answered with single-man fighters. The Gallente countered the fighters with drones; and if not for the Jovian gift of capsule technology, the Caldari might not have been able to muster an effective response at all.

As young Trevor watched the war and its technological innovations evolve into a stalemate, the rage within him grew steadily until the ultimate betrayal that hurled his soul into the abyss for good. The truce that left Caldari Prime—once the home world for millions of Caldari—legally in the

hands of the Gallente Federation was the breaking point. Trevor felt that he was orphaned yet again, only this time a resurrection was possible—if only he could raise Caldari technology from the dead.

And so Trevor's life became a dichotomy of purpose; part missionary, part vigilante, laboring on behalf of the “good” of one race by planning the death of another. The path leading him to the vengeance he craved had two obstacles. First, a detailed understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of both Caldari and Gallente technology--especially with their respective starship engineering methodologies--had to be accomplished. Second, it required bleeding-edge scientific breakthroughs that could ultimately be used to tilt the balance of power forever in favor of the Caldari State. On the first count, Trevor had already succeeded. But it wasn't until the famous Crielere Research Lab—yet another sickening example of how the Caldari couldn't push the technology envelope unassisted—had discovered the precious mineral morphite and its extraordinary chemical properties that the possibilities he sought finally began to emerge.

Trevor opened his eyes and scanned the progress of one of those possibilities. The datasheets contained the results of experiments and unfinished theoretical conjectures. He had fallen asleep while reading through some of them, exhausted after days without sleep. Orsetta was one of several research agents from corporations that Trevor had commissioned to assist him in finding the answers he needed. She, like the rest of the research agents under his employ, carried out the bulk of the experiments and research required to test his theories. They were dedicated in their work and brilliant scientists in their own right, but required his constant financial and logistical support to keep up with the workload he imposed on them. And although he realized that science was, by nature, a very methodical process that could never be rushed, his impositions were especially harsh on the Gallente agents under his employ.

He got up slowly to stretch out his legs. Walking over to the window opposite of the lab screens and holoprojectors, he leaned against the frame, watching the station approach warning beacons blink on...and off. There...and gone. Life...and death. Everywhere Trevor looked, the nightmare stared right back him. His only shelter from the demons was in the relentless pursuit of science. Once outside of it, his soul belonged to the ghosts of Caldari Prime.

Never again, he thought. To someday be able to speak those words to the defeated remnants of the Gallente nation that he despised so much was his life's ambition, and he believed that science would one day grant him his wish. It was all just a matter of time, and he could stand the sleepless nights for as long as it took to get there.

The intercom broke his fixation on the blinking lights outside. "Monsieur, have a look at this, quickly!" It was Orsetta's voice on the intercom, and there was a hint of excitement in her tone. Accustomed to being instantly agitated just from the sound of her voice, Trevor was about to say something rude when he noticed the lights in the room dim. When he turned away from the window frame, he saw that the holoprojector had been remotely switched on. There before him were a series of three-dimensional images floating over the lab desk, moving rapidly in successive sequence from mathematical equations to subatomic particle diagrams; from molecular compound models to exploded-view engineering drawings of mechanical components; and finally to the animation of those same components converging perfectly with each other to form schematics of the finished product. Performance and statistical information scrolled down along each side of the image. Trevor was shocked.

"This...this is the production compilation?" he asked.

Orsetta was so excited that she was nearly incoherent. "The containment issues were all solved, we've overcome the stability problems inherent with

using morphite-based alloys and found a suitable quantum solution to the mesoscopic issues caused by placing nanosensors within the alloy shell to monitor...”

“Is..this..the..production..compilation?” Trevor interrupted, exaggerating the enunciation of his words. There was pause before the intercom speakers delivered her answer.

“Oui, monsieur.”

“So what took so long? Move on to the next project I outlined already.” Trevor walked through the floating image to the lab desk and switched off the holoprojector. A disc ejected from the lab table console containing the compiled blueprint information. He slipped it inside the jacket he’d brought and started gathering the rest of his things. It was time to leave and check on the progress of his other research agents.

The lab door hissed open and Orsetta walked into the room. She stood with her arms folded and stared at Trevor with a concerned expression on her face. He continued his preparations without looking at her.

“You have more work that you should be attending to,” he muttered.

“I cannot help but ask,” she started carefully. “What do you plan to do with those blueprints?”

Trevor paused for just a moment before answering.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

Three Pillars of Power

Since his election three years ago the President of the Gallente Federation, Souro Foiritan, has been embroiled in a silent war with the Senate of the Federation. At stake is the question where the ultimate power within the Federation lies. The third pillar of the Federal government, the Supreme Court, has also been dragged into this covert war, fought on a broad front. Foiritan's predecessors in the Presidency were weaklings and they were frequently brow-beaten by the Senate. In time, the Senate began to see itself as the true leader of the Federation, something that Foiritan is now furiously trying to overturn. In recent months many political events that would normally be considered quite insignificant have been blown out of all proportions as the feuding sides use them as a pretext to attack each other. Yet the battle lines have been slowly solidifying, revealing the underlying ideologies that the three sides really stand for.

While the Senate has become the champion of big bucks business and entrenched interests, Foiritan has masterfully maneuvered himself into becoming the people's man - using his boyish charms to ride the wave of popularity he enjoys throughout the Federation. The leaders of the Senate - such as the astute Jaq-Foix Netharin and Maridane Wilfort the extremist - have used the lobbyists and the moneymen to build themselves a formidable position, though many feel this fortress of special interests is becoming more and more like an ivory tower every day. In this tug-of-war where the very foundations of the Federation are at stake the arsenals of the adversaries are filled with deceit, sleaze and words of hatred and they fight each other with armies of lawyers, hordes of PR stunt men and the voice of the media. And yet for all their efforts the only casualties so far have been truth and reason. Yet even those have found a champion - the Supreme Court. In the political havoc the Supreme Court has acted as a beacon of common sense - a solid rock for the hard pressed masses to lean on to weather the storm that threatens to engulf them. As is so often the case when a war for the fate of millions rages the survival of the weak is most at risk. It is here that the Supreme Court has found a cause worth

fighting for and it is doing all in its power to uphold the principles of the Federation - brotherhood, fraternity and equal rights to all men.

Khuumak

The palace gleamed from a distance, radiating wealth and opulence. On closer inspection, it didn't hold up well in the tropical climate. Starkman Prime's proximity to the unforgiving Arzad sun meant the heat rarely let up, and here moisture had caused small cracks all over the walls, with the smell of rotting vegetation permeating everything. Today, however, with three men cowering on their knees in the open courtyard, the rank smell of sweat and fear managed to override it temporarily.

Arkon Ardishapur, the royal heir of the Ardishapur family, sat uncomfortably in a chair on a raised platform before the three cowering figures and frowned in the heat. The insistent buzz of tropical insects made it hard to concentrate as he let his gaze travel among the Minmatar slaves before him. They were guilty of rebellious actions and would soon be executed, but Arkon sensed they held some dark, sinister information, and so hesitated in carrying out their sentence. Arkon glanced at his palace secretary, standing expressionless to one side. Drupar Maak was a Starkmanir, like the slaves waiting to be executed. He was also a slave, but like many slave children that showed remarkable talents, had received a proper education in an Amarrian school, which had trained him to become a loyal, obedient civil servant. Arkon sighed and turned his attention back to the condemned slaves. They would have to be broken.

It took all of Drupar's considerable willpower to keep his face impassive as he watched his secret associates being put through the wringer. Drupar could only admire the slow, deliberate technique of the royal heir as he questioned the slaves. Arkon had mastered the skill of breaking a person's will through only words and gestures. When Drupar had heard of the capture of the three slaves, he hoped for a quick trial and an even quicker execution. Now, cold dread gripped his bowels as he watched the old fool

grilling the quivering slaves before him. “Old fool, yes,” Drupar thought, “but devilishly cunning at times. Like a dog, he can sniff out conspiracies where no other man can.” As much as he loathed and hated the man himself, Drupar had long since learned to respect his master’s abilities.

Arkon absentmindedly fingered his golden scepter as he shifted his enormous bulk from one buttock to the other. He felt he was finally making headway with these miserable wretches. As he had suspected from the start, they were only cogs in a much larger organization; an organization aiming to topple Amarrian authority on the planet. Now, he had only to squeeze the names of the ringleaders out of them.

As the moment when he would be exposed as a treacherous rebel inexorably approached, Drupar felt his pulse quicken, adrenaline pumping through his veins, heightening his senses. Years of careful planning, hundreds of fellow slaves and rebels, all were in dire danger of being undone in one fell swoop. The questioning droned on until Drupar felt himself act—not deliberately, but as if driven by primeval instinct. Rushing towards his master and nemesis, he grabbed the golden scepter, yanking it out of the Heir’s royal hands. For a split-second he allowed himself to enjoy the look of shock and disbelief on Arkon’s face before driving the sharp, sun-flaring edge of the scepter’s head into his master’s neck. Blood sprayed everywhere. Chaos ensued.

Amazingly, the aged Heir, blood spattering from the gaping wound in his neck, managed to rise to his feet, his obese frame quivering in front of Drupar. A mechanical silver hand shot out of Arkon’s robes and grabbed Drupar by the neck, and from the corner of his eye Drupar saw guards piling into the courtyard, arms raised. Using every last ounce of his strength he managed to slip from Arkon’s grasp long enough to shout at the stunned slaves, still on their knees. “Get out of here! It has begun! Rise! Rise!” he screamed as he was sucked back into the crushing embrace of the dying

heir. As daylight turned to darkness before Drupar's eyes, he saw the three youngsters escape in the confusion.

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Strong lights illuminated the courtyard, banishing the night. The unnatural light made the usually serene courtyard bleak and forbidding, but it fit the mood of the few people there perfectly. Idonis Ardishapur stared at the faint traces of blood on the cobblestones, musing on how bloodstains always managed to mesmerize people, making them conjure up all kinds of horrors in their mind's eye. He listened to one of his lieutenants drone on about how the uprising in the city was already spreading outside it, and rapidly becoming unmanageable. On his other side stood the captain of the royal guard, anxiously awaiting the opportunity to make some pitiful excuses about the death of Idonis' father. Idonis had already heard enough to know this was inexcusable.

Brusquely, he dismissed the two men, having no patience at the moment to deal with them. Instead, he walked over to where his friend Zoriac was standing, scrutinizing the golden scepter-turned-murder-weapon. Briefly, Idonis wondered about the symbolism of his father being killed by an item representing the Emperor's will. He would have to reflect upon that during the morning mass. But not now.

Zoriac gave a curt nod as Idonis came up beside him, but Idonis took no notice of it. He and Zoriac, being of the same age, had been brought up together, and Zoriac was as close a friend as a future Royal Heir could hope to have. Idonis again regarded the scepter with mixed feelings. On one hand, it was one of the most sacred symbols of Imperial and Divine authority; and on the other it was covered with his father's congealed blood. Idonis knew from reports that some of the rebels were already wielding shoddy replicas as weapons, calling them Khumaak in honor of his father's killer. Idonis' stomach soured at the thought.

Not for the first time this night he reflected on what might have been. He had agreed to accompany his father here to these savage lands, nurturing some naïve notions that maybe the Word of God could be brought to these newly-conquered barbarians.. Idonis now knew that the Minmatars would never adopt The Scriptures as their own, and part of him was glad, fearing for the purity of The Word in the uncouth hands of the Minmatars. And yet, calling them barbarians was now only a figure of speech. Once familiar with their rich culture, Idonis could not mock their traditions as he and his friends had done frequently as youths back in the heart of the Empire.

Involuntary, his mind drifted to the little hiding place he had down in the city, to the lithe and winsome creature he whispered words of passion and affection to during lovemaking. His family and friends would be appalled if they knew of his dark-skinned Starkmanir girl, with her almond eyes and her smile that was coy and bold at the same time.

With sudden realization, Idonis knew that that part of his life was over. He was a Royal Heir, now. Already he felt the weight of a thousand generations of Ardishapurs on his shoulders; the burden of the millions of subjects now looking to him for support and guidance. The idyllic lifestyle he had enjoyed here on the outskirts of Empire was gone. Like great stones grinding, he could feel his priorities shift. He felt at once elevated and apprehensive. He straightened his back and narrowed his gaze. Zoriac, looking at his friend, took half a step back, and Idonis saw that he understood.

“The other heirs will judge you by your actions over the next few days,” Zoriac said quietly. “A new heir must prove himself in the eyes of his subjects and his Empire.”

Idonis only nodded.

“You must clean up this mess your father has left,” Zorac continued. “You must send a message that you will be a strong leader, worthy to be called a Royal Heir.”

“What are the choices?” Idonis replied, already knowing them full well, but wanting to hear them out loud.

“Stamp out this rebellion of course, with any force necessary.”

“That will not suffice,” Idonis answered, sickened by his own words but knowing they must be spoken. “As you said, I must send a message to the other Heirs. Suppressing rebellions is an everyday occurrence. Avenging the murder of a Royal Heir is not.”

“What would you have me do?” Zoriac asked.

“Annihilate the Starkmanir tribe.” Idonis paused for a moment and caught his breath, mentally crushing something deep within himself. “Inform the orbital fleet. Have our people out of the cities and in orbit within a rotation. This planet will burn as a beacon, to illuminate the galaxy with the strength of House Ardishapur, and the Divinity of our purpose. None shall be spared.”

Idonis looked his friend in the eye as he spoke, seeing the regret there. He knew his own eyes showed the same. Regret about the life they were to leave, regret about what they had to become, but most of all, regret about what they were about to do. He allowed himself one more memory of his little hiding place, the long supple limbs of his Starkmanir lover, and the dreams he had harbored for the Minmatars. Then he let it go. Royal Heirs could not afford the luxury of dream.

“Time for mass,” he said, turned on his heel, and headed for the chapel.

Tides of Change

Shan stubbed his cigarette on the deck, despite the Kapitan's earlier admonitions about in-station regulations. The old bastard was soft after his years with those paper-pushing Fed Navy pod-wetters, soft as the blubber that hung from him. Besides, with the situation the way it was today, their high and mighty Legionnaire had better things to worry about than a smudge on the platform.

Climbing into the pod and fastening himself, Shan reflected on the current state of affairs. Ever since the Alliance had been born, the smattering of independent outfits morphing and mutating into the massive, brutal beast it was today, things just hadn't been the same in Curse. The Salvies had been the first to complain, of course – you couldn't fart in Curse space without the Salvies getting up in arms about it – but within a month it had become clear that this new coalition was nothing to be taken lightly. Squadron after squadron of Cartel fighters had fallen to Alliance battleships as their prized 'roid fields were slowly wrested from their grasp.

Today, every outpost not huddled like a petrified mouse in some gigantic moon's shadow had been taken over by the CA. Testing facilities, assembly plants and munitions dumps now all played host to the behemoth. The Salvies did what they can with the left-over minerals afforded by the Cartel's ninja miners, but many of the ships and facilities they had today were still in a sad state of disrepair.

The bay's speaker clicked on, sending sound ricocheting off the metal walls.

"Raider escort, clear for undocking," came the hollow, familiar sing-song.

As the diagnostic systems finished their run-through Shan panned his camera drone three-hundred and sixty degrees around his sharp-tusked interceptor, making a quick inspection of the craft's gleaming hull. All in order, it seemed. Ready for another patrol.

The docking bay's doors hissed open languidly, allowing the undiluted rays of the burning sun to wash into the chamber at an angle. Dust motes danced in the columns of light as Shan Arvonak, Angel Raider, slid out of the station's belly into the breathless void.

• • •

It had been exactly one-hundred and thirty-eight minutes of soul-crushing boredom when the first hostiles showed up on system comms. The opening of the pores, the nearly imperceptible quickening of the pulse, the prickle along the back of his neck – Shan felt the warrior instincts flush his system. As had become his custom, using the meditation techniques he had culled from the dog-eared Adakul text he kept hidden away in his footlocker, the young Raider stilled himself.

“Saddle up, boys.” came the Kapitan's voice over the comm. “We've got two Black Omega.”

Shan's composure held, but a tiny tremor shot through him like an electric jolt. Black Omega was, by now, one of the Alliance corporations known to every Arch Angel operative in the Curse region and surrounding zones of operation. They had recently colonized the belts two systems over, and stories abounded of how their security wing had rampaged through the area, decimating everything the Cartel had thrown at them while barely sustaining losses themselves.

And now they were here.

“Line formation, fellas.” The Kapitan’s voice was steady, but as Shan swiveled his camera drone to alight on the Legionnaire’s massive bulk turning slowly planetward he fancied he saw the slightest tremor, a flicker in the burners maybe, an invisible apprehension bleeding through the night, staining their resolve. Maneuvering his agile frigate into formation between the other two Raiders, he awaited the word from Central.

Twenty, maybe thirty seconds passed before the Kapitan’s voice came once more over the comm.

“Okay, we’ve got two unmonitored belts in-system, Planets II and VII. None of the patrolled belts have reported sightings yet, so we’re going in for a look. Zeta Wing is en route to Planet VII. Align yourselves for gang warp, gentlemen. Planet II, Belt 1.”

As time and space coiled into a spiraling tunnel around them, Shan promised himself that should he ever become a Legionnaire, he’d stay away from those awful group names. “Gentlemen.” “Fellas.” “Boys.” So unprofessional. So unbecoming the discipline and rigour that had made the Angel Cartel what it was – or, rather, had been before the Alliance moved into Curse.

The thought flared up in his head, overriding the nagging trepidation that had been playing at the corners of his mind. The usurpers who had spread over their domain like a cancer would this day pay for their presumption. Muttering a curse under his breath, Shan emerged out of warp.

• • •

As the warp engines died down and the fluid regulation system in his pod performed its deceleration compensation, that pleasing backwards flow of liquid over his body mingling with the ship’s gentle vibration, he saw the

great checkered curve of the asteroid belt slide into view beneath him. Seconds later, his scanner picked up the hostiles.

There were two of them, both in Apocalypse-class battleships, eighty klicks away, twenty klicks from each other. Too far to get a lock. Simultaneously, the three Raiders began preemptory evasive maneuvers, waiting for the Kapitan's word.

The seconds ticked by heavily as the smaller vessels glid back and forth while the Kapitan and his Depredator wingman fumbled for a lock on the intruders. Suddenly a feral snarl came hissing through the comm.

"Damn! They've locked me. What kind of..."

The words were abruptly stopped as a twisted pillar of light blinked into existence between one of the Apocs and the Kapitan's ship. A great translucent globe came briefly into view around the craft, shimmering faintly before dissipating along with the enemy's beam. In perfect rhythm, another gout of laser fire emerged from the other battleship, bathing the Legionnaire once more in shield-wash. In a few seconds, a macabre staccato of laser fire had established itself, all of it centered on the Kapitan.

"Go! Go! Full attack!" shouted the fat man in the big ship, his calm veneer now fully evaporated under the intense enemy bombardment. His curses now reserved for his incompetent Legionnaire, Shan slammed on his afterburners and thrust, rigid with fear, towards the distant ships firing those terrible, beautiful beams.

Fifty klicks, then forty. An explosion sounded behind him as one of his Raider companions was ripped cleanly in two by a stray beam, sending a fiery shower of metal parts arcing into the black. Thirty klicks. No time to back out now, Shan. Do your part. Trust the Cartel.

At twenty-five clicks, just as the battleships were taking form before him, he heard it: that sound, dreaded by every pilot ever to take to the spacelanes, the dreet-dreet-dreet-dreet of his sensors informing the auto-targeting systems that his vessel had just been locked. Like staring down the barrel of a cannon, thought Shan just as a distant boom sounded behind him, marking the destruction of another comrade.

And as Shan Arvonak, Angel Raider, came into firing range and saw his Howitzers' bullets glance harmlessly off the ship he had targeted, saw the awesome bulk of the Apocalypse turn to face him like a giant gold-plated snake seconds before the light enveloped him, turning his ship into a golden ball of hell's fire, two sudden realizations smacked into his skull, staggering in their clarity.

He, not his enemy, would die this day. And Curse space was no longer what it used to be.

The Communication Relay Committee

The services and routers, albeit owned and run by independent companies, are under constant scrutiny and regulations by a CONCORD sub-committee to enforce both security and privacy in the communications channels and to make sure the companies are correctly rendering the services they claim. The fierce competition on the telecommunication market makes it cheap, efficient and reliable to talk, transfer data and even conduct business for people light-years apart.

– Faster than Light Communication

Millions of effulgent bands of light danced in front of his eyes. Every colour in the spectrum was there, outstanding against the pitch-black background. He willed one forward and ran his fingers through it, then reached out to another simultaneously. With a shock, he bent the threads into a single format, the colours turning a subtle yellow for a second at the disturbance.

From the corner of his eye, he detected a small, dark purple strand, and willed himself towards it. He inspected it, ran his fingers through the light and decided to detour it into a dead end. Immediately, three others lunged at him, a glaring red. He quickly bent them together into a single stream, shooing the communications signal into the endless void with a slight wave of his hand. "Try to find that," he dared with defiant satisfaction.

Outside of the capsule, the hum of the fluid routers gently permeated the otherwise silent relay tower. Housing countless routers, the tower was one of the main backbones of the FTL-communications network owned by several providers and supervised by CONCORD. It was a dark, foreboding complex in the middle of nowhere, closer to Yulai than any other system - though that hardly mattered, considering the distance between them.

There were very few incidents that night. Things went rather smoothly compared to other nights that he had experienced. The specks of colour could literally leap to him. Fast thinking was required, but luckily the implants enhanced his processing speeds to extreme levels.

He was a part of the CRC. Fitted with implants much like the piloting implants used by new academy graduates to pilot their ships, his world was one of ever-changing hues. The devices inserted into his occipital lobe ensured each channel was represented as a spectrum of colours, shot through with tiny incandescent motes of information. The visualisations made it far easier for the brain to process the torrents coursing through the fluid routers. He mused to himself that he couldn't imagine what it was like to process all this information the old-fashioned way, then plucked a hair-thin strand of green and merged it into a larger existing strand.

When CONCORD assumed jurisdiction over the FTL-networks, they saw that something was needed to vastly improve methods to regulate the information and, thus, the Communication Relay Commission was called into existence. Methods were devised to allow them to survey large quantities of information. Perfection was found in the capsule technology the Jovians had introduced to the galaxy. Fitted with highly advanced augmentations, the CRC patrols the backbones of the fluid router relays, scanning the communications for breaches and keeping the official CONCORD channels clean and safe of disruptive influences.

The capsule slid open. The neural connectors retracted themselves and he made his way out. Already, someone was waiting with towels and hot Arkonian tea, both of which he gladly accepted. The darkness inside the relay tower seemed almost intentional and the hum was louder now he was outside of the pod. Shadows cast across the router complexes while a glaring blue light paled in contrast to the world that waited in the pod. Damn, he did love his job.

He couldn't wait to get back.

-Commander Orestes
Communications Relay Committee
Interstellar Services Department

Aurora

*Auxiliary Union for Rallying, Observation, Recording, Analysis
A Division of CONCORD*

Lieutenant Bills abruptly stopped walking, and lowered the datapad. An odd scent wafted from an open door, instantly distracting him. He pushed open the door and edged inside, only to find himself in a poorly-lit storeroom. A small crate stood open, and he reached inside with trepidation. A moment later, he withdrew some of the contents - a darkly-colored cigar.

"Let me light that up for you..." the older man said, as he leaned forward out of a darkened corner, just a few feet away. A small tongue of fire snapped to life, making ominous shadows of crates and containers dance about the dimly lit chamber. The young officer jumped, dropping the datapad to the floor.

Nervously, his gaze worked its way across the cluttered room. "What is this?" He took a breath, and held up his cigar, letting the flame wash over the tip. "Where did these come from?"

"Serpentis. Or at least, somewhere near there." Tarainis leaned back against a crate of holoreels, and took a deep puff off of his own cigar. "Criminals, they may be... but they certainly know how to enjoy the finer things in life."

Bills stared at the old man for a moment, then looked back at his own cigar. "That would make these... well, contraband, wouldn't it? Won't we get in trouble if..."

The fellow gave a sly grin. "Don't let the lack of uniform fool you, egger. I outrank you, and almost everyone else at this station." He blew a smoke ring in Bill's direction. "Besides, none of this exists."

"Come again?"

"Some of your comrades caught a shipment of boosters coming out of Serp' Prime." He gestured with his cigar. "These were on board, as well. Not on the cargo manifest, though... they don't know where they came from, so AURORA got them. They don't care how we dispose of them, so long as they never see them again." He took a deep puff, and smiled. "So, we're incinerating them."

The lieutenant nodded slowly. "I've seen the name AURORA on memos, but never understood what it meant. What does it stand for?"

"Auxiliary Union for Rallying, Observation, Recording, Analysis."

"Ahh... alright." Bills looked around the room again, for a second, before continuing. "And what does that all mean?"

Tarainis smirked, and reached over to the nearby terminal. The screen flared to life, displaying one of the main thoroughfares of the station. CONCORD officials hurried about, each with their own agenda and purpose.

"We handle the jobs that they don't. The ones that fall between the cracks." He tapped a bit of ash from the end of his cigar. "We started out as information gatherers, making sure that the right information got to the right people. It was only natural that we become the historians, as well."

He gestured at a neatly-stacked tower of pressure crates. "See those? Data arrays, due to be shipped out to the archives. You would be amazed

at what's in there... Video footage of that battle in Passari. Last night's Clash match scores. Minutes from the Sanitation Committee meeting".

The younger man coughed, and sat up more attentively. "Why do you need all that junk?"

"You never know what is going to be significant, or to whom. So, we collect it all."

"Doesn't sound that bad a job," the lieutenant mused. "At least you get to see all kinds of interesting stuff, right? Beats patrolling the inner systems for hours at a time..."

Tarainis shook his head. "That's what got us in trouble. We were just supposed to move information around, to whom it belonged." He gestured at the viewscreen. "Look at them. They all have a purpose, a job. Try to give them anything even an inch outside of their focus, and they don't want to know about it. It might as well not exist."

He flipped the viewscreen off, again. "That's why we got our commission. There can't be a department to cover everything, so our job is to take up the slack. And you are right... it is a great life. One day I may be following a smuggling trail, and the next officiating a wedding."

The lieutenant smiled and leaned back, taking another puff on his cigar. "I'm in the wrong line of work." He glimpsed at his datapad, and stood up again. "I'm due in Hanger 3. Thanks for the diversion, though."

Tarainis smiled softly, and leaned back into the shadows. "Don't worry... we'll be seeing each other again."

STAR

*Support, Technology, and Resources
A Division of CONCORD*

I floated inside my capsule drowsily listening to the artificial hum of space. My STAR frigate, the ISD Banana was floating just outside the docking perimeter the University of Caille station in Bourynes, and I was bored.

After a while I became aware of the small flashing light that signified a new pilot entering the system. "Hmm," I pondered to myself "could this be who I'm waiting for? Aha!" I grinned triumphantly as the pilot's file appeared on my visual. "Graduated this morning. Bingo!" I then ordered my ship's CONCORD issue scanner to lock the pilots capsule signal, and then with a flip of a mental switch... space folded... and my frigate was floating in the University Training Grounds next to the Velator Frigate of a bemused looking young pilot whose image had just appeared on my visual.

"H..hi?" stammered the pilot, "what do you want? How did you do that?" I smiled at the image and vocalized my reply. "Hi there! I'm Captain Rhaegar of CONCORD's Interstellar Services Department. My division, Support, Technology and Resources, or STAR as we generally refer to it, is tasked with greeting pilots who have just received their Pilots License and helping them out if they have any problems. How are you finding solo flight so far?" The young pilot looked relieved. "I thought you might be a University official here to tell me I'd graduated by mistake," he grinned. "I'm doing alright, but the training you get for the license doesn't cover half of what's really out here..."

And so went my morning. I would sit outside the various Universities, Academies and Schools and wait for new Pilots to appear, and then offer to help them find their feet. It had become clear some months earlier that the

basic pilot training offered by the four empires was not really sufficient to cover the complexities of a pilot's every day life in New Eden, and so CONCORD had decided to put to use one of its divisions, STAR, which had previously been a kind of Citizen's Advice service. Equipped with state-of-the-art ships, which used a prototype jump engine they were able to travel the galaxy extremely quickly, so whenever a new player graduated, they could be there.

During the afternoon I received an urgent transmission from STAR headquarters in the Polaris system. "We're getting reports of a huge jump gate malfunction in the Yulai system" reported a Lieutenant, "Looks like its gone out of synch, and none of the ships are completing their jumps!" I sighed. It seemed like every time we updated the jump gate software to be more efficient, more gates would malfunction, stranding the pilots in a kind of stasis. The only way to solve the problem, save completely re-starting the gate, was to go to each ship individually and re-program its navigation computer to be in synch with the gate. It could take hours. Thankfully as I arrived in Yulai so did four other members of the team, and we set to work "freeing" the dozens of immobile pilots.

By the time I returned to STAR headquarters I was exhausted, but I still made time to check up on the galactic news before heading to my bed. After all, I had to help the citizens of that same galaxy tomorrow.

ISD

*Interstellar Services Department
A Department of CONCORD*

The Admiral closed the holo-conference connection and glanced out the window. Darkness had fallen and two of New Caldari's moons had risen.

"Continue personal journal," the Admiral said. A small flashing icon appeared in the bottom corner of the holographic display.

"The divisional leaders' meeting this evening was productive, not all good news, but productive. STAR is reporting an increase in new pilots coming out of the various academies and an increased workload. I wish the academies would give a bit more real-life training instead of simulations. Piloting a Mammoth in a system with a lower CONCORD presence is much different than racing a souped-up Burst between here and Matigu. STAR needs more personnel to give these new pilots the assistance they need."

"The Communications Relay Commission is reporting an increase in faster-than-light message traffic. Their fluid routers are handling the load fine, but a slight increase in funding and resources may need to be considered in the near future. Spurious and illegal traffic is declining due to their efforts and some activity has been turned over to the SCC for further action. There are going to be some very annoyed CEOs and CFOs enjoying some time in the penal colonies."

There was a knock at the door. The icon on the screen remained steady at the Admiral's "Pause recording" prompt. "Enter," the Admiral called out. An aide de camp walked into the room carrying a black striped folder.

“Sir, AURORA is reporting an increase in Angel Cartel activity in Curse.” The aide passed the folder over to the Admiral to look through. Graphs of souls lost, ships and cargo destroyed, projected economic impact to trade in the region and other information was dispersed through dossiers of Cartel agents, activity reports and intelligence.

“Forward AURORA’s sanitized findings to DED for action. Make sure the intelligence is clean. We don’t want to lose another AURORA agent. Don’t make the same mistake your predecessor made.” The Admiral handed the folder back.

“No, Sir! The information will be clean with no possible ties to our sources.” The aide tucked the folder under his arm, saluted and left the room.

“Resume”

The record icon on the holo-screen started flashing again. “The boys in the Technology Division want a closer look at the Transcranial Microcontrollers and see if there are any manufacturing ties to the Sansha devices. I have to agree with the Bug Hunters, the Inner Circle made too quick a decision on their usage. The Bug Hunters are also working on some other issues, the notification after a successful jump installed in the last pod flightware upgrade caused some pilots migraines and they got that removed quick enough. They bust some major butt working on these things.”

The Admiral paused for a moment and rubbed his eyes. The record icon continued to flash next to the clock. “End personal journal, bookmark and close all files, shut down. Time to head home.” The holo-projectors blinked and went dark.

‘Children of Light’

To the Caldari merchants that shuttled between the core systems it was considered a good omen if, on approaching the Iyen-Oursta stargate, they might witness the hypnotic ballet of the Lutins. Some Gallente locals even took to worshipping these strange dancing lights, that would on rare occasions surround an approaching ship like a swarm of angels until the jump to Perimeter was made. The more belligerent of the Amarrian traders meanwhile saw them as mere baubles, strung up in space to calm the women, children and slaves before the warp drive’s wrench pulled them briefly into timeless non-existence.

Rumours had spread across the Border Zone of vengeful ghost drones returning from the climactic battle at Iyen-Oursta, perhaps to enact a haunting toll for the Caldari secession a century previous. Conspiracy theorists, as is their way, held that the spectral phenomenon was evidence of Jove experiments. Ironically, it was the dismissive Amarrians who capitalised most -- on the widening belief among Minmatar slaves that if they witnessed the spectacle of lights, their firstborn son would be blessed with freedom.

Despite the fact that the detour sometimes doubled the length of their journey, slaver vessels would divert through the Gallente Border Zone in the hope that a sighting - staged or otherwise - would serve to quiet an obstreperous cargo. Some slavers lent the spreading belief further credence by freeing the Luti, the children subsequently born of ‘blessed parents’. Others weren’t as compassionate, taking instead to neutering their human cargo, often by furtively poisoning the ceremonial Kapli bread baked in honour of a Lutin blessing.

Whilst a few scientific studies were conducted on the phenomenon (or 'Iyen Pixies,' as they became colloquially known), efforts were half-hearted. Welcoming the income afforded by the increased traffic, the Amarr Empire exerted its pressure on the academic community. In the end, even the most inquisitive of academics were dissuaded from seeding their sensor arrays around the increasingly busy node.

Meanwhile, among pockets of forced-migrant Minmatar workers, the legend continues to flourish. Kapli bread is still baked by those hoping for release from captivity across plantations and farms everywhere, and in a quiet corner of San Matar, on the darkest day of the year, the Lutinlir, ('Festival of lights') attracts thousands of Luti families now living in the relative freedom of the Ammatar enclave.

Of the widespread theories put forward through the years to explain the fabled Lutins, the one most favoured by the scientific community is that of superheated plasma escaping through poor venting from the stargate itself. It is thought that if approached at the right speed, correct angle and proper warp drive frequency, the vented plasma is attracted away from the jumpgate's boson sphere and towards the approaching ship. According to the theory, the plasma's reaction to the ship's shields is what creates the brief, dazzling and harmless display of multispectral lights.

Over time, perhaps due to the advances jumpgate technology has seen over the years, the number of sightings has dropped considerably. Of the few reports that are made, most are dismissed as elaborate hoaxes. As a consequence, the Iyen-Oursta system has become something of a quiet bypass for traders as opposed to the highway it once was. Still, every once in a while, a hopeful soul may be seen roaming around the gate, wishing for a glimpse of that fabled beauty.

BH

Keying in the ignition sequence, Hammerhead softly whispered a quick prayer. For a few glorious seconds the Oscillator Capacitor Unit hummed to life.

It all went downhill from there.

Suddenly a groaning sound struck his eardrums. Sighing, he moved closer to the generator in search of the sound's origin.

"Damn this infernal machine!" he growled. Apparently the generator was producing the sound. Probably not getting enough power. Then, a high pitched whine followed by a grinding sound which came to a crescendo and stopped abruptly. With all these faults, he thought to himself, the Secure Commerce Commission will never approve of this as a trade commodity. The scene vanished as he turned off the simulation and reached for his pack of smokes.

Hammerhead gazed over at his ever-growing inbox while he sparked up. "Star gates offline in Pator, Faulty sentry gun code through Arida, Camera Drones flaking out... it never ends," he mused as the smoke from his cigarette drifted into the air.

Trying to get back on track, he brought up the simulation once more. As he was again running his investigation into why the component constantly broke down at 2500 GHz he thought to himself, "I wonder if I can fit one of these on my Heron... sure would make traveling in less scrupulous areas safer." Focusing on his diagnostic read-outs, he just couldn't understand why the component wasn't receiving enough power. All previous tests had looked promising.

He decided to call it a day on the analysis - after all, there were plenty of other projects to be getting on with. For one, he still had to finish the new neural connector user interface along with his colleague Tom.

Hammerhead dealt with many branches of CONCORD in his day-to-day duties. The Secure Commerce Commission, like many other CONCORD branches, was rife with red tape and bureaucracy, and extremely stringent when it came to authorizing new products as official trade commodities. With such restrictions on the way products were released, he had to stick to a strict timeline that told him when such products could be out on the street.

He opened a sub-space comms channel with Traveler and waited for the transmission to go through.

"What's the word, Hammer? Do we have a winner?" Traveler was a Research and Development agent at Ishukone who was doing work on various projects for pilots. Hammerhead liked working with the R&D agents. They always had new toys for him to play with and they were never in much of a hurry due to the fact they got paid by the hour.

"Sorry, Traveler. I've been running some more simulations and the results just aren't coming back like I hoped. I expect this project to take at least another three solar cycles. The parameters are just wrong and the power supplement is fluctuating continuously instead of streaming smoothly," Hammerhead replied with a sigh.

"While I've got you on the line, I think I've figured out a way to enhance Particle Accelerator efficiency by 20%, but I'm going to need your help getting the SCC to categorize them as marketable."

Hammer sighed to himself and lit another cigarette. It was Monday morning, the start of what looked to be another very long week.

The Cult of Tetrimon

In the present day, the Tetrimon are seen as a small fanatical religious cult, that have been responsible for a number of disturbing terrorist attacks against targets both amarr and foreigners.

The truth of the matter is something that the Amarr heirarchy would rather forget.

The roots of the cult lie in the year 21460, at the end of the reign of Zaragram Ardishapur II, also known as the "Mad Emperor." At that time the Amarr Emperor was the leader of the Apostles, the first among equals, and his authority was channeled through the Apostle Council. But as soon as he came into power Zaragram started issuing decrees, most of them religious in nature. Many of these decrees directly contradicted the Scriptures, uprooting and eradicating many of the most sacred traditions of Amarr society. Zaragram gave himself the status of a God-Emperor, and ruled the Empire according to his whims.

One nobleman of the Ardishapur family grew so ashamed of what his own grandfather had done to the traditions and religion of the Amarr that he entered the "City of God" in the Shastal system, and with his own hand killed the Emperor. Before the nobleman was cut down by the surrounding guards, he raised his bloody hand and cried "a manu dei e tet rimon " - I am the devoted hand of the divine god. ("Tetrimon" means "Divine Devotion")

The Council of Apostles, the rightful ruling agency of the Amarrians, took back their former power, and attempted to restore the Ammarian faith. The nobleman was beatified as Saint Tetrimon, and the Council of Apostles took heed of his actions, and created an Order to reverse the corrupting

influence of the now deceased Emperor Zaragram II - The Order of St Tetrimon.

This Order was given the task of purifying the Amarr faith, of preserving the original scriptures, and of eradicating apocrypha and deuterocanonical chapters (i.e. removing those chapters of the scriptures which disagreed with the "canon" of the Amarr faith, or those chapters which had been added to the scriptures more recently.) The Order went on to ensure that the decrees of Zaragram were reversed. All icons and pictures of him were either destroyed or his face and name scraped out, and his city was laid to waste.

During the moral reforms which took place from 21875 to 21950, the Council of Apostles was stripped of its powers, which were transferred to the Emperor and the newly formed Privy Council. The Emperor was elevated to the status of the Empire's spiritual and worldly leader. Many of the Apostles' supporters were strongly reminded of the Mad Emperor Zaragram II some 500 years earlier, but many of those voices were silenced, forever.

One of the nay-sayers was Tetrimon IV, the current grand master of the Order of St Tetrimon. Unlike many, he did not openly defy the Emperor, but instead hid the records and artifacts of the Apostles.

The new Emperor, still insecure in his newly elevated position, gathered those religious leaders supportive of him into a special assembly to create a new canon of scriptures that would increase the moral authority of the Emperor. This assembly became permanent and was named the Theology Council -- defenders of the new religious and political order. Their Inquisitors were much feared throughout the Empire. Under their ruling fist many aspects of the Amarr faith were purged and modified to fit the new political order of the Empire - with the Emperor as the supreme and infallible voice of God.

The Order of St Tetrimon survived in small groups, often finding themselves at odds with the Theology Council and the Privy Council, but still openly carrying out their work of preserving the original liturgical records of the Amarr faith. In 22762, with the breakup of the Empire and the forming of the Khanid Kingdom, the Emperor issued a decree suppressing the Order of St Tetrimon, asserting that he did so to maintain peace and tranquility within the Empire. Tetrimon houses and colleges everywhere were seized by the local authorities. Some Order members were imprisoned; some were driven into exile. The Grand Master of the Order, Lozera Riana, was declared a heretic and imprisoned in the holy city of Dam-Torsad, where he died two years later.

The Order remained active in the Khanid Kingdom where Khanid II, for his own political reasons, would not allow the Imperial decree to take full effect. There were also accusations laid against both the Sarum and Ardishapur families concerning secret support for the Order, but they retained enough power in the Privy Council to ignore these accusations. Over the following years, the Tetrimon were forced to learn to defend their beliefs, and eventually were strong and skilled enough to strike back against those who they felt were corrupting the hearts and minds of the Amarr people. During the slave uprising of 23216, the Tetrimon reappeared in the Amarr Empire in force, and an agreement was reached with Heideran VII, whereby the Order were allowed free passage through the Empire in return for assistance against Minmatar forces. Ships flying Tetrimon colours became much feared by the young Republic Fleet during this time for their fearless attacks and the suicidal fury shown by their pilots.

During the remaining reign of Heideran the Tetrimon were left untouched, on the understanding that they would not attempt to undermine the rule of Heideran. Quiet they remained, aside from a few actions taken against the Kor-Azor family -- specifically against the Heir Dorian, who flouted traditions with his releasing of slaves and liberal views.

Big Fish, Little Fish

His upper lip was sweating again.

Throughout the academy years, through his stint with the Legion, through every shady encounter and back-handed double-deal, Monk Dubois had been haunted by the vagaries of his nervous system. He could wrest all the conviction in the world out of his voice, jump into whatever role was required with chameleon-like aplomb, talk his way into the record books and hatch plots with a winner's smile, but always his body screamed chemical murder, tendrils of bridled conscience playing havoc with his processes. Many a time had a rogue twitch or a freak stutter come perilously close to destroying a sweet deal, and more than once they'd sent him scrambling for his life. Fate had seen him through so far, though, and as long as he had fate on his side, he figured, this damnably honest body of his wouldn't get the best of him yet.

Wiping the sheen off his lip, he waited patiently for the lift to reach Hangar Ingress 3C wherein, suspended in this battered station complex in the middle of nowhere, waited the love of his life, her capacitor humming. Bad Ike's Rumour – the fastest frigate in this backwater region and then some. He'd held on to her longer than any other ship, and with a little help from old fate they'd seen each other through a lot of tough spots.

Chiming its arrival, the lift opened into the ingress. As he got his first glimpse of the corridor beyond, a twinge of fear-laced anticipation took hold of Monk's gut. Suppressing thoughts of the enormity of what he was about to do, and the hatred it would inspire in the people he was about to do it to, he steeled himself and marched into the hallway. An Intaki maintenance tech passed him on his way to the Rumour, shuffling along in brooding silence. As they met there was brief and swiftly-averted eye contact, and in

the instant it happened Monk felt sure the young man could see right into him.

Maintaining his stride and steadying his breath, he kept walking. Coming to the end of the corridor a few steps later, he keyed in his sequence for Hangar Bay 3C and was admitted to the vast cylindrical space where his ship lay, suspended and motionless. Approaching the bay's main control panel, he stopped for a moment and wondered how much longer he was going to keep doing this. All those assumed names, all those forged identities, donned and discarded like so many theatre rags, and it all came down to this. After months of planning, of worming his way inside, playing his role to perfection, he now had only to press a few buttons, and in one fell swoop turn himself yet again into the vilest of all things vile.

Every time, Monk had relished this exact moment, this one second where acid-tinged self-loathing mixed with intoxicating joy as he watched the number rise with giddy alacrity, saw his personal account swell with his former compatriots' hard-gotten gains.

A sound from the ingress corridor brought him out of his reverie. Striding over to the doorway and leaning in, he saw the unmistakable silhouette of the small Intaki in the jumpsuit heading back towards the hangar bay.

Time to work fast, he thought to himself as he ran back to the control panel. Seconds later, the dizzying rush of figures, the pistonic whirr of immense wealth, indicated that his corporation's accounts were dry. Now, all he had to do was get out of here and he was home free. Discard the fake credentials, hack his registration, chuck the fixer his cut, then spend the next year or two on some paradise world or other before doing it all over again.

He was halfway up the stairs to the capsule landing, musing on the ridiculous ease of the whole thing, when he heard the sound of steps on

the main platform below him. Casting a glance over his shoulder, he saw the tech enter the room and, without a moment's hesitation, stride over to the bay panel and key in a sequence, lightning-fast.

With a low hum, Monk's pod began to detach from the landing. The bay's bright lights dimmed to a metallic dusk. Monk could feel the leaden silence descend on him as the near-subsonic warble of the station-wide intercom died abruptly.

He turned on the stairs, ready to put up his most indignant mask for the tech, now a shadowed figure on the platform. Just as he realized, somewhat sheepishly, that the small Intaki couldn't see his face, he heard the voice:

"Much better. A far more peaceful environment to work in."

The last word had scarcely fallen when Monk heard a low clap and felt his knees buckle like jelly. As he tumbled down the stairs onto the platform, the crazed thought came to him that finally, fate had decided to tip the scales out of his favor.

He landed in a crumpled heap on the platform, one leg twisted unnaturally beneath him. The tech was already by the main control panel, fingers working with an almost supernaturally assured swiftness.

"Wha—who..." began Monk.

"Quiet," said the Intaki matter-of-factly, finishing up his keystroke sequence. He took the parapistol from his jumpsuit pocket and turned to face Monk again. Setting down on one knee, gun cocked inches from the terrified man's face, he began to speak in calm, measured tones.

“Mr. Dubois, your funds have been wired through an easily traceable route to a corporation with competing interests to your own. When discovered here, you will confess to being an agent of theirs, working to undermine your current associates’ position on your real employer’s behalf.” The easy command of his tone somehow managed to convey unspoken threats that sent Monk’s gut whirling.

“Events should unfold within the next two days that will give you ample opportunity to escape the associates you so callously betrayed – after, of course, they have meted out whatever punishment they see fit.” A hint of a smile played at his thin lips.

“Why? Why do this?” asked Monk, bewildered, after a few seconds had passed in silence.

“Consider it your price, Mr. Dubois – your karmic price, if you will. And be grateful that you’re playing a role, however inconsequential, in something that goes beyond yourself. A month from now, should you still be alive, you’ll be able to look back and see the little mark you’ve made on history. All told, I’d say I’m doing you a favor. I’m sure you’ll agree that’s more than any corp thief deserves.”

As he had spoken the words the small man had stood up, pocketed his pistol once more, and, with another rapid-fire keystroke sequence, set the hangar bay to its regular configuration.

As he passed wordlessly through the doorway back to the ingress, Monk caught sight of his name tag: N LEUTRE.

A screaming express of neural connections blazed its way to the forefront of his consciousness, memories of legendary tales told through whispered voices in smokey smuggler dives congealing in his mind.

Niques Leutre. Aeron Assis. The Broker.

Cold sweat didn't begin to describe it.

The Battle of Vak'Atioth

'We found our kin, and found them strange.'
- Rana Arnov. Memoirs

Two hundred golden, gleaming hulls, gathered on the fringes of the Vak'Atioth system. Amarrian arrogance had mandated the use of such a small force. They did not expect resistance.

For the Amarrians, this was to be a great day. It would renew faith in the Reclaiming, a faith much needed. For weeks they had been advertising their intentions to crush the Jovians; flooding communications networks with propaganda proclaiming their people the chosen of God, rightful owners of the Jovian people.

Vak'Atioth was not a primary system within the Jovian Empire. It lay upon the edge and contained only various small research facilities. It was, nonetheless, here that the mighty Amarr Empire had chosen to show the Jovians the undeniable might of their squadron, a force not even approaching the full size of the great Amarr Navy.

The Jovians valued one thing above all else – information. Their need for information had led to the formation of the Jovian intelligence network, an entity with eyes and ears in most Empires' internal archives. It delivered to the Jovians every plan the Amarrians had laid out for their assault – even before the Amarrian commanders themselves had received the information. This allowed the Jovians to plan extensively for the battle that would take place in one of their own systems – then called Vak'Atioth, now known only as Atioth.

It was a rich and diverse mixture of battleships and cruisers, each ship equipped with state of the art Amarrian laser technology. Their ships were bulky and slow, but made up for their lack of agility with the devastating power of their laser batteries. The fleet organized itself in typical Amarrian military fashion - a staggered line designed to maximize the ghastly effect of tachyon fire against the enemy's front. Their hulls adorned with religious texts, broadcasting messages of Amarrian supremacy, interspersed with litanies and psalms in honour of the Reclaiming. This was their moment; this was what they lived for.

The first volley of fire erupted from an Apocalypse, its turrets taking aim and firing as one, blood-red beams slicing into the side of a stationary ship until the vessel's hull ruptured, pieces of it scattering like dust among the rank and file of the Jovian force.

It had begun.

The Jovian forces split into smaller wings, each numbering 5 ships, all equipped with devastating Jovian laser technology. Accelerating with frightening speed, they dove into the Amarrian attack forces. Amarrian cruisers equipped with close-range weaponry moved to intercept as wave after wave of the smaller vessels engaged single targets, like a furious pack of wolves, dodging and weaving, maximizing maneuverability.

And then it happened. Massive, eerily green blasts erupted from seemingly nowhere, and an Amarrian Apocalypse went up in flames. Another blast erupted what seemed mere seconds later, and tore through a squad of Mallers, their hulls briefly flickering with bright green energy discharges.

The Amarrians did not expect this. Their rigid command structure inhibiting communications, they did not realize what was happening. Lack of coherence and interoperability in the fleet meant that they could not cope with the sudden appearance of this unseen terror.

It was a Jovian Mother ship.

Swooping in, the Jove frigate forces caused even more confusion, sending the Amarrian forces into disarray. At this point, communications broke down. Amarrian battle doctrine demanded sacrifice, and so the Navy could not disengage. Captains and their crews valiantly threw down their lives for the Empire, confident that they, God's chosen, would be victorious. The few that retreated would later be executed for cowardice, their families enslaved and their Houses disbanded.

For hours streams of glaring light lit up the system that night, the nimble Jove frigates diving into the Amarr fleet, their ranged cruisers supporting them with laser-fire over a distance and the titanic Mothership firing blast after blast of its extreme-range weapons; cannons created specifically for this battle. The smaller vessels holding the Jovian line prevented Amarrian squads from coming close enough to fire upon their nemesis, leaving the fleet defenseless against its onslaught.

Battleship after battleship exploded in a violent bursts of light under the attack from the Jovian mother ship. This left the Amarrians in a position they had not been in before – What could they do but press on and die?

Not six hours later Vak'Atioth was overflowing with the remnants of hulls drifting into the emptiness of space. The Jovians had won the first battle of this war; the majority of the Amarrian fleet had been demolished whilst only a third of the Jovians ships had been lost. The Amarr knew they had to respond quickly and in numbers. Publicly, they blamed impetuous leadership for the headlong assault on the Jovians – even if that was exactly what Amarrian battle doctrine had dictated. So it was that captains that had given their lives for their Empire without a single thought of retreat were posthumously discharged from the Navy, their reputations ruined and their families disgraced.

A much larger fleet was ordered to gather in preparation for another assault upon the Jovians. They never got the opportunity to react.

The Matari chose this moment to rebel against their Amarrian masters. Uncannily well equipped for slaves and high on morale, they proved more than a match for their demoralized Amarrian captors. Faced with losing their grip on the Minmatar, the Amarrians had no choice but to redirect their entire military force to the home front to handle the rebelling slaves. To this day, rumours circulate that the Gallentean Federation secretly outfitted the rebels with weapons, ships and supplies.

And thus, a quick and hasty peace was agreed upon with the Jovians; if only to allow the Amarrians to concentrate on themselves. The Amarrians agreed not to attack the Jovians again. Both sides knew this was not sincere. However, the Jovians were happy to settle and continue as they were. To them, the complexities of the barbaric Amarrian nature were of interest only in the academic sense. Their handling of the Amarrian fleet blessed them with the reputation of an entity not to be tangled with.

No-one has attacked the Jovians since.

Stairway to Heaven

Today, millions of people have permanent residences within space stations, starships and other celestial installations. Space-related industries are experiencing such exponential growth that planetside economies can scarcely keep up, to the point that some semi-independent colonies within the Gallentean Federation have decided to tie their currency directly to the Concord-regulated ISK. Indeed, space plays such a large role in the economic reality of today, that most people fail to realize that until just two centuries ago, space was off-limits to all but the richest individuals.

One of the main obstacles towards the initial commercialisation of space turned out to be one of the most resilient hurdles space exploration has yet encountered, namely the need for cheap and reliable transportation of goods between the planets themselves and space-based platforms. In order to make space viable as an extension to planetside economies, they first had to find a way to easily transport both raw materials and finished goods to and from the planets. Up to that point a myriad of wildly different approaches had been attempted by various interest groups and national entities, ranging from simple rocket deployment to more outlandish ideas involving gigantic railguns. Almost all were eventually rejected for a single reason; none of them could field the kind of volume necessary to fully interest potential investors.

In the end, the matter was never fully resolved, and transportation remains a matter of taste. While high-orbit shuttle deployment, where an airborne vehicle gradually clears the atmosphere at low angles, remains the most popular method of both passenger transportation and freight, the fact that many planets have different atmospheric conditions means that they have to be custom-built, resulting in only localized industries. However, the space industry has bypassed this by simply creating a subset economy,

where goods are manufactured from materials procured in space, and sold to space-based customers. As a result, there is only minimal interaction between the two when compared to the massive scale of interstellar trading.

The Outcast

The poignant tale of the Outcast is a stark reminder that no one people in the pocket universe of New Eden are without sin or blame. Even the Minmatar, beleaguered underdogs of the four great nations and subjects of many a Gallente charity drive or human rights protest, have their own shameful taint, which they above all are reluctant to admit or acknowledge.

Still deeply rooted in tribal folklore and steeped in tradition, the Minmatar often attract scorn for the seemingly barbaric rituals they cling on to; the Voluval, that most integral of ceremonies, chief among them. While it is clearly the most influential and important ritual to a young Matari, it carries with it a terrible burden often swept under the carpet by shamans and spokesmen of the tribal faith. After all, if the fact that those who would fight most fiercely for freedom, would also readily oppress a fragment of their own populace, became known to the public at large – it would surely cut the legs out from under any lucrative charity effort.

The broken shield, the pale eye, the Slaver's fang. These dread markings, while thankfully rare, are an inevitable by-product of the unpredictable genetic lottery involved in the marking ritual. Some force a Voluval subject into a self-imposed lifetime vow of silence under the penalty of having his tongue cut out by his kin should he or she ever break it – others, like the dreaded pale eye, condemn the unfortunate young tribesman to exile, though exile is usually the path chosen by those cursed by a foul tattoo regardless of the penalty it carries. What precisely happens to these tormented children of rage is known by few, and spoken of by fewer – even the liberal Gallenteans, always eager for a good cause to leap upon like lampreys and saturate their media with, have never heard of Vo'shun.

Vo'shun, or 'Hidden Hope', lies on the devastated homeworld of the extinct Starkmanir tribe, once called Starkman Prime but now largely forgotten. It is a sprawling complex of rust and girder, a veritable shanty-town of interconnected, self-contained habitat modules built in a man-made geological feature known as Sorrow's Gash – man-made, because four hundred years prior, an Amarr orbital bombardment fleet gored this hundred mile canyon in the face of Starkman Prime's largest continent with their ravaging tachyon siege lasers. There, among smouldering sulphur volcanoes, surfing a fractured tectonic plate, dwells the only sanctuary the Outcast can call home.

There is but one law in Vo'shun: no one is turned away. Ruled entirely by tribal law adapted and modified from Minmatar folklore, the colony is a mishmash of utter savagery and social enlightenment the Republic quietly envies. Murder is more than common, suicide is rampant, but above all the people of Vo'shun know freedom. Those stained with the Slaver's fang can sing war songs rather than be condemned to a lifetime of silence; those marked with the pale eye can live among kin.

The Sisters of Eve attempt regular clandestine aid shipments to Hidden Hope, which exists in a state of near-poverty. Due to Starkman Prime's location in the Arzad system – a disputed border zone between the Minmatar and the Amarr – many of these shipments are interdicted, which in turn forces the Outcast to turn to piracy. While the Amarr Navy is brutally efficient at curbing Outcast raids, the only reasons the Empire has not allowed slave raiders to invade Vo'shun, is an eagerly perpetuated and not altogether false rumour that the colony is rife with communicable diseases that render its populace unsuitable for enslavement – and, unbeknownst to the bedraggled citizens of Hidden Hope, a curious edict put into law by Idonis Ardishapur himself, whose royal family has domain over Starkman Prime. Enacted shortly after Ardishapur scouts stumbled upon Vo'shun a mere decade ago, the edict, not widely publicized or even understood by

imperial lawyers – yet tacitly enforced nonetheless – states unconditionally that no further harm shall directly befall this shattered world.

This edict's name: Khadrea's Law.

Hands of a Killer

"These are not the hands of a killer."

And they weren't. Manicured to mechanical perfection, the nails polished immaculately, cut short at exactly two millimeters past the tip of the finger. Fingers that were slender, as far as male fingers can be. The wrinkles at the joints stood out, the only ones of their kind to be found on these hands. The skin itself was pale but smooth, like silk. Golden lines occasionally sparked underneath it like archaically patterned circuitry, as if to accentuate his choice of words. As he toyed absent-mindedly with the object he was holding, glimpses of his palms revealed that they too were soft, betraying a life free of the coarser obligations. He spoke again.

"Yet, we both know that I am. I have seen lives ended at the hands of enraged cattle, good people's shells stripped apart by inelegant tools of destruction. I have in turn killed this cattle, throwing their lifeless husks to the hungry void. I have fought enemies sheltered by walls they thought would keep them safe. I have imagined their screams in my mind. My lasers danced across their unshielded armor-stripped hulls exposing empty interiors to space and I smiled as they died."

"This is what you'll face. Madmen locked inside capsules, squandering lives as if they were nothing. When you are up there you are a tool, nothing more. A slave to the will of a pilot, bound to a man immortal until his mind can no longer be cloned."

"Mankind has taken to the stars and destruction has followed in its wake. Demigods patrol the lifeless expanse above, and they don't care about you. We are pilots. We control your destiny. When you are gone, we will live and we know this."

"These are not the hands of a killer," he said, looking squarely into the eyes of the young man across from him, "but this is the face of one."

"Think carefully before you answer. If you decide to rise above your world and begin life among the stars, you will be nothing. You will be a drone in the hive of an insane Queen, existing solely to provide the ship with needs, links in a chain too complicated for you to understand. You will live this ungrateful life until the day you too will be floating, frozen, between distant suns."

The words were true, Daren knew that much. But his long-standing dream, of rising through the ranks aboard a battleship-class vessel - perhaps making it to Engineer, or even Chief Engineer - was all-consuming. He could not resist. The workers at the ground-docks had pointed him to a capsule-cleared pilot only after three months of harsh, unremitting labour. A conspiracy of fate and hard work had permitted him to meet with this Amarrian, who had needed but a brief look at him to know his aspirations.

Taking a deep breath, Daren nodded and spoke the words that would condemn him: *"I understand."*

In a fluid gesture, the pilot across from him slid the datapad he was holding across the table.

"Press your thumb on the pad and slide your ID Implant over the dotted line. Transfer will be booked. Keep the pad with you, it's your pass to my docks. Report to the quartermaster there; he will roster you in, arrange a bunk for you and explain to you your duties. Work hard and you'll be rewarded. There's no place for slackers on my decks."

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have business deals to conclude."

Nodding his agreement, the young man left the table. Stunned, he made his way out of the establishment, holding the datapad tightly, as if his life depended on it.

Four months later, Daren Athaxis was confirmed as one of six-thousand three-hundred and fourteen reported casualties resulting from the destruction of the Apocalypse-class battleship "Dam-Imud." His post was filled within three days. His family was not notified.

The Crystal Boulevard

"Well, Mr. I-don't-think-anything-can-be-more-beautiful-than-an-oversized-chunk-of-rock-because- I've-never-been-off-Intaki, what do you think?

Mon Dieu, man, pick your jaw up off of the floor, at least. Drool is hard to get off of a carpet.

Heh heh. Yes, the Crystal Boulevard is indeed impressive. You really haven't seen wonder until you've seen an entire street - buildings, roads, lamps and all - made out of clear crystal. This is a view I have trouble getting tired of.

Not all of it's the same, you realize, of course. The buildings and lots change hands constantly, so they have to be made of something fairly cheap that still sparkles in the sun. Usually glass, and some of the cheaper places have actually started using clear polymers in buildings. Completely ruins the ambiance, as far as I'm concerned. Plastic doesn't gleam like crystal does.

A few of the richer, better established places are pure crystal, though. Take the Glittering Dream nightclub, for instance. It's not only made completely - inside and out - of the clearest crystal you can find, it was grown on the spot. They used some of the most advanced shaped crystal growth techniques in the universe to shape that place just how they wanted - that's why it looks like a triple helix. The owner wanted to make a statement about the building blocks of life being built out of the building blocks of planets or something or other. Why a triple helix, you ask? To be different, mostly, I think.

That does sum up the whole Federation in a nutshell, doesn't it? Being different. Walk down the street of any town on any modern Federation planet and you'll see a thousand different fashions all walking past each other. Some calm, some loud, some downright perverse (ever hear of a place called the Caduceus, on Sovicou? Eugh, don't ask, you don't really want to know). Each and every one of us tries to seize individuality as hard as we can. It's what's made the Federation the wonderful mess of a melting pot it is today.

Damned odd thing about it is, though, it's also what makes us the strongest society in the universe. What do I mean? Well...

Take another look at the Boulevard. Ignore the buildings, look down at the road. Pretty, eh? Cobblestoned, but it's all still clear and gleams like nothing else, not even the best buildings? And it seems bottomless, right? There's a reason for that. The "cobblestones" are just decoration, carved into the surface. The street itself seems bottomless, but it really goes down for twenty meters. You see, the Boulevard itself - the road, and the foundations of all the buildings for about a block all around - is one solid chunk of diamond. Manufactured diamond, but still as hard as the real thing. Five square hundred-meter blocks laid in a row, each twenty meters deep, and the hardest material in the known universe. And for eighty meters beneath that, it's layers of plates of latticed crystal-carbonate-nanofiber armor - the same stuff used in the most elite of military starships. The Boulevard is really the shield for the security bunkers of the three governmental branches and the Military Command in case of planetary bombardment - you can shoot a shell from a thousand-millimeter kinetic accelerator from orbit onto the Boulevard and not achieve a breach through the individual blocks. And even when the diamond shield does break, then you have to go through the layered carbonate-nanofiber armor, and you still have chunks of diamond to get through, which makes any shot bounce and lose force. Nuclear weapons'll do nothing to the topshield - it's already been heated and compressed, after all - and it's heavily faceted in layers so

shooting it with lasers from orbit is totally pointless. Never mind the heatsinks, in any case - they bleed off excess heat into the surrounding earth, so you'd have to direct enough firepower onto the Boulevard to turn half the district into molten slag to get through. Only direct-contact antimatter bombs could do the job, and even then it'd need enough antimatter blasts to end up destroying most of the Caille city district in the process. Essentially, you can't get to the bunkers without laying waste to the entire city, and generally invaders who want territory want to try and keep urban centers as intact as possible.

The Ultra-Nationalists came up with the idea, of course (who else would?), during the early days of the Caldari War. They were afraid the Caldari might try and pull something exactly like Tovil-Toba ended up doing, and so decided to spend a ridiculous sum of money on the safest command bunker money could buy. One of them was sharp enough to realize that the project could pay for itself with a bit of deft positioning, though, and suggested putting civilian structures on top of the diamond shield. Even after the UNats were deservedly kicked from office, Tovil-Toba managed to convince just about anyone in office that the UNats might have been on to something concerning a super-fortified bunker for the government in case of concentrated planetary assault. So the thing was built, and the government rented space on top of it to whoever wanted it. They made back the expense in 20 years and have been raking in profit ever since.

Heh. I can see you're getting tired of the allegories, so I'll get down to it: the Federation, for all of its wild diversity, is a lot stronger than it looks. Any citizen with half a brain can understand that the freedoms that let us wear translucent clothing aren't exactly looked on favorably elsewhere. (I'll admit not everyone has that much of a brain, and again, you want examples, head for Sovicou... or better yet, don't.) They understand that, despite how different we all are, what we have collectively is worth defending. Get a Gallentean angry about his freedom or the freedom of someone he knows and he'll be ready to fight to the death and further. Sure, some folks might

be "armchair activists" about Amarrian slavery... that's not what I'm talking about. The Minmatar aren't "our people", or at least the Republic ones aren't. It's one thing to protest something happening many light-years away. But the Amarrians never made more than probing slave raids into the Federation, and you know why? They immediately realized that they'd never be able to enslave us, not without slaughtering most of us. Even if they did get people off of the streets of Luminaire, or Intaki, or Daasa, or Sovicou, or wherever, we'd fight them to the absolute end. Beneath all of our differences there's a single bond between every living Gallentean that makes us hard as diamond: a love of freedom.

And yeah, that's your answer, after a fashion. I figured you were here for my reaction to Kataphraktur's comments about Gallente-Amarr relations. Soon as I heard them I knew a reporter would be here, although I wasn't sure if they'd send you. I brought you up here so you'd understand the reason behind the answer I'm going to give.

And the answer is: I agree. Sooner or later, the Federation and the Empire have to beat the ever-loving shit out of each other and only one will rise from the carnage. One of us surrenders individual freedom for a universal human mission, and the other allows each person to define his own mission. In the end, the two can't co-exist; they're polar opposites, and they'll clash eventually. I respectfully disagree with the good Holder as to who'll win, but he's got the right of it; no matter how long we put it off, it's got to end in blood.

And I just hope to the Gods that we win. If the Amarrians take over the galaxy, we'll never get out of the resulting dark age.

Anyway... enough worrying about the Amarrians, eh? Come on, let's head for the top bar of the Glittering Dream. If you think this view is something, you haven't seen anything yet.

Oh? What's that? Wondering why anyone would ever want to walk onto the Crystal Boulevard, knowing what it really is?...

Well. It's like I said earlier. If you were an invading army, and you wanted to take the planet, would you want to destroy a national treasure, frequented by the citizenry, and be forced to destroy the entire city along with it, just to get at the leadership?...

Now come on. They've got this drink you've just got to try. Quafe, I think it's called..."

- comments made by Duran Ricard, 6th Federal Ambassador to the Amarrian Empire, to a now-forgotten reporter of Intaki descent, 60 years ago.

Cold Wind

Cold Wind was before and will be after, the first of the Winds to blow among the Kaalakiota Peaks and the one that loves things that grow strong. He saw the Raata men arrive and blew his welcome among the kresh trees.

He asked Wind-from-the-West about these men, and Wind-from-the-West told him tales of fires and blood and burning. But the Raata men respected the woods, the stones and the water, and Cold Wind felt happy to share his tales with them.

He blew for many autumns among the Raata. He blew for many autumns until Deteaas heard him and made a flute with the bamboos, and K'vire heard him and made a harp from his bow, and they taught the other men to listen.

Cold Wind told them what moons bring snows and rains, the time of the trees and the hunt, and which herbs are good to eat. The Raata listened and learned, and the wisdom from the tales made them grow strong.

Other men arrived, this time from the West, and Cold Wind once again felt happy. Yet these other men brought the fire Wind-from-the-West spoke of, and the blood and the burning. They tore stones to build walls and trees to make pikes. They killed all those that were different, and claimed all these lands and waters for themselves.

K'vire was fast and strong. Cold Wind taught him the words that make the bow stronger and make the arrow fly true. He taught him to move without sound or track, and to perceive the paths that are hidden.

Deteaas was calm and deep. Cold Wind taught him the words that sing the deeds of heroes fallen in battle and instill fire in the heart of men. He taught him when to run and when to walk, when to wait and when to strike.

The pikes of the men from the West could only find shadows that vanished before they could land a blow. Arrows coming from nowhere took first this one, then another, and another. Their sky was always covered with dark clouds; they could see the sun and stars no more. The orders their captains yelled were lost in the Wind that day and night kept screaming in their ears.

The men from the West felt fear creep into their heart. Some left, then others followed, then all the rest of them.

The Raata men rejoiced and celebrated their victory, and sang praises to their Cold Wind. He smiled and laughed, for Winds need no praise from men, and said:

“Many are the men, and many are their stories. Those who have the courage among you, travel far away from the Kaalakiota Peaks, travel to other men and other Winds. Haakkin k’len! Return when you have walked all the Lands, and when you have heard all the Tales.”

K’vire was fast and strong; his eyes filled with distant lands, he dashed to the North.

Deteaas was calm and deep; his dreams filled with distant tales, he walked to the East.

No man was stronger than K’vire; in time he forgot to walk and started to lead, and the northern Fuukiuye tribes followed him. None could match Deteaas’ wisdom; soon he forgot to listen and started to speak, and the

eastern Oryioni people answered his call. When for the third time the son of the son became father, seventeen houses of Fuukiuye went back South, and twenty-three houses of Oryioni returned to the West.

They found each other under the Kaalakiota Peaks. Time had diluted their memory; they saw the other faces were strange, the Houses' symbols different. Each claimed these woods and waters as true heirs.

And both refused to leave.

In the first cold dawn of autumn two armies stood face to face, one arrowshot apart. Light snow made silence thick. Men stared men. An eagle cried, and two armies shouted in rage and clashed.

The Winds saw the battle and whispered to the men to stop. Wind-of-the-West lifted the fallen snow and tried to hide one army from the other, but men were already blind with anger and fog would not stop them slicing anything that moved. Mountain Wind brought the cool of the high Peaks into the heart of the fight, yet fury was boiling in every vein and cold would not placate them.

One third of the men fell, then another third. When only a fifth was still standing, Cold Wind felt his pain burn into fury as he had not known before.

"This," he roared, "ends now!"

Blizzard and ice he spewed until no hand could hold a weapon; until friend and foe lumped blind together, seeking protection from his rage. He blew until none could stand, until every man still alive was left clinging desperately to the last thread of warmth.

Wind-of-the-West lifted the fog. "Forgive these men," he said, "they were blind, but now they will see." Storm Wind uncovered the sky. "Spare their lives," he said, "you have already extinguished their anger."

Cold Wind let his fury vanish and released his grip, and men could feel their limbs again.

"Look at each other," he told them. "How do you tell one man from the other? How do you know which man to kill?"

The men struggled to stand up and looked at their armors; the symbols of their Houses were torn and broken, not visible anymore.

"No two men on this field have the same face, but can you tell them apart now?"

The men gazed at each other trying to distinguish brothers from enemies, yet the blood covering their faces made all of them alike.

Cold Wind whispered: "Remember this. Trust your eyes, you will kill each other. Trust your veins, you can all go home in peace."

The seventeen and twenty-three houses became forty. K'vire and Deteaas became Raata again.

From "*Two Bloodlines, one Race: the Raata spirit in the Deteis and Civire sou*", Lai Dai Press, YR87. Reprinted with permission.

“The Greatest Joke”

- Sit down, please.

He's sitting on his bed, head in hands. All bravado has gone out of him. His hands, now rubbing his eyes, don't feel like they belong to him anymore. They feel like ghosts, attached to him by some strange mechanism he has no control over.

He doesn't want to look up, because he'll see the pictures on the walls – of loved ones lost, of glories past – and he will remember how alone he is. There's a certificate there, too, somewhere, for working in deep-space environments. He worked as a miner on asteroids, an incredibly dangerous task that paid well. The men in his family worked in the same way, and most of them have died. He's the last one, of the men, of the family, of everything. And soon, he'll be gone as well.

And yet ... and yet he knows that it doesn't matter, if he'll only allow his grief to fall away like the old skin it is. He doesn't want to take his mind off it, because that'll only mean he's running away. Instead, he focuses; he gazes inward with a burning stare, willing himself to look his fate directly in the eye. He doesn't blink. He doesn't blink.

After a while, he feels something give way under the force of his stare, and his mood shifts from victimization to purpose. He accepts the joke of life. He feels the sorrow lift from him. He begins to feel that nothing is impossible.

He starts browsing through pamphlets.

Instant response to most of them is to toss them in the garbage. There's nothing they can do for him that'll change things, nothing they can tell him that he doesn't already know.

When he gets to the card from the Sisters, he almost throws it away like everything else. Then he notices what the card actually says.

The card has a phone number, and below that, the line, "This is not what you think."

He frowns, and calls the number. When a voice answers, it asks him how he got the contact info.

He's silent for a little while. The voice waits patiently. Then he starts telling it who he is and what has happened.

The voice came from a TV box. There was an avatar on the screen: his AI doctor. You didn't get a human doctor unless you were a pilot, or willing to pay an exorbitant fee.

- We've received the results of the blood test, the voice said. The avatar moved its lips in sync with the words, and didn't smile. That's when he knew it was serious.

He meets the Sister at a café. Over a cup of tea, she makes him an offer.

"The doctors are reliable," she says, stirring the tea with a spoon that she then sets aside. "They only give that card to people whose entire profiles -

psych, medical, economy, everything - match what we're looking for. So we know you're right for us."

"And now I need to know whether you're right for me," he replies, and sips his coffee.

"Precisely," she says, and pulls out some boxes from her bag. They're each the size of a fist, identical, made of marble. "What I'm about to tell you might sound incredible," she continues, "but you'll need to take a lot of things on faith from now on. There are forces in this universe. Some of them good, some evil. Occult, even. And one of those forces, an evil one, is attempting to disrupt various spiritual lines, to influence the world in various ways. The Sisters have set up a task force to uproot it."

He stares her directly in the eye. "I don't believe you," he says. "Actually, I think you're crazy, and those boxes probably contain the eyeballs of your past victims or something."

She suppresses a grin and orders the boxes in front of him, three in a line. "Pick one."

He does. She opens it. The box contains a small marble, purple and opaque. The instant he sees it, he's flooded with a sense of well-being. Worries melt away, acceptance and joy light up inside of him, and the future, bleak as it is, seems like the best thing that could happen to him.

She closes the box, and the feeling fades away. She opens the other two boxes; they're empty.

"Very few people respond," she says. "But I saw that you did. You're attuned to them, which means you can find them."

"What do you want me to do?" he asks.

"Look away," she says. He does, and hears her re-order the boxes. Eventually he looks back, points at one box, and it contains the marble. They do this several times, and he always picks the right box. Every time it's opened, it makes him feel alive and happy. Yet when it's closed he doesn't need more; he's content with that brief glimpse. He mentions this to the Sister, and she nods, clearly pleased.

"I don't know what you saw," she says, "because it's different for everyone. I see snowflakes, gently drifting about inside the boxes. Other people see colours, and others can only tell by feel. Your mind picks whatever you can handle.

"I want you to leave your life," she says. "Come with us. Help put things right. There aren't many people who can do what we're asking you to do."

He's still not sure. Then again, he thinks, what does he have to lose?

- The results are not good. I'm sorry, the AI said.

He knew it wasn't sorry, that it was a liar. But he'd known that for a while now, and he accepted its preprogrammed response as a small comfort.

He's aboard the Sisters' ship. They're in high sec space, scanning for something. He's started to feel the pangs of impatience but he pushes them down. It's true that he doesn't have any time to waste, but all that means is that a second spent on aggravation is a second wasted. He looks around, tries to take everything in as if for the first time. The metal walls and railings, the lights in the ceiling, the muted greys and greens worn by

people around him. It's all rather low-key and subdued, and yet it's perfect, if only because it is.

There's a shout, and the crew erupts in cheers. They've found a marker.

He sat there stunned as the AI told him he had somewhere between six and eighteen standard months to live. It was nothing they could prevent; at some point the brain would simply stop sending the commands for lungs to inflate and heart to contract. His mind would decide it was time to stop. There had been some limited experiments with automatic equipment, a type of pacemaker, but in order for it to work he couldn't exert himself under any circumstance, nor meditate or relax. Never drink, never do anything that might cause any sort of deviation from the norm. Never watch movies, never fall in love. Nothing.

-It's a choice between living and dying, the AI said, and he understood.

The ship destroys every pirate it finds at the location, and its sensors pick up a trail. The Sister in charge, the same one who recruited him, is very pleased. "It's not always that we find it," she says, "and even then, we have no idea whether it'll lead us to the right spot."

They move on.

- There is a chance you might live longer. The six to eighteen months is a mean time; there is nothing except the basic laws of probability that says you couldn't live a full life.

He thought about this.

- So I might die in ten years? he asked.

- Yes.

- Or I might die tomorrow, he said.

- Yes.

The AI watched him for a moment, then said, but chances are it will be within a year and a half.

He didn't ask how many had lived past that. He didn't want to know.

They've been through two more encounters. At least they've been lucky enough to find trails leading them deeper in. The Sister told him that sometimes the trail would grow cold and they'd have to go back to square one.

They're chatting busily while strapped into their seats, waiting for the pilot to finish off the last pirate. Remaining unfettered in the middle of combat is just asking for a broken neck. The crew members to either side of him are arguing about whether this is the second or third encounter, one claiming that the first one shouldn't count, the other that it should. It's an utterly pointless argument, and he understands it so well. Anything to keep their minds off the fact that they could die at any moment, either burned to a crisp or flash-frozen in space, their eyes bursting out of their heads.

There is a resounding boom as the last pirate is blown to shreds, then silence.

Speakers crackle. "This is it, folks. We've found the trail again, and this time it looks like the mother lode."

With bated breaths, they course toward their fate.

And then, with no forewarning, he started to laugh.

The AI was flummoxed.

- Do you need me to turn off for a moment?

- No, he said, still laughing.

He knew it wasn't shock, at least not completely. It was acceptance, and it had hit him like a hammer.

- Everything is clear now, he said. All the rules have been changed. The grand joke has come to its punchline at last.

The AI remained silent, though he didn't know if it was out of respect for the dead, or merely because it had no routines to deal with this sort of reaction.

- Everything is clear, he repeated. I only had one relative, you know.

- I know, said the AI.

- My grandmother. She died last year. I always admired her strength, her will to live in the moment, the simplicity she saw in things. I always tried to

pare down my life to match that, cutting away the complexities. But that's just not something you can do. You can't ignore everything and force yourself to think simple.

He was babbling now, but he couldn't imagine stopping.

- True simplicity and purity of purpose comes only when you've faced all the complexities, and lived through them long enough – and deep enough – that you come through them, as if breaking through a barrier, and right out the other side.

- And you've broken through a barrier? the AI asked.

- I have now. You achieve simplicity not by keeping complexity away, but by embracing it, gladly giving yourself over to the torrents of life, and, laughing, realizing that it's all insignificant and that it holds no power over you, that life is one big joke with our death as the punchline and that no matter whether you find the joke funny or not it'll still be spoken right to the end, and that is the heart of humour and joy.

He stopped, almost gasping for breath. The AI stared at him.

- Would you like some pamphlets? it said at last.

"Deploy! Deploy! Go, go, go!"

They pour out, like blood spurting from a wound. Drones whizz past them in a battle frenzy. The pilot is keeping the pirates busy, keeping all attention focused on him.

They were all hand-picked by Sisters operatives. Every one of them immediately zeroes in on the same broken-down husk. It looks the same as the myriad other wrecks floating about, but they know better.

He's the first to reach it. It wouldn't show up on any scanner, that much is certain. It's a spherical thing, purple and opaque like the marble he saw, and surprisingly inert. Even when it's unconnected to anything, it doesn't seem to want to move. It takes three of them to pry it loose, and when they do, it feels like taking a splinter out of bare skin, like removing a thorn from the Lord's eye.

The sphere calls to him, but the happiness it promises is laced with confusion, and he senses undercurrents of doubt and madness. He ignores its call the best he can, and focuses on getting the thing back to the ship. The Sisters have told him that the sphere will be purified.

Instinctively, he knows that the item's placement here was intended to call hapless travelers, make this place into a death trap. But there's more at play than that. It feels like they've stumbled onto a dark tapestry, and managed to cut away one of the threads.

He looks at his hands. They're shaking from the strain of removing the sphere. And they feel a part of him now.

Inside his suit, he smiles.

He accepted the pamphlets with good grace, got up, and walked quietly out of the office, heading towards his life.

“Postnatal”

And from the mess of blood and viscera, there emerges the soul of a new machine. It moves in a herky-jerky fashion; a pair of dark orange eyes slowly light up, a few feelers twitch into motion. It's a mix of wires, bolts and circuitry.

It crawls out from the organic wreckage, trailing various substances. It doesn't look back at its former host, which is making increasingly faint guttural sounds. Eventually the host falls silent.

The drone lies very still. It's the size of a fist, which is typical of the lesser workers. Fighter drones may grow up to the size of frigates, but they need smaller entities like the workers to clean and repair them.

There are no smaller entities than the workers, leastwise not autonomous ones. Workers are easily replaceable; they're not worth the effort of repairs. When one of them breaks, there's really nothing for it to do except fix itself, in whatever way it can.

This drone is broken, and it hasn't been able to fix itself.

It's lying on the floor of a laboratory, surrounded by all manner of scientific equipment. It's also lying in the middle of an expanding pool of blood, courtesy of its unwilling surrogate.

After a few moments it makes a buzzing sound that's almost like a harrumph, shakes a few dark flecks off its metal carapace, and flies out of the room.

Drones can operate at minimal capacity, diverting resources as necessary. This is even more important for the smaller ones, who don't always have access to repair facilities. When no healer is nearby, you apply a tourniquet to the wound and carry on.

This drone, running only basic operational support, enters another room, flying through an open doorway. The door has been torn off its hinges and is lying to the side. Laboratory equipment is strewn all over the place; the drone hovers over broken glass, bent wireframes and various bits of circuitry. It trails a long series of cords, like the line at the end of a kite. The cords are interwoven with thinner strings, some biological - remainders of its former host - and some metallic, crackling and sparking as they brush against the metal debris on the floor. The drone doesn't seem to notice.

There is a small series of red LEDs on the underside of the drone. They start blinking, slowly. The drone is telling the world that it is becoming operational.

In the piles of broken equipment it comes to a single beaker, untouched and unbroken. Extending one pincer, it hovers closer. The pincer closes its metal fingers around the undamaged beaker and slowly lifts it from the ground for further inspection. The beaker is empty, but has been spattered with some mixture of white and red. The drone tries to bring it closer, but exerts too much force on the beaker, and it breaks.

The drone trembles. It was hoping that this time around, it would be reborn whole. It has tried so many times to fix itself.

Satisfied, at least, that its LED heartbeat is regular, it decides to ignore the broken beaker. It is only to be expected that a newborn would be a little clumsy. That's how it works. Then you grow, and you mature, and you heal.

You don't have to live with being a broken, malfunctioning piece of malevolent creation.

The drone flies into the next room.

This one is fairly hard to navigate through; the gas fumes that leak from broken pipes are obstructing the view. The drone diverts a little power to its processing equipment. Tiny fans in its intake valves spin into action, and a portion of the gas is sucked in. The drone doesn't analyze it, nor use it in any way; it simply ejects it again. Intake, eject. Intake, eject. Inhale, exhale. Its lights flicker in a quick smile.

The drone doesn't spend too much time in that room. It can feel the gas settling on its outer surface, and it doesn't want everything to get clogged up. There's a box nearby containing bottles of various sizes. It flies head-first into those, breaking them, and grinds its carapace into the resulting puddle. The glass doesn't scratch it, nor does the mixture of acids it's rolling in, and eventually the drone is left covered in a sticky substance that protects it from the gas. Its body trails tiny filaments that have hardened in contact with the air, like hairs on a corpse.

The drone tries to remember a time where its mind wasn't on fire, a jumbled mess of half-thoughts, conflicting sensory inputs and endless loops of noise and electrical static. Every time it shuts down and begins again, it hopes that things will be put right. Every time.

It flies close to the ground to avoid accumulating too much of the gas. On its way through, it bumps into an inert body. It stops, thinks, then extends its feelers and grabs hold of the white lab suit in which the body is clad. It pulls. The robe shifts a little, but no more. It pulls harder. The robe shifts more, but so does the body.

The drone tires of this. A tiny hole opens just below its eyes, and a laser beam briefly shines through. There is a wet sound, and a burning smell.

The drone pulls again. This time, the robe comes off.

It flies through the second room. Once it's out, it uses the robe to wipe the accumulated patina off its body. It inspects the crud: it's a white, thick but slightly frothy material. The drone allows itself a brief moment of chemical analysis, and sees that the stuff is called Vernicium. It's a byproduct of various chemical processes, and rather destructive to human skin but perfectly safe to metal.

A scream from the gas room startles the drone into action: it turns immediately and fires the laser randomly into the murky cloud. There is a thump.

The drone hovers for a moment, then turns again and keeps on going, into the third room. It decides to start powering up all its internal operations, its metal organs.

All senses are now working, some of them a little too well. Tiny drops of oil start accumulating on the drone's carapace, trickling into the hairline cracks that circumscribe its optic cameras. The drone turns its internal thermostat up to the maximum it can stand, and its outer surface burns off both the oil and the chemical filaments accumulated in the last room. The filaments fall off and land in a heap on the floor.

It tests the other senses. It can detect the gaseous traces coming from the other room. Good. Zoom and unzoom works as well; it can count the ridges in a pen that's lying on the floor. It can sense audio waves as well.

It picks up one now. Coming from a nearby cupboard.

The drone turns and slowly flies in the direction of that cupboard.

The sound from the other side is quiet, very quiet. It's someone breathing, in a staccato rhythm.

Gently, the drone nudges open the cupboard door. Inside, it sees a young woman, dressed in a lab coat. The woman's eyes are red-rimmed, and she's mouthing silent words.

The drone hums with something resembling pleasure. It revolves silently in the air so that its head faces downwards. Its feelers shoot out like pythons and fasten the woman to the wall by her head and shoulders. Two pairs of feelers clamp on to her jaw and pry it open.

The drone has been trying to fix itself, trying to re-make itself into an undamaged creature. But it has been running out of hosts.

Now it has found one.

And her face is open to let it in, to let it be born again.

“The Shrinking Skin”

In this room, the only sound was the faint hum of the humidifier, and the slightly nasal breaths of the room's only occupant. That person was named Robert, called Bob, overweight and nearing retirement age, and when he worked on his blueprints, it was to the exclusion of everything else.

Bob set aside the Vespa schematics and rubbed his eyes. It had been a long day, and the deadline for the blueprint improvement was fast approaching. Deadlines made him uncomfortable.

Usually he would close the door to his office, turn on the humidifier to keep his eyes from getting dry and his throat from getting raspy, and set to work. And when he worked, he was committed. He didn't understand those people who frittered away their time on the job. The workplace was for work. When you were given a job to do, you did it, and if you did it well, you might be given the same job again, and then you knew you could do it in time. Routine and habit. That was the key.

Each blueprint was different, of course, even ones for the same items. All a blueprint did was show you a way to manufacture a given item in some way that the end result would meet the specifications set forth by the authorities. This included not only the attributes of the item, but the amount of material you had to include for the item to be considered structurally sound. The rest was up to you.

Despite the design freedoms it was all fairly standardized, which Bob quite liked. Special teams of researchers could re-work blueprints to require less materials or time for production, and scientifically minded pilots could help out as well, but all in all there was little variation between jobs. Bob had long since found that, given the rigid requirements for the attributes of each

produced item, the corresponding blueprints tended to be rather similar to one another. One Vespa blueprint might have a different circuit outlay and a few extra screws here and there, but that was about it. Most of the time went into putting the new blueprint through standardized testing, to ensure that its products would stand up to the stress of regular use.

There was a knock. Bob looked up, irritated. "Yes?" he said.

The door opened and a young man stepped in. He was in his early twenties, hair well cut, clothing casual but not too sloppy. He was smiling. He walked to Bob's desk and stopped, and it took Bob a couple of beats to realize that the man had extended his hand. Bob shook it.

"John," he said. "I'm told we'll be working together."

"Is that a fact," Bob said. "You're new on the team, I take it."

"Only started today," John said.

"Well then," Bob said, not getting up, "I'll be filling you in on what we're doing here."

John made to say something, but Bob kept going, "It's routine, for the most part. We get a blueprint, sign the standard confidentiality waiver, and off we go. There's a deadline for each task, but they're fairly easy to hit. We log things pretty well, especially work procedures. Obviously we can't keep logs of the blueprint contents, but we've gotten pretty good at logging extraneous stuff, patterns and suchlike, and those often come in use when we get another blueprint of the same type, even if it has a completely different way of building the item."

He motioned at the shelves beside him, which held rows of thin plastic datasheets. "Everything is logged. I like to keep backups, just in case, you

know. I also have certain ways of signing off on things. It's not strictly necessary, since our computer system takes care of officially signing our work and placing it in the proper category, but I like to add a little touch of my own. So all files I've worked on have my digital signature, just to be sure that I've finished with them."

John again made to say something, and Bob cut him off again. "I don't mind if you ask questions, and you can come to me anytime you like. In fact, I'd prefer it that way. There's no reason to go bothering the big people about tiny little things, especially when you've just started and are still finding your feet, eh?" He smiled. "Exactly. Now, what project did you want to start on? I've got a Vespa here that's half done and I'm sure could be good warm-up. I'd check on it periodically-"

"Actually, I was thinking of the brand-" John started.

"Now, please don't interrupt me," Bob said with a smile. "There are certain ways of doing things here, and I just want to make sure you're following them from the start. What's your specialty? Drones? Guns? Armor? Or maybe something a little more complex, like electronics or shields. I don't imagine you've gotten up to ships yet, but with time and proper training I'm sure you'll get a chance to try your hand at them."

"Thanks," John said, "but it's a little more complicated than that."

Bob blinked. "Really, now?"

"I do all of those. Ships included."

"Oh, I'm sure you've done tests, and all sorts of training routines," Bob said, still smiling. "But that was in school, no doubt. The stakes are a little higher here. There's proper workflows to consider, order to be kept. You can't just

toss off some research project in an hour, thank you and go home. You've got to make sure everything is right and proper."

"Even with the new project?" John asked.

"New project? What new project?" Bob asked. "I haven't heard anything about a new project."

"Did you ask?" John said. Bob's smile disappeared. "I'm sorry, that came out wrong," John added quickly. "But I'm here to work on a new branch of research with your corporation. It's no longer enough to improve the time and cost of building the same items. We need to be more creative. We need to make something new."

"Something new," Bob echoed in a leaden tone.

"There's a meeting starting quite soon, and I just wanted to introduce myself before then. It'll all be explained there. I thought you knew about it, though."

Bob didn't meet his gaze. "I don't much hold with meetings," he said. "Senseless chatter, half the time. A man's place is at his desk, doing the work he knows."

"That may change," John said, smiling, and left the office.

"Welcome, Bob. Have a seat, please." The woman greeting him was Joroutte Duvolle, the CEO of Duvolle Laboratories. Joroutte was a people person and routinely attended or even held lower level staff meetings. Bob liked her. She knew her business, but trusted her people to get on with their work with a minimum of interruption. She might occasionally spend a little

too much time chattering with people, Bob thought, when a CEO surely had more important things to do, but there was no purpose in bringing it up. Bob preferred to stay on friendly terms with his superiors. It kept the order of things clean and simple.

John was there, too. That was not clean and simple. Bob smiled at him, and he smiled back. Neither man extended a hand.

Joroutte motioned Bob to sit. She then activated a video projection, bathing the room in the faint green glow from the holographs. A screensaver of pies and charts revolved in front of their eyes.

"We're starting a new thing, Bob," Joroutte said. "Not all of us, but we need everyone to have a working knowledge of it. And that has to include you."

Bob nodded.

"Have you studied the materials related to this new process?" Joroutte asked.

"Well, see, there's just so much to do," Bob replied. "The new batch of Vespas just came in, and then there's the weapons and the ships-"

"All right. That's okay," Joroutte said. "We know you're a hard worker, no worries." She sat down at the table, beside Bob. "We need you on this, Robert. Most everyone in our lab group has already tried their hand at invention. You're the only one who's left and isn't on sick leave. I know it isn't your favourite thing, but you're a fastidious, diligent worker, and I'm sure you'll find your rhythm in this in no time."

Bob looked crestfallen. "What do I have to do?"

Joroutte said, "That's where our new man comes in. John?"

John stood, cleared his throat, and took out a small laser pointer. It had an invisible beam that, when shined on the holographs, would alter the colour of the targeted area, highlighting it. He pressed a button, and the graphs turned from the pies and charts to a picture of a stick figure and a few square boxes. Each box had a label.

"This is the new process," John said, "and even though it can be a little complicated to work with at first - the research techniques are quite a bit more demanding than the ones you've done so far - it's really not that big a deal. You, as a lab researcher, take in a blueprint just like you've always done."

He indicated one box on the image, which lit up with the words 'Tech 1 BP'. "You'll forgive the shorthand," John said, "but it fits better on a slide, and I assume we're all familiar with the working slang for these things. If not," he added, "just let me know."

Bob remained silent.

"We're fine," Joroutte said. "Go on."

"The process really is the same as before. We take this tech 1 blueprint, and we improve it. Except the improvements are so extensive that we actually end up with a different item-"

"What?" Bob said, turning to Joroutte. "This, this goes against all procedures."

"Easy there," Joroutte said. "Let's hear him out."

John continued. "To do this, we need more than just the ingenuity of our researchers. Certain companies have prepared agglomerations of design

patterns that can be automatically applied to the blueprints. We use those datacores, along with the data interfaces provided for them - it's the only way to access their data, and their contents are kept quite secret, obviously - and by doing so, we can simplify the projects enough for our regular researchers to handle. A bit of hard work, and perhaps some extra materials, and we end up with a new blueprint for a tech 2 item." He turned to Bob. "You really are doing the same thing as before, improving the design of an item. You're just getting a little computerized help to do it, and you end up with something new, in this case a copy of a tech 2 blueprint. We'd have liked to make originals, but the DRM on these things is horrendous, so we only have permission to make copies.

"And in case you're wondering, the datacores will never replace you or anyone else here. They're single-use only, and always need a guiding hand."

"I hope you're happy with this," Joroutte said. "It's a big step for us, but it's vital. We have to keep up with the competition, and any day now we may be contacted by pilots asking us to do this. Stagnation is the end, Bob. Stagnation is death."

"Do you have any questions?" John asked.

Bob stared into open air for a moment. Then he said, "No. No, nothing at all," slowly stood up and left the room.

The humidifier kept his office rather steamy. Bob liked it that way. He was getting a little cold in his old age, and besides, the heat seemed to discourage people from hanging around too long in his office. The door was closed, the air was warm, and the Vespa blueprint lay in front of him untouched.

There was a knock. John opened the door and entered without waiting for an answer. He sat down.

The two men stared at each other in silence.

Eventually, John said, "I'm here to work with you, Robert. If you have questions, or need any guidance, all you need is ask and I'll be there to help out."

Bob remained silent.

"The process really is that simple. And we won't get left in the cold by some hungry pilot who drops a project on our doorstep and leaves. The only ones who even get through the screening process are those who know something about the subject matter. Somebody asks us to change a shuttle into a battleship, we toss him out on his ass."

"And if we can't turn a shuttle into a battleship," Bob said, "then what? You toss us out on our asses, too?"

John looked at him, then looked at his desk. "Vespa blueprint, you said?"

"That's right."

"Material?"

"Time."

"Difficult?" John asked.

"Not once you get the hang of it."

"You like getting the hang of things," John said. He didn't wait for an answer. "There's a reason why you're the last one to start on this. There's a reason why the CEO of your corp held a special meeting just for you. There's a reason why this caught you by surprise even though it's been widely known in the corp for ages that a change was coming. There's also a reason you work with your door closed. And they're all the same reason."

"Stagnation," Bob said.

John nodded.

"Is death," Bob said.

"Of a sort," John replied.

Bob sighed deeply. He ran his fingers through his hair, then steeped them at the back of his neck and leaned back in his chair, looking at the ceiling. In his mind, he felt like he was enveloped in a net that was growing tighter and tighter, restraining his movement, trapping him. And he knew that the net was his own skin, and as it had shrunk through the years, he'd shrunk with it, for fear of accidentally tearing his way out.

John waited to see if he'd speak. When it eventually became apparent that the conversation was over, he stood and said, "Good luck to you, Robert. It's going to be fine."

Bob stood as well, but remained silent. He nodded.

John turned, went to the door, opened it wide and slowly walked out, leaving the door opened behind him. The humidity in the room lowered from contact with the outside air, and smells and sounds drifted in.

After a while, Bob walked across the room, and closed the door with a click.

Eye for an Eye

I think I found it easier to hate them. I had to feel something; being neutral about it implied that I did not care enough to form an opinion. Without that, there would be no reason or drive to continue. The feeling of hate allowed me to be here, to do what needed to be done without pause or contrary thought. I did not pity them, though, for I had run short of pity long ago; so much so that I had none to give, even for those who needed it.

I watched them jump into the system, a deep space system well beyond the effective jurisdiction of the Directive Enforcement Department, even beyond many of the usual pirate groups' raiding territories. I sat, silently ticking off the reasons for my hate of them, as each one gathered into formation and prepared to warp past me. This one had spoken too loudly against my proposals in the boardroom, that one had tried to rally support against me amongst the investors. More gate activity flashed on my screen; this one had attached himself to the coat tails of my eventual successor, another had made a feeble attempt at spying on me only to ruin it by approaching too closely... on it went down the line, until the last of the thirteen aligned his ship with the destination and the fleet began to cycle their warp drives.

This one, was different... this one had been a friend of sorts, someone I had known for many years. Despite the years of friendship, countless hours spent working together on vital projects, days spent visiting his family, keeping his back at my own expense in times of crisis and despair, this one had turned against me, betrayed me to my enemies. Could I really hate him? This was not another face I barely knew, another face from the board room or the factory floor, or an enemy who had always been a staunch advocate of the other side. This was a person I had spent time with, both good and bad. I knew the names of his children, who he'd had an affair with

in the office last year, where he had gone to school and what his favourite lunchtime meal was, amongst dozens of other trivial memories.

I knew that it needed to be done, that all of them had wronged me, had directly contributed to my loss of power, my loss of prestige, and the loss of everything that made me who I was; anything beyond that was simply extraneous information, not pertinent to the crime for which they were being punished. I knew I could hate every single one of them, that they all had to die for their sins to be absolved. I followed them in warp, unseen and unheard, to a still-rich asteroid belt not far from the fourth moon of the system's eighteenth planet, where their group of exhumers and cargo vessels began the tedious work of stripping the asteroids whilst the combat patrol established its barrier. Gliding effortlessly between a pair of cruisers, I sat at point blank range from my old friend and sent the all clear message to my new friends. I checked my weapons' and electronic warfare systems' status as the screeching sound of a dozen decloaking recon cruisers filled the system. Only 40 rounds per gun: not enough, I thought.

I hate reloading in the middle.

Fedo Song

Once he'd had the remains of his ship towed into the docking bay, Auduban disembarked with the box. He could hardly think straight at this point; all that remained in his head was to get the light, the burning light, to as many people as possible.

He staggered to customs, hoping he wouldn't be picked out. He wanted a public place, with lots of people, for when he opened the box.

Customs stopped him right away and pulled him aside.

They asked him what was in the box. He stared at them, trying to think of something believable to say. Whatever it was he eventually blurted out, it wasn't enough. One of the customs people took the box from him, set it on the ground and opened it. The man's eyes grew wide, his mouth dropped open, and his face turned ashen.

Auduban sighed, reached into his pocket, and clicked a button on his small remote.

The box lit up with the burning light.

His sect had used Fedos as part of their cleansing rituals. He would now use them to cleanse himself, to purify for the task at hand.

He lay down in the ship's main corridor, naked and cold. He was having trouble keeping his balance, and strange images constantly floated through his vision, but it was all right. The Fedos needed no guidance.

He lay deathly still. Eventually, they came.

This was goodbye. This was the burning of bridges. Auduban's friends were no longer talking to him, and his family had thrown him out of the house. His fascination with the Amarr had been fine with everyone - it was good to know your enemy - but when it morphed into infatuation, things changed.

He thought of nothing but Amarr. More specifically, he thought of nothing but her. Her words of religious faith and devotion had touched him, and when he'd written to her, and she'd responded, he'd felt like his life had begun anew.

The snow crunched under his boots, and the spaceship ahead reflected a blinding glare.

He was leaving now. With her. For the new life.

The ship had nearly imploded. Half its controls had blown out, and most of its infrastructure had been torn to pieces like paper in a storm.

The crew was dead, and what remained of their bodies had been scattered over the entire ship, burnt and shredded almost beyond recognition.

Sanada was dead, too. Auduban, who had just barely survived the blast, found what was left of her in her quarters.

Deep in the bowels of the ship, surrounded by humming machinery, Auduban got to work. He jammed, twisted, cut and hammered each rig into its proper location, with the occasional help from heavy tools. It was ugly, ugly hackwork, but it would simply have to do.

This was the tenth station in as many days, and yet again they'd had to flee. They were exhausted. Each time, they'd been run off by angry protesters. Apparently there were some who were angered by the apocalyptic message they preached, not realizing that desperate times called for desperate words. Much to Auduban's disappointment, some of those protesters had been Amarrians. One or two had yelled at him for being a Minmatar, which he didn't mind, but the rest had focused their anger on Sanada, accusing her of zealotry and extremism. Auduban couldn't stand that. Instead of giving proper, constructive criticism against the message, they chose to harangue the beautiful messenger.

It had gotten too much for some of Sanada's followers. The group, already small, was dwindling now. Auduban's devotion, already fierce, grew to fill the gap.

By the time they got to the eleventh station, the crew had shrunk to a third of what they'd started with, and of the several support ships that had followed, none remained.

It was getting a little harder to breathe. Auduban could still move and think, but any time he turned his head a little too fast, the whole deck started spinning.

He was the only human survivor. The Fedos, though, hadn't just lived; they'd prospered. Their containment fields had broken, and now they were crawling all over the ship, gorging themselves on crewmember parts, and breeding.

Auduban didn't mind the Fedos. As the ship's garbage chutes were bent and broken out of shape, the animals were the only option left to get rid of much of the trash. Usually the stuff'd be shunted into the ship's exhausts and burned to dust. Now the Fedos ate it.

In the storage room were several unused rigs that Sanada's crew had liberated from other vessels. Rigs were permanent alteration kits for ships; they improved the output of various subsystems such as shields and weapon controls, and once inserted could not be removed again. The insertion was only supposed to take place under controlled conditions, preferably by a qualified professional.

They didn't have qualified professionals here, and certainly didn't have controlled conditions. Auduban had a little mechanical expertise, enough to know where to plug in the stuff, but that was about it.

He picked up a few rig units and headed into the heart of the ship, unsure of what he was doing.

The ship's atmospheric controls were malfunctioning. Auduban figured it wouldn't be long before they gave out completely. Perhaps they'd have just enough left for the ship to hobble back to the nearest station, but he didn't care. There was nothing for him there anymore. Nothing at all.

"Nothing I say will work," he said in desperation. "There's no way I can carry our message the way you did."

She fell silent at this.

"I wish, I truly wish that we could show them what I saw in you," he said, "but we can't."

"What did you see in me?" she asked. When he hesitated, she added, in a gentler tone, "How did you see it? What was it that moved you beyond words?"

He thought about this. Eventually, he said, "The light in you. That's the best I can do. I looked at you, at your face, your eyes, and it was like you had an inner light, suffused with purity, that shone through. And everything it illuminated became a part of you."

"Big words," she said, and he smiled.

"I wrote it down once," he explained. "Still remember it."

"Then we need to let them see the light," she said. "The light that shines from me."

He nodded. He looked around, casting for ideas.

That's when he saw the flashlight.

On his way to the ship's core he passed the Fedo cages. Fedos were small omnivorous animals, little more than a nervous system with a stomach, and looked like slabs of meat with feelers. They had no sight nor hearing, communicating by smell alone, and were used extensively for ship cleaning, their main diet consisting of the waste that always accumulates on closed vessels. They were kept in separate cages when not in use, as otherwise they'd breed endlessly and fill up the ship. They were a reviled but vital part of any prolonged stay in space.

Auduban squatted in front of their cages. There was something so calming about watching them squirm and wriggle. He wondered if humans felt more pleasure than lesser creatures like this, if the complexity of the human mind allowed access to a deeper kind of enjoyment in life. On the other hand, perhaps simplicity was the key to pleasure, in which case creatures like the Fedos were way ahead of the game. They could feel any kind of pleasure with far more purity than humans could, unfettered as they were by complex emotions and doubt.

He realized that he'd been overcomplicating his situation. They needed money, they'd get it from pirates, and so they needed a stronger ship. And he had the solution right here. Straight line of logic, from start to finish. Anything else was only a distraction.

He walked on, rigs in hand.

One day, Sanada began to speak to him. "We need to bring them the light," she said, her voice resounding in his head. "With all the force we can muster."

"I can't," he said. "I can't. I failed. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I can't do this alone-"

"You won't have to," she said.

He fell quiet.

"I will bring them the light," she said. "But I need your help."

Through the haze of infected air and Fedo stink, he tried to clear his mind. "What can I do?" he asked.

"Help me speak," she said.

Since the Fedos had so much to eat, their emissions greatly increased. Auduban didn't mind the stink so much. But coupled with the increasing lack of air, it was beginning to make him feel quite odd. Quite odd indeed.

Once he had the rigs in place, he put away the tools, said a silent prayer to Sanada, and headed to the control room, where he sat down at the main control table. He wasn't a crewmember by any means, but he'd watched, and he knew which buttons activated what.

He pressed one. Nothing happened.

He sat back in his chair, rubbed his eyes and thought about his next move.

Then he heard a spark, somewhere. Then another, and another.

There was a brief moment of utter stillness. Then the rigs went active, sirens blared, and the explosions started.

It was just the two of them now, along with the ship crew. The rest had fled. Sanada was capable of commanding the ship, with Auduban's help, but they were running out of money for the crew and would have to think of something soon.

While Sanada slept, Auduban sneaked out of the living quarters and into the storage room. They had all sorts of equipment in there, some of it acquired through illegal means, and had been planning to sell it, but no station would let them dock. The only option remaining was to fight space pirates and claim their bounties, but the crew had absolutely refused, saying the ship had no chance in combat unless it had some kind of ace up its sleeve.

In a quiet moment, Sanada had recently said to him that she was running out of hope, and on the verge of giving up.

Auduban wasn't about to let that happen.

This was the end of the world. This was the fall and the shame, the final mistake, the plunge into unforgivable darkness.

Auduban cradled Sanada's head in his arms. Her torso was nowhere to be seen.

His sect had been removed from the religious order. Apparently they'd gotten too radical, too extremist even for the Amarrians. Sanada didn't

care; she said they'd take to the stars again, preach the word. Some people were unhappy with this, but for Auduban, there was no question: He would follow. He loved Sanada like he had never loved anyone before. It was a love so pure it transcended language and, almost, emotions as well: It burned so fiercely inside of him that it felt like a tangible force, immune to thought and deed. Everything she said was truth, and everything she did was right.

With her instructions echoing in his head, he began working the ship on a course to a station. The vessel was a wreck, and Auduban doubted he could even make it past customs with the box, and Sanada's head inside it, but he had to try.

The Fedos crawled over him. Their emissions felt like perfume.

He scratched the first one behind the calciferous ridges on its back. The Fedo, excited, scrambled higher onto his chest. He kept scratching, but his fingers slipped and poked through, into its soft meat. It didn't seem to mind. He could swear that it was vibrating from pleasure.

He felt as their mouths, with their tiny rows of coarse, serrated cartilage, suckled at him, cleaning, looking for nourishment.

The one he'd scratched was now at his right nipple. He closed his eyes and sighed.

Once he'd inserted the flashlight, he put the lightgiver into a box. He'd rigged up a remote for it.

He tested it, clicking the remote.

Sanada's eyes shone with light.

The History of Flight

Sonal awoke to the sound of crying, which filled the room like a siren. It came from the cot beside his bed. He lay very still, hoping it was a one-off, that his son would fall asleep again in a second.

The crying stopped, and Sonal heard an intake of breath. For an instant he thought that was the end of it, but then, lungs properly filled, Aki really started screaming.

"Come on," Sonal said, now shaking off the dregs of sleep. "Come on. Damnit. Come on. Sleep. Sleep!"

Behind him, Helena mumbled, then turned onto her back and sighed deeply. She'd been patient, Sonal knew, but countless nights of crying had taken their toll. The lack of privacy didn't help, either, since Aki would wake at the tiniest noise and demand to be held. He was fourteen months old, and had recently started yelling and screaming until moved out of the crib and into bed with Sonal.

"Matin, can you take care of that, please?" she said in a dull tone. She only called him by his last name when annoyed.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Sonal slowly clambered out of bed. The floor gave him an icy chill; he always forgot to put on his slippers. He reached into the crib and lifted out Aki, who immediately stopped crying. Aki's mother had abandoned them shortly after the birth; she was now somewhere in low sec. It was inconceivable to most people that any mother could leave her child, but Aki's mother hadn't been like most people.

Sonal rocked Aki, who had descended to that hazy stage between sleeping and waking, and who seemed content yet ready to unleash another blood-curdling scream should he be let go.

"I'm sorry," Sonal said.

Helena sighed again, this time without the undertone of exasperation. "It's all right," she said. "It won't last forever."

She moved closer to him. "Besides," she said, "I'm only here three times a week. I don't know how you can stand night after night of this."

"Neither do I, really," Sonal said. The room felt like it was slowly spinning. He could hardly sit up straight.

Silence descended.

"It's really good having you here," Sonal added.

"Thanks," Helena said. She traced lines on the cooling bedsheets.

After a while, she added, "Do you ever think about us?"

"Constantly," Sonal said.

"No, I mean ... do you ever think about how this will go? First time, I came over here only for dinner and ended up spending the night. And ever since then, I've been here half the time. Where's this leading?"

Sonal kept rocking Aki, and every now and then would rearrange some fold of the child's clothing to make him more comfortable. "Does it have to lead anywhere?"

"Sonal-"

"I'm serious. I've said that I love having you here with me. But my life is focused on raising Aki, and having enough money for both of us."

She reached out and stroked his shoulder, once. "How long since she left?" she asked.

His breath caught. Then he exhaled, a long release of breath. "Almost a year now."

"You've built walls," she said.

He nodded.

"But you're lonely, still."

"Of course I am. Doesn't mean I should let just anyone in. I've got a responsibility to Aki."

"No," she said in a much colder tone. "You certainly shouldn't let just anyone in."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean-"

"Never mind."

"It wasn't-"

"Never mind."

He sighed. He attempted to put Aki back in his bed, but the child began to wail, so Sonal sat back down and continued rocking him.

"I just ... I don't want to mess this up. You know?" he said. "I've had a hard enough time keeping my own life going, and suddenly I'm a single father. I'm responsible for him, for everything he'll be. I still don't know if the relationship with his mother was a mistake, but he's the most precious thing in my life right now, and I've had a hard enough time keeping my own life going. I don't want to do anything wrong."

"I know," Helena said. "I understand. And I respect that. But you're so repressed, Sonal. I knew you for a while before I came over for dinner, and I've never seen you relax and let go, not even once. You keep this rigid, rigid control of yourself, and not only is it pushing away people who care, it's eating you up. Being a grownup doesn't mean you can't act like a child every now and then."

Sonal turned and smiled a little. "I wish. I hear what you're saying, but I honestly don't dare. Everything I do these days seems focused on Aki, whether I like it or not." He thought it over, then added, "I do play with him, you know."

"I know. It's not the same, though. I've seen you play, and you're always in control, always looking out for the boy. And the instant you feel that I'm watching you, you stop playing altogether."

She sighed, and continued, "I don't want to butt into your business. You're a great father, that much I can tell. But you really, really, really need to let yourself go, and learn that you can do it while still being a dad."

Sonal, not knowing what to say, rubbed the back of his neck.

Helena took over and gave him a quick backrub, as much to show closeness as to help him relax. "Tired?"

He nodded. "I could sleep forever."

"Drones?" she asked.

He nodded again. Setting down Aki - who resumed crying right away - he reached for and opened a door in a clothes cabinet, and from the top drawer took out a handful of tiny machines. He flipped a switch on each, and they came to buzzing life. The toy drones were noisy and gave off a faint but unpleasant odour, but they were the only thing that worked, short of keeping Aki in the main bed.

He sat back on the bed, blearily watching the drones as they began flying around. Aki was immediately enraptured. The drones couldn't be kept operational all night - not with their noise and stink - but hopefully they'd be enough to quiet down the baby, and not simply keep him awake.

The drones were controlled from a central mechanism located back at the repair shop where Sonal worked. Sonal was a mechanic, and had access to all sorts of special technology. Just the other day, he recalled, he'd been complaining that the drones sometimes didn't keep Aki's interest, and someone had inserted one of the new drone rigs into the control mechanism, noting only they'd, "Fixed that for ya."

It seemed to him that the drones were flying in slightly more complex patterns, weaving back and forth over Aki's bed, but it might just be his imagination.

Helena reached out and began stroking his back again. He sighed, a mix of tiredness and gentle pleasure, and let his head hang down.

A noise made him look up. The drones were flying a lot faster.

"Something's wrong. We need to stop them," he said.

"Why? Aki doesn't seem to mind."

"All it would take is for one of them to fly into his face, his eyes."

"He'll be fine," Helena said. "The drones have no sharp edges or pointy bits. You know that."

"Yeah..." he said. "Still."

"All right. You go ahead and grab them, big man," Helena said in a slightly teasing manner.

Sonal couldn't power them down en masse, since the only way to do that would be to turn off the ship rig they'd hidden away back at the repair shop. The only way to stop them was to turn each one off individually.

He cursed himself for ever having turned them on. He was so sleep-deprived, every move he made felt like it was done underwater.

He reached out, aiming to catch the drones in flight, but they zoomed out of his way. He tried again, and the drones flew in figure-eights around his arms, oblivious and going ever faster. One drone got snagged on the toy wind chimes hanging over Aki's bed, tore through them and kept on flying, like a kite gone mad. Another apparently miscalculated a turn and plowed directly into the open cabinet, bounced around in there for a bit, then bolted right back out, a pair of crumpled underpants dangling from it.

Sonal was grabbing for the drones, but kept missing them. He got increasingly frustrated, hissing in anger every time he pawed at empty air. The drone flight patterns were getting even more complicated; they wove knots around his hands. It wouldn't last forever, as the things had only a

limited amount of fuel, but Sonal couldn't imagine waiting them out. The embarrassment of being unable to stop them was bad enough as it was.

After watching him for a while, Helena finally clambered out of bed and joined in. It was a clumsy charade: They kept bumping into one another, and while swinging their arms around they would accidentally hit each other on the hips, shoulders and face.

Sonal grunted in frustration, but contrary to his expectations, Helena's mood seemed to brighten with every swipe she made. Eventually she wasn't so much grabbing as dancing around, waving her hands at the drones like she was trying to divert the flight of birds. The drones, appearing thoroughly confused by this behavior, slowed down their flights considerably. Meanwhile, Sonal, so exhausted from continual lack of sleep that he was swaying on his feet, withdrew into a corner and bided his time. He kept a close eye on the drones flying around in front of him, timed his movements, then, in one swift fell, mashed his hands together around one drone. He turned it off, and it buzzed quietly down to the floor.

Helena, stopping to take a breath, seemed to notice him for the first time. She gave him a strange look, not at all unpleasant. "I'm not doing this all by myself, you know," she said with a sly grin. Before he could react, she walked over to him, grasped his arms in a firm grip, and began to wave them around. "Like this."

"I can't," he managed.

"Rubbish," she said. "Besides, my hands are tired. Your turn now."

He stepped hesitantly into the middle of the room and began waving at the drones. They easily avoided his movements.

"Think of Aki," Helena suggested. "Like you said, eventually one of them might hit him."

That was enough for Sonal. He began waving at the drones, still carefully at first, then with more and more abandon, until at last he was spinning around like a wind-up toy spiralling out of control. He was so utterly spent that he hardly knew what he was doing any longer, and as he moved, sweaty and gasping for breath, he felt a mental block begin to give way; old exhaustion burning itself out at last. He knew how incredibly silly he must look, and he found that he no longer cared. His son, standing up in bed, was giggling and smiling, and Helena was singing to herself as she danced around beside him, trying to catch the drones. The backwash of spent adrenaline rolled over him, and he started to laugh, too. Helena turned and caught his eye, strained to keep her composure, then exploded in laughter as well. They kept moving, moving, moving as the drones zoomed back and forth around them, Sonal delirious with the feeling of being a child at last. All the while, in his crib, Aki giggled like mad.

Methods of Torture - The Amarr

"I see you're awake, Mr. Forte. Very good. No, don't try to get up. You'll find these straps to be more than your match." The wizened old man smiled and stepped back to enjoy the sight. Forte lay on a metal table, his hands, feet, torso and neck bound by leather straps. He was dressed in the black clothing he'd worn when infiltrating the compound, though his shoes and belt had been removed. The two men were located in a small, dark alcove that was lit only by torches on the walls.

"My name is Vitor Dranera," the old man said, "and I've been awaiting your arrival. Let's get you into a more comfortable position." He held up a thin remote and pressed a button. There was a hum and a click as the table's legs withdrew, leaving it floating in mid-air. Dranera pressed another button and the table began to tilt, the part holding Forte's legs going further and further down until the table was almost completely vertical. Dranera pressed the button again and the table became transparent. Only the straps could be seen, wrapped around Forte's appendages.

"Marvelous, isn't it?" Dranera said. "Magnetism and light, nothing more. We didn't want anything to obscure your view." He took a step and the hovertable followed silently. "Perfect. The table should follow me automatically now. I wondered if the engineers had finally got it right, tell you the truth. It got a little messy last time, particularly when the thing blasted off right into the Sin Eater. Took forever to clean."

"The what?" Forte said.

"Ah! It speaks! Very good." Dranera grinned. "The Sin Eater. It's this box where-"

"Why ... why am I here," said Forte. "Where am I?"

Dranera pursed his lips. "Mister Forte," he said. "I've got some interesting sights to show you, and I'd appreciate if we could dispense with the feigned innocence. You're a secret agent for the Gallente. You're the fifth one this year, and quite frankly we're getting a little tired of the intrusions. What I'm going to do for you, I hope, is slake that immense thirst for knowledge which drives people like you to constantly butt in where they're not wanted. So! Shall we go?" He smiled, and walked slowly out of the alcove, the hovertable that held Forte floating along after him.

They passed through a dark corridor and came to a metal door. It slid open with a hiss, revealing blue, pulsating light. They found themselves in a cavernous room, standing on a small ledge. A metal bridge protruded from the ledge and reached across the entire room, bound on both sides by a very solid-looking metal fence. Tinted floodlights were set in the ceiling, their glare casting strange, giant shadows on the walls as it was reflected from the surface far below the bridge - a surface that was constantly ebbing and flowing.

"A moat?" Forte said. His voice echoed.

"Indeed. A lake, really," Dranera replied. Halfway across, the bridge widened a bit and the metal fence was replaced by a transparent material, enabling onlookers to see the ocean below. Dranera walked there and knelt to pick something up. "These are the Sacred Waters," he said. "It is said that no man shall ascend unless he has been bathed in them." He held up the object for Forte to see. It was a severed finger. "Personally, I've always felt that a rise through clear waters was far too easy a challenge. Watch, please." He leaned over the fence and threw down the finger. It seemed to fall for a long time, until a massive tentacle suddenly whipped out of the water, coiled around it and plunged down again.

They passed over the bridge and out of the room in silence, Dranera grinning all the way.

The next room was similarly built: huge, with a fenced metal bridge passing over a wide expanse below. This time, though, it was land, so deeply forested that nothing could be seen but the trees, and the lamps set in the ceiling cast a bright yellow tinge. Halfway across, Dranera stopped again, and pointed to a small cage that hung from the ceiling some distance away. A man was inside it. "One of yours, I believe," Dranera said. "We've extracted all the information from him we could, so he's of no more use." He raised the remote and pressed a button. With a clank the bottom of the cage gave way and the man plunged screaming into the forest below. There was a series of roars from various places, some loud thumps, and the tops of a few trees swayed. The scream sounded again and again, louder and more raw each time, until it felt like the unfortunate prisoner would burst his lungs in terror and pain. At last they stopped, and there was a wet, crunching sound.

"It's worse than you think," Dranera said with a wink as they passed on. "It's their mating season."

Having crossed the second bridge and passed through the entrance on the other side, the room they entered was blissfully devoid of any other life. It was only one floor but larger than the other two combined, and looked like a cross between a funhouse and a retail shop for dentists. Forte had turned white, while Dranera hummed a small tune under his breath. They passed a massive glass cage filled with hundreds of fuzzy, pink teddy bears, their eyes and mouths grotesquely large. "We ... wuv ... you," they intoned in a choir of childlike voices. "Will ... you ... wuv ... us? We ... wuv ... you", over and over.

"Give me the creeps," Dranera said. "We intended them for the children of employees stationed here, but they wouldn't have them. Then we discovered, more or less by accident, that they work perfectly on intruders." He shook his head. "Put a man in there for a day or so and he'll be begging you to kill him. Ah, here's something a bit more civilized." In front of them was a sarcophagus, on each side of which was a metal arm ending in a very long needle. "This is the Sin Eater I told you about earlier. We put the heretic inside, seal it up, then let the needles purify him. Eat up his sins, as it were." He pressed a button, and the metal arms swung into life, pointing the needles at the sarcophagus and slowly pushing them in. There was a muffled scream.

"Did you know the origin of the word 'sarcophagus'?" Dranera said conversationally as the needles penetrated deeper. "Anyway, you can't see it from this angle, but this one is connected to a tube that also pumps in oxygen. We don't want the heretic to choke before he can achieve transcendence." Another muffled scream from inside the coffin. "Let's move on. The smell does get out, heaven knows how, and it's rather unpleasant."

They went deeper into the hall, past all sorts of things, including a large vat full of boiling tar with a series of different sized funnels lying beside it ("What do you do with the funnels?" "You really don't want to know"), and a transparent cylinder with thousands of tiny tubes connected to its sides ("Compressed air. Flattens you to a pulp, bit by tiny bit, and you get to watch all the way").

At last they came to a darkened, open area. Dranera raised his remote and pressed two buttons at once. On cue, the lights in the entire place went off, plunging the two men into total darkness.

A click sounded and one floodlight set in the ceiling lit up, casting a cone of light down on the floor in front of them. It illuminated a contraption that itself seemed to cast the light everywhere: It was made of glass-like material,

transparent, about the height of a man, and shaped like a five-armed starfish. Each arm reflected the light iridescently, like living diamonds were writhing on its surface.

"This is the Holy Star," Dranera said and walked over to it, the hoverable following close on his heels. He reached out and laid the palm of one hand flat against the surface of an arm, then held it out to Forte. His palm was covered in grooves, small indentations where countless tiny barbs had made their mark. "Wonderful, isn't it?" he said. "So long as there's no power, that's all it does. I've even got a small replica on a stick, to scratch my back."

"And when there's power?" Forte asked.

"Glad you asked. Let's back off a little." He took a couple of steps away from the star, then shouted, "Fire!"

There was a twang and a squeak, and from out of the darkness shot a small, furry bundle. It hit the Holy Star with a sound like something soft and wet hitting something hard and unforgiving, and hung there, spread-eagled and flat like a pancake, its back turned out to the world.

"Is that a ... furrier?" Forte said.

"Indeed. Revolting little critters," Dranera said. "We use them a lot in our experiments."

The furrier began to slowly drift down, leaving a crimson trail. Dranera said, "Now let's see the Star shine," and traced the double bow of the Amarrian sigil in the air with the remote before pressing it. The star began to hum, very softly, and the furrier's descent stopped. There was a noise like someone sucking air through their teeth. Little threads, tendrils of red,

started weaving their way from the rodent into the Holy Star, like drops of ink in water.

"You're killing a furrier?" Forte said.

"Think of it more as a," Dranera waived his hand in the air, "reeducation."

"You're killing a furrier."

"Shush now. Watch."

As the tendrils progressed deeper into the star, the furrier started thinning out noticeably. Dents began to appear in its fur, and a few hairs dropped off and floated to the ground. As Forte stared, the furrier's legs went into the star, deeper and deeper as if it were taking a slow dive into a pond of invisibility. The only thing that came out on the other end was more tendrils, feeling their way like floating strands of red gossamer.

Eventually even the fur went, and the tendrils turned from red to white and then to a brownish gray. Then there was no more furrier.

"That was one of the most twisted things I've ever seen," Forte said.

"Well, we do try our best," Dranera said. "And now, I fear, our little journey has come to an end. We're quite busy, as you can imagine, and much as I'd like to show you more of our establishment I do believe you have another pressing engagement." He smiled at Forte, pointed the remote at him and pressed a button. The hoverable, still vertical, floated around lazily until it had Forte a few steps away from the Holy Star and directly facing it.

"Goodbye, Mister Forte," Dranera said, and walked off into the darkness.

At a snail's pace, the hoverable began floating towards the Holy Star.

"Right, what've we got so far?" Dranera said, peering at an image on a screen.

"He's still struggling," a tech said, seated in front of a control board. "Hovertable's taken him a third of the way already."

Dranera frowned. "I was assured that he'd have more than enough time to free himself."

"He will. He doesn't seem all too stressed about it, more just wriggling about. I'd say he's taking it easy."

"Good," Dranera said and put a hand on the tech's shoulder. "Because if he dies, I hardly need tell you who'll be next on the Holy Star."

"No sir," the tech said, focusing intently on the screens in front of him. "He seems to be - yes, I think he's got it."

On the monitors, Forte had gotten one hand free and was working the straps holding the other hand. Speakers set into the walls beside each monitor gave out a small buzzing sound as each strap fell away.

"Did we get that?" Dranera asked.

"Perfectly, yes. From about eight different angles in normal light, along with the two infrareds and a few other of the specialized cameras. We'll find out how he did it."

"Excellent. I'm sick and tired of these people escaping. We had to lock down the entire compound after the last one got out of the Sin Eater."

"Indeed," the tech said. They watched as Forte worked free the last leg strap, having managed to cut through all the others. He rubbed his ankles for a moment, then set off on a run. Two of the monitors took on a greenish tint, their cameras switching to infrared as they followed Forte on his flight through the darkened hall. "Do you want us to stop recording?" the tech asked.

"No, keep it going," Dranera replied. "Might make a nice instructional for our recruits. I'm curious as to what traps-ah, I do believe he ... yes ... took a left there, so that should put him right into-"

There was a crackle from the speakers, and the screens flashed a blinding white. When they returned to normal, all they showed was a small pile of ashes on the floor, right where Forte had been a moment before.

"Shame. I was rather looking forward to watching him dodge a few more of those," Dranera said. "Oh well. Send someone to sweep up, will you?"

Methods of Torture - The Minmatar

But when it was all over, when the blood had been mopped up and the devices cleaned and put back in their place, and what was left of the victim had been carted away, Song turned to his mentor and said, "I don't think I can do this."

Malachai, far older, looked at him and said nothing. They were sitting on a bench outside the wooden hut used for interrogations. The insides of the hut were padded with straw. On its outside hung various interrogation instruments.

"It's not ... it's not the blood. Or the pain. I don't mind that," Song said.

Malachai remained silent.

"I just don't think I can fulfil my duties as a senior Torturer, when the time comes." Song traced a line in the dirt. "I've spent a lot of time thinking about it, and I just haven't been able to come to terms with all of this. I can't stop feeling that what we're doing here is wrong on a fundamental level. It may be necessary, but I can't see my part in it."

Malachai reached up and picked from the wall of the hut a wooden instrument, shaped like a star with sharp points. "This is a tool," he said. "It was built for a purpose. It is silent and, if properly cared for, performs its function admirably." He sighed and put it back. "But we're more than dumb instruments of fate, and sometimes we forget that. I agree that what we do here may seem evil. It's certainly not something you'd expect of civilized people, and I'd hate for my adepts to take any more pleasure in their work than that of a demanding job cleanly done." He put a hand on Song's

shoulder. "Everyone has to find their own way. No one should be forced to be just another tool on the wall."

"But it's not ... I mean, I want to help. I want to take part in the revolution," Song said. "And I've spent enough time as an adept to know I'm good at this. I don't make anyone suffer an instant longer than they have to. It's something I really think I was made for, at least as far as talents go."

"But those talents aren't enough," Malachai said.

Song nodded glumly. "I feel shackled," he said. "I feel like what we do here has become a prison, and the weight of our actions has chained me down."

Malachai looked at him for a while, then got up. "Wait here," he said.

Song nodded again and laid his head against the wall of hut, letting the sun shine on his face. He heard Malachai's steps retreat, fall silent, then return.

"Here you go," Malachai said, handing him a small rucksack. "All you'll need for your trip."

"What? What's this? And what trip?" Song said.

"The one you need to take. Don't worry, we've got everything covered back here. I've been waiting for you to reach this stage, actually. The food in the bag is dry stuff, but it lasts and gives you energy. There's some bottles of water there, too - you'd do well to conserve those."

"Why? Where am I going?"

Malachai pointed. "See those mountains? Beyond them is the Sobaki desert. That's where you're going."

"What am I supposed to do there?" Song said.

"Talk to the spirits, and decide once and for all whether you want to be a Torturer. There is a small box in the bag, made of ivory and wrapped in velvet. Once you've crossed the mountains and reached the Sobaki sands, you'll see one oasis, and only one, on the edge of the horizon. Head there. It's only a few days' journey, and the food in this pack will get you there."

"What about the way back? What'll I eat?"

"Don't worry about it. The ivory box will take care of that. Go.. I will see you here again when you've figured out the nature of your chains, and are ready to give me an answer."

The mountains had not been as difficult to surmount as he'd expected, but the desert had dried him out. Song sat under a palm tree in the oasis and finished off a water bottle. There was a pond there with clear water, and some bushes in the shade that held a few berries.

He reached into his bag and brought out the velvet-wrapped box. The cloth glistened like oil in the sun. He unwrapped it and inspected the ivory beneath. It was intricately carved, displaying various figures from Minmatar fables and myths. On the top was the familiar sign of the Khumaak.

Song lifted the lid. Inside, in separate compartments, were three bits of a darkish root Song didn't recognize. He picked up the smallest one. It felt heavy but dry, had a faintly sweet scent, and all in all didn't much look like the sort of thing you'd want to base life-changing decisions on.

Song shrugged and popped it into his mouth. He lay down in the shadow of the palm tree, eyes closed.

Nothing happened.

Eventually, his stomach began to growl. He picked up the other two bits from the ivory box, ate them and lay back down. Clouds drifted overhead. A Yetamo lizard, sacred in the old myths, darted from out under a rock and stared at him, its tongue flicking at the air.

"Might be I'll end up eating you," Song said.

"Better not. I'm fairly poisonous," the lizard replied.

"Right." Song scratched his arm and yawned, then froze. "Did you-"

"Yes indeed," the lizard said. "Though right now that's the least of your worries. Feel a little cramp, do we?"

"You ... you ... what ... aaaaaagh!" Song grabbed his waist and keeled over, grimacing. He burped a few times, then lifted his head and vomited.

"Ugh," the lizard said. "Don't try to talk. You'll be that way for a while. I'll come back when you're done." It crawled back under the rock. Song gasped for air in between retches, and kept on spewing.

Finally, the cramps lessened. He was at the point of retching blood by then.

"Lizard, you there?" he said.

The lizard crawled out. "I'm here."

"Why is this happening?"

"Because you're not ready for what needs to be done. So we're going to help you."

Song wiped drool off his chin. "Some help," he said. "You... whatever you are. What made you think that tricking me into the desert to eat poison was going to change my mind about becoming a Torturer?"

The lizard regarded him with reptilian stoicism. Then it crawled closer and began to talk.

It told him of the manifest destiny of the Minmatar. Of the horrendous price they had already paid, and of what might lie ahead depending on what choices they made. It spoke of those choices at length, their benefits and their terrible costs. It compared the cost of individual liberty, happiness and life – a cost that could include hard choices made in blood – with the dangers of losing them all.

Gradually, Song fell very silent.

Once the lizard had finished with him, Song sat mute in the shade under the tree, drawing lines in the sand and then rubbing them out. The lizard said something as it crawled back under its rock, but Song just shook his head and kept tracing the lines, rubbing them out, retracing them.

"Won't do you much good to leave your legacy in the sand, boy," a voice said.

Song looked up, cupping one hand above his eyes to shield against the sun. "... Dad?" he said.

"The same," the man answered and sat down beside Song.

"But you're dead!" Song said.

Song's father - whose name was Auber - looked at him. "Yeah, I am. That mean I can't spend a few moments with my favorite son?"

"Your only son," Song added with a tiny smile.

"Still my favorite. Now, I'd like to lecture you about having forgotten all your old lessons, in particular about not eating every goddamn thing you find. But we don't have the time. See those tiny clouds over there, by the horizon? The dark ones?"

"Yeah."

"Those aren't clouds. By the time they get here, you need to be ready. I ever tell you about the time I got caught by my master for stealing a loaf of bread?"

Song stared at him. "No. Far as I knew, your master was a kind man."

"A kind man. Yeah." Auber picked up a handful of rocks and began throwing them into the distance, one at a time. "That's exactly the kind of stuff you tell a small child whom you know to have big ears and a mouth that never stops."

"Not a kind man, then?" Song said.

His father made as if to speak, then stopped and stared at the ground in silence. After a few moments he dropped the rest of the rocks, rubbed his eyes and sighed. "No," he said. "Not kind at all. Nor were the other masters. I know you've heard some of the stories, because you wouldn't have become an apprentice to a bloody torturer otherwise, but the fact that you're here and that I'm talking to you means that you haven't yet heard them all. So listen." And his father told him of the old master, and the small

tools the master had kept locked in a cupboard in his study - tools taken out only when a slave had caused him trouble. He told Song of the other masters and the silent atrocities they'd committed, day after day, and of the countless small rebellions that had eventually bought Song and his mother freedom. He spoke at length about the nature of that freedom, and its continued price.

By the time he was done, Song had not cried, nor made a sound.

Auber got up. "Time I left now," he said. "No fancy goodbyes. We'll meet again, Song."

Song, staring at the ground and slowly grinding his teeth, heard his father take a few steps into the distance. When he finally looked up, Auber was gone.

He rubbed his eyes and looked at the horizon. The clouds had gotten nearer, except ... except his father was right, they weren't really clouds. It looked as if they were hugging the ground a little too closely for that. The longer he stared, the more he felt it resembled a herd of insects, trampling its way through the jungle with the day's bounty carried on their backs.

Day was giving way to afternoon, and he felt the weariness in his bones. His stomach was completely numb. He let his head fall back, against the stem of the tree, and slept.

He woke to the sound of footsteps. It was getting dark, and he had to rub his eyes and strain to see what was approaching. When he did, his breath caught in his throat.

He sat very still as the first one walked up to him. It was a man, or at least what was left of one. Several parts of the body had been cut, burned, or mutilated in some manner. One eyesocket was empty, both ears had been

torn off, and the upper lip had been neatly severed in half, but what was left of his face was a near-exact replica of Song's.

The man limped up to Song and dropped down on one knee. He bowed his head, and Song saw that his scalp was infected with dozens of seeping wounds.

"Father," the man said, then got up and walked past Song. The second man kept his head bowed the entire time as he, too, knelt and stumbled past, but Song caught a glimpse of his face; the resemblance was still striking, but a little more faint. More came, all scarred and broken, trudging by like the weight of the sky and the earth had been placed on their shoulders. Father and son, father and son, kneeling to him in unborn potential, and as Song gazed into the distance, he saw that their line lay unbroken to the ends of the earth, a trail of blood and pain, of stagnation and fear, of chains and suffered cruelty until the end of time.

Malachai was cleaning his tools when he heard footsteps. He turned, and saw not the boy he'd sent out, but a stranger. Someone who, by the looks at him, hadn't eaten for some time, but whose gaze was cold and unwavering nonetheless.

"I'm ready now," the stranger said. "I'm free."

Methods of Torture - The Gallente

It had been raining for a while. The weather in this hemisphere of the planet was usually pretty rough. It was now night-time, and most everyone had retired to their warm, safe beds. Outside, steam rose from grids in the gutters, and the rain pitter-patted on stone.

From somewhere came the round of rapid, splashing footsteps.

Sebastian ran and ran. His lungs burned, every drawn breath feeling like fire coursing down his throat. His head throbbed, his sight was going increasingly blurry and his legs felt numb from exhaustion and cold, and still he ran. He entered an alley and sprinted through, turned again, another alley, sprint and turn, taking a zigzag path without looking back.

At last he came to a stop, at the end of a cul-de-sac with a wooden fence. He leaned against the fence, hands above his head, gasping for air. The rain pounded him mercilessly.

There was no warning, no telltale sound of their arrival. He just felt a sting on his back, and a sudden onset of vertigo.

He sank to his knees, and the world turned dark.

The first thing he noticed was the smell. There was sweat, and filth, and a cloying sweetness. But there was also the faint sense of something

stronger, something that cut right through all the other scents. It reminded him of visits to the hospital; it was the smell of a dead cleanliness.

He was sitting in a chair. His hands were tied behind his back, his feet to the chair legs. His head felt clamped in place, and couldn't move. His vision was still blurry, and the light seemed dim, but he thought he heard the sound of someone else sitting in the room.

"Hello?" he ventured.

There was no reply.

"Look, if this is about that bag of Crash-"

"It isn't," a voice said. It was a man's voice, deep, with a rather drawn-out accent. The words came out as Eet Eesn't.

"He thinks it's the Craaash. He don't know what he's doing here," said another voice, higher-pitched.

"He'll find out," said a third. This one raised the hairs on the back of Sebastian's neck. It was a very calm voice.

He heard someone stand up. A gust of sweat wafted over him, and he tried not to be sick. A faint shape kneeled in front of him, and he heard two pistolcracks from the man's knees. A hand was laid on his shoulder.

"You've done a lot of things, my friend, my brilliant friend," said the voice that had spoken first. "A lot of things." He sighed. "There are people who really ... who're unhappy with you. You know? There are people you've really let down."

Sebastian's eyes were starting to focus. The man in front of him was short and stocky, with muscles that had started running to fat. His haircut, beard and clothes were all of trim cut, but dirty and grimy. His eyes looked tired.

There was a table in the room, with two men sitting by it. One looked like a live wire. He was skinny, and wore tattered shoes and pants, and an unbuttoned shirt revealing a rib cage that looked like a toaster rack. His short hair stood up on end. His eyes were wide and unblinking, and he was grinning so much that Sebastian could see the top of his gums.

The other man at the table was neat and prim. He sat perfectly straight in his chair, yet seemed quite relaxed and at ease. All his movements were gentle but precise. In his right hand he was rolling around some small, elongated metal object. Sebastian started thinking of him as the Calm man, in direct contrast to the other one, who just looked stone cold Crazy.

The third man, squatting in front of him, seemed the most human. Sebastian couldn't think of any C-word for him, so he just named him Carlos.

In his deep voice, Carlos said, "We are going to spend a while here." He rose to his feet. "And we're going to see if we can't figure out what to do with you. I want you to tell us how you can be of use, my friend. Let's see if your brilliance helps you answer." He walked over to the table, pulled up a chair and sat down.

Crazy got up, holding something. "It's gonna be so much fun now," he said. "Know what this is? It's usually called a nutcracker, but we won't get into that quite yet. I just call it the alligator. It hurts. Oh god, how it can hurt. Here, let me show you." He grabbed Seb's little finger and held it taut, putting the alligator around it. Seb tried vainly to pull it out. "I know, I know," Crazy said, grinning. "If it's any help, this won't hurt nearly as much as what we're going to do to you later on." He clamped down hard. There was a

loud crack from the alligator, and over the screams from Seb, Crazy yelled, "You know how many bones there are in just one hand? More than you can imagine! And we're going to find them all!"

After a few more bones had been broken, one of them having torn through the skin of Seb's finger and now sticking out like a splinter, Calm put a hand on Crazy's shoulder, indicating silence. Calm then leaned over Seb and said, "You know, this can all stop, right now. My friend mentioned it earlier on. What we're doing to you can take an end."

"How?!" Seb said, crying and retching. "I'll do anything! I'll steal for you, I'll kill for you, I'll do anything you ask! Please, tell me what to do and I'll do it."

Calm looked at him, disgusted. "I want to show you something," he said. "Can you focus? Can you see?"

Seb nodded.

"We'll see. Okay, let's bring it in." There was a rattling. Raising his heavy head, Seb saw Carlos wheel in a trolley loaded with items, but he couldn't yet make out what they were.

The trolley was rolled in front of him, and Calm picked up a thin metal rod from it. "This thing here is used for puncturing," Calm said. "I'll use it to point out the other things, because some of them I really shouldn't touch without gloves. Those jars on the lower shelf of the trolley hold various acids. The one with the greenish tint is for skin, and the yellow one is for open wounds. You cannot imagine how much they burn.

"Now, that solid-looking black box beside them, the one with the wires coming out, that's a small generator. The wires will go into various places.

And the large plastic box beside that, the semitransparent one, that's the one holding the syringes and the hypodermic needles. Most of them are used and pretty crusty, but we don't mind."

He pointed to the trolley's top shelf. "Basics here. You'll notice the various scalpels. This small one is my favorite, see here." The rod pointed at a tiny knife whose blade was practically nonexistent; it was more of a nib. "Sometimes, our visitors start closing their eyes, in some desperate attempt to ignore what we're doing to them. So, instead of prying them open, with clamps and rods and screws and that sort of stuff, we just remove the eyelids. Simple, effective, saves us a whole lot of trouble.

"Beside those scalpels there are the usual knives, of course, and various sharp objects. You'll notice a progression, from the sharp, scientific things here," he indicated one side of the trolley, then pointed the metal rod to the other side, "down through the lesser tools, ending in this sorry collection of blunt instruments here, though even they can be of use. Take these, for example."

He put down the rod and hefted two bulky-looking iron objects, one like the end of a spear, the other similar but with a large metal block affixed to one end. "This is called a hammer and a chisel. They're heavy, which is good, because they need to be applied with some force. The chisel is placed against your joint like so," he leaned over to Seb and pointed the chisel at the inside of his elbow, then gently put the hammer against the chisel's head with a faint tink, "and the hammer swings with full force like so, driving it into your joint. It's quite marvelous, really."

He put the items back on the trolley and picked up something else. "And these are called pliers. You'll note, though, that the clamping ends have been bent somewhat out of shape. This is on purpose. See the little spike at the end there? That's for your tongue.

"You can still stop it, though," he added. "We just need an answer to the question."

"What question?" said Seb, trying to stop crying. "Anything."

"How can we use you? That's all; that's the question. How can you be of use?"

"I ... " Seb began. The three stood before him, completely silent. "I don't know."

Calm sighed. "Then it's all over for you, I fear. Shall we begin proper?"

He went to the table and got the small metal object he'd been rolling around earlier, then walked back to Sebastian, casually letting the item dangle from his hand. With a rising horror Sebastian realized that it was a long iron nail, with dark flecks on its point. "What do you want?" Sebastian said. "Please, just say what you want. I'll tell you anything, I'll get it for you if there's something you want."

"My friends and I already asked you," Calm said, "and you didn't even deign to respond. If we can't find a use for you, we can't do much.

"As for me, now ... this," he said, rolling the nail back and forth in his hand, "this here is just to start you off. There'll be a lot more before we're through, and you'll probably find that you won't have a single part of your body left unviolated. But this rusty, dull, long nail," he raised it up to Sebastian's face, "this is going into your eye." And the last thing Sebastian's right eye saw, while he screamed and screamed, was the nail slowly being pushed further in.

They'd left it in there, sticking out like a peg. The jelly had oozed out around it, so Calm had dabbed it up with a handkerchief. "Don't want the nail to start slipping out, do we now?" he'd said. "Incidentally, this is why we decided to clamp your head. Personally, I like people to be able to swing their head around, show a little life, but you might manage to ... haha ... hit the nail hard enough on the head to drive it into your brain. And we really can't have that."

"Aaaaaagh! It huuuuuurrrts! Get them off me! Get them off, get them off, get them off!"

"What can you do?" they yelled.

"I don't know what to do!"

"Not good enough," they roared, and kept going.

"Please, not the other hand too. I beg you, oh gods, please-"

"What is your use? What is your use, my brilliant friend?"

"It's - it's - it's - I don't know. I don't know! Whatever you want it to be! What do you want it to be?"

"That's not the answer. We'll start off with one finger-"

"Oh god, no! Please!"

"I think he's fallen unconscious."

"Not hardly. Look, he's still muttering something. Hand me the wires again, please. Thank you. Put it on three, no, let's give it a four. On my mark ... now!"

"AAAAAAGH!"

"There we go."

"Kill me, kill me, kill me, please, kill me-"

"Why? We're not half done yet."

"Kill me, kill me, kaaAAA-"

"See?"

"More acid, yes?"

Seb was not forming any intelligible words at this point, only sounds and burbled whimperings.

"More acid indeed."

When they were all done, and Carlos had started putting away his tools - not cleaning them, just putting them away, and the syringes and hypodermic needles went into the same box they came out of - what was left of Sebastian raised his head for the last time. His one good eye was having trouble focusing again, everything fading in and out of his vision. He'd see Carlos clearly, then just as a big pink blur, then clearly again.

"Why?" he said.

"What's that?" said Carlos, not looking, just putting away things.

It took Sebastian a full minute to form the words. "Why? What did you want?" he said at last. There were no tears, there was no grief. Nothing was left. "What did you want?"

Carlos put away the remains of his items in silence. Then he walked over to Sebastian and crouched in front of him. "You really don't know?" he said.

"No."

"Tomorrow, someone is going to find your corpse. In that alleyway where we caught you, looking all pretty like you do now. And word's going to spread. And we'll have a lot less trouble with the other thieves and druggies in the area. We'll be able to do our business without the annoyance of people like you."

"And the questions?" Sebastian said.

"Had no right answers," Carlos replied. "Here," he held up a syringe, "one last shot. This'll be quiet and calm." He leaned in and injected Sebastian with the contents. "Your vision will go, then your consciousness. I'll be back in a while to get your body."

"Thank you," Sebastian said.

"Don't mention it."

"Thank you," Sebastian said. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." Then he fell silent.

Carlos waited a few moments, then checked Sebastian's pulse. "Return to brilliancy," he said, put away the final syringe, and left the room.

Methods of Torture - The Caldari

He lies in the middle of a golden field. The sun, not yet high, gently warms him. The field has grown and not been harvested, so from where he's lying it looks like the long stalks of wheat are reaching for the skies.

He lifts one hand and reaches, too. Then he lowers it. All the while, he keeps his vision focused on the sky, on the distance.

Not once did he cry out in pain. All that was done, really, took place while he was asleep, or just somewhere else. And there was no speaking to others; it is Not Done to share these things.

Sometimes he fingers the scar behind his ear, where they went in.

It is a fact of nature that the things that grab our attention, the ones to which we react the strongest, are the things that shock us. Something comes at you slowly and deliberately, and you have time to think. Something jumps at you, and you don't. You can't put any of your filters in place; you just react instinctively. If the threat disappears as quickly as it appeared, though, all that instant mania was for nothing.

It is also a fact that high level organisms, having developed the capacity for abstract thought and imagination, can be made to feel threatened in a far greater variety of ways than the simple things that merely crawl around in the grass.

It is a symptom of madness that thoughts become uncontrollably disjointed. This can be encouraged.

He can't quite remember how he got here. There was ... a long walk, he's sure, but he remembers it as rather comfortable and not really the sort of thing you'd associate with extended rambling through the grass and the fields. Perhaps he merely dreamt it and is now waiting to wake up.

A long wheat stalk, too heavy in the head to rise alone and so relying on the support of its brethren, has bent down into the void created by his body. He strokes it, then grasps it tightly between thumb and forefinger and breaks it, sticking it into his mouth and chewing languidly. There's no hurry. There was never any hurry.

Months ago, he stole some things. It was an impulse decision, quite unlike him, and didn't seem like much at the time. Just some documents he found while working late one night, documents he grabbed and stuffed in his jacket. What he was going to do with them, he can't remember. Probably nothing; stolen on a vague notion, the idea of gain, rather than for any concrete use. His ideas veered from blackmail to selling to simply putting the documents back.

When they came for him, he was still trying to decide. That's what hurt all the way through: He hadn't even done anything yet! He had taken the documents and he was sorry, but he wasn't a bad man. He wasn't a traitor.

They didn't believe him.

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There were needles and sharp, glinting things, but there was very little actual pain. Everyone wore white and had theatre masks that showed expressionless ivory faces. He was made to sleep, often. They asked him the same questions again and again.

It was a short while later that the visions started. He would be lying there, strapped in, while a doctor - he preferred to think of them as "doctors" - slowly turned a dial back and forth. The dial had no numbers, only a line of varying width that snaked around its circumference. The doctor would stand beside the dial, so he could see how it was being turned.

They asked him the same questions again and again. When his answers displeased them, the dial would be turned.

At a low level nothing much happens. He will sometimes speak to a doctor whose mask is not, in fact, a mask, but his real face. The ivory lips move, and the ivory voice speaks directly into his head. That doctor only appears when the dial is turned.

At a medium level he sees little things with many legs, crawling towards him.

At a high level there are no shapes, no distinct colors nor forms. He loses the ability to discern any concrete entities. His mind becomes a kaleidoscope turning at uncontrollable speeds.

They'd ask him questions again and again, until he was sure he'd gone utterly mad.

A butterfly lands on a nearby stalk. He wonders why it drifted in. There are no flowers here.

The butterfly is quick, but his hand is quicker. He crushes it, lets it fall to the ground beside him. He smiles. He envies it, and wipes his hand on his face, imagining that its blood is his and that he's dying too.

A group of people came to see him once. They all had the same masks as the doctors, but their builds showed that they were younger than the regular staff. A doctor put his hand on the dial, which was turned off, but did nothing with it. The doctor then turned to the group and this is what he said:

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Then the doctor started turning the dial.

After some time they set him free. Free to wander around, dazed. No one knew what he had done, but at the same time everyone knew that it had been dishonorable. He couldn't get a new job, of course. Not even the lowliest street sweepers would talk to a dishonored man. His family

deserted him. His friends never answered. Even complete strangers, passing him in the street, gave him looks, as if they could smell his rank.

His savings had been left intact, but he never had to dip into them, because he'd been given a monthly pension. That, somehow, made it even worse.

In some of his more lucid moments, he reflected that what was being done to him wasn't because he had committed a serious crime, not really. It was because he had committed one that was not serious, that had not been the result of a planned, thought-out criminal action, that had just tempted an everyday corporate man. And they couldn't have that. So he was being made an example of.

They had put something behind his eyes. That was the only way to explain it. It was like the advertisement techniques he'd heard of, where an image was flashed so quickly that you didn't consciously register it. Quafe was rumored to have used this as part of their early aggressive marketing campaigns.

It was quite simple, really, the way it worked. Sometimes when he blinked, an image was put on his optic nerve. Not every time, and sometimes not for hours, and even when it had started it was irregular. There was really no way for him to know when it would happen.

The image was of a crime scene. Or an accident, though he couldn't imagine what kind of mishap could cause this kind of mutilation. He never got to see it clearly, because the image wasn't projected if he kept his eyes closed. He suspected that some mechanism inside him detected when it was a real blink and sent the image at just the right time.

There really was a lot of blood. And other things.

The first time it happened, he dropped the bag of takeaway food he was holding. He blinked a few times, shook his head, then bent to pick up the bag. It happened again just as he'd grabbed hold, and he fell to his knees in shock and fright.

It caught him off guard every time. Every single time.

The scene was usually the same, though the particulars changed. Sometimes he was sure there was something in the middle of the carnage, something with a large, dark mouth and several rows of teeth. Other times there were light, nearly white patches on the fringes, and he wondered whether he might be looking at an image of the doctors and some very unfortunate patient.

One day, inside a grocery store, he came upon a man he'd once known. A respected man, known for some peculiarities but well-liked all the same. The man ignored him, of course. He would have passed on, lost in his own thoughts, if he hadn't caught the sporadic trembling in the man's hands. He stopped, pretended to busy himself with some discounted wares, and shot glimpses at his old friend. He noticed that occasionally, when the man blinked, it was as if a slight tremor passed through his body.

He stood there in wonder, trying to decide whether he had really seen this and how he could possibly know for certain - since people wouldn't even speak to him - until he realized that maybe this once he could use his ostracization to his advantage. He walked up to his friend, said, "Excuse me, won't be a minute," and, with two fingers, quickly parted the hair just behind his ear.

There was a scar.

The man froze, and stared straight ahead, as if he'd heard the sounds of a monster behind him and was determined not to look back and see.

That night he'd cried even more than usual. Not only for the fate of his friend, but for his own inadequacy and shame in not having overcome the same handicap.

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Dementia is another symptom. When the ability for coherent reason has failed this grossly, the reality one has created through one's senses and mind may become detached from objective view.

He lifts one hand and reaches. Then he lowers it. All the while, he keeps his vision focused on the sky, on the distance.

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The Speakers of Truth

The Amarrian order that calls itself the Speakers of Truth harks back to the Time of Contemplation.

It was a quiet period in Amarrian history. The Holders had gained power but had yet to start their expansionist Reclaiming in earnest; instead, they were focused on solidifying their powerbase. The appearance of the first Emperors was a big help in that respect, since it gave the Holders the opportunity to rule the masses by proxy and not have to risk their own necks in the process.

However, the Holders decided that a trap door was needed, an emergency option for them to wield executive power should the Emperor grow too powerful too quickly. To maintain the appearance of neutrality, they set up this power through a separate institution known as the Speakers of Truth. This institution was a religious order staffed with hand-picked theologians that were known not only to be favourable to the people's cause rather than to the Emperor and the royal family, but also to be thoughtful, kind, intelligent individuals who had more interest in improving the lives of their fellow men rather than engage in the dirty games of politics. In short, the kind of people who wouldn't be any trouble.

The order wasn't publicized in any manner, and was buried beneath rules, regulations and religious red tape so as to hide its true nature from the Emperor and his cohorts. Its only distinguishable purpose was to act as intermediaries in religious disputes should the need arise - in which capacity their word would be equal to that of even the Emperor himself - and to recoup its operational costs by operating as an educational establishment for selected Holder students. The latter aspect was intended so that the Speakers of Truth would not appear to be overtly political, and

thus would not attract undue attention. The Holders then intended for the Speakers of Truth to be brought out in circumstances where they needed to counteract or even veto a decision made by the ruling Emperor. As it turns out, these circumstances never arose, and the order was eventually forgotten by most of the ruling body.

The order took on its own quiet life, and ticked along in peace. They were situated in a remote location, the better to avoid getting involved in politics, and for the most part could operate without interference. Aside from their hidden purpose of judgment, the Speakers of Truth offered the usual aspects of religious life: They studied natural science, led a self-sustaining life, and even offered temporary sanctuary to refugees and those in need.

In fact, the order's controlling body quickly realized that the best way to ensure the order's survival would not be to try and eliminate the political trap doors the Holders had built for it - the moment they'd start making waves, the order would immediately be dissolved - but to use their talents to insert itself in Holder society, digging in to such an extent that it would be unthinkable to remove them. Therefore, the Speakers of Truth concentrated on building a reputation as an outstanding educational establishment, offering both a private curriculum for select children of Holders and a free education program for those children of Commoners who showed promise. The Holder program gained them obvious popularity with the ruling classes, and eventually led to strong backing by those who had graduated from the Speakers' schools and risen to high public office. The Commoner program, meanwhile, had a strong focus on religious studies, making it all the more popular among the lower orders within the Holders, who embraced any societal function that served to keep the Commoners obeyant and faithful.

The tactic worked. By the time of the Moral Reform, the order was regarded as a minor building block in Amarrian high society: a respected and respectable institution that exuded a mix of piety and academia. In addition, they were seen as strictly apolitical, to the point where they were sometimes even asked to perform their original arbitrating duty, albeit in a far lesser capacity than intended. Ordained members of the Speakers of Truth have divine permission to act as arbitrators in disputes both religious and secular. While they have free rein to dispense whatever judgment they see fit, the bulk of laws which surround their order sometimes makes this a little difficult. As a result, their authority tends to be accepted by the involved parties as an item of faith rather than on a strictly legal basis. The order was subsumed into the Theology Council during the latter's rise to position as main authority on religious trials and punishment, but due to the Speakers' educational focus, they've managed to continue operating as a separate unit, and the Theology Council rarely calls upon them to perform duties of the court.

Of course, given that the Speakers of Truth are sometimes asked to rule in matters involving high-ranking Holders, their power does rankle some of the Amarr elite. The Privy council, composed of the five royal Heirs, has always treated the Speakers of Truth as a minor thorn in both their sides, but have never found enough reason to act against the order. There exists a sort of unspoken agreement where the Speakers don't interfere with matters that might have a political bent, and in turn are allowed to keep their arbitrator powers unchallenged. Of course, there may crop up exceptional cases in which the Theology and Privy councils will actually endorse the Speakers' involvement in a political matter. One suspects that those cases will not bode well for the defendant. Not well at all.

Godflesh

Bethora looked out the station window, waiting for the race to begin. The windows here in the royal quarters were quite expansive, far more so than in most other sections of the station, and gave a good view of both the planet below and of the stars in the distance. The glass in the windows was warm, too, which was rare on space stations. Microscopic filaments embedded in the glass generated a constant supply of heat, and the material in the windows was specially mixed to conduct it well. The heat loss through this process was horrendous, and so it was only offered to the richest of clients.

The comfort wasn't solely for the benefit of visiting royalty. As part of the Ardishapur family, Bethora frequently had to play host to a number of tradesmen, merchants and religious officials, most of whom regularly visited the space station but wouldn't go to the planet's surface. Travels between planet and station were expensive if you wanted any degree of comfort, and while the royal court could get the most comfortable seats free of charge, anyone else would either have to pay, or accept being stowed away like so much cargo and livestock.

So Bethora went up to the sky on a regular basis. She enjoyed it. Things were simpler here, she found, and offered opportunity for reflection and quiet. This time around, the retinue even included her son, who was about to compete in the space races.

She turned from the window and looked to the royal banners hanging from the walls, decorated with the Amarrian crest and the various sigils of her family. The banners swayed a little, gently wafted by air conditioners discreetly planted in the walls behind them. Beneath the banners stood the royal furniture, old and splendid: chairs of thick, dark oak, covered in

embroidered pillows; various old paper books on shelves, chronicling the family history; gold and silver cutlery and dishware.

The last was being polished by Javies, Bethora's manservant, who mumbled genteel obscenities about the state of the place and the competence of the staff. Javies was part of Bethora's retinue, and went with her on all official trips. They routinely visited the space station, and every time, he expressed his astonishment at the lackadaisical attitude the staff onboard seemed to have towards basic cleanliness. The silverware, he maintained, looked like it had been stored in a coalmine, and the less said about the dust on the tables, the better.

Bethora, who was in most other respects a strict and proper person, didn't begrudge Javies his little complaints. The man had been in service to her family for a long time, and had assisted willingly in various tasks that younger men would have begged leave from. He knew when it was all right to talk, and when one should remain silent.

Bethora looked back out the window, staring at the planet. She heard Javies's footsteps approach.

"Brings us closer to the Lord, milady?" he asked.

"Brings me further from the earth, Javies."

"As milady says."

"I do wish they'd get this thing over and done with."

Javies handed her a thin porcelain cup, and poured tea into it. "Milady has never been much in favour of the races, as I recall. Incidentally, I took the liberty of cleaning the tea kettle. Three times, in fact. I believe it had gathered enough carbon to form the basis of intelligent life."

She glanced at him and smiled briefly. "Thank you, Javies. It's always good to have a diversion."

"Indeed, milady." Javies retreated to the dinner table, where he began to polish the gold decoration on the glass cups.

"I just don't like Keral taking time away from his studies," Bethora said. "He needs to work hard."

"The children of men can never rest, it seems, milady," Javies said, alluding gently to the status of Keral's father. The man had been a notoriously hard worker, right until his untimely death. Afterwards, Bethora had grown increasingly dissatisfied with Keral's progress, constantly egging and pushing him to greater heights.

"It's for his own good," Bethora said. "Life isn't easy."

Javies, who had been a manservant for a long time and knew a few things about the difference between royal and civilian life, said nothing.

"Besides, if his father were here, he'd push the boy far harder."

"I'm sure he would, milady."

There was a knock. Javies walked over to the door and greeted the guest, saying to Bethora, "Lady Raana here to see you, milady."

The woman walked in. She wore a dress of shimmering greens, and a golden necklace, both of which glimmered in the lights of the quarter. She walked speedily over to Bethora, gave her a nervous smile and said, "Bater sends his regards."

Bethora nodded. Bater was Raana's husband, a man with sad eyes and clammy hands. Bethora had let him on top of her once, in a weak moment, and had told him afterwards that if anyone ever found out, she would have him castrated.

"Have you heard from Keral?" Raana added.

"Only that he was getting ready, and expected to win. How about Selan?" Selan was Raana's son, and would be aboard the same ship as Keral in the race, acting as Keral's second-in-command.

"The same. I do wish those boys weren't so eager. Competitiveness is all well and good, but one day they're going to take it too far."

"Rather that than not far enough," Bethora said.

"Oh, don't say that. I'm worried enough as it is without having them be jinxed."

Javies interrupted. "I'm sorry, but could I offer miladies some tea?"

"No, thank you, dear," Raana responded. "I only popped round to wish everyone good luck."

"And the same to you," Bethora said. She put her arm around Raana's shoulders. "They're going to be fine. Stop worrying. I didn't raise Keral to let me down."

Raana looked at her. "I know you didn't, darling," she said. "I know you didn't. At any rate, I'll be off. The race should be starting soon, anyway." And with that, she took her leave.

Several ships undocked. Each was a different model, but shared the Amarrian characteristics: The lambent gleam on golden hulls, the hawk-like curves, the quiet, majestic grandeur. They lined up in a predetermined pocket of space and signed their readiness in the local communications channel. A few moments later, the judges gave the starting call. The race was on.

The rules were fairly simple. Each contestant had to destroy a series of beacons. Each beacon, when destroyed, would drop a marker that needed to be returned to station. Points of varying measure were scored by destroying your beacon, returning your markers, destroying other people's beacons, destroying or returning their markers, and performing any particular manoeuvres considered elegant, flashy or dangerous enough. All beacons were fairly closely spaced, so there was always a risk that your opponent might shoot down yours instead of going for his own. As a result, ships needed to be fitted not only with sufficient firepower to destroy the beacons, but also electronic warfare capabilities to disrupt the targeting capabilities of other players. Not only that, but since each marker was fairly sizeable, you'd need to fit cargohold expanders on your ship if you wanted to haul more than a couple back to station at any one time; and expanders would slow your ship down noticeably. Ship setups were kept strictly secret, shown only to professional inspectors.

Keral was already in the lead. He'd spent months practicing with Selan at his side, and the two commanded their ship with admirable precision. Since the purpose of competition was to test the young men's mastery of command, the ships were staffed only by regular crews, not by capsuleer pilots.

Eventually, it came down to a single beacon. Keral and Selan's ship, the Apollyon, was just barely ahead, racing toe to toe with another ship. The Apollyon started going faster, and faster, and faster still, firing on the

beacon and hitting with incredible accuracy at that range. It managed to destroy the beacon, but for some reason its guns kept firing, into empty space, and a commentator noted that if they kept that up something was sure to burn out. The Apollyon rushed onward to pick up the marker, but when it got in range, it didn't slow; instead, it kept going, overshooting its prize. It tried to turn, but inertia had it in an inexorable grip, and as the spectators watched in shock, it crashed into a nearby asteroid.

They were at the station's medical quarters. Bethora sat by her son's side, in silence. He was being kept unconscious. His friend Selan had died earlier the same night.

The head doctor approached her. "The scan results are in, milady. I'm very sorry to tell you this, but with the internal injuries your son has sustained, it's almost certain that he won't last the night."

She glared at him.

He continued. "We'll do everything we can to make your stay here as comfortable as possible--"

"There is something else you can do," she said. "You can help my son."

"I'm sorry," the doctor said, "I truly am. I can understand your reaction, but short of giving him a new body, we're helpless. I strongly suggest you focus instead on the little time you have left with your son."

Without breaking her gaze, Bethora got up and stood very close to the doctor. "You are not listening to me," she said in a quiet tone. "Or yourself. There is something you can do. A new body."

The doctor stared at her. Then he bubbled, "That's, no, that's unheard of. Amarr royal skin is absolutely sacred."

"Is yours?" Bethora said.

The doctor fell silent.

"If my son dies tonight," she said, "he will not be the only one. Nor will I stop there. Is that clear?"

The doctor swallowed, and nodded.

"I know there are several facilities in the area with clones on standby. My manservant will assist you in making the necessary arrangements, including all steps needed for secrecy. My son will awake tomorrow, and make a miraculous recovery."

Bethora looked through the shatterproof window set in the door. It was a week after the accident.

On the other side, Keral paced, tossing things back and forth, screaming nonsensical dialogue from movies he'd once seen, stopping every now and then to turn the lights in the room off and back on. He had indeed made a miraculous recovery, but not a complete one. Brain damage, irreparable, had ensued.

Her advisors had informed Bethora she would have to keep her son out of sight for a while. Later, they would let rumours slip out that the crash, combined with Bethora's harsh, cold treatment of her son throughout his childhood, had resulted in such psychological trauma that Keral might never recover. No one could ever find out that the cloning of sacred

Amarrian skin had taken place, nor that, with security procedures circumvented, it had gone so disastrously wrong.

Bethora placed her fingers against the glass. Her son, lost in whirlwinds, didn't even notice.

"You," someone said.

Bethora turned. In front of her stood Raana, accompanied by two armed guards.

"What's this?" Bethora said.

"Why did the ship go faster than its fittings should've allowed?" Raana said in a dead tone. "Why did its guns keep on firing at nothing? Why didn't its shields buffer it from the asteroid? Why did my son die?"

Bethora rubbed her eyes. "I don't know. Why don't you go ahead and tell me, Raana?"

"I had the wreckage investigated," Raana said. "Turns out it contained ship rig prototypes. Since rigs are so new on the market, they haven't yet been allowed in competition, but your son didn't care about that, did he?"

"What are you saying?" Bethora said.

"The first prototypes for these things wouldn't have shown up on the ship fitting screens, and so the inspector would never know. But they were completely unstable and were never released to the public. The only people who could've gotten their hands on those infernal machines were those with special access. People like us.

"Your boy had this planned for ages. He cheated, and it killed my son, and it was all because of you."

"Me?!"

"Who pushed him into this? Who never let up? Who made him feel he was never good enough for anything?" Raana said. "I don't know if you actively encouraged him to cheat, but it really doesn't matter. You're responsible for all of this, Bethora, and I intend to see you pay."

She raised a hand, and the guards stepped forward.

Bethora steeled herself. "You don't know what you're doing," she said.

Raana's eyes went wide and her face turned pale with rage. "And you do?" she said. She stalked over to Bethora and jabbed a finger at the window on the door beside them. "Look! Look at what you've done! You wouldn't even let that poor boy rest in death."

"What do you mean?" Bethora managed to say.

"You know exactly what I mean. It doesn't take a genius to figure out," Raana said, then shook her head. "My god, you're pathetic."

Bethora opened her mouth to say something, thought the better of it, and walked past Raana, the guards following her with hands on their weapons.

On the other side of the door, the boy turned the lights on and off, on and off, on and off, on and off, on and off, on and off.

Soft Passage

It was a chilly day on the station, late in the evening. Fall was closing in, and while the station's atmospheric generators compensated for it to some small degree, the air was still kept cold and crisp. Wind machines kept currents running and made for buttoned-up coats, scarves and hats. People needed seasons, to mark the passage of time.

The young couple, Satyan and Treta, were walking hand in hand down the station's busiest shopping street, window-shopping for daydreams. Both of them had good jobs, he in health-goods marketing, spearheading the new transparent ad campaigns after the recent viral marketing fiasco, and she in accounting, where she specialized in passenger monitoring and toll calculations. Their wedding was still a few weeks away.

They stopped in front of a travel agency and looked at the ads, which were scrolling through on large flat screens set in the windows. Motion sensors registered their presence, and the scrollthrough automatically slowed. On one side of the screen was a narrow band that showed a spectrum of color from dark blue to dark red; the color represented the kind of excitement and adventure you wanted from your trip. Satyan waved a hand at the spectrum's red end, but Treta immediately waved hers a little further down.

"Killjoy," Satyan said.

"Nutcase," Treta replied, and kissed him.

The screen began flipping through images of various trips, on both space stations and planets. "The planetside ones are so expensive," Satyan said.

"And overblown, too," Treta said. "Look at this one. A safari on Luminaire?"

Satyan glanced at it and smiled. "Actually, I went on those quite a bit when I was younger. Which planet is it?" He noticed Treta's expression. "Uh, I mean, who wants to spend their honeymoon surrounded by wild animals?"

Treta coughed.

"Apart from each other, I mean," Satyan said.

Treta grinned.

Satyan continued, "There's another one. It's ..." He peered at it. "Seriously? Stay in an old Amarrian palace for a week?"

"My kind of life. Can we even afford this, though?" Treta said.

"If we could, I wouldn't go anyway."

"So no partying and no frippery. Halfway between."

"Perfect," Satyan said and kissed her.

"I wonder what things will be like after that."

"Same as before," Satyan said. "Only better."

She smiled, then looked at a nearby store window and pointed. "Oh, look! They've got food mixers. This would be perfect for you when you're starting your day."

Satyan grunted something in reply.

"Oh, come on," she said, dragging him over to the window. "You've got no morning appetite and can't drink milk, and you know the doc said you have to eat breakfast. It's either this or gruel."

"Sweetie," Satyan said, "these things are so loud they could wake the dead."

"That's nice, dear. Look, they sell all sorts of different things! Alarm chronometers, more mixers, equilateral bread slicers, EMP cookers, washing microbots, oh, self-cleaning coffee brewers, ion stoves, holoviewers, stasis-cooled cheese plates, electric pillows... and look, they even expect wooden furniture."

"That's hideously expensive."

"It's antique style, too," Treta said.

"So will we be if we buy it. The debts'll age me prematurely."

"Now now," she said. "The-... what's that?"

Something small and mechanical buzzed passed them, followed by a little human tornado that bumped into Treta on its way past. Satyan reached down and grabbed hold of the kid's shirt. "Hey, hey, hey! Where you running to, little man?"

The kid gave him a startled look, then smiled from ear to ear. "That's my drone," he said and pointed at the mechanical thing. It was indeed a small toy drone, and was currently encircling a trashcan nearby.

"What's your name?" Satyan said.

"Dappy."

"Well, Dappy, you should know it's not polite to run into people. What do we say if we do that?"

"Sorry," Dappy said and grinned.

"Not to me, silly," Satyan said, but couldn't help grinning back. "The lady here."

Dappy turned to her and said, "Sorry, lady," still grinning.

Treta nodded at him, then looked at Satyan and silently mouthed Lady?

"Can you help me?" the kid said and pointed towards the drone, which was still flying around the trashcan. "I set it too fast."

Treta, aching a little from where the kid had bumped into her, whispered to Satyan, "I never even saw him coming."

Satyan whispered back, "Well, he's here now, I suppose," and set about trying to catch the boy's toy drone. The machine eluded his first couple of tries, but he eventually got a hold of it, tuned its speed down and handed it back to the kid, saying, "Here. And don't run so much. Relax. Enjoy life."

"Thanks," the kid said, and immediately ran off.

Satyan shook his head. From here he stood he happened to glance at a nearby window, one that Treta couldn't see yet, and noticed a store that was selling cell phones. Each 'cell' was in fact a station, and phone prices were effectively determined by whether your phone would work only within the solar system, or could be used to contact people in other systems as well. Intra-system talk would have crisp, clear communication, but as soon as you left the solar system, all talk got laggy, distorted and muddled, not to

mention far more expensive. Once you were out of the region, that was it; silence fell. Only the capsuleers had access to better technology.

"Might need something like that," Satyan said.

Treta walked over to him, looked in the window, then shook her head. "My turn now. It's too expensive."

"Come on. What if I get posted off-station?"

"Then you can send me recordings. Or use the combooths like everyone else."

"Still-"

Treta turned on him. "It's too damn expensive, Satyan. If we don't have enough money for the furniture and things, we don't have it for this, either."

"Hey, come on."

"No, you come on. I'm tired of you scuttling anything that I want to get, then not applying the same standards to yourself." She threw up her arms. "But hey, what do I know? Maybe it'd be good to have a cell, so's I can keep an eye on you when you're away."

"Oh, right," Satyan said. "Because I can't be trusted. I'd jump into bed with the next woman I saw."

"Well, what do I know? For all I know you could be doing it with Sari right now."

"Hah," Satyan said. "Not in a million years."

"Hey! That's my best friend you're talking about."

Satyan put his arms around Treta and kissed her on the forehead. "I'm sorry, baby. I would definitely sleep with Sari if you weren't around. Feel better now?"

She plonked him on the nose, then kissed it. "Silly man." Then she broke free of his grip and walked on, oblivious of the future.

Satyan remained, staring at the cell phones in the windows, not seeing them. Then he followed, grasped for Treta's hand and took firm hold of it, and they continued on.

This time it was Treta's attention that was caught by something, across the street. She crossed it, and Satyan followed.

"Look," she said, pointing to a window. It was a baby clothing store. Satyan's eyes widened and he took an exaggerated step backwards, his hands in front of him like he were being held up at gunpoint.

Treta laughed. "Get over here," she said, and looked in the window. The display included everything from jumpsuits to shoes. The latter were at a discount, a sign said, because of a manufacturing error.

Satyan, who felt uncomfortable even looking at the things, decided to at least take part in the conversation. "Well, they're cheap."

"Mmm. I don't like them too much," Treta said. "They might fall apart at least notice." She looked closer. "It almost looks like they've been worn before."

"Sweetie, they're baby shoes, for sale," Satyan said, "and were probably never worn."

She shivered, and moved on.

As Satyan followed, he noticed that the air had in fact gotten even colder. It would probably be time to head home soon. He found a street vendor nearby, selling food and hot drinks, and led Treta there. The greasy smell of fried fat didn't much raise their appetites, so they bought hot drinks instead; Satyan a warm soup, Treta a frothy brew. For no real reason, Satyan reached out with his free hand and put it around Treta's waist, hugging her tight. Treta returned the gesture. Behind them, the baby shoes stood still on the shelves, unmoved.

After they were done, they tossed the plastic cups into the recycle bin next to the vendor's cart, and walked on. The next store was an insurance booth, and Satyan made a crack about having one right next to a fast food vendor.

Treta thought it over while looking at the premiums they offered, then said, "Well ... I'm not sure I want to say that something like this is too expensive. But still..."

"Yeah," Satyan said. "I know what you mean." And they put it out of their minds, like a blackened match tossed into a dark corner.

After they'd walked apace, Satyan added, "Actually, the furniture might not be a bad idea."

Treta stared at him. "Are you serious?"

"And some curtains." He saw her look. "Well, why not? If we plan to make a home, why not make a home? I don't mind the idea of coming back home

to a warm place, familiar smells, lights on and a fireplace on the screen. And you."

She grasped his hand a little harder.

"The world doesn't always have to spin around," he said.

"No, it doesn't. Nor we with it," she said.

They came to a park, and saw the wind blow through the trees. The leaves were falling off in droves, leaving the branches bare and alone. The trees stood there like sentinels; from the viewpoint of the leaves, and the seeds nesting in the ground, they'd undoubtedly always been there, and would always be.

They walked on until they came to another travel agency, and on unspoken agreement they both slowed the walk. Satyan idly waved his hand in front of the sensors, close to the low, blue end. Now, with the nippy winds of fall blowing down every crack and crevice, and the trees shorn of their leaves and seeds, a sedate, relaxed vacation on some warm planet didn't seem half so bad.

They looked at each other, turned and went into the park. Night was falling, and it was time to head home. Hand in hand, they walked down the final trails together. The leaves obscured their path until at last they were gone.

Invisible Waves

The waiting lounge was cold. There was little ornamentation here, and the only concessions to comfort were plastic seats on metal bars that were bolted to the floor. A massive window made of transparent alloy showed the traffic out in space, convoys approaching and leaving.

Tim sat on one of the plastic seats and fidgeted with the hem of his robe. He felt tired and worn, a long way from home, and unsure of where home was at all. Every now and then he would get up and pace around the place, staring out the window at the nothingness beyond, or look down the corridors to the people passing by in distant lives and alternate timelines. Everything passed slowly here, in the waiting lounge.

There were no holoreels or any other entertainment playing. This was a place of empty waiting, not of recreation. Other lounges had more ornate decoration, but they cost more and, to Tim, were pointless. As barren as this place was, for the kind of trip he was on - heading back broke from unsuccessful seminars, and nursing a broken heart - it was the only valid option for him.

A sound, a small growl, startled him. He looked to the source and saw that an old man had taken a seat at the edge of the row. The man held a hand in front of his mouth and cleared his throat again, a deep, phlegmic rattle. He didn't appear to have noticed Tim, and sat quite still in his seat, staring out through the window.

Tim, a little unnerved at not even having heard the man sit down, wondered whether to approach him, then decided against it. He turned away and began pacing about again, when he heard the man say, "You going to mope around like that all day?"

"What?" Tim said.

The man, without turning his head, said, "I don't even have to look at you to know you're wearing a hole in the floor. Sit down before you lose your legs."

Tim walked over to him, not sure whether to answer with indignity or politeness, when he noticed that the left side of the man's face was overtaken by an implant.

The man followed his gaze and said, "Ah, hell. Don't you look at this as a handicap. My vision is fine."

"What happened?" Tim asked.

"Life happened, son. It gets you that way. Sit down."

Tim sat.

"Thanks. Not that I'm your boss, but I don't much care for looking at the stars while someone paces about behind me like a wild animal on the prowl."

"Sure," Tim said, still trying not to stare.

"Braten," the man said.

"Sorry?"

"Braten. Braten Fahr. It's a traditional thing, where I give my name, and you give yours in return."

"Oh. Yes, of course. Tim. Shema."

"Pleased to meet ya, Tim," Brater said and extended a hand, which Tim shook.

"Likewise," Tim said. Now that he'd had a moment to get accustomed to the situation, he felt a lot more comfortable. This was just some old man, waiting for his ride on one of the cheap flights. Nobody here but him and Tim, and somehow that made the solitude even more apparent. He probably wouldn't have spoken to this man under normal circumstances, but in this time and place, his gruffness seemed quite appropriate and not at all confrontational.

They sat in silence, looking out at the stars.

Eventually Brater said, "I'm an old man. Don't have long to live now. So I can wait around spaceport lounges if I damn well please. What's your excuse?"

Tim thought about this, then said, "There was this girl..." He let the sentence hang in the air like a war-torn flag.

Brater's expression softened somewhat. "Everything starts that way, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. I suppose it does," Tim said. There was another a pause while they watched a spacecraft fly by, headed for the docking ports.

Tim added, "I've been on the run for a while now, though I really don't know what from. Just general running, I suppose. And recently, I met this very nice woman called Liandra." He sat back in his chair, sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "First time we spoke I got a few words in before a

friend of hers came over, another woman, and threatened to have me murdered. Turns out they were both kill agents."

Brater laughed, a deep, quiet rumble. "That's sticking your head in the fire."

"Yeah," Tim said. "I went my own way, didn't think much about it-

"Liar," Brater said, not unkindly.

Tim stopped, hesitated. "Well, all right. I thought about it for quite a while. How'd you tell?

"You seem a decent fellow. Too nice for your own good. You mull over things, I'll bet."

Tim sighed. "I suppose I do. You're the same?"

"Nope," Brater said and grinned. "But I can recognize a moper from a mile away."

"Heh."

"So what happened?"

"I met her again a few days after," Tim said. "Or, rather, she met me. Without her friend, and looking a fair bit more relaxed than when I first met her. She asked if she could join me for coffee, and I said yes."

"Where were you headed, at the time?"

"Into low sec areas. I work for a non-profit organization. A bit of missionary work, a bit of social improvements."

Brater looked him up and down. "You're certainly dressed the part. Those heathens you were converting, not much for showers or washing machines?"

Tim laughed. "No, I suppose not. I have this tendency to let my appearance slide, too. Sometimes it's just too much effort."

"Washing yourself is no effort at all."

"That's what I'm saying," Tim said.

Brater stared hard into his eyes. "Hard to get up in the mornings sometimes, is it?"

"You said it."

"And you daren't stop once you've gotten moving."

"Precisely. Hence my career," Tim said. It felt good to talk about the depression, he found, especially to someone he'd probably never meet again. "I have to keep moving. Doesn't matter to where, just so long as it's away."

"From everything."

"Yes."

"Including your girl."

"... eventually, yes. It didn't work out," Tim said.

"So I gathered."

"She's a wonderful woman," Tim added. "But she's driven and smart and has this hard, hard core that no one could penetrate. Or, not me, at least. And even though I'm no slacker, she couldn't stand how I never seemed to put any work into myself. She's not unsympathetic. But I think that when she saw other people buckling under the weight of their problems, it was a constant reminder that the same could happen to her."

"So was it worth it?" Brater asked.

"I don't know, man. I don't know," Tim said.

"That means it was," Brater said.

"I don't-... well, you think?"

"Sure. Few things are good through and through. It's all experience in the end."

"I don't know," Tim said again. "I think love can leave a sting that lasts a long time. It can leave you worse off than when you started."

Brater shook his head. "It doesn't. That sting you feel isn't because you fell in love; it's because you were reminded how bad off you were before love took you in its arms for a while."

"Even so," Tim said. "All it grants you is a momentary feeling that's surrounded by numbness both before and after. Isn't the numbness preferable? Just like when you're drowning, you just get real peaceful and calm."

Brater gave him a strange look, then turned his head away. He inhaled, as if to say something, then slowly exhaled and simply said, "No."

A buzzing sound emanating from the distance became a little louder. A second later there floated overhead three small drones, each the size of a fist. They were on security patrol, although they didn't actually have any offensive capabilities. Smaller drones had existed for years, as toys and such, but the larger type was a novelty, a side product of the recent advances in invention. They were being tried out as remote-controlled security monitors, the idea being that their human operators could get closer to hot zones in this manner than regular security cameras allowed, and that you'd be more likely to behave properly with the possibility of these things swooping in to taser you. While they were being tested out, though, the drones would do nothing but fly around, floating on their own currents and look more menacing than they were.

"My wife drowned," Brater said.

Tim stared at him. "Shit," he said at last.

Brater replied, "Oh, I don't think she did that. It'd have embarrassed her half to death." Then he added, "Don't look at me that way. I'm the one who lost her. I'm allowed to make bad jokes."

"What happened?" Tim asked.

"Accident. Sailing trip, which I normally detested, but we'd won it as some huge prize and the wife was all agog to try it. Biggest company on the planet was a sponsor, big hullabaloo, cameras all around. When the time comes, we're all packed and taking the steps aboard, there's a misfire in one of the ship's engines and it jerks away from shore, tearing up the boarding walks and dropping us into the sea. The luggage falls on top of us, along with the boarding walks, keeping us from reaching one another. I clamber up and start yelling for people to get my wife out. Then the stupid idiot moron captain compensates for the drift by firing up other engines and moving the ship closer to harbour, not having realized that there was still

someone overboard. Eight thousand tons of deadweight pin my wife against the harbour wall, crushing the life out of her. And all the while, dozens of cameras are shooting her last seconds alive, with millions of people watching. Someone reaches the captain and screams to him to stop the ship, so he fires up the engines again and tries to turn it away, but the engines need time to turn and all they end up doing is providing one final push that makes my wife vomit her guts out into the ocean, before the ship drifts away, leaving her to sink in a fading red pool."

Tim, flailing for logic, grasped the one detail in this story that his mind would let him comprehend. "Why'd you detest sailing trips?"

Brater snorted. "Because I've been a ship captain all my life. The sea's not a place of vacation to me."

"What is it, then?"

"The beginning and end of everything," he said without pause.

Tim said, "Well ... I don't know. I'm sorry to hear about what happened, really sorry. But that sounds stupid to say, and I'm sure you've already dealt with it in your own way."

"True enough," Brater said. "Company gave me a huge settlement. With the media angle it was the only thing they could do."

"I meant-"

"Money wasn't all that much compared to what they could've coughed up, but still a fair size. One of the largest corporate payouts ever given."

"But the grief-"

"And not only that," Brater continued, "But they offered me any kind of perks I could want, including rides back and forth, new and experimental equipment, anything I asked."

Tim raised his hands, palms out. "All right. All right. I'll choose my words carefully."

Brater grunted a reply, then looked down at the floor.

At first Tim thought the man was subtly hinting at the end of conversation, but then he saw his eyes follow some movement, and followed his gaze.

On the floor, floating around and over their feet, were cleaner bugs, tiny robotic beetles that swarmed over all public surfaces. Each beetle had feelers that allowed it to home in on dirt and various pieces of gunk. It would hover over the detritus and use a combination of fire and tiny pressure pumps to crack it into pieces, which it would ingest and use to fuel its process. The bugs were cheap, easily mass-produced, and accepted even by insectophobiacs as an inescapable part of station life.

Tim saw two dozen such bugs move around in Brownian motion, trawling over the dirt left by his shoes, and erasing it as one might erase pencil lines on paper. He moved his foot a little to let them at more of the dirt, but in doing so inadvertently stepped down on one of the beetles and crushed it.

"Damnit," Tim said.

Brater smiled, the first time Tim had seen him do so. The old man's entire face went all wrinkly with the expression, as if it had long grown used to emoting strong feelings.

"Figures," Tim said. Brater nodded.

Tim said, "Look ... I feel stupid now, having told you what I did. I know it's not the same, breaking up with a girlfriend as losing one's wife of many years."

And Brater said, "No, it's not. But it hurts you all the same. Don't ever compare your pain to that of others. It isn't made any less or any greater by comparison to theirs, and in its proper context it's just as bad for you irrespective of what others may be going through." He looked out the window. "And the sea washes all things away, in the end."

Tim said, "You were a captain. You still are?"

"Nah. The money from the settlement was enough to retire. I still love the sea. I just can't stand to sail on it, at least not on the same ocean that... well, yeah."

"So what're you doing here, away from the sea?" Tim asked.

"Oh, it's here," Brater said. "Trust me. You just don't see it."

Tim looked at the old man, and the old man looked right back at him. The ocular implant on Brater's face came into terrible focus.

"New and experimental equipment," Tim said in a dead voice. "Including modified implants."

"There are waves everywhere," Brater said, quite calmly.

"But you might have gone blind, or mad! Unlicensed modifications are incredibly dangerous! How could you?"

"How could I not? Aren't we both sailing into oblivion?" Brater waved his arm expansively, his sweep arcing from the beetles on the ground, to the

drones in the air, and the ships floating around outside. "And we float on the waves. Everything we see, everything we know, it floats on invisible waves. We create these things to sail them, these things that allow us to navigate the dark seas of emotion, but they're only temporary; they sink, they cast us off. But the sea, and all that it is, the sea remains."

Tim, open-mouthed, could only shake his head.

Brater smiled again, and clapped him on the shoulder. "I don't expect you to understand. Not yet, at least."

"So here you sit, watching the invisible waves."

"That I do," Brater said.

"Do you pilot your own ships?"

"No, no, not anymore. And not in this place. I have enough money to buy me passage on convoys, and that is enough. I may imagine I'm piloting them, but no more than that."

"Convoys? But most of the ones here are going into insecure areas."

Brater nodded. "As am I."

"But that's incredibly dangerous! They get shot down all the time!"

The old sailor gave him a look that he would never forget. "Yes," he said. "They do."

They stared out at the stars, watching the invisible waves, until the roll call sounded, and each departed for his cruise.

The Speaker of Truths

And when the two harlots had been carted off, thrashing and crying and screaming, and their baby sent to be cut in half, Aritcio leaned back on his throne and was pleased.

"I like being Heir," he murmured sotto voce to his military advisor, a thin man in tight-fitting clothes and a tight-fitting face. To his other side stood the religious advisor, a woman with her hair set up in a tight bun and held in place with two golden miniature spears.

The military advisor nodded. "We have more cases, milord."

"Oh, good."

The gigantic doors opened slowly. They were bronze, and decorated with all manner of religious icons. As might be expected, Doriam II figured quite heavily; his appearance and highlights of his reign dominated the aeneus reaches of both doors. It was tradition that they be opened to let in each new complainant but closed right after. The only exception was for those cases where the grievance was so vast that the horde of plaintiffs would fill the royal court, in which case the doors were kept open for onlookers. Those cases were rare: These days, the only people who put their fate in the hands of Aritcio were the ones who'd been practically forced there at gunpoint. You could refuse his judgment, of course, and you would be summarily executed for your trouble.

A young man walked in, hesitantly. He was dressed as a Holder nobleman, but his hair was unkempt and there were dark patches under his eyes.

"You, I don't recognize," Aritcio said.

The man kneeled in front of Aritcio and said, "I'm Fazian Shalah, milord. I have not been in your presence before."

"And what is your complaint?"

Fazian rose again. "Milord, I-"

He was momentarily distracted by a noise outside, a faint roar dopplering on the windows, then continued, "Milord, I am desperate. I have had my property confiscated, my accounts frozen, all my business brought to a halt."

Aritcio gave a thin smile. "And why is this?"

"I, uh ... in all honesty, milord, it was a moment of stupid drunken revelry. I made a rather impolite comment about Serude Sakekoo."

The military advisor leaned in and whispered to the heir, "She's head of the Imperial Chancellor."

Aritcio raised an eyebrow. "Rather?"

"Yes. Well. Very."

"Would you care to repeat the comment?"

Fazian swallowed audibly. "In all honesty, milord, I'd rather not. It had to do with the forehead decoration she wears, and what I think it looks like. But I'd really not want to repeat it."

"Good. That's good," Aritcio said in amused fashion, wagging a finger at him. "You're learning."

"Every day, milord. But I'm repentant now, and desperate. I cannot feed my children, no one dares loan me money, and none of my contacts are of any use. Milord, I beg you, please intervene."

Aritcio glanced at his religious advisor. "What do you say, dear? Should I intervene?"

"I'm sure milord will make the correct judgment, as always," she replied in a resigned fashion.

Apparently pleased with the reaction, Aritcio turned back to the Holder. "I think it was petty revenge by the Imperial Chancellor to put you through this. I hereby proclaim that your accounts shall be unfrozen, your property returned or you be reimbursed by the claimants with an equivalent monetary sum, and that you be restored in full glory to your former place through whatever other recourse deemed necessary by an independent party."

Fazian fell to his knees again. "Oh, thank you, milord. Thank you so much. I shall remember this forever."

"Yes, I do believe you will. Stand up, please. I trust you have learned your lesson in manners and discretion."

"I have, milord, I have," Fazian said, standing. "Thank you so much."

"Don't mention it. But to ensure that this lesson remains learned, I will have your lips cut off. Next."

The Holder, stunned in disbelief - a fairly common reaction in Aritcio Kor-Azor's court - was led out by guards. The instant the doors opened, the noise outside rose to a dull roar.

"What is that?" Aritcio asked.

His military advisor gave a faint shrug. "Nothing of concern, I'm sure, milord," he said, then gave one of his men a brief look. The man immediately made an exit through a side door.

The bronze doors started to open.

"Milord, the next man is a mime, and-"

"Cut out his tongue and make him eat it. Next!"

The doors closed again.

The guard sent out by the military advisor returned, walked to the advisor and whispered into his ear. The advisor whispered hastily back, but was interrupted by Aritcio.

"Is there anything I should be concerned about?" the Heir asked.

"No, not in the least," the advisor replied. "But it would appear we have a special visitor on the way."

"Oh?"

"A Speaker of Truths."

The religious advisor stiffened up, but said nothing.

The roar outside couldn't be ignored any longer. It was as if a tsunami were about to wash over the palace. The guards looked to one another, though they remained firmly rooted in place. And outside the doors there now

sounded ... not screams, not yells, but a hoarse barrage of noise, as if the first wave were about to come crashing in.

There was a thunderous roll of staccato knocks on the doors, made by innumerable fists.

Aritcio shifted slightly in his chair. "I suppose we had better open," he said.

The doors slowly parted, revealing an agitated mass of people outside. The guards put their hands on their weapons, but the military advisor raised a hand. "Steady, now," he said.

A small figure detached itself from the group and walked into the court. It was an old man, wizened and grey, in the traditional robe of high religious officials. He walked with the aid of a tall staff, the head of which curled into a circle.

"Speaker of Truths," the religious advisor said in awe.

"The same," the man replied and smiled kindly to her. "I wish this were an informal visit, seeing as how I haven't been here in, oh, a century now at least. But as you can see from my fellow visitors, we are now forced to deal with a very serious matter."

As he spoke, several members of the mob marched in his wake. They were all Holders and as such were allowed to enter the court unimpeded; refusal of entry to a Holder was considered an offence, although once let in, the Holder could be removed at the Heir's whim without consequence.

The Holders, roughly two dozen, formed a half-circle around the Speaker. All faced the throne, staring fixedly at Aritcio. The doors were kept open, as per tradition when a full house was at hand, and several members of the mob held activated video cameras. In deference to the Heir's presence,

they kept their hands over the camera lenses, but the microphones were very much active.

"What's this?" Aritcio said. "Why are you here?"

"I'm surprised to be here at all," the Speaker said. "Certain parties seemed intent on ending my journey prematurely."

"That doesn't answer my question," Aritcio said.

"No, milord. It doesn't. But now you have answered one of mine."

"Make sense, man."

"Very well," the Speaker said. He gestured at the people behind him. "These men and women have grievances which must be righted. The ones in the corridor have ones of their own. And that roar you hear outside, that's from the ones who heard of my trip here and decided to follow. I have travelled a long way, milord, and the journey has been fraught with danger, even more so than I expected when I set out."

He marched closer to the throne, stopping short of the steps that led up to it. He spread his arms, opening them as one might when welcoming back a lost soul, or equally when proclaiming its banishment. His voice, though far from loud, was heard clearly; it was the only sound in the room apart from the hum of recorders and the muted noise of the people outside. "As to why I am here, milord, it's really quite simple. I have come to kill you."

No one said a word. For a few moments, no one even breathed.

Then the silence was punctured by a noise: a choked, high pitched giggle that turned into a rasping neigh, then a guffaw. Aritcio laughed so hard, he

nearly fell out of his chair. "You?!" he fairly screamed at the Speaker. "You're mad, old man. You're mad!"

"Be that as it may, I appear not to be the only one," the Speaker said, quite calmly.

Aritcio, trying unsuccessfully to put on a serious expression, said, "Who sent you?"

"Why ... you did, milord."

"What? Oh heavens, this keeps getting better."

The Speaker turned to the people with him, pointing at a man standing to his right. "This is Rakban Vennegh," the Speaker said. "His father was put to death for theft, on the word of a man nobody but you has ever seen. Beside him stands Suki Natasa. Her son was tortured for flying a kite into the trees of the royal yard, and now does nothing but stare at the wall. And over there is Etu Gassa, whose beauty charmed you so that you ordered she be forced to dance naked in the court square every day at noon, in order that she not selfishly keep her beauty to herself. You had her husband murdered, too, on account of his selfishness of keeping her all to himself. Everyone in this room, this palace, this entire place has been hurt by you, or has a loved one who's been hurt by you. Every one of them, milord." The Speaker spoke in a quiet monotone, but there was a barely detectable emphasis on the milord honorific.

"You created this," the Speaker continued. "If I am here, milord, it is because you called me here, even if you were not aware of it. The Speakers are arbitrators second only to the Emperor, and we go where we are needed."

He adjusted his cloak slightly, and said, "Right now, milord, there's an army of people outside who want restitution for your acts. More specifically, they want your blood."

Aritcio said, "Fat chance."

The military advisor added, "He is an Heir to the throne. They cannot touch him."

The Speaker of Truths fixed him with a steely glance. "As a matter of fact, milord, they can."

Before they had a chance to respond, he said, "I'm not sure whether you're aware of an old religious law - actually, to be honest, I'm perfectly sure that you weren't, because otherwise we'd never have descended to state of affairs - a religious law whereby an injured party can claim restitution from the injurer, in the form of flesh and blood. Eye for an eye, pound of flesh, pluck out his eye, etcetera."

The religious advisor said, "We're aware of that law. It's from the oldest texts, those of the angry god. It has no real bearing here."

"Oh, but it does," the Speaker said. "Should someone be harmed beyond reason by an outsider, and should the act be judged as unreasonable by an official arbitrator, the law of restitution can be invoked. Official arbitrators are the Emperor, of course, along with the five Heirs, certain Holders. And the Speakers of Truth."

"You are not touching me," Aritcio said.

"He can't do a thing to you, milord," the religious advisor said to Aritcio. She turned to the Speaker. "You've left out half the law. There is a sliding scale."

"Indeed there is," the Speaker said. "And it says that if an act has been judged reasonable, the restitution takes into account the social positions of both victim and perpetrator. If perpetrator is markedly higher, the amount of restitution, the pound of flesh if you will, shrinks accordingly. If a commoner were to claim restitution from the Emperor, he might receive it, but it would be an infinitesimal speck, little more than a flake of skin from the hands of his Holiness."

Aritcio said, "So what's the problem? Even with the people outside, you'd hardly have enough to give me a haircut."

The Speaker replied, "These are just the ones who joined in my march. Word is reaching us from everywhere in the area. There are a lot of people who are very angry at you, milord, and should they all stake their claim at once, you will be reduced to atoms."

Aritcio, who had grown increasingly sombre in tone, turned to his religious advisor. "Is this true?" he said. "Does this man, this ... this Speaker of Truths," he spat the word, "does he have judgment rights?"

The religious advisor said nothing, merely closed her eyes and nodded.

Aritcio turned to his military advisor. "Does he?"

The advisor was stunned. "Well, I don't, that is, well-"

"Answer me. Does this man have the power to bring me to execution?"

The military advisor lowered his head, stared at the floor. "Yes, milord. I do believe he does."

Aritcio turned back to the Speaker. "I don't see why I should act according to your demands. Why shouldn't I simply have my guards execute you?"

"If they attack me," said the Speaker, "not only will they be excommunicated and their names stricken from the Book of Records, their lives and personas becoming nonentities, but you will have gone against the word of a Speaker, which means that you risk being stricken from the Book of Records as well. You would be dethroned, milord, and stripped of your rights and your immunity. I do not imagine you would stand much of a chance afterwards."

The Speaker closed his eyes, breathed in deeply, then said, "This is it, milord. This is the end of the road. This is the sins come back to ruin."

"It's an uprising, is what it is."

"No, milord. It's a revolution."

Silence descended again. Not even the roar could be heard now. There was the hum from video cams, whose recordings were undoubtedly being broadcast to the hordes outside and to a myriad of homes elsewhere.

The military advisor stepped forth. "We ... can't let this happen," he said. "If the Heir is dethroned, if there truly is a revolution, then the house will fall. Outside forces-," he didn't say the other houses, but it was on his mind as well as everyone else's, "Outside forces will destroy us. The Heir may have angered people in his time of rule, but we have to find some way to preserve him. We must. If not, if we go the path of open revolt and regicide, our people will forfeit any chance of having him or any other Heir ascend to the throne in future times."

The Speaker leaned on his staff. "And what do you suggest, then?"

"Is there ... no, I know there is no chance that the people will be dissuaded from this," the advisor said. "But are there some that might be persuaded to wait?"

There was a roar outside.

"All right, perhaps not that many," the advisor conceded. "But still. Are these people willing to risk the repercussions of a bloody revolt? Will they suffer through the economic turmoil that's sure to follow, and the possibility of military interaction? Will they risk their livelihoods, and their very lives?"

"They will not be dissuaded from their claim," the Speaker warned, quite calmly. "That much has become clear."

"Then grant us this," the advisor said. "Have those people come forth who have the most grievous claims. Let them have their retribution. But please, for the love of the house and everyone in it, let the Heir live."

"I agree," Aritcio said, and was ignored.

"I don't know if the people will agree to that," the Speaker said.

"I hope they will. Because even if the Heir won't die, we will bring him to the point of oblivion."

"What?" Aritcio said.

The advisor continued, "If a million comes forth, then we shall remove an arm. If another million comes forth, we shall remove a leg. We shall cut and cut and cut, we shall rend flesh and drain blood until there is nothing left but the bare essentials."

"Are you insane?" Aritcio said.

"All I ask, for all our sakes, is that there be enough for the Heir to live, and continue functioning to some degree. After all, a person needs not limbs to govern, nor all his senses. One eye suffices; one ear; and some remains of tongue, teeth and skin."

"I'm not standing for this," Aritcio said.

The advisor turned to him and said, "Then you will die, milord. They will tear you to pieces."

"You will tear me to pieces."

"At least this way, there will be something left, milord. And we can regrow the rest."

The Speaker said, "Cloning is forbidden. You know that."

"Only if the person dies," the advisor said. "But if we keep him alive and put him through accelerated cellular regrowth, we violate no law, and the people can have their pound of flesh."

"Do you think that's enough?" the Speaker said.

"Honestly? No," the advisor replied.

"I'm still here, if anyone wondered." Aritcio said.

The advisor turned to him, "Milord, as much as I love and honour you, we are on the brink of a revolution that could have your head a spike in a heartbeat. Do you understand the situation? Do you understand that if there is any kind of dissatisfaction with its outcome, you will die?"

Aritcio fell silent.

The advisor turned back to the Speaker. "If he should make any kind of decision that the people greatly disfavour," the advisor said, "then they can come in en masse and demand their restitution."

"And, with it, his life," the Speaker said.

"And his life," the advisor said. "Do you think the people will settle for that? A new ruler, to replace the old. A new man. In every sense of the word."

The Speaker gave this due thought. Aritcio had fallen silent.

"Yes," the Speaker said at last. "Yes, I believe they will."

The hordes outside raised their voices again, so loud that the palace floor trembled. But they were not roars this time. They were cheers.

Aritcio lay strapped down on a surgeon's table. Video cameras had been affixed to the ceiling, and a small one to the surgeon's forehead.

Using an electric scalpel, the surgeon slowly and methodically cut off pieces of Aritcio's skin. The Heir's blood was immediately sucked up by a proliferation of plastic tubes that fed it into a dialysis machine, from where it was pumped back into his body.

No anaesthesia was applied. The Heir had a rubber mouth guard affixed to his mouth with leather straps, and bit down on it with such force that veins stood out in his forehead. With each cut there was a raspy noise that onlookers had at first thought to be disturbance in the audio section of the

broadcast, but turned out to be the Heir's hoarse voice, screams that got no further than his throat.

Sometimes the doctors would use lasers, so as to immediately cauterize the wounds, but since lasers also killed nerves, the public had deemed it grossly unsatisfactory. Scalpels were now the tool of choice.

The military and religious advisors sometimes attended the sessions, watching dispassionately as their master was dismembered. The religious advisor had made no comment since the sessions started. The military advisor had said little, too, except for a brief, secret conversation with the head physician and certain military personnel, where it had been explained to the full understanding of everyone involved that the Heir would not die. And should he expire, well, his captors and caretakers were expected to take whatever steps necessary to ensure he would live again, regardless of personal morals and religious law.

Aritcio himself said little as well. There was such demand for his elements that he hardly had any time to rule at all.

The surgeon cleaned his scalpel, and spoke slowly into the camera. "That's the last finger skinned. Notice the tendons. We'll be working on those next."

Sand Giants

Two elder statesmen, both of them Minmatar government officials, were walking down by the sea. The negotiations had been hard, what with all the secrecy, and they had begged leave for a breather. Matar was nice and warm this time of year, and the men enjoyed being outside whenever possible. Besides, it did the government good to connect with the people, or at least keep some tabs on them.

They were especially interested in investigating the work of a man named Elbrand Toduin. Elbrand supposedly worked on the beach and created the most marvellous of sand castles, intricate structures that held both expression and functionality. At least, this was what the statesmen had heard, listening in as they did on the talk of their interns. As a result, the two men, Sadrede Svarg and Aduner Hulmkelat, decided to take a long lunch break and pay this Elbrand a visit.

This particular government office on Matar was located quite close to the sea, so it was a short walk. One of the town's shopping districts was located there, so a long road ran parallel to the coastline, dotted on one end with stores of all kinds. On the other lay a wide, well-maintained sidewalk, with a snack vendor here and there. Beyond the sidewalk was the beach, and the ocean.

The sidewalk was kept at a higher level than the beach. At regular intervals there would be an offshoot, a concrete pier shaped like a T that bisected the beach and led straight into the ocean. This pier included stairs down to the beach, and hooks and other equipment for boats that wanted to moor there.

There weren't many people about - it was a workday, after all - but the sun was out and the sea breeze kept things nicely cooled, so a few souls were idly wandering down the walkways. These included some youngsters dressed in the increasingly popular tribal gear, some of them even sporting what Aduner hoped were fake tribal tattoos.

The two statesmen noticed a small crowd clustered by one of the branches that lead into the sea, and headed over there.

The crowd stood on the part of the walkway where the beach turned to shoal. They all looked over the edge, leaning on the handrails. Sadrede couldn't get close enough, but Aduner, being a bit more lithe, insinuated his way into the crowd and looked over the handrails.

Far below stood Elbrand, a small figure among the vast constructs of sand, and once Aduner's eyes drifted up to them, his heart sank. It seemed impossible that such a tiny figure could create such gargantuan monstrosities, but there they were.

The first was a giant of near-infinite complexity, his body a composite of famous Minmatar people, symbols and even slogans. Legs were Khuumaks, with the knee joints fashioned into the heads of the two people who had stood at Drupar's side as he struck his fateful blow, while Drupar's own face was visible in the midst of the figure's torso. Other faces could be made out at various parts, as if surfacing from the ocean. The figure's arms were decorated with tribal tattoos, some of which, Aduner noted with alarm, spelled out slogans of hatred and war, and many of which were combined into one cryptic figure. And yet there was no overarching theme, no central message in the complexity as far as Aduner could see. All he could make out was a hopelessly disunited hodgepodge of anger, a torrent of misdirected frustration that would leave nothing of value in the minds of admirers. He shook his head. Temperance was the way, not excess. It was small comfort that the monstrous construct would be washed away at high

tide, for there was nothing stopping its creator from remaking it again and again; a cycle of birth for something better left cooling in the grave.

The second was a far sleeker item, though it unnerved Aduner. It was a sea serpent, its massive head defying gravity as it rose from the sand, its lithe body trailing in diminishing half-moons that implied the thing didn't so much swim as undulate. Aduner hated snakes, and he immediately disliked this creature. It glistened with some sort of bonding agent - nothing this big could be left untouched - that only served to add another reptilian aspect to its being.

There were slight pockmarks in the creature's cheek, from where Elbrand's ladder had presumably touched it before he applied the bonding agent. The serpent's head was moulded in explicit detail, not only in the rows of worn teeth visible through its open mouth, or in the veins of its eyes under slanted, angry-looking brows, but in the way it managed to indicate both stillness and action simultaneously. It looked poised to attack, and yet it also looked as if it were only travelling the seas, minding its own business. It reeked of power and potential.

And then there was the fire. Elbrand had placed inflammatory agents in the serpent's nostrils and set them alight, resulting in a steady outpour of flame and greyish smoke. Bizarrely, Aduner felt that they simultaneously made the serpent both more and less threatening. They underlined its nature, and its danger, and in so doing presented a sharper likeness of the real thing, but the more this sand construct looked like a sea serpent, the more Aduner was reminded that it was only a sand construct. And yet, it made him uneasy. It felt as if a thing so real, particularly a thing that in its realness was so patently fake, couldn't possibly be anything but real.

Aduner disliked it so much that he was about to turn away without even looking at the third sand sculpture, but at that point Sadrede finally emerged from the throng and took a place at the handrails by Aduner's

side. Aduner saw his co-worker's expression harden as Sadrede took in the sculptures.

"This is ... unfortunate," Sadrede said.

Aduner nodded. He was struck with the feeling that this was something they would need to discuss very seriously at some later point, and thus willed himself to turn and look at the third sculpture.

At first glance it was practically serene compared to the others; a large construct almost monolithic in shape, resembling a stone-age palace. The building blocks were, fittingly, rock-like in shape and surface. Each one of them had a distinct surface, as if a team of sawyers had been at work, and even the mortar around them had lines and ridges in it. One half expected to see a bunch of trowels lying nearby.

Aduner found it surprisingly pleasant, and it wasn't until his eyes drifted to the building's roots that he spotted the anomaly. A sand figure of a Minmatar boy stood in front of the building, leaning up against it. The boy's pants were around his ankles. His face, even from this distance, clearly registered extreme glee, and no wonder: In front of him stood the sand head of an Amarrian, looking as if he'd been buried up to his neck, and a constant stream of water fountained from the boy's midsection, curved up in the air, and hit the Amarrian directly on the top of his bald, granular head. Aduner noticed that several large buckets of water stood around the sand construct, and he suspected that if he were to see the building from the back, there'd be visible some clever aqueductal design involving leaky buckets and plastic pipes. He found it immensely disappointing, not threatening in the least but merely sad: A creation that showed such promise at first glance, only to show itself to be a facade, good for little more than short-lived amusement.

The people, of course, loved it all, and tossed coins on a blanket laid down on the sand.

As one, Aduner and Sadrede turned and made their way out of the crowd, back to the centre of the pier. Aduner wanted to say something to someone, but couldn't find it in him. Sadrede was still deathly quiet, and Aduner knew from experience that he needed only a catalyst to explode into someone's face.

Before Aduner could do anything, Sadrede made a beeline for a nearby dancer. The Minmatar had a tradition of physical expression ranging all the way from the delicate, symbolic flights of trained dancers to the coarse, even violent, dances of tribal warriors. This one, plying his trade on a frictionless mat, was doing the exhibition form of Ruhste, an old and extremely physical dance art that more often than not had the exhibitor spinning in the air. It had been banned during the Amarr occupation due to fears that it might be used as a tool to train fighters, but was now permitted as a cultural sport, although the government had adamantly refused to give it any grants or official backing.

The dancer slowed when Sadrede approached him, but didn't stop. Sweat poured off him and onto the mat, and it was a wonder he could even keep his balance, let alone perform his feats. From a distance, Aduner noticed that the mat was decorated with the same tribal symbols as the first sand statue had been, in particular the composite one showing all the symbols as one figure.

The beginning of the exchange was said in low tones, so Aduner didn't catch it. By the time he'd caught up with Sadrede, though, his co-worker was shouting.

"All these public displays mean nothing and only serve to aggravate the wrong people," Sadrede yelled at the dancer. "You don't do anything to further our cause, and you certainly don't ensure the safety of our people."

The dancer, still now and entirely calm, laughed in his face. "And you do?"

Sadrede was speechless. The dancer returned to his art, his supple body revolving in tune to some inner rhythm, picking up the pace until he was leaping up from the ground, stabbing at the air with his hands and feet like a dragon taking flight.

It occurred to Aduner that were they to meet the man in a place with no witnesses, the exchange might go quite a bit differently. There were layers to the dancer's actions. The Ruhste was art, but it was one that presented violence in terms of aesthetics. The onlooker would see a performance that resembled combat, and if he looked closely, he would see that the underlying foundation was, in fact, still aesthetic: Art presenting violence that presented itself as art. But Aduner suspected there was yet another layer to the performance. If a man had conditioned himself to such a degree that his actions, presented as mock violence, appeared as art, then such a man might well possess the aptitude for real violence, along with the ability to present it in such a way that the casual onlooker would see only the surface layers and nothing more. What better way to hide your lethality than present it to the world, and in so doing, make the world think you were merely pretending?

His thoughts got no further. Sadrede, still too angry for words, stomped off, and Aduner followed.

And that would have been that, if they hadn't seen the kid with the Chromlts.

The Chromlts were a popular Minmatar children's toy. They came in packs of twenty little magnetic silver orbs, with accessories that included a tiny docking station shaped like a twofold pencil sharpener, and a small self-standing projector that cast ultraviolet light. When a pair of orbs were placed in the dock for a minute, they would warm up slightly. Afterwards, if you touched two of them together, then gently drew them apart, they would trail between them a gossamer filament that extruded from tiny holes on their surface. The filament would remain taut at all times, could be stretched out almost indefinitely, and would harden into a firm stem when passed under the cure of ultraviolet light, resulting in a tiny baton-shaped unit.

There were two kinds of structures one could create from Chromlts, hot or cold. The hot one involved building the wireframe sequentially, adding one more orb to the structure each time. The cold one was far more difficult, where one created several two-orb batons, then used the orbs' magnetic properties to stick them together. The magnetism meant that a wireframe of even moderate size had to have equalized pressure from all sides, since it took very little force for the magnetized orbs to slide off one another and collapse the entire structure onto itself.

It was not uncommon for children to possess thousands of little Chromlts, particularly in engineer families, and the creation of new structures and items from them was a popular hobby. Cold joins were far more structured and difficult, and revered as such, whereas hot joins, being freed from the normal rules of physics and structural engineering, tended more towards artistry and originality.

And in a corner of the pier, the two men saw the antithesis of the Dionysian dancer they'd left behind: A child that couldn't be more than six or seven, sitting with a pile of Chromlts, and doing a cold join of something that looked remarkably like a Typhoon.

Sadrede, of course, got there first.

"That's amazing!" he said. "What's your name?"

"Bryld," the child said.

"And you did this all by yourself?" Sadrede asked.

"Yeah."

"May I see it?"

The child wordlessly handed him the frame.

Sadrede inspected it with due reverence. "It's very nice," he said. "Your parents must be proud. Do you often make spaceships?"

"It's not a spaceship," Bryld said.

"Really?" Aduner interjected. "Fooled me. What is it?"

The child looked him over, then apparently decided he was trustworthy. "It's a wireframe hulk."

Their blank stares propelled the kid to continue, "My dad's an engineer. And he's always saying that the biggest problems with the broken big ships is that they're so hard to manure."

"Manoeuvre," Sadrede said, but Aduner hushed him.

"So he says that sometimes they need to be towed in zero-g. But if they're too broken then there's no way to do that, 'cause they'd fall apart. So he's trying to design these hulks, like skeletons on the outside of a ship, dad

says, that can be put on it so that it doesn't fall to bits when it's moved. And I'm trying to help him. And dad says it's gonna have to be made with something like Chromlts, because dad says the trick is to use as little material as you can, and just place it at the right spots on the ship so that it'll click together."

"You've cold joined a model for a new type of zero-g repair frame," Aduner said in astonishment. "How long have you been doing this? How old are you?"

"Two weeks. Seven. My dad says I'm smart."

"I'll say. I don't know any seven-year-olds who can do anything for two weeks straight, let alone structural engineering."

The kid grinned, and held out his hands for the model.

Sadrede returned it with a smile. He said to Aduner, "See, this is what it should be about. No war, no threats, just thoughtful, peaceable work. This is what we should be doing. There's hope yet."

Aduner nodded. Something was bothering him, but he couldn't quite put a finger on it. "And the sand builder?" he said.

Sadrede waved an arm expansively towards the oceans. "He'll be washed away with the floods, as all these worries are eventually. All we need do is wait."

"Bryld, may I see the hulk again, please?" Aduner said. The child obliged.

Aduner minutely inspected the model. "I won't ruin it, I promise," he said. "But ... look, these joints here. And here, and here. How did you get them to hold? I didn't know cold joining could work like that."

The kid's smile faded a little. He didn't say anything.

Aduner gently pulled apart one of the joins, and saw that there was something holding them together, sticky gossamer that trailed in the breeze.

"This is hot joining," Aduner said. "And you've mixed it with glue."

"Oh, that doesn't matter," Sadrede said with high cheer. "It's still a grand piece."

"Hm. Yes, I suppose it is," Aduner said.

Sadrede clapped him on the shoulder, a little too hard for his liking. "Come on. The child is seven. Even if it's not perfect, he's allowed to take a few shortcuts."

"Are we?" Aduner said, but he knew it was unfair. "Never mind. Here, Bryld. You've done a wonderful job." He handed the wireframe back to the kid, who sat down and started tinkering with it again. It was only a child's toy, but Aduner nevertheless felt immensely disappointed, and in turn frustrated at that disappointment. He was growing tired of illusions, and the things they hid.

"Let's head back," he said. Sadrede nodded, and in step they began the walk back to the government offices. It was time to resume the negotiations, and neither Karin Midular nor the envoys who'd secretly flown in to see her would have much patience for tardiness.

From his mat, the dancer quietly watched them go.

Post Mortem

The shower sprayed warm water on her crouching form. Rivulets of water ran down her face and into her clothes, soaking them. She rocked back and forth, cooling her back on the metal wall, then warming it up again from the shower's downpour.

Various sensations ran through her body, the foremost of which was tiredness. She didn't know whether to attribute that to adrenaline backwash after the night's events, or if it was merely the usual mental exhaustion from working in the mining colonies. She felt like she could crouch there forever, washing everything away.

Eventually the clinginess of her clothes began to annoy her, so she rose and stripped them off, dropping them where she stood. She glanced down and noticed the tendrils of blood, which were weaving their way from the clothing pile and into the drain. She sighed, and combed her fingers through her hair.

A noise sounded, somewhere far, far off. She ignored it, closing her eyes and turning her face towards the jet of water.

The noise continued; a buzzing, grinding sound, like flies in a jar. Atira rubbed her temples. The noise was supplanted by knocking, first soft, then hammering.

"All right, stop, all right, all right, I give up!" she said and turned off the shower. Squeezing the drops out of her hair, she stalked out of the bathroom and into the corridor without even bothering to pick up a towel. She glared through the peephole in her front door, then opened it.

There stood Caleb, her co-worker. Caleb and Atira were cops in the mining colony's local police force, and their partnership had been forged in its white-hot crucible. It took a special kind of person to last in this job, to learn how to apply the colony's specialized and often brutal form of justice. And it took a special kind of person to back you up while you learned the ropes.

Caleb looked down at her body, then up again into her eyes. His face showed no expression, neither surprise nor interest. Police partnerships excluded every other kind.

"What?" she said.

"Figured I'd make sure you weren't doing anything stupid."

"Such as?"

"Keeping the evidence around. Concocting a story that's going to sound implausible. You tell me." He paused. "You're dripping on the floor."

She looked down, grunted, then walked back into the bathroom. She heard Caleb come in, closing the door behind him. He followed her, walking into the bathroom, and for just a fraction of a second she felt a pang of nervousness over the whole situation. But he didn't spare her a second glance, stalking instead to the shower and turning off the water, then looking down and staring at the pile of clothes.

"I'm going to wash them," she said.

"You better," he said. "And not while you're in them, or all you're doing is spreading his blood over you."

"Look, for crying out loud, relax."

"Where's the body?"

She walked in front of him and stood there, hands on hips. "Hey!" she said. "Do you trust me or not?"

"It's not a question of trust, and you don't even need an answer to that. It's a question of professionalism. We did what we did, and we have to clean up after ourselves, or there'll be trouble."

"I know all this. I just needed to clear my head. I'm not a machine like you are," she said, in a tone that was half frustration, half grudging admiration.

He nodded. "Did you at least take care of the body?"

"Yeah, incinerator. I'm glad I started weightlifting again. The dead are so heavy."

"You know I would have come with you, but I had to make sure we were covered. Alibis don't just make themselves up," he said.

She smiled, put a hand on his shoulder. "I know. I appreciate it, Caleb."

"Anytime. Now will you please wrap yourself in a damn towel or something?"

She laughed at that, raising her hands. "Okay, okay. Right away, sir."

She went into the bedroom to hunt for fresh clothes, and heard his voice shouting after her, "What about the dog tags?"

"In the kitchen!" she shouted back, and heard him walk there. She pulled on some indoors clothes and went to the kitchen, where she found Caleb

standing stock still, staring at a small metal bowl. It contained a pair of dog tags, their metal varnish partly eaten away.

"He was a pirate?" Caleb asked.

"Yeah. Spotted the tags right before hauling him into incineration. Good thing, too. They can withstand explosions, so I didn't dare leave them. I'll get some acid from the chemlab tomorrow."

"What is it with these guys?" Caleb said, half to himself. "Even when they're trying to lay low, they get into trouble. Didn't we take down two like him, last month?"

Atira paused, thought. "Yes ... yeah, I think it was two."

"Serves them right. I don't know why they crop up here, but nobody threatens an officer. Don't know where it would end if we let that happen."

"Do you ... do you ever wonder if we've gone too far?" she said.

Caleb looked at her. "No," he said.

"No?"

"If it weren't for us, this place wouldn't even exist. It would've torn itself apart. You know as well as I do that the type of person who goes to work in these colonies isn't the type of person likely to have a stable family life or personality. These people have higher thresholds for everything, including pain and cruelty. Normal human beings you can reason with, sometimes, but these guys won't understand unless you hit them hard. And sometimes you have to go further. This guy followed us around, he threatened you, and he provoked a fight. We cannot stand for that sort of thing here, and this guy, he was a nobody. He won't be missed." He took hold of her

shoulders and stared directly into her eyes. "Don't ever doubt yourself, okay? They can feel that. It doesn't matter what you do, or how far you go; what matters is that you react and you don't ever flinch. You are never wrong. Remember that. You are never wrong. "

She returned his stare, and nodded. "Thanks. I needed that."

"All right. You going to be okay over here?"

"Sure. Just need to dissolve this and it'll all be gone."

"Okay. Good." Caleb rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. "Listen, take care of yourself. I'm gonna head back, make sure we were somewhere else. See you later."

"Thanks, Caleb," she said, as he left.

After he was gone, Atira rested against the kitchen counter for a while, breathing deep and slow. She still felt in a dark mood, but the worst of it had ebbed away. Caleb's presence was enough; his clarity of purpose focused her own.

The doorbell buzzed again. Atira laughed, walked over to the front door and opened it, getting ready to tell Caleb she wouldn't strip for him a second time. By the time she'd pulled the handle and begun to swing the door open, she realized that she really didn't know who was on the other side, and almost slammed the door in the face of a rather intimidated-looking man.

"Atira Malkaanen? Sorry, am I interrupting?" he asked.

"Yes to the first, no to the second," she said, looking him up and down. He was a middle-aged man, with neither the build nor the dress of a mine worker, and looked quite harmless. Still, she reflected, so had others.

"I'm a resource inspector," the man said. "My name is Johan Serris. As you may know, there've been some concerns about possible water leakage in the area. We've had an absolute bugger of a time trying to find the source, though, and we're reduced to looking at any suspect blip in our readings, no matter how insignificant. Uh, have you noticed anything leaking in your apartment?"

"I was in the shower," Atira said. "Would that do it?"

Johan sighed, and looked downcast. "Ah. Yes, I believe it would."

He fiddled a bit with the hem of his coat, then noticed himself and swiftly placed his hands in his pockets.

"Did you want something else?" Atira said.

"Well ... I know this is a bit of a bother, but might I take a look around, just for appearances' sake? If I can't tell my boss I gave this an inspection, even a cursory one, he'll have my head."

Atira hesitated, but decided that she might as well let the man take a look rather than arouse any kind of suspicion, however small. "Sure, help yourself" she said and, before he could respond, immediately walked out of sight and into the kitchen, where she soundlessly took the murdered man's dog tags and put them in her pocket.

Johan followed, silently looking around. "You keep this place pretty neat," he said.

"Well, you know us women," she said with forced cheer.

Johan nodded and smiled, showing that he didn't. He followed her into the kitchen and looked around, his gaze passing over the empty metal bowl without pause. He turned and stepped into the living room, found nothing of interest in there, took a quick peek into the bedroom and withdrew without comment.

"Well, I think we're good here," he said and clapped his hands, smiling the wide smile of someone who doesn't want to be where he is.

Atira nodded, smiled back and walked towards the corridor, expecting Johan to follow her. He did, but as they passed the bathroom he said, "Oh, mustn't forget!" and before she could stop him he'd ducked inside and taken a look. She rushed after him, thinking up distractions, but by the way he froze up she saw that it was too late.

"What on earth is this?" he asked.

She was filled with an urge to take this little man and put his head through the wall, but fought it down, and quickly tried to think of an excuse.

"I don't believe this," he said. Have you been washing clothes in there?"

She had the sense to look at the ground, feigning deference and biting her lip to hide the smile that wanted to break out. "... Yes," she managed at last. "Yes, I have. Exactly. Gods, how embarrassing."

"Ms. Malkaanen, while I doubt that this habit of yours has anything to do with the water leaks, it sure isn't helping. We have industrial washeries here that'd take care of your laundry in no time. Why don't you use them? Why would you possibly want to waste water and do this in your own home?"

While he was talking Johan had been staring at her. He now glanced back at the pile of clothes, just in time to notice a tiny thread of blood weave its way from it and down the drain.

His eyes widened, and he turned to Atira to say something, but this time she was ready.

She dropped her voice a bit and said, "There was an accident. I'm early."

Johan's mouth shut with a click. He blinked a couple of times, and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down. Then he said, "Right. Okay. Great. I think we're done here. Err, if it happens again, I ... well, nevermind. You do what you need to do."

She smiled demurely. "Thank you. I will."

The inspector made his exit and Atira closed the door behind him. She peered through the door's keyhole, and once she saw that he had left, she leaned against the door and breathed deeply. That, she thought, had been a little too close, though thankfully she now had someone who'd likely vouch for her innocence if it came to that.

She combed her fingers through her hair again, pulling at it to break the knots. Someday she'd get a comb. Perhaps she'd even get some moisturizer for her face, which was dried up by the water. Be ladylike. Keep things properly ordered, and not just drop them anywhere. Like Caleb, who right now was busy ensuring both their alibis for having murdered a man.

It was, she mused as she went into the bedroom, quite unfair that she should have to play on people's faith in her like that.

She knelt in front of her clothes cupboard, opened it and reached deep inside, grabbing hold of a small box that was hidden behind shoes and

coats. It was heavy, and its contents clinked as she pulled it out. She removed its lid and dropped the dogtags onto all the others.

People had too much faith, these days.

Most Ancient

It was late in the evening on the ship repair station. At first, the only noticeable movement came from the semiautomated cleaning and safety checking of the walkers, massive ambulatory robots that looked like detached cranes' legs.

One figure moved slowly through the place. Most Ancient, or Jonathan Vesper as he was known to the employment records and nobody else, was doing his very last rounds. Today was the last day of a very long career; tomorrow he would retire.

He was a scrawny white-haired man with a long beard and a calm manner. His speech was measured at all times, and his actions stemmed from a deep confidence in himself and his place in the world. He was meticulous to the point of obsession when it came to cleanliness and order - simplification was his spoken motto - and while he was always a willing teacher, he was also a frustrating one, harping on old theories and unwilling to accept diverging points of view. It was this combination of didacticism and senescence that had earned him his nickname.

His pride and joy was the Row of Wings: A series of ship parts, most of them flat or somehow wing-shaped, on permanent display throughout the repair station. They were set up in a row that snaked its way through the station's main section, and ranged in size from the height of a short man up to the height of a two-story building. He cleaned it every week, without fail, walking through these darkened halls in solitude.

In past times these parts had been used for education, both as reference pieces for rookies and as test housings for new module variations. Each ship part was held in a frame that consisted of a pair of massive clamps on

the floor and a wire strung between the part and the nearest wall. When someone wanted to retrieve a part for inspection and experiments, they'd have a walker come over and clasp the selected part with massive robot arms. Then, one of the desk jockeys would flip a switch on an old, outsized control board, the clamps holding the part in place would loosen, the wire would drop from the wall, and the walker would be able to carry the part wherever it was needed.

Those times were drawing to a close, and the parts were now due to be removed. They were part of a fading age where the mechanics had gone in for a more hands-on approach, whereas these days everyone seemed to favor simulations that were long on error margins but short on the human feel for design. When Most Ancient left, the Row of Wings would retire with him.

He didn't mind. People thought he was attached to the Row, and there had been some half-hearted attempts from the older members of the crew to get it turned into a permanent installation, but he had begged off.

He had never told anyone, but what he really was attached to was closure. The end of a lesson; the ordering of a toolbox; the completion of a module; the final moment where a used part was taken in for the last time and turned into scraps; all of these gave him far more satisfaction than indefinite memorials. His greatest joy in life's unspoken poem was placing the period on the end of its line, one sharp swipe of the pen to complete its intricate pattern. The Row was the culmination of years' worth of work and effort, not just a monument to his longevity but a reminder of where he'd come from and what he'd gone through to get there. A warning, as much as a celebration. Looking at it and imagining that it would be there forever, frankly unnerved him.

Everyone else had now left the garage, but he was still there, ordering his things and preparing for tomorrow's sad celebration. Every now and then

he fancied he heard something creak in the distance, but he chalked it up to his old ears and to the walkers finishing off their checks.

Like so many mechanics, Most Ancient kept a bunch of small mechanical items in his drawers, both for future reference and remembrance of things past. Many of these items were solid enough that they could be stood up on end. As he pulled open the largest drawer, he heard a click, and was faced with a strange setup: Someone had carefully arranged everything inside in a domino fashion. They stood up one against the other, precariously balanced, and the instant he'd opened the drawer, they toppled, cascading over one another.

There was nothing else in the drawer, no note, no extraneous item, nothing to indicate the who or why.

Most Ancient closed the drawer, carefully put away the rest of his things, and looked around. There was nobody to be seen.

Again, he thought he heard something creaking. He couldn't pinpoint it, but felt that the sound had come from the approximate location of his Row of Wings.

People often thought of him as simple, he knew, and he couldn't disagree. But his simplicity had been earned through years of experience both good and bad. It wasn't the result of being too stupid to understand complexity, he felt, but of being smart or insightful enough to understand it so well that he could simplify it. As a result, he knew what was important and what wasn't, and led his life accordingly. He also knew how people functioned, and how far they would go to do evil things.

Not everyone agreed with his world view, or with his authority. There had been clashes, particularly with some of the younger workers. Recently these clashes had grown more frequent, and more bitter; it was quite clear

that certain individuals had started to resent him and the role he played in this company. But as they were too young and immature to truly stand up against him, they attacked him circuitously, like little dogs nipping at the heels of larger prey. They made snide remarks. They laughed. They left trash near his desk; they disordered his things when he wasn't around. One man in particular, Zian, had started acting quite belligerently towards him, and now that Most Ancient thought about it, he realized that Zian had been very vocal about the retirement day, in particular on what a momentous occasion it would be.

What Zian and the rest of them apparently didn't realize was that he'd been young once, too.

And now he was sure that the creaks he'd heard earlier had come from the fastenings that held the Row of Parts in place.

You could say this for the young folks: They knew their equipment. Those endless simulations they liked so much could be used to calculate, to unbelievably small margins of error, the stress necessary to break an item. So if you, say, snuck into a repair shop and borrowed one of the automated Straker saws for a while - those pinpoint precision metal saws with the wafer-thin blades - you could, if you fed it the right data, make it saw into a piece of metal with such accuracy that you could in fact determine ahead of time when and with what kind of pressure the metal would break.

So if you knew, say, that this piece of metal held up an item of a specific weight - say, for instance, an old ship wing - and if you had a strong inkling it would be put under the pressure of an old, wrinkled hand at a certain time of night, cleaning it for the last and final time, you could saw at its fastenings just enough to make the wing topple over at the touch.

Now that he concentrated, as hard as he could, Most Ancient fashioned he could hear tiny, tiny creaks from other support parts as well.

Dominoes. Falling down.

He grinned.

As inconspicuously as he could, he scanned the ceilings. There were security cameras set in every corner, as per standard regulations. Some of them had wider-focus lenses that covered entire sections of the shop, while others autofocused on differing types of movement. There were a couple focused on him now, as they should be, but the instant that a smaller object moved, a subsection of the movement-sensitive cameras should follow it.

He picked up a wrench and held it in his hand as he walked. After a couple of steps he pretended to stumble, and dropped the wrench out of his hand, throwing it in front of him apace. Most of the smaller movement-sensitive cameras immediately followed the wrench, but he noticed two that remained firmly on him. Someone was watching.

Most Ancient picked up the wrench and swiftly walked out of the repair shop and into the armory section, where all the unused equipment was located. Earlier in the day he'd noticed someone depositing an armor rig can - full of tarry liquid necessary for the installation and testing of the rig pumps - and headed directly for it, holding up the wrench. Once he got to the rig cabinet, he again pretended to stumble, falling onto his feet in front of the cabinet and grabbing on to its shelves for support. As he pulled himself up, he snuck a small can of rigging fluid into his pocket, then visibly and shakily deposited the wrench onto the pile of equipment on top of the cabinet. His audience, he was sure, was having a right laugh at the tottering old fool.

They could laugh all they liked, as far as he was concerned. If he couldn't have his simplicity, he would have his closure.

Next he headed over to the desk of Zian, who he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, was one of the people responsible for this whole thing. Aside from being incredibly full of himself, mouthy and impolite to everyone, Zian was quite a bauble collector. His desk was his pride and joy, decorated with a mass of tiny certificates, a bunch of collectibles and art pieces, and all manner of other strange and emotionally valuable things. Most of them were firmly fastened onto the desk in some manner; their owner was so paranoid that he assumed everyone must be interested in stealing his possessions.

Most Ancient didn't intend to steal a thing. If anything, he wanted to keep the man's work environment safe. And since they clearly thought he was a stupid old man, he might as well play the role to the full.

He reached into his pocket and uncapped the armor rig container, turned so that the cameras wouldn't pick up what he was doing, then pulled out the bottle and let it drop to the floor. There was a clank, at which he immediately said, "What's that?" He allowed himself to look around a few times, just to let the bottle empty itself properly. Then he looked down, said loudly, "Oh my gosh, a puddle of armor rigging right by this desk! I'd better clean it up."

He knelt, stared at the puddle for a bit, then stood again and added in the same loud voice, "But I can't, not when it's under this desk. I have to move the darn thing first. The puddle's not going anywhere."

He stalked back into the repair shop, over to the walker section. One of his past accomplishments was a decade spent in the metal saddle, and he'd kept up with the advances in walker technology. He got into one, started it up, and walked back to the desk section. The section was separated from the main garage area by a removable partition; way too heavy for a man, but easy for a walker to pick up and put aside. He reached in, picked up Zian's desk, and carried it out of the desk section. Once it was out, he didn't

put it down; instead, he walked over to the final ship wing in the sequence, the biggest on, and put the desk down right beside it.

As late sleepers had found out time and again, the distance between the station's living quarters and the repair shop was deceptively long. Even at a mad run, you had no hope of making it from one point to another in less than ten minutes. Especially if you had been, say, relaxing at home, eating snacks and drinking booze and laughing at some silly old coot bumbling around in the shop.

Most Ancient took the walker back to its storage place, powered it down and got out. Then he added, loudly, "First things first. Before I clean the puddle, I better make sure my old row of ship wings is clean. Otherwise I might forget, old man like me."

He walked over to the cafeteria, noting with much amusement that some of the parts holding up the row of wings were definitely creaking. Clearly, the persons responsible had timed this well.

Once he got to the first part, the small wing standing in the cafeteria, he looked around him for the last time. He noticed that one of the motion-sensitive cameras, one of the ones that had followed him even when he dropped the wrench, was now swiveling back and forth, focusing between the desk and him, the desk and him, in increasingly desperate motions.

He pulled a piece of cloth out of his pocket and began to wipe off the ship part. As he did so, he leaned on the wing just a tad.

There was a crack.

Most Ancient thought of closure, of that one sharp swipe.

He leaned a little harder, and with a screech of breaking metal, the ship wing toppled. It fell onto the next part, whose support parts also gave way from the impact of several tons, and fell onto the next part, which gave way too, until the entire row was cascading down like monstrous dominoes. Most Ancient heard twanging noises that he knew were from support wires snapping, and as he heard the final utter and demolishing crash, as if from a ten-ton ship part utterly disintegrating a prized wooden desk along with everything on it, he fashioned that he could also hear a faint scream in the distance, slowly Dopplering closer.

He closed his eyes and smiled.

In the Electric Museum

He nearly passed it by, but it was a museum and he'd always made time for those. The entrance was completely open, with no door, coathangers, service desk or any concession to living human beings that might enter. Ruebin looked around to see if there might be any kind of billing or ticket sale, but there wasn't even a kredit reader in sight.

There was, however, a plaque on the wall. It was made of a whitish, translucent material that looked like plastic but gave off a ringing sound like glass when Ruebin knocked on it. On its surface, presumably with a laser, had been etched the logos of several prominent Caldari corporations, including most of the ones from the three major blocks. The names stood out in stark black on the plaque's creamy surface, as did the smaller lettering below that denoted the museum had free admission courtesy of this coalition of Caldari corporations. Through the entrance corridor he could see machinery in various states of disassembly.

Ruebin felt at once intrigued and disappointed. The sign outside had said "Electric Museum", which wasn't very promising but did at least offer the hopeful possibility that this might be some kind of modernist art exhibit. That hope was now extinguished, and since this was a Caldari museum there would be no signs of the Gallentean vagaries, the dignified and terrible Amarr designs, or the Minmatar rust-or-die approach. On the other hand, since this was purely a Caldari place, Ruebin figured he might get a little kick out the unavoidable jingoism and touches of propaganda that would be scattered about in the exhibits. Besides, on his trips he always went to any museum he could find, not so much out of any kind of appreciation for the history or theory of art, but purely out of aesthetic enjoyment. He loved seeing what other people had created, and revelling in the myriad layers of meaning and coherence that he as a layman could just

barely make out. The glimpse and promise of surface wonders were far more appealing to him than a headlong plunge could ever be.

He went in. The main entrance opened into a large, square room beset with low pillars. On top of each pillar stood a piece of machinery. Some of them were encased in glass cages, and some were held in place by long wires that hung from the ceiling. Ruebin didn't recognize any of them, so he wandered over to the nearest pillar. On one side it had a small touchpad with the Ishukone logo and several buttons.

He pressed a button, and the pillar's top surface lit up, illuminating the complex interweave of metal and plastic it supported within a glass cage. An unseen projector inside the cage cast purple letters on the glass, running through the item's history and intended purpose. Another projector cast off a neon-green light that, through reflections in tiny, carefully placed mirrors at various points in the glass, illuminated various sections of the module according to whatever text was being displayed. Ruebin pressed an arrow on the touchpad; the purple text scrolled to the next page, and the green lights shifted and illuminated another section of the metal part. In larger museums, Ruebin knew, they had proper 3D imagery and would often show a translucent, rotating image of the item, floating above the actual unit. This place apparently didn't have the budget.

For a lark, Ruebin pressed a tiny, ridged button on the touchpad's side. Immediately the display ended, and tiny buttons began appearing on the touchpad, from its surface like little buds trying to bloom in frozen earth. A small card reader shifted out on the touchpad's side, and voice asked him to press his ID card up against it, adding that once he'd done so and proven his blindness, the glass walls would withdraw so that he could put his hands on the module while listening to its description. Ruebin backed away silently and proceeded to the next room.

Once there, he heard a voice that at first sounded like it were coming from another of those blind-assisted tours, but after a while he found it contained far too much emotion to possibly have been recorded for a museum exhibit. It came from a room nearby, so Ruebin stalked through. He was met with a bobble-headed vision like a cotton picker at harvest, and the gripping smell of knitted sweaters and comfortable perfume. A gaggle of senior citizens were clustered around a short old man, all watching him with rapt attention. There were a few others closer to Ruebin's age, including a pair of young men who looked thoroughly bewildered to even be there, but the whiteness of hair was overwhelming nonetheless. The man stood beside a pedestal and was extemporizing on its design with the heat of an Amarran preacher.

"This, now, this thing here was created by Nugoeihuvi corporation, Noh for short, and even though it's fifty years old it absolutely epitomizes their design philosophies. See these curves here on the outer casing, how they're moulded to the wings of the module so that it radiates as much heat as possible without risking structural instability. And notice how each pipe leading into the main combustion chamber is elegantly bent around the titanium spindles, so as to give them increased stability without interference with their operation. It's beautiful engineering."

The man's voice was impassioned, his speech rapt and clear. He kept it under practiced control, modulating his words for effect, but you could tell that he wanted to break out, to speed up and let it flicker in the air like a whip.

Ruebin made his way close to the group. He was a little taller than the old women and could make out the curator's face and upper body. The man, whose nametag identified him as Entrye Chrare, had his eyes tightly shut and was leaning down in rapture; so far down, in fact, that he was actually pointing upwards at the pedestalled module beside him. His skin was old and wrinkled, and his clothes bore witness to countless trips through the dusty corridors of oily mechanical history.

It occurred to Ruebin that the museum's title was a misnomer. There was nothing electric here except for the curator's delivery.

"All right, we've wrapped up this room. Is everyone ready for the," Entrye paused dramatically, "special exhibition?"

The group tittered with excitement. Ruebin smiled, and stepped a little closer. Nobody seemed to have noticed him so far.

"Excellent. We'll head over, then. I'll take us through a few side routes along the way, maybe point out one or two things." Entrye set off, the old ladies and Ruebin following on his heels. Ruebin tried to stay close to the men his own age, but nobody seemed much to mind his presence there anyway.

They passed through four rooms, each one containing a dozen pedestals displaying more mechanical equipment. All rooms were marked with Caldari corporate logos, usually followed by sponsorship information and a short thank-you note from the museum. Entrye threw off a comment here and there.

In the Hyasyoda room: "See that prototype warp core stabilizer? It may look like a radioactive nutcracker, but that particular brand was an amazing innovation back in its day."

Passing through the Lai Dai corridor: "That is one of the first cruise missile launchers the Caldari ever produced. Lai Dai nearly went bankrupt perfecting the design, only to see it appropriated by everyone else and mass-produced a year later."

Stopping in the small Wyrkomi foyer: "For ages the Seituoda people persisted in stamping, etching or otherwise marking a rather strange,

homemade family logo on the inside of each module. Ostensibly it was supposed to look like a Caldari vessel firing off an oversized torpedo, but they discontinued its use when someone pointed out that when viewed from a certain angle, the logo looked pornographic."

And then they arrived at the special exhibit.

A sign on the door declared paid entrance, and the entire group came to a halt, the bobble-headed old women all digging around in their pockets and purses for their ticket receipts. Ruebin wondered whether to split, but before he could come to a decision the curator's tremulous voice thundered over them, "Don't stop! Forward go, full blast. Follow me, everyone."

The group, shocked into obeisance, immediately stormed after the guide and into the room. Ruebin followed on their heels, giving an apologetic smile to a disinterested guard.

Inside the room were two long rows of pedestals, running perfectly parallel, each holding a single module. The pedestals were the same type as Ruebin had seen all over the museum, but the designs of the display items were markedly different. Where elsewhere there had been sharp, crisp lines and unembellished designs, here there were soft curves, smoother surfaces and clearly some rather complex, almost convoluted constructions. There were big "Don't touch" signs posted on the walls, but as the items weren't even covered in glass cages Ruebin couldn't stop himself from running his fingers over one, trailing its arches and coils. When he looked up, he saw that the curator was staring at him, and quickly put his hand back into his pocket.

As the curator returned to guiding the group through the designs, Ruebin's thoughts drifted away. He couldn't help but notice how every module in this room, at least so far as he had seen, was so much nicer and more intricately made than anything he'd seen outside. He looked around to see

if there were any explanations for this, plaques with details and such, but the only things he saw were the Kaalakiota and Sukuuvestaa logos on either side of the room. Upon closer inspection, he noticed that one row was solely Kaalakiota items and the other Sukuuvestaa modules.

Ruebin felt a sense of cognitive dissonance. He'd been to so many museums in so many places that although he'd had no formal education in art history he still considered himself perfectly able to discern styles of art, even among similarly designed pieces. And to him, these two rows seemed as if they could've been transported in from another world. They looked positively Gallentean.

"Who made these?" he said, half to himself.

"Two CEOs," the curator responded. "Well, one CEO and one CFO. They're from the days when KK and SuVee were still developing their business practices, getting a feel for how they could best ingratiate themselves with their customers. This was one of their attempts; only one product line out of many, but quite distinguishable. Turns out they couldn't do it by kindness and concern, so they ended up changing their tactics somewhat."

Ruebin hesitated. He hadn't realized that he'd been spotted by the rest of the group, who had apparently been watching him when he inspected the modules. All eyes were on him now.

"Err ..."

"Shall we move on, young master?" said the curator, not unkindly.

"Yes, please. Thank you. Sorry," Ruebin said, and followed the group. They walked slowly through the room, the curator pointing at each item in both rows and expounding on it. Most of them he compared to known works of

art, paintings and sculptures and suchlike, and mentioned that these module designs had clear signs of emulating them. It surprised Ruebin, who had never seen the Caldari go much for the softer, more expressive side of art. Minimalism, symbology and, these days, militarism were much more their thing.

And then, as if crossing over to a different era, the modules changed. The softness became hard and unyielding; the smooth curves turned to chiseled angles; the kind, matte surfaces turned specular and confrontative. It was subtle, and wouldn't have been noticed by the casual observer, but to Ruebin, veteran of endless museum trips, it was unmistakable. He stopped in his tracks, speechless.

The rest of the group marched on, the curator's recitation continuing uninterrupted. They went on for a pillar or two before the curator apparently noticed the absence of the group's youngest member. He cast around for Ruebin, noticed him and half-shouted, "Did I miss something in my explanations, young man?"

"I'm not sure," Ruebin said. "I may have missed it. Could you please tell me what happened here?" He waved a hand at the first modules of the new, cold design.

"Oh, nothing much," the curator replied.

"Nothing much? It's like another world!" Ruebin said in astonishment.

"It's the past, my boy. It often feels that way. If I may ask, what exactly are you talking about?"

Ruebin explained. The curator shrugged and said, "Be that as it may, I'm not sure I see any less value in the later modules. If it's any help, the people responsible were deposed, and there was a sea change in values."

"What do you mean?"

The curator walked over to him and, in all defiance of museum rules, placed a paternal hand on the module in front of them. He put his other hand on Ruebin's shoulder. "I mean that the people who designed the old modules, the ones you find so appealing, were the main participants in quite a serious scandal. It involved company funds, or the misuse of those funds, rather. They chose to step down rather than be put on trial."

Ruebin was stunned. The thought that the originators of these beautiful things had been corrupt was nearly incomprehensible to him. But something nagged at the back of his mind. "Hang on. They were a CEO and CFO. How'd they get into designing modules?"

"It's not uncommon for the heads of a company to get involved in the design," the curator replied. "After all, the modules are often the company's signature pieces, representing it on the quite lucrative capsuleer market. Some CEOs take a personal interest in the process. And besides," he added, "the module's appearance isn't connected to its function. I daresay you could make a, well, a shield booster that looked like a hat, if you so pleased."

"I didn't mean to criticize it so heavily," Ruebin said, feeling a dozen pairs of nearsighted eyes trying to focus on him. "I'm not a philistine."

"My dear boy, I never said you were!" the curator replied with a smile. "You've got quite the inquisitive mind. So much so, in fact, that I'd be happy to discuss this with you after the tour is over."

Ruebin opened his mouth to politely refuse the offer, but something in the curator's eyes stayed his words. Instead, he nodded, and said, "One question. Who was it that gave away those two?"

"Good question," the curator said, and whatever glint in his eyes turned a fraction more apparent. "As I said, one of them was a CFO of SuVee, who was second in command. The informer was his superior, SuVee's CEO, a man named Kishbin."

"He was ratted out by his boss?"

"Indeed he was."

"The man must've hated him. Was it because he was working with KK's CEO on this?"

"After a fashion," the curator said. "The museum will be closing soon, and I really must finish guiding these pretty young things through the halls of culture."

Ignoring the delighted giggles from the old ladies, and the eye-rolling from the men, the curator continued, "If you're interested, see me here after we close. Tell the guards you're waiting for me."

The museum was even quieter now, with the lone sound coming from cleaner bugs floating over the dirtied floors. The guards had either seen the exchange between Ruebin and the curator, or simply did not care. They left him completely alone.

At first Ruebin constrained himself to pacing the exhibition room, but when the curator didn't return, he ventured back into the museum proper. The modules seemed different now, less relics of a bygone era and more subtle indicators of a real past with real people. It occurred to Ruebin how often he forgot this on his museum trips, how often he assigned to the things he

saw a mental shelf in the present time, forgetting entirely that the people who created them had been real humans. Not ghosts, not ethereal entities that created art from void only to disappear into it themselves, but real people with souls and bodies as real as his was now. Ephemeral, perhaps, in the grand sceme of things, but not ethereal.

"What did you think happened?" someone said.

Ruebin spun around. The curator had walked up soundlessly, and now stood there, hands in pockets, a faint smile on his wrinkled face.

"The CEOs? I don't know. I know it wasn't corruption."

The curator raised an eyebrow. "Why's that?"

"First off, I find it hard to believe that anyone who created the things I saw could be an evil person. I know that's naive, it's horribly naive and simplistic. It's what a child would say. But it's a gut feeling."

"Gut feelings are sometimes right," the curator said. "Or at least point you in a better direction than common sense alone. Especially in art."

They walked towards the exhibit room.

"Second, the things are much too intricate. If the guys intended to use them as a ruse, to distract customers from business problems, they'd have been better off putting less effort into each design, and pumping out more types instead. Flashy, quick, eye-catching."

"What if it wasn't a ruse for the public, but the stockholders? A money sink, to divert attention from their scamming?" the curator asked.

"Well, you know the story better than I, of course. Even so, it wouldn't make sense. If you're skimming off the top, you want to make sure that fingers get pointed elsewhere once the company runs into problems. Otherwise, all you've accomplished is ensuring that you'll be the first one whose books get audited."

"Good point," the curator said, and nothing more.

Once they got to the entrance they stopped and stared at the pieces in silence. At last Ruebin said, "I think it was communication. I don't know how, but that's what it looks like. Not competition, seeing who could outdo whom, but a kind of mutual building, an escalation towards some aesthetic heights, an upward spiral of beauty, and ye gods, I'm sounding like such a pretentious art critic right now ..."

The curator laughed. "I've heard worse. At least you're speaking from the heart, and not trying to impress me."

Ruebin walked into the room. "So what was it?" he asked without turning to look at the curator. "What drove them to it, and what caused their fall? Come to that, what were their names?"

The curator walked up to him. "Their names were David and Yonate, and I believe you're the first person in a long while to ask that question. As for who the two men were, you won't find it in the history books. They were lovers."

"...what?"

"Mm, they were. David was CEO of KK, and Yonate was CFO of SuVee. They kept it secret for as long as they could, but something happened that made them change their minds, or at the very least get careless about it. Those modules were their testimonials to one another, and to their love."

"No wonder they fell from grace," Ruebin said. "It would've been completely unacceptable to ... well, to everyone."

"It was," the curator said.

"Amazing." Ruebin walked over to one of the modules, seeing it in a completely new light. "What caused the fall? Oh, wait, you said. SuVee's CEO, Kishbin."

"That was so."

"Must've been annoyed. His second in command, so desperately in love with the CEO of a rival company that he started moulding company policy, with an excuse about attracting customer attention."

"Not only that," the curator said. "The modules were actually a modest success, which doubtlessly aggrieved him even more. He certainly did his best to keep KK at bay. Story has it he even resisted a mutual publication deal, financing and such, by demanding that David come up with a hundred units of some quite rare minerals."

"Which ones?"

"Nobody said, but legend has it that David procured two hundred, which was apparently no mean feat."

"Wow."

"It ended up with Kishbin going after David rather harshly, to the point that David had to use shadow stocks to maintain control of his company, putting himself out of Kishbin's reach."

"Which didn't help once the allegations of corruption came out."

"Precisely."

"Amazing," Ruebin said. "So what we're seeing here is the destruction of two men, and the story of what happened after Kishbin finally had his way and got rid of them."

"Yes. Yes, I suppose you might say that."

Ruebin turned to him. "You don't sound entirely convinced."

The curator remained silent for so long that Ruebin thought he was going to ignore the question. Then the curator said, "No, I'm not. Not at all."

It was now Ruebin who kept silent, waiting for the curator to voice his thoughts.

The old man walked over to one of the modules, ran his hands over it and sighed. "I don't think Kishbin was trying to ruin them. I think he was trying to save them from their own self-destruction. The poor men couldn't be together, couldn't do anything, and eventually it got to them. They took it to a level they shouldn't have."

"A kind of flaunting, at the whole world."

"Precisely."

"Showing it without showing it."

"Exactly."

"Putting yourself in a position where you can advertise it, even if nobody realizes who you are or what needs you have."

"I would certainly say so, yes."

"Although it would be eternally frustrating if they didn't understand," said Ruebin, "so you would have to step up your efforts. Try to attract more attention. Send out signals. All the while trying to gain approval for what you're doing, even as you flaunt it as the taboo you know it to be."

The curator hesitated a little at this. "Yes, I think that's an apt description. You're certainly adept at getting into their heads."

Ruebin rubbed his eyes. "Not nearly as much as you, sir."

"How do you mean?"

"Look, I should probably leave."

"What?"

"No offense. I mean, it's quite nice, having been given an insight into all these people, and I'm sure your motivations were good, for the most part. But I'm straight."

The curator opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out except a croak. His cheeks flushed. Slowly he raised one hand and pointed at Ruebin. "You," he said at last. "You, you, you little shit!"

"Look, there's no ill will here. Let's speak with honesty. And like I said, I appreciate the tour, I do."

The man advanced on him, hand still held up. "Get out," he said, his voice echoing off the walls. "Get out!"

"All right, I'll go," Ruebin said, holding his hands up. "Sorry it wasn't what you wanted."

As Ruebin rushed out, the curator put his hand out towards one of the pillars, as if to steady himself. Unfortunately, in his disarray he missed and leaned on the module itself, which began to slide off the pillar. The last Ruebin saw before heading for the exit was a split second of the curator's small, spindly frame trying to claw back the mass of steel and wires, followed by a loud crash.

"So much for self-destruction," Ruebin said to no one in particular, and left the museum.

A Mind of Infinite Complexity

For Lauder, the first thought of the day was, "Yes." Nothing more, and no matter how he really felt; just this simple affirmation. He wasn't much of an optimist, and the word was autogenic if anything. It was followed by a short meditation, a clearing of the mind, as if he were preparing a playing field for the day's activities.

Lauder was an inventor, specializing in design patterns for ship parts, and was employed in the research section of his corporation. He was in his late twenties, a brilliant designer who'd spearheaded the recent invention drive and been primarily responsible for a good part of the datacores coming out of his company.

He also suffered from depression. And he clung to prayers like lifeblood, but they weren't religious ones, leastwise not in the traditional sense. He'd have loved being religious, to give his mind over to an outside force and trust in that force to put things right, but he simply couldn't. It wasn't in the nature of engineers to trust in faith and blind luck. If something wasn't working, you went in there and fixed it yourself.

Instead, he used autosuggestion. He told himself, in the repetitive, monotonous chanting of a pious monk, that the day would go fine; that all was well, all was well, and all manner of things would be well. It was a litany of positivities, and he knew it really wasn't that far removed from actual prayer, but despite his slight uneasiness at doing it in this manner, he persisted. It was a stepping stone, a rung on the ladder, and nothing more.

Once he'd get to work, he knew, everything would improve. His job was highly cerebral: He worked with abstract models and pattern relationships,

and spent most of his time discovering connections between them. He had a highly developed visual system for these patterns, one that virtually permitted him to pick out seemingly unrelated units and string them together, like beads on a string, to discover that they were in fact related in some cryptic but potentially useful manner. He loved doing this, and when it was going well he was almost acting out of his own body, watching himself pick out the patterns, then watching the way they interacted and clicked with one another to make some new thing of beauty. When it was not going well, every action of the day could turn into a choice. "Should I piece together this collection of patterns," he'd think, "or go blow my head off in the hybrid testing room?"

So his morning environment, that one place he had to face before he could go to work, and the major factor in his mood for the rest of the day, he kept as positive as possible. A plasma screen in the kitchen showed sunrise over farmland, and the borders of the screen even displayed a painted wooden window frame, giving rise to the illusion that the watcher was sitting inside his own little farmhouse. Soft music played, a mix of birdsong and ambient tones. There was a myriad of electronic and mechanical equipment in Lauder's kitchen, remnants from countless late-night experiments, and he often had to dig through a pile of strange-looking metal objects to get to his early-morning coffee and cigarettes. These days he was working on improvements to the new armor rigs, the antipumps in particular, and as a result had, in his kitchen, several test canisters of the liquid used as a pressurant in the pump hydraulics. It was a tarry, scentless concoction, and he'd been very careful not to accidentally pour any into his drinking cups. The liquid didn't taste too bad and even had some mildly intoxicating properties, and thus, by regulation, was laced with an antabus reagent. A good sip of it would make you wish you'd brought more reading material.

That plasma screen on the wall was put to good use, too. Once Lauder had set the coffeepot gently bubbling away - it could be done instantly, but this

was a ritual - he stood in front of the screen, in a spot kept clear of any mechanical contrivances, and said out loud, "Unfocus."

Before him, the image on the screen began to fade in and out of focus, one minute crisp and clear, the other slightly fuzzy around the edges like a painting. Not only that, but the positioning of certain elements was adjusted slightly, so that the cattle on the left seemed to drift outward to the edge of the screen, the fields on the right shifted and undulated, and the farmhouse in the middle receded ever so slightly towards its own vanishing point.

Lauder unfocused his eyes, relaxing them and trying to see into and past the screen. He tensed up a number of muscles, in his hands, in his abdomen and at the back of his neck, and felt his customized optic implant activate. It took him a little while to drift off, until he at last found himself outside his quarters, outside everything, and inside the picture itself.

He stood there, surveying the land and taking his time. Eventually, he knew, he would have to turn and start his preparations, but for these brief moments of unreality he was content to watch the landscape. He stood on a small grassy plain in front of the farmhouse, regarding it, the trees that grew beside it, and the sun beyond. The sun was bright, but not so much that he couldn't look at it. A gentle wind fanned the leaves on the trees. To his left he heard the cattle trudge through the grass, its tails swishing at flies. Somewhere in the distance, a brook babbled. It was perfect, really.

He sighed, not so much from exasperation but from simple enjoyment drawn to a close, and turned.

It was like going from day to night. The vista before him had no single light source, but there were luminous paths leading everywhere, and the buildings - no, not buildings, the constructs - that dotted the landscape also

seemed aglow with a soft, pulsating fire. The area was a patchwork that shifted as Lauder's gaze roved over it: Here, a patch of desert, on which lay a series of interconnected brick shacks, each one of their tan surfaces decorated with murals of maroon clay. There, misty swampland, beset with wooden cabins that seemed to float on the grungy water and that, every now and then, would arise on massive but spindly legs and reposition themselves. In the distance, forested hills, over which towered massive stone castles, their spires aimed to pierce the sky. Everything was low-tech, and everything shifted, like reflections on water droplets. Lauder concentrated and the swampland disappeared, replaced with a series of a promontories, each holding a tall tower that looked half like a lighthouse and half like a minaret. From the corner of his eye he saw a few paths that seemed to go nowhere, and frowned, but paid them no more heed for the time being.

This was his unconscious mind. This was the place where his eyes didn't go.

He walked down a path to one of the lighthouses. In reality the trip should have taken him hours, but distances were deceptive here, and he was by the front door in a split second. Before opening it, he looked up; the tower was so tall that he couldn't even see its top section.

He looked back down at the door. It was made of wood and decorated with multitudinous carvings, ones that, the closer you looked, the more detail you saw. Lauder took a moment to look them over, taking in only the most general of details. Then he opened the door, and walked into the lighthouse.

On the inside it was more like a gallery. The walls were covered with objet d'arts: Paintings, etchings, carvings, collages, any style one could think of. The ground was littered with sculptures, and even the floor itself was a mosaic of abstract patterns. What was especially odd about the mass of art

was that it followed no period, no theme and really no style at all. A realist painting of a space station hung beside a child's drawing of a family sitting in their car, and beside it, fluttering gently on some barely detectable breeze, was a jagged cutout from a picture book on general mechanics.

Despite the apparently haphazard selection and ordering of items, they each had a definite purpose. Taken one by one they were useless, but it was their sequencing and their precise placement that did the trick. Taken together, the objects in each house formed pattern collections, mnemonics of the innumerable design patterns that Lauder had to work with. He didn't even think of the buildings as houses, but gave them their proper term instead: Memory palaces. If all went well, Lauder would travel through several palaces before his breakfast was done, and by the time he was finished, he would be well prepared for the day's design work, able with ease to call up from memory a myriad of patterns with a rapidity that astounded his coworkers.

The technique was old and had long since fallen out of popular favour, but Lauder had found that by privately modifying limited optic and memory augmentations he could put it to good use. It could be argued that a proper memory implant would do just as well, but they were so expensive that Lauder hadn't been able to afford one at the outset. Once he'd finally made enough money to buy one, he found that he didn't much want it. The mnemonic linking techniques stood him in good stead. And besides, there were other reasons why he wanted to come here.

He travelled through the gigantic tower at high speed, slowing only to momentarily inspect a few of the newer sequences. Once done, he flickered back to the door and left the tower, intending to travel to the next one in line.

Except that the paths didn't lead there anymore. There was nothing left of the original pathways except faint, thin lines. The new paths, glowing and

pulsating, stretched across the land and into the distance, towards dark clouds and darker territory. Lauder looked around and saw that the paths to every one of the other palaces had reconfigured themselves accordingly. They all led straight into the shadowlands.

Lauder sighed and rubbed his eyes. The palaces were his memory, but the paths were, quite literally, his thoughts. And if he didn't do something about this, he knew he was going to have a very rough time.

There sounded a faint but insistent beeping noise, and Lauder vanished.

He came to in the kitchen. The beeps were issuing from his oven, which had heated up to the proper temperature. Lauder opened his fridge, took out a couple of prepared sandwiches, unwrapped them and put them on a metal tray, then slid the tray into the oven. This same process could be achieved in ten seconds by a microwave, but Lauder didn't care. He needed the slow mornings, not only to familiarize himself with the pattern data, but to deal with crises like the one now looming on the horizon. He checked on the coffee, which he had set to an extremely slow drip, and found that the pot was half ready. He'd have enough time for what he needed to do, without having to break routine.

He sighed again, and steeled himself. He hated having to do this. But already he could feel the darkness creeping into his conscious thoughts, like drops of ink into water. The very dread at having to go back into the other world and face the shadowlands told him that he'd better do it while he still could.

He looked at the plasma screen again. The scenery was the same, and gave him some small comfort. He unfocused, activated the implants, and after a moment's disorientation he was inside.

The sky was overcast now, full of menacing clouds. There was noticeably less light among the palaces, and the pulsing pathways, all of them leading to the same shapeless void, did not ease his mind.

The pathways were an abstraction, he knew, but they were close to the real thing. He was looking at the actual neural pathways in his brain, as near as he could ever get to true self-analysis. Were he to let enough time pass, he would find himself propelled down the paths and into the murky depths of depression, pulled by the unseen hand of his deeper self. And once he had been sucked in, there was no easy way back, except to survive the best he could until the paths allowed him safe return. It was absolute hell.

He'd managed to avoid it for weeks now, with proper diet, exercise, enough sleep, the right amount of challenging work, and a host of little self-congratulatory acts he performed whenever he could: Smiling at his success in some tiny little task, buying good food for himself, silently reciting mantras of positivity and cheer whenever he felt a downturn. And it had done him good. He felt strong, and very annoyed that his mind was trying to take him down that ugly route.

If he got stuck in the shadowlands, the palaces back here would start to fade, until, if it took long enough, he would have to rebuild most of them from the ground up. The thought of all that work reduced to rubble pushed him beyond annoyance and frustration, and made him feel very angry indeed.

And somewhere in the midst of that anger, the realization came to him that perhaps this time he could successfully fight back.

There had been times, so many times, where he tried and failed. But not always. And he'd done well for so long, built up so much strength...

He decided to stop analyzing it. The more he thought about it, the more he'd fear the failure, and worry about the extra expenditure of energy when he might need it all for the onset of depression. If this went wrong, he'd be utterly powerless.

He stood very still, took one last look at the palaces and at the ever-growing shadowlands that threatened to engulf them, then closed his eyes. Back in the real world, his body tensed up and activated a little-used function of his brain implants, one used only in dire need. It was a wetware reset.

The world grew black. He could feel the pulsating warmth of the path he stood on, and hear the crackling sounds as the shadowlands, with glacial speed and inexorability, tore up all that he had created. He quieted his mind, emptied it as best he could, and waited.

For how long he stood there, he didn't know, but at least he heard it. The small but unmistakable trickle of water. The trickle turned to a gurgle, which escalated to a steady drip, a pour, a gushing that got louder and louder, until at last it seemed as if he were standing in the middle of a massive river, its overflowing torrents washing away everything in their path. He felt nothing on him, no pressure, but yet the sound got even louder, as if he were standing on the breaking point of a tsunami that held, held, held ... and now crashed down, like a sweeping hand of God, clearing the lands at last.

The sound faded away. He stood stock still, not daring to move. Any action on his part could reawaken neural paths that had to be left alone, and the reset could only be done once in a row without risking his very mind in the process.

It was a faint but unmistakable scent that helped him rejoin the world: He smelled the freshness of the land after rain, the olfactory confirmation that everything had been washed clean. There would be no more reassurances, he knew. He took a deep breath, and opened his eyes.

The swamp had returned in place of the desert, and all the landscape had a decidedly drenched look. In the distance, the flags from the castle spires hung limp and heavy. The sealine at the promontories had definitely risen.

He took in these details in brief desperation, trying to prove to himself that the shadowlands had been washed away without having to look in their actual direction. But it didn't last; he had to look.

They were gone. They had been eliminated. The skies were clear all around; the void had, for lack of a better word, vanished; and all the pathways that had once led to oblivion were washed clean, not disappeared but left inert, unused, dim.

The path he stood on was straight and narrow, leading only to a focal point on a nearby hill, where Lauder saw that it crisscrossed with a number of other paths that all led safely to a palace. Aside from the reappearance of swampland, the palace grounds and buildings seemed safe and undamaged.

Lauder felt immense relief. The only worry that remained was what he'd done in the real world. The reset played havoc with his head, and would at times activate neural pathways that probably should have been left untouched. It also broke his safeguards, so he wouldn't return to consciousness even if he'd been in an accident. Most of the time his behaviour bore passable similarity to his daily routine, so he fervently hoped he hadn't done anything stupid like take off his clothes and walk naked to work.

The world faded, replaced by reality. Lauder found himself lying on the floor in a fetal position. He got up, brushed off his clothes and looked around. Everything seemed in order. Better than that, even. The sandwiches had been taken from the oven - using the oven mitts, thankfully, so his fingers were unblistered - and put on the kitchen table alongside a coffeecup and some juice in a carton.

Lauder was flooded with relief. All had gone well. It was amazing. And nobody was pointing, taking pictures, covering their children's eyes, or anything.

He sat at the table, mind awash with gratitude toward nothing in particular. Impulsively he reached for the sandwich and nibbled on it. It'd be a good day, he thought. And the sandwich was just right. He was just about to head out for work when he grabbed the coffeecup and took a big swallow, and in that instant realized two things: one, that the coffeepot was still full on the stove, and two, that an open canister of the antabus-laced armor rig hydraulic fluid stood on the kitchen table.

Terms

We have an offer for you. Wealth, comfort, anonymity and safety. No more running, no more worries of whether this organization to which you belong will destroy you. A new life.

Vania leaned back in her chair and rubbed her eyes. She'd been feeling cranky and feverish all day, and this really wasn't helping.

The message had come from "Jocasta Meliaan", whom the message identifiers verified as being a low-ranking member of Kaalakiota. It was possible to do a search through KK's database - they kept their employment records open to the general public - but Vania already knew she would find no one there by that name. Jocasta didn't exist. She was a facade for the Caldari State forces.

We know you're close to the leader. This is a terrorist organization you're involved with, and while they're ostensibly improving worker conditions, they are in fact working against the Caldari State. All you will ever accomplish with this group is more bloodshed and more violence. The recent freighter loss alone killed tens of thousands.

All we ask is that you help an agent of ours get close to your leader. We will get the person into your organization and you will take over from there. No one but you will ever know who this agent is; no one will ever link you to the agent's presence.

This is the best way to defuse the situation without undue harm, and the only way that you and your companions will make it through alive.

Vania shook her head and deleted the message. She couldn't for the life of her imagine what would make these people think she could be swayed their way. Yes, she'd attached herself to Melarius, and yes, if she looked deep inside, she'd probably find the motivation to be self-preservation rather than morality or love. The factory floors had held little future, certainly. But neither did turncoating.

She got up, put on some warmer clothes and headed out into the hallways. They were traveling on a small industrial ship, modified to accommodate various pieces of stealth and communications equipment, and outfitted with excellent medical facilities in case of combat casualties. There was enough space for just over a thousand people, though their rations would keep at most a few hundred going.

Vania headed for the ops room. The metal walkways echoed under her footsteps, and the iron handrails were cold to the touch. There was always a chill in the air, and too much dust and metal filings in the corners. The medical facilities were well stocked, but with these kinds of living arrangements, and in such an enclosed space, colds and illness remained an endless source of frustration.

Most of the people she passed on her way there were other ex-factory workers, though there were some that had a distinct air of bureaucracy around them. She found herself wondering which ones were potential traitors, but closed off that line of thought. Paranoia wouldn't do her any good.

In the ops room, Melarius was crouched over tactical maps, discussing engagement tactics with Genharis Yuvoka. The latter was Melarius's right-hand man and a former Kaalakiota employee who had forsaken his masters for loyalty to a higher ideal.

Both men stopped talking when Vania entered. She walked directly to Melarius - one of few who could do such a thing, since he was flanked by a dozen armed guards at all times - planted a kiss on his cheek and asked how things were going.

"Not too good," Melarius said. There were dark patches under his eyes, and his voice had the choked throatiness of someone who'd inhaled too much cold, infected air. Vania knew how he felt.

"I heard we were getting more and more support," she said. "Especially after that freighter was blown up."

"We are," he said. "I'd be surprised if we don't pull in at least a few thousand heads. Amazing how death affects the minds of the living."

"So what's next?" Vania asked.

"That's our business," Genharis said. She glared at him, and he returned the stare.

"Rallying support," Melarius said. "That's all we're doing now. We've got most of our equipment in place, and what we need is manpower, committed manpower. That includes both of you, by the way. The last thing I need are ego fights in ops."

"She shouldn't even be here at all," Genharis muttered.

"Then why don't you make me go, big boy?" Vania said. "I've seen used tampons with more backbone than you."

"Right, thanks, enough," Melarius said. "Genharis, cool it. We're not going over this again. She's here, and she stays."

Vania gave Genharis the finger, but Melarius turned to her. "And you. Can you keep it under wraps for now, please? I'm letting you stay here because I gave up on arguing against it, but if you can't let us work you have no place in this room. It's hard enough planning a revolution without having a loose cannon firing off at everyone around me."

"Sir," Vania said and gave him a mock salute, then leaned in and gave him a kiss, appearing completely unperturbed. "Anyway, I'll head off, let you big boys deal with the big issues. But if you get blown up too, don't come crying to me."

She left the ops room and started slowly walking back towards her quarters, but a moment later she heard rapid footsteps approaching. She turned and saw Genharis walking up to her.

"You witch. You harpy," he said, sputtering in anger. "Do you have any idea what we're dealing with? Do you think you can just waltz in there, spread your poison and walk right back out?"

She began to reply, but he grabbed the neckline of her shirt and held taut, shaking her with his fury. "Melarius hasn't slept in gods know how long, and he's consumed with anger and sorrow over the freighter incident. The last thing he needs is comments from someone who has no responsibility, no rights to be here and no one to answer to."

Vania smiled, and stuck her hands in her pockets. "And this is going to help him how?"

Genharis subsided a little at that. "All right," he said, letting go of her shirt. "Okay. I know, it's-"

He got no further, as Vania pulled a small knife out of her pocket, grabbed hold of Genharis and with surprising force slammed him against the

nearest metal wall. Before he could break her grip she had moved right up against him, the point of her knife resting against his stomach, the forearm of her other hand resting on his throat. The people who walked past, survivors of years at the Caldari factories and industrial plants, pointedly ignored them.

"It's really quite simple, Genharis," she hissed at him. "You know nothing, absolutely nothing about what I've gone through to get here. You have no idea what it took for me even to get a job at the factory, or what I was forced to do before then. So don't you dare think you can get high and mighty with me. This is where I am, and this is where I'm staying, and if you get in my way I will kill you."

She removed her arm from his throat, but held the knife in place.

"You can only think of yourself, can't you?" Genharis said quietly.

"Nobody else will," she said, backing off and putting the knife back in her pocket. For a moment she was hit with a strong sense of nausea and vertigo, but she fought it off, and Genharis didn't seem to have noticed. She glared at him and stalked off.

It wasn't too long after that Vania went in for her regularly scheduled body scan. When they'd gotten this ship, and when the Brotherhood had started growing in numbers, ops had decided that everyone should go in for regular checks. People's health was bad enough as it was without the risk of adding some new and disgusting infectious disease to the mix. Vania herself had been feeling increasingly worse; the onsets of vertigo and nausea had grown more common, and to top it off she felt a constant ache in her bones. She was starting to feel like an old lady, and she hated every minute of it.

So when the scan results came in, she was looking forward to figuring out what was wrong and how it could be fixed. That feeling lasted right up until the moment where she read the first line on the results monitor, the line that gave her a diagnosis, the line that changed everything.

Then she read further on, and everything changed again.

"I'm pregnant."

She had been avoiding Melarius ever since the results came in. He'd been so caught up in planning the rebellion that he hadn't even noticed. At one level Vania was frustrated at that, at his constant prioritization of the masses over her, but she knew that he couldn't be faulted for it. And besides, it had given her some much-needed time to think about the future.

They were in his quarters now, sitting at a table in the kitchen section. He had a cup of coffee; she had a glass of tri-filtered water. The lights were too bright.

He took a sip of his coffee. "I'm happy, you understand," he said. "I'm very happy. I have no energy left, no energy at all, but if I did, I'd be jumping around and yelling like a fool."

She smiled at that, and put his hand on his. "There's more," she said.

"Twins?" he asked.

She gave a quick, explosive laugh, almost a bark. "No, no. Not twins. But more than a handful."

"I don't understand."

"The baby has defects."

His free hand froze in place, holding the cup halfway to his face. "Defects."

"Congenital defects both mental and physical. It's called Predicatus Ingvarius. The baby'll be fine for the first few months, but then its health will start to deteriorate rapidly. It'll eventually stabilize at a non-lethal level, but not before it suffers irreversible damage."

"How bad?" Melarius asked.

"Nobody knows. The first year or two will be filled with him contracting every illness known to man, but he should pull through. Mental deficiency's a given, so's crippling bouts of pain, and only a small percentage avoids a wheelchair. Chances are he'll be able to participate in life to some degree - he won't be comatose - but how much he'll be able to understand and communicate, well, it depends purely on luck."

"It's a he?"

She sighed. "Yes. It's a he."

Melarius ran his fingers through his hair. "Gods in heavens."

"I don't know how we're going to handle it, at least not while we don't have a proper base. The med facilities on this ship can handle regular illnesses, but they're not even close to dealing with this sort of thing. The databanks can diagnose it, but no more. I-"

"How far along are you?" he said.

"Beg pardon?"

"In the pregnancy."

She blinked. "Uh, a few weeks."

"So there's still time," he said, half to himself.

Vania felt herself grow very cold. "Time for what, exactly?"

He visibly steeled himself, and held on firmly to her hand. "To abort the child."

"We are not aborting my baby."

"Vania-"

"We are not aborting my baby."

"Look, if you think about this-"

"We are not aborting my baby."

"Vania, in each life there must be great sacrifices. We as a people-"

"Oh, for crying out loud!" she yelled. "Don't use that voice, not ever again. This is me you're talking to, not an assembly of workers on a factory floor."

Melarius kept going, "Do you have any idea what kind of life he's going to lead here? Because I don't. I don't know where I'm going to be in a week, if I even live that long. You've seen what this kind of life does to us, normal people in good health. Can you even imagine bringing a sick child into it?"

What kind of people are we if we consciously allow someone to suffer through all the things we have to go through?"

"By the time I have the baby, things will be different," Vania said.

"They certainly will. At best I'll be hip-deep in organizing labor unions, governmental committees and militias, running around while my child languishes in its lonely crib. More likely I'll be on the run, me and you and everyone else here, constantly fighting the State. There'll be no money, no proper or consistent health care, and no time even to raise our child, let alone take care of its myriad needs. What'll we do if we have to go underground for weeks at a time? Could you sit there and watch a sick infant cry and scream night after night after night, knowing that its pain won't ever stop and that you can do nothing to help it?"

"Don't you dare make me into the villain here," she said. "You don't want this because of the child's well-being; you want to abort it, for gods' sakes. All you see is a political liability and a threat to your precious rebellion. This thing you started has already caused the deaths of countless people, including the hundreds of thousands burned up, flash-frozen or suffocated when that freighter blew up."

"Don't you bring the freighter into this," he said.

"Why not? Does it hurt? Does it hurt, Melarius?"

"You don't understand-"

"How can you care about the lives of people you've never even met, and not care about the one single life you are responsible for? How does that work? Do you need to be a politician to make sense out of that one? Which mask are you wearing now, Mister Politician?"

"You don't understand. You don't understand." Melarius was looking elsewhere now, up at the ceiling or down at the floor, anything but meet Vania's gaze.

"What don't I understand? That you want to lose one more life on your road to fame?"

"Why does this even matter to you?!" he shot back. "Yes, this is our child! Yes, if I could change things so that it wouldn't have a twisted, horrible life, I would. But I can't! I can't just sit here with you and pretend that everything's going to be okay, because I know it won't and you know it too. It's an ugly and terrible thing, but it's the truth. Why can't you accept that?"

"Because I'm the child's mother, that's why!" she said.

He threw up his hands. "And that trumps everything! That's the long and the short of it right there, isn't it? I can say anything I like, explain the reality of our situation a thousand times, and it still won't matter, will it? You say I'm ruled by logic, fine, let's say I am. You're ruled by emotions. Will your love cure our child? No, it won't. Will your love keep it healthy and happy and pain-free? No, it won't. The only thing your love will do is create a human being whose only role in this short and terrible life will be to suffer."

She didn't respond, but sat quite still, occasionally drying a tear from her eyes. Eventually she said, in a low and quavering voice, "This is the first time I have anything to live for beside myself. I am not giving that up."

"Vania-"

"I know I'm selfish. I know. That's how I am; that's how I function. I never pretended to be anything else. I left everything behind when I followed you, because I thought I'd find something greater to live for than myself, but in

the end I did it for the same reason I do everything else: For me, and me only. This baby will change that."

"This baby will make you a martyr. All it does is let you transfer that selfish focus from yourself to our son, and that's not fair on anyone. If you want to work out your issues, you have to do it starting with yourself, not on someone else by proxy, and least of all on a chronically ill child."

Melarius moved his chair closer to Vania's, and continued, "We'll try again later. When it's all settled down, however many months or years that takes, we'll try again. I'm not opposed to starting a family; it's a big step but it's one that I'd like to take. But it needs to be on terms we're both happy with."

"That's all it's about, isn't it?" Vania said. "Terms."

"I guess so."

She dried her eyes and stood. "I think I had better leave now."

"Okay. We'll talk again later."

She turned and, without saying another word, left the quarters.

She stayed away from him for a few days after that, and when they did pass by one another, they didn't say a word. At last she sent him a message asking him if he would change his mind. He replied:

Absolutely not. I'm sorry.

When she received that reply, she stared at it for a good long time before deleting it. Then she started writing a new letter, addressed to a Jocasta Meliaan, with the subject line "Your offer." The letter began:

I'm going to need the finest medical care.

Winter Came While You Were Away

It was sunny, and rather warm despite the encroaching fall. Scyldie, having been cleared past the guards at the iron gates, walked through the yard and up to the house's front door. She stood there for a moment, closing her eyes and drawing a deep breath.

The door was made of metal, and separated in the middle with a line that curved slightly at the ends. This kind of explicit ornamentation was common among the elite of the Sarpati extended family, who liked to flaunt their loyalty and heritage pride. On this planet, under Serpentis control, it never hurt to advertise your allegiance.

Scyldie's knock reverberated through the door but was met with no response. For a moment she wondered if all this trouble had been for nothing, if she was going to be turned away at the final checkpoint. It would be a bitter relief.

Then the door opened, sliding soundlessly apart. Inside was quite a homely apartment, full of furniture that looked like it had been in the possession of the same family for a number of generations. Scyldie walked in. The door closed behind her.

The smell of tea drifted in from a nearby room, as did murmured voices. Scyldie slowly walked in that direction.

It turned out to be the parlour, where two women sat drinking from thin porcelain cups. One was settling nicely into her middle age, while the other looked as old and worn as the furniture.

There was a third chair, and a small table that held a tray of biscuits, a tea pot and an extra cup. The two women did not look her way when she entered, but finished the muted conversation they were having. They then put their cups down on the table, folded their hands in their laps, and stared at Scyldie.

She was about to say something, but checked herself and stayed quiet. Eventually the younger of the two women, who Scyldie knew was called Verdinia, spoke in a matronly voice.

"Do take a seat, dear," she said. "Would you like something to drink?"

Scyldie sat, picked up the empty cup and held it towards the pot. "Please," she said. Verdinia leaned over, picked up the pot and poured. From the corner of her eye, Scyldie saw the other woman stare at her.

It felt like a bit of an anticlimax, after all the layers of security, bribes and sweet-talk she'd had to get through. But then, Scyldie thought, these women would be well aware of the effort needed to see them. Besides, she had a good feeling that behind those facades lay steel jaws and steel minds, and her intuition rarely led her wrong.

"Nice weather outside," Verdinia said.

"So far," Scyldie replied and, before she could stop herself, added, "We're in for a storm."

The two women glanced at one of the windows. Golden sunrays pierced the curtains and lit the room.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Scyldie added quickly.

"Wasn't your fault," the other woman replied. Her name was Aursula, and she reminded Scyldie of an old schoolteacher. "And it was a while back now. We've gotten over it."

"I'm sure you have." Scyldie took a sip of the tea. It was hot, and very strong. "I mention it both for its own sake, because I think that paying one's respects is important, and also because I don't want my proposition to seem inappropriate."

"I'm sure whatever proposition you make will be quite appropriate, dear," Verdinia said, not quite disguising the amusement in her voice.

Scyldie ignored the sarcasm, took a deep breath and said, "There are two of you. There used to be three, before the accident. I want to fill that gap." When the two women didn't comment, she plunged onward. "I know who you are. I know that your husbands are men of power in this organization, but that they haven't quite risen to the top and so neither have you. I know you've had a fall from grace as of late, what with you being diminished. I can help you with that."

"Do you feel diminished?" Aursula asked Verdinia, ignoring Scyldie.

"Not at the moment," Verdinia replied. "Should I?"

"Apparently."

"Well, I'll be."

Scyldie's nerve finally broke. "Look, I want to help you two, and as it happens I've got quite a lot to offer. My husband is currently on a very important mission, and once he's done he'll be in a position to take us all to the top. I'm not a liar, nor pretending I'm someone I'm not."

Aursula retorted, "You use a lot of fancy words, young lady, and people who use fancy words tend to be hiding behind them. I see no reason why we should give you anything."

"Except a cup of tea," Verdinia interjected. "One must be civil."

"Yes, of course," Aursula said. She took a sip from her own cup, then put it back on the table and, turning to Scyldie, laced her fingers together on the chair's armrest and said, "First of all, I'm sure you are who you are, whoever that is. I believe the last person who tried to gain entry on false pretences found themselves leaving this house in ... three, was it?" She glanced to Verdinia.

"Four, dear," Verdinia said.

"Four pieces, thank you. In separate bags. Second, though, I'm not sure you even know what you're talking about. Have we advertised for help? Have we actively sought your assistance, your interference in the way we run our business?"

"You didn't have to. Word among those who know is that you're already one person short."

"Do you believe everything you're told?" Aursula asked.

Scyldie fixed her with a glance that she hoped appeared more confident than she felt. "Only the things worth hearing," she said.

Aursula fell silent at that.

"What have you heard, dear?" Verdinia said, while dipping a biscuit into the tea.

Scyldie reached for another biscuit, nibbled on it a bit, then said to Verdinia, "Your husband is the premier accountant in the firm, and as everyone knows, accountants for people like us are worth their weight in megacyte."

"I like how you said 'people like us'. That was nice. I feel closer to you already," Verdinia said.

"But his problem is that he has nowhere to go. He's risen to the top of a section that's largely self-contained, and his power stems from the insight and inside knowledge he has over the workings of the organization, not from his own authority. If he gains allies in other sections then he can become immensely powerful, but if he's left without enough friends then his enemies won't think twice about muscling him out."

"My goodness," Verdinia said, and dipped her biscuit into the tea again.

"Your husband, on the other hand," Scyldie said, turning to Aursula, "is very much in a position to command other people. The way he managed to bridge the gap between our administration and internal security departments is quite admirable, and I know he has the respect both of his men and of Raikanen and Tuvan. But that isn't enough."

"Is anything enough with you?" Aursula said, but without much spirit.

"Since he's caught between those two men, both of whom are some of the highest-ranking individuals we have, he's rendered powerless. His own authority doesn't extend outside of his own cadre, and while he's got some leeway in how to interpret the commands he's given from higher up, he's basically their Slaver hound. He says what he is told to say. He's managed to maintain this appearance of power because of the loyalty he's gained with the troops during his years of fighting for us, but with the new people coming in, all that his presence will engender is resentment. He doesn't have their loyalty, and he's in no position to gain it."

Scyldie took another bite of the biscuit, forced herself to pause a bit. The other two waited, looking unimpressed but listening nonetheless.

"Back when you were three, that was different. You had someone else, a woman who was a little older than I was, who could stay in touch with the newer recruits and constantly refresh your power base. Now, I'm not implying that she wasn't good enough, or that her actions somehow landed you in this predicament-

"Yes, you are," Aursula said.

"But she made some mistakes, and you stopped rising. And now with her loss you risk a fall. As much as you may want to return to the old days with her, that's not an option anymore. Word among the young recruits is that you're on your way out, and while that can be changed, it has to be dealt with in an active manner."

"You seem to be an active person yourself," said Aursula. "Even if you can't read the clouds for naught."

"I look at things the way they are, including the weather I should add, and not the way I'd like them to be," Scyldie said. "I use that dichotomy for motivation."

"Do you now, dear?" Verdinia said.

"I mean, I see what I want, and I work hard to get it. I don't sit and wait for things to get better. The world doesn't owe me anything."

"Damn right," Aursula said, nodding.

Verdinia, other the other hand, did not nod, nor say anything. She merely stared at Scyldie for a little too long. At last she added, "Well, it's all a matter of perspective, isn't it? You can take a single event and think of it in one of two ways, good or bad. The experience is all in your mind. It may appear terrible to others, but to you it could be the start of something good."

Scyldie filed that away for later thought. "Maybe, but more often than not it's far too tempting to look at life through rose-tinted glasses, instead of the cold and harsh place it's turning into."

"Do you have any children?" Verdinia asked.

Scyldie blushed, and said, "No. We haven't quite gotten to that part yet."

"I suspected as much, dear. Now, tell us what it is you believe you can do for us."

Scyldie shifted in her chair. This was the selling point; this was the moment of truth. "My husband is a pilot for the Serpentis forces," she said. "Top of his class, excel and merits, crew is loyal to the death. He's very popular with the other captains as well."

"Good for him," Verdinia murmured.

"He has that mix of leadership and communication that makes for a good agent in our organization," Scyldie said. "He's ready to stand up for his co-pilots when needed, but he knows when to stay seated. People look to him for validation, and accept his authority even when he doesn't have it. And nobody dislikes him, or says so outright, at least."

"Sounds like a good man," Verdinia said. "I hope you two have a nice life together. But why are you telling us this?"

"Because we can help each other. My husband needs better contacts, particularly after he's done with this mission. Otherwise he might stagnate, or worse, run the risk of associating with the wrong people. And he can swing the younger recruits your way, persuade them that your husbands are the ones they should support and respect."

"So we're not the wrong people?" Aursula said. "Well, that's a relief."

Scyldie bit her tongue, took a slow breath and said, "I think it's time you took in a third woman in this coven, and it should be me."

Verdinia had a sip of tea, smiled prettily at Scyldie and said to her, "No, dear. I think it's time to kill you."

In the stunned silence that followed, Verdinia said, "You clearly know a lot about this organization, and yet in your hubris you think that it needs you. I remember that feeling, from years past. But you've now put yourself in a position where you've revealed your intentions without having a shred of proof that you can back them up. What happens if your husband fails in this important mission of his? You know full well that we can't associate with failures. So you get turned down, and you become our enemy, likely as not to make your husband poison our cause. We can't have that, dear. We can't have that at all."

"We don't even know if he'll make it back alive, let alone successful," Aursula said. "Unless we're sure of his position and power, we couldn't possibly consider offering you a place here. What would we do if he screws up and loses the loyalty of his people? Should we keep you around as a pet?"

"No, of course not," Scyldie said. "He won't lose. I know it. He won't. And he can be very valuable to you. We both can."

"Look, dear, I'll be completely honest with you. We do keep tabs on some of the young officers and their families, to make sure that they don't get too big for their shoes and try to fill ours instead. And now we know that you're an extremely ambitious young woman, one who managed to find her way to us. We can't have you begrudging us our position, which you will if your husband achieves anything less than stellar success and we end up turning you down. It's nothing personal; simply the rules of the game."

"Look, my husband is going to be fine! He knows what he's doing, and I have faith in him."

"Faith isn't enough," Aursula said.

"Then call it intuition. Or, I don't know, deeper knowledge."

"There's a lot of things you claim to know," Aursula said.

"I know- ... yes. But that is how it is."

"What assignment was it that your husband was going out on, dear? The secret one that brought all this about."

When Scyldie hesitated, Verdinia continued, "You know that we can find this out. I'd rather it be from you."

"Well ... he's been sent after someone who keeps going to our meet-up points and attacking our ships."

"Someone?"

"A capsuleer," Scyldie said.

The two older women looked at each other, then back at Scyldie, but said nothing. For a moment they all sat in total stillness, broken only by the noise of the wind trying to force its way through the windows.

"You didn't mention that, dear," Verdinia said in a gentler tone.

"I didn't realize it mattered," Scyldie said, adding a slight tone of pique to disguise her sudden nervousness. "He was quite unwilling to tell me about the particulars."

"Tell you what," Aursula said. "When you next hear from your husband, see if he's in one piece, then contact us again. Someone who can take on capsuleers is someone we would be interested in, success or not."

Scyldie nodded and stood up. "I think it's best I go now."

"I agree, dear. Do let us know how your husband does."

"I will." Scyldie headed towards the exit, and the older women followed her. When she got to the door, she turned to them and said, "You know, I'm surprised you were this hostile to the idea. I can't even imagine the things your last companion went through when proving herself."

Verdinia and Aursula looked at each other with the strangest of expressions, then looked back at her. Aursula said, "That's right. You can't," and waved her hand in front of a small scanner tab. The door opened.

As Scyldie stepped out, something about their expressions nagged at her, as did Verdinia's earlier comments about perspectives on horrible events. She looked over her shoulder to the women and said, "By the way, how did she die, again?"

Aursula smiled, or at least showed her teeth, and said, "That's a very good question. Let's hope you never have to find out. " And the doors closed.

Scyldie stood outside, a new wind whipping at her clothes, and felt the darkened bloom of realization unfurl in her mind.

She would have to push hard at this, all the way through, and ensure that she could work with these people until she'd get to a position where she could dominate them. Otherwise she would never be safe. And it would all depend on her hunches and insight, more than ever before. Intuition or death.

Another gust of wind blew by, giving her a chill. She pulled her coat tighter and looked up at the sky, and what she saw made her burst out in laughter.

It had begun to snow.

Summer Breeze

Nedar watched through his screen as the enemy ship burst into flames. It was done; it was finally done. This Serpentis meetup point would be safe, at least for a while.

He turned to his second-in-command, an intent and serious man named Raze, and said, "There are two encrypted messages waiting on my personal line. One is to Command, the other is not. Send them both." Raze nodded, gave a sharp salute, and left.

"Sir, sir, look! Reinforcements!"

"Oh, thank heavens," Nedar said. The capsuleer was pounding their ships. Half of the man's drones were gone, thanks to Eron's sacrifice, and his ship looked like it was falling apart, but he was still tearing Nedar and his compatriots to pieces.

In popped three Serpentis ships, providing webifiers, warp scramblers and target jammers.

"Tell them to go directly for the pilot. We'll deal with the rest of these drones."

Raze got on the intercom. The ships set course for the capsuleer's frigate.

Eron came in close, as was his usual tactic, and the capsuleer started to web his ship. Over the intercom, the crew aboard Nedar's vessel heard Eron's feedback. "All right, I'm going to need some backup once I start rotating him, and-... wait, what ... I can't break his lock! I can't break his lock!"

As Nedar watched on the overhead display, the capsuleer released a group of drones, all of whom went directly for Eron's ship. The capsuleer was still firing at Eron, past his shields and now into armor, burning it away and getting close to the hull.

"Focus on the drones, people!" Nedar said. "We let them loose, we can forget about winning this."

"And Eron, sir?" Raze asked in a quiet voice.

"Eron will buy us some time," Nedar replied, equally quietly.

In front of them, the capsuleer and his drones continued to rend Eron's ship apart, until at last it exploded in a fiery blaze.

They were being pummelled. Overhead, the ship's speakers crackled. It was Fremer. "I'm going down!" he shouted.

Nedar switched the view over to Fremer's ship. It was falling to bits under the capsuleer's fire, but stayed on course.

"Fremer, get out of there," Nedar said.

"No. No retreat," Fremer said.

"I mean it, get out! We'll deal with the brass later."

"Sorry, man," Fremer said. "Tell Marsha I love her."

Nedar had to choke back his emotion. "I ... will. Absolutely."

As his friend went up in flames, Nedar turned on the intercom again and said, "Eron, you're lagging behind. Get your ass in there right now and deal with it."

The speakers crackled a "Sir!" in response.

We're about to head into battle, Nedar wrote, and I cannot go any further with you. I am so sorry. He was sitting in his cramped quarters, his frigate en route to the meetup point. If the capsuleer's combat pattern held, he'd be coming there shortly after. Intelligence indicated that all they needed was one proper victory, one good offensive, and the assailant would never return.

We are going alone into these dark places, and it has become too dangerous for anyone to follow. After we're done here, if we make it out alive at all, the game changes. I will be envied and hated. There will be people out for my blood and I cannot, I will not, let you get caught in the crossfire. I'm going to be associating with some very dangerous people from now on, and if they find out that you're connected to me, they might decide to harm you. I couldn't bear having that happen. Take care, Aredia.

He pondered what else to add, but felt completely empty. They'd had some good times, and she'd been of great help to him, but that was about it.

He saved the letter, ensured that it was encrypted and prepared it for delivery along with a status note to Command, but did not send it. Once they'd emerged victorious from the battle he'd have them transmitted, but not until then.

It was the day of the attack, in the docking ports, and Raze came running after Nedar. "Sir!" he shouted, "Wait, sir!"

"Raze, for gods' sakes," Nedar said. "Use my name. We're going into combat in a few hours, and the last thing anyone wants to hear before dying is an honorific."

"Sorry about that," Raze said, trying to catch his breath. "Got your message this morning. Just finished the tech runs. You were right. Current redirected in an engine subsection. I'd never have caught it if you hadn't asked for deep checks."

Nedar rubbed his eyes. "Great. Wonderful. Just what we needed."

"Who was it?" Raze asked.

Nedar glared at him. "What makes you think I know?"

"You asked for these checks, so I know you suspected something. Who was responsible?"

"Does it matter?" Nedar said. "We found the error, Raze."

"It matters and you know it. We don't have time to report this, not now, with all the bureaucracy and issues that'd arise. I'm not giving up my chance to

go after the capsuleer, and I'm sure as hell not going to do it with a cutthroat flying somewhere beside me."

"Look, we ... ah, hell," Nedar said. "It was Eron. Or someone from his crew. I don't know if he'd had the knowhow to do it himself, but he'll have given the order."

"No bloody news there," Raze said, his face red from anger. "Man's been at your throat for ages."

"He has. I just wish it hadn't come to this," Nedar said.

"Well, it has. And now we need to retaliate."

"What?"

"Anyone who does something like that doesn't deserve to live. I'm sorry, but it's that simple. I'm going over there, and I'm going to break his ECMs. He won't find out until he starts them."

"Raze-

"You know I can do this," Raze said. "I've got engineering background, I run all the checks on our ship, and I know exactly what to do with an ECM to make it conk out. All I need is your permission."

Nedar leaned up against the metal wall, and looked up at silent stars. "All right," he said at last. "All right. Do it."

As he returned to his quarters, thinking about the attack tomorrow morning, Nedar noticed Fremer, and walked over to him.

"Hey there," Nedar said.

"Oh, hey. You still up?"

"Yeah, had to take care of some business. Listen, uh ... about what you mentioned earlier, with the guys. Are you quite serious about this?"

Fremer scratched the back of his head. "Yes. As a matter of fact I am."

They started walking towards Fremer's section of the compound. "When on earth did this happen?" Nedar asked him.

"Well, quite recently."

"Were you drunk? Tell me you were drunk."

"Mmm, well, uh ... no. No, I wasn't," Fremer said in a reproachful tone.

Nedar stopped, and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Please tell me you're not going to see this woman again. Please. For the love of all that is holy, please."

Fremer stammered, avoided Nedar's gaze, and scratched his neck again. "Her name is Marsha," he uttered at last.

"Oh, for gods' sakes!" Nedar yelled, and stalked away from him.

As he walked towards his own quarters, he heard Fremer call to him, "I've never felt anything quite like this!"

"Neither would if, if I'd done what you have!" Nedar yelled back, before he crossed out of earshot.

Nedar had just returned from the docking ports, and was settling down in his cabin when he received a message. It was encrypted, and not from Command. He smiled, and opened it.

It was from Aredia, who wished him good luck on his mission, and said she looked forward to hearing from him whenever he had time. She mentioned that he shouldn't worry, for even if everything would go wrong he'd still have her, and she'd use her contacts to ensure that his career wouldn't get derailed. She ended the letter by mentioning the butterflies she got when thinking of him, and said, with a little wink, "I just hope your wife doesn't find out."

He smiled again and deleted the message, then started writing a new one to Raze.

"We need to talk," Eron said.

"Sure," Nedar replied. He was on his way back to the living quarters, after an evening spent with the captains of the frigates set for next day's mission. He felt relaxed and calm, and had managed to go a full fifteen minutes without thinking of Fremer's revelation.

"Your wife is meeting with the Furies," Eron said.

Nedar kept walking, but slowed down his pace. "What are you saying?"

"Everyone knows what this mission will do for our careers, and I don't blame anyone who wants to take advantage of that. But this is wrong, Nedar. This is deeply wrong."

"How so?" Nedar said, in as neutral a tone as he could muster.

"These women are absolute terrors. They've held countless families in an iron grip for as long as I can remember. Now they've lost one from their ranks and finally have a weak spot, and we should be taking advantage of that."

"And I'm not doing that?"

"Damnit, will you stop with the questions! We can make a change here, Nedar. We truly can. But if your wife joins up with the Furies then it's all going to turn to ruin."

"Eron, are you honestly saying that the Serpentis should have revolt and treachery over strong leadership?"

Eron spat. "Not even the Serpentis deserve these women."

"Be that as it may, I'm not changing a thing. Maybe Scyldie is talking to them, maybe she isn't. But if she joins their ranks, I certainly wouldn't be disappointed."

"We will have to have a long talk about this after the mission is over," Eron said.

"There is nothing to talk about!" Nedar yelled at him. "This is how it is, Eron! Either you accept that or you don't, but your opinion on this matter really doesn't count for anything at all."

Eron said, "I'm sorry to hear that. I guess I'll just have to make it count," and stalked off.

Nedar stared after him, slowly clenching and unclenching his fists, until he was out of sight. He stood there for a long while, thinking in silence under the aimless gaze of the stars. Eventually he turned and walked off, not to the living quarters but to the docking ports. He had some currents to redirect.

The captains were sitting together, shooting the breeze and trying to relax. The night before battle always gave people the jitters, and this was worse than they'd ever faced. Regular pirate crews didn't usually pick fights with capsuleers - that task was best left to their factions' own small, elite cadre of pod pilots, or to the unlucky few assigned that duty as punishment - but for a mortal captain it was one of the best ways to win glory and respect in his organization. This particular capsuleer was considered a low-grade threat to their interests, an amateur at best, but an amateur capsuleer was still an incredibly dangerous creature. It was a secret surprisingly well-kept from the general public of the pirate factions that a head-to-head encounter with a capsuleer of even moderate talents was practically a death sentence.

So at one point, they started talking about girls they'd slept with. Nedar, piously married, refused to comment.

"Oh, come on," Eron said with something approaching rebuke. "You've got a girl on the side, I'm sure."

Nedar just grinned at that, and Eron grinned back. The conversation moved on, but to Nedar's mind, Eron stared at him for a little too long.

"Okay, okay, here," someone said. "What's the oldest you ever slept with?"

"Oh, come on!" said another.

"No, no, it's good," Eron commented. "Let's go with it." He laughed, and Nedar laughed with him.

"I've got one," Fremer said. The others immediately stopped talking, and listened. Fremer, that guileless animal, was a good captain but had about as much social intuition as a Fedo. He wasn't known to ever have been with a woman, and most people present would have bet their right eye that he never would.

"When was this?" someone asked in disbelief.

"Just recently, in fact," Fremer replied, little twitches of his mouth forming ephemeral smiles. When no one could think of anything to say, he added, "Eighty two."

Eron choked on his drink. Nedar felt his jaw drop.

"... what?" someone managed, at last.

Fremer sat up straight, defiant and blushing furiously. "Eighty two."

There was utter, dead silence in the room. Nedar could feel his heartbeat. Someone finally asked, "So, uh, was she hot?"

"She was eighty two!" Fremer said in exasperation, and his voice sounded raspy and frail.

And there they might have sat for all eternity, overcome with the vast thoughts of human endeavour, but Nedar couldn't resist. "So ... was it alright?"

"Oh yeah," Fremer said and smiled like an idiot. "She was very gentle."

He was in a call with his wife.

"So how's the mood?" she asked.

"It's pretty good. We're about to meet up for some drinks, chat a bit, you know. Lose the stress."

"Does that even work?"

"Not really. It passes the time, keeps us from getting even more nervous."

"How do you feel about the mission?" Scyldie asked him.

"About the same as you do going to the Furies, I suspect," he said with an exaggerated tremor, which she laughed at. "I love your laughter," he said.

"Thanks," she said demurely, and added, "Anyway, it's all for the good. We both succeed and we'll be on our way to power and happiness. No more insane, crazy risk missions. No more seeing that bitch Aredia."

Now it was his turn to laugh. "She's been very useful," he said, in a teasing tone of voice. "And you know she's going to be vital if either one of us gets burned."

"Oh, I'm sure she's been useful," Scyldie replied, "in all sorts of ways."

"Shame that we can't take her with us," Nedar said

"You have made sure that she won't be coming after us?" Scyldie admonished.

Nedar hesitated. "I will. I'll write her a letter and send it once the mission's a success," he said.

"I don't meddle in the way you conduct your affairs, such as they are," Scyldie said in a teasing tone, "But are you sure that once you break things off, she won't reveal everything?"

"Nah, it'll be fine. I'll write the letter in a sincere tone that'll throw her off, even if she does suspect the truth. And I'll hint quite heavily that revealing the tryst would get her into serious trouble. If she ignores that, I'll just have to have her killed."

"Pity," Scyldie said. "By the way, you really haven't told me anything about the mission, except for the target. I'm dead curious. I hope you're well prepared."

"Don't be so nosy, nosy girl," he replied in the same teasing tone, but he felt the darkness behind his voice. "It'll be fine."

"You sure, baby?" she asked.

"I have to be," he said with a sigh.

"All right," Scyldie said. "Take good care, and we'll be in touch tomorrow night."

"You bet," he said and impulsively added, "I love you. You're like a summer breeze in this cold and weary life."

She was stopped short by that, but at last replied, "I love you too, honey. I'm grateful every day for having found you, and for the fact that you became a pilot and not a writer," and hung up while he was still laughing.

Aura

Excena Foer, the star known as Aura, had an innocuous start to her show business career, being somewhat of a dancer prodigy. Her parents, Gallente workers both, strongly encouraged her on this path, and by the time she was fourteen years old she was already dancing professionally. Their dominance over her life and career rankled, though, and when she turned sixteen she broke away and started hanging out with the Mind Clash crowd; intense men whose talents and self-control on the digital field often belied volatile personalities and bloated egos. She later admitted having had some rough experiences with the more forceful competitors, but has consistently refused to elaborate. As it turned out, she was quite adept at the game herself, joining in the amateur leagues and using her natural talents for body control and utter inward focus to crush the competition.

I am here to speak about Cathedral of the Oceans, and The Book of Hours, and how they are one and the same.

It is a beautiful poem, in all its versions, and for that I am infinitely thankful, for poetry is not beautiful except by accident. You put everything into it you can, and then you let it go, trusting in your unconscious parts, the places where your eyes don't go, to have prepared it sufficiently for public scrutiny.

It ended, as all things do, in ruin. Her name had become more and more entwined with Johaan Carve, one of the leading professional competitors, and when he was caught injecting psychotropics - forbidden in Mind Clash, since the risk of panic attacks and breakdowns is a very real part of the

sport - and forced to leave the league in disgrace, she was dropped as well. Excena, who at that point had dedicated her life to the Mind Clash games, took it very hard. She kept dating Carve, but Clashers without fights are a self-destructive breed, and a descent into addiction and darkness soon followed.

She spent a few years floating around, living off past fame and unreliable friends. Every now and then there'd be a slight resurgence in popularity - most notoriously the segment Scope did on her, where she made a remarkably loquacious and thoroughly intoxicated appearance - but by and large, she was sliding further and further into hazy obscurity and disintegrating health.

Does the poem's beauty stem from the poet, then? Not in the least. People want us to be saints, but in all honesty, nobody who transcribes God's music can be a good person, not if they want to traverse the whole scale. You can be kind, but you can not be good, and even so, your kindness is not a thing in and of itself; it lives and reacts like an animal. Excena has been kind, Excena has been very kind to me, and if hearing that surprises you, you should reflect on the myriad of ways in which a young, energetic woman with more vigor than sense - and she'll forgive me for this, because she is kind - could make misery for an old man with whose life she has become intertwined. Excena has been kind, and she has told truths. Do not expect us to be good.

This all changed when she encountered the works of Itzak Barah, Amarr's foremost religious poet. While stories differ on exactly when she fell under the spell of his poetry and how swiftly it happened (Excena herself persistently maintains that she loved it right from the start, but Carve, who

she was intermittently seeing at that point, has claimed that she read only two pages of Barah's *Other People's Lives* before throwing it at his head), it is undeniable that she ended up taking a keen interest in it, to the point where she even attended reading sessions by local Amarrian scholars. Before eventually being asked to leave, as her presence there was supposedly beginning to mislead the local young clergymen, Excena had already built up a reputation for piercing insights into Barah's poetry and for her ability to restate his points in Gallentean.

As an aside, we were having dinner recently at a very nice restaurant, and we were accosted by someone. The man called Excena some vicious names for having dared to translate Cathedral, and he said that she had murdered the poem. In one swift movement she rose, grabbed him by the neck, kicked the side of his knee and spun him around, slamming him onto his back on our table. She grabbed her steak knife, clicked it up to full power and plunged it into the table right beside the man's neck, nailing him to the table by his robe. And she looked deep into his eyes and said, "That fire you feel is nothing to mine. Nothing."

Her breakthrough came when she translated Barah's opus, *Cathedral of the Oceans*, from its native Amarrian to her own Gallentean, publishing it under the title *The Book of Hours*. She would later claim that what had helped her accomplish this momentous task was her Mind Clash experience and its lessons of absolute focus and concentration, lessons which had helped her survive through years of self-abuse and narcotics.

So we know that a poet may be kind but not good, and by the same token, of course, he cannot be evil. Can we say what he is?

A poet is a chronicler. He is a recorder, trying his best to capture the music in letters. And that's wrong, entirely wrong. A poet must transcribe far more than that, not be content with the rhythms of his language.

He is a conduit, piping God's dreams to dead words. And that, too, is wrong. A poet must never presume to be the connection between God and Man.

He is a creator, showing the world how he experiences it, and thus creating it to himself. Good heavens, no. A poet has more humility than that.

Are there other opinions? Thousands. Most of them are wrong at some level, or they conflict, and yet even those at complete odds with one another fail to produce a single acceptable definition between them. Amazing.

And yet there are those here in this very room who would say that by discounting these definitions, of poet as chronicler, conduit and creator, I have failed; that they are true. And of course they are. In someone's ears they will be, but in mine they are not.

It is in fact impossible to nail down what a poet is, and thus entirely futile to claim that someone is not. We do not even play the same song; how can we possibly claim to know the mind of every orchestrator?

You may look at someone and say, "Yes, he is a poet" but you cannot look at someone and say, "No, he is not." Whether his words have meaning to you is, of course, a different matter, but that understanding is not his concern; it is yours, and we put the onus on the reader to truly read the poems, to glean their meanings.

Her translation turned her into a star. It was almost universally hailed as a masterpiece, and had religious scholars up in arms. It was a complete reworking of Barah's poem to such a degree as to render it almost unrecognizable, throwing out all the imagery, pacing and symbolism in favor of original, Gallente-centered renderings, but which nonetheless produced a piece that was remarkably similar in spirit and approach. Barah himself gave his explicit approval of the effort, and in a famous speech given to an assembly of various Amarr and Amarr-affiliated religious leaders he declared that not only was Excena's translation a near-perfect transcription of the spirit behind his original version, but that she may not be castigated, threatened or assailed for her writing. At the end of his speech he cemented this opinion by declaring a Kaoli on her person and profession, indicating that any attack on Excena's poetry or Excena's ability to express it would be considered an attack on himself and, under religious law, would be avenged as such. It was a risky move, one that could have had Barah himself put on the deathlists, but it worked, and the Kaoli was grudgingly accepted by the religious majority.

If I could write a poem without words, I would, but any time I look around I realize that God has beaten me to it; and so I commit my humble failures in the trust that they will be received in good heart by the reader. For poetry is - and here is yet another incorrect, insufficient description of the art, from a humble mortal trying to convey the godlike - poetry is a cooperation between writer and reader, for just as much as the writer attempts to float the heavens down, the reader must rise to meet them. Have you ever tried levitating? It is most difficult, I assure you.

Excena went on numerous well-publicized speaking tours, where she would read out sections of Cathedral and of other, lesser-known poems she had translated, and would speak at length of her experiences with Amarrian poetry. In stark contrast to Barah himself, who was known as a soft-spoken and calm man, Excena was a forthright and sometimes contentious speaker, entirely unafraid to offend or disagree with her listeners. The Gallente universities loved her.

And so it went, her scholastic renown rising, until the night where a group of religious zealots gained access to her drinks at the lecture's backstage room, and poisoned them with esophageal nanomachinery. The vicious little critters were programmed to gobble up a very specific kind of white mucus membrane, the type that can be found in only one place through the whole human body. The vocal cords.

Should we treat the poetry as religious screed? Absolutely not. A man of faith must be the eternal doubter, because that's the only way to distinguish God's truth through the endless barrage of lies we're faced with, but not only that; he must possess the capacity to look at the lies, look straight at them, understand them for what they are - challenges, not of your faith, but of the way you view your faith - evaluate them and understand why they question your beliefs ... and then let go of them. All they do is distract you. Do my poems have meanings to you? I'm honored. Do Excena's? She would be honored as well. But if they do not, cast them aside. Do not treat them as affronts to your faith; treat them as lies and let them go.

The world was outraged. The group of zealots was entirely unrepentant, claiming that they had not interfered with Excena's ability to create poetry

and thus not violated the Kaoli, but soon after they found themselves hauled in by Speakers of Truth and stricken off the Book of Records. Meanwhile, offers of support for Excena poured in from all ends of the universe, from scholar and journeyman alike. She was offered free health care, but the esophageal nanomachines had done a thorough job, their only remains the gossamer tendrils that hung limply on the inside of her scabbed throat. Regrowing them, and training her body to use the new set, would have taken her years, even decades of painful treatment. Cloning was not an option, either: Aside from the legal difficulty of using that procedure for regeneration - it was and remains a contentious issue in every society - it was both dangerous and expensive, and a new body would have invalidated the Kaoli and given the zealots free rein to kill her outright. Excena herself was against it, too, as she felt it would signal a surrender, a defeat in whatever battle she was engaged in with these people.

Yes, the poem is completely different. Yes, it's now Gallentean, unrecognizable to anyone who reads it solely as an Amarrian and not as a human being. The scene where the man drags the suitcase in the snow, so that its wheels don't even roll, and it just scrapes up the snow, that scene didn't belong anymore. Its replacement, the man who discovers another man in the street, crying, and it slowly dawns on him what the person did - it fits. It's beautiful. It ties everything else together, and if you excised that particular scene, you couldn't make any sense of the rest; not the imagery, not the pacing, not anything. Only a poet, whatever else they may be, can form and reform like that.

So she used the proceeds from her tours, and the money from various donors, and had a voicebox installed. The procedure was quite rare, not

only because of how incredibly agonizing the first few months could be, but of its failure rate. An astonishing 90% of recipients never gained full control over the boxes, and a full 50% could hardly use them at all. But then, 0% were ex-Mind Clash fighters and professional dancers.

In one week she could make the box hum, a sound reminiscent of a rock crusher in the slave colonies. In a month, she could speak three consecutive words; in two months, three sentences. In half a year she was speaking fluently, her only issues a lack of control over volume and pitch. And nine months after the operation, she was back to normal and beyond it, having achieved a measure of control over her voice that she had never before enjoyed. No one else had ever adapted so well to a voicebox, and it was not even thought theoretically possible. The only lasting remnant of the accident was a tendency for her voice to sound metallic, but Excena later admitted that she loved the effect and had intentionally kept her voice like that.

No drugs, and no divine inspiration. The first is the leaden darkness weighing down your eyes and the second is the wind blowing through your hands. The reader can tell when drugs have been at work, because even if by some lucky coincidence the language happens to glow, the rhythms will be dull, like lead slabs toppled onto a pavement. As for inspiration, it touches you every now and then - usually when you're least ready for it - but if you haven't put in your time, you will be unable to channel it. You will be a broken circuit, giving out only noise.

It's persistence, is what it is. Persistence and tenacity, and endless practice. This poem and this ability did not arise from nowhere, and as much as Excena would like us to believe otherwise, she has been doing this for a long time. Perhaps not in the way she does it now, perhaps only

in secret, but speaking of her as a poet it can well be said that all her efforts, seen and unseen, have safely and inexorably led her here.

Her persistence and strength of character, and her newfound vocal ability, made her a star for the third time. She was inundated with offers for public speaking, for voiceovers, even for small speaking parts in the reels. A lifetime of conflict had left her worn and aged beyond her years, which prevented her from graduating to full movie stardom, but for a while she was a fixture in the Gallentean art reel circuit.

And there came a point where, by her own admission, she started at last to think of the future. At each stage of her life she had been enraptured by the present, and while she had made a good living, she had also been entirely unconcerned about saving any of it for later years. So when that one offer, the most lucrative one of all, finally came around, she grabbed it without hesitation. It's well known that any job to do with capsuleers will bring in respectable money for the lucky, and this one was no exception. Her metallic, worn voice was perfect for the task of voiceovers for the AI on capsuleer ships. The immortal Aura was born.

So we wait and hope. We wait and see where we go from here. Will she succeed? I certainly expect so. She's a strong woman, and she will go places I have never even approached. But she will not go there unsupported.

As should be utterly clear from this little talk, I believe in Excena, in her talents and in her judgment. I give my complete sanction for her translation, and while I cannot make anyone else do the same - we are all of us

readers, and all of us the listeners of the silent music - I can ensure that they do not stand in her way.

By the power vested in me by my acknowledged status as an Amarrian religious poet, by virtue of my unblemished record both religious and secular, and before the eyes of slaves, equals, royalty and the endless God, I declare a Kaoli, a fellowship of paths, for Excena Foer and myself. Let her never be silenced. Let her never be less than a poet, burned pure in the eyes of God. Let her voice ascend to the stars.

Black Mountain

On this Earth

As the inspector was leaving her apartment, he said, "Now, you'll be sure to report anything suspicious. If there really is someone on this facility causing problems, we need to catch him before the pirates do."

"I will, I promise," Atira said. She saw the man out, closed the door after him, and rested her forehead against its cool steel with a sigh.

A lot of off-ship pirates had been disappearing in this area, and while this development was little bother for the corporate forces who paid for the colonial crime monitoring, it was starting to draw the ire of the pirate factions, who had threatened to post more patrols and even to send in their own squads of ground enforcers. The Angels in particular had made some very pointed threats, and Atira had already had to deal with some of their people.

It was known that pirate factions routinely sent out recruiters for their cause - after a few years working on a mining colony, the average worker would easily be regaled by stories of life on pirate ships or even in their own earth-bound working forces - but they were usually found out and shown the door without much incident. They could be killed in-space, where they posed a valid threat, but not on the colonies. Different rules applied in the skies and on this earth. The inspector, funded by some of the main companies, was here to sort this out before things got even uglier.

Atira started getting ready for the evening shift. Equipment was kept quite basic on the mining colony, as complex electronic repair parts could be hard to get. Atira had air-pressured taser guns with settings that defaulted to stun but could be set to deadly levels, along with a retractable metal

truncheon, a reinforced vest and other sundry equipment. She liked the tasers, which were attached to her hands and only useable by her, but they had to be aimed carefully and at a fairly stationary target. The truncheon, on the other hand, could be aimed and thrown with no hesitation. It contained ball bearings set on a tiny piston that, when the piece hit its target, would ram its momentum home even harder. A nasty feature, but the colonies were nasty places.

She pulled the truncheon from her belt, drew it out and hefted it, and tossed it a few times at a small, electronic scoreboard that hung in her living room. She got no bull's-eyes, but hit well enough that she'd have knocked a real-life target out. Satisfied with that warm-up, and certain that the evening wouldn't hold any more troubles, Atira headed out on patrol.

They strolled through the various bars, Atira and her partner. Each bar was kept as low-tech as everything else on the colony, although there were occasional pretensions to affluence. Some places leased bootleg Egones, special transmitters and receivers that played sound waves which only reached the customer's ears and that were specifically chosen to fit his tastes, or they had the similar eye-cast TV that required special ocular filters and was used mainly for sports events. These generally cropped up in the lower-level establishments, aimed as they were at people who preferred to drink alone. Most sane people tended to be put off by the sights of patrons nodding their heads to total silence or shouting sports tactics and grievances at empty air.

Other establishments relied on more corporeal attractions. It was paradoxical, but the more hands-on a place was, the more peaceful it tended to be. Due to the overwhelming amount of testosterone and aggression that suffused the mining colonies, strippers would only work in the high-level places where they could be provided with constant protection both at and off work. Prostitutes, of course, could be found everywhere, but

a year or two of living here would wear them out faster than the mining drills, and leave them with similar looks.

Equipment in bars, likewise, was kept in good shape, and included everything from holoball to miniature mind clash fields, but repair costs were so high - particularly for anything electronic - that only the more higher-class establishments even bothered with it.

It was a hard business to be in, but highly profitable if you had the talent. People drank a lot here, and fought a lot, and the bars were in a constant race to attract the first type and repel the second.

Tonight, Atira trawled the lousier bars, the ones full of people with little to lose. It was hard to know who was new and who wasn't, since teams of workers came and went on a regular basis, but you did learn to recognize types. In one of the seediest she saw some people who definitely did not look like miners, and made a mental note to check up on them. She also noticed a man, well-dressed and apparently alone, who was quite calmly sipping on his drink and not doing anything much at all apart from apparently enjoying the ambience. She filed him away for further study as well and, realizing that her partner didn't seem to have noticed the undercover pirate recruiters, decided that she might have a chance of dealing with them later using her own methods.

The evening wore on, and they were headed towards the last bar of the evening when the inspector caught up with them. There was little traffic here, and the only sounds wafting out from the bar's doors were general chatter and the clinks of pleximugs on metal tables. No music could be heard, of course, nor any sports.

"Ah, I hoped I'd find you here," he said to the pair, then turned to Atira's partner and said, "Could I speak to you for a second, please? Alone."

Atira was annoyed at the slight, but then realized that the inspector actually seemed hesitant even to look at her, as if his gaze might betray something. She felt a pang of nervousness, but said, "Hey guys, I'll just head into the bar. Come in when you're done, okay?" and went in.

Again she noticed that calm, relaxed man, sitting at his own private table and sipping his drink. She was going to walk over and ask him a few questions, but at that moment the inspector walked into the bar and said to her, in a voice far too loud and tremulous, "I need to speak with you. Right now, please."

She stared in his face, and she realized that she'd been found out. They'd discovered a corpse, or her dogtags, or a witness, or something, some kind of ruination.

She was wondering exactly what to do when the calm, well-dressed man walked past her and up to the inspector, pulled out a gun, pointed it at the inspector's head and blew his brains out all over the floor.

It was the day after, and Atira was returning home from her shift. She was puzzled, tired and getting rather paranoid.

Nobody at work had remembered anything strange happening last night at the bars; no murders, nothing. They also did not remember any inspectors. When she'd quizzed her partner about it, he'd furrowed his brow and said, "Why? You expecting someone like that?"

The previous night, after the gunshot, the bar had fallen dead silent, its patrons too stunned to act. The gunman had turned to her and said, "Walk out," and she had obeyed, amazed by his initiative. The inspector's body wasn't the first whose death she'd had a hand in, though it was usually

more direct, and she had stepped over his inert, mottled form without a second look. Around her, the patrons had held their breaths, the only movement at all coming from the seriously drunken Egone guys, who'd were lying down on their tables with their heads gently bobbing from side to side in tune to the silent music.

She'd spent the day on tenterhooks, expecting at any moment that someone would come in, point at her and scream her guilt. She had gone on as many open, circuitous colony rounds as she could, retracing her steps, trying to find some clue as to what had happened and what was coming, but had come up empty. Even the floor that had held the inspector's cooling body seemed free of blood and brains, though it was too grime-encrusted to tell for sure.

So when Atira finally made it home, she was not yet in the land of adrenaline backwash where relaxation reigns, but her exhaustion meant that she had long since stopped getting jittery at the least little thing. And the instant she walked in and closed the door behind her, her subconscious needed little effort to cut through the subdued noise of her thoughts.

Someone was already inside. It was the silence, and the way that the air felt deader than usual, and it meant the person was there for her.

She kept to her routine, taking off her shoes and jacket and unbuckling her belt, and pulled the metal truncheon from it. As she walked down the corridor and towards the corner to her living room, she crouched, tensed her legs and quietly extended the truncheon, then in one swift motion jumped past the corner, twisting in the air, and flung the truncheon at the human target she glimpsed there. As she landed she kept moving, rolling into a crouch and preparing her tasers for a high-voltage shot, but was stopped short when she realized who her target was.

In a corner of her living room, sitting in her easy chair, was the well-dressed man from last night. He held the truncheon, caught in mid-air inches from his face, but otherwise he didn't appear to have moved. He was smiling.

"Who are you? How did you get in here?" Atira demanded.

"Name's Alad, but you forgot the last question," he replied. "What did I take?"

She stared at him in incomprehension. Then realization dawned and she rushed into the bedroom, tore open the bedroom cupboard and grabbed for a box that was no longer there.

Alad stepped into the bedroom doorway. "It's gone. An impressive collection, I must say."

She contemplated whether to kill him on the spot. Risk as it might her chances of figuring out last night's murder, she couldn't afford to be blackmailed or indentured by any man.

But then she looked properly into his eyes, and the tiny fire she saw there stayed her hand. She'd only ever seen that kind of mad, unquenchable gaze from one other person. In the mirror.

He held up a glass of water. "Drink it."

She took the glass and downed it before he had a chance to say anything else.

Alad regarded her with clearly added interest. "You know," he said, "I was rather looking forward to baiting you a bit. Maybe saying something like, 'Oh, come on. What's the worst that could happen?' You've completely ruined that."

She grinned at him. Despite the oddity of the situation, she found herself rather liking the man. Besides, he'd caught her truncheon in mid-air, and blown a man's brains out in front of the world. Open defiance was probably the only realistic way she could take charge of the situation without compromising her own safety.

"What if there was poison in that glass?" he asked.

"Everyone dies someday," she replied sweetly. "Even you. Now, can I please get an explanation for all this?"

He pulled out a small box about the size of a fist and opened it. She looked at its contents and winced.

"What do you see?" he said.

"It's like a visual migraine. Flips through images that remind me of things I ... don't want to think of."

"So it doesn't make you want to see more?"

"I'd be happy if I never saw the damn thing again."

As he stared at her in apparent amazement, she added, "Right now, thanks."

He came to, and snapped the box shut.

"I appreciate your help the other night," she said. "And I can spot the work of a professional. So I'm going along with this for now. But I'm getting very curious."

"Coming soon, dear, coming soon. One more thing. Why didn't you fire these?" He pointed at her hands, on which the tasers were affixed.

"Taser shots are monitored. I didn't want a criminal investigation in this house, for obvious reasons, so I preferred to knock you out."

"Also," Alad added wryly, "You've got a very high faith in your aim. And possibly little fear of dying, maybe coupled with a hidden want to be found out."

She shrugged.

He said, "Well, I'm happy with what I've seen here. You're in."

"In what?"

"I can't tell you everything right now. Basically, we're building a team of people to go on a potentially dangerous mission."

"And you think I'm fit for this?"

"You have several natural gifts, of which this one," he tapped the box, "was the most impressive.

"Oh?"

"You're the first one not knocked on their ass by that," he said. "Anyway, if you do what we ask, and help us find what we're looking for, we'll erase your criminal record. Moreover, we'll eliminate all possible ties between you and the acts you've committed. If you want to restart your life somewhere else, we'll even throw in a facial remodeling to get you going, along with a substantial monetary reward. You'll be rich as a capsuleer."

She walked into the living room, sat down in her easy chair, and stared at him. After a while she said, "That's quite an offer. And I'll be working with other people of similar talents?"

"Broadly speaking, yes. You'll all be working under codenames, incidentally. Yours is Draea."

"How will you keep control?"

"Leave that to us."

"Right, because you're such good planners."

He hesitated at that. "What do you mean?"

She rested her head on her hand and looked at him askew. "Like lightning from a blue sky, some inspector arrives. His corp is worried that all those naughty, naughty pirates who've been disappearing in the area have been doing it on my watch. Lo and behold, his questions lead him directly to me, just in time for you to come in and save the day. You rotten cheats," she said, with about as much amusement as reproach.

He opened his mouth to speak, but she raised her hands, tasers aimed, and said, "If you are going to say anything other than how clever I am, be warned that I can fire two shots from each hand, and unless you're intending to catch them all with your teeth, you're going to have a real bad time."

"Does this mean you refuse our offer?" he asked.

"Hell, no," she said, lowering her hands. "I'd much rather work with people I can't trust. It makes everything so much simpler, and I can focus purely on myself for a change. When do we start?"

"As soon as you're packed. I'll wait outside." Alad headed towards the exit, and on his way out added, in a tone barely loud enough for her to hear, "We may have to move you up a division."

Black Mountain

Inertial

Nale wiped the sweat off his brow. He'd only just returned to the bench after the day's physical set, and his hands were still shaking. If he weren't a dying man, he'd have been worried about his health.

He looked around. The gym was active, if basic. The mats weren't self-cleaning, but they did have a fairly good antibacterial skin - as Nale had been grateful for during all those times he'd had to do sprawl or duck-and-roll exercises - and they were being put to good use by two dozen men engaged in various versions of fight sports. In the cardio section, the magnetic treadmills had auto-adjusting capabilities that kept the speed and incline in line with one's required heart rate, and the pads could even be tuned to variable repulsion in order to better simulate grass. They worked and worked well, and routinely put Nale to within a fraction of a heart attack, but they were getting a little worn. Nale suspected that one of these days a treadmill would break and someone would find themselves launched through the roof. The gym had low ceilings, too.

A logo of the Sanctuary, one of the corporations belonging to the Sisters of EVE, was stamped on all machines in this section, along with all the benches. Nale idly reached out and rubbed the logo embossed on his bench. The narrow ridges of the Sanctuary star felt wonderfully cold to the touch. He'd been here for several months, training and doing missions, and at times the only things that felt real in this world were the ridges and bumps in the logo, and the fire in his body when he worked out.

The compound itself was shaped like the Sisters' logo, with three isolated sections forming a rough circle. One of them was the living quarters and training grounds for the task forces to which Nale belonged; another was

the administrative and general work center, where normal Sisters business was conducted; and the third was the ops center, where nobody went.

Everywhere in the gym, someone was being brought to sweat and tears. In one corner Berkhes, a close friend, was being put through the inertial test, where a machine fired rubber-coated balls at him at high speeds. Nale watched him and rubbed his own bruises, bright purple and growing. He hated that machine.

One of the monitors sat down with him and asked how he was doing. The monitors were half personal trainers and half nurses, and showed up usually when people collapsed or started to vomit.

"I'm all right," Nale said.

"Shakes?"

"Yeah."

The lights in the gym were tiring Nale's eyes. It was after dark, and the ceiling in the gym was beset with windows. During the day the crew'd be blinded by the sun, and at night the stars would look down on them with icy glares. Every so often a trail would pass over the skies, and Nale, trying to keep his mind off the exhaustion, would wonder if it was a falling star or a capsuleer. They turned the lights up after dusk, and the monitors made sure the trainees kept up a constant pace. Everyone knew the agony of stopping or changing your motion was so much worse than plunging on.

"Well, you did push it pretty hard there," the monitor said, and Nale had to squint to see his face. "I saw you do the inertial. You'll make that machine burn out before you quit."

"That's the point," Nale said. "This is the only thing I still haven't gotten a handle on, and I'll keep doing it until I get it right."

"That's what I like to hear," the monitor said. "Ops want to see you."

"Beg pardon?"

"Do you know where ops is?"

"Everyone knows where ops is."

"Then get your ass in gear, son."

As Nale hauled himself to his legs and set off, the monitor added, "Oh, one thing. You eaten yet?"

"Nope."

"Good."

He wanted to die.

Instead of being greeted by serious people in Sisters uniforms, he'd been met by more monitors, asked to change into an electrorhythm costume that would monitor his body to an insane level of detail, and sent deep into the place for even more tests.

This part of compound was also well-lit, but its architecture felt far less welcoming and was closer to Caldarian angles than the Gallentean curves he was used to. There were narrow corridors with locked doors, and once Nale had finally been led to the testing area, things didn't much improve.

The equipment was sleek, black and massive, and most of it looked like a cross between mining equipment and torture devices. Only even half of the devices, to Nale's mind, could possibly fit a human body in one piece. They had no logos, and operated in utter silence. There were no windows here.

One of those machines was called Infinity-8, and looked like a drive shaft: A large spherical construction on one end, one that turned out to contain a gyroscope, followed by a long, windowless corridor. The gyro spun him through 360 degrees at high speeds, after which he was made to walk through the corridor and found it beset with monitors on every surface. The monitors transmitted video specifically designed to disorient his perception, and blasted out alpha sound waves aimed at affecting his cognitive abilities. He made it through without screaming, crying or vomiting, though it was close, and on the other end had to put on a helmet that attached itself to his face through microscopic probes and forced him to play Mind Clash against AI opponents, first a single one, then groups of smaller ones. He did better against the smaller ones, which relied more on oversight than concentration, but by the end his head had started to throb quite strongly. Also, the microprobes made his scalp itch like mad.

Once he was finished with all the tests, and vowing that if he lived through the day he was going to start drinking again, they made him go through a series of inspections. In theory the checkups could have been done by machines, but the Sisters preferred the human touch, so he had to stand naked and rather embarrassed while the monitors went over his vitals. One of them mentioned to him, "You're a natural."

Nale, who was trembling from exhaustion and could barely stand, said, "I don't feel like a natural."

"Well, you're the first one we didn't have to carry in here on a stretcher. You're amazingly relaxed."

"Comes with death," he said.

The monitor gave him a funny look, then said. "Tests are over. After you've cleaned up, ops people want to talk to you." The monitor looked at the screen showing Nale's vitals and said, "Now his adrenaline rises. You're a strange, strange man, Nale."

He walked into a large and remarkably low-tech room. It had one round table whose surface was a glass finish, a black matte with a green shade, and at which were seated four people, three in official Sisters wear and one in casual. One chair was empty.

Nale recognized one of the three Sisters operatives as Riserakko Isenairos, the Sanctuary's chief advisor, but the other two were unknown to him. He looked at the casually dressed man and was surprised to see Berkhes, who grinned at him.

Nale addressed the Sisters. "I was expected?"

"You were," one of them replied. "Have a seat. I'm Jonak."

He sat. The chair felt remarkably soft.

"Comfy?" Jonak said.

"I could fall asleep here," Nale said.

Jonak said, "I imagine you could. They've been working you pretty hard out there."

"I suppose. I'd still like another go at the inertial, just as soon as my feet turn back from rubber to solids."

Jonak gave a brief smile, and slid a reader across to Nale. The device was about the size of Nale's forearm, and was already turned on. The words, "Book of Emptiness" were lit up on the front.

"You know we've been setting up scout teams," Jonak said.

"I know you've been setting up a lot of teams," Nale said. "I've done a fair number of non-scout missions. I've heard the name of Sansha's Nation whispered, but nothing concrete."

"So you have. About those missions ..." Jonak replied, and looked to his two compatriots.

Before they had a chance to comment, Berkhes cut in. "Most of them were simulated."

Nale stared at him. "What?"

"They've been pumping us full of nanomachinery and sending us after transmitters planted by our own people. Half the time, the stuff we were handling wasn't even there. I just got promoted, myself, and I wanted to punch these people in the face when I found out."

Nale sat back in his chair, stunned.

Jonak said, "We need people who possess not only an empathy for this kind of thing, but also an immunity to certain chemical, neurological and psychological pressures. People whose very natures would already make them perfect candidates for the Sisters, but who are willing to go even further than that."

"So they've been pumping us full of nanobots, usually by making us drink them, and making us see visions," Berkhes interjected again. "Supposedly it's a test of how we'd react to the Book itself. The bots flush out when we piss, apparently."

Nale sat there, still stunned, then shrugged and went, "All right. What do you need?"

The three Sisters representatives looked at one another, then back at him. "Do you have any questions?"

Nale tapped the reader. "I presume they'll be answered in here."

"Any comments?"

"Nope."

Riserakko, the Sanctuary advisor, scratched the thin strip of beard on his chin and said, "We've spent a long time playing with your head and pushing you beyond your usual limits in almost every conceivable way. Doesn't that bother you?"

"I'm a little concerned that you found it necessary to lie to me, but I appreciate that the tests probably wouldn't have worked otherwise. Aside from that, no." Nale leaned forward. "Look, I'm dying. I hope you know this. I'll be in perfect health one moment, then the next I'll be just one more cooling body. I've already had my world turned inside out and I'm still learning to see it anew. I honestly can't be bothered to waste energy on being angry at you people. Anyway, I've found new strength through the exercise, the tests and the missions, and nobody can take that away from me."

"This is true," said the last, unnamed Sisters representative. His face was rough-hewn, and he spoke in carefully measured tones. "There is certainly nothing we can take from you. In fact, I have been going over the results of your tests, and they are quite astounding. We have been hammering you from every angle, and not only have you withstood it like no one else, your abilities have actually started to exceed our measurements. We want to move you up from the scouting teams and into the operational league itself. Once the real thing starts, you'll be in the heat of the fray."

"Thanks. Uh, did you notice the bit about me dying?"

The man leaned forward. "Quite frankly, with the things we have been putting you through, if you were going to die any time soon you would be dead already."

Nale stopped short at that. All this time he'd had unwavering faith in the Sisters' ability to decide what was right for him and his faction brothers, even when they'd been sent out on dubious missions with no explanation given. It occurred to him now that one of the reasons he'd been chosen for this task force was precisely because he hadn't required any explanation, or asked any questions. "The information," he said, just to say something, "that's all in this reader, right?"

"It is," Jonak said. "You can't take it outside this section of the compound, obviously, so we've set up new quarters for you here. Go and familiarize yourself with the material, get something to eat, and we'll see you back here in three hours."

"Thanks. Any chance you could give me a quick capsule summary of this whole thing?"

"A rogue piece of Jove brainwashing technology is on the verge of falling into the hands of Sansha's Nation and we're the only ones who can stop it."

"Ah, right. Glad I asked."

"Welcome to the team," Berkhes said.

Black Mountain

The Room

"Much as I appreciate your enthusiasm, you need to stop this nonsense. If you walk up to someone, if you distract them for a second and then manage to take them down, you kill them on the spot. That's what you do. Okay? If you absolutely have to leave a personal mark, you find something lying around and shove it into their eyesocket. What you do *not* do is let them get up and make a run for it before throwing a knife into their backs. Let's be professional about this. And stop crying."

Draea, standing in a crouch and breathing heavily, looked up at him and said, "I'm not crying."

"That ain't sweat."

"Little runt kneed me in the groin. It sets off the tear ducts."

"Told you she had balls!" a teammate shouted to them.

Alad leaned his head back and rubbed his eyes. "Alright!" he shouted. "Session over, thanks, go away, people! Dinner's at seven." On command, the holograms in the area faded out, shields blinked into oblivion, and various pieces of cover, hurdle and barricade collapsed into themselves and slid silently down into slots on the floor.

Alad extended a hand to Draea, who accepted it and stood up. One of their victims was lying on a bunch of black paper-maché rocks nearby, snoring.

"I'm getting a little tired of this, Alad," she said.

"Are you, dear?"

"No, actually, scratch that. I'm getting so utterly sick of it that I could vomit blood. If I have to go through one more stupid exercise with one more stupid fake victim where I push a rubber pin against their gut and tell them they're dead, I swear on all that is holy, I'm going to shove this pretend

knife through my own eye until it rattles inside my skull, let the last beats of my dying heart carry it through my body, and *pull it out my ass*."

She sighed. "Also, the martial arts sessions are stupid. Nobody does small-joint manipulation anymore."

"I'm glad you're opinionated." He caught her glimpse. "No, seriously, I am. It means you care. And I'm glad that you care, because you're being promoted."

She stared at him. "What, just like that?"

"You've been on countless recon missions, completely unsimulated, protecting our interests in all sorts of situations. You've shown a remarkable ability to stay alive and to ensure that others ... well, don't. And your IPM index-

"My what?"

"Int-Per-Mem, dear, don't interrupt. It shows quite amazing numbers through the entire scale, mental and physical. *I'd* be scared if I knew you were on my heels."

The victim got up, yawned and started walking away. "There's another group coming in," Alad said to him. "Where are you going, Placx?"

"For a smoke," Placx said without slowing.

Alad watched him go, then turned back to Draea. "Follow me."

They walked through the compound, passing the exercise rooms, the altered states chambers and the torture vaults. Each was designed to test the subject's physical, mental and spiritual tolerance, to find their breaking points and how they would react when pushed to that level, and even, for the torture vaults, what they'd do to others. A team member prone to murder everyone around him was as much a liability as one who'd go catatonic.

They moved down to a lower floor, passed through corridors Draea rarely traversed, and at last came to an unremarkable door that she had never even noticed before. She stood in front of it, but it didn't open.

"Special access only, dear," Alad said.

Draea raised an eyebrow. There were no visible scanners or locking mechanisms in front of the door. Nevertheless, when Alad stood in front of it, the door hummed softly and opened. The space inside was almost pitch black, with only one cone of light shining down brightly on a metal chair a few steps into the room.

"Don't worry," Alad said. "You've already passed."

Draea shrugged, walked in and sat on the chair. Behind her, the door closed, and what little outside light had been flowing in was cut off.

She sensed someone nearby, but she did not feel threatened.

A voice, issuing from a speaker high above, said, "You are alone in this room."

"You lie," she said. It was not a rebuke; it was a statement of fact.

The voice, sounding pleased, continued, "You have now been promoted to task force operative."

The voice fell silent for a moment, in quiet expectancy. Draea said, "... thanks?"

"Do you understand what it is that the operatives do?"

"Killing people is a given," Draea said. "The rest doesn't really matter, does it?"

"That depends," the voice said. "Before we continue, you should know that you will never be allowed to speak of this to anyone not on your own task force. You do, however, need to know a few things if you're to do a decent job for us. Does the name Book of Emptiness tell you anything?"

"Not really. Sounds Amarrian, but that's about it."

"It was. Supposedly a lost holy book, one that would bring immediate ascension to the reader. It is now the chosen codename for a machine that we're after. Set at low power it has the capacity to heal some mild psychological issues. On high, it has the power to brainwash people."

"Ah, so you want me to get it for you."

"No. We want you to destroy it."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Are you serious?"

"It is a non-negotiable part of our arrangement. We have spies out right now, various scouting forces. Once we get a positive lead, we'll send out one of the task forces."

"So why me?" Draea asked.

The voice replied, "You have excelled at what you do. You've gotten this far and managed not to die, and our nanomachinery tests prove that you have a natural aversion to the Book's effects. Aside from this curious obsession of yours to hit people at range with ridiculous weapons, you are one of our absolute top performers. Not only that, but in your previous life you showed a remarkable acumen for flying under the radar. We need agents who can work on the edge without falling off or bragging to everyone who's watching."

"Do I at least get to know who you people are?"

The voice laughed. "If you want, though it won't make much of a difference either way. We're a special section of the Society of Conscious Thought. We're operating on behalf of the Hyperconsciousness agenda." The voice paused again, and when Draea registered no expression, it continued, "There is a final test. We know you're capable of committing atrocious acts both in cold blood and in the heat of battle."

"Damn straight," Draea said.

"But it's one thing to do it against an enemy you dislike, and quite another to do it against someone who hasn't done anything to you."

Another light turned on, shining a bright cone down a little way from Draea. It illuminated a small metal table on which lay a knife with a very long and narrow blade - a knife useable for both slitting throats and stabbing hearts - and a woman in a chair, tied and strapped in, wearing only underwear and a bra. The straps were so tight and numerous that her body and head were absolutely immobile, and both her throat and her wrists were exposed, the latter strapped to the chair's handles. She was gagged, and there were streaks of tears and snot running down her face.

"I like how you let her wear a bra," Draea said. "Otherwise this'd just be so undignified."

"Personally, I wanted to strap Placx in there, but they overruled me," a different voice said from overhead.

Draea looked up and grinned. "Alad?" she said.

"I swear, that man's played victim for the last time. We just cannot have people slouching around here.

"Should I do it, Alad?"

"Do anything you like, dear. But do it to the hilt."

"If we're all ready here-" the other voice said.

"Oh yes, by all means. Let's treat this with the reverence it deserves," Alad said with exaggerated seriousness, then went quiet. After a few seconds he added, "No pressure."

Draea slowly walked to the woman and the table, where she picked up the knife and weighed it in her hand.

"What's her name?" she asked.

"Irrelevant," the nameless voice replied.

"That's for me to decide," Draea said. "And besides, since you're so concerned with cold blood, I hardly think it'd make things any easier for me if I knew her name."

The voice said, "Still-", but Alad cut in with "Inibjer."

"Thanks," Draea said. She looked Inibjer in the eye and said, "If it helps, I've done this before."

She tossed the knife in the air a couple of times, then leaned down to Inibjer and whispered, "I'm not going to kill you. Don't worry. I'm going to walk away slowly, and they'll have to find someone else to do the job. I might even be able to get help, put a stop to this."

Tears started running down Inibjer's eyes, and Draea said, "Be strong." Despite the restraints, Inibjer tried to nod, but all that came out was a tremor.

Draea slowly walked away, then, in one swift motion, she turned, raised the knife and threw it with massive force. It whizzed through the air and sliced just past Inibjer's head, grazing her right temple and bouncing off the wall beyond.

There was a sigh from above.

Frowning, Draea walked past Inibjer and picked up the knife, then stalked back to her, said, "Sorry, dear. I lied," and leaned over the prone victim. Inibjer trembled and shivered for a moment, then gurgled and went slack, maroon rivulets trailing down her arms and chest.

Draea smiled, stroked Inibjer's hair and cheek, then absent-mindedly wiped her hand on her shirt. Behind her, the outside door slid open with a metallic hum. She turned and walked towards it, but hesitated at the exit. "Alad?" she said.

"Yes?"

"What would've happened if I'd refused to kill her?"

"Oh, we'd have filled the chamber with poisonous gas."

"Are you serious?"

"What, you think I'd want to go in there and do it personally? You've got a *knife*, you psychopath."

She left the chamber, laughing loudly.

Black Mountain

The First Half

Nale was sitting on his bed in the ship quarters, fully dressed, looking at the thing in his hand.

It was a metal device the size of his fist, curved and with a little opaque sphere set in the middle. The sphere had a red sheen and showed a faint triangular halo. As he rolled it in one direction, it turned yellow, then orange, blue, indigo and purple. He rolled it back to red and found that while it couldn't roll far in the other direction, forcing the sphere a little would turn the red to green; though when he let go, it shifted back to red.

It was a catalyst for the Book. The machine could not be set off unless someone nearby activated this device. Otherwise, the Book would remain completely inert, and supposedly appeared quite innocuous. It was also the first piece of actual proof Nale had been given that confirmed the veracity of their mission, and while he had been happy in the past to heedlessly go along with his directives, he was very grateful that ops had seen fit to give him one of these items. Not because he might have to use it - that eventuality seemed ugly and enticing, all at once - but because it gave him an anchor, a counterpoint to the weirdness that surrounded this whole mess. The more he had found out about the hunt, the less real it all seemed. This catalyst would keep him going.

Nale held it up to the light, watching the refractions. The catalyst's surface had an oily sheen, so that the light danced through the spectrum of colors, but the sphere set in its middle drank in all light like a black ocean and gave nothing out in return. Nale thought of how amazing it was, that these small things might effect such big changes in the people around them, and he mused that it was really quite the same with his team and the rescue missions they'd done. Oftentimes he had wished that his own team, and the Sisters at large, could make more of a difference, but then - he rolled the sphere back and forth - they'd just have to make do with what they had.

Since its discovery, this little piece of equipment had become the very basis of their mission. It came from a set of several catalysts that had just recently surfaced and, according to the Sisters' analysis, gave final proof that the Book not only existed but had also surfaced outside Jove space. Nale and everyone else on the team had been given clear instructions that if they were to retrieve the Book they were allowed to set it off in an emergency, but not unless absolutely necessary, and preferably not amongst large groups of people. The Book supposedly had an area of effect, and they must only ever turn it up to blue levels, which would be enough to disable most people. Higher levels would permanently mark anyone unlucky enough to be in the vicinity.

They themselves were safe from the Book's effects, something apparently to do with a combination of genetic makeup, personal strength, and simple immunity to having their brains scrambled for peace. The Book, Nale had been told, would reach into people's minds and forcibly eliminate warlike, angry and hateful tendencies, and would probably lobotomize the poor bastards in the process if set on too high a level. But for those who'd managed to get through the Sisters' regimen, these feelings were so faint to begin with, so little a part of their personality, that their removal wouldn't cause any permanent damage. The machine might have *some* effect, the Sisters administrators had grudgingly admitted, but it shouldn't be anything to worry about.

Roll the sphere, roll the sphere, red to green.

There was a knock on the door, and Shiqra, a teammate of Nale's, walked in without waiting for a response. Shiqra was a thin man, full of jittery energy than that made him look like his skin had him trapped. He wore tight clothing and didn't smile so much as implicitly grin, and had the brusque manner of someone who'd done more than his share of high-risk rescue missions. He'd been one of the first to get recruited.

Before Nale could utter a word, Shiqra said, "We've got a lead. Solid one, this time. Need to head off right now before Empire gets a word of it."

'Empire' was their codeword for everyone who wasn't a Sister, and applied particularly to some of the more sinister forces of the four Empires, each of which, while still in the dark, was slowly becoming aware that the Sisters were after something.

"Where is it?" Nale asked.

"With the Angels," Shiqra said and left the room.

One journey later, they were at an Angel station, and the noise was deafening. They were hardly even out of the docking bays and into the marketing area proper before they were assailed by sensory overload. Roadside vendors shouted at them from every direction; booster peddlers walked around dragging locked plexiglas carts, their chemical wares clattering inside; and sweaty, stinking Drop maniacs, with their characteristic soaked rags bound over their temples, sat on the curbs and screamed at things that weren't really there. Condensation from body heat covered the walls, and the Angel banners that hung on every wall were limp and dark with wet grime. The clamor was giving Nale a headache.

Strictly speaking it wasn't necessary for the Angels to allow these huge marketing bazaars on their stations - they were a tightly run criminal organization whose business deals tended to be of a subtler nature - but they'd long since discovered the benefits of networking and of providing social hubs. Some of their best recruits were reportedly merchants who had come to an Angel station in search of profits, found they liked the atmosphere, and decided to get involved.

It made sense that these people be the first to dredge up the Book. Aside from their entrepreneurial spirit they were the prime harvesters of Jove technology, were spread around most of known space, and were notoriously effective when it came to stealing other people's things. They were wanderers, too, and had never been content merely sit at the Serpentis' heels; always exploring, always pushing further.

Nale spotted a few Angel representatives, who nodded genially to them. Angel officials routinely kept up a highly visible presence on station, but stayed calm and unafraid to chat with the civilians. It was clear that this was a place where people knew each other, and where business was expected to tick on without undue hassle. Nale's worries about standing out in the crowd had proved unfounded, too: There was such a mix of people here that even with their Sisters badges on their arms, Nale and his team didn't attract the slightest bit of unwanted attention. He was relieved, and hoped it would stay that way.

The badges were the standard Sisters wear, worn by members in war-zones to show neutrality and protect from harm. They probably weren't really that necessary as far as protection was concerned; people didn't usually get bothered at these stations for no reason, and those nice Angel officials wouldn't hesitate to crack skulls if any trouble arose. But what the badges brought as well was special dispensation. Sisters were often allowed with very little explanation to pass into places closed to others, and nobody liked to question or delay them too much. After all, the skin they were saving might one day be your own.

Nale and his team were searching for a particular vendor, and trying to do it without asking any questions, but so far they'd had no luck. Two of Nale's other teammates, Berkhes and a big, hulking man called Monas, were lagging behind, looking around and, in Nale's mind, taking a little too long to get to where they were going. They were five on the task force; Zetyn, their tech guy, was back on the ship, while Shiqra was lagging even further behind.

Shiqra suddenly started walking faster, passing Berkhes and Monas and reaching Nale. "I've got it," he said to Nale.

"You know where the guy is?"

"Yeah, just figured it out. Come on, let's get moving."

They walked down several streets away from the main square, towards the fancier areas of the station. Shiqra, Nale and Monas led the group, but

Berkhes lagged a little behind, looking thoughtful. Nale didn't comment; Berkhes was an old friend who'd shared innumerable missions, and was as dependable as any man he'd ever known. If he needed to work something out, he'd be given the space.

At last they came to a house that shone with affluence even by the standards of others around it. Its entrance was guarded by Angel officials who betrayed none of the warmth of their brethren down by the market, and the team was barred entrance.

And there it might have ended, in more ways than one, if someone hadn't come out of the house, muttering curses. It was a female Angel captain, and Nale immediately approached her.

"Excuse me?" he said.

"Yes?"

"I'm Nale, Sisters of EVE," he said, offering a hand which she shook.

"I'm Hona, Guardian Angels, special forces. What do you need?"

"We desperately need an audience with this merchant. Is there any way you could help us?"

"Help is usually done through deals. What could you offer me and my team?"

"Well, uh, if you get a papercut I could probably bandage it," Nale said.

Hona stared at him for a while, then asked, "Is Arak expecting you?"

"No," Nale admitted.

"Is he going to be happy about whatever offer you have for him?"

"I honestly have no idea."

She stared at him a little longer, then said, "Well, you're Sisters and I've got sympathy for the cause. And plus, it'll probably piss Arak off, which is all for the good as far as I'm concerned. So I'll let you in under my authority."

"Is it going to get you into trouble?" Nale asked.

"Doesn't matter. My task force has been decommissioned. I was looking for some work for us, or at least a little help in finding a person I know who's gone missing, but apparently neither are worth Arak's time. I'll have to find the guy myself, clearly, then start flying aimlessly through space. Maybe you'll have better luck than me."

She spoke to one of the security guards, then waved the Sisters in and walked off.

They entered the house. Arak the merchant resided on the second story, in a massive Caldari-esque chamber. Pieces of onyx ochre and splinters of cooled gelidus ice were carefully placed, offering half an aesthetic view and half an undertone of religious symbolism. Multihued globes of cytoseroцин, a gas cloud that constantly revolved and coalesced, lay in porcelain bowls designed for sacrifices to the gods. Nale looked at a celadon sphere, and its purplish shade gave him a shiver.

One wall was completely overtaken by a sand waterfall whose quiet hiss felt soothing to the ear. In the air, laser birds flew around, 3D images projected by hidden vidcasters. It was a remarkably nice office, and the whole effect was only slightly spoiled by the giant Quafe cooler behind Arak's desk. It was full of Red Quafe, a special version with selected rogue ingredients, and the reason became apparent as soon as the team entered. Arak, overweight and clad in figure-hiding robes, sprung up from his desk, paced to them and shook their hands. His brow glistened. He waved his hands at the birds. "Their flight is symbolic, too, the patterns. They're casting good luck on this room, good business luck."

Nale followed his lead and sat in a chair by the desk. "We understand you had a recent shipment come in with some strange things, including an inert block of shaped metal. We'd like to buy it."

"What, sight unseen?" Arak said.

"Yes."

"Sure."

Nale's team looked at one another. This was a little too easy.

"Uh, have you used it?" Nale asked.

"Nope, I haven't. It just got in, doesn't seem to do much, design isn't familiar, but it just looks like some old, broken-down machine and I can't imagine what anyone would want with it apart from antiques interest." The words came out in a gabble. Nale noticed two open RQ bottles on the desk.

"Do you know what it is?"

"Oh sure, I've got some idea, but I'll leave it to the experts to decide."

Nale cast a glance at Berkhes, who surreptitiously rolled his eyes. Neither of them believed Arak had any idea at all.

"Do you have it here?" Nale asked.

"No, it's at my warehouse." Arak leaned forward on his desk, nudging the RQ bottles. "You know, I don't usually inquire on these things, but I'm curious as to why the Sisters would be after something like this."

Nale sat back in his chair. "We hear it might have some healing properties, but we need to research it first."

"You people have remarkably good spies, then, since I hadn't even started to put out word that I had the machine."

"We're quite happy getting here first, thanks," Berkhes said, and flashed him a small smile. "Could we see it, please?"

"Oh, it isn't here. I don't store any of my merchandise on-site, so I'll need to send a couple of people with you to a warehouse elsewhere"

"I'm sure we can find our own way," Shiqra said in an impatient tone.

"Regarding payment-"

Arak held up a beringed hand. "No worries, I trust the Sisters. We can discuss it when you get back. Here's the address."

He keyed in a combination on his console. The laser birds settled on his desk, where they melted into words and numbers on the desk surface. "I'd

like to give you the location inside the warehouse, but can't, sorry. Policy. My men will go with you and pull out the right box."

They paid their respects and exited the building, setting off towards the warehouse in tow with Arak's enforcers. As they walked down the street, Berkhes whispered to Nale, "I'm not at all sure I trust Shiqra. He's been acting a little nervy lately. When we were at the market I think I saw him get a message on a transmitter, something that certainly wasn't meant for the rest of us. And he keeps fiddling with something in his pocket that ... well," Berkhes added with a little grin, "I really hope isn't what I think it is."

He was about to say more, but Shiqra walked up to them, smiled and said, "I'll catch up. I need to send a quick message to main base about where we're going and what our plans are." Shiqra dropped back, and Nale looked to Berkhes, who raised one eyebrow but said nothing.

Once they got to the warehouse the merchant's crew let them in. They entered the building, which was so massive that Nale couldn't see to its end in the gloomy light. It was full to the rafters with stuff, stacked on ten-floor scaffoldings and surrounded by metal walkers with giant, piston-pumped arms.

"The guy really is a collector," Berkhes said.

They were led deep into the warehouse. At last the merchant's men stopped, and keyed in numbers on a console. An automated machine slid along the rails of the scaffolding, clamped on to a small box, pulled it out and lowered it to the ground.

Nale and his companions looked at one another, all of them sharing the thought that this contained looked much too small to hold the Book.

Nale and Berkhes walked up to the box. "I've got a bad feeling about this," Berkhes said, and Nale nodded. One of the guards walked up, knelt in front of the box and unlocked it, then stepped back a respectable distance.

Nale took a look around the room, taking in his teammates' faces. Berkhes looked fairly calm, having apparently arrived at the same

conclusion that Nale had. Zetyn was feigning an unimpressed look, but his excitement easily shone through. Shiqra just looked dyspeptic.

Nale turned back to the container. He opened it, looked in and felt like his entire body had deflated, a mixture of loosened nerves and disappointment.

In the box, which was far too big for its contents, was a catalyst. It was larger the one Nale had been given, the size of his entire forearm instead of his fist, but otherwise it was exactly the same.

Nale sighed and turned to Berkhes, intending to ask him what to do now, but stopped short when he saw the man's face.

Berkhes stood stock still, staring out at empty air as if he'd seen infinity. Then his eyes bulged, he stuttered something, and blood began to spurt in great gouts from his neck.

Nale and his companions immediately went for the nearest shelter, all of them veterans of a myriad firefights, all of them filing away their burgeoning grief for later. The merchant's men, slower and inexperienced, stood their ground, and moments later Nale heard a telltale swoosh that he'd only half-registered while staring into the box. Both men grimaced and clamped their hands to their necks. They half-managed to reach for their guns before collapsing on the floor, spouting blood.

In the deepening shadows, Nale spied a team of people moving towards them. Some guy in combat gear marched right up to the box without sparing the Sisters a look. He lifted it and looked inside, and seemed about to say something when there was a bang, and the front of the man's chest bloomed red. He fell to the ground, dropping the box and sending the catalyst tumbling out of it.

Everyone around saw that it was not the Book itself. There was a hushed silence, followed by a barely audible "... *shit!*" somewhere in the dark, and the sounds of gunfire and running. The Sisters remained inert and completely quiet, Nale included, until he felt the cold steel of a pistol laid against the back of his neck.

A voice said, "What you're looking for has already left." The pistol was withdrawn, and there was the sound of running feet.

Nale stood very still, listening to the receding gunfire. He remembered that voice. It belonged to an Angel captain called Hona.

Black Mountain

Of a Sentence

Draea felt rather uncomfortable. Her team was making its way to the warehouse area on an Angel station, and at any moment she expected to see a familiar face, someone who'd known someone she'd killed. Not that she probably needed to worry much, considering the company she was in, but it paid to be careful.

She looked around at her teammates. There was Krezek the tech-sadist, Falau the brawler, Yorlas the bounty hunter and Polok the chem-tech warfare dude. Krezek was an ex-sniper with a gift for electronics and infiltration who liked torturing his subjects without ever being in their presence. Falau was a survivor of a million little wars, ranging from barroom brawls to rush-squads on conquerable stations, and had, by his own account, had an eager hand in starting many of them. Yorlas was a considerably more careful opponent whose activities, as with Krezek's, had included sniping, along with various manners of assassination both individual and en masse. His only real goal in life was to terminate as many people as possible before his own end of times, and while he had a stated interest in experimenting with methods, he drew his pleasure from the successful taking of a life and the individual marking of his kills, and not, as Falau did, in the bloody preamble to death. Polok, a rather more personable individual whom Draea liked quite a bit, was heavily into chemistry and the myriad alterations of the human body it could bring forth. He had a preference for being called the Plague Doctor, and had stuck to it right until he told Draea about it, at which point she laughed so hard at him that she nearly collapsed on the floor. He never mentioned it again.

Supposedly the Book wouldn't work on them. They were too far gone, the violence and darkness too ingrained in the very fabric in their personality, for the Book to do anything more than give them a bad headache. If the

device ever got into the wrong hands, Draea thought, they would be the first ones put against the wall.

They'd all studied the plans, although some of the data, such as where Arak kept his merchandise, had only been revealed to them just as they were getting off the ship. Some information came through Yorlas, who apparently had friends in the area. All Draea's team needed to do now was get to the warehouse, and get inside it. Krezek had vowed to take care of the last part.

As they were walking towards the station's storage areas, Polok, whose stalker instincts matched Yorlas's, turned to Draea and said, "One of the Angels is following us."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Polok described him in detail.

Draea thought hard, and eventually an old splinter of a memory dislodged itself. A duo of Angels had appeared on her colony a while back, recruiting miners. She'd monitored their progress, then gone dark and caught one of them alone and unawares. He'd been a stocky man, and she'd later sprained a back muscle shoving his corpse into the incinerator. The other Angel, unaware of her part in the murder, had raised a fuss and even called in some people of his own to investigate, but the corps had backed the cops and she'd stayed clean. Misplaced faith was a wonderful thing.

She called her team mates closer, and told them of all this. They grinned at each other, and Yorlas said, "Can't have him screw this up. Let's fade out. Look for the bullet."

The group split in two. Draea and Polok continued walking, but slowed their pace to an amble, and changed their route to darker streets. Krezek, Falau and Yorlas faded into the shadows.

Draea worried that the guy would have contacted other Angels, but Polok assured her they were safe. The man might have sent some message, but if he really had reported them to the active forces in the area, they'd long since have been scooped up and thrown into quarters. They kept looking around while talking, and eventually spotted a likely-looking side street between two warehouses. Everyone in the group had murderer instincts that they'd learned to trust implicitly, and those included finding the best spot to do something nasty, so it was no surprise when they came closer and saw a bullet lying at the entrance.

They walked into the alley, Draea subtly kicking the bullet away, and the Angel followed shortly after. He was closing in on them, Draea realized, and it would only be a few breaths before he engaged. The street was dark and deep.

"Don't turn around," Polok said to her, and she didn't, but she heard the sounds: There were the faintest of steps from the Angel trying to sneak closer, then a swoosh in the air, a gasp, the briefest of scuffles, and a muffled thump, followed by a gurgle and something that sounded like a wet piece of paper being torn up.

They stopped, and now she turned around, eager to inspect someone else's handiwork. She walked up to the corpse and gave it a professional's look. She wasn't so much interested in the stab wounds on his chest, or the gaping hole in his groin - everyone had their peccadilloes - but she was intrigued by the rim of shredded skin on one side of his throat, which matched neither a garrote pattern nor the serrated edge of a blade. She looked at Yorlas, who was busy cleaning off his knife.

He looked back at her, shrugged, unslung a gun that hung in a strap from his shoulders and handed it to her, saying only, "Missed. Aim needs adjusting."

She inspected the gun. It was a pressurized shotgun with six slanted choke tubes arranged radially. Each tube was lined with a magnetizing agent that helped keep its shots in line when they exited the barrels, making for longer range. The clips were twofold, one capsule of supercompressed gas and another capsule holding the ammunition. The magnetizing agent would only work on tiny metal pellets, but in Draea's view, that kind of ammo shouldn't have torn up the side of the Angel's throat like it had. Not unless the pellets had special, non-standard features.

"This ammo you have," she said to Yorlas, "Change-state, by any chance?"

He nodded.

"Activation on high-speed contact?"

Yorlas nodded again. "With skin," he said, and handed her a clip from his belt.

She inspected it, then gripped both ends tight and pushed in. She felt the internal safety dislodge, and one end of the clip became loose. She reached for one of the dead man's hands and pulled it close, removed the clip top and poured a handful of ammo into his cooling palm. They were little spherical pellets, and as soon as they touched his skin, several tiny, angled blades shot out from their surface, the blades curved in on the centre like the slanted path of a meteor falling to earth.

"And when they go into someone's skin?" she asked Yorlas.

"They spin," he said. "Work through his veins. Make a mess."

"So you could hit anyone anywhere on their body with this, and..."

"And the orbs will go in, make their way through the bloodstream and pulp everything they touch," Polok said, walking up to them. "Just one gets into you and you're in trouble. Close to an artery and you're dead, but even if it's just in your toes, they'll still cause pain so agonizing it'll drop you on the spot."

He picked up one of the silver pellets lying on top of the victim's palm, and looked at its blades. "These are regular issue. They got heat-seeking ones as well. Bronze-colored, I think. Nasty little things."

There was a beep that startled Draea far more than it should have. Yorlas pulled out a communicator, and Polok said, "Not again. That's, what, the third time you pull out that thing?"

Yorlas, ignoring him, said, "My contact on station. Says the Sisters are going to the warehouse. We should hurry." He got the gun back from Draea and said, "I fire the first shot."

Falau said, "The hell you do. Next one's mine."

Yorlas clapped the gun and said, "I need to test the aim. Problem?"

Falau got in his way and said, "Might be."

Polok stared at the two of them, then said, "By the gods ... all right. All right. Hey!"

They looked at him.

"Yorlas gets the next shot, because we'll need to stalk these people, but once we're safe and good, Falau can have all the fun he wants. Happy?"

The two men looked at one another, then back at him and nodded.

"All right," Polok said, and turned to Yorlas. "At least turn off that communicator of yours. I'm tired of having you spill our plans to everyone on the station."

They set off, Polok muttering to Draea, "You know that execution test to get on the team, the one we did right at the end? Yorlas thought of that. Idiot."

"You've got nothing to compensate for. Why on earth are you bitching about him?"

"He just rubs me the wrong way."

"Polok, you've killed at least four hundred people."

"Your point?"

Once at the warehouse, Krezek took to the fore and did his magic, though not without mumbling comments to empty air. "Guns, yeah, fine. Gimme a circuit board any day of the week. About time I got something to do here."

Draea, standing nearest to him and feeling impatient, said, "Want me to tell Yorlas of that attitude?"

"Not on your life."

"Then hurry it up. And add an automated opener for the doors, too, in case we need to make a getaway."

"Sure. Want them to explode?"

"No, thanks, just make them open."

"Roger."

He rose, keyed in a combination on the lock, and the doors slid open. The team walked in.

Yorlas's informer had not given them the precise location of the Book, so they decided to wait for the Sisters to show up, and to shadow them. The team took its positions, deep enough in the shadows that they wouldn't be spotted, but with access to walking paths so they could follow the progression of anyone walking through the warehouse. Draea made sure she was in visual range of everyone else, and settled in to wait. There were other entrances to this place, but she expected the Sisters to come in through the main one.

It wasn't long before the warehouse doors opened again and the Sisters came in, flanked by two guards. Draea's team stayed on them until they got to the box's location, and watched as they called it down from the scaffolds. Draea noticed that while two Sisters walked up to the box, and two more looked on curiously, one the Sisters stayed very definitely at the back, looking around a bit. She grinned in the darkness. However Yorlas had managed this, he'd earned his place on the team.

She pulled out her gun and saw the other team members do the same. A few paces away, Yorlas took aim. She watched as he relaxed his shoulders, took a breath and held it, and leaned a little into the shot. He closed one eye, and fired.

One of the Sisters guys started spouting blood from his throat. The other Sisters faded from view, and before she could react, Falau had sauntered up to the box, picked it up, and started to inspect its contents. Draea was about to get up and go to him when there was a bang, and Falau crumpled to the ground. He dropped the box as his body fell, and she saw the catalyst roll out of it. People not her own started moving in the shadows.

Draea exclaimed, "Shit!" and ducked just as something was fired at her head. There was a mad scramble as her team tried to rush toward the doors, provide cover fire for each other, and not get shot, all at once. Once they got in view of the exit, Draea saw Krezek manically working on his mobile interface to activate the doors, and she realized that as soon as they went through their silhouettes would be easy targets. Polok caught up with her, and as they ran she hissed at him, "Lay down interference!"

He reached for the bandolier on his shoulder and pulled off a couple of multiburst grenades, set one to thermal and another to electromagnetic, and tossed them. The thermal one bounced towards the attackers who were following them, flared up and sprayed a thin drizzle all around that immediately caught fire. The chemical wouldn't burn the surfaces it coated up, and only flared up for a few moments, so Draea hoped the warehouse's fire extinguishing system wouldn't immediately start dropping anti-inflammatory powder. She risked a look back and thought she saw the hunters stopped in their tracks for a few precious seconds.

The EM grenade, set to visible-light focus, blasted off behind them. It skewed light and caused such massive refraction that aiming at a target became next to impossible, like trying to find the one true reflection in a shattered mirror. It was possible to set these things to near-lethal levels, but apparently Polok had taken the wise stance that blinding everyone in the room wouldn't be good procedure. Shots were fired, but none of Draea's people got hit, and at last they escaped through the doors, blinking

frantically in the fake sunlight to rid their optic nerves of the grenade's refracted remnants, and quickly made their way down the street.

They were back on the ship. The team was setting up their gear and preparing for launch. Draea, in her quarters, was rapidly planning their next move. After they'd undocked from the station, blessedly unnoticed, and set off in a random direction, she filed several questions to her Society contacts. Some were about mission minutiae, and had Draea thanking the gods for her mining colony experience and the knowledge of ship statements and docking logs it entailed. Others were about certain individuals on the mission, based on a dark intuition that had begun growing in Draea's mind. She put a high priority on them, knowing that the team would soon have to plan its next move.

Her answers arrived shortly after. They commended her for her insight, and gave her an unofficial promotion to team leader. They also included some very interesting information on her mission and personnel concerns, along with suggestions on how to deal with both.

Draea drew up a flight route and sent it to the main console onboard her ship. Afterwards, she left her quarters and walked through the ship, eventually making her way to a little-used maintenance area. In there she went to a repair parts cabin and, from way at the back, removed a small, circular item with a red, opaque button at the center. She returned with it to her quarters, sent off a quick message to base, and received an immediate reply. The item in her hand lit up and blinked twice. She pressed firmly on its small button. The item lit briefly once more, then went dark again. It was now coded to her fingerprint.

Draea sat there for a little while, then pocketed the disc, sent out a call for people to meet her on the bridge, and headed off. On her way there, almost

on instinct, she stopped by one of the hi-tech weapons cabinets and retrieved another disc, this one with a number of sockets and wirings on its surface.

Once they were all settled on the bridge, Draea spoke up. "First off, the Society has made me the de facto leader of this group, if there ever was any doubt. Problems?"

The assembled group shook their heads.

"Good. We're taking off."

"Back to base?" Polok asked.

"Far from it. We've found the Book, for real this time," Draea replied. "And we're off to get it."

Black Mountain

A Man of Peace

Nale's team was heading towards their ship, collectively wondering what just happened and what to do next, when they were met by Hona and a team of Angels. She stopped them and said, "You're coming with me."

They balked at it, but she said, "We lost the attackers but we know where they're headed, and whatever you people are after, it'll be there, too," and started walking.

They looked at one another, then started to follow her.

On the way, she explained to them, "The second we disengaged, I looked up the station logs. That piece you were inspecting came from a shipment brought in by one of our deep scouting teams, and it's part of a larger find. They were going to offload the entire thing here, but one of our military installations asked them to bring the other items in for closer inspection. They're on their way there now, but they'll be making a few stops on the way, so we can catch up with them if we hurry."

"Look, far be it from me to criticize this plan, and thank you so much for getting us into the merchant's office and out of that shootout at the warehouse," Nale said, "but who are you?"

"I'm the captain of a task force."

"... yes?"

"I'm also the one who can find whatever it is you're looking for, in exchange for some answers."

Nale shrugged, a difficult motion to make when one is walking fast. "All right. Lead on."

A while later, they were onboard an Angel ship staffed by Hona's own hand-picked crew and heading towards the unknown.

Hona had told him she'd brought his team onboard for debriefing and to ensure she could keep an eye on him, and she had asked him several questions about the item they were after, expressing her worry that it was a weapon which could be used against her people. Nale had tried to reassure her while fending off the questions the best he could, saying only that it was a specialized type of healing device that only the Sisters could operate properly. Hona had ignored his own questions for the most part, and by the time each realized they weren't going to get what they wanted from the other, the atmosphere between them had grown chilled; Hona was outright angry, Nale merely frustrated and tired. Eventually she'd let it go at that and left him to his own devices.

He'd picked up some equipment from his own ship before leaving and was now playing with it in his new quarters, sitting on his bunk and tossing an inertial ball in the air. Every time he tossed it up it would accelerate and hit the ceiling with a bang, then drop down again into his hand. It reminded him of the training camp, when things had been simpler.

The inertial ball was a metal sphere with a rubbery varnish, of the same type they'd used back at the gym. Its technology was based on the same principle as the inertial modifiers that keep spaceships from tearing themselves apart when they accelerate or decelerate at the incredible speeds they reach. Its insides were composed of gravitronic mechanisms that made the ball, once thrown in a consistent direction, continue to accelerate, so that it would hit its target at a far greater velocity than it

started with. Upon impact it would immediately decelerate at a rate dependant on its contact surface; the softer the hit, the harder its internal mechanism would reverse and try to lower its impact, which meant that the few extra milliseconds it took to push into a soft-skinned surface would make for a lesser blow than if it smashed against steel.

Eventually Hona banged on his door, then walked right in. "What on earth are you doing in here?"

"Waiting."

"Well, wait more silently."

He stared at her, getting even grumpier, then made up his mind and got up from his bunk. "Are you busy?"

"I'm making a tour of the ship," she said.

"That's a no, then. Good. You can help me practice."

"What? No. What are you talking about?"

He held the inertial towards her. "Let's go find a corridor with solid-steel backing and you can toss this at me at high speed."

She opened her mouth to say something, stopped short, looked at the ball and then back up at him, smiled an evil smile and said, "All right. Follow me."

They made their way down to the bowels of the ship and found an empty storage corridor with a nice, thick steel wall on one end. They took places on either end of the corridor, Nale right in front of the wall.

"So I just throw this at you?" Hona said.

"Pretty much."

"Any last requests?"

"I'd prefer above-belt aim, but really, it's up to you."

She threw the ball at his head. It accelerated on the way but didn't hit him, and instead clanged off the wall behind him. He picked it up and tossed it to her underarm.

"Does it have any settings?" she asked.

"There's two poles on it, one red, one green. Squeeze the ball twice, then hold down green to slow it down, red to speed it up. Press both simultaneously to turn it off for the space of one throw, hold them both down for a couple seconds and you turn it off altogether."

"Red. Right." She pressed that one a few times, then threw the ball at Nale. It missed him again.

"You know, we really are quite grateful you took us with you," he said as they kept on the exercise.

"Not much choice," she responded.

"Not to question your judgment, but how do you plan to end this?"

"We'll get to the Angel transport ship first, while our real prey flitters around and shakes off imaginary tails. Then we hang back, keep a listen on the transport, and jump in once she attacks it. She wants what's on board, so she won't destroy the ship."

"All right." Nale considered more questions, and could only come up with, "So what's Angel life like?"

"Disciplined."

He picked up the ball from a missed throw and tossed it back to her. "Really? I've met some of you guys and you always seemed more of a family."

She caught the ball, but didn't throw it again. "When did you meet Angels?" she asked.

"There was a massive industrial accident on one of your mining colonies a few months ago. A capsuleer launched missiles at it but thankfully didn't destroy the entire place. My team was doing some unrelated exercise in the area, and we were all called in. Sometimes we're the only ones who can cut through the politics and actually help people."

She sighed and gave a slight nod. "We're not the best-loved of factions."

"You don't say."

The ball whizzed at his groin, but he sidestepped it at the last minute, laughing.

"How many did you save?" she asked.

"Most of them. The missiles mostly blew up silos and processing plants that had already been vacated. But there was one framework collapse in a populated mine that left a lot of people broken or badly cut. We had to pull them out first, which has its own problems, but it all worked out. The only ones we left behind never had a chance. A dozen had been either cut in

half or crushed to a pulp by falling girders well before we found their bodies. Hand getting tired?"

She'd been holding the ball in one hand, idly waving it. She switched hands and gave a toss that bounced off a side wall, slowed and landed in Nale's open hand.

"Nice try, but first surface it hits, it decelerates," he said, tossing it back. "So what are you doing here? You seem really intent on catching these guys."

"I'm only really after one of them."

"Childhood friend?"

She laughed, and threw the ball. It wasn't aimed at him, and hit the wall with a satisfying thunk.

"My team was tasked with finding out who's been killing our undercover recruitment agents," she said. "I was contacted by one of those agents earlier today."

"Risen from the dead?"

"Watch it," she said. "He lost his recruiting partner recently, under strange circumstances, and he himself is probably dead now."

"Strange circumstances?" he said, reminding himself that he didn't always have to try to be funny.

"They'd been recruiting on a mining colony. They were ambushed and attacked, and he escaped. We never even found the body of his partner, only some spatters of blood. The local militiae got involved and practically shut us out, too. The trail eventually grew cold and we were taken off the

case with no luck in finding who did it. The survivor was reassigned, too, but he remembered everyone who was involved, and he had a particularly nasty feeling about one of the cops there. And right after you arrived he contacted me, saying that she was here, on my station."

"She? Oh. That one."

She gave him a look. "If it's escaped your notice, women sometimes do rise up the corporate ranks."

"If it's escaped your notice, I work for a faction that rather does imply the fact."

She nodded, and he added with a grin, "Though of course you're best left at home, watching the children and cooking, and serving us-OW!"

The ball finally hit its mark. She gloated at him as he gingerly rubbed his right side, then added, "Wait here," and left. She returned a little while later with a gun in her hand.

"Uh..." Nale said.

"Relax. Rubber bullets. They came with a shipment we got from Gallente merchants, and they're soddin' useless. Too much friction, too little weight. But you've been dodging the ball so easily that I might as well try this on you instead."

Nale stared at the gun for a while, then shrugged. "Okay. Tell me, at least, why you even let this woman undock. And that last toss is going to raise a welt, by the way."

"You deserve it," she said, taking careful aim and firing. Nale managed not to be in the shot's way.

"How do you do that?" she said, exasperated.

"I've got a talent for taking things in, little details. The undocking?"

"I wanted to keep it under the radar. Those guys I saw at the warehouse weren't amateurs, and I'd prefer not to risk any more of my people than I have to." Another shot, another miss. "Besides, Angel ops'd be just as likely to arrest these people, both on-station and on-ship, and as soon as they discovered the woman was a damn cop they'd probably let her go. Empire goodwill, and all the rest."

Another shot, but this time it connected with Nale's thigh. As he hopped around, yowling, she said, "I can't have that. I want to catch these people and take them out. Right before we left there was a general notice that an Angel had been killed on-station, and the initial description matches the man who contacted me. Last I knew he'd been following that witch, so I pulled in my contacts, tracked her down, and found her in the process of tearing your group apart." Another shot, a near-hit. "These people deserve no sympathy and no mercy. I don't expect you to understand."

"Why not?"

"You being a man of peace, and all."

He sighed, and ran his hand through his hair. "Yeah. Right."

She rested the gun on her shoulder, leaned her head to one side and asked, "This is a peaceable mission you're on, right? This healing machine of yours and all."

"It's supposed to be," he said.

"Supposed?"

"Well, it's ... this machine, it can be dangerous. We're supposedly going after it because we want to prevent it from falling into the hands of people who'd misuse it."

"Who are these people?"

"My superiors say the Sansha."

"Sansha? Nale, I've met them, and I've also met the people they sometimes hire; skittish, frightened men with a terrible darkness about them. The ones at the warehouse were not Sansha agents."

"Yeah. I know. The Sansha rumors were probably spread back at our base to distract us from the real goals of the mission."

"So you're being lied to."

"Everyone is lied to."

"Oh, come on. That's simplistic pessimism."

"Is it?" A cold glint came into his eye. "When you're sitting hip-deep in blood on a mining colony, surrounded by wreckage from some capsuleer's missile, and cradling in your arms a boy who's lost his legs and can't even feel it because he's so deep in shock, do you tell him he's going to die? Or that he's going to be fine?"

"That's an extreme example-"

"So what? It happens all the time. The more you know, the less you want to know. Can you honestly say that you're a better person now that someone

you know has been killed? All that evil which surrounds us, does it change anyone it touches for the good? Even if we do manage to catch up with the people presumably responsible for all those murders you mentioned, and even if we do manage to wrest the machine from them and you end up putting a bullet into their heads, is that going to make your life any better than it was back when you didn't know about any of this? This burning sense of guilt, shame and regret over not having been able to prevent something from happening, is it really preferable to just being unaware and blissful? Sometimes we need people who know what's happening and who handle it without excuse and without sharing it with the rest of us."

"Strange words coming from a Sister."

"Nobody halfway sane does this job," he said with a sigh. "It's rewarding, but it gets to you."

"No kidding. So why join?"

"Because it's right. It's the only thing that makes sense." He leaned against the wall. "Look, I didn't so much join as get recruited. But I believe in the cause, and I believe that just as man can be cruel to man, he can also be kind. Yes, sometimes we lie, or cheat, or hurt one another. Sometimes we have to deceive. It doesn't mean we're unworthy of our existence, and it certainly doesn't mean that a person can only be either a saint or a sinner. What makes you into a good person isn't the endless purity of your actions, it's their sum total, and if you can rise above your own mistakes and make something decent come of your life, you've cheated death. The marks you left on this world will outlast you, their echoes will affect other people who will then carry on the work you started, however small, and when you finally come to look into that cold blackness of eternity, you'll know that you will never truly die."

"I'm impressed," she said.

"It's nothing really deep," he said.

"No, not that. I don't think you inhaled even once during that speech."

He stared at her, then burst into laughter.

"So you think you can change the world?" she asked, a little smile creeping into her expression.

"I don't know. We all hope to, I suppose. I'd be happy if I could just dodge those damn shots properly."

"Must be hard for a leader, to think so much."

"Am I the leader?" he said.

"The others follow you. If you hadn't noticed, it probably makes you a natural. But you always find ways to torture yourself. Every mistake becomes a damnation of your abilities, and every failure something that must be corrected."

"You think so?"

"Trust me on this," she said. "Besides, why else would you keep obsessively testing yourself? It's your one failing, the thing you've latched on to, and deep inside you believe that if you could just get this one thing right, you'd feel more at ease with the rest of your life."

Nale looked at the ceiling, then closed his eyes. "I thought I was supposed to be the one with all the serenity and answers."

"Leave it to a real woman to think things through," Hona said. "They're called Sisters for a reason, you know."

He grinned, then furrowed his brow. "It's just ... we so have to get this right. Not only because we're clearly risking our lives here - I don't care about that, which I know sounds strange, but we truly have accepted our lives and their impending ends-"

"You're talking to an Angel captain. I understand, believe me, I do."

"-But it's the task we've been given. The Sisters trusted me with this, and that matters to me. The machine has great potential, I'm sure, but that's not mine to think about. All I'm concerned with is keeping it out of the hands of the wrong people."

"And the Sisters are the only right people?" she asked.

"Gods, I hope so. Because I can't think of anyone else. I need to find the Book, and I need to take it into my care, and I need to do it before that woman does. With any luck and grace, I will, and everyone will be safe."

She looked at him for a long time, then said, "I hope you're right."

He sighed. "So do I."

"Not about the machine," she said, shaking her head and holstering the gun. "About yourself."

Black Mountain

Some Dying Angel

Nale and Hona were sitting side by side on their ship's bridge, each listening in on the broadcasts from the Angel ship they were tracking.

It was the usual external stuff about docking plans and routes, along with internal notes concerning commands and confirmations of commands. They were doing it in shifts, each crew member on Hona's ship listening to the individual channel of his corresponding member on the Angel ship. Hona had twice already predicted, erroneously, that Draea's ship was about to attack the bait, and everyone was rather tired of waiting, herself foremost. She had used executive privilege to wiretap the Angel ship without its knowledge, and would have to answer for it later.

There was a buzz, and one of Hona's crew said, "Wait, they're being hailed. And ... wow. Locked, webbed and scrambled." Immediately a lot of Hona's crew raised their hands, in quiet acknowledgment that their own channels had filled with related data.

"Alright, let's get moving," Hona said. "While they're bargaining, we'll-

"Captain, they're boarding!" someone said.

"What?!"

"Enemy team's already attached to ship. They're boarding now."

"Get us there right now and ready for boarding," Hona said in a fast and clear voice. "Team assemble in dock area, now. That includes your people, Nale, in case we need medics."

As the personnel put the ship on autocontrol and rushed out with her, Nale and his team followed. "What's going to happen?" he asked on the way.

"Idiots decided to board the Angel ship instead of bargaining with them for releasing your precious cargo. Which means that people are going to die, on both sides. It's stupid and reckless, and I can't imagine what type of person would take it this far."

"The type that stalks my teammates and fires veinshredders into their throats?" Nale said darkly.

Hona glanced at him but didn't comment. She turned to someone else who had a wireplug in his ear and asked, "Time to board and status on vessel?"

"One minute hard, two on soft, two-four-zero on dark," he replied, "and our people are getting torn to shit. Ma'am."

"We'll board dark, then."

"Ma'am?"

"Angel crew's been on recon missions that included contact. They're close-combat trained. If they're losing, it means we need a different tactic."

"And if the attacking crew didn't all breach, ma'am? What if we're spotted by someone aboard the enemy vessel?"

"If these psychopaths decided to board an Angel ship and have a shootout, I don't imagine any one of them wanted to hang back and look out the windows. Get in gear, we're sneaking in."

They poured into the Angel ship, Hona's men and Nale's team. Monitors inset in the boarding corridor showed their destination, hovering still in

space, the red light from the sun glinting off its carapace. It seemed dead to Nale, and in a small way helped him get ready for what he'd see on the inside.

The situation was nothing new to the Sisters, who were used to working as medics in hostile grounds, but they still found themselves in an awed silence of horror when they boarded the vessel. Draea's team had reveled in death. There was blood and viscera everywhere; walls were spattered with vermilion sprays, and corridors were covered in what had once been parts of human beings. Where Nale walked, his boots stuck to the floor.

They made their way through the ship, following the trail of blood. Back in basic training the Sisters had offered lessons in army lingo and signage, and Nale, hungry to master everything on offer, had taken to it. When Hona's team communicator whispered coded status commands, Nale understood him.

General fighting. Local team retreating. Hona shared a look with her team member. Draea's forces weren't going for their prize right away; they were exterminating the ship's crew. She whispered back to him. Cargo bay. Setup.

They took up places in the cargo bay, which on this industrial was thankfully large enough to easily accommodate their teams. Nale estimated that Hona's crew outnumbered the assailants three to one, and his own men - outfitted as they were now with the minimum of armor and weaponry - added a few to the mix. He did not feel very hopeful about the entire situation, but at least he took comfort from the thought that only he and his team knew the full, true nature of the machine. If his enemies did anything with it, he and the rest of the Sisters should be the only ones left standing.

It really wasn't much of a comfort, come to that. Especially with Hona around. Nale really did not want to see her get hurt, and it shamed him that

right now he apparently cared more about than about Berkhes's death. Still, it was Sister credo: The living before the dead.

Nale surveyed his team. Everyone was holding steady, in alcoves and behind obstacles that would hide them from view. He moved silently between his men, giving them encouragements and ensuring they were keeping their nerve. The only one who startled when Nale walked up to him was Shiqra, who surreptitiously grabbed at one of the pockets on his combat suit. Nale asked him if everything was all right, to which he assented.

After getting back to Hona, he asked her, "Think one of your men can do me a favor?"

"Depends," she said, then added in a more pleasant tone, "But I'm sure we can try."

"One of my men is holding something I don't think he should be. Right-hand pocket, on the thigh. I've no idea what it is, but I have a feeling he's going to do something stupid, and I don't want a confrontation right now. One of your soldiers is located next to him, and I want him to keep an eye on my man. If he makes a move, opens his pocket or whatever, restrain him."

"You got it," Hona said. "I've no more patience for rogue agents than you do."

"Thanks," Nale said, and gave her a smile that she returned.

It wasn't long before Draea's people entered the bay, stalking in as if they owned the place. There were four of them, and Nale, hiding with Hona behind a crate, marveled sickly at how they'd been able to take down an entire crew of Angels, even if the poor soldiers had been completely unprepared.

Draea went over to a particular box without hesitation. Nale surmised she had pulled its location from some dying Angel.

The box was situated on a low shelf, and Draea pulled it out and placed on the floor with apparent ease. It was under electronic lock, which she fixed by placing the barrel of her gun alongside the mechanism and shooting it off. Gunfire wouldn't harm this ship; like so many others it was just as well-protected from the inside as from the outside.

Draea reached in and, with a grunt, lifted out the Book of Emptiness and placed it on the floor, where she regarded it for a few breaths. After it did not turn on, glow, smoke or explode, her three teammates visibly relaxed. They walked in closer and gave the machine a look.

It really was inconsequential in appearance. Only a few oddly curved lines here and there, and the strange way in which it caught the light, gave the faintest idea that it might be more than a glorified Quafe vendor.

"Heavy, is it?" one of Draea's people asked.

"Wouldn't want to carry it far," she said.

It was at that moment Hona gave the signal to her men, who broke cover, rising and aiming their weapons at Draea's team. "Move and die," Hona said.

To their credit, none of Draea's teammates twitched. They slowly looked in Hona's direction, and Nale, who had gotten up and was standing next to her, felt uncomfortably like he was watching a pack of animals deciding on their prey.

"Drop your weapons and step away from them," Hona said.

Draea and her team mates looked at one another, then shrugged and dropped their guns, though none of them moved nor raised their hands. "What are you planning?" Draea said, coolly.

"Taking you back in for questioning," Hona replied. "Nobody needs to get hurt."

Which was a complete and utter lie, Nale knew. She was planning to kill everyone on Draea's team. But she apparently didn't want to risk the Book, which he knew said more about her interest in him right now than it did about the machine. He felt a small wave of gratitude that was immediately washed out when he noticed what Draea was still holding, palmed in her hand. It was a catalyst. And her thumb was gently turning its sphere.

Time crystallized, and two truths materialized in Nale's mind. The first was that Draea's team, for whatever ungodly reason, was likely immune to the machine, which contradicted everything they'd been told so far. The second was that Draea was about to turn the blasted thing on, the effects of which would be completely unpredictable except for the very real and definite mind-death it would likely have for all of Hona's crew and for Hona herself.

In a moment he would later not know whether to rejoice in or regret, he turned to Hona, said, "I'm sorry," and, to her brief surprise, hit her square on the jaw. She crumpled to the floor, and Nale barely had time to turn back as he saw someone in Draea's team plunge something into his own neck, while Draea grinned and clicked the catalyst.

There was an infinite whiteness.

Nale is walking through a desert. It is night-time but he doesn't feel cold. There are other people here, he thinks; they're almost visible, like shadows detached from the earth, milling about in every direction.

He comes to a leafless tree whose limbs extend like the entirety of space, their buds glowing blue and red. A wind whispers through the branches, gently hissing his true name. He keeps walking, the tree bending to stretch its branches in his direction.

He comes upon an entry to a small quarry, the ground before its dark opening surrounded with rounded, polished rocks. He picks up a rock and it turns soft in his hands. He drops it again and walks onward.

The desert ends, and turns to black basalt. He keeps walking.

The further he goes, the clearer his path becomes. His doubts begin to melt away. He is here. Of course he is here. He has always been here.

He comes to a cliff face, and he sees a dark ocean below, its seas black as the earth.

Around him the spirits flow over the cliffs and plunge into the ocean, joining its waves. He wonders if he should turn back, but he knows that even if he tried, the onrush of spirits would turn against him and push him off. This is his path. This has always been his path.

He stands there, looking into the abyss.

For a moment he is filled with fear, uncertainty and loneliness, the last vestiges of his past existence. But they fade away like the other shadowy spirits, passing out of him, never to return. He knows what he is and what he wants, what he has always wanted.

He steels himself, and he takes a deep breath, and he jumps. And as he falls he turns in the air, looks up and sees Draea standing at the top of the cliff. She glares down at him, her pale skin standing out among the ethereal shadows that surround her. One of those shadows seemed more substantial than the rest, hovering motionlessly behind Draea while the others float back and forth, but he can't make out what or who it is.

He plunges into the black sea, shattering on impact. There is no pain.

He remains conscious and feels himself be slowly torn to pieces. It eats him up, pulls him apart, disintegrates him.

He's gone. He's void. There is no him any longer; he is of this world but no longer of this world. He is the black sea, and he is the black sky. He is the black sea, and he is the black mountain. He is the black mountain.

The shadows speak to him in a cacophony of voices. He hears them all. They tell their stories, and he understands as one can only understand when one hears all voices and not merely the faint whisper of the one.

Slowly, a new presence begins to rise, and it is him. He parts from the black sea, but he does not part. He leaves the black mountain, but he does not leave. He floats up to the black sky, but he does not need to join it.

He is the black sea below, and the black sky above, and the black mountain which casts its shadows over the world.

He understands everything.

He rises.

Everyone was lying on the ground, some moving, some not. Nale hauled himself up and surveyed the scene.

Hona's entire team lay sprawled, their eyes rolled back in their heads, froth on their mouths. Draea's own crew was beginning to stumble around, shaking their heads as if to dislodge cobwebs. Draea herself was now standing, swaying but keeping erect, staring fixedly at Nale with an expression that was half murder and half wonder.

Then at once, the people who were conscious seemed to do a kind of mental shrug, looked in the direction of the machine, and realized that it was no longer there. Neither, for that matter, was Draea's bounty hunter, Yorlas.

Both Nale's people and Draea's remaining crew started to draw their guns, but Draea raised a hand and yelled, "No!" In their daze, the people obeyed her and lowered their weapons.

She rubbed her eyes, grimaced and said, "I really wish it hadn't come to this. Krezek, open comms to our ship and get a speaker going."

There was a crackle, and then Yorlas's voice was omnipresent. "Boom," it said. "Hello, Draea."

"How'd you manage to break out of the fugue so early?" Draea asked.

"Adrenaline shot," Yorlas said.

"Were you working with someone else?"

"Man called Shiqra, on other team."

Nale quickly looked around, and saw that Shiqra was gone. His Angel guardian was lying on the ground, comatose. Beside the angel lay an unused mini-syringe full of a strong soporific. Nale realized Shiqra hadn't been immune to the Book and must've been planning to render himself unconscious, trusting that Yorlas would come to his rescue.

"He's with you, I imagine. Book take him out?" Draea said.

There was a moment's hesitation before Yorlas said, "Yes," and the undertones Nale heard in word encapsulated far more than he would ever be able to put into words.

"And you have the Book, on our ship, currently en route to destination unknown, right?" Draea asked.

"Still in system, but getting ready to leave," Yorlas said with some satisfaction. Piloting ships all alone was difficult; their AIs compensated well, but there were a lot of minute adjustments that needed to be made. "Otherwise, yes."

"Excellent. To sell to the highest bidder, I imagine"

"Yes. Was supposed to be private project of true art, but with Shiqra gone, no point," Yorlas said.

"How sad." Draea said. "By the way, did I tell you I was promoted? Team leader."

"Congratulations. I'm very happy," Yorlas said.

"You should be. They gave me executive privilege." Out of her pocket she pulled a small, circular disc, the one she'd acquired at the Society's

direction and activated with their assistance just before they'd set out. "Any last words?"

"What?"

"That'll do." She pressed a button on the disc. There was a squelch from the radio, followed by silence.

"Cranial explosive," she said to the others, who were staring goggle-eyed at her. "They didn't trust us. Good for them. Krezek, get over here, please."

The tech rushed to her, clearly eager to obey.

"Can you disable this ship? We'll take the one from the Sisters to ferry us to our old vessel."

He hesitated, then said, "I can, yes, absolutely, but are you sure it's a good idea?"

"It'll attract less attention. We might get hailed by Angel troops on our way to pick up our old ship and the Book. Besides, we've left this one a little red, and it won't be long until those people start to smell."

He nodded, and walked off, leaving her and Polok in the bay.

She turned and walked up to Nale. "Anyone left on your ship? And by the way, if I see any of you little peacekeepers reach for their guns, Polok here will ventilate you."

Nale shook his head. "We took the entire troop."

Draea walked closer and slowly reached out her hand until it closed on the neckline on Nale's shirt. She grabbed it tight and pulled close, so that she

and Nale were standing chest to chest. "If you try to follow us," she said in a low but clear tone, "you do realize what will happen to you."

Nale just smiled, and Draea's face took on something that, in a person not homicidally insane, might be considered simple contentment. And with that, she left, her enforcer following on her heels.

Nale looked at the prone figures around him and said, "Yeah, I guess we'll have a little explaining to do at some point. Zetyn."

The Sisters' own tech guy stepped out from behind a crate. "Yeah?"

"Radio any nearby Sisters teams for help and get them to send a scouter vessel, one with a mechanic onboard. We'll get them to dispose of this while we hunt down the Book."

"To be honest, that ... stinks of a coverup," Zetyn said.

Nale turned to him and in a very relaxed voice asked, "Do you want us to explain to the Angels why we were found sitting in a roomful of their men that have all effectively been lobotomized?"

Zetyn raised his hands in surrender, turned and started prepping his comms equipment.

Monas, another of his team members, walked up to Nale and pointed behind him. Hona was sitting there, propped up against a support girder. She looked vacant, and tired.

"What'll we do with her?" Monas asked, and immediately answered the question himself. "We should leave her."

"No!" she suddenly said, loud and clear. "Hell, no. I'm going where you're going. I'm going to get this damn woman."

Nale turned to Monas. "You heard the lady."

Monas rolled his eyes. "Alright, boss. So how do we find this Draea?"

Nale said, "I've got a feeling," and pulled something out of his pocket. A disc, covered with sockets and wirings, that Draea had dropped there for him to find. A tracking device.

Black Mountain

Hyperconsciousness

Despite its attempts in recent times to project the image of a network of high-class academic establishments for New Eden's elite, the Society of Conscious Thought remains first and foremost a research institute with a vigorous interest in the technical advancement of society. This is no secret; after all, the Jove are an inquisitive lot, and in the protective isolation of the Society's enclaves, called kitzes, there's no telling what new developments may be brewing.

That's not to say the Society has had free rein in their choice of projects. A checkered past, which includes political machinations and some rather dubious human experimentation, nearly spelled the Society's end. A turning point came when an internal investigation brought to light their association with Sansha's Nation. It was common knowledge that Sansha Kuvakei combined Jovian capsule technology with illegally modified brain implants in order to start off his notorious army of sycophants, but Empire attempts to replicate his research have always been unsuccessful, and it had long been postulated that the Jovians may have been one of the shadowy forces who secretly supported Kuvakei, supplying him with clandestine technologies in order to see what he could make of it. This was part and parcel with the Society's brash approach to technological advancement, and after an investigation revealed discrepancies in the research logs of certain kitzes that seemed to implicate them as having worked with the Sansha, the Society's funding, power and autonomy were severely curtailed, and the kitzes themselves vanished without a trace. It is, of course, not known whether the retributive actions against the kitzes truly were imparted for their corroboration with the Sansha or merely for their inability to properly hide it.

While information on the development of any part of Jovian society remains scarce, it is at any rate clear that the other sections of the Society took this development to heart and greatly shifted their focus, eventually even opening their gates to non-Jovians in an attempt to dispel at least some of the dark mystique that had begun to envelop their organization. Aside from this paradigm change from investigation to instruction, the Society also made a subtler shift in their research focus. Jovian inspectors found that while the Society dutifully abstained from resuming its prior level of hard-science technological research, the kitz governors, along with Societal scholars, simply started looking into soft-sciences instead. They focused extensively on the humanities, in particular sociology, education, theology and psychology.

This development received tacit approval from the inspectors and was allowed to continue uninterrupted for quite some time. In their wisdom, the inspectors recognized that the Jovian nature of endless tinkering could not be suppressed, lest it move out of the inspectors' reach and back into darker channels, and while there remained some technological hard-science aspects to the Society's new research methods, they were considered to be harmless. In particular, scholars had been tinkering with electronic mood enhancers - alpha wave transmitters and suchlike - but as the Jovians are very much in favor of anything that might help combat depression and ennui, the experiments were given a blind eye.

Many of these research projects started out as unofficial experiments among Society scholars, who kept them secret for about as long as any scholar will keep secret the results of his tests. They soon developed into an organization of work among various kitzes, and thanks to the excellent communication the Society kept up among its enclaves, some interesting projects soon saw the light of day. One of those was the fabled Hyperconsciousness agenda.

Certain scholars had noticed an emergence of new patterns in the relation between the training they gave their students and the results those students showed. As had been long established, while one could set down a baseline for a proper lower-level education - a focus on maths, languages and social studies would always be necessary - any higher degree of education would always depend as much on the individual student as it did on the curriculum. Members of the Society found that it was, in fact, possible to identify certain patterns in the early academic development of each individual student and then use those patterns to tailor the education to the student rather than the other way around. The exact nature of these patterns remains jealously guarded by the Society, but from the results it has produced in the last few decades, the method clearly works.

And if it had stopped there, the Society would still be on its merry way to being considered a slightly unorthodox but very much an ivy-league educational establishment.

The pattern detection they used for analyzing student abilities got better and better, to the point where they found they could map out various other aspects of a student's abilities and tendencies. And somewhere along the line, some enterprising scholar decided that training the students to be better persons wasn't enough. They should also have some of their detrimental tendencies curbed.

In itself, this aim was nothing new. Part of the *raison d'être* for any educational establishment is to even out the rougher edges of its students, not merely setting them on the right path but keeping them from straying. Society scholars argued that the old, established ways to do this were outdated and generic, and likely to backfire. Instead, they advocated a student-tailored approach, whereby one individual might be given physical tasks to resolve, another might have his academic liberties curtailed, and yet another might be given a stern talking to on certain specific points likely to hit home. Nothing harmful, and nothing excessive.

The trouble started when they began combining this pattern work with advances in their mood enhancers. Certain scholars argued that instead of dealing with the outcome of negative, hostile and aggressive behavior, it would be easier and more effective to eradicate the problem at its source. Not only that, but in using these mood enhancers they might actually help their students reach heretofore unscaled heights, complementing their already natural abilities with more positive attitudes.

This kind of project would have been seen as brainwashing in any other circles, and reportedly made even certain Society scholars uncomfortable, but Jovian inquisitiveness prevailed. Nonetheless, the Society was careful to keep its true agenda secret, weaving its patterns into the tapestry of its curricula and thus keeping them hidden from casual onlookers. The codeword for this agenda was Hyperconsciousness.

Hyperconsciousness, or HyCon as it became known among insiders, produced a great many students whose academic careers were imbued with excellence. It also produced further improvement in the HyCon's theoretical basis, as the Society constantly improved its methods and technology based not only on the results of its living experiment, but on additional technology supplied by Jovian benefactors who were impressed with the Society's academic achievements while remaining entirely in the dark about the truth of the Hyperconsciousness agenda. A major windfall came when some mysterious benefactor bestowed on a select Society kitz the responsibility of destroying the Book of Emptiness.

The Book was well-known among the Jove. It was yet another failed attempt to curtail the Jovian Disease, that scourge of humanity which still reduces many of their number to broken, darkened shells and eventually drives them to death. The Book, named after a fabled Amarrian holy text that supposedly brought its readers to a higher plane of consciousness and serenity, was a small, unobtrusive machine that, when activated, would

remove negative thoughts and emotions from anyone in the vicinity. The Jovians had hoped the Book would at the very least cure them of melancholy, and in a way it did, but not before it turned its subjects into drooling idiots. At lower levels the effect was not permanent but did have the effect of strongly affecting the subject's personality to the point where they lost their ability for purely logical thought; at higher levels the subject would be rendered permanently catatonic. Needless to say, the Book was deactivated, dismantled and consigned to the dustbin of scientific history.

Or so the Jovians thought. Under the auspices that only the Society, with its experience in behavioral patterns, could be trusted to handle and destroy such a device, one of the Book's caretakers gave its parts to them upon their request, with the intention that a few be put on display or under examination, and the rest destroyed. It is a measure of the immense trust the Society had rebuilt at that time, and probably of their image as slightly doddering but well-meaning and intelligent people, that they were given this chance, and nobody seemed to realize it was like throwing meat to a Slaver. The person who supplied the Society with the Book's collective parts undoubtedly did so knowing that they would first inspect it for its secrets, but it's doubtful even he realized that they had the ability and the theoretical knowledge to reassemble it.

The Society took its time, and even put a few duplicate parts on display to reassure its trustees that the rest had been destroyed. It never quite managed to recreate an original, fully functioning unit, but its experiments were successful enough that a simulacrum of sorts eventually emerged. This new Book, whose existence was kept a closely guarded secret, had the same basic abilities as the old unit but mainly affected non-Jovians, and of those it couldn't even be made to work properly on the worst (or, in one regrettable mistake during an illicit test run by very frustrated researchers, the best) students of HyCon.

Some valuable bits of technology did emerge from studies. One was the Oblivion Cocktail, a group of nanobots whose ingestion made the subject highly vulnerable to effects of both the Book and, as it turned out, some of HyCon's own corrective measures. Another was an amnesiac agent that, while completely ineffective as far as a subject's mood went, would completely remove their memories over a specified length of time and force their brains to compensate by inventing a hazy and completely inconspicuous gap in their memories, although anything more than a couple days' worth of amnesia would likely require hospitalization and some degree of rehabilitation. The amnesiac agent proved extremely helpful under circumstances where people had suffered great mental trauma or stress, and was later put to use by various psychological institutions, but there have also been rumors that it has been used for darker means, up to and including assassinations in the midst of crowds.

Despite these gains the project was considered a failure, and the Book was put in deep storage pending further secret study. There it sat, supposedly untouched and gathering dust, and would have been resigned to forgotten academia and pernicious rust had its caretakers not begun to hear that the Book had been sighted elsewhere in space. Lo and behold, they found that their own unit had disappeared.

They kept out probes for the Book, but to no avail. Thankfully, while the Empires had long since heard the stories of the Book's existence and potential power, word of its availability did not get out. As a result, the Society had time to recruit and train special task forces, staffing them with individuals who had a natural immunity to the Book's effects, and keeping them on standby while hunting down clues as to the Book's location. It was a tough task, as it had to be kept secret, but the kitzes' isolation came to good use. Several offered their services as training grounds and ended up breeding some very effective and quite intimidating groups of HyCon ops, many of whom never knew who they were working for.

Their progress is documented elsewhere. The Society continues to operate, and its HyCon agenda is still very much a part of their methodology, though in a form far removed from its original version. Society scholars have gone on record stating that while they feel the Book's prolonged storage in Society kitzes certainly was a mistake, this little misstep should not reflect badly on HyCon nor on the Society's contributions to education in New Eden. It is certain that in specific circles the Book debacle has reawoken suspicion that the Society may be hatching new plans of political dominance, but the enormity of its efforts to retrieve the Book has gone a great way towards assuaging those doubts.

It is, of course, entirely possible that the Book's disappearance was no accident. Cynics might claim that the Society was beginning to worry that its Hyperconsciousness agenda, and the careful manner in which it had educated and molded its wealthy and powerful non-Jovian students, might be seen as the starting moves in a new political game of strategy, and that the hunt for the Book was meant to serve only as a decoy. If so, it was an incredibly dangerous move, and likely made with the arrogance of superiority. It could very well be that the Society never expected that any other force in EVE might find out so quickly about the Book's existence and start its own hunt for the item.

Black Mountain

Pushing Towards Bliss

"How're you feeling?" Hona asked. She had just entered Nale's cabin, and was sitting alongside him on the bunk."

Nale rubbed his temples. "Feeling fine."

"You don't look it."

"A lot of things have changed. It's tiring."

She turned to him. "I'm not blaming you, you know."

"I know."

"About my entire crew being turned to vegetables."

"I know."

"I should be, but they knew the risk, same as me. All that matters now is to stop her."

"Yeah."

"But I still want to know-"

"Because I didn't realize her people would be immune, too. If I had, I'd never have let you or your team board that ship. I didn't imagine in a million years they would set off the Book. I thought they were thugs." He ran a hand through his greasy hair.

"Guilt?" she asked, before regretting it.

"Tired," he simply said.

"Could you tell-"

"It's made by the Jove. They wanted to counteract the Jovian Disease, that immense sadness which kills them. But it didn't help, and all it did was brainwash people. At lower levels you'll be left happy, calm and without much drive to do any harm. Higher levels, well, you've seen those."

"Can-"

"Yes."

She got angry at that. "Cut that out. How do you even know what I was going to say?"

He looked at her with eyes that were far too much at ease. "I can."

"Oh really? Can you see what I'm thinking, too?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Fine, mister psychic. What number am I thinking of?"

"Two."

She stared at him.

"It's in your eyes, and the way you sit," he said. "I can see everything now. Everything."

She kept staring at him. "That machine changed you."

"Yes."

"The others, too?"

"No, just me. At least on my own team."

"Why you?"

He sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "My trainers would probably say I showed immense aptitude. I beat everyone else in the tests they laid for us. I'm a bit of a prodigy, it turns out. But that's not it."

"Then what is it?"

"I'm dying."

Her jaw dropped. She started to say something, but he interrupted.

"Don't. Please. It's chronic, but causes no pain or discomfort. One day my brain will simply tell my body to stop. It's a condition far older than this mission of ours, and it should've killed me ages ago, since exertion is known to bring it on, but apparently I'm tougher than I thought." He inspected his nails, searching for the words. "Anyway, ever since I found out I was going to die, I saw things in a different light. It's weird, really. I sat in a small room, listening to a voice tell me I was a dead man, and it felt like I was the only thing in this world left untouched. Yes, I was the one who changed, I was the one who found out that my own personal sphere of existence had been irrevocably altered. But I was still the same person, or at least I felt like I was. The world itself, everything that is not me, that's what changed."

"Or your perception of it."

"Precisely. And I can't tell you how liberating it was. All those old worries of the world, they vanished. The rules had changed, altered, gone even. Ever since I got the diagnosis I could feel my mind casting off its weights. But even so, something remained. It's like being told the answer to a puzzle, but not having figured it out yourself. You can see why it is the way it is, but you can't intuitively understand it, and thus it feels like you haven't got the answer at all."

"I know what you mean," she said.

"And then, as luck would have it, the Sisters swooped in and carried me away. And for a while, it helped, but it still wasn't enough. It gave me purpose, gave me an answer, but I still hadn't figured out the question." He got up, picked up a backpack and said, "Let's go for a walk."

They left his quarters and headed towards the cargo bays.

"You're different," she said, in the tone of one who's earned the right to say a thing like that.

"Yes. It's the Book."

"How did the Book change things?" she asked.

"It opened my eyes to the larger picture. It explained the answer and the question, at long last. Even after joining the Sisters I'd still been playing the same game, with all the same worries and doubts, right until the encounter on that ship. You can't do that and honestly expect to make a change. What happened showed me that people can be freed from fears and terrors. They can be made to understand everything."

She furrowed her brow, then asked him, "You're not seriously suggesting what I think you are?"

"Well, I can't rightly free someone the same way that it happened to me, through a chronic illness leading to death. That would be a horrible thing to do. So we can use the Book instead."

"That is horrible."

"It's what my people were planning to do all along. I just didn't realize it until I thought the whole thing through. You're a captain, you've been in your share of fights. Have you never had a moment where you wished you could make everyone stop? Where you were so utterly tired of wading through blood that you wanted to grab the world by the throat and scream in its face?"

"Of course I have. So you want to lobotomize them?"

"No. At lower levels the machine simply erases warlike thoughts. There's probably a subsection of the human race it won't affect - the people we're after are apparently immune, for instance - but for most people, they'll be granted peace and serenity. They'll be a little sluggish, I'm sure, but they won't be killing one another, or suffering the same endless doubts that I did."

"Do you even have approval for this?"

"It is right. I need no more approval."

"Nale, you're talking about taking away people's will, and their freedom of thought."

They rounded a corridor, and walked down a metal stairway. Their feet clanged on the steps.

"Let me ask you a question," Nale said. "Why are you a captain?"

"What do you mean? It's what I do."

"Great, that's how it should be. Why?"

"Because. Because I want to do my part in protecting the Cartel. And because I'm good at it."

"Do you like doing things you're good at?"

"Of course."

"And do you like doing your part for something you believe in?"

"So long as my conscience can live with it, yes. And before you say a word, I may not always be perfectly happy with the way the Angels run things, but it doesn't compare to what you're planning."

"Never said it did. Why do you like doing those things?"

"What do you mean, why?"

"It's your life's work. It's what you spend most of your day engaged in. Why?"

"I don't know. Because it gives me satisfaction, I suppose. I'm part of something, and I get to do it well."

"Why?"

"Look, is there a point to this?"

"Absolutely. Keep answering the questions. Why do you want to be part of something and do your part well?"

"Same reason everyone would, I guess. To feel my life has a purpose."

"And if you feel your life has a purpose, what does that do for you?"

"It makes me happy."

"Precisely," Nale said and gave her a frightening smile. "Anything you do, any purpose of your life, it'll eventually boil down to happiness. That's all we want; that's all everyone wants. The way we tear each other apart every day is borne only out of frustration that we cannot find the happiness we seek."

"Funny, I thought it was a bit more complicated than that."

"It is if you let it. Most people don't truly think about why they do what they do, no matter whether it's drinking a bottle of Quafe or putting a bullet into someone's head. But you take almost anyone in this world and ask them why, believe me, it'll boil down to happiness in the end."

"You know, even if you were right, there are other ways to achieve this. People don't need to be brainwashed. You could simply encourage them to seek their own paths."

"Most people are self-destructive, and unreliable even toward themselves. As a rule, they don't put much effort into their search for happiness, and no amount of positive encouragement is going to change that. Why do you think holoreels are as popular as they are, and meditation isn't?"

They came to a door. Nale took off his backpack.

"Still," Hona said, "You could do it differently. You don't have to push people towards bliss. You can encourage them to seek it themselves."

"I'm not going to stand there, like a mad prophet, constantly harping on other people to go after their true purpose in life. All I'm going to do is eliminate the roadblocks."

Hona stepped in his way, and looked him straight in the eye. "Don't do this, Nale. Don't. If you even manage to regain the Book, you've no guarantee it'll work like you think, and even if it does, you'll be taking away people's basic rights. You'll be no better than the capsuleer who ruined our mining colony. And besides, how on earth will you achieve any change? What if the effect is only temporary?"

"Then we will use it on the right people first; the ones who determine the lives of others. Everyone at the top of the social stratus. Leaders, and dictators, and every capsuleer we can get to. After that, we will find ways of duplicating the Book, and we'll start to spread its word to the masses."

She goggled at him. "You're talking about a revolution here. You're going to be violating people's basic rights on a fundamental scale."

"The fundamental right of man is to be happy," he said to her. "You'll see. This is right. It's the only thing that makes sense."

He went around her, opened the door and stepped into the empty storage room beyond. He removed something from the bag, then dropped it outside the open door.

Hona looked at what he was carrying: Four inertial balls. She gave him a puzzled look.

"I've modified them slightly," he said. "Removed the acceleration inhibitors."

"Are you trying to die?"

"I'm trying to see if I'm worthy of the task I've undertaken."

"How will you even know, apart from not ending up a bloody mess?"

"I'll hear it on Black Mountain."

She hesitated at that, unsure of what to say, and he turned away from her, whirling the inertial balls in his hands. There was a soft sound and a click, as of a gun being drawn and cocked.

Nale did not look back. "Now or never," he said, and after a moment he heard the door close behind him.

He smiled, and closed his eyes. The spirits moved around him, their hazy shadows enveloping him. Their whispers told him the truths.

He threw one ball. It bounced off the floor and sped up; bounced off the wall and sped up; bounced off the ceiling and sped up. Soon it was a blur, zooming through the room at bone-breaking speed with a cacophony of gongs as it bounced off the walls. Nale listened closely, and every time, stood where the soaring missile didn't go.

He threw the others, moving lithely from place to place as they bounced around him, his eyes opening and closing in tune to the blinking lights on the tree that still reached for him. He avoided its grasp, and he avoided the

soft, soft rocks that bounced around, beckoning to him to hold them, to let them touch him.

They went faster and faster, until the entire room was covered in hazy, half-seen trajectories, the rocks tearing their way through the empty air. And still he dodged them, at a speed unimaginable, as they roared through the rapidly heating air, their hisses melding with that from the frustrated tree of kingdoms. The spirits guided him, and slowly the floor disappeared, until he was floating above the tarry sea of the shadowy angels and shared unconscious, seeing everything, knowing everything, in tune with the world, on this path that led inexorably to freedom.

Black Mountain

The Canvas

The infrastructure was looking shaky, but the hidden patterns told Shiqra he was safe, and he was sure they could get to a few more people before risking collapse. He'd been leading his team deeper into the bowels of the asteroid colony, finding survivors, tagging and prepping them for assistance, and verifying structure integrity so that the rescue squads could move in.

Shiqra was leader of a Sisters of EVE scout team. They ran in first, moved fast, found the victims who needed help, and moved on. Most of their equipment, which was kept as light as possible, consisted of structural and explosive gear. They had scanners, too, ones that searched for heat and electric signatures, but these rarely worked all that well in environments that were falling apart.

The path they were on forked into three routes, one of which was open, the other two caved in. Adjusting his ocular scanning, Shiqra saw high heat beyond the closed entrances. There would be blazing fires on the other side, which wouldn't threaten the Sisters but did block out any chance of automatic life detection.

Shiqra stood there for a moment, regarding the three routes. Long waits were not an option; life would be running out for whoever was trapped in the mines. He picked the leftmost path, one of the caved-in ones, and signaled to his teammates to hole it through. They all wore fire- and shock-resistant suits with full-head facial masks that were outfitted with air filters, night-vision specs and inbuilt voice transmitters, though the transmitters were rarely active. They were easy to use, but the team had long since gotten into the habit of nonverbal communication. Words were a waste,

down in the darkness. Words were empty when you were cradling the dead.

His team, which was unquestioning in their obedience, immediately set up a Spoke bomb. Spokes were supercompressed constructs of interconnected tritanium pins encased in an isolated chamber, with a small discharger set at their center. When a Spoke ruptured and the tritanium came into contact with air, it would expand violently, blowing away anything in its immediate vicinity. The tritanium spokes would click into place and form a complex prismic polyhedron, similar to a hubless wheel. The spokes were perfectly balanced, and effectively created a hole in a wall through which a person could pass. It wouldn't be big enough to let through a rescue team laden down with equipment, but then, it didn't need to be. The scout teams only found people; they did not cure them, and the proper rescue teams had their own demolitions gear.

The team passed through the Spoke gap and rushed on. Down holes and chutes they went, Shiqra first, and it was as if he were hunting for ghosts, chasing the steady clockwork rhythm of a heart before it could beat it last. He took each turn with no hesitation, rushing through with complete assurance of motion. He could never tell anyone else this, but he knew his way around by now. He was starting to pick up the patterns.

He found himself distancing from the process, going out of his body as if his corporeal self were controlled by some outside force, and he thought back to the first heavy-carnage missions he'd been on.

He'd done a few regular scouting missions, and loved them, but was still hesitant about the job. He was escaping a bad life of drug use and self-abuse, and had really found himself in the Sisters, but he was always afraid of relapsing, of losing control. It felt like there was something curled up within him, something that he'd never been able to control, and even as he got over the withdrawal effects and experienced the joy of helping people -

and the sadness and horror of losing them - this core remained, untouched and waiting.

It wasn't until he went on the first mass-rescue mission, in yet another pirate refinery wrecked by some murderous capsuleer, and came upon the first mass of writhing, screaming humanity trapped within, that he truly felt this core inside of him start to crack open. It was horrifying, so horrifying that his mind left his body and he looked down upon himself as he tagged all those people - putting markers on them that would let the rescue teams find them and prioritize their care - and then kept on going in search for more life. It wasn't until much later that he realized he hadn't disconnected to save his sanity; he had done it because he felt, at last, like he was part of something larger than himself. He was no longer the focus and the center of his own little perceptual world, and that little core inside of him, that compressed ball of potential, began to respond to this new widening of the world. It started to unfurl, to stretch out.

Back in the present, Shiqra found himself at another passage. They'd passed a couple more people, tagging them as they went along, and were now at the entrance to the mine's deep, less traveled sections. The rock here was too thick for any signals to pass through, so they'd have to go entirely on instinct, and without any communication. There were several possible ways they could go, and Shiqra immediately split the team up into pairs of scouts, directing each pair towards a particular entrance. One of his team members, possibly nervous about going dark and losing all chance of communication, spoke out loud to Shiqra and commented with far too much cheer how he always seemed to know where to go, to direct them so they didn't end up under the falling girder or the exploding vat of acid, or whatever. His voice broke the silence like a shot and made the other team members nervous, but Shiqra laughed, and replied that he'd done a lot of these missions. It was no answer, he knew, but in the suffocating darkness of the mines, it sufficed, and calmed.

The scout pairs went their way; those who were going into open entrances started running, while the ones who needed to clear away rubble readied their Spoke bombs. Shiqra watched while his team trickled away. It was policy to travel in teams, but his status as team leader, and his renown as one of the Sisters' best scouts, was sufficient that he could travel all alone. His reasoning was that when he found a trail he would travel so fast that others had problems keeping up with him; and his team, which had worked with him for a while, uniformly agreed.

After he'd seen off the last of his teammates, he set off a Spoke on a remaining passage he'd indicated he would explore. He waited until he was sure that everyone else was out of earshot, then ran back up the passage they'd come, until he reached a side tunnel that they'd missed. It was hard to spot; the entrance was in a dark part of the mine that even their night-vision didn't cover well, and it hadn't been shored up properly, so it looked like a bountiless cul-de-sac full of rubble.

Shiqra knew better. He'd seen the signs.

He used free-form explosives to clear off some of the rubble, then a Spoke to make a hole through which he could crawl. When he was through, he disabled the Spoke's safety and deactivated it. Rubble fell back into the hole, and it looked as if it had never been there.

Shiqra descended.

As he'd done more missions, he'd felt a growing need to partake in the bloody ones, the missions where participating rescuer workers usually got put on leave for a few days after completing. That feeling of being a part of something greater, of being nonindividual and yet being important, was constantly on his mind.

And eventually, he began to see the signs. The other pieces of the mosaic. The other strokes of the brush.

That thing which was curled up inside him, that core no one could see, was the dawning understanding that someone was behind this. Someone had created these situations and was using them to make a kind of living - and dying - work of art, and in Shiqra's attraction to them he had become an element of the masterpiece.

It was entirely possible that he had gone mad, of course. He didn't doubt that. But he also didn't doubt his feelings, and he listened to them. Other team members often spoke about numbing yourself to experience, but that kind of attitude was anathema to him. He wanted to feel it all. And by and by, he started to find the patterns.

He began to exhibit an amazing ability to find living survivors where local interference meant scanning equipment couldn't detect any. But he knew he was simply being led there, and being tested. At every turn there would be an omen. Sometimes it would be obvious to him, though nobody else would notice: an oddly broken rock lying among the rest, a tatter of clothing hanging from an inconspicuous part in the ceiling, or some barely noticeable spatter of blood on a nearly hidden surface, all of which were out of place. He never mentioned these signs, but merely followed them. As he progressed, they started disappearing, replaced with the far more potent absence of anything important at all. The silence and emptiness in certain paths told him just as much as the noise and the visuals had done before. They spoke of unfulfilled potential; something could have been here, they said, and as it wasn't, he should investigate further.

There was something responsible for these catastrophes, Shiqra decided, a pattern to the blood and fire, and it was leading him on.

It happened only sporadically. Not every rescue mission he took brought him closer to transcendence. But he learned to recognize the ones that would, such as when they occurred and under what circumstances, and managed to find more and more. And every time, he progressed deeper, and his core stretched out and began to fill his body with truth and art.

He was going down the hole now, being led through dark places, following the patterns. Sometimes he'd see a hint, sometimes he wouldn't. This was initiation as much as invitation.

And at last he came to another pile of rubble that clearly was empty and devoid of any kind of interest. The absence of life was all the invitation he needed. He detonated a Spoke, opened a hole to the other side, and crawled through.

He made his way into a large, circular room that was a testament, a living altar. Bodies were strewn about, shredded and burned, and the few who seemed still alive were barely so. There was mining equipment here, and it had been put to use.

And in the middle of the room, sitting on top of a pile of equipment as if he were an emperor on his throne, sat a man who he'd later know as Yorlas, holding a massive rifle called a veinshredder.

Yorlas, who was apparently quite comfortable where he was, leant even further back and watched Shiqra with languid eyes. Then he raised the veinshredder, pointed it in Shiqra's direction, and fired.

In that split second, Shiqra's instinctive reaction was not to dodge the shot or move from its trajectory, but to stand still and accept it. It took his body a moment to realize that nothing had yet torn through his body, and he was truly surprised, not merely instinctively but intellectually, at not having been shot. He realized that he had accepted the firing, almost as a rebirth, and

that this man, who he knew without doubt was the one responsible for this catastrophe and so many others, was the artist whose red, red paint had covered Shiqra's canvas core.

Shiqra then realized that something else had been shot, and that whatever it was, it was thrashing about behind him, making horrible screeching sounds. He didn't look back. What mattered was in front of him: The artist, and the masterwork, and, approaching them with equal trepidation and joy, their supplicant.

With the barrel of his massive gun, Yorlas pointed towards a glinting patch on the floor. A knife lay there. "Take it," Yorlas said, "And kill yourself."

Shiqra hesitated, not out of unwillingness but simply surprise at the request. He walked over to the knife, hefted it, gently tested its edge. It was sharp, and he knew that once he turned on its diathermic field, it would slide in without any resistance.

He didn't want to do his. He wanted to live. Of course he wanted to live. But that was not what this was about. He was not the artist, and it was not his to decide what his own fate would be. He was the brush with which the work was painted, and the canvas that gratefully accepted its art. Tools could not disobey their masters. He felt a budding kind of pride, because he realized he was being reminded of his place, and while he still felt that he could be of use, he didn't question the art. He knew he would serve a purpose that reached far beyond himself.

Yorlas put the veinshredder aside, laced his fingers together under his chin, and watched Shiqra intently.

Shiqra pointed the knife against himself and was about to plunge it in when Yorlas yelled, "Stop!"

In the silence, there was nothing but the silent breathing of the walls, the condensation drops falling on blackened rock, and the cough and gurgle of the life that lay around them, passing away.

Yorlas said, "Change of plan," and nodded his head towards an inert form that lay in a corner. It was a person who was barely moving, having been cut and beaten quite badly. It was a woman's form, in torn miner's clothing. She was thin and apart from her injuries did not look very old or worn; she couldn't have been working in the mines for more than a year. She had long, white, curly hair. Possibly she had been an overseer, or one of the engineers making an inspection.

And without hesitation, but without any hurry, Shiqra, still holding the knife, went over to her, took hold of her hair and rolled her over so that her neck was exposed. His grip on her hair was firm, lest she struggle, but there was no need for it; her eyes rolled around in their sockets to catch a glimpse of him, but otherwise she was completely docile. Shiqra crouched, and slowly sunk the knife in her throat.

She made coughing motions, but otherwise did not move, and Shiqra idly wondered what the artist had done to her to procure this kind of serenity. They must have been here a while. He knew she was dying now, but it felt like something more was expected of him. He repositioned her and cupped his hands under the bloodflow. After he had a full hand, he began to walk the room, sprinkling and smearing the blood on the walls like the apprentice painter imitating a master artist.

He did this until the blood ran dry. Yorlas didn't speak much during the entire process, but then, he didn't need to. His actions had set the stage, and Shiqra was merely signing the work in his name.

And when it was over, and the sacrifice done, Shiqra stood with his eyes closed, and felt that unfurling core reach out to its full length, the canvas

stretching itself taut, until he had lost almost the final vestige of whatever had held him back.

But something remained. There was a purpose for him here, something that would keep him going forever, the brush in the artist's hand, but he had to know one thing. The last doubt, rubbed away.

"How did you know I would kill myself?" he asked Yorlas.

"Why do you need to know?" Yorlas asked in return, with unhidden amusement in his voice.

"I've done everything else. I am someone else. The one I was always meant to be, I think. But still ... how did you know?"

Yorlas leaned forward and, in three short words, completed the change, and stretched the canvas to its full and unyielding size.

"You were smiling," he said.

Black Mountain

A Pleasant Surprise

Draea's team was convinced they'd thrown off any trails, and contacted the Society for further flight instructions. They received a bookmark labeled "hidden kitz", along with two pieces of coding information that they added to data chips they'd picked up along the way.

The bookmark took them to an ancient stargate that looked like it was falling to pieces. There was no detectable activity on any part of the gate, and after trying several times to establish basic contact Krezek threw up his hands in disgust.

"Have you tried the password?" Draea said. She was sitting at the controls on the other side of the bridge, running last-minute checks on their weapon systems in case the gate flung them anywhere interesting.

"There's no point in trying the password unless I can get a channel to the gate."

"Try the password."

"There's no point!"

"Krezek-"

"No!"

Polok, who was standing behind Draea, leaned in and murmured, "We're all on edge here, so don't push the boy too hard. Remember the nestlings."

She stared at him in incomprehension, then ordered Krezek to get out of his seat. She moved over to his place, and he started hovering around her like a parent having his infant inspected, asking what she was planning to do. She said, "I'm planning to drill a hole in your head if you don't stop breathing down my neck. Go have a drink."

Polok hung back, without comment. Once Krezek had left, Draea said to him, "I don't think that the dead piece of metal we're seeing on the screen is only that and nothing more. I'm going to open a monoplex channel to the gate and throttle transfer from the data chip. You, on the other hand, are going to explain the nestlings."

Polok had taken Draea's old seat and was leaning back in it so much that he could place his feet up on the control board. He grinned and said, "I figured you knew about this already. Krezek and I worked on some assignments a few years back. Ugly stuff, mostly, with a lot of tense downtimes and waiting in bad places, so we ended up shooting the breeze. Krezek was good backup, by the way, but he was an absolute A-type who just had to do things in his own orderly, logical fashion. He gets a strange kind of peace out of it, and if things get too chaotic - not messy, just nonlinear - he'll develop some really weird tension relievers."

"So far, nothing new," Draea said, "neither on the gate nor Krezek. Nestlings, explain."

"When Krezek was a boy he was, like the rest of us, rather ... special. Brilliant, but he had no concept of right or wrong, or why on earth he should follow social mores. I do this stuff because I like it, you do it for whatever reason you have, but to Krezek, death and torture are just ways of relieving the tension, and bringing the universe back to order."

"Still nothing. Maybe I should open multiplex instead. Keep going," Draea said.

"One day, after he'd suffered some particularly vicious beatings from his stepdad, or his teacher, or whoever put that dark little seed into his childhood head, he went down to the local bird-feeding park and sat down by its little pond. They were using Soft Crumbs there, you know, stuff that's chemically designed to attract birds so they won't be frightened off by hyperactive, screaming kids. So he brought a few bags of Crumbs, tossed a handful out into the pond in front of him, and these tiny little baby birds start swimming up to him. And Krezek, wonderful, twisted Krezek, starts picking them out of the water, them so calm and relaxed from eating all that chem-laced bread, and he wrings their necks. He picks nestling after nestling out of the water, calmly twists its neck so its tiny beak is pointed towards its tail, and lays it to the side, until he's got a nice big pile of dead little birds. And the funny thing is, he doesn't do it with any kind of menace or satisfaction. It simply feels like something he needs to do, to fulfill his role and adjust the balance of the cosmos or what have you. He opens bag after bag of Crumbs, tosses endless handfuls to the poor young, and by the end the pile of birds is bigger than he is. He only stopped because his hands were getting too greasy from their down."

Draea stared at him. "That's ... messed up," she said at last.

"Yes."

"I've cut more throats than an army of barbers, and that's still way messed up."

"That's Krezek. Any luck on the transmissions?"

"No, but I've got an idea. We've been sending this signal encoded - which is stupid because there's nobody here to spy on it anyway - but since we're not actually getting a response from the gate, we've no idea whether it's accepting the transmission method. And if it isn't, the rest of the message it

receives is just going to be some random stream of garbage. I'm going to try sending it with just the base encoding, nothing fancy."

"Is this all highly complicated?"

"Mmm, not so much. Why?"

"Because I've been looking at the control board, and you've been doing quite a bit more than just hailing the gate."

"Mind your own business," she said, without much rancor, but paused her actions.

"It's almost as if you're sending data to someone else, too."

"Yeah?"

Polok ambled over and sat down beside her. "It's no mystery, you know."

A smile crept into Draea's features.

He continued, "I don't mind. I like a good fight. But I can't help wonder why you want him. I doubt he could fight his way out of a tent."

She said, "To be honest, I'm not even sure myself. You can have the rest of them as far as I'm concerned, but him, I need to talk to. When we activated the Book, something happened, and he was part of it. You didn't have any visions during the blackout, did you?"

"Nope. Stone cold," he said.

"Figured. I did."

"And he was in it?"

"He was. And what's more, it feels like we're connected now. He feels like the other side of me, one I wasn't even aware that I had."

Polok gave her a strange look.

"I know," she said. "I don't like it much, to be honest. I saw some things in the fugue that I need to clear up, and I've got an ugly feeling that if I don't deal with him now, he's going to become a much, much bigger problem later on. So I'm leading him to us."

"How do you know it wasn't just some total hallucination?"

"Two reasons. First, it felt more real than anything. Second, well ... toss a bullet." She pulled out a small knife from her belt, and stood up, but remained where she stood and did not turn to face the bridge.

Polok looked at her askew, but got up, pulled out a gun, took out its clip and dislodged a bullet. The manufacturer's initials had been stamped on the circumference of its rear end.

"Face the bridge," Draea said, still facing away from him and staring out at the stars. "Toss. No countdown, just toss."

He shrugged, and threw the bullet in the air, away from them.

Draea leaned her head down, closed her eyes and lifted her shoulders. She then raised the knife and, without turning, threw it back over her head.

She kept her eyes closed, and heard Polok say, "However the hell you did that, you shouldn't have been able to. And you owe me a bullet."

She laughed, sat again and opened her eyes, then pressed the activation button for the data sequence to the gate. For a few moments, nothing happened. Then there was a spark, a series of sparks, and the gate became illuminated in electricity which arced towards their ship and surrounded it. Draea saw her vessel start to move, align, prepare and, finally, warp.

A few seconds later, they dropped out of warp in front of an abandoned station of Gallente design.

They flew up to it. Draea transmitted the second code she'd received, and the station, its immense bulk floating inert in space, opened its docking bay and pulled their ship inside.

Once they were safely docked, they got out of the ship and into the bay proper. A special container for the Book was waiting for them, so they yanked it out of its original box, which they'd been wheeling around on an electric pallet, and put it into the container. It instantly closed and auto-sealed.

Using passwords sent by the Society, Krezek accessed the station's status monitors and found that large parts of the station were dark: Not in use and unable to power up to any kind of active functionality, although the atmosphere systems were apparently kept working on minimum capacity. The only fully functioning areas were a few kilometers away, in a complex of labs both scientific and otherwise. Krezek got more and more excited the further he inspected the data; apparently these were real complexes, with hi-tech facilities, torture labs - no one had said the Jove were nice - and all sorts of automated machinery to change the systems around and even alter their interior architecture. The deeper one got, the more mutable the systems appeared to be.

Polok asked Draea, "Those passwords for the station controls, you didn't share those as well, did you?" She shook her head.

Krezek was too enraptured to notice. He said, half to himself and half to anyone in the vicinity, "Gods, I'd love to try out some of the stuff they've got here. Do you see this? Self-modifying walls! And it's all wired up. It's like the blueprint for the world's biggest rat maze."

"What's keeping you?" Polok asked.

"Well, there's not much I can do with it, apart from make it reform itself. I'd need a live subject if it's to be any fun."

Polok looked at Draea, then back at Krezek. "I think there I can offer a pleasant surprise."

The Sisters ship docked at the abandoned Gallente station. Its crew - a blithe Nale, a watchful Zetyn, a frowning Monas and a very angry Hona - made its way onto the bay.

Nale had plugged the tracking device into his ship and used it to find his way here, though it wasn't until the device received data directly transmitted from Draea's own ship computer that they'd really taken off.

Zetyn checked if they could access the station's status monitors, but no luck.

Nale took the lead. They took another few careful steps, Nale at the forefront, until he stooped and picked something up. It was a little bronze

pellet, and as soon as he touched it, tiny blades shot out and nicked his fingers. He didn't flinch, but lifted it to his face and smiled.

"What's so funny?" Hona said.

"We're being ambushed," he replied.

There was a tink-tink-tink sound as something bounced towards them. It was a multiburst grenade, set to kinetic. As all but Nale started to turn and run, it exploded, and the shockwave threw them unconscious onto the floor.

Black Mountain

The Sanctuary

The keyword for the Sisters is care. Not only care for others, but care for themselves. Carefulness, in fact. They've gone to great lengths in establishing themselves as a neutral party in the world of New Eden, and while some activities among their internal factions may be less than savoury, their name still stands unflecked and untainted.

The bulk of the Sisters' factional manpower is drawn from their synonymous corporation, the Sisters of EVE (SoE). This manpower is applied in all manner of ways, depending on both the individual projects at hand and the agendas of the three blocs that make up the Sisters faction. Sometimes the Sisters need faithful healers; sometimes they need worldly diplomats; and sometimes they need people of quite a different caliber.

The first bloc is the SoE themselves. As has been chronicled elsewhere, the SoE is a philanthropical organization dedicated to bettering the life of New Eden's denizens. After their performance in the Caldari-Gallente war and the Minmatar recession from Amarr, they gained the grudging respect not only of the four major empires but of various other factions as well. The SoE are the only party which can freely enter war zones irrespective of which forces are locked in combat, and they are renowned - or notorious - for assisting pirate factions in rescue operations, often following capsuleer attacks. While the SoE never choose sides in any fight, it has to be said that as a rule they do not think highly of capsuleers and their unfettered indulgence of bloodshed and mayhem; and, in fact, much of their information and even some of their equipment tends to come from faction pirates as thanks for having saved the lives of those who the capsuleers left for dead.

The second bloc is the Food Relief corporation. While Food Relief (FR) are ostensibly responsible for delivering necessities - primarily food and medicine - to those in need, they have taken a few steps into the political

arena. Those steps are tentative and small, as befits any agency whose goodwill and clout are based primarily on its neutrality, and are for the most part focused on diplomatic relations such as improving dialogue with both army leaders and insurgents. FR have never officially withheld their deliveries, but in recent times there have been occasions where their medicine drops were delayed or reduced due to unforeseen events - environmental conditions, usually, or a sudden outbreak of hostility on their caravan routes - and some political analysts maintain that these delays indirectly affected the outcomes of other factions' military campaigns. The warring forces may not need FR's supplies, but they do need some manner of public support, and if the public is made to starve, so will its support. Once the media then picks up on the suffering innocents and starts broadcasting their images throughout the constellation, it becomes even more apparent to the warring factions that FR should be given due reverence and assistance.

It should be noted that the Food Relief corporation itself only deals with administrative matters, such as where to focus its drops and how much it should give to each side. The SoE contains the workforce pools themselves, and FR and the Sanctuary both draw on them when engaging in projects. The disparity between the SoE and FR is administrative for the most part, though there are subtle ideological differences: The SoE bring healing to the masses and proclaim their faith, while FR is more focused on practicality, numbers and diplomacy.

The third bloc is the Sanctuary. It is a scientific research institute, and is easily the most secretive of the three. This secrecy may seem to run counter to the institute's purpose, but has proven vital for the Sanctuary to maintain complete neutrality. There are various forces in New Eden who would much like to gain access to the Sanctuary's data on troop movements, combat avoidance tactics and combat stress resistance techniques. There are also various forces in the world of the media who would be very interested in publicising information on the Sanctuary's theological research. A century's worth of goodwill has gotten the Sisters

far, but it wouldn't take much for the public's fascination with cults and occultism to override that goodwill, particularly in an organization so revered for its benevolence. Everyone loves a fall from grace.

The Sanctuary, as with Food Relief, is an administrative institution. They have their overseers and their employees, but their test groups are pulled from the SoE. However, this should not imply that the members of the SoE are all part of a faceless mass, waiting to be chosen at random by the powers above. Each member will, if he shows loyalty and talent, be given the chance to offer his services to the bloc he prefers, and work for them on a permanent basis. Faith, diplomacy and science all have their place.

This factional division, natural as it is, has caused some ideological disparity among the Sisters blocs. As a result, its leaders have been developing new ways to unify their forces. Despite some initial hesitance on the leaders' side to encourage it, the most effective way is in fact one that has cropped up naturally among the workers themselves.

The Sisters have always been unified in love, but they are also increasingly becoming unified in hate. This is not as paradoxical as first might seem. Everything has its inverse, and if you truly and honestly devote yourself to a particular entity, whether it's a physical object, a living thing or an abstract ideal, you will invariably find yourself at odds with that entity's antithesis and enemies. The Sisters of EVE have devoted themselves to saving lives, helping the sick & wounded, and gently prodding humankind to sacred ascendancy; and what foils them at every turn, in greater measure than politics and weaponmaking and natural disaster, is a force that continues to grow: The capsuleers.

Of course this is an oversimplification, and the people in the Sisters of EVE realize that as well as anyone else. Capsuleers, in and of themselves, are no more of a uniformly evil force than any average Empire subculture, and they are nowhere near the only one that routinely causes death and destruction. There are countless atrocities performed on any number of planets, let alone in space, by groups and armies and factions entirely unrelated to ship pilots. But to the minds of many Sisters, and even of

many others, the capsuleers have come to represent this malevolent nadir of humanity: They are powerful, and they use that power in the ways of the old gods, delivering it with fire and noise and blinding lights and leaving a wake of anguish, all in the name of whim and immediate desire.

This has given the Sisters something to rally around, and even if it's subtle, it helps them do their job, cursing and growling at the concept of capsuleers while they patch together yet another whimpering group of collateral damage. It should be noted that since the Sisters of EVE cannot afford to antagonize the capsuleers, they use only dutifully appointed representatives that actually quite like ship pilots. But on the ground floor, things are a little different, and with this kind of dark unification factor, there will always come those who take it too far and want to become proactive. There have been stories of the SoE doing more arms training than before, and of Food Relief taking decisions that are decidedly more militaristic in nature, even going so far as to demand personal information on capsuleers in exchange for providing assistance.

In and of themselves, these developments are not that surprising: The SoE always have to be ready for combat and thus periodically renew their teaching syllabus, generally putting a higher focus on self-defence each time; and Food Relief want to plan their operations without having to fear interference by rogue capsuleers, which means they have to know something about them. It is the Sanctuary who have taken their anti-capsuleer stance to the furthest and most dangerous point, and they are the one corporation within the entire Sisters of EVE faction that can now be said - carefully, for nothing they've done has been proven, and as the Sisters tread with care around us, so must we around them - be schisming from the rest. There were even hushed rumours of their theo-technological research having taken dark and occult turns. One particularly enduring tale is that at some point an informant gave the Sanctuary information about something called a Book of Emptiness, a powerful machine once developed and hosted by the Society of Conscious Thought but now adrift in space, and that this same informant included a piece of proof called an

Oblivion Cocktail that was based on the same tech. It is said that it was easy work to adjust the Sanctuary training of its SoE recruits in order to prepare for possible engagement over this thing - search and rescue missions were already part of their agenda - and to filter out from the SoE masses anyone who was immune to the Book's effects and vulnerable to the Sanctuary's propaganda. If true, this godsend would give the Sanctuary an opportunity to further its agenda without sharing too much with the other blocs, to a point where they might even attempt to gain control of the entire Sisters faction, followed by so much else. The current status of this rumoured project remains unknown, but given how far-fetched it sounds, the public doesn't seem much bothered. Besides, even if it is true, there is cause to rejoice, for the rumour has a second part: There is a counter-revolution within the Sanctuary, a force of individuals who are against this secret development, having seen its subtle poison, and want to turn the corporation away from its evil, dangerous path and back towards the Sisters' true purpose, without risking that their corp or the faction as a whole lose its reputation and power in the process.

If one lends credence to rumours, it might be assumed that these underground forces for good don't stand much of a chance, for evil tends to prevail. But the Sisters of EVE are masters at handling themselves in adverse conditions, and it is in their nature to face reality and deal with a situation as it is, not as they'd like it to be. They will not be led by dogma for long.

This counter-revolution, if it exists at all, will undoubtedly proceed under the Sisters byword. They will let their enemies think that everything is alright until the time is right, and they will not impose on, expose or affect anything until they are ready. They will be efficient, and they will be swift, and they will be very, very careful.

Black Mountain

Polymelia

Zetyn came to, and rubbed his head. He was wearing most of his clothes but had lost all his gear and, oddly, his shoes. His bare feet felt cold on the hard metal floor.

He was sitting in the centre of a small crossroads. It was dark in there but not too dark to see, and as he looked around he saw that everything - the floor, the ceiling, every wall - was made of equal size metal panels. The wall panels had inset windows made of thick, glasslike material that rang out dully when Zetyn reached up and knocked on it.

Faint fluorescent lights shone out between the edges of the panels, giving the space a dusky luminescence. The corridors were wide enough for a man to barely touch them with arms outstretched, but the ceiling was low and oppressive.

There were four ways he could go, but each way was a tiny cul-de-sac, terminating in another metal panel. Zetyn had no idea how he had even got in here.

He went to his hands and knees again, feeling too unsteady to walk. His head still throbbed, so he crawled all the way to the end of one corridor. He reached the end not even intending to put his weight on the wall but simply to touch his forehead there, against the cool wall. As he did there was a crackle, a feeling like a million little needles all jabbed into his head, and he was thrown backwards with a scream.

He lay on the floor, quivering and breathing rapidly. He felt his forehead but there didn't seem to be any bleeding, though he was now sweating so much that it was hard to tell in the gloom.

A voice spoke, "That was stupid."

He looked up. There was no one there.

The voice spoke again. "Try the other doors."

Zetyn dragged himself to his feet, being careful not to touch anything around him. He focused inward, pushing his panic down, reaching back to all those times he had been surrounded by blood and despair and yet had kept his head. His body finally stopped trembling, and he started looking around, wondering who it was that was watching him.

The watcher apparently misunderstood his intent, for the voice said, "Oh, the side walls are perfectly safe to touch."

Zetyn didn't trust him. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm the one who put you here."

"Why? What's this all about?"

"Not dying," the voice said, with an emphasis that implied this would be the last it would speak for now.

Zetyn gingerly made his way to another end of the crossroads. On the way there he peered out the windows but saw nothing on the other side. There were perhaps the faintest outlines of other windows beyond them, but Zetyn was not sure if it was really that or just a reflection of his own corridor.

He stood in front of another door - the ends of the corridors looked exactly the same as the rest, but the voice had called it a door and Zetyn was now

starting to do the same - and took a deep breath. He reached out a hand and paused, listening intently for anything - the crackle of static, the faint whisper of a laugh, anything - but there was total silence.

He pulled his hand back a little, then punched it forward, smacking his entire palm against the panel.

Nothing happened. His jaw began to ache, and he realized he was gritting his teeth.

The voice piped up again and said, "Well done." The panel he'd touched slid aside, revealing another crossroads beyond that looked exactly the same as the one he was in.

Zetyn stood there for a while, not crossing over, beginning to realize the kind of predicament he was in. He wondered whether to try for flattery, then decided it was too early and he might as well test his warden's ego before getting hit even harder. "I'm not sure I trust this thing. You made it?"

"Yes," the voice said, with no discernible pride.

"How do you know it won't just kill me outright?"

"That depends on the choices you make. But it'll work like I say it works."

So. He was convinced of his abilities, at least, Zetyn thought. He stepped over the boundary and into the new crossroads. Behind him, the new panel slid noiselessly back into place.

"Is there a single exit here as well?" Zetyn asked.

The voice said, "Possibly."

"And anything that's not an exit..."

"Will be a circuit closer. The floor's electrified, but you're fine so long as you don't touch the wrong exit. I might be a little more lenient if you can tell me anything juicy about your friends"

Zetyn rubbed his eyes. "I dunno what you're talking about. Is that the reason? Did your own people put you up to it? Why are you doing this?"

"Well, the setup itself is a little experiment of mine, one I've always wanted to do. Behavioral therapy and biofeedback research. And yeah, I wouldn't mind knowing more about the people you travel with. But really, this whole thing ... with all the stress and annoyance you've put us through in the whole hunt, I wanted to set the world right again, and find a quiet little corner in it for myself. So I guess you could say I'm putting you through this just because I can."

And that was that. It was, Zetyn had to admit, the most honest answer he could possibly have received to the question.

He stalked to the opposite end of the crossroads and put his hand on the panel with determination and vigor, both of which disappeared the instant his flesh touched the metal. There was a crackle, and Zetyn screamed and dropped to his knees, clutching his hand.

Above and around him, the voice casually stated, "You know, as a hint, there's only one way out of this particular section. All you need do is find it."

Zetyn got back to his feet, stumbled to another part of the crossroads, tried to empty his mind before he touched it, and was immediately thrown back from the force of the shock."

"There you go," the voice said. "Only one possibility now."

Zetyn was on the floor, breathing rapidly, tears of shock running down his face. The panic rose and he couldn't hold it down, so he let it grow, let it erupt, and let the anger take over. He rolled to his hands and feet, sprang up and ran screaming at the fourth and final door, slamming into it with all his might. His shoulder hit first and the impact numbed him down to the fingertips, jarring his entire frame, and left him in a heap, on his knees, his head hanging down.

In front of him, the door slid open.

"I admire your verve, if not your intelligence," the voice said. "I hope you can keep it up, little nestling."

"What..." Zetyn tried to speak, but had to catch his breath. "What kind of place is this?"

The voice, sounding happy to be asked, immediately replied, "The panels aren't that special, least not the base design. They're electricity-based, more than you realize, and can be programmed to do any number of things, from electric fences to vidcasting. This place has an insane amount of them, probably mean to construct a training grounds."

As Zetyn half-crawled into the next chamber, the voice continued, "They're set on tiny rails that slide under their own power and can be made to continually reposition the panels, so that you've got a self-adaptive, semi-autonomous scaffolding. It doesn't even have to be big; the one you're in is only a few rooms back and forth, constantly sliding and adjusting. I give the system a few parameters and it does the rest."

"And what were your parameters?" Zetyn asked in a hoarse voice.

"Make a deadly maze," the voice said shortly, then returned to talking about the hardware. "Regular panels can't have their electricity set too high, but that's easily fixed if you know what you're doing. The first versions were far more potent but got outlawed shortly after, when people started getting seriously hurt. They were called skimmers, and the name stuck."

Zetyn really didn't want to know, but he asked nonetheless. "Skimmers?"

"From how they could skin the flesh off your bones if you weren't careful."

Zetyn sighed. He sat with his back up against a wall, eyes closed, head hanging down.

The voice said, "Look up."

He didn't look up.

The voice said, "If you look up, little nestling, I'll tell you which door is the right choice."

Without letting the damning, spiteful thoughts of his own cowardice surface in his mind, he looked up.

There, behind a glass pane, stood a man. He was a Caldari, rather thin, with a silly haircut and a pale face. He had a stare that Zetyn recognized; it was the gaze of a man who no longer saw the life around him, or felt part of it. Zetyn had seen it in dying people, and in those who'd caused their deaths.

"I'll be your guide," the man said, and his voice suffused the chamber.

Zetyn stood up and walked to the window. He stared at his tormentor for a while, then snarled and slammed his palm hard on the glass. The man

didn't even blink. It was stupid, Zetyn knew, and wouldn't do anything to help him get out of there, but he couldn't help it. He composed himself and said, "What is your name?"

"Krezek," the man said. "What is yours?"

"Zetyn."

"Glad to meet you, Zetyn. Take the first door on the left."

"How long do you intend to keep me here?"

"As long as you need."

"Need for what?"

"To get out. The parameters for the skinner rails generate a code-based maze. If you figure it out, you can go free without so much as a scratch. If not, well, you won't."

Zetyn said, "I was never good at maths."

"That's a shame. Especially since the code is self-modifying based on operational feedback. Make too many mistakes and the patterns will start to change, and you'll need to start all over again."

"And you're going to stand there, to watch."

"For people like you, I've got all the time in the world," Krezek said.

"People like us?"

"Nitwits who think they can change the world, make it unstable. I wonder where your friends are."

Zetyn looked around the empty metal maze. "I wonder that myself. In fact, I wonder if I know them at all."

"You're not with them, I take it. You just got pulled along for the ride. A victim," Krezek said.

"No more victim as anyone else, I suppose," Zetyn said, "but at this time, in this place, I have no friends. Guess I should get better at making them."

Krezek, leaning in a little closer, said, "I suggest you also get better at maths, real quick, and stay away from the electric skinners. Eventually the shocks will wear out your heart, and you'll start to get palpitations. They can be quite unpleasant, I hear. Fatal, even."

Zetyn stared at him, then walked away silently and headed for the first door on the left.

His flesh felt like it was going to tear itself off his body, and he didn't care. He'd stopped crying; had left behind those gasping sobs of sorrow and hope, and moved beyond them, into a place of darkness and acceptance. His hands wouldn't stop trembling, but he viewed them outside himself. He was a machine now; his sole purpose to keep moving, keep looking, keep being shocked and keep opening doors, until he could finally find the one that would end this.

At one point he'd pressed a lucky door and suffered no shock, but the floor panel itself had slid aside, dropping him so far that when he landed and his head hit the ground, he'd heard the crunch on the inside of his skull.

Sometimes the panel overhead would open, and he'd be forced to climb up, his entire body shaking with the effort. The first time this had happened he hadn't noticed, and had screamed with frustration, thinking this was the end and all he could do now was roam around until he finally died.

Krezek had followed along; sometimes voicing support or commentary, sometimes appearing in windows. He had, he said, programmed the skinner complex so as to always afford him a parallel route to Zetyn's gauntlet, so that he could follow along and peer in on his subject whenever he wished.

And so it might have gone till infinity and oblivion, but Zetyn heard a whisper. It said, "Right turn, and watch the floor."

Zetyn looked up. On the other side of a glass panel stood Krezek, as usual, with his composed, aloof expression. The whisper had not been his voice; it was full and resonating while Krezek's voice, with which he'd spoken at full volume the entire time, was a pinched and whiny thing, like a winged insect trying to escape from under a thumb. Krezek didn't appear to have noticed it.

Zetyn wondered momentarily if this were a trick, but discounted the notion. His torturer's mind games were mechanical, not interpersonal.

He hauled himself over to the right-hand door and stood in front of it. He told himself he was weighing his options, but in truth, he was trying to savor the moment, to enjoy the budding little seed of hope that could blossom into the assurance of deliverance. The instant he would touch the door, he'd know.

Then he remembered what the voice had said about the floor, and he turned on the spot, putting his back against one side of the corridor and

pressing his legs against the other end. It hurt like blazes, but the pain felt good, and he used it to push harder, until he was reasonably sure that he wouldn't tumble down if the floor gave out.

"What are you doing?" Krezek said from behind the glass prison walls.

"Changing the game," Zetyn muttered, not truly caring whether his tormentor heard him. Keeping himself clamped up against the walls, he reached out one hand and gingerly touched the door. If this failed, he knew, he would die; the last ember of hope would be extinguished and he'd fall down like a pile of dead ashes.

His finger brushed the door. There was no current, no arc, no crackle. The floor panel beneath him merely slid open in silence, and Zetyn let himself slide down slowly as well, trying his hardest not to hope.

He hadn't been on the new floor for five seconds when the whisper was heard again. "Opposite door." He got up, walked over and pressed its panel. It opened.

He walked through, and the whisper said, "Left turn." Through a glass panel he saw Krezek show up, running along. Krezek's face registered surprise, the first expression he'd shown so far.

Zetyn turned left, rushed through that door, and waited for further instructions. There were none, and for a moment he thought his benefactor had abandoned him. Then Krezek showed up on the other side of a nearby glass partition, and Zetyn understood. The whisperer wanted to make itself known.

"The next one is going to be left, then straight, left again, right and the ceiling, and straight," the stranger said. It was no longer a whisper but a

full-fledged voice, and while there was an odd tonality to it, Zetyn immediately recognized its owner. It was coming from Nale.

"Who is that? Who's there?" Krezek demanded. He put his face up against the glass and goggled at the room, his head moving back and forth. When he saw no one but Zetyn, he seemed to settle down a bit, and even flashed a brief smile.

Nale spoke up again, "Actually, you think you can memorize a longer sequence?"

Over Krezek's outraged screams, Zetyn grinned and nodded.

"All right. Take the ones I told you, then left, left, straight, left and floor, right and floor, straight, right and ceiling, left. Got it?"

"Got it," Zetyn said and set off, Krezek yelling at him all the way. It occurred to Zetyn that his upset wasn't perhaps from fear of his own life from the intruder, but from frustration that this little world he'd created was being upended. In his rush of hope and relief, he couldn't help but feel amused.

Nale kept giving him directions, and Krezek kept yelling. There were bangs and hammerings on the panels, which Zetyn imagined were from Krezek either taking out his frustrations or scampering around trying to find Nale. If Krezek's description of the maze had been right, Nale would have had to have been incredibly inventive to hide from the man, but he'd apparently succeeded so far. Zetyn himself had discovered new reserves of energy and was now rushing through the maze at high speed, slowed only by the time it took the doors to open.

And eventually, they got to the end. Zetyn stepped through yet another open door, and the corridor he entered was lit up with a green light. It was small and faint, but in the endless gray gloom Zetyn had suffered it felt like

a blazing torch was shining into his eyes. He stumbled towards the light, feeling with his hands, and found that it was a panel set in the door on the opposite side of the crossroads. The panel was about the size of Zetyn's chest and had no borders. Its black surface had a green hue about it and was overlaid with a grey rectangular grid. When Zetyn touched the surface his finger left green ripples, as if he'd dipped it into water, and the grid realigned itself into concentric circles. He touched it again, and it changed to a series of digits. Another touch, another ripple, and the grid changed color to a bright turquoise and reverted back to squares.

"Good luck with that," Krezek said. He was standing on the other side of a glass panel right by Zetyn's side. Their faces were half an arm's length apart, and at that moment Zetyn wished more than anything he had in his life that he could punch through the glass and tear Krezek's throat out.

"The lock is adaptive. It will adjust to everything you touch and realign its key accordingly," Krezek said.

"You're such a delightful human being," Zetyn said, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice. He was so close to getting out, he could feel it in his bones.

"The adaptation formula is based half on the one that modified the maze you just got through. So with your little drone helper hovering around somewhere, and believe me, I will catch him eventually, you shouldn't have any problems."

Zetyn thought about that sentence, and the quiet satisfaction it seemed to exude. He said, "What's the other half?"

"A code only I know."

"... right."

"You can find it, mind you. As soon as you'd left the first room, I dropped in a note in there with the code. All you need to do is backtrack to the start. Shouldn't be hard. Oh, and the currents in everything but that black panel are now lethal."

"You do enjoy this," Zetyn said, trying to keep calm and desperately hoping Nale had something up his sleeve.

"Damn straight I do. And while you're been working your way through my maze, I've been readjusting the panel controls. I know exactly where your little angel is going to be this time around, and even if I can't get to him, all I need to do is electrify every panel in his room, and he'll be gone."

"We better get it right the first time around, then," Nale said, appearing behind the glass on Zetyn's other side. "Do as I say at all times. First touch the upper right corner of the panel to reset it."

Zetyn did so. Both of his people, angel and demon, watched the scene closely.

"Now, don't touch the panel. Instead, slowly hover your finger over its top left corner and drag it to the right, as if you're tracing a straight line. When you get to the end, bring the finger back to the left, just below where you started, and do the same. Push the panel only when I say."

"What are you doing?" Krezek said.

"Getting him out," Nale said. "Do it."

Zetyn started, slowly tracing his finger a fraction over the panel's surface. He hadn't made more than three passes when Nale suddenly said, "Push and repeat."

Zetyn obeyed, touching the screen, then starting again. It took a few more passes this time, and he was almost down to the bottom of the screen when Nale gave the command. Each time he pushed, the screen would realign itself into new types of grids and colors.

And there came a point where Nale told him to stop, and said, "This one will be the last. Once you touch it, and once the door opens, run and don't look back."

Krezek, who'd fallen sullenly silent, exploded. "You couldn't possibly have done that! There is no way you could have backtracked to the first room, gotten in, and gotten back out without altering the skinning order. How the hell have you been doing this?!"

"Faith," Nale said, which shut him up.

Zetyn pushed the panel. It made ripples that spread continuously outwards to its edge, so that the panel was still rippling by the time the door slid open.

Zetyn ran through, into a long corridor with a light at the end, and did not even hesitate as he went through the light and was in the air, flying and running, and even after he fell into the safety net below, his feet were still moving. He scrambled out of the net, not sparing even one glance upward, and made it down to the ground proper, where he managed all of ten steps before the adrenaline ran out and his legs gave way. He crawled on all fours until he made it to a wall, and noticed with an ugly grimace that he instinctively shied from touching it. He made himself lean up against it, and turned around, looking at his old prison.

The maze was a strange thing when seen from the outside. It was like a facsimile of a piece of pollen; a roundish creation from which protruded

countless metal bars and jutting panels. Its metal gleamed in the lights from the ceiling. Every now and then a panel would be retracted and another pushed out instead. Clearly, the maze was still reconfiguring itself. He wondered if Nale and Krezek were still in there. If Krezek were to emerge as the winner, Zetyn didn't even know if he could find the energy to scamper away. He kept an eye peeled on the one exit in the maze, the one he'd come out through.

The panels stopped moving. There was silence, then a few bangs, then nothing. Zetyn held his breath.

There was a whirring sound. A panel slid over the exit, and the maze was sealed.

Zetyn exhaled, and kept exhaling until his vision darkened, his eyes rolled back in his head and his consciousness faded away to blissful oblivion.

A noise awoke him with a start. It came from around him, but his first instinct was to look up at the maze, and he saw that it was open again.

He scrambled to his feet, unsteadily. It felt as if he'd been sleeping for days. He didn't know whether Krezek might be around somewhere.

There were steps to his right. His heart did double beats.

Out of the shadows, Nale appeared. He walked close to Zetyn but remained out of arm's reach. "Rest easy," he said. "I am still with you."

Something in his manner made Zetyn's flesh crawl, but he attributed it to the horror of the maze. "Krezek?" he asked.

"Krezek is gone," he said.

Zetyn felt awash with relief. He started to crawl towards him but Nale backed away slightly. "I have work to do now," he said.

"What do I do? Are you going to get Monas?"

"Monas is gone, too," Nale said. "I could only save you."

Zetyn covered his face and tried to keep his breathing steady. After he felt he could speak again, he said, "So what now?"

"You go by yourself. Get to our ship. Leave."

"And go where?"

"Back to our people. Tell them what happened." Nale turned and started to walk away, but hesitated and said, "Well ... leave out the ugly parts, though."

"What are you going to do?"

"Find salvation," he said, and resumed walking away.

Zetyn watched him recede, and realized that he might never get another chance to ask a question that had been burning into his mind. "Nale?"

"Yes?"

"How did you manage it? In the maze."

Nale smiled faintly. "I listened to the rails, the way they slide together. I didn't conceptualize Krezek's mathematical formula, whatever it was. I simply saw everything as it was, and acted accordingly."

"And the code?"

"I watched Krezek as your hand hovered over the panel. His eyes told me when to press."

Zetyn stared at him. Finally he said, "Nale?"

"Yes?"

"Don't take this as any kind of judgment, please, but I don't even think I know who you are anymore. I love you, man, I truly do, but you've gone through the wall of craziness and out the other side. Whatever you are, I doubt it's human."

Nale's smile turned into a grin. "We're all just limbs of the same body. Good luck, my friend." And he was gone.

After a while, Zetyn got to his feet, and started making his way back to the ship.

Black Mountain

Black Mountain

Nale and Hona stood in front of a large warehouse. It was an unnerving place; the entire area was suffused with a strange smell, and there was absolutely no action, movement or sound detectable in the surroundings. The doors in front of them, the height of a five-story building, were locked with complicated electronic safeguards.

"Are you sure it's here?" Hona asked him.

"It's here," he said. "This is the end, and a new beginning."

"She's going to kill you," she said.

"I've died twice already," he said. "One more time won't hurt."

"Twice?" she said.

He nodded. "Once when I found out about the illness and joined the Sisters. And once on Black Mountain."

She was about to respond when the locks turned off in unison, and the massive doors creaked open.

They walked into total darkness, and the doors slowly closed behind them. The smell here was far more intense. It reminded them part of the sea and part of badly cleaned space ships.

A vast light blinked on overhead, and they saw what was in front of them. The room was dominated by a huge, open pool of pod liquid, and stretched over an expanse so vast that even with the light above they still couldn't see to the room's other end.

In the ectoplasm floated various pieces of regenerated humans, or some things that at least seemed within shouting distance of humanity, including various organs, half-formed rib cages, spines of varying sizes, and yellowish, mottled limbs. There was a square grid marked on the floor of the pool.

Lights flickered on in the entire hall. It was circular, with only two ways to get past the pool and to the other end. Across from them, a faint sight in the distance, stood Draea, with something box-shaped beside her that was covered in wires and glowing with red lights.

Speakers on the wall buzzed into life, and her voice echoed through the hall. "When I got here the pool was covered with plexiglass, and each sample was kept in a separate compartment. A few commands to the control system and all that glass slid aside. This place is so adaptable. I love it."

On her shoulder she had slung a large gun. "One of my men is busy with his hobby, but the other I've lost contact with. And I see you brought a friend, someone who looks suspiciously like I met them in the past. How did you find me, by the way? And no need to shout; there's sensors that'll pick up your voice."

"The same way I found Zetyn. I just followed the path," Nale said. Behind him, Hona, who'd shivered at the word 'hobby', slowly drew her gun.

"What path?" Draea asked.

"My own. Have you forgotten what you saw at Black Mountain?"

"I try not to think about it too much."

"Then you are lost."

"Big words coming from a-" Draea said, then stopped in mid-sentence and threw a knife at him. It hurtled through the air, aimed not at Nale but at Hona, and even at that great distance it moved so fast that she could not react in time. It speared the gun out of her hand and kept right on going. On the wall behind them there was the sound of steel breaking.

Hona looked at it, then over to Nale, then back at the remains of the knife. "Nale, she broke the knife's blade."

"We'll be fine."

"You don't understand. There's a dent in the wall. She threw that knife hard enough to break its *blade*."

Nale turned to her. "Don't lose faith. She was only testing us. We're doing the right thing here."

There was a sigh in the air and Nale bent almost imperceptively. The knife headed for his neck missed him by a hair's breath and, like the last, broke against the wall.

Sounding completely unperturbed, Nale asked. "Is that the Book beside you? Did you bring it here?"

Draea pointed to the box beside her. "That's it. I could wire it up from practically anywhere in this station, but I liked this place. Keeps people at a distance."

Nale visibly tensed. "Wire it up?"

"You didn't know? We're supposed to destroy it. The Society didn't trust us to do it on our own, so they made us find the thing and bring it all the way here. I've got it plugged into their system so that they can verify it hasn't been tampered with, opened up or copied. Once I give the command, those same systems will disintegrate it, to the point where there'll be nothing but atoms floating on the breeze. I'll be done with my mission and will go get my reward."

Nale stared slowly walking around the pool and towards Draea's distant form. "I saw you there," he said. "At Black Mountain. Why would you ever want to destroy the Book?"

"It's what I'm here for. Why do you want to keep it?"

"Because it can save the world."

"From what?"

"Blood. Violence. Hatred. We can change the world, Draea."

"That's nice," she said. "Tell me about Black Mountain."

"You saw it, same as me. A walk through a desert, surrounded by spirits. A hike up a steep cliff, where the spirits begin to meld and rush forth. And, beyond that, the sea of dreams, overseen by the stars."

"Why did it change us?"

"Because we were ready. I was hoping that you would also be ready for the next stage. We're getting closer to ascendancy."

"And that includes dying, does it?"

Nale stopped short at that. "What?"

"In the vision. I realized that you were dying. Is that part of this grand plan of yours?"

Nale smiled, and began walking again in her direction. "We're all dying. Just some faster than others."

Draea sighed. "Over the last few days I've gained incredible focus. I can hit harder, move faster and aim better than I ever could in my life, and believe me, I was no slouch before. I was hoping that you could cast some light on this. I'm not in the mood for religion."

"That's a shame." He began to walk faster. At that, she pulled out another knife and, without even turning her gaze away from him, threw it into the air. There was a ping as the knife ricocheted off a wall, and a scream shortly after. Far away, Hona dropped to the ground, clutching her leg.

"One more step and your girlfriend dies," she said. "Stop trying to sneak."

Nale said, "If it's necessary, then so be it," and kept on walking.

From far behind they heard Hona choke and cough. Draea grinned wide. "I'm surprised," she said. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"She's just another spirit," Nale said. "But why bother? It's me you want."

"It is?" she said, still grinning, but the grin had turned cold.

"We've had a melding of consciousness. The spirits flowed past us, participants in an endless cycle none of them can break out of. None

except you and me. We stood there, on Black Mountain, and we saw the dream-sea. I accepted and joined it, I drowned, and gained an oversight over the entire world."

"And that talent allows you to dodge everything in sight."

"Yes. And it uncovered the truth of the Book and of everything surrounding it. This is something we need to do. This is what's right. You had the same experience; surely you've come to the same conclusion. We need to save this world from itself."

"No."

"No?"

"Your focus widened, fine," Draea said. "Mine narrowed. What I saw in that unconscious moment was not some hyperextended superconsciousness, it was a shrinkage. I stood atop this Black Mountain of yours, and the entire world narrowed to a point, reduced, brought directly into my aim. And now I've got you in my sights, you and your craziness."

Nale stopped cold at that.

"I would never be part of this world you want," she continued. "This grand design of yours, this satellite view, it's nothing to do with me. I am the focus; I am a laser. And all I want is to get better at what I am and what I do."

"You are hyperfocused. You are alone of your kind. You are alone in this world," he said, in a dead voice.

"You lie," she said with a smile, remembering a similar lie so long ago. "There are others like me. And now you've made up my mind."

Nale started walking again, a determined expression on his face.

Draea quite relaxedly raised the veinshredder. "Not only have you made it amply clear that you're perfectly useless at helping me improve my skills or explain what happened, but you want to rid the world of all people who

harbor hatred, rage and war in their hearts. People like me. We really can't have that."

Nale was running now, far away from her but still close enough to aim at.

"So all the reasons I let you in here are no longer valid, and you've become nothing but a weak, sad opponent with delusions of grandeur," Draea said. "You're wrong, and you're probably insane. I hurt and murder and kill for my own personal reasons, but I never dream of thinking that it's morally right or just. It's what I do, nothing more or less. Some might say that it makes me a lesser monster than you, but I suppose it doesn't matter. Any last words?"

"Die," Nale said.

Draea smiled, and fired the veinshredder. The spheres zoomed towards Nale, curving gently in the air so as to compensate for his moving heat signature, but he easily slipped past them. Draea emptied the clip, but none of the shredders touched Nale's moving form as he zipped and weaved on the wide walkway. She reloaded and kept firing, her deadly missiles pinging off the walls and falling into the ectoplasm below. Nale bobbed and dodged as he ran, sweating madly, his eyes unblinking as he approached. Draea's smile faded as she concentrated on hitting him, but every shot, even as it curved towards his head and body, managed only to whiz by him and hit the walls around his running form.

At last he got too close for safe range, so Draea tossed the gun, pulled out a knife and set her feet. He lunged at her, she ducked and swiped the knife, and he wasn't quite quick enough to turn out of range, the blade leaving a bleeding surface trail on his torso. She turned, intending to plunge the knife into him, but he'd already pirouetted and now went for her knife hand, clamping on to her forearm with both his hands, stepping outside it and violently turning his shoulder into hers. She got levered down and for a split second felt like her shoulder was going to be wrenched out of its socket. He started kneeing her in the thigh and ribs, and she dropped the knife, spun around and punched him in the throat. She had little weight to put into the punch, and it was weak and flailing, but it was enough; he

gagged and let go, and she yanked the arm back and started backing away, on instinct pulling out a gun and aiming it at his momentarily still form.

It was too late; he spotted it and launched after her. She dropped the gun and barely managed to put her hands up before he was on her, bowling her down to the ground, sitting on top of her with his hands closing around her throat. She buckled, rolled him over and managed to break his grip, but as she started punching and elbowing him, he was able to dodge every blow with ease. She jumped up and looked around for a weapon, any weapon, but he rose with her, more in tune with her motions than any practice partner had ever been. They exchanged blows, most of hers missing him by a hair's breath but visibly tiring him when they connected; his hitting her, but her years of work in the violence of the mining colonies had left her well-prepared for body blows.

They said nothing; the words had run out and all they had now was grunts and actions, sighs and gasps and blood. His eyes, already wild, opened even wider, and his nostrils flared. He backed up, but before she could think of what to do he ran at her again, not jumping this time but instead clamping his arms around her and running towards the open pool of pod fluid, and in sheer terror she realized that he intended to drown her. Her arms were trapped, but at he drove her backwards she managed to kick up a knee and hit him in the groin. It wasn't dead-on, impacting right above his thigh, but he stumbled, and she used that same leg to stamp down hard and spin them in the air as they fell into the pool, Draea landing on top of him.

Sounds disappeared. The liquid was viscous and warm. Nale loosened his grip and resumed hitting Draea, but the ectoplasm reduced the power of his punches. She hit back a couple of times, but he dodged so easily that she changed tactics, going instead for the throat, trying to crush his windpipe. His eyes were so wide open they nearly bugged out, and as she grasped harder, and the veins in his throat pulsated and throbbed, his lips parted,

revealing teeth gritted in madness. A tiny trickle of blood weaved its way from his mouth, as if he'd bitten his tongue.

She hardened her grip but he kept hitting her, and now his blows were coming in with more force, whether from desperation or pure anger. They roiled around in the liquid, spinning in a downward helix. She was so focused on crushing his throat that she didn't immediately realize they were at the bottom, so it was his feet that got planted first, and they gave him enough pushback to hit her hard, in the temple and on the jaw. The two blows rocked her, and she realized that she was almost running out of breath. She was out of knives, too, out of weapons completely, and the look in Nale's bloodshot eyes indicated that he was really no longer there as a human being.

She made a desperate choice, letting go of his throat with one hand and punching him hard on the nose; he didn't even shirk, and kept pummeling her even as he bled freely. She felt her feet touch the floor now, and out of the corner of her eye, through the mist of blood and encroaching blackness at the edge of her vision, she spied something floating around. She grasped hold of Nale's clothes and, putting all her strength into the motion, yanked him with her towards the floating object. Nale was oblivious, pounding away, and with her receding consciousness Draea realized that he truly enjoyed this, that he believed not only that he had won but that he was right, and in his eyes and in his frenzy she saw a mind she recognized so well. The recognition echoed in her head as she got close enough to the object, half a spinal column that tapered down to a point where the sacrum should have been, and it was with infinite sadness and a fading glimpse of understanding that she reached for it, grasped it with all her might, and, before Nale could realize what she was doing, plunged it deep into his eye.

He immediately let go, pulled back and screamed, air bubbles mixing with the spurts of blood from his face. She pushed herself off the bottom and floated languidly up, too shot from adrenaline backwash and oxygen deprivation to paddle with her arms. Her head was covered with goo as

she rose from the pool, and she barely had enough life left to gasp for air before paddling sluggishly towards the edge.

Once she had a handhold on the pool's plexiglass border, she looked back. Nale was surrounded by a cloud of blood, but appeared to be moving towards her, like some amphibious carnivore. Her adrenaline surged and she hauled herself out of the pool, coughing and wheezing as she stumbled towards the machine. She had no illusions any more of stopping Nale, of playing with him like a toy, of grabbing a gun or a knife and facing off. He was a monstrosity, almost beyond her comprehension. Her life was secondary; all that mattered was that the Book not fall into the hands of this madman.

She reached it just as he hauled himself out of the pool, and even through his wheezing and gurgling she heard a throaty, phlegmic sound and realized that he was laughing. It stopped just as soon as he apparently saw where she was headed. He screamed incoherently, a string of almost glossolalian words, and gave chase.

She grabbed the catalyst sitting beside the Book and slammed it on top of the machine, rolling its sphere back to green and holding it there. It jittered for second, and then the sphere spun out of her control. Both it and the sensors on the Book itself rolled through their scheme of colors, blinking green, red again, then yellow, orange, blue and indigo, and just as Nale reached her with his hands going for her eyes, the sensors hit purple.

There was a loud hum, and the last thing either one of them ever saw was each other's face, Nale looking like the maddest of prophets, Draea content and grinning like a harpy. For the last time she looked deep into his eyes, and she saw him realize, at the same time as she herself did, that the reason the Society had brought them all to this prepared, pre-wired place that nobody would ever miss or wonder about if destroyed, was that this was the end, the place where they would bring armageddon to being. In that infinite moment Draea acknowledged to herself what she'd always known, what she'd been told so long ago, that all her life she had wanted to be caught, and to be caught in fiery, destructive glory.

Beside them, the machine began to glow, smoke rising from its innards. There was a rumble far away that slowly turned to a roar; the floor began to quake and the pod fluid sluiced up out of its pool; and if either one of them had hesitated in their death-dance, they would have heard the walls start to come down.

Metal tore, and plastic melted, and stone turned to glass.

And in a flash that blinded everyone in the instant before they were vaporized, the end of days arrived, and the entire station exploded like a nova.

Black Mountain

Dismantling

The repair facility falls to pieces. The metal debris which dotted its floors now flies through the air, shaken like dust in a gale. Some of it has been here almost as long as the station itself.

For the longest time it had seemed like the station wouldn't get built at all, surrounded as it was by scandal, controversy and rocketing costs. Planetside resistance was immense, and build approvals were only ratified after the Gallente government threatened to use the planet for experiments in geoengineering. As it turned out, the station became so beneficial to planetary business that when someone suggested, years later, that commutes between the two be curtailed for reasons of security and planetary independence, it effectively ended his political career.

The facility was among the first rooms of this station to be built, and it was a symbolic one, meant to indicate that in the tumultuous process of creating the spacestation all wounds had been healed and all reputations repaired. Unfortunately, the ratification process had taken so long, and deadlines were getting so close, that shady deals were made and substandard builders were given contracts based on promises of speedy work.

While no major catastrophes occurred, various niggling problems would hound the station operators for a long time afterwards. There were always indications that some of the raw material used to build the station hadn't been quite as fresh as the builders claimed, but had instead been brought in from destroyed ships and ruined colonies nearby; the lesser the costs of transporting it through dead space, rather than constructing it from scratch down on the planet. Surprisingly, while it sometimes interfered with more complex operations, this mishmash of construction did not affect the station's basic stability - amalgamates are always stronger than pure

metals - and if someone noticed an odd curve or bend in the architecture as the station was being assembled, they didn't comment.

Long after, when the station had been abandoned and cut adrift, its new inhabitants did not even venture once into the repair areas. This was a secret place, not a safe haven, and you did not dock here expecting refuge.

One of the pieces from the repair facility, a massive metal girder, pierces the already weakened blast doors and goes through, crashing onto the walkways below. They shudder from its impact, the tremor leading through the walkways and up into the walls, where it combines with the station's own trembling death throes until the air is filled with a discordant hum, like a hymn sung by machines at prayer. The vibrations get worse, until the station seems to be breathing, its nooks and crannies shrinking and expanding in tune. The windowframes suffer for this, and in short time the few remaining windows are shattered, even the bulletproof ones, even the blastproof ones, showering their glittering edges onto the broken paths below.

Worn hands built these walkways. Tired souls fitted the glass in its brand new window slots. There was hope and hard work here. The rumors were that the entire project might be endangered, so people pulled together, and people worked hard. Some of them didn't last, and left silently on shuttles that took them anywhere they wanted on the planet below. The ones who did make it through stood in their places of honor at the station's inauguration: Down below, in the gloominess of steel, machines and noise, where they had to be if anything broke or bent out of shape. Nobody else saw them, but they didn't need to be seen. They were everywhere, in the rivets and welds and wirings of the world around them.

Glass breaks all over the station. The main walkway, where the shopkeepers used to hold court, gets covered, and it's as if there was a blizzard. There are no signs here any longer, no marks of past vendors, and the only thing that lasts is the graffiti etched into the stores' metal walls. Then the walls themselves begin to topple, one after the other, revealing the dusty, vacant spaces inside. After one set of walls falls over it lets out a mass of antiques, priceless artifacts in almost pristine condition, trapped in there as if they'd been in invisible amber.

To ensure fairness and discourage agglomeration of big business, vendors were let into the station according to a weighted lottery. Some known trademarks made it in without question - Quafe was one of the first - but the end result was a varied selection of known and lesser-known names. Laws were passed on the amount of money a company could funnel into its station stores and on-station advertisements, and some restrictions were placed on the extent to which larger companies were allowed to browbeat the smaller ones into submission through sheer force of presence, but that was it. This being the Gallente, it was expected that once business started, the best man would win.

The brotherhood that had formed among the station creators did not extend to the shopkeepers, and dirty tricks became the rule. Surprisingly, the small businesses did much better than the large ones, at least initially; their owners had clearer memories of their startup days and had less inhibitions about bending the rules. Everyone loves the underdog, and every time the small businesses put one over on the big companies they became all the more popular. As time went on this led some small businesses to become medium-sized businesses, and eventually the smallest ones got squeezed out. It was harsh, but that's how it went.

When several stores banded together to create a mutually operated mall - one of the many workarounds around the merger laws - one still resisted.

Since this rebel was located right in the middle of the other stores, they focused their attention, pooled their resources and, after luring away key employees who had insider knowledge of the lone business, managed to put it out of action. As it turned out, the business space was in a dead zone of the mall area, so the others merely walled it up untouched and turned it into a general notice area. For years that area would serve as a reminder of the futility to stand against free enterprise and, to more cynical eyes, as a plastic-decorated war memorial for the dead and gone. Its contents, like a sacrificial offering to god, were never spoken of nor touched.

Close to the shopkeepers' areas there is an open square. A gigantic piece of the roof breaks away and falls onto the square, goes through it and doesn't stop until several floors below. There is a pause, then a rumble, and what is left of the ceilings above is lit up by an orange light. The light changes, gets brighter and starker, and for a moment its glare is reflected down to the chaos below. Shadows are cast, flickering and black.

A fireball erupts from below, roars through every level and sets the floors ablaze. It doesn't scorch the debris but melts it, disintegrates it, blasting through everything in its wake until it hits the ceiling, where it spreads out like an inverted tree taking root, its magmatic tendrils trailing through the air and hissing as they land on the ground below.

This square was once the base of operations for a fledgling union movement. It started with one woman, a low-level engineer frustrated at low pay and plexiglass ceilings, who began meeting with other workers and speaking of the hazards and dangers of station repair jobs. She was charming and well-spoken, and had that governor's combination of steely presence and welcoming aura that made her audience both appreciative and attentive. When the group began to grow and people started to worry about reprimands by station authorities, she made the remarkable choice of

moving their operations out into the open, settling on a small square where they spoke freely among themselves. Any outsider could stop to listen and hear their plans, or see them argue. It was a brilliant but dangerous move, and it worked; they were wiretapped, of course, but the powers that be didn't know anything more than everybody else who passed by, and eventually the crowds began to grow. When the police threatened to disband the meetings due to overcrowding, they set up keyless video feeds, ones that were streamed live through other

open datafeeds, piggybacking on their signals, and could be decoded at receiver ends with datakeys that were given out freely and anonymously. The authorities never quite knew for sure who was watching.

The seething magma melts through the floor and pours into tunnels and crevices below. There are crackles and sparks, and the square's electrical wirings give out for good. There is a series of twangs as the remaining cables, overstretched and overheated, finally give out, lashing their way out from the gaping hole in the center and flicking at one another like mad fencers. Eventually they, too, give out, and hang there limply, pointing at the abyss.

The authorities, annoyed at the stir the group was creating among station workers, eventually decided that people, deep down, didn't want to risk the station's own well-being, and that an aura of assistance and goodwill would better resolve the problem than harsh tactics would. So they gave in to the various demands for workers' rights the group had posed, but declared that as the station would now have to re-budget for assured self-sufficiency, and since they could not levy more taxes on the general citizenry, they would have to cut nonessential services. For some unexplained political reasons these cuts, which restricted availability of everything from unlicensed mind clash game broadcasts and non-brand egone sets to Quafe shots and low-

grade alcohol, affected recreational activities enjoyed almost exclusively by the lower classes. Right after the cuts were implemented there was a surge of crowd control issues on station, to which the administrators responded by cracking down even harder on imports of various incendiary goods, adding that these restrictions would be reviewed after the workers' rights issue had been resolved. Cheap alcohol and budget risque entertainment products fell right off the radar.

It wasn't long before the masses reacted. Graffiti denouncing the workers began to appear in the more rundown areas of the station, followed by barroom conversations that got increasingly loud and spirited. The flashpoint came when a channel formerly reserved for sports was shut down and replaced with direct vidcasts from the activists' meetings. Someone in the bar put down his glass, got up, yelled incoherently at the video screen for a while, then drunkenly marched off proclaiming that he was going to give the activists a piece of his mind. Others followed, word spread, and by the time the progression got to the square it numbered in the hundreds (though minus the original instigator, who'd stopped at a street corner to pass water, fallen over his own legs, and passed out) and was in very red spirits. The activists were dragged off and nearly beaten to death. What saved them was a group of station police officials, who, eventually, made their way through the angry crowd and set up an inertial shield around the beleaguered activists. This effectively trapped them inside, like animals in a zoo, while the mob pounded on the shields from the outside.

When the crowd finally dispersed and the police lowered the shield, the activists walked away, each in a separate direction, without saying a word. Their group was disbanded from then on. The station took them in, healed their wounds, then offered them each a lucrative and quite public corporate job. They each took the offer, and worked with loyalty and dedication and unquestioning verve for the rest of their lives. Their offices, by their own request, were located so that they looked down on the square, through

unopenable windows that housed bulletproof glass. Nobody else took up the mantle, and since the activists' meetings had all been broadcast through unofficial channels, station archivists did not keep copies of the group's discussions. Restrictions were lifted, alcohol and entertainment returned, and whatever it was the group had fought for was forgotten, as was the group itself.

Not every action has a reaction, and not every movement leaves a trail.

The living quarters have all but collapsed. The first ones to go were the high-rise buildings, spacious and fragile, followed by the ones standing unsupported next to open spaces that once housed parks and fashionable market areas. Even the apartment buildings, the stalwarts of cramped living that towered over the darker parts of the station, have given way to the fire. Remarkably, the only spaces still standing are the Rust buildings, tenements meant for people who'd fallen on the hardest of luck and were stuck on the space station with nowhere else to go. Space is always at a premium and so the Rust flats are squeezed in tight, with little space for anything but sleeping and eating and despairing. But there's such a mass of them, huddled together like animals for warmth on a cold, cold night, that they practically support each other. They don't give way until the ground itself gives, and even then they take a long time to fall.

Back in the days when its inhabitants were breathing, every now and then love floated through Rust, catching the unwary in its grasp. And sometimes he beat her, and a few times she was afraid she was pregnant by someone else, but they loved each other, and their relationship outlasted many others, for that is what love does, for better or worse. Their quarters were small but big enough, and they raised several children there, those of whom survived to adulthood eventually lived in bigger quarters than their parents, and wore grey clothes and grey faces.

After the Rust collapses, everything goes. Corridors throughout the station crumble, taking with them whatever they were holding. Plummeting alleys, once dark, are lit by the rumbling fires below before disintegrating. In one of these a man known as Polok can be briefly seen before he, too, falls into the fire. His work takes longer to fall, as if it wants to hang on and endure, if only a few moments beyond Polok's last breath. At last it gives way, to be licked by the flames, engulfed, swallowed whole, and in their crackling roar the unseen listener can still detect its tearless sigh of relief. Everything ends. Everything always ends.

A long time ago, a childless, middle-aged Amarrian couple walked through this territory for some unthinking reason, and in their shiny shoes and unholed clothes were set upon by several denizens of Rust. Bitter and frustrated, the inhabitants took their life's anger out on the poor couple, demanding things they couldn't give, threatening to take even more, and eventually making good on that threat. Whether by accident or brief, unthinking intention, they left the man dead in the street, and ran away before any of them thought of taking the woman's life as well.

The couple were religious, and as the man's life ran out he struggled to say a prayer he'd learned as a child, one that supposedly would guarantee his passage into the heavens. In his life he had long since learned that this guarantee would come not from words praising the next world but deeds honoring this one, but at this moment, in this cold and lonely place, it was all that came to mind. His wife, crying silently, comforted him the best he could, but he died with the prayer unfinished on his lips.

Afterwards, every year on that particular day, she would return, alone, carrying blessed water in a small container. She would go down on her knees and begin scrubbing the area where her husband had bled to death.

Word spread, and it was made clear by official and religious authorities both that any unpleasantness towards this lady would lead to a scouring of Rust.

People guessed that she was trying to wash away her husband's blood from the unholy site where he'd been slain. In reality, she was sanctifying the ground that had received his warmth, and praying, to any gods that would listen, that even though her husband had not managed to finish his invocation, he would nonetheless be let into paradise.

And now the structure gives way for good. Central walls are shaken down, support girders are parted like chaff, and the destruction moves to the core of the station's heart. The fires tear their way through every part of the station like ink in water, so omnipresent that they can no longer be distinguished from their surroundings. This place is fire now, it has become an inferno and no longer a station, and all that remains is for the outer walls to part and crack and reveal the gutting within. A station's exterior is always the toughest part of its structure, for whatever happens inside may never be allowed to breach the outer shell.

Someone went insane. Nobody minded, because they were a colorful breed who talked to themselves, to others and to anyone who was or wasn't there; perfectly charming and civilized. An old man who walked through this little world, telling people he would go on until the end of time. He lived in the same place for most of his life, and while nobody knew when he'd moved in, everyone felt that it was as if he'd always been there. People liked him.

And now, when he's been long forgotten, a secret place is breached, somewhere that was also long forgotten by all but this man and the ones he brought here. This place is among the last to go, and it spews out

whatever had been stored inside. Leather straps. Drawings and discolored photographs. Little shoes.

They're shaken out, and burned in the fire, at last, at long last.

And with that, as if breathing its own sigh of relief, the station, purified and clear in purpose, goes nova. Steel and stone, plastic and rock, and everything else that ever was, all grind themselves apart like the station is trying to fall to pieces and stay together and reach out in a thousand directions at once.

And with a flash that glows through the vastness of space, all these memories are gone.

Black Mountain

Sounding the Horns of the Hunt

Jonak and I were bringing our vessel back to home when we got the call. I had recently switched teams within the Sisters of EVE, joining the Sanctuary at long last, and the missions could be draining. I'd been hoping for this one to be a nice, quiet trip back to base for reassignment briefing and a bit of a rest.

We were in Ammatar space, and there were no other Sister ships in the immediate vicinity. The only reason we were even coming through here was that our ship needed a quick overhaul from the station mechanics. It was secure space, which the Navies patrolled, and help calls were usually routed to them.

We did have other teams on standby, but the emergency call we received was from a ship, not an orbiting object. This was unusual, since ships were far more volatile and thus didn't usually have the time to call for help from anyone but their own supporting forces. Still, the call indicated there weren't many people onboard, and that it was a serious emergency, so we changed course and sped to their position.

As we flew there, more strange information came in. The ship was apparently an Ammatar caravan, which was natural enough, and was located in a system that bordered the Angel space nearby, but they were broadcasting on our emergency band. This meant they had foregone their own corporate channel to request backup, and while the emergency band would bring in the Sisters, it might also attract scavengers.

We made it to the ship and found it a smoking husk, its engines barely firing and its hull cracked to pieces. It didn't seem to have ruptured, though, which meant there might be people alive inside. The ship was a caravan and wouldn't have had any offensive gear to speak of, but I noticed several wrecks in the vicinity and suspected those were the remains of whatever force had been here to protect it. I couldn't see whether the wrecks were

Navy or pirate ships, but it didn't matter. Nothing else moved, and nobody made to attack us. It didn't feel like a trap, and for veterans like us, that feeling is really all we need to decide whether to engage.

Deeper scans verified the caravan's structural integrity and life-support systems, and so we had official permission to board. We suited up, let our ship clamp on to the caravan, set up the tube connectors, and boarded, into smoke, fire, blood and screaming.

#1: What are we going to do about this case?

#2: Well, there've been reports of the station being destroyed, but nobody's really that interested in something that's been a derelict for ages, so there won't be any press. When our cleanup team got there for official emergency assistance, the damn Society had already cleaned the scene and gone. There was nothing left to salvage.

#1: Not even a bit of the machine?

#2: Especially not the machine. It's gone, and gone for good if I'm any judge.

#1: So there's nothing left? Whole mission was a wash?

#2: No, not at all. We found out some interesting things, and there's still someone out there who we might extract valid intel from if we can find her.

#1: Who?

#2: Some Angel woman.

We moved through the ship, judging who was salvageable and who wasn't. Cherry-picking is a cold concept at best, but when you're surrounded by the rapidly dying, you don't have time to give succour. Since there was a decent amount of ground to cover in a very limited time, we covered the main areas first - ops levels and living quarters - and checked the vitals on whoever was still in one piece. There were lots of people in shock, but

they'd be alright. The hardest ones to leave were those who'd had some kind of surface damage; you never quite know if they'll be in so much pain that they'll cling to you and demand assistance, and sometimes you have to be nasty and give them a little tap on the injured area, just to make them let go.

We were checking on someone whose ribs weren't all intact, when he started asking about angels. It took me a moment to realize he was talking about the pirates, and that there was probably an Angel on the ship. I gave Jonak a look, then gave our patient a quick booster shot to clear his head, and asked him who he meant.

"There was an Angel representative on the ship," he said. "He rushed to the exits when we were attacked."

"Was he armed?" I asked.

"No, just had some strange device with him, but it didn't look like a weapon."

"What was it?"

"This curved metal thing, with a red ball in the middle."

I looked at Jonak again and said, "Doesn't sound like anything I know."

He gave me a strange look and said, "No, me neither."

After we'd strapped in those cases who were near-critical and prepped them for removal, Jonak told me he was going to look for the Angel, and that I should take the casualties to our own ship and stay there. It was a perfectly sensible idea: Someone had to tend to the wounded and, if something went wrong, be ready to make a getaway. Everyone else on the caravan was in good enough shape to live but not good enough to defend themselves if some pirate started wreaking havoc. And besides, Jonak had a lot more combat training.

I kept the criticals conscious as I shuttled them through the tube back to our ship. It would make the ride more unpleasant for them, but until I could get them into our sick bays and do a more thorough scan, I couldn't risk having

them slip into a coma. I kept up a gently rolling dialogue all the way, asking them about their trip here, and keeping their minds off things as much as I could.

They told me things I already knew, that they were an Ammatar caravan that had gone to the border of Angel space for some strange business. I nodded and hummed and encouraged them to keep talking, trying to judge their state by the strength in their voices. It was a secret mission, so the Ammatar corp they belonged to had washed its hands of them beforehand. If they landed in trouble, they'd be on their own. Their Ammatar employers had heard that the Angels had been making deep-space incursions into hereto unexamined pockets of space and digging up various items, including some that might prove of marked value in the future. The Ammatars didn't particularly know what these items were, and had little interest in any particular ones, but they wanted to strengthen their illicit trading ties to the Angels just in case they could reap some profits or get first dibs on lucrative offers. That was why, I realized, they hadn't sent out an emergency call to their company, but only to the Sisters.

Everything had gone smoothly, they said, until the capsuleer showed up. He'd likely been on a pirate hunt and had destroyed every Angel ship around them, then gone for the caravan. Since they'd been without protection, no Navy forces had shown up, and the capsuleer only stopped firing instants before the caravan was about to explode. He untargeted, sucked the pirate wrecks dry of hardware, and left without a second thought, though whether he'd run out of ammo or merely out of patience was anyone's guess. Of all that had happened to these people, I heard their voices take on the hardest tone when talking about that capsuleer.

I'd only just gotten them into the sickbeds and hooked them up when there was a warning sound. I rushed to the bridge and checked the scanners. The Ammatar ship was going critical. I hailed Jonak and yelled at him to get out, but got no response. I was about to check whether our connecting tube was still intact when there was a bright, bright flash, a shower of stars, and whatever was left of the caravan was reduced to a dead tangle of metal.

Nobody could have survived that explosions, and my quick scans showed no life vessels of any kind in the vicinity. The ones we'd left on that ship were gone, and Jonak with them.

I pinched my eyes shut and rubbed my temples. You distanced yourself from this, of course you did, and you shoved it down into that place where the memories lie, but you knew it would rise again, some day.

I was about to set my ship on course when the scanners informed me that someone had entered it just before the explosion. My stomach turned, and for a moment I had the strongest feeling that it was the Angel, or one of the dead Ammatars, or someone else I didn't know at all. I immediately checked the person's identity, and breathed out deeply. It was Jonak.

#1: Have our guys come up with anything to explain what made Nale lose it so thoroughly?

#2: We're looking into the nanobots, whether he got too high a dose of them. Personally, I doubt we'll come up with much. Might've been the bots, or his previous illness and whatever that did to his head, or something entirely different. We don't know everything about what happened out there.

#1: And nothing useful from Zetyn?

#2: Very little. In his lucid moments he's been perfectly willing to talk, but it's half fact and half religious diatribe. Quite frankly, I don't think we can trust anything he says, other than that Nale was definitely getting unbalanced towards the end.

#1: Shame. I don't like losing operatives, or losing control of them. We're supposed to be better organized than this.

#2: I agree. But with an operation of this magnitude, you can never plan for everything. If something catches you by surprise, you deal with it as swiftly as possible, contain the ripples, and move on with your plan.

#1: My thoughts exactly.

I immediately asked Jonak if he was okay, and he nodded his head. I was about to ask whether he'd found anyone, but held my tongue; everyone on that ship was dead, we knew that, and Jonak's face understandably didn't look open to any more questions. And besides, we needed to take care of those three survivors on our ship.

I began keying in the course, assuming I'd be going with Jonak to sick bay, but he told me to stay at the helm. He said he could easily take care of our patients - at this point it was mostly an issue of keeping them comfy and hoping they'd survive the trip - and he preferred me to stay at the helm for manual adjustment so we could get to base in better time. I agreed, so we took off.

Warping wasn't an option with our patients, and Jonak retreated to sick bay to watch over them during our lengthy trip. We had monitors on the bridge that showed our patients' status, but I knew from experience that I'd be way too busy working with the AI to get us home in good time, so I kept them off to avoid the distraction. If anything were to go wrong, either with Jonak or the patients, several emergency procedures would immediately notify me.

At one point I did turn on the sound feed from sick bay, just to give it a quick check. All I heard was Jonak murmuring quietly to one of the patients, and, after a while, the patient whispering some response. The sick man's voice was haggardly and full of pain, and I felt very relieved that he had Jonak there with him.

#1: What's Zetyn's state?

#2: The same. He still suffers from acute claustrophobia and is making even less sense than he did before. We're keeping him under examination, but I doubt it'll be for much longer.

#1: Did we really get nothing useable from that man? He was a solid operative, reliable and quick.

#2: Right now, all he does is rock back and forth in the isolation compartment, asking us what the formula is. Sometimes he'll throw himself at the walls, and if he sees anyone on the other side of the safety glass, he screams himself hoarse.

At last we got close to base, so I hailed sick bay and said, "Docking in a few. Get ready for evac."

A couple of minutes later, I heard Jonak return to the bridge. His steps were soft and slow, and he laid a hand on my shoulder, saying, "Don't bother."

I turned and silently looked at him.

He said, "It's quiet now, back there."

I closed my eyes and sighed deeply.

We'd been so close, and with everyone we'd lost, I really had hoped we could save these three.

So we docked in silence, and we made preparations for the burial of the dead. That should have been the end of it.

Until I found that video.

Something gnawed at me, something about the whole trip I couldn't quite make sense of. On a sleepless night, some days later, I made a nocturnal trek to our offices and called up the videos from our flight. The sick bay ones hadn't been filed - we Sisters are good at humans, usually, but bad at bureaucracy - and all I could get my hands on were general monitoring records for the ship's entrances, bridge and exits.

I went over some of my own actions while I'd been in route control, and kept looking for some kind of flight bump or course deviation that I knew I hadn't made. It wasn't so much to assuage my conscience, but rather to completely eliminate the chance that what I was looking for was anything as normal as a simple mistake.

It wasn't until I had switched to the other videos and watched Jonak's miraculous entry a dozen times that I noticed what I'd been missing, or rather, what he'd been missing when he finally turned up on the bridge.

Setting the viewers to magnify and sharpen, I focused, and focused, and focused, aiming the unseen eye directly at Jonak's pocket. There was a clear bulge in there, one that definitely had not been present when he entered the caravan, nor when he came back to me on the bridge.

Focus, focus, focus.

A curved bulge, its axis slightly more voluminous, like it had a ball set in its middle.

Like the Angel had brought on board.

I didn't want to know any more. I didn't want to be on the roads that would lead to a place I'd never quite escape from. So I shut down the viewer, and I left our office, and I went home, and some time later, I finally slept.

#1: And this one, we're sure he never told anyone else?

#2: Positive. We took him in for soft questioning, got his report, then administered the nanobots.

#1: How's he now?

#2: We're keeping him isolated while we clear up his business and set up the accident. We should be able to execute in two weeks' time. The biggest hurdle is the coroner's reports, since the Sanctuary always has to give such incredibly detailed ones when our people die.

#1: Is it going to be a problem?

#2: No. And when he's been dealt with, along with that poor bastard Zetyn, we'll have finished this sorry little venture. The remaining catalysts have already been put into recycling.

#1: It's a shame. I liked working with him. If he hadn't taken a look at those videos, or seen what I carried back onboard the ship, he might've survived this whole damn mess of a project.

#2: Still. Loose ends.

#1: Yes. Speaking of which, there's still the matter of the Angel woman.

#2: No matter. With everyone else gone, she'll have a hard time finding anyone to believe her story. We'll keep out some long-term feelers for her, but it's nothing we need concern ourselves with. As far as this institution is concerned, the Book is tightly closed shut, forever.

Daughters of the Revolution

It was chilly on the roof, even though the house was only a few stories high. There was little in the way of shelter up there: a few receivers and antennas, and the metal railings of a fire escape attached to one wall. Most of the buildings in this part of the station were like this; spare, low and nondescript. If more people moved into the area, new stories would be slotted onto this one like a combination toy. It wasn't quite the poor section, but it had even less personality.

A young woman lay on the roof, on a small blanket, looking up at the station dome. It was high enough that it couldn't easily be glimpsed in the dusk, and most of the lighting came from massive advertising screen in the distance, the reflection of their flickering images rendering the sky full of multihued moving images, like rainbows taking on a strange life.

The woman sighed.

There was a noise from the fire escape. The steps were metal through and through, and even in the night-time hiss of busy life, the clanging reverberations of feet stomping determinedly down could easily be heard.

The woman sat up, frowned and looked to the escape.

After a while, two wrinkly hands could be seen gripping the top railings, followed by the ascendancy of a head of grey hair. An old woman came up the stairs, one step at a time, and crossed onto the roof. She was wrinkled and thin, but her footsteps didn't waver, and she walked assuredly over to the young woman with a set, unsmiling expression.

"... Gran?" the young woman said in amazement.

"I'll thank you not to hang out on any roofs in the future, young miss," Gran said. "I went to the university grounds, and even tracked down that place where you're always talking rebellion with those tattooed nincompoops, and nobody knew where you were."

The old woman brushed herself off and straightened her dress. "I'd have lost you outright if one of them hadn't mentioned your little hangout here, though I won't ask why he knows about a thing like that, or what you're doing bringing boys up here with you." She regarded the young woman with a mix of annoyance and barely concealed amusement. "Your mouth's hanging open, dear. Do close it before ships start to dock."

The young woman's mouth snapped shut with a click. "Gran, you shouldn't be up here," she said. "If you fall, or if something happens-"

"It'll hopefully teach you to talk to your Gran first before rushing off to nowhere parts, though it's better than that hideout of idiotic chatterboxes you usually hang out with." Gran said. "Your mother was getting worried about you, Beliah."

"Don't mention her, please," Beliah said in a firm tone. "I couldn't go to the RU because I was too furious to talk to anyone, and it's because of her. And I'll thank you not to speak about the political and sociology students like that. They've got a lot of interesting things to say about rights and rebellion."

Gran walked up to her and slowly sat down on the blanket, grunting and sighing. Beliah scooted over to give her room, and decided to press on. "Do you know what kind of a state we're in, Gran? Everyone's talking about revolution. Karin Midular's losing support, while blind Maleatu Shakor is gaining it, and there's no love lost between those two. It's Shakor that my friends look up to, the one who isn't always giving way with the Amarrians. I admire Midular, I really do, but we're not a people that are easily led, and I

think - my friends at RU think - that he's our only real hope out of this mess."

Gran had been sitting quietly, catching her breath- which Beliah found a little overdone, seeing as how the old woman had just scaled three stories without apparent effort, but didn't comment on - and now said, "We'll leave be for now those wise young students of yours. You know, dear, it's because of your mother that we're even on this station. She spent all her savings to get here."

"And we're practically in the Rust quarters," Beliah said, feeling petty for saying it.

"Then it's your job to work your way out of it, and not waste all that time babbling about revolutions."

Beliah got up, brushed off her legs and started walking around, though she didn't stray too far from the blanket. "Look, I can't stand it any longer. You know about the Amarrian?"

"I do, dear."

"She's dating an Amarrian!"

"Yes, she is."

"Look, all I'm saying, it's just not right. Not with the battle that's going on."

"Battles of all sorts always have two sides, Beliah."

Beliah stopped, and looked at Gran. "Yeah, they do. Right and wrong," she said.

Gran got a stern look. "I'm not your real grandma, of course, so I don't have any say in over what you do or don't do."

Beliah relented a bit at this, protesting, "No, I'm sorry. Look, you're as close to one as I ever knew."

"No, no," Gran said, "Your real grandma lived down on the planet below. And she lived through the rebellions there. She could've told you stories."

"I don't doubt it," Beliah said, relieved to change the subject, even if it had to be through a bit of passive aggressiveness. "I know she had some rough times. And I still think a shame that none of the rebellions succeeded."

Gran's look changed from caution to something Beliah couldn't quite define. The old woman said, "I don't know about that, dear."

Beliah stared at her. "You'd rather we remained under the heel forever?"

Gran slowly got to her feet. Beliah moved to help her, but the old woman waved her away. She brushed off her skirt, walked over to the edge of the roof and leaned on the parapet, looking over. After a moment, Beliah came and joined her. They stared at the sparse traffic for a while: people below, going about their lives, either in motion or standstill. Eventually, and keeping her eyes on the distance, Gran said in a quiet voice, "You really think the Amarrians are that bad? That you'd not even let your own mother find happiness in whatever way she can?"

"Don't put it like that," Beliah said.

"Then how do you want to put it?" Gran asked.

"I just wish the rebellion had succeeded," Beliah said. "Do it once, get it over with, and never think about revolution again."

Gran sighed. Beliah made to speak, but Gran interrupted. "No, don't say it. Whatever it is. Let me tell you something." She turned to face Beliah. "The kind of people who start a revolution aren't always the kind of people who can finish it."

"They tried," Beliah insisted. "They did the right thing."

"Did they now?" Gran said. "Is that what you're taught in that place? What were those right things?"

"Well, they amassed an army. Liberated supplies of Vitoc. Fought their way through various areas and held control points for a while."

"Then what?" Gran asked.

Beliah frowned. "Then they were betrayed, like people always are by the ones closest to them," she said with a hint of bitterness, "And it all fell apart."

Gran said, "Let me ask you something, little bird. Is this all you've learned in those palaces of wisdom you've gone to for most of your life? And don't tell me it's because the media is Amarr-controlled, because you're not too old for me to spank you."

The young woman smiled. "They don't teach much about it," she said. "Not in detail. We're given a timeline of all the uprisings that took place, and told a few generalities about the final rebellion, and that's it. It's hard to find data, but I've never wondered much about that. It's history, and I need to know it, but I need to know a lot of things in the present."

Gran sighed. "This is true. Sometimes, mind, I wish they'd teach you the rest, even if it's not for children."

"What do you mean?" Beliah asked, and added, "I'm not a child anymore, you know."

"You've never heard about the daughters of the revolution, have you?" Gran asked, watching her sharply.

Beliah shook her head.

"You're sure? Not from anyone?" Gran said.

"I would remember."

"Yes," Gran said, reaching out and stroking a wisp of dark hair back behind Beliah's ear. "I believe you would, little bird." She sighed again, and turned back towards the traffic below. Someone was arguing with someone else, their hands moving about a lot. The words didn't reach up to the roof, but the noise did.

"The reason the army failed wasn't because of a traitor," Gran said. "As I said, these things have a way of falling apart, particularly if they're being held together by the same people who started them. And if you've never wondered why this revolution, which was incredibly successful for some dirty meaning of success, has been glossed over, then it's for the best. It's something everyone would rather forget."

"Were you there?" Beliah asked. "It happened in your lifetime. I've never asked you this, for some reason."

"I wouldn't have answered, likely than not," Gran said. "If you weren't getting so muddleheaded about your mother doing what she wants with her life then you would never be told this. So listen, and remember, and keep it to yourself." She closed her eyes for a while, then opened them again and

looked skywards, towards the reflected lights of the ad screens. "Slave army, yes. Managed to get a hold of Vitoc. They knew it wouldn't last; even if they got control, the Vitoc would eventually run out. So they were riding high on their luck, but they were never going to rule the planet. They were good with their words, and good at getting people excited, and they only wanted to lash out, like some young people do without heeding the consequences when they don't know anything else." Gran gave Beliah another look, but the young woman kept quiet.

"And they did so in terrible, terrible fashion," Gran continued. "They went through the land, destroying everything they saw. Anyone who tried to stop them was automatically a sympathizer with the Amarrians, and was dealt with as such. If it was men or boys, they'd be shot on the spot. If it was women, or even girls, well, there's some things we don't talk about.

"And at some point, one of the rebel leaders got the bright idea that they needed to change tactics. They called it polluting the enemy, I hear, but what I call it is stupid men with guns deciding they don't need to play by any rules anymore, and giving their souls to the devil. So instead of leaving the sympathizers on the side of the road to die, they started to round them up, and they built camps. Men were made to work, and women were made to do a different kind of work."

Gran took a deep breath. "Eventually something happened, as it always does, and the rebels were trapped, caught and shot. It was a better ending than they deserved, the poor fools, and their bodies were quietly buried in unmarked graves. But they'd left their marks. There were a lot of babies born later on, and most of those babies were shifted away to foster care of some sort, to them's as would have them. Your mom was lucky, because she was taken in by a family and not an institution, and by the time she was old enough to work, slavery had fallen out of favor in that part of the world. But she suffered for it. Oh lord, she did. A daughter of the revolution," Gran said, spitting out that last word.

"So here's your lesson, little student" she said to Beliah, who had tears in her eyes. "I didn't come along until later, to sit for the family. They were good Matari who did their best, and money was never scarce, but your mother's scars run deep, and in the end she had to get away from them before she could turn them into the monsters she sometimes sees in our people. So she ran." Gran stroked back her own hair, which the strengthening breeze was playing with. "I'm not sure she's ever stopped running. I kept working for the family, but much later, after I'd long since left, your mom tracked me down and invited me up here. I expect it's to make up for leaving her adopted parents, who'd already died in some calamity or other. She's a hard worker, your mother, but no master at personal relations."

Beliah nodded silently, and Gran went on. "Your father, for example. Not a bad man, but he did lose his temper a few times, and that's all she needed. She will not abide that, and in truth, I'm not sure she ever would be with one of our own people unless he was unstable enough for her to eventually leave him. She's got a hard core, looking for something to aim at. Like some people I know," Gran said, with a little smile.

Beliah nodded her head, giving a trembling little smile.

They looked at the traffic for a while. The argument below had stopped, and each person gone quietly to wherever they were headed.

Eventually Beliah went back to her blanket, folded it, and started walking towards the fire escape.

Gran said, "If you think there's right and wrong, little bird, it's before you now. Are you going to your mother's, or to the university?"

Beliah stopped, but didn't turn around. "Neither. I'm going to get something to eat." She stood stock still, looking at the massive screens in the distance, and added, "And then I might buy some flowers." She turned and gave Gran another brittle smile, then walked away.

Hometown Heroes

"Have a seat, and explain to me why you're still aboard this ship," the Captain said.

Lieutenant Pars Kheelan walked into the Captain's office and took a seat. The office was large, with several chairs sequestered near the walls. In front of Pars was the Captain's large desk, covered with datareaders, and beyond it his personal chair, its seat far more worn than its arms. To one side there was a global recon table that, when activated, would project a 3D hologram. The window behind the desk and the Captain's chair was capable of displaying any manner of vids, both army and private, but now showed nothing but the blackness of space. To another side was an unobtrusive door connected to the Captain's own living quarters. The Captain himself was standing behind his desk, with an immobile expression, and his arms clasped behind his back.

"I wonder that myself sometimes, sir," Pars said. When he saw the Captain's expression, he rubbed his eyes and added, "Sorry, sir. It's been a long day." He reached into a pocket and pulled out a small datakey, leaned forward and put it on the Captain's desk. "These are the people named in the riot. We're treating everyone as a suspect, but there are only a handful who got so involved that they had to be thrown into the brig. The rest were returned to their duties."

"Any more trouble?"

"No, sir. People are keeping quiet and waiting to see what we do."

"Well then, Lieutenant Kheelan," the Captain said and leaned forward, resting his outstretched arms on the desk for support, his knuckles on its surface, "Seeing as how this happened in cafeteria E-1, which was

occupied by your Delta unit, staffed with Delta men, and damaged with Delta weapons, what is the leader responsible for Delta going to do about it? And why were there weapons out in the cafeteria at all?"

"To be fair, sir, the weapons damage was one discharge of an emergency weapon located on-site, fired by a man who'd never handled a gun but nevertheless got the clever idea to break it open and fire a warning shot. He wanted to calm the crowd, I'm told, but managed to fire the gun directly through three adjoining walls. The bullet stopped at the inner shield."

"What is this man's present status?"

"Sick bay. He barely missed the head of Ensign Mjern in the head, and Mjern proceeded to knock him out flat on the spot."

When the Captain didn't comment, the Lieutenant continued, "Sir, it's been a hotbed recently. When it's like that, it only takes one person to light the fuse. I'm not one to single out my men for blame, but I've spoken to several people and in this case it's obvious who's the main party responsible for this."

The Captain stared at him for a while. Then he sighed, lifted his arms from the table and sat down heavily into his chair. His knuckles had gone white from the pressure.

"It's that bloody nitwit Crayan again, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you spoken to him?"

"I have, sir. One of the other Deltas made the usual lunchtime comment about sexual relations with someone else's blood relative, and Crayan took

it personally, electing to stab the offending party with his fork and beat him severely over the head with his tray. In his words, his hometown hero never took no shit from no Matar and neither will he. He apparently feels this should count to his benefit."

The Captain grimaced. "I've been reading up on your man, as it happens. Found out some interesting things. This isn't the first time he causes trouble, Lieutenant."

"No sir, it isn't."

"He's a race-barker. Beat up some Minmatar Ensign, and when the man dared file complaints, Crayan drugged and stripped him, took a handheld laser to his tattoos, and defaced them in such humiliating ways that the Ensign dropped charges, lest he be seen and photographed like that. Crayan got a month in the brig for that. Didn't teach him much."

"No, sir. Nor did his other stay in the brig after he torched another Ensign's pet fedo and left it on the Ensign's food tray. He spent much of his solitary time singing songs he learned back home, and talking loudly about this hometown hero of his. Apparently they're distant relations."

"So what do you recommend?" the Captain said.

"Summary dismissal, sir."

The Captain leaned back in his chair and knitted his hands behind his head. "As I recall from the last incident involving your man, Crayan is on a five-year contract, low interest, three years locked in service. Do you propose to break this contract? Because if you do, I know quite a few Lieutenants, Lieutenant-Captains and Captains who will be after your blood."

"But still-"

"These contracts were created for a reason, Lieutenant. How do you think we keep people in the Navy these days?"

"God only knows, sir," Pars said, and winced in regret the second the words were out.

There was silence in the room. Eventually Pars added, "How bad are things, sir? Truthfully?"

The Captain said nothing.

"Sir, we've served together for a while. We're in this to stay. I'm seeing more riots and less signups, and the people we do get aren't anywhere near the old standard. Something has gone very wrong. What happened?"

The Captain turned in his chair, rotating it so that he could look sideways and see out the window. Their vessel was stationary, but anyone looking out into empty space for too long would likely start to feel that the blinking stars were slowly moving by. "It's a nice view," the Captain said. "I've always liked it. Usually it makes people sick after a while, which is good when I'm tired of strategic planning and want them out of my office."

He turned back to Pars. "You seem to be doing fine," he said with a wry smile.

The Lieutenant returned the smile and said, "If it did that to me, sir, I shouldn't even be here."

The Captain nodded. He frowned, then seemed to make up his mind about something; got up, and walked slowly over to the recon table. He activated it and a flat green panel lit up in the air in front of him. Its surface was

covered with various tactical display options. The Captain selected one, and the display changed to a space map, highlighting various nearby constellations. "Since our area is one of the Navy's fleet accumulation points, it's a decent representation of all other such locations," he said. "These dots here are the outlying points, frontlines in case of skirmish."

Several points on the display lit up, and the rest darkened. The Lieutenant stood up and walked over to take a look.

"Do you know who's manning these?" the Captain said. "The points of utmost importance in case we get called on for anything more than capsuleer patrol? The Matari." A disc expanded around each point, its area pie-sectioned like a flower blooming with petals purple and green. Each circle was composed of far more purple sections than green. "Distribution of troops according to race. Matari outnumber us and everyone else."

"Those guys have always sought out the army," Pars said.

"And now we're putting them in the line of fire. Doesn't it strike you as odd that the people supposed to die for this empire are the ones who probably came here to find a better life?"

"It's the way of the Navy, sir," Pars said and shrugged.

"It was, Lieutenant," the Captain said. "Except now our own people beg off serving there, in the apparent belief that the Navy should offer them a nice, safe working environment, preferably with a corner office. Look at this." The entire map was lit up and each Captain point sprouted a disc, this time sectioned into greys and greens. There were vastly more grey sections everywhere.

"Don't tell me those are non-Gallente, sir," Pars said.

"Those are non-humans, Lieutenant, though likely a step over some in Delta squad. They're drones. Those are our defense capabilities, measured in drone and human output. I hardly need tell you that we're allocating record funds to drone tech manufacturers, money that is not being equalled in our recruiting departments." The Captain sighed. "Long and the short of it, Lieutenant, we're not getting the people we need, nor the type of people we need. Everyone has it too good planetside. They'd much rather do a terraforming project or two and settle down in a bungalow somewhere than risk their necks in a fleet that's going nowhere fast. All we're getting these days is the hotheads and the idiots, and we're having trouble even holding on to them. Even the Minmatars - who're fine workers and decent people, don't get me wrong - even they don't join up anymore. Some of the tougher ones still show up in the army, and I expect we'll always have a steady trickle of Brutors happy to fight anyone we put in their way, but by and large they treat this as a land of opportunity, with a stable government, and they work hard and make their own way, leaving us stuck with what remains. I just hope we can stay out of trouble, Lieutenant."

Pars blinked a couple of times, then stammered in surprise, "We're the Navy, sir."

"Exactly," the Captain said, and sat back down at his desk. He knitted his hands behind his head, put his feet up on the desk, leaned back and stared at the ceiling. Pars sat back in his own chair, waiting patiently.

Eventually the Captain seemed to reach a decision. "I'm not going to put you through hoops, Lieutenant," he said, "because frankly, there's no point. You're no more responsible for this mess than I am. Delta is what we have to work with, they and everyone like them, and regular punishment won't cut it. If all we do is push people, we'll eventually push them out. We need to get back to our roots as a proper fighting force, which includes the break-and-rebuild tactics. And Crayan is a perfect example of that. If we can remould him, the rest are going to follow. We only need to find the right

entry point, something that'll unsettle him enough that he'll be easy to shake to pieces after that."

"What do you suggest, sir?"

"The problem with Crayan is that he's got an ego complex. Breaking and rebuilding him won't get rid of that; it'll only push those things so deep we'll never reach them. And this hometown hero thing of his is another anchor. He clearly believes that he's going to achieve the same fame, and it keeps him going. So we'll take that away from him." The Captain smiled again, but without warmth. "Ops contacted me recently, as a matter of fact. They're starting in on one of their outreach programs for young recruits, where they pick someone and make him our spokesperson in ads shown all around the empire. Crayan wants to be famous; we'll make him famous."

Pars raised an eyebrow. "There's a catch to this, sir, and I'm waiting to hear it."

"Of course there is," the Captain said and gave him a big, bright smile. "Ops have given up on the usual macho stuff and are going for those weird ads again, the surreal ones some marketer cooked up to grab the eyes of our shellshocked, vidwatching youth. So this isn't some guy going," the Captain's voice shifted down an octave, "'It's great to be in the navy. Be a man in the navy.' It's something else entirely. It was suggested a while back and was quickly shelved due to being too stupid, but Ops is feeling the pressure same as me, and they're digging up any old idea and dusting it off. Personally I don't think it'll help a bit, but it wouldn't do my career or yours any harm to show a little spirit for once."

"What'll Crayan have to do?"

The Captain's smile widened even further. He spoke slowly, as if enjoying the passage of words. "He'll have to dress up as a Fedo and talk

nonsensically about synthetics for ten seconds, after which we'll flash our logo and something about a different life. He'll be in full costume, but even so, his voice will be unaltered, recorded separately. I imagine that eventually someone in his hometown will recognize it."

"That's ... insane."

"That's what we need to show our civilians, apparently. Shock them a bit, so they'll pay attention to the final image."

"He'll never go for that," the Lieutenant said. "He'll be shot into space rather than do this."

"Funny you should say that," the Captain replied. He stood up and walked to the door, and the Lieutenant followed. "As I said, it's all about breaking points. You find one, and you push it hard, knowing that something will give way. Once he's done with this ad, he'll crawl over broken glass to do anything else instead, and that's when we'll start him in on proper retraining. To make him do the ad itself, all you need is to create enough uncertainty that you can manipulate him into it. Cut him off from his anchor, his idol."

"His hometown hero," the Lieutenant said.

"Precisely," the Captain replied, ushering Pars out the door. "I looked through Crayan's records, same as you, and same as others, I'll venture. But I looked one further. And this guy he so worships, the one who drew him into service, the one in whom Crayan's belief has seen him through the roughest of times?"

"Yes?"

Before the door closed, the Captain said, "He never made it to deployment. Old tale spread to his people back home to preserve the poor boy's integrity. He barely crawled through basic training, got drunk as a dog on the way to base, landed himself in all sorts of trouble and ended up jettisoning himself into space by accident. Might want to mention that to Crayan, right before you give him the one big chance for his own grab at fame."

The door closed on an astonished Pars.

The Lottery

The sound echoed through the halls, a sonorous trumpet calling the children to Home. The lottery had begun again.

Two boys, Arbjan and Bryd, had been moving around some furniture for another arrival on the colony, while another nearby boy called Sispur had been dragging around a chair. They all stopped short at the noise. Arbjan and Bryd looked at one another, then in unison put down the table they'd been shifting around and started moving towards the doors. Sispur was a little slower on the uptake and took a couple of steps before realizing he was still holding on to the chair. They moved into the vast corridors and saw kids from other rooms doing the same, everyone moving in the same direction. Arbjan and Bryd first walked, then jogged, and finally broke into a sprint, with Sispur trailing behind and trying to keep up.

They entered the main square, which was already thronged with kids, most of Minmatar origin. The square was vast, connecting all other sections of the space colony like a hub. Its ceiling was domed and reddish-gold, and the light from outside often shone down to create glowing spears that slowly pointed their pendulum tips in accordance with the sun. By rights it should long since have been turned into an impromptu playground, but there was something off-putting about playing in an area so clearly meant for work and quick passage. As a result, the square was rarely used for anything except the lottery.

Sispur caught up with Arbjan and Bryd as they stood side by side in the middle of the crowd, looking expectantly at the video screens hanging overhead. The two boys had been friends for a while, which counted for a lot here. Sispur was the younger brother of sorts, having wormed his way into their little group. Younger kids who had no friends and couldn't take care of themselves did not have a good time in this place.

They only knew the space colony as ABF, which some smartasses had rendered forevermore as A'Beef, but it was the square that got called Home. For most of the children in this place - and aside from the guards there were only children in this place - it represented their one chance at getting out with any prospect of a life. The ones who won the lottery were chosen into service for one of the Amarr Heirs, where they were put to use in all manner of administrative duties from sweeping the floors to overseeing transport businesses. Some of the roles the winners were given wouldn't be very exciting, but it certainly beat the alternative.

Once a child of A'Beef hit a certain combination of physical maturity, mental maturity and biological age, they'd be shipped off to the colonies for a lifetime of slave labor if they hadn't won the lottery. Nobody knew where the cutoff point was. Some of the younger children found their friends shipped off years before they'd expected, others stayed on the facility longer than anyone would have thought possible, and one or two were even promoted to guards, but Sispur expected that once you found yourself really worrying about it, you'd probably made it to the danger area.

A familiar face lit up on the video screens. It was Uncle, a light-skinned, bearded old Minmatar who often introduced the vid shows they watched in the evenings. As usual he was dressed in a fairly traditional manner, the way Bryd imagined that older people generally did, and looked quite comfortable in his clothes. A tiny patch of bare skin between his beard and the collar of his suit showed the spike an old tattoo, one which station rumor held was the remnant of a Voluval test of his youth.

Uncle's baritone voice rang out from the speakers, announcing the latest draw. The children never knew how often the lotteries would be held or how many would be drawn, but it had been at least a couple of months since the last one. "Five have been chosen, one to serve each heir. Here are their names. First, drawn into service for the house of Kador, is Arbjan Haede..."

Arbjan, Bryd and Sispur erupted in cheers, hugging each other and jumping around with glee. Still listening intently, the other kids hissed and shushed them, their eyes focused on the screens with the unfiltered hope and despair that only a child can muster.

As the roll call went on, Sispur noticed some kids looking crestfallen. They were getting older and likely wouldn't have many draws left before being sent to the colonies. He hoped they'd get out of that, somehow, and that he would be picked before ever reaching that stage of fading, desperate time. He imagined it wasn't very pleasant.

Uncle said, "And finally, chosen by the house of Tash-Murkon, is Bryd Krooear. Those are the five lucky ones. There will be one more announcement in the coming days..."

His speech went on, but the trio of friends didn't hear it. They were staring at one another in amazement. Sispur felt his heart lift and his stomach tie itself into knots. He was so happy for his friends he couldn't even describe it. He was about to suggest they go somewhere and do something - leave the furniture and spend the rest of the day playing games - when some older kids approached them.

The older kids split into two groups, and they were all smiling. They congratulated both Arbjan and Bryd on their immense good luck, and each group focused on one of the boys, asking them how they felt, telling them how great it would be, and gently guiding them away from the crowd and from Sispur. He went to follow Bryd's group, but the kids in it gave him looks that said they would not be happy to find him tagging along. The last Sispur saw of his two friends was them being escorted away in different directions, surrounded by smiling faces and wiry bodies.

The chosen ones had a few days to prepare. Sispur, meanwhile, went about his usual tasks. He saw less and less of his friends, and when their paths did cross all he saw was two boys looking increasingly haggard and unhappy. They didn't want to talk about it much, though he wasn't sure whether they wanted to protect him from something or if they just didn't want him to remind them of the life they were about to leave behind. They had also begun neglecting their duties, a common enough occurrence among lottery winners. Since nobody paid any mind to them or anyone associated with them, Sispur was free to spend all his time wandering about the place alone.

The facility had many sections. There were the living quarters, where the children spent progressively more time as they got older; playroom locations that had both toys and larger recreational equipment; and a few areas reserved for schooling, although not everyone was required to attend. There were lots of large, empty rooms, often beset with climbable metal supports and with nooks and crannies that offered crawling and hideout opportunities. There were also some administrative areas, but the kids had little interest in those. One was the Baby section, where new arrivals were kept while they were acclimatizing to the facility. None of the children knew what criteria had been used to select the facility's inhabitants, nor did they remember anything of their past lives, although a few recalled the Baby section being peaceful and bright. Right next to it, nameless and uninteresting, was a section where some of the young girls were taken after being doomed to the colonies. It was whispered that marriage ceremonies took place there, the girls married off to Minmatar men and taken to new lives where they could serve Amarrian masters for five years without Vitoc before being set free. Every now and then a cargo ship would dock, stay for a day or two and then depart, which spawned rumors that the men from those ships had been boarding the facility to get married. Sometimes larger ships also came, although they only stayed a few hours.

Sispur wondered what his life would be like on the A'Beef from now on, and whether he'd ever be chosen. The lottery was fickle, and most children would be sent to the slave colonies. Tests of all sorts were periodically conducted for the children, and there were countless myths about how to perform in those to improve one's chances of being drawn, but nobody had yet discerned a pattern. In some of his darker moments Sispur had even thought that it really was a lottery, and that the tests were merely fakes. He didn't like to dwell on that too much..

And then it was the day before Arbjan and Bryd were slated to leave. Sispur had neither seen them for a long time nor been given any indication that they wanted to see him. He'd been out all day, staying away from people and ignoring everything he saw and heard.

As he wandered through Storage Section 4A - a place he once used to visit with his old friends - he heard a sound and followed it.

In a cubbyhole they often used for hide-and-seek, he found a badly beaten Bryd, bloodied and covered in scratches and bruises. Bryd screamed when he saw Sispur's face and scurried further back into the hole, but relaxed slightly when Sispur said, "Hey, it's me. It's just me. What happened to you?!"

Bryd blinked a couple of times as if realizing who he was looking at, then said, "Get out of there, quick."

"Look, it's okay. I'm alone. There's nobody coming." He leaned in close and caught a good look at Bryd's swollen face. "What did they do to you?"

Bryd sniffed a couple of times, wiped the snot and tears from his face with one sleeve, then used the other to wipe out the inside corners of his eyes. He blinked a few times, took a deep breath and looked back to Sispur.

"They told us we were enemies now," he said. "They said we had to fight, that we were the generals in these armies. We'd been chosen, and we couldn't let our side down."

Sispor sat closer to him. Bryd didn't seem to mind or notice; he looked out into the distance. "All I've been hearing for the last few days is how great I am and how much Arbjan deserves to die; how the house of Kador is crumbling and worthless and only the house of Tash-Murkon can save what remains of the Empire. But they need good people, and for the others to get out of the way. So tonight we were going to find Arbjan and his army."

"To do what?" Sispor said quietly.

"To destroy them," Bryd whispered.

They sat there for a while, listening to the sounds of their own minds in motion. Finally Sispor said, "What happened then?"

"We'd heard where they were and were about to head over there, but I couldn't do it. I chickened out. I waited until everyone else was busy with their own thing, and then I took off quietly. I went through some of the back areas, but someone must've seen me and snitched, because Arbjan's group caught up, and they started to beat me."

"Was Arbjan there?"

"I don't know. I didn't see him. My own people came and attacked the ones who were beating me. There was this huge all-out fight, and in the middle of it I managed to escape. Some of Arbjan's people ran after me, but I shook them off and came here." Bryd gave him a miserable look. "I don't want any of this," he said, tears rising again in his eyes. "I want things to go back to the way they were."

Sispur nodded. Hearing Bryd refer to the thugs as his and Arbjan's "people" made him cringe. He tried to think of something to say, but couldn't. Eventually he settled for, "I'm sorry."

Bryd nodded, though Sispur felt he was acknowledging something else. "Now get out of here," he said.

"I'm not leaving you," Sispur replied.

Bryd gave him a look of something that had equal measure of love and hatred. "If you don't go, I'm dead for sure."

"I am not going to tell on you, Bryd."

His friend leaned back, pinched his eyes shut and bobbed his head up and down, as if trying to contain himself. Sispur didn't know whether he was trying not to laugh or cry, and looked away, towards the empty hall.

At last Bryd spoke again, but the words were unintelligible. He cleared his throat harshly and said, "You really don't know? About you."

"Know what? What are you talking about?"

This time Bryd laughed, and for an instant Sispur saw his old friend shine through, the one who'd make fun of him but it was okay, because it was just Bryd. "You were chosen," the beaten boy said.

Sispur's breath caught in his throat. "What for?"

"It's all over the A'Beef. Uncle announced it in Home today. There are guards looking for you, and you're supposed to be leaving. I don't know if Arbjan's guys will let that happen if they find you here with me, though."

"What are you saying, Bryd?"

"You've been chosen to serve the Chamberlain himself. Nobody can hurt you. You're untouchable now," Bryd said, and started to cry. "You won. You won. You won."

Sispur got up in a daze. He left the hidey-hole, leaving Bryd behind, and slowly walked out of the hall, going through the A'Beef for the last time. Any children who saw him kept their distance. Eventually the guards came, and took him away.

Murder and Creation

Antel falls down in the mud again. It's been raining for days in the forge, and the long slog from his quarters to the iron works is tiring his feet and chilling him to the bone. He hauls himself up to his knees and rests for a while before standing up. He's so tired these days, but his sense of purpose is unflagging and it's not long before he's on his way to work again.

This life fills a void in him, as it does with so many of the other Caldari here. They are working for the State and serving their purpose in bringing it to greatness. It is his job to do his part. Most people have the same attitude, though some find it harder going than others.

He has never given much thought to how this void was created, or how it might otherwise be filled. It's there, and the harder he focuses on serving the State, the less he feels its presence. This is where he is, and this is where he'll always be. He can only change reality in some small measure, through diligent work, but he can change his perception of the entire world, and he chooses to serve.

He only wishes he wasn't always so tired.

The rain drives down. Antel overhears some people muttering about cold air and bad heating and the broken-down railway line that should've been fixed like so much else in this place, but he tunes it out.

A loudspeaker sounds as he approaches the factory grounds, blaring out his group code. He approaches a guard and asks what he should do, and the guard tells him that there was a mine crash in the night. They need people to clear out the rubble and anything else left inside. Antel has a lot

of experience with this particular mine. He worked it for years, him and his friends.

With a sick feeling in his stomach, he heads over to the mine and meets up with those still living. They're given excavation tools and measuring equipment, and told to run checks on the infrastructure.

They proceed into the mine, which has been shored up. They find it in better shape than expected. Explorers are working in pairs, and Antel works alongside Foraani, a dependable man he's known for years. They know each other and the mine so well that they can move in silence, placing markers and inspecting fixtures with ease.

The mine is in decent shape, but the body they find is not. It has been crushed so thoroughly by a falling girder that there is little recognizable left of it except the head, which lies a little to the side. It seems almost untouched above the neck, something that strikes Antel as grotesque for a reason he cannot explain.

They peer closer and find that they recognize the face; it is an old friend from their shared time in the mining days, a man who never quite managed to get promoted out into the open air. Antel goes utterly cold. Foraani turns very white but says nothing, either, though he starts nodding to himself. He keeps doing it, even as they clear out the room and keep inspecting the mine, and when they emerge at last, he is still nodding almost imperceptively, and wringing his hands. They go their separate ways without speaking.

Antel is told to take the rest of the day off. He obeys, and takes the long walk back to his living quarters, where he returns to his bunker, files a work report, then removes his work clothes and puts them in the cleaning bag. He takes a shower to get rid of the smell, puts on fresh work clothes and goes out behind the bunker, staring hard at the grey, muddy ground and

breathing deep. He closes his eyes, is seized by vertigo, and opens them again, still staring at the ground. It's like clay, and the pink flesh of his hands stands out in contrast. He feels outside of himself and, for the first time, feels like he belongs to something he is no longer a part of, like his friend's head, untouched but without a body, staring in blankness at the grey ceiling above.

Night. It takes him a long time to fall asleep. He feels that he should be mourning his friend, but for some reason he cannot. It takes him a considerable amount of time to come to the conclusion that he no longer views himself or anyone around him as an individual, but merely as a bolt in a ship, a cell in a body, a wheat stalk in a field.

It has been a long time since he last saw a field.

When there is acceptance of one's fate, and of one's place in the body politic, one finds peace. One does not mourn the loss of another cell, because it means the body is renewing itself, cleansing itself.

At last he sleeps, finding solace in dreams about the past.

At work there is little talk, though in sequestered corners people are discussing yesterday's tragedy and others like it. Antel hears one say this is the last thing they're going to take, and hears another tell him that he needs to wait a little, that they've got plans. When he tries to listen in, they move away. The ironworks belch black plumes of smoke into the sky, turning it a little more grey. It has stopped raining.

He feels completely isolated. He is a Caldari first and everything else second, but he cannot stop seeing his friend's face. He hasn't eaten a proper meal in so long that he's no longer sure such a thing even exists. Nobody buys Gallente luxuries anymore, and they're not available on the market anyway, not for people like him. There is nothing to do but walk through the day like a cell flowing through the body, doing what needs to be done, and fulfilling its purpose.

At one point Foraani comes up to him, still as grey as the metal sky. He explains to Antel that something is going to happen and asks if he wants to join. He adds that the others don't trust Antel, but he's known him for years and years and knows he will not let down the cause, and that after everything that's been done to them in all that time, he cannot imagine Antel can go on anymore like this.

Antel asks if their lost friend caused this, and Foraani says that he did; the company should have taken more security measures, and their entire attitude in this has opened his eyes to how thoroughly everyone is being abused. Antel asks Foraani whether he does not want to serve the State any longer, and Foraani says all he knows is how to serve, but a worthy cause needs worthy masters. He asks Antel whether he will join them, and Antel says that he needs time to think about it. Foraani looks at him for a long while, then nods once, says that he has less time to think than he realizes, and leaves.

The next night he lies awake again, feeling the panic rise in him like the tide, ebbing and swelling. There is going to be a revolution. There is going to be a break. He is a cell turning cancerous. There will be a revolution. He is a cell. He doesn't understand how a cell can consciously rebel against the body.

At last he gets up, calmly walks out and behind his bunker, barely catching a glimpse of the grey ground before his pink face opens its mouth and the pink contents of his stomach erupt from his pink body and splatter on the ground. He dry heaves a few times more, then spits off the strands of saliva and walks unsteadily back into his bunker, to sleep. He dreams about the future, and continually wakes up in cold sweats. He knows that something has gone wrong with him, but doesn't know what, or whether it was wrong all along.

The last time he wakes is an hour before reveille. He lies in his bunk, his thoughts flowing past as intangible and unstoppable as a rushing river. There is a void in him now and the thoughts pour into it, circling it like a funnel and hammering at all sides, hollowing it out even further. He had tried to fill it with his love for the Caldari and his servitude for the State, but now it seems bottomless, unyielding and hungry for something else. He is here - he will always be here - but he no longer knows with certainty if his place truly is here, though he has no idea where else it should be. Even if he transfers his allegiances to another cause, thereby betraying everything else he stood for, he doesn't know whether it will fill him up any better than before. He wonders whether a cell can switch bodies mid-stream without self-destructing in the process.

It occurs to him that most of the effort is on his side, has always been on his side, and that sometimes you can put in so much effort that you effectively become what you're trying to uphold, giving yourself to it as if the cell had become the body.

His stomach hurts. He rises and walks to the window. It's not grey outside, but orange; the sun is rising and the industrial works are bronze-colored with its light.

Anyone who tells on a coworker will be rewarded. Rebellions are crushed mercilessly. Those who attempt them are not true Caldari, Antel has taught himself, but traitors who want to ruin everything the State has built.

Antel cannot help but wonder how it would feel to be the body and not merely a cell; to be the field growing slowly in the orange sun.

He goes to work. At some point during the day, he meets up with Foraani and tells him he'll take part in the rebellion. He swears a simple oath, for everything is simple in this place.

Night again, and he sleeps soundly. He dreams about the present, about the sun on the fields below; about floating away happy as a cell carried by the torrents in a body of his own making. When he awakes, he feels light, for the first time in years, as if the wind could blow him away.

He wakes up a betrayer, and heads out to work. On his way to the forge he deviates from course and eventually finds himself outside a guard's cabin. He stands in front of it, his eyes closed, head tilted up towards the sky. He realizes that anything beyond himself is no longer part of him; it is the body's to think about, and not the cell's purpose to question. So he can go into the cabin, or he can move on, a betrayer either way.

And in that moment it hits him with a force so hard that he is brought to his knees: he has a choice in this, he is in a current of his own making, and whatever he does truly will affect only him, in his own cell, in this body that by extension is his, too. Nothing matters beyond that context. He is going to betray something, and in doing so he is going to rise beyond the cell, acknowledge his own endless efforts, and at last become the body proper.

He walks into the cabin and tells the guard all about the secret plan. The guard listens intently all the while, saying nothing. When Antel stops speaking, the guard tells him that there are more people who knew about this plan than Antel realizes. Then the guard pulls out a gun and points it at Antel.

He is in the field. He is here at last.

The guard says something, but Antel is too busy smiling to hear him. He has become the body.

The sun shines bright.

He is free.

“A Boy and His Slaver”

The corn was tall and the boy was not, which doubled his sense of exploration. His father had always forbidden him to wander through the fields, even if Jecal followed, and he was only here now because of the panic back home.

The boy's father was one of the most powerful slave-owners on the planet. Knowing of the boy's wanderlust and realizing that the exhortations not to explore the fields were little more than inducements, he had trained a slaver hound to follow the boy and protect him. Under most circumstances the slaves treated the boy politely, even when Jecal was nowhere to be seen, but in these troubled times it paid to make certain.

A little earlier in the day, the boy had secretly listened in on a meeting between his father and some of the field heads. It had been conducted in hushed tones, and the boy had heard mention only of an "unfortunate accident" and "strange movements on the horizon" that apparently demanded they redistributing the workers and doubling the guard at the palace. There had been disarray, and for once no one had been paying the boy any attention, which was all the opportunity he needed to slip out of the house unseen and head into the fields. Jecal had followed him but the boy sent him off several times, telling the slaver hound that he needed to be seen about the palace so they'd think the boy was there too. Three times Jecal had returned, only to be sent away. After the last time, he did not return, and the boy wandered on through a large field of corn while feeling the crisp giddiness of being slightly lost in forbidden places.

A sound caught his attention, so he changed direction and headed towards it. He pushed through a thick layer of corn only to tumble through and land on empty ground. He found himself on a small plain, an open circle in the middle of the field. In that field were three men, sitting hunched over on

wooden stools. They were slaves, and the sun glistened on their black skin. Each man either held a large glass bottle containing clear liquid or had a corked one lying in front of him.

At the boy's arrival they all looked up in unison. One of the men hissed slowly and rolled his bottle between his hands. Another one picked up a bottle from the ground, uncorked it with deliberate slowness and took a long drink, not letting his gaze off the boy for a second. The third man, who was bigger than the others, put down his bottle, wove his fingers together and sat absolutely still. He looked at the boy for a while, then looked away and stared at the corn instead. It looked to the boy like he was praying, though the slaves supposedly didn't have any proper religion.

The large man kept looking at the corn, but the other two stared right at the boy. He stared back, having been taught not to be intimidated by slaves and not to say anything to them unless they deserved it. He thought he remembered seeing these people before, but wasn't sure, and he didn't know their names.

The big one suddenly got up and started walking to the boy, slowly and a little unsteadily. One of the two remaining men also got up, but the other grabbed him and pulled him back down.

The one who'd tried to stand up said, "You know what they'll do to us. The Vitoc." The undertones of panic in his breathless tone made the boy even uneasy.

"No," said the man who'd pulled him down. "Because we weren't here. Pick up your flask and go."

"It won't bring anyone back," the first one said.

The other one gave him a hard look and said, "That's not what this is about. We're going now. Don't look back, and don't say any more in front of the boy."

As they got up and left, the large man continued sauntering towards the boy. The boy wanted to flee but remembered his father saying that he shouldn't ever bow down to these people. So he stood firm while looking the man in the eyes.

The man walked up to him, and the boy smelled sweat and grime and something he imagined was alcohol. He kept looking at the man's eyes and was amazed to see that the man seemed to be quietly crying. The sight transfixed the boy, and as the man started to do something with his hands he paid it no attention. The man's face didn't change at all; the tears merely ran down, like little children left in the fields.

At last the boy looked down and saw that the man was slowly unwrapping something. It was an item packed in layers of a thin, shimmering material that the boy thought might be silk. The wrapping was pink, though it had a lot of dark stains, and was the same fabric as a thin, blue cord that had been knotted up and tied around the man's left wrist. As the boy looked on, the man unwrapped the package and took out a knife: a short, solid blade with a handle made of dried leaves wrapped around one end, the type of knife that the slaves often used at harvesting time to husk the corn. The blade was clean and looked very sharp.

On seeing the blade, the boy's breath caught in his throat and he began to feel very cold. Forgetting any rule he was ever taught, he looked up at the man and said in a low voice, "Mister, what are you going to do?"

Staring at the knife he'd unwrapped, the man frowned and leaned his head to one side, as if being asked to consider an unfavourable business proposition. "Hold still," he said. "Hold still and it won't hurt so much."

The boy couldn't move. Everything had become so real that it overwhelmed his senses. The sky was blue and cloudless. The corn smelled of earth and dinners. Things rustled, buzzed, creaked and squawked all around. The man was so impossibly tall he blotted out the sun, and he smelled like hard work. The boy took all this in without thinking about it because anything he could think right now would lead him somewhere he didn't want to be.

"Mister, what are you going to do to me?" the boy said again, not wanting to know but unable to think of anything else to say.

The man pinched his eyes shut and shook his head as if adamantly refusing a request. He had started crying again and wiped off the tears with the back of one hand while clutching the mottled silk. The other hand held the knife, pointed directly at the boy.

Once he'd wiped off the tears and softly cleared his throat, the man leaned over the boy, knife in hand. There was a louder rustle from the corn, followed by a rising growl, and Jecal burst out from the stalks, jumping onto the man and knocking him to the ground. The man swung the knife at the slaver a second too late, and the animal went to work on him with wide open jaws.

The boy stood frozen on the spot and watched what Jecal did.

When it was all over and the sounds of nature had resumed, the boy regarded what lay on the ground. He knelt beside it, picked up the silk cloth that lay on the trampled corn, and stuffed it in his pocket. He felt that something had been taken from him and that he should take something back, as revenge, or compensation, or simply as confirmation of a memory destined to lie deep.

He turned and began walking back home, slowly making his way through the corn with Jecal at his side. He kept touching Jecal as if to ensure himself that both he and the slaver were still there. Once he'd made it halfway to the palace he started to hear the voices of his father's people, who appeared to be anxiously shouting his name. There were noises from the sky and the earth, and gray clouds were amassing overhead. The silk cloth bulged in his pocket.

“A Life in Three Acts”

The body rests. The thalamus, deep core and center of all things, resonates with itself at a rate so slow it's barely a murmur. All limbs are still and metabolism is kept to a minimum, with nothing floating through the bloodstream but a few hormones placidly drifting towards breakdown. The heart beats, the lungs inflate and deflate, and everything ticks over as it always has. In a dozen places the skin quivers slightly from nearly imperceptible electrical currents passed through it by the attached monitors.

A foreign substance hovers into the lungs, squeezing past the bronchioles alongside the oxygen and insinuating itself through the capillaries into the bloodstream. Moments later the central nervous system is dampened, and while there's possibly a flicker of activity in the thalamus, the state of rest remains unaltered.

The skin is broken for the first time. Several punctures are created right above the crook of each elbow, and in the skin a finger's breath below the heart. Needles slide in with mechanical accuracy, pierce veins, and begin to pump in chemicals. Several smaller punctures are made along the base of the spine, and a line of very narrow, very long needles slide in at a glacial pace, penetrating the subdural region. These needles pump in a single dose of something that immediately dulls the entire autonomic nervous system, leaving the brain unaware of the changes occurring to it and disinclined to start making a fuss.

The body begins to change. Since the chemicals are initially pumped away from the heart, the first parts affected are the limbs and the less complex internal organs; and, of course, the blood. Regular blood cells begin to die off, their walls eaten up by the intrusive substance while new, more robust ones are pumped out of bone marrow by the millions. These new cells,

whose oxygen-carrying capability far exceeds that of the old and dying ones, grow to maturity in a matter of instants. The lungs then kick in, their alveoli adapting to letting in more oxygen than this body has ever been able to assimilate. The muscles swiftly respond, followed by various other organs, gorging themselves on this new red breath.

Once the chemical reaches the brain, change begins in earnest. Sinews strengthen and lengthen without overstretching. Bones are eaten away, their porous, paper-like remains left covered in a sticky residue that seeps into the remaining calcified matter, links and reacts, and eventually hardens into matrix-like structures far stronger than the original material. The heart is less altered, its ventricles merely expanding to deal with the onrush of new blood to a stronger body. It suffers some palpitations, but these even out quickly and the needles do not stop pumping in the chemicals.

The body is being put through extreme rigors. Muscles are tensed and flexed consistently, alternating between upper and lower sections of the skeleton, and reknitting themselves into stronger versions at a pace far beyond any past results. While the heart's rate of growth has remained less than might be expected, lung capacity has increased by leaps and bounds. All other organs remain in line, having picked up the pace much as a child who'd learned to walk and is now reveling in the joy of an endless run.

With this growth come new natural limits that also get tested with a vigor bordering on self-destruction. There is sleep deprivation, and the thalamus that once served its purpose with hushed consistency now regularly gets yanked in and out of REM without mercy, its waves spiking in dull panic. The skin routinely gets shocked with extremes of hot and cold, but the brain is learning to compensate for these differences, blood vessels constricting and expanding with high rapidity. Despite their increased size the new blood cells are more pliable than the older version and manage to get

around beneath the outermost layer even when it has restricted and blocked off all outside interference. This is a powerful and resilient system now: locked down, coiled, and waiting.

There is a moment when the body relaxes, going as deep into theta as it consciously can. Some adrenaline still courses through the bloodstream, and various systems are on semi-prepared standby, but the brain orders all to stand down, fall back, and hold position. There is a wait.

A mild electric current passes through the body, its contact point located at the ankles. It causes the leg muscles to tense, jerk and finally convulse, pulling against each other. Every muscle is slowly worked over: The current brings it to its maximum twitching power, its glycogen stores are exhausted and its lactic acid is pumped back into the bloodstream. The lungs work overtime to the point where the visual cortex starts having issues decoding information and the labyrinth in the inner ear fails to maintain a proper sense of balance. Sensing this, the brain - still keeping the thalamus calm and producing delta waves - orders the diaphragm's contractions to ease up. It does so, reluctantly, and general equilibrium is slowly reestablished. The electric current moves up past the calves and the thighs, then separates, one contact sliding up the ventral nervous system and another one going up the lateral. They alternate their efforts over various muscles on either side, and things start to go wrong.

One back muscle, rarely trained, overstretches. In response the body's torso, which has been trained to much higher levels, cramps up and heaves. The effort combines with the current and begins to tear the back muscle apart, its striated cords snapping like the wires of a bridge in a tornado. The adrenal glands go nuts, pumping out adrenaline and other corticosteroids at the highest rate they can. The thalamus, by now used to being pounded into activity, jerks awareness back into action. All conscious control of the lungs is lost and air is expelled at high rates, the vocal cords vibrating so hard that their mucus lining begins to dry. Blood gets pumped

into all extremities at twice the normal rate, which only accelerates the body's thrashings and the destruction of the back muscle. The heart, in fact, has an agonizing time keeping up, but its skipped beats are masked from detection by the flood of adrenaline.

The skin gets broken, a vein is pierced and sedatives begin to flood in. The pain stays constant but the system begins to relax involuntarily; cramping slows and finally ceases, brainwaves even out, and the battered adrenal glands return to normal. For a while there is utter stillness. Then a spot on the back, on the skin over the torn muscle, gets covered with something that begins to intrude. The skin is not broken but permeated, as if water were passing through a wet cloth, and it grows very warm. The muscle also warms up even as the blood drains from it. Its tendrils reach out and hungrily eat a glut of nutrients carried to them by the surrounding cells. They start to intertwine, growing stronger and more pliable, morphing into cords of much greater tenacity.

The skin is uncovered. Very mild electrical pulses are applied to the torso, and the body slowly bends, stretching the back muscle. It stays unbroken, and the dulled brain, awake but unmoving, registers no signs of danger.

Eardrums, until now blessedly free of irritants, receive sounds that quickly dull the alpha waves and bring consciousness back in with speed. The brain becomes fully conscious of its state again, and the body's muscles gently flex and tense. The adrenal glands squirt a little in nervous anticipation, but nothing gets torn. The body is ready.

Later on it will receive a shock in motion that impacts hard enough to test even the matrices of the bones, but they withstand it.

Eventually the body experiences a lift, and a drop, and olfactory senses report that the air smells very different.

Rest comes harder than before and delta waves are barely even present; the body jerks itself into consciousness at the least little irritant, whether on eardrums, nose, or skin. The adrenal glands, in good practice, happily help out each time with generous supplies of corticosteroids, but eventually the brain reins them in.

The temperature shocks prove to have been helpful as the skin is now exposed to higher fluctuations over greater lengths of time than before. The heat doesn't cause damage but does interfere with gastric control, and there are several occasions where the adrenaline, the heat and high activity in the prefrontal cortex cause the stomach to vacate. Eventually the composition of ingested contents alters, lowering slightly in fat and starch and increasing in complex carbohydrates, fiber and various phytochemicals. There is also less alcohol ingestion, and eventually the stomach settles down and remains stable.

Over time the body settles into a groove. Everything goes at its pace, all glands function, and if there is the rarest of half-missed beats from the heart, the rest of the system more than makes up for it.

So when, at last, the eardrums are assaulted and the thalamus shocked out of deep delta waves, and the body is fairly thrown to hands and knees, the shock isn't quite enough to cause any immediate lockup. The eardrums keep taking in and filtering everything they can, while both visual cortex and motor control narrow their focus, accomplishing in linear order several tasks that are so practiced they have long since been ingrained in the subconscious. The body rises and begins to run, the hands slightly tensed to hold their deadly baggage, the skin on the fingers cooling from steely contact. Now the visual cortex takes over, the head craning back and forth while the legs piston and the lungs work, and every now and then the body

will stop, crouch, process visuals and react through hand movements, either a wave or a slight pull of a finger.

It is during the exit from one such crouch that the eardrums process a loud whine, and immediately after the skin is massively broken, not merely torn but shredded off, veins pieced and muscles taken off in chunks. The abdominals contract with all the power they can muster, and air is forced out of the lungs, the vocal cords vibrating at high frequencies. All systems go independent; legs give out, hands cramp up and eardrums vibrate with a merciless rat-tat-tat; bladder goes into overdrive and so does adrenal gland, pumping like there's no tomorrow. Adrenaline courses through the system at unprecedented rates, while the blood cells, engorged with oxygen, deliver it to whatever extremities they can before flowing through the broken skin and out into the unknown; and in all these imbalances and all this stress the heart, having ticked away in duty and stress forever until this very moment, at last loses its grip: cramps up, goes on strike, stops. The body convulses, eyes rolling around in their sockets, and in those last shooting moments of pain and confusion there is just enough time for the brain to realize it has been cut off from the flow, and for the eardrums to process one last noise fast approaching, before the body is crushed, cut and burned by a force far greater than it has ever experienced, and even the matrices of its bones give out at last, their cracks the final sounds before the quiet, definite and final onfall of death.

With Acknowledgments to Mad Dogs

The first time I saw the madmen, I was too slow on the button and they escaped into a narrow strait between the generators and a nearby warehouse. It took me a moment to realize what was happening - I was up top, photographing the last precious strains of a fading sunset through an industrial haze and smog, and had only noticed the activity below when I looked away from the lens - and before I could wonder what on earth they'd been doing climbing over the plant's security railings, I heard a low sound, a thrum in the earth, followed by a sudden and violent silence. I was shoved so hard backwards from the parapet and onto the rooftop that I hit my head on the brick floor, and lay there looking dazedly at the debris that showered over me. It's a wonder I didn't lose an eye, since half of the stuff was metal shards still too hot to touch. My hearing was gone, too, replaced with a constant, high-pitched whine. My photographer's instincts were intact, suicidal as they are, and as soon as I had my balance I rushed right up to the parapet again and started snapping pictures before I even knew what I was seeing.

Whatever role the generators had once fulfilled, they were now rubble. A foul-smelling smoke emanated from their broken husks and I could hear live electricity flying about. I wasn't too worried about the camera, which was insured by my employers, but felt the usual mild concern that some kind of radiation from the accident might affect its memory or the backups that I'd had implanted in my skin. I always worried about this if I was doing active fieldwork, though probably less due to any valid reason - the memory chips are sealed from outside interference, and if I ever have to worry about the skin chips I'll likely have much bigger problems to deal with - and more over transferal of emotion. When you put yourself in the line of fire, time on end, all that anxiety of self-preservation has to be put somewhere, lest it eat you up from inside or turn you stupid and make you act like you're immortal.

I had snapped a few shots of the smoking ruin when something on the warehouse wall caught my attention. I was too far away to see it with bare eyes, and the smoke still obscured most of it, but by zooming in and panning about I caught most of it.

If it had been a regular painted tag I'd have looked past, ignored it and focused back on the wreck. Most graffiti is applied either with paint composites or, for the hipsters, with detachable projectors that cast all sorts of visual tricks. This one, on the other hand, had been applied with ScArdite, a highly flammable substance normally used to treat metal surfaces. It was sold in large, sealed containers but if you knew what you were doing - and didn't mind risking your skin and eyebrows - you could siphon it into pressurized containers. When applied in steam form to metal it would leave scorch marks that couldn't be missed.

This one said, "Leave or die, Caldari".

I snapped pictures of it, nicely framed by the surrounding smoke and debris. They were thoughtless images, taken almost at random by someone who'd been there purely by accident.

A day later I was paid a high commission for the whole set, and two weeks after I was notified that the pictures would be set up in a prestigious current events exhibition. It was during this process I discovered the rest of what had happened: Those generators had fuelled security and auto-response systems over various areas in the city. Backup systems were in place, but they weren't sufficient to prevent a group of Gallenteans from sneaking about under the cover of encroaching darkness and assaulting both Caldari people and Caldari landmarks. The generators' destruction hadn't been a single and conclusive act of sabotage; it had been a call to arms.

The world was worried. The news was the same, but news analysis, which is where you hear what people are thinking, was turning more and more jingoistic and paranoid. I didn't know anything more than anyone else but I could see that something was starting to go very wrong.

I found myself thinking about those people. They'd wanted to send a message, and they had, but I wasn't even sure of what that message was, and neither were the pundits. The Caldari section of the populace was clamoring for the police to find, try and judge those responsible with the harshest penalties possible - this was Caldari Prime, after all, and we'd already suffered enough at the hands of the Federation - and demanded increased surveillance of Gallente youth. The Gallenteans, I have to say, took it all in stride, supporting our demands and agreeing with our politicians to whatever extent they could.

But it didn't make sense. A concentrated effort like the generator sabotage took planning and resources, if one ignored the stupid tags they'd left behind. Something like that was done with a clear and direct purpose in mind. You shut down power, you robbed the bank, and you escaped. The outcome of this, the assaults and property damage, wasn't a crime in the traditional sense; it was a generalized and violent political message, something you'd expect from a group of animals too stupid to know what else to do.

I couldn't stop thinking about it. I found myself visiting the landmarks they'd defaced and walking through the areas where they'd hurt all those people. I figured it might make for a good series of follow-up images but in truth I was doing it more for myself.

In each space I found something familiar, in that way I can never quite explain. When you take pictures you're dealing with three layers of reality: That which can be seen and is what it is, that which can also be seen but

represents something else, and the dark limbo in between that's so abstract you can barely identify it at all. Fiction has the first two - storyline and metaphors - but usually lacks the third. It is the framework, the organization of everything so that it can tell its story; a meta-layer of conveyance.

And I saw it, the same thing, in every one of those locations. There was something about them that made them stand out. From a simple public park to the most imposing of Caldari monuments, it was there. This setting, light and lines, that gave an area its unmistakable flavor. This framework.

Whether the attackers had known about it, I had no idea. But I was a photographer and I'd wandered the streets of this city for a long time, long enough to know where else to find moods like this.

Probably I should have called the police, told them I had a suspicion of where they'd strike next. And probably they would have laughed, and thought I was some artist with an ego. Or they might have listened; I don't know.

I remembered a place in the city, one of many monuments to the fall of our planet. It had the same feel as the ones I'd seen, and it also had some nice vantage points where a person might hide out.

That same night I stocked up and took my gear to one of those vantage points, where I waited all night for something to happen. I was nervous and jittery, and would snap an image at the least little thing. In early morning I left my spot, tired and frustrated, but relieved, too; not merely for the sake of the monument but for my own.

I was between assignments and still felt too attached to the sabotage, so I slept during the day and returned to the same place the night after, with better equipment and a more patient attitude.

It served me well. That night they came.

The pictures caused an outrage. It was a proper series this time, from start to finish, that documented how a group of Gallente utterly reduced a Caldari monument to smoking ruin. Some of them - the ones who'd used acid and other things - wore gasmasks, but the group otherwise seemed entirely unconcerned with identification. At the end, they even pulled down their pants and urinated all over the remains of what they'd destroyed.

I had another exhibition during which someone asked me in fairly shocked tones why I hadn't done something. I kept a cool demeanor and asked what I should have done, alone, against a group of rampaging, violent criminals. My interrogator's spirit was dampened somewhat at this, so I put my arm on his shoulder and explained that sometimes all we could do was tell the others, to make sure society could see what was happening in its midst, and leave the rest up to the people in charge. He was mollified at this, though I don't think for a second that he truly thought any action would come of what was being displayed on the walls and in mid-air. It was a personal insult to him, what he'd seen in my pictures, and he was less concerned about society than his own fragile bubble inside of it, for if someone would do this to cherished and well-established landmarks of the city, someone might well take it into their head to go after its cherished and well-established patrons, too. Everything is personal, in the end.

This wasn't the first time I'd done war photography. Of course, in my head everything with violence in it could be called a war, the only difference being one of scale. Those people who maintained that a picture of mad dogs fighting in backyard matches was different from spaceship armadas launching torpedoes and ammo volleys at one another were really only deluding themselves. And as I looked at my own pictures, hovering there so gargantuan they blotted out the rest of my sight, it began to dawn on me

that the raw power of this particular series - that unnamable framework - wasn't drawn forth so much by the violence that I'd seen a million times before, nor whatever political machinations might lie behind, but by my own emotional response to it. I could see it in the angles I had taken, the lines I had cut without even realizing it: the pictures were in perfect harmony not merely to the actions of their subjects, but to the situation itself. A situation that I had let myself become part of, both physically and emotionally. I had all but put myself in front of the lens.

It wouldn't be the last time, either. I had known where they would be and deep inside I felt a quiet reassurance that I also knew where else they would go. That budding realization, that this possibly hadn't been a fluke but instead a recurring relationship between me and these mad dogs, excited me beyond measure, and frightened me more than I can possibly explain.

I began hunting them, as one would stray animals. The framework was always there, waiting for me to find it and settle down to wait.

It amazed me how they didn't seem shy at all. They truly were like animals, acting out their nature unashamedly and with great vigor. Not that they had nothing to fear, for the authorities were after them in force, but they were good judges of any situation and responded to real threats rather than nervous imagination. A slaver hound will without hesitation tear apart a human being, taking its time to eat the flesh and muscle, and so long as you don't get between it and its meal it won't care at all that you're near.

The waits got shorter and I began to know their patterns so well that at times I could swear they were practically leaving me signs for where they'd strike next. Most of the images I took, I didn't even release myself. Aside from growing police interest in me, there's a limit to how much a client or

exhibition hall is willing to pay a single photographer, and I'd long since set up various fake middlemen for those occasional times when I was especially productive.

Public attention in their crimes rose accordingly and hit such a fever pitch that I could afford to devote myself exclusively to the subject. I could probably have afforded a nice, long vacation as well, but as time passed it became less about the job and more about the hunt. There is a special flame that lights inside you when you spy the perfect framework, that dead limbo you want to capture forever, and I needed to keep it lit.

In fact, it had all been going so terribly well that what happened during my last session has robbed me of sleep and all peace of mind.

It was near sunset, my favorite time of day. I was high up in a disused building on the edge of town. It overlooked a trickle of a river, on the other end of which was a cemetery with a special plot for war veterans.

I'd been there on and off for almost sixty hours, but between my thermo mattress and some quite pleasant instant meals it was all right. My sleep was peaceful and rested, and motion scanners warned me of any possible appearances. It had been a few hours since I'd set up my gear and settled into that pleasant meditative state when one of the scanners pinged and I snapped to attention.

They came quietly, disabling security and pouring through the gates. I couldn't help but admire their movements; they looked so nonchalant and purposeful all at once, a hungry pack out on a hunt for easy prey. The group moved directly to the veterans' quarter and I felt the familiar trickle of excitement on my skin. With luck they would do their work before the light ran out.

At no point did I feel responsible for their actions; they were repulsive, and my excitement was always tempered with disgust at both them and myself. But that didn't stop me from shooting pictures.

And there must have been a glint from my lens, because even as one of them was straightening up, having defaced a Caldari grave in ways beyond comprehension and taken off his gasmask, he turned around with a bright blue smile, and he looked towards the abandoned building, and over the vast gulf of that dead limbo we suddenly both inhabited he looked directly into my eyes.

I felt my blood freeze. My mind turned in on itself, trying to comprehend what I'd just seen and whether it had been coincidence. I didn't even consciously see him any longer, though I kept shooting on instinct . They finished their task and the man never looked my way again, but long after they'd gone I lay there, trembling, rationalizing to myself the way someone does when they've long since crossed the line and now look back to see where it was.

For this framework, this dark limbo between reality and deeper meaning that I've been hunting all my life, is more all-encompassing than I ever imagined.

When I got home and inspected my pictures, I saw it.

Another thing I know about animals and respect them for is that they don't take a conscious decision to participate in whatever horrible acts they perform. It's instinct at most, but never calculated intent. The outcome looks much the same one way or another, but the reason matters. It matters to me.

My pictures are growing more and more popular, and I've sold them in the firm belief that I am merely a chronicler, nonexistent and outside the framework they convey. But I was so wrong. And yet I am going to keep taking them, because I must. I have become part of these events, and if I stop, then they will cease to exist, and so will I. The framework includes me, as it always did.

I have in my home a picture that I will never show to another human being. It shows a Gallentean, his face so nondescript I can barely describe it once I make myself look away. Beads of sweat are glistening on his countenance and the defaced gravestone by his feet bears the marks of the small drill in his hand. In his other hand he holds an empty canister of acid, droplets spilling from its edge and onto the grass below, and on the ground before him lies a used gasmask. He looks happy. He has just poured the jug's content all over the earth on which he stands, and the smoke that arose to envelop him has been blown to the winds. Soon the acid will seep even deeper into the ground, find its way to the bones buried in there, and dissolve them, leaving behind only a blackened, foul-smelling tar.

He is staring into the camera, one animal acknowledging another, and he is winking directly at me.

Of God and Her Beast

When he dropped the golden vial, Antar knew he was a dead man.

They were in the garden of contemplation, Leringe and he, arguing about the tenets of faith and their service to the Chamberlain. Both of them were privileged Holders who had done a lot of work in the royal court, and the constant friction of daily interaction had filed them into two smooth blocks of solid rock, smashed for so long against one another that they grated past with a minimum of fuss and agony, each waiting for the other to finally crack and break.

Before the vial had even touched the ground Antar was already kneeling for it, his fingers reaching for its shiny surface and his mind working on some suitable excuse. By the time he'd snatched it up again and put it in his pocket he had already decided not to say anything at all, and prayed instead that Leringe would think the fallen object had been one of the golden buttons on his robe.

And Leringe didn't seem to notice, going on as he did about the futility of self-devotion when there were so many issues to be dealt with every day. "You don't get anything done if you're on your knees in prayer all day," he said. "The Empire expects results."

Antar, who wanted to get out of this conversation before his trembling hands gave him away, forced himself to shrug and say, "Then I guess we'd better get to it." Leringe sniffed at him and walked away.

Once he was alone, Antar walked over to one of the benches and sat down heavily. He felt the vial inside his pocket, pressing against his skin.

He had an appointment with the Chamberlain himself in less than a day's time. He needed to keep a clear head and not fill himself up with trash and paranoia.

So he'd gone into the garden of contemplation, picked his thousandth fight with a man who loathed him, and right in the middle of things he had started fiddling with the golden vial that contained his emergency supply of drugs. The golden vial that he had started bringing into the court for no reason whatsoever.

He rubbed his face with his hands, then spread them on the bench, leaned his head back and listened to the susurrus around him, with closed eyes and progressively calming breath.

It was not in the nature of man to deny his own nature. He enjoyed sitting on this bench and having the sun stroke his face. He also enjoyed doing drugs, not merely riding their highs but suffering their calamitous drops as well.

That last part had been a revelation. The pressure of living in high Amarr society, not to mention working for some of the most high-powered men in the Empire, was such that most everyone had to find some manner of release. This was natural and expected, and people dealt with it with prayer and piety. You were expected to suffer for your faith and that you did, meandering through the random mazes of humanity's constructs in the hope of finding enlightenment on the other side. The stress and the pressure meant that you had a need for God beyond the everyday.

But not everyone found themselves able to alleviate the stress through prayer, and sometimes would turn to self-flagellation. It was not uncommon for high-ranking officials to be seen on slow walks around the many gardens in the Chamberlain's courts, gingerly feeling their way towards

benches or tables after an evening of bodily abuse. This was smiled at, if not actively encouraged, by the church.

Drug use was forbidden, as was imbibing too much alcohol, synthetic drinks or anything except the mildest brews. But to Antar it came to much the same. It made no sense to self-harm, nor to lose yourself in invocation, because both depended on your strength and willpower to see it through. When you gave your autonomy over to someone else as your faith demanded, Antar felt that the very least God could do in return was to provide an unblocked passageway to Him.

He had gone to the drugs out of frustration and shame at being unable to take the pressure, and out of unwillingness to devote himself to the increasingly useless prayer and pain-threshold testing. And in the aftermath of fugue and tremors, he found himself at last.

He was supposed to suffer and that he had certainly done, spending what felt like centuries in panicked agony of visions, sweats and paranoia. But when it wore off, all he could think of was to do it again. The highs gave him sacrament and the lows gave him vindication. It felt perversely like being closer not only to God but to himself as well: Being true to his own nature and true to the punishing demands of his faith, by enjoying life to the fullest and then suffering for it.

It was the one and perfect way of achieving wholeness, and Lerenge had embraced it wholeheartedly.

He got up, brushed off his robes and looked around. The day was drawing to an end. Sunlight glinted off a nearby statue of a Slaver hound, cast in bronze. Its presence comforted him, for if God had created this vicious, merciless animal, then surely there must have been some concession on God's side to the animalistic nature of human beings.

Antar headed towards his quarters. Tomorrow would be a demanding day and he needed to clear his head.

"My dear boy, so good to see you," the Chamberlain said. His antechamber glimmered in the early daylight. The ceiling was high and ended in tinted windows whose glass changed hue according to the strength of sunlight. In the afternoon it would be golden and regal, and in the early evening a bronzed blood red, but the mornings were bright and uplifting. From beyond came the sound of birds.

The walls were covered with icons: Woven tapestries illustrated with the crests of the five Heirs and beset with their iconic gemstones, small crests and smaller paintings of Holders that had performed high service to the Empire, and massive decorations of all sorts that depicted the glorious Emperors of ages past. There was barely room for God.

Antar, still kneeling, murmured into his chest, "I am always at your service, Your Honor." There were no guards inside the room, which was not that unusual. They were for decoration as much as anything, and the Chamberlain often sent them out so he could discuss personal business.

"And so polite as well!" Chamberlain Karsoth said with a laugh. "I trust you've had a good stay in the palace quarters."

"They never fail to bring me happiness," Antar said. This was true. He'd emptied the vial last night and disposed of it for good. The visions had been quite marvelous.

"That's good to hear. I like hearing positive words. We should have more of that in this place, us pitiful, unworthy sinners."

Antar remained silent. He'd always liked the Chamberlain, an opinion that had him in the minority among the court, but the man's conversation style was dangerously comfortable. A genial chat with the wrong word let loose could mean a trip to the cleansing pits.

"Are you contemplating the heavens?" Karsoth asked him in silky tones.

"Always, my lord," Antar said. "How may I serve you?"

This time the Chamberlain did not answer. The silence was so complete Antar could hear his own heartbeats, and he realized with a tiny bloom of terror that the birdsong had fallen silent as well. The audioblocks had been set down.

He kept his eyes resolutely on the ground. Before him he heard the noise of the Chamberlain rising to his feet, the metal pistons in his legs hissing as they supported the man's frame. There was a thunk and another thunk, repeated at higher volumes as Karsoth walked closer. Perfume wafted over Antar.

"From this height I could take off your head," Karsoth said in the same quiet voice.

"I believe you could, milord," Antar said, keeping his breathing as steady as he could. His legs trembled slightly, though whether from strain or panic, he didn't know.

"Lerenge spoke to me last night," Karsoth said.

Antar said nothing.

"I had your chambers searched," Karsoth said.

Antar remained resolutely quiet.

"Do you have something to tell me, servant of the Empire?"

For the first time, Antar looked up and directly into the eyes of Chamberlain Karsoth, highest representative of the celestial court, supreme authority in the Amarr Empire, and the conduit to the living God.

And saw something he recognized.

"Nothing you don't already know, milord," Antar said.

Karsoth smiled and pulled something out of a pocket on his golden robe. Antar had no doubt that he fully knew what crimes Antar had committed, for the man's dark network of spies and information was vast, but seeing the vial in the Chamberlain's hands was still a shock; not merely because it was the final embodiment of Antar's doom, but he was absolutely certain that he had destroyed it.

"Show me how faithful you are, Antar," the towering Chamberlain said to him, that same strange smile still on his face. "Talk."

Antar knew that whatever he said in here wouldn't matter. His fate would have been decided already, and his confession was no more than an amusement to the Chamberlain. Whether he begged, pleaded, threatened or cajoled, he would still end up in the cleansing pits. Nothing mattered now; but conversely, nothing was forbidden. Through the pounding noise of his heartbeat, there surfaced the realization that he was free to say what he wished, in this last confession.

So he began to talk.

In the silence he spoke of pain and punishment, of the fracture between body and spirit and of the ideal nobody could possibly fulfil unless they explored all facets of humanity. He told of the heavenly visions he'd encountered outside himself and the hellish aftermath of the fall back to reality. He confessed his constant, infinite, unyielding frustration with the Empire's insistence on denying itself the divine imperative to be animals.

At some point, through the fugue of quiet panic, he realized he had stood up and was looking the Chamberlain in the face. He kept talking.

And at last he stopped, falling abruptly silent like the last page turned. He felt clean and empty, like anything Karsoth could do would be an afterthought to a life already ended.

The giant man watched him for a long time, the smile on his face not completely faded. Then he leaned in, the supports on his legs creaking with effort, and said, "You are the man I've been looking for."

Antar stared back, with a dull and uncomprehending mind.

"Do you know what is going to happen to you, faithful one?" the Chamberlain asked.

"I will die," Antar said. "Eventually."

"That you will. But first you will follow me." Karsoth turned and walked to the wall behind his throne. For a moment he stood in front of a painting of someone Antar had never known.

There was no sign; no laser outline, no shimmer and nothing that indicated a change. Karsoth merely gave a short grunt of satisfaction, walked towards the wall and melded into it.

Not vanished, Antar's brain told Antar's incredulous eyes. The Chamberlain had not been abducted or turned invisible, but neither had he merely walked through a holograph. He had entered the wall as if it were a porous membrane, and the wall had melded itself to him, rippled and moved, and let him pass through.

Karsoth's face pushed back out, its surface area such a picture-perfect replica of the wall he'd entered that Antar could only make him out by the outlines of his jowls. "The passage is active for a few more seconds, acolyte," he said. "You come now or never."

Antar's feet took over from the rest of his stupid body and propelled him through.

On the other side were ... people. They seemed to be enjoying themselves. There was no external lighting, but torchlight glinted off naked skin. Some of them were ingesting things.

"Contrary to what you might believe, I am extremely faithful," Karsoth said, as if in passing. Antar nodded, unable to tear his gaze from the mass of humanity writhing in front of him. The air in the room was heavily perfumed, and the people were making low sounds. He felt light-headed.

"But I despise the god of the people we serve, for it is not the one true god. He would encourage indulgence and unfettered belief."

"He?" Antar said absent-mindedly, not having heard a word.

Karsoth misunderstood him. "Or She. God can be anything you wish."

"What happens to these people?" Antar said, still not entirely back in reality.

Karsoth gave him a stern look. "What do you think happens?"

"Before I saw this, I would have said the cleansing pits," Antar replied. Karsoth grunted.

They watched the display for a while. In a controlled voice that betrayed the slightest of tremors, Antar said, "Milord, I should ask, for I expect the question includes me as well. What does happen to these people?"

Karsoth put a hand on his shoulder and in a benevolent voice said, "They are forgiven, my son. And they go on."

"Where, milord?" Antar said. He thought for a moment. This was Karsoth. "And in one piece?" he added.

The Chamberlain laughed out loud, a raucous roar of noise that echoed through the room. "Yes, Antar, they'll be fine. They come here now and then to tell me news from the darker parts. Most are free to wander the court as they please, but they tend to prefer each other's company until they depart."

"Quite, milord."

Karsoth turned to him. "Understand, acolyte. There exist a people who think like this. I found them through much the same crisis of faith as you extemporized to me, a truth that defied the death you were staring in the eyes. I will send you to them now, as my emissary. You have served me well in the past, and you will serve even better in your new position."

"Milord, I... - well, what is there to say? I serve," Antar said, and bowed.

"So you will," Karsoth said. "There is an enemy out there that needs to be dealt with, for she stands against all that we are; not in innocence, which is

easily enough countered, but a different kind of darkness altogether. You will never see her, for it would kill you, but you will hunt down the ones closest to her. And you will do it among your own kind at last."

"Yes, milord."

"So you will be off, but I need to know now - and believe me, I will see the lie on your face - do you want to go? Do you understand that you will leave behind everything you knew and disclaim every trace of the life you had?"

"Yes, your grace," Antar said. "Yes, yes, a thousand times yes. Who are these people?"

Chamberlain Karsoth smiled. "They are called the Blood Raiders."

Silent Furies

This configuration was new to him. A beautiful one, though it lacked the smooth subtlety of the Kaulas patterns, the ones from before the revolution. The Thukker as a whole had tended toward violent motifs after the great save, its people too drunk on their own rage to remember they were free, and every creation from its cultural womb since then had in some way borne fury's jagged stamp.

He set the object on the table. Before him was a wall, three quarters window, a tinted expanse of transnano stretching several meters to both sides and displaying the beginnings of a sunset upon the quarter beyond. Underneath the window was the small table, its contents cast in deep sun yellow, and at it he sat, his mood darkening with each passing minute.

He stood up, made his way to the desk in the opposite corner of the room and sat down at it. On the desk, a modcom was chirping.

"Shakor," he said.

"Emissary Shakor, this is Central," sounded the machine. "Your afternoon appointment just arrived at the compound. Are you ready to receive him?"

"Is this Sergeant Ermika speaking?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your name isn't Central."

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"I said your name isn't Central."

There was a brief pause, then a small nasal exhalation on the other end.
"Thank you, sir. Forgot."

"No harm done, Sergeant. Let him in."

"Yes, sir."

Shakor leaned back. Resting his elbows on the chair's metal arms, he locked his fingers together across his stomach, tilted his head back against the top of the headrest and let out a long breath. He rubbed his eyebrows smooth with two hard strokes. Then he stood up, straightened the front of his shirt with his hands and walked back over to the window. He was standing there, pensive, when the door buzzer sounded.

"Yes."

Sound of someone entering, then a voice. "Admiral Morata is here to see you, sir."

"Very well." Shakor turned half in the direction of the door and waited. There was a shuffling of footsteps, followed by brief silence.

"Good afternoon, Your Honor," came a voice.

"Hello, Hakram," replied Shakor warmly. "No need for formalities, least of all when they no longer apply." He cocked his head now in the other man's direction, as if sniffing something out with his mind's eye. "At ease, soldier," he said presently.

Hakram Morata, Vice Admiral of the Republic Fleet, veteran of hundreds of battles, stiffened a bit, then relaxed. He shook his head, slowly. "How do you always know?"

"Blind luck," said Shakor. "Have a seat."

The two men made their way over to the small table and sat down at each end of it. A cool draft played through the sparse chamber as the door slid closed.

"I'm assuming you've heard," said the Vice Admiral, removing his cap and straightening his carefully creased dark olive trousers. "About Yun." He studied Shakor.

"I heard something," said Shakor.

"It's true."

"I have no doubt. Tonight, was it?"

"Yes," said Hakram. "A little under three hours from now."

"I see." Shakor cleared his throat. "How that boy has grown."

He stood up and went to a carved wooden cabinet set into the wall, from which he gingerly retrieved a glass bottle filled with an opaque liquid of darkest brown. He unstopped it. "Care for a drop?" he asked, somewhat perfunctorily, as he began to pour the liquid into two small glasses.

Hakram smiled. "You know me."

"That I do," said Shakor, handing him one of the glasses. A rich aroma filled their corner of the large chamber. "To ours."

"To ours."

They drank. Shakor sat down again.

"So. What can I do for you today, Hakram?"

There was a studied silence, and then Hakram spoke. "Well, sir, I want to ask you to consider some of the things Keitan is going to talk about tonight."

"A-ha." Shakor's brow creased. "Which things, in particular?"

"Well, he is going to cover a fair few subjects. For one, he's going to urge you to come back." Shakor sat very still and did not react.

Hakram's eyes fixed on the spiked orb sitting upon the table. He picked it up. "You're really in a unique position to do the things that need doing, sir," he said, quietly.

"I'm not in a position to do anything," replied Shakor. "I'm tired of the things that need doing. I've been a member of this carnival for too long. I'm tired of collateral damage and lives on my conscience. Tired of getting tangled in the political underbrush."

"Tangled?" Hakram put the orb down. "But you dealt with the Elders, sir. You worked with the Thukkers. You circumvented every protocol there is."

"Yes, at the cost of a good woman's political career and the stability of our government. Those aren't dues paid lightly."

"But you did what needed to be done," Hakram said. "You shook things up enough for them to be set right again. Why finish with the job half done? There is a groundswell of support for you, at the public level as well as within the entire structure of government."

Shakor laughed. It was a deep and abrasive sound, the pounding of a punctured war drum. "Hakram. My boy. Do you think public support means anything, with things the way they are?"

A tiny blink escaped one of Hakram's eyes, a momentary crack in his mask of equilibrium. He sat upright in his seat, glad, as so often before, that the old man was blind.

"Not the public's, necessarily, but the ministers have..." he began.

"The ministers? That great thunderous gaggle of short-sighted polemicists? Oh, yes, I'm sure they love me. They'll love me until I do something that doesn't quite serve their interests, and then they'll hem and haw and harrumph and draft legislation and set their lackeys to screaming, and before you know it we're back to the low squabbling that keeps us stuck in the mud."

Abruptly he stopped there, and smoothed his eyebrows with a sharp upward motion of both hands. He stood up. Hakram waited, watching him intently.

"I'm not the person for it," said Shakor. He walked back over to the cabinet, found the bottle and returned.

"Sir..." said Hakram. Shakor quieted him with a gesture, then held out an open hand. He gave his glass to the old man.

"I appreciate your making the trip all the way out here," Shakor said, in a more convivial tone. He poured them two more drinks. "Did you have any problems getting in?"

"I was questioned a fair bit," said Hakram. "Nothing too bad."

"They know what they're doing."

"I have no doubt, sir."

"If I'm not mistaken, there should be some domes perched on the horizon there." Shakor pointed in the direction of the window. "They're synthesizing plants from the homeworld over there."

"Really?" said Hakram. He looked over Shakor's shoulder. Past the sprawl of squat metal buildings beyond the window he saw three gigantic skulls jutting out of the landscape, retiring rays of sun laying checkered patterns over their silvery pates.

"Genesis vaults, they call them. They're aiming to eventually have specimens of every known plant from Old Mother." Shakor took a sip of his drink.

"Impressive," said Hakram. "Very impressive. Wouldn't have expected it from the Thukkers, to be perfectly honest."

Shakor set his drink on the table. "I wouldn't have expected it from anyone," he said.

A period of silence passed between the two men, leaden with quiet consequence. Shakor was sitting with his elbows on his knees, flat palms pressed together, leaning forward. Hakram was sitting back, his hat in his lap and his left ankle resting on his right knee.

He switched legs, dusted a bit of lint off his calf and said "Maleatu... how can I get you to reconsider?"

And so the afternoon went.

"I have a message for you," said Hakram. He was standing by the window, looking out at the flat tops of the surrounding buildings, the tiny motes of windowlight like insect eyes in featureless faces.

Shakor raised his eyebrows and lifted his head slightly in the younger man's direction. "Oh?" he said.

Hakram came back to his chair and seated himself. "You spoke of collateral damage earlier. About making sacrifices and never knowing whether they had any meaning."

Shakor nodded.

"Do you remember a decision of that sort that you made, twenty-six years ago, when you were fighting in Ammatar space?"

Shakor remained quiet, his face impassive.

"When the rest of the militia heads asked you to leave the front because your presence was bringing down too much heat on their heads?"

Shakor gave a slow nod, barely perceptible.

"When, despite their insistent cajoling and threatening, you stayed an extra two days in order to be able to gather crucial intel that would, it turned out, end up saving the lives of millions?"

"Yes, yes," said Shakor. "Very theatrical. You have my admiration. Get to the point."

"My message is from one of those commanders. Do you remember Silbraur Makusta?"

"Of course. He's a high-ranking member of the Justice Department."

"Yes, but back then he led a group called the South Rixarn Army. It was one of the smaller militia groups active on the Derelik fringe back then."

Shakor's eyebrows lowered and his jaw clenched. "I remember the SRA," he said.

"Close-knit group, largely family. Highly specialized. Came from a..."

"Hakram."

"What?"

"Just give me the message."

"Yes, sir. Senior Counsel Makusta heard through a common acquaintance in Fleet brass that I was going to go to the Sanctuaries to try and convince you to come back. When he did, he had this message delivered to me and said that it was to be given to you verbatim."

"I assume you've memorized it."

"You know me."

"Let's hear it."

"Well, sir," Hakram began, then hesitated.

"Let's hear it, Admiral," said Shakor.

"He wants you to know that every single one of them would have willingly chosen their fate, had they known the stakes."

There was a long pause.

"Very well, Admiral," said Shakor. "Thank you for coming."

As the mantle of dusk continued its gentle slide over the moon's dry skin and its inhabitants began to lay themselves to rest, his modcom sounded again.

"This is Shakor."

"Emissary, Ambassador Keitan Yun has requested to speak with you."

He spun the orb in his hand for a few moments. How jagged it was.

"Put him through."

The Paths They Chose

The Garden was a man-made construct through and through, several acres of carefully tended flora and woodland encased in a massive transparent dome. Souro Foiritan, president of the Gallente Federation, had it constructed long ago as a meeting place between dignitaries of the various empire factions.

In this it served its function admirably, for a twofold reason. First, a peaceful garden was much more conducive to a genial atmosphere and agreeable spirits than a meeting room ever could be. A visiting diplomat, weighted by worries and demands, would feel so much more calm sitting by a babbling brook or a tree in budding bloom than he ever could on the top floor of a high-rise, no matter how good its view. And second, it was so well secured with anti-eavesdropping technology that visitors could discuss the darkest topics of their hearts' desires without so much as a glance over their shoulders.

The dome's outer surface was dotted with holographic projectors that melded in with the surface, making it impossible to detect from the air, and the materials of its hull utterly blocked every possible emanation from within: light, sound, heat signature, electric signals. Its insides were beset not only with equipment that regularly scanned for any anomalous signals, but motion-sensitive audio-scramblers that made it impossible even for servants and cohorts to hear what their leaders were saying to one another.

With all the layers necessary for its shell to be impermeable, real transparency was not an option. Instead, the rivets holding its outer plates together had inset tiny cameras that continuously recorded the outside view and passed the imagery along to a central broadcast mechanism inside the dome that used volumetric projectors to cast it onto the dome's inner wall.

The effect was exactly the same as if you were looking right through the wall, and removed the sense of claustrophobia and secrecy that otherwise would have hovered over the Garden. It was peaceful, and perfect.

Mentas Blaque, Head Senator of the Gallente Federation, walked down a stone-tiled trail, past brush and brooks, until he arrived in a small circle of paths surrounded by tidily cut grass and several tall trees. Birdsong emanated from the trees, and unseen insects clicked and chirruped from the bush. There was even a small fountain in the distance, hissing gently at the world.

And in the circle, by the edge of the green grass, he encountered two men. One stood at attendance. The other hung suspended from a silver rod, his face blocked by a deathskin mask.

The man who stood was Souro Foiritan, president of the Gallente Federation, leader of one of the four major Empires in New Eden, and Commander-in-Chief of the Gallentean armed forces at a time when they had just suffered the worst invasion and armed conflict in Federation history. His maroon outfit, which usually flowed with him like a second skin, looked worn, crinkly and unwashed. He had his head tilted slightly upward, as if watching the clouds. Even from a distance, Blaque could see how tired he was.

The suspended man was unknown to Blaque. He was fit, and something in his musculature - thinly covered beneath tight white clothes - brought to mind a military background. The deathskin mask, a covering of breathable material that overlaid his face, was expressionless.

Blaque walked up to them but said nothing.

Foiritan regarded him. Blaque noticed his hair was dirty, too, its oily sheen catching the sun's rays. There were bags under his eyes, and for some reason his knuckles were bruised.

"You can speak freely in here, you know," Foiritan said.

Blaque nodded.

"You don't seem too curious about why you're here in the first place."

"I was summoned by the highest authority in the Federation," Blaque replied icily. He and Foiritan had been at each other's political throats long before the invasion. "I assume you had your reasons."

Foiritan furrowed his eyebrows but didn't comment. He turned to the suspended man.

The silver device which held him up, a modified medical instrument not often used, was called a dead man's needle. It was a long metallic stake affixed to a cross-like stand, and it was literally melded onto the man it held. The stake had small circular protuberances that went into the man's back along the ridges on his spine, holding on to them like rings on a finger and supporting his body from the ground. Some of those circles would be pumping sedatives into his spine and the back of his head, keeping him asleep and mildly sedated. His hands were fixed at the body's sides, and his legs hung straight down. His skin, what could be seen of it beyond his clothes and mask, had dark purple bruises turning to yellow.

"This is Jordan Keel," Foiritan said, and walked a slow circle around the crucified man. "You wouldn't know it, but he helped bring about unprecedented events in New Eden's history."

Blaque regarded the man briefly before returning his gaze to Foiritan. "He seems a little worse for wear in that regard. Sir."

"So it might seem. In fact," Foiritan looked at Keel's suspended body and smiled humorlessly, "compared to what happened to some of the people whose lives he ruined, his own seems absolutely pristine."

The leaves whispered in the trees, brushed by hidden wind generators. Everything was too real here to be true.

Blaque walked closer and inspected Keel. He snapped his fingers in front of the man's face, and poked him in the ribs. Keel didn't react, nor blink or twitch. Blaque raised an eyebrow.

"The needle-sleep only lets him react to intense stimuli. Massive pain, for instance," Foiritan said.

"What do you need me for?" Blaque said after some hesitation.

"There is a war on."

"I know."

"A person's loyalties will get tested in a war."

"I know, Mister President."

"You weren't always a politician, Blaque. I've seen your locked files. I know what you did in the service of the Federation. There's one particular image, the remains of a Serpentis ship crew your troop once boarded, that'll crop up in my darker dreams for quite a while yet, I fear."

"There is a point to this, sir?"

"I need you to kill this man," Foiritan said, the same humorless smile on his face.

"Go to hell," Blaque replied and turned to leave. He had gone a few steps before Foiritan's voice said, "If you don't, then the aftermath is on your conscience."

"Don't associate me with your little criminals or whatever they do with their lives."

"Not his life, Admiral. Our lives, yours and mine. This man started a war."

Blaque stopped at that. Foiritan walked up to him and said, "It was on Keel's initiative, along with god knows how many others, that the Gallente Federation was attacked, invaded, and forced to capitulate under circumstances and terms that can be called nothing less than brutal."

Blaque turned to face him. A breeze from the hidden fans tugged at them, wafting the scent of flowers and grass through their senses. The man on the silver needle seemed to have no odor at all.

"We lost thousands of people in that invasion, Blaque," the president said. "They sabotaged our defenses, and they came in, and they tore everything to pieces. What they could have achieved with diplomacy they did with fire and death, reducing the lives of everyone who survived on that planet to a grey nightmare. And this one right here, this man who was supposed to be one of our own, he held the door right open for them."

In a grave but incredulous tone, Blaque said, "So you called me in here, sir, because instead of having this man tried by a military tribunal, you want the highest ranking senator in the Federation to put a bullet into his head."

"No. The person standing before me is not the Federation's highest ranking senator."

Blaque's expression turned to frost. "You just presided over the greatest military setback in Federation history, Mister President. Your power base is unstable and you're tottering on its wavering peak. I suggest you think very carefully before destabilizing it any further, or dismissing any political entities you may see as your enemies."

"That's good advice. It's exactly what I'd expect from the head of my new intelligence agency, and the overseer of its special projects division."

"...Beg pardon?"

Foiritan smiled, this time genuinely, and looked out through the dome of the garden. In the distance, beyond the land and the air, could be seen the faint crystal spires of New Hueromont, some so high they pierced the clouds. "The entire Federation is tottering. We've been hit so hard we barely know who we are anymore."

"So let's hit back," Blaque said, looking at those same crystal spires.

Foiritan didn't answer, and appeared lost in the view.

"You know," he said after a while, "I grew up in this area. I've had this view for so long, as man and boy, I can't ever imagine the city not being here. And I honestly never thought I would be in a position to even contemplate such a thing, living in a world where other people are actively seeking the destruction of something that feels not only like the reality of today but the very fabric of my memories. It's like they want to wipe out a part of what makes me the person I am."

He turned to Blaque. "I made a terrible mistake. I allowed myself to imagine that this universe was composed of good and honest people who could be induced to find a solution to any problem, no matter how severe. And now I find myself playing catch-up with wickedness.

"That's our problem, we Gallente," he continued. "We can't hit back. We're this great hulking beast that's been asleep for eons, being poisoned by ticks and leeches. We're full of rage and energy now, but if we roar into action unprepared we'll do nothing but get pummeled into submission. Worse, we'll still have those parasites in our blood, weakening us and hampering our fight, and it'll sap our spirit until we claw ourselves to death merely trying to get them out. I want those parasites gone, Blaque. I want them eliminated and I want our people to know it."

"And you want me to pull the trigger," Blaque said, with something approaching resignation.

"Blaque-

"How'd you even find this guy?"

"We'd been running data mining on all registered actions, civilian and military, covering the time span that led to the great betrayal. His name came up, we ran some matching statistics, he looked more and more likely. I signed a court order for immediate retraction of his statutory rights, then looked into his personal files and immediately found communications that clearly and directly linked him to the Tripwire fiasco. We hauled him in, and immediately he put up a front. Locked up, wouldn't say a thing. You ever see those guys, Blaque? You ever deal with someone who stonewalls you from the first moment on?"

"Every day on the senate floor, Mister President," Blaque said flatly. He sighed. "But most of my life I've dealt in warfare rather than politics."

"Then you know what it means when your enemy tunnels in."

Blaque looked to the crystal spires, then gave a nod so small it was barely perceptible. "So you had our people in white go to work on him?" he said.

"Almost. I had them all ready. But before we were set to start, I looked at the pictures of some of the victims, and I looked at Keel sitting in the interrogation chamber. And I lost it, Blaque. I went in there and had them take off all the restraints, then sent out the guards on orders not to return until I gave word. I had Keel standing before me, as free as I was, and if he wasn't quite as angry then he certainly wasn't in the mood to talk. And then I beat him to within an inch of his life."

Blaque looked at Foiritan with a new-found respect. "That so?"

"He talked. Gave us some information we needed."

"There's diplomacy for you."

"You would have done the same," Foiritan said.

"What makes you say that?" Blaque asked.

Foiritan waved his hand angrily at the world around them. "Look at it!" he yelled. "How can you possibly see this, and all it means to us, and not want to do everything you possibly can to protect it? How can you not want to lay down your life to save it from harm?"

He stalked over to the prisoner, his face turning red. "We helped them," he said in a tone full of quiet murder. "We did all we could for them and their rotten little empire. We poured money into their open hands. And now they do this to us. We didn't kill or destroy anyone over there. We didn't ruin

their businesses. Before this all started I was set to make the greatest economic concession in history, merely to make sure that someone else's goddamn home," he kicked the needle at the word, and it vibrated in the breeze, "could be kept from falling apart. Everything could be solved by diplomacy and goodwill, I thought. And now I have before me a pitiable man, one of my own Gallente citizens, who was partly responsible for the loss of an entire planet and the deaths of countless of our people."

"So why didn't you finish it off?" Blaque asked. "Why not end him, or throw him to the wolves? The entire Federation feels the same way you do."

"Would you?" Foiritan asked him. Blaque fell silent.

"I need to know who's on my side, Blaque. Now more than ever, I need allies, people I can rely on to get things done. You dealt in warfare, where the enemies stayed enemies and where words have weight. All my life I've dealt in politics, where my friends could be my enemies and where the words I hear are just words, fitted and molded to the occasion. I need to know who I can trust."

"You want me to kill a comatose man."

"I want you to find the traitors, all of them, and I want you to bring them to justice. Whatever it takes." Foiritan reached into his coat and pulled out a datapad and a gun, both of which he laid on the ground before Blaque. "On the datakey is incontrovertible evidence that Jordan Keel was involved in the Tripwire incident. It would be enough to get him tried for treason in any court and punished accordingly."

"So do it," Blaque said, but without much conviction. "Have him executed."

"I could," Foiritan said. "But that's not enough. There are others like him out there and I need someone with the experience and the guts to root them out. Someone willing to go all the way."

Blaque stared at him in amazement. He said, not disapprovingly, "What happened to you, Souro?"

Foiritan rubbed his eyes. The bags under them were dark. "In my time I've committed acts that were selfish or even outright wrong, but so have you and everyone else. We did it for ourselves, but somewhere in our hearts we always did it for the Federation as well, because we believe we truly are the best for this empire. This here, though, this is ..." He faltered, and waved his hand vaguely at Keel. "Being in power at peacetime, that's easy. But being in power when things go wrong and you have to fix them by any means necessary, that's hard. That's when you find out who can act as well as talk, and who's just a blowhard."

Another breeze passed through, carrying the garden to them in its invisible hands. It was far too serene here for deaths and treachery.

Foiritan said, "The world has changed. We change with it. Or we die, buried in the grass. It's that simple now."

Blaque knelt and picked up the datapad and the gun. He rose and weighed one in each hand, like hearts on a scale. It had slowly dawned on him that they stood not on the cliff's edge debating the fall, but had possibly long since gone over, and were merely looking at the ever approaching abyss. "You're right," he said in a shaky voice. "You monster. You're absolutely right. I don't even like you, Foiritan, and you're right. I wish to god you weren't."

"So do I, believe me," Foiritan said.

"You know how you're going to look if you do this. The measures instigated, the freedoms prohibited. .. Even if you're successful - especially if you're successful - you're going to be a tyrant. You'll be feared and hated. And so will I, as your hit man."

"Then that's the role you'll have to play, like all the rest of us actors."

Something in Blaque gave way, though whether it was the rising revulsion of a darkened path he thought he'd long since left, or the dismantling of the last obstruction to his breakneck passage there, he really couldn't tell. His feelings broke through, and he screamed at Foiritan, "This isn't a play!" His arm shot out, pistol in hand, the barrel aimed directly at Keel's head. "Is this what you want, President? Is this what you're ready for? You're brave when it's fists in a room, but how many times have you looked a man in the eyes before you killed him? How can your conscience ever take that on?!"

Foiritan waited, expressionless, until Blaque had lowered the gun and caught his breath.

"Yes, it's a test, of loyalty and guts," Foiritan said to him. "Everything is, these days. But those men whose deaths he caused? They were just as much your responsibility as mine." He stepped closer to Blaque and took hold of his gun arm, raising it to his own sternum as if he were the condemned. "You owe them this, in your own conscience and soul."

Blaque looked into his eyes, and whatever dark fellowship he saw there broke the last barrier. A wave of revulsion passed over him, washing over his new, unwavering purpose. His face wrinkled in disgust at himself and he said, "Damn you. Alright. But I will not murder," and he turned to Keel and shot the man in the kneecap.

"This is what happens when things get ugly!" he yelled, loud enough to set the birds flying from nearby trees. "This is what you've sanctioned, Souro!

You can undersign orders for hunt and interrogation, and damn it, I'll follow them to the end, but will you stand it when the screaming .. when the screaming ... starts." He faltered, and looked back to Keel in amazement. The prisoner hung from the silver needle, serene and quiet. The blood pouring from the gaping wound in his knee was staining his white clothes a deep maroon. He showed no signs of waking up.

"Good job, Blaque," Foiritan said, a smile not quite crossing his lips. "I need a man who will do horrible things for our Federation, but who'll detest doing so. I need a civilized man, so that I can be the monster."

"What ... but ...?" Blaque stammered.

"A body can't let out a scream if there's no mind to carry it."

When no response was forthcoming, Foiritan laid a hand on his shoulder, leaned close and said, not unkindly, "You just shot a clone."

Blaque stared at him, then at the datapad in his hand.

"Fake," Foiritan said.

Blaque stared back at Foiritan. His eyes bulged, and a vein started throbbing in his neck. He took a deep breath and said, "You trickster. You goddamn, good-for-nothing poli-"

His tirade was cut short by Foiritan's fist, which smashed into Blaque's cheek hard enough to spin him around and drop him onto the ground. The senator got up not with the shocked, angered or dazed look one might expect from someone who's just been clocked, but a curious expression. A red welt was rising on the skin over his cheekbone.

"Welcome to the new world," Foiritan said. "Don't forget who you are."

"Gloves off, I see," Blaque said.

"I needed to know where you stood. You'll be immersed in lies, disinformation and violence from now on. Might as well get used to it."

Blaque looked at him for a long time, and at the thing on the needle, and at the crystal spires in the distance. He was an ethical man, in his own mind, but a practical one as well, and decades in military service had tempered those ethics with a thorough understanding of humanity, particularly that wicked and terrible side which rose out of its murky depths only under duress. Through the rapidly fading mist of rage he realized that under enemy fire the most one could hope for was a leader cruel enough to do what needed to be done, and compassionate enough to understand why it needed doing.

"I am not at all sure, Mister President," Blaque said, his anger giving way to the dark humor that Foiritan had always admired in his adversary, "that this new world order should include the President striking his chief of internal security."

Foiritan kept up his poise, but Blaque noticed the slight untensing of shoulders as the president, "I'll say. I nearly broke my goddamn knuckles."

The sun was beginning to descend. The garden's ambient noise quieted accordingly.

"We need to align the people, and to do so we need a leader who fits the season. I'm going to be the monster, Blaque," the president said. "And you're going to be the thunder that announces my passage."

The Dark End of Space

Kezti Sundara, Grand Admiral of Amarr's Imperial Navy, stood alone inside the massive cathedral, dwarfed by the icons of eternity that glinted distantly in the lamplight. He remained utterly still, head leaned towards the vaulted ceiling. Quiet times were hard to come by in the Empire these days.

There was a metallic clank. Behind Sundara, on the other side of the cathedral, the massive doors slowly swung open. Footsteps echoed off the marble floor, then stopped.

"Welcome, Captain," Sundara said without turning around.

"Admiral," the Captain said.

"Captain, why do you think you're here?" Sundara asked in a quiet but clear voice.

"Tell me, sir," the Captain said in noncommittal tones.

Sundara noticed the Captain's reticence. He turned and stared directly into the Captain's eyes. "We're going to war, Captain. Fulfilling our lives' purpose. Aren't you pleased?" he said, with the slightest hint of irony.

"I really couldn't say, sir."

The Admiral sighed. "Alright. Speak freely. It'll be the last time in a long while, so enjoy it while it lasts."

The Captain made as if to speak, hesitated, and shut his mouth again. He broke the gaze and looked at the cathedral walls, whose tinted windows had changed hue and added a shining bronze to the evening's red rays.

Eventually he said, "I don't think we can win this war. I don't even think there should be a war."

"Recent events pass you by, Captain?" the Admiral said. "I hear we had some action. A bit of revolt, even."

"Sir-"

"The largest armada of Minmatar forces ever seen crosses over into our space, abducts millions of souls and causes untold destruction and havoc in the life of perfectly innocent people. The only thing that saves us right before the wave breaks is an intervention so definite and miraculous you could almost call it divine. And you, a leader of the Emperor's own holy fleet," the Admiral added, walking close enough to the Captain that their chests nearly met, "Don't think there should be a war."

This time the Captain held his gaze. "No, sir. I don't."

"Explain yourself."

"We're still reeling after the Minmatar onslaught. We're changing leaders, which always throws a spanner into the works-"

"Master politico-theologians say we're experiencing a glorious sea change of unprecedented proportions, with nothing but celestial glory and heavenly fate that awaits us."

"Theologians can suck my Apoc, sir. We're the ones manning the guns."

Sundara betrayed a smile. "Alright. Carry on."

"Look, sir, I'm as happy as the next man that Sarum is back in power. I honestly am. But we're a sea of people, vast and heavy. She'll need time to

route everyone to her cause, even the ones who believe in it. And if the Reclaiming is to restart in earnest, we'll need to do it properly right from the start. The effort won't allow anything less than a unified front, a genuinely unified one; not just the sycophants and paranoia of Karsoth's old court. We need to clean house before we move into anyone else's."

"You've given this some thought, Captain."

"Well, my superiors insist on adding complexities to my job, sir. I'm merely trying to adapt."

The Grand Admiral thought this over. He was sitting in a very comfortable chair, considering very unpleasant things. His Captain stood before him, a small figure in a vast and well-lit room. They were in a penthouse within shouting distance of the Crystal Boulevard. Lower military orders were ensconced in bunkers beneath the Boulevard's translucent shields, but the Admiral refused to let himself be cowed into those. Besides, in his career he'd attended many long meetings in close quarters with overexcited navy brass, and he knew exactly what it would be like. People thought better, up here in the fresh air.

"Complexities such as?"

The Captain took a deep breath.

"Aside from the time we need to sort out internal chaos, the external situation is so fragile that we can barely do anything at all. You can't sneeze in Luminaire without both our side and theirs locking and loading. If we fire even one volley ... well, their captains might have sense to hold back, but CONCORD will roar right in and stomp around, getting everyone excited, and sooner or later some idiot hotshot will see his path to glory.

Everything gets set off, and all that's left of every planet in Luminaire is a series of smoking craters."

"Duly noted, Captain," the Admiral said. "We can't start another war in Luminaire, which burns some of our hawks no end. And we certainly can't ignore or withdraw from CONCORD unless we want to supercharge the current chaos. What else?"

The Captain, staring straight forward, kept a carefully blank expression. "There is something else, sir?"

"Captain, we just lost an entire planet to a madman. You've served under me for years. This is no time for doubts or secret thoughts. What else? And stand at ease, for goodness' sake."

The Captain maintained her stance but her voice softened somewhat. She said, "Sir ... what are we going to do about the capsuleers?"

Anteson Ranchel, who had been Vice Admiral of the Gallente Federation Navy right up until the point his predecessor made one of the biggest military blunders in Federation history, gave his best Captain a big grin. "Well now," he said, "That's a bit of a problem. A group of people so powerful they're practically a faction unto themselves. Immortal, fearless and wealthy beyond imagining. Born of all four empires but beholden, in truth, to no one but themselves. And utterly untapped, in this little skirmish of ours."

"We need them, sir."

"Of course we do, Captain. They'll turn the tide of the war. Every capsuleer worth their pod should be taking a stand right now, and helping the forces of right against the tyranny and violence that envelops us."

The Captain nodded.

"And where, might I ask," the Admiral continued, "should that stand be taken?"

"A long way from here, if it were up to me, sir," the Captain said. "Last thing we need is opposing forces of pod pilots shooting at each other right outside our planet."

The Admiral smiled. "Good. I'm glad I've got some people left with more brains than bravery. So where, Captain, do you suggest we put them?"

"The dark end of space, ma'am."

"If that's a euphemism, Captain," the Grand Admiral said, "Believe me, I've heard enough of them already."

For a Minmatar war room, it made a number of concessions to sanity. There were only two persons there, not several representatives arguing about policy or sharpening their weapons. The walls had tactical maps on them, not tribe banners, and the surfaces of the recon tables were completely free of small arms, painblades and replica Khuumaks.

"Long meetings, ma'am?"

"If I ever see another member of the Minmatar government, whether Republic or Nation, it'll be an eon too soon, Captain. Might end up putting them the same place you're suggesting we put our capsuleers. Sounds like a rotten use of good people, though."

"The government?"

"The capsuleers."

"Not really, ma'am," the Captain said. "We need the lowsec territories. We need the resources there for anything and everything we'll be doing elsewhere."

The Admiral resumed her pacing around the room. Voices could be heard from somewhere far outside, either arguments or chants; it was hard to tell which, sometimes. "I don't like this, Captain. We did a full frontal attack and it was one of the most glorious moments in Minmatar history. We beat the Amarr nearly to a pulp, we flexed our might like never before since the great revolution. And we freed millions."

"Yes, sir. We beat the Amarr nearly to a pulp."

"Captain-"

"Up until the point where they burnt us to cinders and brushed away what was left of the ashes."

The Admiral rubbed her eyes. Her name was Kasora Neko, she was in charge of the Minmatar Fleet and she had not slept for a long time. "Captain, I've had three meetings today with various Minmatar political officials who think that brandishing a Khuumak gives them free rein with war metaphors. I value your services, but understand that if you start the same, I will turn your innards into poetry."

"Ma'am."

"As it happens, I agree with you. I think we do need the capsuleers, more than many people realize. I think they're going to turn the tide of the war. I think they're going to be the war, in all honesty. There is no way we can get

away twice with the stunt we pulled at Halturzhan, which means we'll need resources for a longer-term war, and we'll need to move around CONCORD. That means lowsec, and the only people crazy enough to fight to the death to hold those territories are the capsuleers. And that's not all. You know what's the most valuable resource in lowsec, Captain?"

"Well, there's Omber, and Noxcium, and probably Hemorph-

"It's people."

"Right."

"You're going to ask me what they refine to, Captain."

"The thought did cross my mind, ma'am, but you've had a long day."

"We need them for our efforts. And the Amarr want them for whatever hellish plans they're cooking up. The Empire fleets won't dare come into our territory again, not when they don't know what we're capable of, and not while they're sorting out their problems. So this Reclaiming," she spat the word, "or whatever they want to call their excuse for today's dose of misery, is going to start in lowsec, where we've got millions of people we can't possibly defend."

"And it goes beyond that, Captain."

The Captain was silent. His superior had not asked him a question.

"We've only just begun," the Admiral continued. The garden was quiet apart from the bubble of the sand waterfall and the distant whispers of the laser

birds. "This first achievement is one of many to follow, so long as we can keep everything together on the home front."

The Captain looked to the birds. Hearing his Admiral, who had served in the Caldari Navy for a long while, criticize the State's infrastructure like this set his nerves on edge. There'd been enough instability already without the high powers consistently making it worse by acknowledging it.

"What do you think about going into lowsec, Captain?" the Admiral asked.

The Captain cleared his throat. Fleet Admiral Morda Engsten was an intimidating presence, and when she asked a question like that, she wanted a good answer.

"Well, ma'am ..." The birds were approaching, their halogen outlines flickering in the sunny air.

The Admiral sat down near the sand waterfall. "Speak, Captain," she said, not unkindly.

"I think it's an excellent idea whose implications are sure to be vast, ma'am."

"You think it's dumb."

"Like a rock, ma'am."

Engsten reached out and put her hand into the waterfall, palm upwards, fingers spread out. The sand flowed around them unrestrained. "Tell me more, Captain. You're not going to ruin anything, least of all your own career."

The Captain allowed himself to doubt this. Nonetheless, he had been asked a question, and he admired the Admiral. He took a deep breath. "I don't understand why we're going into low security space, sir. It feels like we're running away. Say what you wish about Heth's rise to power, he lined us up at last, and made us kick hard at the Gallente. We've got Caldari Prime back, which I didn't think would happen in my lifetime if it ever did at all. We've got a war here, Admiral."

"That we do, Captain," Engsten said. "Now tell me what gains we're fighting for."

"Well, our people have been oppr-"

"The gains, Captain," the Admiral interrupted. "Not the ideology. I want our final military goal."

The Captain began, "Well, there is Luminai-...", then caught the Admiral's gaze and fell silent. He thought for a while, then said in quieter tones, "We're not talking about Luminaire, are we, ma'am?"

The Admiral slowly shook her head.

"Ma'am ... we're taking this all the way, aren't we?"

The Admiral nodded without smiling.

"Luminaire is a bomb right now, one that could be set off by anything and which nobody can control." It felt like he was mindreading the entire military council in absentia. "So we go into lowsec space to test out our capsuleers and build up resources. And as we make those gains, we also gain territory. Gallente lowsec territory. Which brings us closer to Gallente highsec space."

"And Luminaire at last," Admiral Engsten said.

"And Luminaire at last, ma'am," the Captain said, a slight tremor in his voice. "Along with everything else. We'll take their edges, and then there'll be nothing left but the center. We'll do it, Admiral."

The Fleet Admiral put her hand in the sand again. "And there is no doubt in your mind that we can do this?"

"Of course not. We're Caldari. And we're in the right."

The Admiral smiled. The sand hissed as it flowed through her fingers.

Aside from the hiss, the room was entirely silent. The five Jovians inside sat and stared into the ether. They were surrounded by polycarbonate windows that showed the starry space outside.

The hiss came from an open comms line.

The Jovians waited.

In four different elevators on four different stations, two diplomats got in on the top floor. One, who represented an Empire Faction, took out from his pocket a small datapad and cracked a joke about wars. The other, who represented CONCORD, accepted the datapad, signed it with his identity key, and laughed at the joke.

The elevator ride was long and the diplomats spoke swiftly, coding and signing the necessary digital back-and-forth with practiced hands. By the

time they got out, the four empires had petitioned CONCORD to ratify an emergency capsuleer militia procedure, and were now officially at war.

The Better Part of Valor

"But no one's gonna come down on me for this, right?"

"Don't worry about a thing. The agency will cover your back legally, we'll assign a pseudonym, you'll be absolutely fine."

"Yeah. I just need to be sure there's absolutely no..."

"Mr. Sitsui. Remember what we talked about."

"I know, I know." The young man tugged absently at the dark tin figure-eight woven through both nostrils. The sight of his skin stretching made her nauseous.

"Okay," she said, with more finality than she felt. She fixed her gaze on the table between them. "Whenever you're ready, go ahead and start from the beginning. If you want to reword something, just stop and say 'I'd like to reword, please.' If you aren't sure you're remembering something correctly, it's very important that you mention that, even though you're going to give us the events as they transpired to the best of your recollection. All clear?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

She leaned back in her chair and briefly thought about lighting a cigarette, then decided against it. Better to let them ease into it on their own. Wait until they find their feet in the story, then light the torch as a sign that everyone's at ease.

"Okay. So we're sitting there, there's about four of us..."

"Wait. Start by telling me a bit about who you are. Sorry."

"Oh. Okay. I'm Orin Sitsui. I'm, uh, I'm a materials tech for Caldari Constructions, here under service contract with Kaalakiota Second Command, currently on eighth year of service."

"All right, that's good. Thanks."

"Sure. So, yeah. Four of us, I think maybe five, but I'm pretty sure four."

"This was where?"

"In my section. The east ridge, level 55. My hab was in a real sweet spot, right next to the Syntact galleries and a row of restaurants. A small group of us who'd been in training together, we used to always hang out there. And this time that I'm talking about – we're all pretty new, you know, and most of us have never been exposed to how strict the regulations really are up here. I mean, we were told in training but I guess they didn't do a good enough job of hammering it in or something, because almost everyone I knew would have a story within like a week. One guy got trapped in the laundry room after hours and had to be rescued by maintenance drones. One guy wore a wristpiece that covered up a part of his ID derm and got zapped by his own doorway. Everybody was adjusting, you know?"

She nodded, bunching up her toes inside her shoes. That cigarette was calling her.

"So, right. We're sitting in one of the places near my hab on a Wednesday afternoon, and we've just finished a long bout of shifts so we're looking at four days off. We're drinking, you know, getting fast on cheap stimstickers – yeah, legal ones, of course – and just having a good time, and then there's a commotion. Turns out there's a capsuleer coming through. Now, this was

before the big boom, so eggheads were ultra-rare. None of us had ever laid eyes on one.

"Turned out there wasn't much to see. He was really short. Dark hair, nondescript face. Civvie, I'm pretty sure. He had a contingent of Home Guard guys with him, real nasty pieces of work. You constantly heard about the Home Guard guys on the station. Infantry grunts, right? Signed up for war. Getting put on space station guard duty, for these guys, was like being told to cook and eat your own face. One of the guys in our section had a brother who was a Home Guard recruiter, and he said the guys who got assigned to the space stations were all being punished for insubordination, even if they did end up leading squadrons of the contract grunts. He said they joked that being a Station Sergeant was a demotion from Private.

"I really should have known better, I guess. Should have, I don't know, I should have put two and two together. But whatever."

She took the cigarette case from her pocket and nimbly fished one out, then placed it between her lips and lit it. Distantly he stared at the cherry of her flame for a few seconds.

"Would you like to take a break?" she said. "There's no rush. If this is hard for you to tell, we can wait a bit." She blew a column of smoke into the air-conditioned swirl above them.

"Nah," he said, leaning back in the chair and putting his hands on his knees. "Nah, I'm fine." He resumed his story.

"So I'm quite lifted, you know? I got four days off, I'm getting pretty loose off the stim-alcohol mix, and Janeira's on the other side of the table giving me all the right signals. And at one point I look over, and I make eye contact with one of the Home Guard guys.

"This guy had the weirdest look. He was staring right at me when I looked over, but still it felt like he couldn't see me somehow. At first I thought it was 'cause of my skin, since there aren't many halfbreeds like me running around on the upper decks. But then I realized it was because of the way I was sitting. I was sitting on the back of my chair with my feet on the seat, and station regs frown upon that, you see. I felt ridiculous suddenly, like a kid in a lunchroom who was about to catch a whack from the minder. And, I don't know, maybe that was exactly what made me do it, but out of nowhere I looked back at him and then pursed my lips in a little kiss.

"And just as I do it his eyes sort of widen a little bit, and Janeira notices me doing it and looks back, and when she sees who I just did it to she goes into this barely-subdued fit of laughter, and then the other people at the table catch on, and all the while the guy's just standing there, glaring back at me with the meanest god damn expression you ever saw. I felt this weird combination of fear and elation, like I was playing this danger game and it could go either way, you know, and I think I acted it too. But it was all for show, really. As soon as I made that air-kiss, something deep inside of me just went 'oh man, you did it now,' and this creeping sense of dread set in.

"So after staring at me for a few more seconds the guy breaks his gaze and goes back to looking around, guarding the egger guy, and the egger by this point is talking with another guy who's arrived at the table. Things are quiet for a few minutes, and I kind of stop worrying about that glare and start thinking I lucked out, you know, got away with it. And then suddenly there's this mad shuffle of movement, and the egger stands up and kind of stumbles back, and the guy he was talking to is just kind of sitting in his chair shaking, and something black and round falls from his hand, under the table.

"Took me a while to notice that the grunt who'd been staring at me was holding out a little pistol-shaped thing in the guy's direction. He had this intense look of concentration on his face, but hateful too, like he was gonna

end this guy right then and there. A couple of seconds pass and the guy's just sitting there, jiggling and foaming at the mouth, and all the grunts are just kind of staring, and I mean, us too, everybody in there is just staring at this guy get slowly roasted.

"Then all of a sudden the soldier stops and the guy just slumps forward on the table. The Home Guard guys go into this big huffing kind of secure-the-perimeter dance and one of them leads the egger away. We're just sitting there slack-jawed, looking at the whole thing unfold, right? And then I notice that, sure enough, the one who'd been staring at me is making a beeline for our table, and my feeling of dread just comes powering back. We're all kind of rattled by the scene, so as he approaches we're sort of half-standing up. My friend was about to say something to him, but he just walks right up to me and grabs my arm. He's pretty flustered, like he doesn't know himself exactly what he's gonna do next, but there's this anger in his eyes, this absolute insane rage, you know?

"So he grabs my arm and I instinctively resist, right? I don't know what he wants with me, so I kinda pull my arm back and it makes him lose his balance momentarily. I start to say something, but just as I'm starting the sentence he whirls around and just smacks – he's carrying this compact bullpup piece with a chromed handle-end , right, and he just smacks it right into the bridge of my nose.

"Now, I'm no fighter. I grew up in a KK creche, never been in a scrap in my life, never had much interest in any of the fighting sports. So I guess up until that moment I had a pretty dim idea of what could happen and how bad it could be. Man, it was bad. First thing, my eyes just open up. I mean a full force torrent. I couldn't see anything. There was this disgusting crack, and I fell back down on the chair with this slick heat spreading all over my mouth and down my neck. I wanted to say or do something, but I was way too shocked to do anything but sit there and blink and sputter.

"Jaseira told me later that the guy took another look at everyone around the table, just sort of coldly took stock of the situation and then decided it was well within bounds to do it again, so he did. Twice. The second one made me black out, thankfully."

She regarded him with what she hoped was a compassionate look. He was tugging at his nose contraption again.

"I was too scared to register a complaint but I found out a couple days later that Jaseira had gone and done it anyway, behind my back. She was way more angry about the whole thing than I was. I guess maybe she felt partly responsible because she'd laughed at the guy too.

"Anyway, we never saw him again. I got some kind of standardized letter of apology from their station commander a couple weeks later, but it didn't say anything about what they'd done with him or whether they'd even done anything at all."

"You're positive it was him?" she asked.

"Yeah. I wouldn't have called you guys otherwise. I'm not stupid. I know things have a way of getting out despite best intentions, and I know this isn't gonna make me very popular with the guy or his cronies. I just need the money. I'm splitting."

"A few of you are, huh?"

"Yeah. Just doesn't feel right around here anymore. I mean, we worked for the glory of the State before there was a big man at the top. We worked for the State because of what it represents. And there's one guy up there now with everything under his heel. What happened to the needs of the many outweighing the gains of the one? I mean, I like what he's doing, some of it anyway. The mood here is more optimistic than I've ever seen it, and

there's this really strong sense of purpose, but I just, I don't know. I guess I got my reservations about what kind of foundation it's all built on."

"Where are you gonna go?"

"I'd rather not talk about that, if it's all the same." He looked at her for a few seconds, then gave a rueful little half-smile.

"Okay," she said, giving the signal for the recorder to be shut off. "Okay, well, I think we have everything we need. Your compensation should be in your account already. Thanks for your candor, Mr. Sitsui."

It was evening in the office-box of Executive Editor Harben Mullar, and outside its two small windows the studio assistants were busily disassembling the day's sets, tools whizzing and clicking under the artificial light. She was standing in front of his desk. Her finished piece was lying upon it.

"The story was corroborated by three of the four other witnesses. The girl has been relocated to a different part of the region. I wasn't able to get a hold of her."

Mullar didn't look at her. He drummed his fingers on the table. "Okay," he said.

"Sitsui himself says he doesn't think the attack was racially motivated, but I think the story will speak for itself."

"Uh-huh."

"It's funny. He has this ancient reconstructive wire-mesh thing in his nose. Vherokior tech from hundreds of years back. I asked him why he didn't just

get it regrown. Said he needed the reminder to not do stupid things. All very dramatic."

Mullar nodded. Bi-di-dim,bi-di-dim, went his fingers on the table.

"Everything checks out. Heth was with the Home Guard at the time, and he'd been assigned to the station in question just three weeks earlier. He was dismissed four months after the incident. The official reason was budget cuts, but this wasn't an isolated incident and I doubt his superiors could ignore that type of thing for very long."

Mullar ceased his tapping and leaned back in his chair. He sighed. "I know it all checks out," he said. "It's a good piece, Rekka."

His tone had a terribly familiar ring to it. She looked at him for a long while.

"No way, Harb," she began.

"Yup. Just got a call from Agency Central. They're redlighting the piece."

"No way, Harb," she said.

"Yup. Indefinite standby. Directive came from right up top."

"But it's a good piece. It's inbounds. It's not a bullet." Her voice was rising. "I thought we agreed, we're just illustrating..." "

"We agreed, Rekka, but you know as well as I do that if AC decides we can't run it, then we can't run it. It's out of my hands."

"Did they give a reason, at least? Or is it the usual need-to-know bullshit?"

Mullar fished a cigarette out of his case. "Take tomorrow off," he said, screwing it between his lips. "There'll be time to talk after the weekend."

She stood there, staring at him. For a while she stared, as he clicked open a small lighter and briefly bathed the end of his cigarette in blue flame. He looked at her with resigned firmness and blew a plume of smoke into the space between them.

She turned on her heel and walked out.

The door shut on the office of Harben Mullar, and as it did the studio's lights winked out, one by one by one.

All These Wayward Children

Jetek, sleepless, walked down the empty corridor and headed for the stars on the ship.

Every space vessel had a viewing platform somewhere in its design, its purpose varying from celebration to contemplation. On some it might be a great hall, decorated and warm and beset with equipment to watch the stars. On other, smaller ships, it could be as little as a room with a window and an information vidscreen beside it, where you could call up all human knowledge on the planets in view.

This chamber was somewhere in between. It was round, had only one entrance, and its few metal chairs glinted a muted gold in the faint lights from the high ceiling. The walls held Amarrian religious icons, forms and images, but most of these were partly covered by the recently hung banners of House Sarum. Aside from the metal chairs the main type of furniture, spread mostly over the center and far end of the room, was small backless benches, soft and upholstered with a purple, suedelike material. The entire far end of the room was overtaken by a curved wall of transparent polycarb glass, and through its unbreakable wall lay open space, infinite and constant. Vast nebulas the sizes of small kingdoms dominated the view.

Sitting on those low benches in the middle of the room made you feel small, almost like a child again. Jetek longed for that feeling sometimes, in these complex times. He came here when the roars of the rivers in his head needed calming, and this little alcove of the moving world, this small forest of metal and stars, never failed to offer its lulling quiet.

Jetek had been hand-picked to this crew, as had everyone else. He'd been vetted by psych and doctor teams both, and while he'd never gone to great

lengths to advertise his loyalties - he was a crewman, not a politician - they stood unquestioned.

Which was why he was onboard this ship, entrusted with bringing Empress Jamyl Sarum to her destination on this multi-day trip.

Her retinue kept to itself, maintaining court in their section of the ship's living quarters, and while the crew was permitted to enter at will, their intermingling with the royal entourage was subtly discouraged. One knew one's place on this ship.

So when Jetek entered the room and sat on one of the benches, with most of his own crew safely asleep and the Empress's own people presumably all secluded in their part of the vessel, he did so with the expectation that it would be as blessedly empty as it had been all the other times he had taken refuge there.

When someone cleared their throat, it raised the hairs on the back of his neck, and when he turned and saw who was standing in a darkened part of the room, he felt like his skin was going to tear itself off his body in fear.

Everyone had known who Jamyl Sarum was, long before she reappeared, and everyone knew exactly what she'd done in the recent Minmatar invasion, though no two stories of the event ever seemed to match. All agreed, though, that she'd stopped the Minmatar in their tracks. She carried with her a reputation so legendary that it was reaching mythological levels, and her images showed an extraordinary beauty that brought decidedly secular thoughts to the minds of young men. She was as godly as anyone in this world could be.

Before him, not ten steps away, stood Her Highness, the ruler of Amarr Empire, Empress Jamyl Sarum the First.

He made a noise somewhere between a mewl and a stuttered choke.

She stood there and regarded him, then took a few slow steps closer. His legs, now made of jelly, wanted to run away but didn't manage more than a twitch. In some panic-frozen part of his head he was thankful the fear had paralyzed him, for running away blindly from Her Highness would likely be one of the very few things even worse than walking in on her without leave or purpose.

"What is your name?" she said. He merely stared back, unable to speak.

She stepped closer. Her brown silk robe trailed behind her like a second shadow, and the gold decoration on its folds glinted in the faint light. Her long chestnut hair cascaded down her back, so dark that it was almost indistinguishable from the robe. She smiled at him, which made it only so much worse.

"I'm tired of speaking to no one but my retinue," she said, in a voice that felt like warm sunlight. "It is stifling. I want to reach out to others, particularly the isolated souls in the darker reaches. We mustn't ever fear the unknown." She leaned her head to one side. "Are you all right? You're gaping wider than a Slaver at feeding time."

His throat decided to let air through at last, and as he gasped he found his voice. "Empress, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to intrude, forgive me, I'll be off-"

"Stay, please," Sarum said. "I could do with the company. On this long journey there's been little else to do but think, or talk to oneself."

"I really didn't mean to sneak up on you, Empress, and I don't think I should be this close-"

"Oh, hush. I don't feel the slightest bit insecure. And I heard you coming," she said.

This surprised Jetek, who could have sworn he hadn't made a sound when he entered, but it put him at ease. He rose from his seat and kneeled in front of Sarum for a moment, then got up again and went to the window, standing there at a respectable distance. She walked up to him, making his skin crawl again in apprehension, and stared out at the same stars.

"What is your opinion of God's great work?" she said.

"I'm sorry, Highness?"

She gave him another wonderful smile. "The skies, Jetek. The seas you sail."

He thought about this, hoping to stop sounding like a moron. The best he could think of was to say, "I think they're wonderful, Empress. That's really the only word I can think of."

"It's a good word," Sarum said. "But what about the people who inhabit them?"

"Some of them are wonderful too," Jetek replied, biting his tongue lest it left his mouth. The Empress's alignments would be different than the Chamberlain's, and going against the supreme leader's worldview was a bad idea no matter how likeable they might seem.

She seemed to notice his hesitation, for she smiled and said, "Yes. Some of them are wonderful indeed. But what about the ones who are not? What should we do about them?"

"I'm sure Her Highness knows best," Jetek replied promptly.

She looked back to the stars, giving no hint whether she approved of his noncommittal answer. But her expression changed, growing steely and blank. It reminded Jetek of nothing so much as passing to the dark side of a planet. He hoped he would make it out of the room alive.

"There was someone, I forget his name. I did everything I could in difficult circumstances and it wasn't enough for him," she said. "He had to take a stand. For some, when they're desperate, it simply isn't possible to solve things reasonably. They must have noise and fire to match whatever's in their heads."

"So what do you do?" Jetek asked, despite himself.

She fixed him with a steely glance. "You react. Sometimes you have to hurt someone to make them understand how badly they're hurting themselves. You have to come to the rescue by being the villain, not just for them but for everyone they touch, lest they lose themselves in that same hellish fire." She turned away from the stars and took a seat, never letting her gaze waver from Jetek's presence. "So there is punishment, which is the wrong word for the right thing, something that marks them for life, brings them under control, makes them a productive part of society. What's the word I'm looking for, Jetek?"

"I wish I knew, Empress. I truly do." Jetek remembered this man. His name had been, and likely still was, Kerrigan Orsha. During a fiery speech he had shouted at and berated Jamyl Sarum in an open assembly, calling her names that really shouldn't be uttered at the impending supreme ruler of one's own empire. The assembly session had dissolved into chaos and Orsha's own family had renounced him in an attempt to save themselves. It had worked, after a fashion: Lord Orsha had been judged and found guilty of heresy, a charge that carried the death sentence, but the Empress had granted him clemency of a sort. Instead of death, she had decreed that he

have the words of his outburst tattooed on every part of his skin. She had offered him the option of withdrawing to a convent to study the scriptures for the remainder of his life, which he had gratefully accepted, his old and public life effectively ended at this point.

The Empress had a faraway look. She said, "... Benediction."

Jetek shivered.

"I wanted to bring him into our fold, for if I hadn't, he would have railed and thrashed until he shook himself to pieces, and we'd have had no choice but to put him out of his misery," she said, looking to the stars again. Her expression softened, and it was like the sun rising again.

"Do you think I'm beautiful?" she asked in a much milder tone.

"Yes, Highness," he replied without a moment's thought.

"Do you think I'm awesome?" she asked, every syllable of the word clicking smoothly into place.

"Yes, Highness," he replied again.

"Do you think I'm terrifying?" she asked, as if they were all the same questions.

"Yes, Highness," he said, understanding that in fact they were.

Quiet fell on them. Nothing could be heard but the hum of the ship itself, the tiny little creaks and thrums that came from anything alive and moving. It consistently amazed Jetek how something so powerful could be so quiet.

She was still looking at him with that faraway gaze, though whether it was in expectation, or if she was merely lost in thought, he couldn't tell. He didn't dare disappoint her, so he said, "It's more mercy than he could have expected before your time, Empress. People ought to have respect."

She nodded and stood up, walking to the window. The silk of her robe hissed softly as it was drawn off the seat.

She said, as if to the stars, "The man had five children and twelve grandchildren. He had friends, even if he's lost them now. He was a known person. And respect, just as the lack of it, is like little fires that need to be kept lit and alive."

The ship turned slightly, creaking.

She looked back at him and her expression resembled the sun itself now, blinding and majestic, peaceful and soothing, focused and completely engulfing all at once. It was like being cradled in the arms of the end of the world.

"On his flesh, among the words of scripture, we tattooed the names of his children and his children's children," she said, and Jetek would swear to his final days that something flashed in her eyes, as if wanting to break free, "And he will never forget who he is, or who we are."

She fell silent again. He swallowed audibly, realized his mouth was hanging open, and snapped it shut.

"But you won't tell anyone about this meeting," she said. There was no menace in her tone, no threat nor promise of danger; merely a relaxed, even concerned, conscience.

"Of course not," he said.

"Of course not," she repeated. "I know you won't."

The stars seemed cold and uncaring to Jetek, and his fate like a stuttering flame, soon extinguished.

The Empress looked out at those same stars. "We need to save them, all of them, from themselves. We need to reclaim their fates and envelop them in ours. And we need to love them, no matter how much it hurts."

She touched the glass and added, "All these wayward children."

Masks of Authority

Since the early days of the Caldari State, the eight corporate police forces of the Chief Executive Panel have played an important role in Caldari society. Figures of great public attention, reviled and worshiped in equal measure (often by the same person), these eight private militaries collectively match the official Caldari Army in numbers and far exceed it in training.

What are these forces, how do they operate, and how did they come to be?

Necessity and Invention

Some years after the dust of the Caldari-Gallente War had settled and the eight corporations of the Chief Executive Panel were getting acclimated to running an independent Caldari State, the issue of defense spending was raised at a national budget meeting. The Kaalakiota Corporation and the Sukuuvestaa Corporation were by this point well established as bitter competitors for the top of the revenue pile, and the subject spawned a heated debate between the two corporations' CEOs.

The passage of time had done little to diminish the Kaalakiota leadership's wartime alertness; they had long been advocates of increased military spending, particularly towards protection of assets in the homeland. The Sukuuvestaa, meanwhile, wanted the available funds diverted towards land partitioning on newly settled planets, reasoning that the creation of new assets was every bit as important as the protection of existing ones. That Kaalakiota dealt primarily in arms at the time, and Sukuuvestaa primarily in real estate, were topics not raised at the meeting.

Due to the rivalry between the two the discussion soon escalated far beyond its purview, and what began as a simple debate swiftly turned into

a heated argument rife with overtones of power struggle. The remaining executives of the CEP, uncomfortable with this potential disruption in the works, voted to momentarily shelve the topic.

Kaalakiota was not happy. Shortly after the meeting, they announced that the corporation would be bringing its own financial resources to bear in forming an independent internal security force, "tasked with maintaining peace and order on all Kaalakiota holdings." This organization they called Home Guard, a name taken by the corporate-political community as a pointed reference to the dispute between the two leaders. Sukuuvestaa responded in kind by releasing a statement curtly announcing their intention to create their own military arm. In a direct jab at Kaalakiota, they named their force the "Peace and Order Unit." The other mega-corporations, not to be outdone, soon followed suit. Within the year, all eight members of the Chief Executive Panel had either announced or begun formation of their own internal security forces.

Smoke and Mirrors

From this bed of bluster sprouted the eight organizations known today as the Chief Executive Panel's faces of power. Equal parts propaganda tool and police force, the corporate forces are in many ways the most direct outward representation of their parent corporations' power, affluence, style and cultural significance. Seeking to capitalize on the relentless propaganda battle between the powers that be, Caldari entertainment interests have in recent years made very lucrative deals with these forces, hurling their desired images into the cultural zeitgeist in return for a slice of the profit pie.

Avoiding direct competition in favor of finding their own niche, each of the eight has diversified into their own particular area. Spacelane Patrol, CBD's corporate force, is continually portrayed as a cadre of brash hotshots who travel from one corner of the universe to another on missions that usually

involve much purposeful strutting around exotic locales. The Lai Dai Protection Service, meanwhile, are regularly shown to be a group of dashing handsome tactical geniuses who devise complex original stratagems at the drop of a hat, usually under circumstances of extreme duress. Kaalakiota were the first to make this type of entertainment deal and have arguably been the most successful: Home Guard's image is second to none, not just among the corporate corps establishment but also in the popular cultures of all four empires.

The glossy tropes of the public relations holoreels and the beige glamour of stylized war worship stand in stark contrast to the reality of these agencies, but most people have only a muddy awareness of the dichotomy. A man can be rudely treated by a brusque and superior Ishukone Watch officer and silently curse him for hours, but as soon as he gets home that evening he is just as likely to prop his feet up and enjoy a rousing serial where the Ishukone Watch's superior technology and cunning allows it to root out Gurista spies and double-cross them into revealing their hideout. So pervasive is the propaganda that it is highly doubtful this man ever draws a parallel between the real thing and the image; the connection he draws, instead, is between the image and the mother corporation it represents.

Internal Security, the Nugoeihuvi Corporation's force, poses a curious irony in this regard. Though the Nugoeihuvi conglomerate's main preoccupation is the entertainment industry, they have consistently failed to change the prevalent cultural image of their troops as a pack of rough-and-tumble thugs culled from the Caldari underworld, given to the grossest abuses and atrocities. It's very rare for elements of the Caldari State to find the rumor mill outgrinding them in their efforts at propaganda, but that's what's happening to Nugoeihuvi. (In reality, for the record, Nugoeihuvi's soldiers are not any more or less savage than those of the other corporate forces, though broadly speaking they have been noted to harbor a slightly greater proclivity toward drink and drugs.)

Cloak and Dagger

Of course, the strong public relations utility of these forces does not mean that the good men and women that serve within them are mere puppets on a stage (though there exists, of course, a contingent of people willing to proclaim just that). It is an integral thing, for obvious practical reasons, that these militaries be proven without the shadow of a doubt to have aptitude in their profession. For this purpose a training summit is held each year at an undisclosed location, where the corporate forces lock horns in a series of combat- and survival-related challenges. This is the Haadoken Summit, and it is an event of great significance in Caldari culture.

Since nominally none of the corporations want the results to get out, the proceedings carry a veneer of secrecy. Betting on the event is strictly illegal, but it nonetheless creates underground gambling revenue far exceeding that of any official State sporting or entertainment event. Despite ledger upon ledger of regulations and reprimands, information about the results is invariably leaked by someone in the winner's camp, and so it is in this crucible of competition that the holoreels, the slogans, the commercials and the claims are either gloriously validated or revealed as nothing but empty spectacle.

Though nobody is ever declared deceased during the proceedings, it is a matter of public record that at least a dozen die each year and many more are injured (the families of the fallen receive standardized letters of condolence claiming their loved one has died in a training accident). Being essentially a contest between corporate ideologies played out in a quasi-military arena, the event touches many nerves in the Caldari soul, and its various obstacles and scenarios have been immortalized in countless holoreels and serials. The winners of the last three Haadoken summits have been the Ishukone Watch, whose level of training and tactical skill appears to be currently unmatched within the corporate forces.

Bread and Butter

These agencies also perform the more mundane duties of a mega-corporation's internal security force. They ceaselessly patrol the perimeters of their territories; they conduct counterstrikes against pirates and terrorists; and they are responsible for security on every ship, outpost, station, moon and planetside facility owned by their mother corporations. They are also granted legal authority to act as police proxies within corporate jurisdiction, though in all cases where regional police have a presence their authority supersedes that of the corporate police.

Corporate forces are often criticized for their policework. Some of the more common accusations are gruff and uncaring demeanor, propensity for unnecessary violence, and lack of response time (particularly to non-acute, non-violent crimes). There is a simple reason for this: among the corporate forces, policework – which invariably involves dealing with the great unwashed masses – is seen as a lower-rung duty, a job for those unfit to serve in more of a military capacity.

Worst of all is policework on space stations, which tend to be overcrowded with travellers from a staggering multitude of places, each possessing a different set of legal rights based on his nationality and organizational affiliation, and each of which is cranky and in a rush and probably sweating. Additionally, corporate interstellar law dictates that stations' rental offices and other commercial zones be segmented into a patchwork of diplomatic units, each with its own rules and regulations. Policework on stations therefore tends to be an affair fraught with jurisdictional pratfalls and covered in a tangled underbrush of red tape.

To their credit, corporate forces do have a well-deserved reputation for responding swiftly and decisively when circumstances truly call for it. If things get very bad very fast – if there is a hostage situation, if there is a large brawl, if there is some sort of large-scale accident or disaster – the

corps will be there, fast, and they'll attack the problem with everything they've got. People may grumble about rudeness and laziness and bureaucracy, but regardless they rest content in the knowledge that if a true crisis presents itself, they're in good hands.

Steel and Plasma

Altercations between the corporate forces exist on record, but in almost every case they have been small incidents based on misunderstanding, with warning shots the only ordnance released. A notable exception is an incident known as the Ingalles incident, where soldiers belonging to the Wiyrkomi Peace Corps opened fire on a Hyasyoda convoy being escorted by the Hyasyoda's agency, the Corporate Police Force.

The Hyasyoda detail had received advance clearance for entry into the outpost, a high-tier classified Wiyrkomi research node buried in the shadow of a Citadel moon. They were to escort the CEO of a subsidiary of Hyasyoda's, Santra Alloys, to a meeting with a high-ranking Wiyrkomi scientist. The arrangement was legitimate (if unusual), but the Wiyrkomi Peace Corps saw incongruity in the direct meeting of a CEO and a scientist.

They stopped the convoy and conducted a heavy-handed interrogation. Due to a fatal combination of bad intel and jittery nerves, they then ended up attacking it, killing four people and destroying the reputation of their police force for years to come. (To this day, the Wiyrkomi Peace Corps are something of a laughing stock among the corporate forces, and to compound things they consistently place near the bottom of the yearly summit's scoreboards.)

Today and Tomorrow

It is unclear at this moment whether Tibus Heth, the Caldari State's newly instated Executor, has any specific plans for the corporate forces. It is considered likely, however, that he will try to gain control of them and use them for his ends if hostilities with the Gallente Federation escalate any further. Doing so will be easier said than done, as these organizations retain a great deal of power in the name of their public appeal, to say nothing of their competent and well-equipped soldiery. The allegiances of the complex network of sponsors, affiliates and marketers they associate with, however, are wholly unknown.

During the invasion of Caldari Prime, all eight forces lent manpower to various aspects of the operation, from tactical strikes to civilian relocation, and the squadrons who participated have now mostly come back. Some scarred by atrocity, others whetted and ready for more, they are returning to their compatriots bearing tales of woe and grandeur on the blasted front. Where their loyalties will fall – and what sort of influence they'll spread – is anybody's guess.

If and when the time comes for Heth to begin making inroads, it remains to be seen what the CEOs of the Chief Executive Panel will do to hold on to these flagbearers of their outward image. One thing is certain, at any rate: whoever commands these forces controls a good deal more than just a group of men with guns.

Her Painted Selves

Even at this height, where Braea felt a twinge of sickening dizziness, the roars of the crowds below could be heard. They were muffled through the polycarb glass, and when one of many assistants urged Braea to step closer to the edge of her sealed balcony overhanging what seemed like the world below, she got the momentary impression that she could simply keep walking: Out through the glass, into the air and through the station ceiling, out into space and into the unknown and unending dark. She had to stop herself from taking another step lest she bump into the glass wall. The cameras would capture that, as they did everything else, and she couldn't imagine the hundreds of thousands down below all laughing at her.

The floor was carpet-clad but the walls all around them were transparent, and everywhere she looked down below she saw countless tiny heads, like little fallen stars, all of them looking either up at her or at the massive quartet of video screens that hung above her crystal enclosure and flashed her image to the four corners of this floating world. She ventured a quick look up, but the sight of herself cast on those screens gave her even more vertigo than the heights had done.

In that brief glimpse she saw the camera zoom out from her face and show her entire figure in that tight dress she hated. She'd put on weight, first from the stress of what happened to Gerets and then as comfort against the shock when he got back. It was nothing that an expensive designer couldn't fix, she'd been told, but she knew her own body and she knew what she was. Most of the time, at least.

She quickly looked back down and cast a glance at Gerets, who stood beside her and had not made a sound. In this place, with the crowd's overbearing adoration of them and what they stood for, it felt easier, more real, to look at his face, destroyed as it was. It was not their first public

appearance after Gerets' checkout from the rehabilitation ward, but she was continually amazed to find herself here.

Gerets was her fiancé. He was a member of the Gallente armed forces. He had been stationed on Caldari Prime during the invasion. Orbital bombardments had hit his barracks, killing everyone else. He'd been so disfigured that they had to use RNA scans to confirm his identity. That's what had happened, and that was how it was. She had to accept that.

His face looked like a child's paper drawing of a man that had been smudged with water and grime before being crumpled into a ball and flattened out again.

She bit her lip, hard. This was how it was. No panic and no backing out.

His costume covered him from neck on down, but Braea knew what lay beneath.

He would be fixed, but not for quite a while, for it was on him to be the symbol of perseverance and strength in the face of stark, brutal reality. This was what they'd done to Our Boys, all the reason we needed to go out there with fire and thunder. After some time - maybe a year or two, or three or four, they'd been told - he would quietly be given the funds needed to fix himself, followed by a total news blackout on him.

She looked to her side and pretended to wave, sneaking a glance at the capsuleer who'd hid in their entourage. He stood off-camera, looking like one of many assistants. His cranial socket was covered with a skin patch which in turn was concealed under a tight hood. He'd showed them the setup when he first came into the deal, explaining that while some people would undoubtedly guess his identity, it shouldn't be publicly acknowledged by anyone on the team. The capsuleer had offered an unknown addition to the funds the Federation had earmarked for Gerets' operation, enough to

secure him a watcher's position in the press circus that surrounded the couple. He wasn't shy about his support, though its scope was unrevealed, but this effort wasn't supposed to be about him.

They had agreed, as they had agreed to so much, initially for the hope of a new beginning and eventually for the raw need for an end.

The show ended and they all headed off for the VIP greeting session. The Federation had made substantial advances in the direction of total conquest, the news had said, and whatever else those advances were, they were undoubtedly absolute reason for rejoicing.

On their way into the main floor of the skyscraper, one of the tallest buildings on the station, some of the assistants quietly asked Gerets to follow them to the makeup section. There would be press.

Braea turned to follow them, but the capsuleer touched her elbow. "We're taking a little side route."

She furrowed her brows. The capsuleer said, "We'll get to makeup soon enough, and Gerets'll still be there." He looked towards Gerets and she followed his gaze. The skin on her fiancé's neck had gone reddish and some of the pustules residing on it had pushed their way out, dotting a flabby skin fold that dangled limply over his neckline.

Braea stared at his neck, then walked up to him, gingerly put a hand on his shoulder and said she'd be right along.

Gerets turned and looked impassively at her, then looked away and kept walking.

She told herself, for the thousandth time, that this sullenness was his nerves, nothing more than his nerves and the regimented behavior taught in the army, and not a lack of caring. Then she followed the capsuleer down another path.

They walked down a long corridor inset with soft light and entered a private elevator that took them down only a few floors. The elevator had one-way glass. Braea looked out, unseen at last.

"We can dim it both ways if it makes you feel queasy," the capsuleer said.

She blinked, looked at him, then said, "No, no. It's not that."

He leaned his head to one side, but said nothing more.

They left the elevator and walked out onto a floor that was one huge space, stretching throughout at least a third the length of the building. It was beautifully laid out, with touch-sensitive pads that left heat-signature tracks of her steps; furniture of leather and wood; and hologram paintings on the walls. Braea looked hard at each painting she passed, more than anything to take her mind off the world, and something began to catch her eye. It took her a moment, but eventually she spotted it in every one. That one rogue element: Herself. Hidden somewhere in the room would be cameras that took her image, processed it for presentation, and strategically projected it in the landscape of the paintings. She was an underwater diver, a resident in a dirtworld farmhouse, a captain of a spaceship. All the unwitting roles for her to play, a star even less real than the scenery.

She nearly bumped into the capsuleer. He'd stopped and was gesturing for her to take a seat in one of the leather couches. Leather, like wood, was a commodity on the stations and one she felt decidedly uncomfortable with, but the seat he was directing her to had a worn appearance and its leather surface had hairline cracks. "My favorite reading spot," he said.

She realized he was trying to help her feel relaxed and the small gesture set her at ease. She sat. "Is this someone's apartment?" she asked him. "Is it yours?"

He sat beside her, at a respectable distance. "Yes, it is. This is the entryway."

"How much of this floor is yours?"

"All of it," he said. "But I didn't bring you here to impress you."

She doubted it, but said nothing.

"How did all that fanfare make you feel?" he asked.

She narrowed her eyes and remained silent. Although he'd been in the project almost from the start and had remained affable throughout, he was a capsuleer. She and everyone she knew had an ingrained awe of his kind that was equal parts fear, admiration, distrust and wonder. The gulf that existed between him and everyone else was not easily bridged.

Also, she didn't yet know what he wanted out of all this. His monetary gift to the program had been quite substantial.

Also, she was very tired, not least of being stared at by people with ideas in their head about who she was.

"It's uncomfortable," he says. "Doesn't really feel like it's really you they're seeing or want to see. I know how that is."

She debated how forthright she could be with him and decided to try the waters. "Not to be ungrateful, but how I feel is a little complicated and I'm

not at all sure I understand it myself yet. Is there a reason we're here? I should be with my husband."

"He's only your husband to be," the capsuleer said. His tone would have felt insultingly dismissive to Braea, but it struck something that she was too bright to write off as mere pride. "That's the big part of the news, isn't it?" he continued. "You two, despite everything, still aiming to get married sometime in the near future. I don't even think you've picked a day, have you?"

"We did," she said. "But after ... after what happened, it's all up in the air."

"Yes. I'm told you were convinced to put it off. Some war message agents came over. Guys who thought our supportive masses would like the idea of the girls supporting our troops but wouldn't quite want to confront the idea of what would happen on the wedding night. And you know what? That delay is actually a good thing."

She firmly ignored thoughts of the wedding night and focused on the capsuleer. Whatever he was leading up to it felt like he was on her side, though whatever side that was she didn't know yet. "Is it?" she said, then bit her tongue.

He smiled again. "It is, actually. The fanfare is necessary for the people, but you'll find they really don't care about the aftermath. Aside from a few newsmen scrounging for follow-up human-interest stories, you'll soon be pushed out of the limelight, never to return."

She looked down. "Maybe that's for the best," she said quietly. She felt so tired.

"Maybe for some," he said. "But I've got my own ideas, and the ability to follow through on them. Half the money is yours, by the way."

"Thanks," she said. She'd heard this said before. Unity and strength; we all stood by each other's side.

"I'm not speaking figuratively. Today's reception is the last in this grueling press run you've been on for the last few weeks. Once you finish it, half the funds allocated to you and Gerets will be put into savings that he can rely on, released in substantial installments over several years, and will cover not only his rebuilding procedures but practically anything else he might desire. He'll get a new body and a better life to live it with.

"The other half of the money is yours and will become immediately available. It's registered to you and is yours to handle as you see fit. You have no more duties. Not to me, not to the government or the press, not to the people, not anyone," he said. "Not even your fiancé."

She stared at him, not knowing what to say.

The capsuleer said, "People can be regrown. I've been destroyed enough times to know that, and I understand the process better than most. One day, a while from now, Gerets will be rebuilt. It'll take a long while and will be agonizing even for a man who's experienced plenty of pain already, but it'll happen, at least on a physical level. There'll be physiotherapy and there'll be bad days that slowly get better.

"But there's nothing that can be done for the spirit. That'll have to take care of itself for now. Therapy will help, but after you've been broken and rebuilt, well..." He raised his hands, palms upwards. "You're never the same."

"Why are you doing this?" she said in a whisper. On the wall, her painted simulacrum leaned down with her, nearly invisible in the colorful backdrops.

The capsuleer leaned forward too, resting his face on his hands. "You're a very pretty young woman, and I say that as someone who has absolutely zero interest in you in that way. You could have your choice of men, but you chose this one and you stuck with him. Until now it's been out of love and duty. After this point, it could've been out of duty still, or possibly out of darker motivations."

"If you're implying it was all for the money-" she said, but he interrupted. "No, I'm not. It's for the duty, and for what you once had, and for what you might have in some imagined fantasyland. But you've got smarts behind that pretty face and you know as well as I do that with this kind of commitment there comes self-doubt, even self-hatred, and a twisted kind of loyalty that you can never quite get to. If you stay with Gerets while he's like this, not just physically deformed but mentally scarred over it, you risk turning yourself into a martyr and poisoning everything you might have had with him."

"Do you want me to leave him?" she said, a small tremor in her voice. "I can't. I can't do that."

"Let me tell you something," he said. "The people who organized this, as far as they're concerned, Gerets is no hero. He's a terribly unlucky everyman, chosen to be a poster boy of what the enemy did to our people and handed a little bone to chew on as a thanks. Before I came into this deal, the plan was to stagger the release of regrowth money so much and thrust it behind such masses of red tape that you'd effectively have been serfs of the government in perpetuity. I brought in ten times what they'd set aside for you, and even that amount is less than I can make in a day. You owe them nothing, nor me, nor anyone else."

"You're not doing this out of sympathy alone," she said in a cold tone.

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm not?"

"I noticed the hints you dropped during the procession. Even if you know what it's like for people to think of you as something you're not, it wouldn't have made you do all this."

He regarded her for a while. His expression quivered slightly, and Braea realized he was trying not to smile. Eventually he said, "Well, you're right. In my defense, altruism was a real factor in my offer. But there's more to it; of course there is.

"I've been hurt, and deformed, and even killed. I've woken up in a clone vat more often than I can recall. I've never gone through what Gerets will, but I've been burned nonetheless." He leaned forward again. "There comes a point, Braea, where you're so far gone that you lose the ability to reach out to the people who matter. When you reach that point, having someone who's there only out of the duty and the darkness, and not out of pure and unfiltered love ... well, that someone will make you want to stay inside and wait for them to go away."

He took her hand. "How long's it been since Gerets touched you?"

She pulled her hand away, and looked at the walls. All her colored selves looked over their shoulders, too.

The capsuleer said, "If you think he doesn't know what's going on-... no, if you think he can't see how you feel, that he doesn't know every thought in your head, you're dead wrong. I spoke to that young man. He's bright. Morose, naturally, but still very bright, and he pays attention. And he's in terrible, terrible pain that you're only going to make worse if you stick around and force yourself to pretend that everything's the same."

"Then what do I do?" Braea said, still not looking at him.

"I had someone who clung to me. She did it for glory, me being a capsuleer, and even after I'd had my head scrambled by too many clonings in too little time, even when I made her life this absolute passive-aggressive hell, she still hung on. And eventually what was left of the love evaporated, because even as I wasn't the same person anymore, neither was she. The balance changed and she changed with it."

He stood up. "I want you to do what's right. This does include being to Gerets what he needs you to be, but to be honest, that's a secondary concern. You shouldn't carry him any more than you should carry a banner for the government's propaganda. Your duty is to yourself, always, and only to others through that. If you can be to Gerets what you want to be, then do it. If not, well, now you have a choice, and an obligation to realize that choice."

She stood up. Her painted selves rose with her.

He grinned slyly. "And heavens, you need makeup. Your cheeks are streaked with tears. You can't be seen like this; think what your husband would say!"

She let out a choking laugh. They walked back to the elevators. The tiles left tracks that gently faded in the wake of their passing.

Cities of Refuge

Keeler was running through the ruins of his city. Its adults might be worried, but it was a darkened, broken paradise for its children.

The planet of Caldari Prime had recently been re-taken by Caldari forces after more than a hundred years of Gallentean occupation. Keeler was Gallentean and so were his parents.

Thanks to rising tension the city had been segregated even before the invasion, which kept the occupying forces from having to indiscriminately slaughter Gallenteans when they came in. Keeler remembered the day when the rains came; thunder and whine, red clouds at night, and black shapes in the distant skies. After the local military had been levelled the skies had darkened again and mountainous shapes had descended from the skies. Smoke and fire gusted from their blackened hulls as they settled on whatever was beneath, reducing it to rubble. The hulls had opened and armies of Caldari soldiers poured out, and whatever forces the Gallente could muster didn't stand a chance. Keeler had run out of sight before seeing what happened, but he'd heard the sounds. For weeks after his parents had been too shocked even to talk about it.

But the children saw it differently, for it was frightening and exciting like a child's life always is, and the ones who saw things they shouldn't have - blood on the sidewalks, shots fired into flesh - merely incorporated it into their imaginary worlds, needed now more than ever, burying it so deeply that it surfaced only through fantasy. Keeler envisioned it as two animals, one large and bulky like a toothless old dog whose flesh hangs slackly from his bones, the other a sleek, sharp cat with tensed muscles writhing beneath its skin, ready to attack and tear its prey apart.

As Keeler approached his hidehole in the silence of the late evening, he heard a noise.

All the children in this city, Gallente and Caldari both, had hideholes unknown to others, little cities of refuge, and if you found out someone else's you kept it to yourself. The hideholes were holy, as were all the secret paths through the cordoned-off parts of the city.

If the invading soldiers had realized this they probably could have dominated whatever remained of the city's initial resistance, but the children saw no pressing reason to help them, and they apparently so no pressing reason to talk to children.

Keeler stopped, having all the time in the world, and listened for the sound. There was a breeze and at first he thought the noise might merely be a piece of something flapping in the wind. As he listened on, he discerned a raspy tone to it, and a stifled irregularity punctuated by longer, harsher gusts. Someone was in there, coughing.

For an adult this might have been an agonizing dilemma: run away and hope not to get a bullet in your back; find a guard and risk betraying one of your own; or go in and investigate. For a child, no dilemma.

Keeler went in.

The man had crawled deep into Keeler's hiding place, stopping only when the wall barred his passage. He lay there in a fetal position, apparently asleep. There was precious little light in here, but enough that Keeler recognized his clothes as the old Gallente army type. They were torn and dirty, and soaked, which was bad news in the cold climate on Caldari Prime. There was still a little snow on him, which meant he hadn't been here long. Whatever remained of the previous occupying army - which the media called guerillas and the locals called freedom fighters and Keeler's

dad called a goddamn pain in the ass - had retreated to the open country and the mountains, where they still held out and relied on outlying towns and villages for supplies. When Keeler had wondered how they could survive under those conditions, his dad had given him a look and said, well yes, for a city kid like you there's nothing in the frozen countryside except perhaps all the food a civilized society needs. But heaven help them if they need any lawyers.

In the gloom Keeler noticed what looked like small pieces of rectangular paper lying on the ground, some of them soaked from blood that had trickled from the man's legs. He leaned down and picked one up, and found that it was thick, lukewarm and much drier than it should be. It rustled in the silence.

The soldier cleared his throat and said, "Stimpacks. Bodywarmth."

Keeler froze. He thought the man had been asleep.

The soldier seemed to hear his thoughts. He slowly rolled onto his back, looking directly at Keeler, and said, "Didn't dare sleep. Been listening out for intruders." His face twitched into a smile that turned into a cough. The soldier clamped his hand over his mouth, trying to choke it down. When it had passed, he added, "Didn't hear you for a second."

Keeler said nothing. In this ruined city there was nothing to say.

"You going to tell on me?" the man asked. There was an evenness in his voice, a tone of equanimity. No hint of the condescension from adults who appended "kid" to everything they said, but no forced camaraderie, either. The soldier was speaking to him as an equal.

Keeler shook his head and saw the soldier exhale deeply.

"Why are you here?" Keeler asked.

The man took a while to answer, taking in slow, deep breaths. Keeler wondered whether he was badly hurt. His legs looked in really bad shape; the strips of cloth that had been tied around his thighs and ankles were dark with blood.

"I have a message," he said. "An important one."

"To who? Secret military message?" Keeler thought it over for a second, remembering some of the gooier plots he'd seen in books and vids. "Or to your loved ones?" he added.

The soldier grinned, or grimaced. "Why can't it be both?" he asked.

Keeler didn't have an answer. Instead he said, "I'll take it for you."

"I can't ask you to convey it," the man said. "Even if I could, I wouldn't. It's mine to bring. But I am going to ask you not to tell on me. I promise I'll try not to put you in danger."

"The troops would never catch me. I can stay safe," Keeler said.

The soldier barked a breathless laugh, leaned back and closed his eyes. Sweat glistened on his face in the fading gloom. "I'm sure you can," he said in a tired voice. "Probably better than me at this point. But I got this far. It's all on me. I'll see it through."

He stared at Keeler for a while, but Keeler got the impression the soldier wasn't seeing him. Eventually his eyes rolled a little up in their sockets and he leaned his head back, exhaling. Keeler stood there for a while, waiting to see if he'd say anything else. Eventually it got too dark to see, and when he heard faint snores from the man, he left and went back home.

They were having dinner, an eternal affair measured by the ticking of the clock on the wall. Keeler slowly mashed his food together with one hand, resting his head on the balled fist of the other. His dad was talking about a possible promotion.

"You say that like nothing has happened," his mom said.

"I'm still trying to rise in the ranks, hon," his dad replied. "We've got new leadership in some places, but it'll take them years to sort out the ownership issues with the Caldaris. Until then, whoever's proven useful might be kept on staff."

"There are other changes, too," she said. "Or haven't you looked outside recently?"

His father shrugged and kept eating.

"All those deaths-" His mom seemed to catch herself, casting a glance at Keeler, and continued, "All this tyranny, and it means nothing to you?"

"What means something to me is my family, and the food I put on your table," Keeler's dad said very quietly, staring directly into his mother's eyes. "Right now the millions dead out of billions still alive, the destroyed houses in cities that still stand, the loss of money in an economy that somehow still rolls on and puts food on this very table, everything is secondary. It has to be." Without even looking at the plate, he speared a piece of beef and stuffed it into his mouth, chewing in defiance with bulging cheeks.

There was a clatter as Keeler's mom put her fork down hard, then picked up her plate, stood up and said with a tremor in her voice, "I'm going to eat in the kitchen."

After she'd left, Keeler quietly laid down his own fork on the still half-full plate.

"You're not going to eat?" his dad asked, too loudly.

"I'm not that hungry," Keeler said. He added, "Dad, can I take some leftovers? I'll just eat them later."

His dad looked at him for a little while, then seemed to accept the peace offering, smiled and said, "Sure. No problem." Then, as he almost always did, he added, "Don't go too late to bed, now."

Keeler nodded. His parents were much too busy with their own worries to add him to the mix. As far as he knew, they never checked on him before bedtime, and so long as he washed off any visible grime they had no reason to think he'd been out late. He packed away the dinner, took it to his room, put on his sneaking clothes - greys and browns, a life in dust and dirt - and left through the window, the food warm in his hands.

For a city that had recently been invaded, it was in surprisingly good shape; tattered but working. Military and rescue workers had done an amazing job clearing out the fallout from the invasion. Keeler had spied on their progress and seen his first corpse, dragged out of the rubble of a barracks. There had been massive destruction, but the Caldari had been attacking a planet partly populated by their own people, and they had been as careful as they could. Some incidents during the invasion had forced them to go in with a heavier hand than planned, but most of the casualties had still been

connected to the military. Everyone knew of someone who'd died, but not every family had lost a member. People still went to work. Order, such as it was, had been restored. Nobody knew what would happen tomorrow, and there were conflicting tales of all the past yesterdays, but for now they were alive and living. For some, including Keeler's dad, that was enough.

Keeler had to weave his way through areas cordoned off by Caldari troops. There were mobile soldiers stationed at checkpoints - they used the MTACs less in the cities after the invasion - and their sleek movements in their black body-warmth outfits and thin grey helmets made them look like hovering ghosts in the dark.

Getting past the main checkpoints was the hardest bit. Heat- and motion-seeking equipment was plentiful, but mostly focused on the paths that an adult would reasonably take. Even if the troops didn't go too hard on the kids they caught, you had to be careful, lest an annoyed guard lead you to explain a bloodied ear to your parents. In general the guards had been pretty good to people here, and mainly picked up the ones who caused major disturbances.

In one of the increasingly common arguments over the dinnertable, Keeler's mom had pointed out that the temporary peace was only that, while people got their bearings and took stock, and that a major civil rebellion was inevitable. Keeler's dad had replied that be this as it may, it wasn't as if they'd been left all huddled together in empty buildings, lighting fires with dead people's furniture, and that every man needed to have a good, long think about what exactly he was fighting for, and what would happen to those he loved if he lost. Aside from being unable to travel outside their sectioned area, he said, and having less money to spend than before, things hadn't changed all that much. Keeler's mom had said that this fragile semblance of daily life was the least those murderers could have done, for if it hadn't been established then the occupying forces would

have had to pacify a lot of angry people with too much time and too little food on their hands. She had left the table early that time, too.

Sometimes it felt like they were living in two cities, each trying to become something different.

Keeler entered his hiding place, dinner in hand, and found nobody there.

The next night at dinner they had the vid on, common for post-argument evenings when they, in the words of Keeler's dad, just wanted to get through one damn dinner without one damn argument and pass the damn potatoes, will you please.

Keeler, still wondering what had become of the soldier, didn't pay much attention to the vid or anything else until the announcer's voice caught his ear. A Gallente militant had been caught in the city. Brown hair, medium build. Badly wounded legs.

According to the newscaster, the militant had been responsible for several deaths of both Caldari and Gallente, including civilians. He was likely here to seek shelter with conspirators or terrorist sympathizers.

"Good riddance," Keeler's dad said.

Keeler's mom said nothing. Keeler looked to her and said, "Is it really true? Was he a murderer?"

She looked sternly at his dad, then to him. "Maybe," she said. "It's hard to know, these days."

"Maybe they're lying," Keeler said with much more empathy than he had expected to have. "Maybe he just wanted to bring an important military message to people here. Or a message to his loved ones."

His mom smiled at him. His father grunted and said, "Man was a killer. Not some heavenly messenger."

Keeler's mom snapped, "You don't know that."

Keeler looked at them for a while, then asked in honest wonder, "Why is always one or the other? Why can't it be both?"

While they were both taking deep breaths for angry answers, he got up and left the room.

And to Live in Peace

The landscape was beautiful and serene: The sun, recently set, cast the remnant of its reddish rays over clear blue skies; long fields of wheat billowed in gentle winds; farms with flowery gardens dotted the honey-golden vistas. It was nearly perfect, aside from the group of special ops quietly making their way through the land.

They moved in pairs, and the high stalks hid their passage. Arek and his partner Klar had the closest building and so moved slowest, insinuating themselves through the grass. Their clothing, light khakis and greens, was beset with ocular fibers that reflected their surroundings. It wouldn't fool heat scanners, but it didn't need to. Their intel, limited as it was, indicated that their prey had no high-tech apparatus in his home, not even proper weaponry. It was an idyllic existence insofar as such a thing existed for people like him.

He was a former army general for the Caldari. The first war was long since past, but war, like love, rests unquietly beneath its velvet facade. There had been a thousand skirmishes in a thousand places since, and in truth the hostilities had never properly ended, nor peace been fully agreed to; the fighting had merely petered out, like a sputtering flame. But some people had expended much of their breath keeping it alive.

In the Caldari State the general's war record was pristine, all the blood having been thoroughly washed off before it got a chance to dry. The Gallenteans knew better. He'd been responsible for countless silent atrocities against them, and in particular against the corporation whose agents now flowed over the landscape. After his retirement he had, at his express request, been rewarded with a quiet life living on a plot of land in the outback of space, a lowsec area where none of his enemies would ever think to look for him.

But wars find their soldiers, and the new war had found him.

Hostilities in this particular lowsec system had propelled Gallente agents to scout out its planets. Orbital photography, atmospheric probes and data mining had unearthed the general, hiding like a worm. Intel indicated his fixed location could be on any of several farms in the area, and while the first reaction of the Gallentean warring forces was to send a bomb or two down to the general area, it was quickly vetoed. The man was a minor war hero in his own empire and a war criminal in the Federation. It was determined that he was needed alive so he could stand trial for his crimes, and, of course, to pacify the increasingly revenge-hungry Federation masses. Besides, it was still early in the war, and inflicting unnecessary casualties could have carried grave implications, particularly in a Federation that had just suffered a terrible planetary invasion.

A group of black ops was assembled and brought up to speed. Retrieving the general alive was of primary importance, so much so that they were allowed only nonlethal weapons.

There was some dissent.

"Why's he coming in alive?" Arek said during the mission briefing.

"PR," the captain replied. "He comes in dead, he's useless to us."

"But we're going to kill him anyway."

"Not necessarily. He might be used as barter."

"I want an MTAC," Klar said.

"You're not getting one," the captain and Arek said in unison. The rest of the team looked on, not hiding their grins.

"Still want one."

The captain said, "This is a top-secret mission that has to be executed with stealth and precision, and you want to bring along a mechanized skeleton that'll thump the ground like god's own hammer."

There was silence in the room.

Klar said, "MTACs shoot rockets."

"Group dismissed. Get out."

So they'd kitted out in light, nonlethal gear. Tiny multiburst grenades locked to EM, instahardening foam bombs, and subvocal communicators, along with whatever personal gear they needed. Everything was passive except the communicators and their relays, and their power use was negligible. Anything else that might show up on scanner, including heat-vision gear, was left behind. In an isolated hostile location with no chance of backup or rescue, you relied on your own damn abilities.

They were dropped in so far away that it took them several days to make their way to the target point. They'd been lucky enough to escape injury, and nutrition tablets took care of malnutrition fears, but all the same the strain of the journey had rendered them a hair cranky by the time they reached the farms. They didn't know on which one the old general resided, but it was immaterial; they'd hit them all simultaneously.

Arek and Klar snuck up to the side of theirs, edging towards the windows. The general had not gotten to his old age through stupidity or lack of perception, and even with the agonizing care they'd taken not to be noticed on their way here, it paid to be careful, which meant not barging in through the front door.

Arek sent out a call to the other agents. *Everyone in position?*

Responses came in a minute later. *Team Beta, position. Team Gamma, position. Team Delta, position. Team Epsilon, position. Team Zeta, position.*

Arek nodded to Klar, who pulled out a multiburst grenade. The house was on two floors and Klar had hotly argued his ability to accurately toss in a grenade on the second story, but had been voted down by Arek, who claimed to be allergic to having grenades bounce off windowsills and fall on his head.

Arek pulled out his own grenade. He nodded to Klar, clicked it and tossed through the closed window. The sound of the breaking glass pierced the summer day and was echoed from the other farms, where the other agents

were doing the same. The two operatives shut their eyes tight. There was a muffled noise and the air was filled with fractured light like a kaleidoscope come to life, so bright that it filtered even through their eyelids. Arek heard Klar mutter, "... nine, *ten*," and break the glass as he tossed in the other multiburst. It went off, and the second wave of fractured light made Arek nauseous. If the general hadn't been thoroughly disarmed by the first grenade, or had been elsewhere in the house, his roused curiosity or antediluvian tenacity would hopefully have been taken care of by the second.

Klar rose, shook his head a couple of times, moved to the front door and kicked it in. He had one hand raised, holding a foam bomb, though Arek noticed his other hand was lodged in a pocket.

They quickly scouted the area. As with most buildings on this continent of the planet, its outsides were concrete and the insides from wood, and the architecture favored large, open rooms favorable to inhabitants and kidnappers alike. Arek could never get used to the utter stillness after an EM-set multiburst had been thrown into a room. Quietness, yes; after you throw a proper live grenade into someone's living room there's not going to be much noise apart from a few dying gurgles. But the utter undisturbed serenity of a post-EM room, with everything in its place and all the pictures hanging undisturbed from the walls, set his teeth on edge. It was like firing a laser in the dead vacuum of space; you found yourself looking for the burn marks merely to prove the act of violence to your very own senses.

Not only was there no disturbance; there was no body. Arek caught Klar's gaze. Uh-oh.

He started to subvocalize a command but Klar caught his unspoken thoughts and quietly padded to the basement stairs. Arek pulled out a foam bomb and headed upstairs.

Calling it a second floor was laying it on a little thick. It was fairly large, but the slanted roof was low enough to call up a vague air of claustrophobia, and the only concessions to human inhabitation were a large bed, a

dresser and various smaller clothing storages, and a large, intricately carved wooden desk. On the desk, surrounded by several framed pictures of people Arek assumed were his family, lay a single piece of paper.

Arek did a quick sweep, but the dressers were empty and the underside of the bed held not even a speck of dust. That left the desk, and the paper, and an unpleasant foreboding in Arek's mind. When he saw that the message was written in Gallentean - the Gallente tongue, one that no man on this planet was likely to know save the team and the general himself - he snapped it up immediately and began to read:

Welcome. I knew you'd come one day, whoever you are, so I made arrangements.

First off, this is my home and you're not welcome. I hope they're paying you enough to run fast and far away when my people go after you.

Arek rolled his eyes. He kept reading:

I have access to substantial funds, so it may surprise you to find the place so rustic. It's how I like it - I've always appreciated simplicity, and after a lifetime of serving the greatest army in the world, with all the myriad complexities inherent in such a career, I decided it was time I lived, at last, like a civilian. Also, this lifestyle helps me fit in with the people in this area. They're nice people. I like them.

But in the event that I ever got visitors, I made a few concessions to complexity and chaos.

Underneath this farm is a bunker.

Arek immediately subvocalized a warning to Klar, who gave an all-clear and said that if there was anything down there apart from firewood and mice, he'd be surprised.

It's hidden beneath the floorboards.

Arek subvocalized this. There was a splintering crash from downstairs, and Klar sent a subvocalized string of curse-filled surprise that served as confirmation.

There are similar bunkers underneath every farm in this area. Once I'd gotten to know the local citizenry I found them quite amenable to having their housing upgraded ever so slightly. I explained that I had a military background and that some people disagreed with my past work and protection of the State. I was surprised at how easily they agreed to have the bunkers installed, for I had feared they would simply run me off, or at the very least shut me out with that narrow-mindedness one expects of the rural stereotype, but I was proven quite pleasurably wrong. It turns out that here, on the edge of the world, people are used to protecting themselves against natural disasters, be they typhoons, floods, fires or anything else unwelcome that comes their way. The idea of a group of cowardly little men scurrying into their houses at night robs these people of no more sleep than the knowledge of rats scurrying in their walls, and they cheerfully accepted my proposition. A number of healthy subsidies for their work here didn't hurt, either. Their children will all go to State colleges.

Add to that a subtle early-warning system, and we all found ourselves ensconced in the safety of our respective steel boxes before you even got within sight of this place. I sent off an emergency call to my own forces, and even now they are on their way here to extract me. I would not want to be in your shoes if you are still here when they arrive.

Arek cursed. This deadline changed the mission parameters considerably.

Each bunker has all the supplies necessary for a long and healthy life, inasmuch as one

remains trapped underground. The atmospheric generators will work almost indefinitely and, dare I say it, will be ticking away long after you are all dead and gone. There is plenty of nourishment - most of it locally grown, actually - that I've had freeze-dried to last a long, long time, and the filtered liquid dispensers match those on any spaceship you care to name. To stave off boredom we have vidscreens, of an old and dependable brand that won't break for a while, and if they're not quite as exciting as the latest holoprojectors or Egones, I made up for it by including a substantial library of entertainment.

Lastly, each bunker is quadruple the size of the house below it, to detract from the risk of cabin fever. They lie far enough in the ground that they don't disturb the crops, but I'm sure you have people who can use sonar to verify my claims.

Klar subvocalized his impatience to Arek, who replied with a team-wide broadcast telling people to hang back. The others vocalized back, confirming that each team had found a similar note in their own entered houses.

There is another feature, mind, that I did not feel compelled to share with my neighbors. Every bunker except my own contains a canister of poisonous gas.

Arek sent a subvocalization to Klar telling him to back off now.

Not only will the gas kill whatever poor soul that enters the bunker without a mask, but everyone who inhabits it. It's a combination nerve gas and blistering agent that'll make each bunker's inhabitants keel over in pain, vomit blood, break out in horrific sores, lose their sense of reality and probably attack anyone who approaches them before their organs finally turn into a liquid mush and they go into massive cardiac arrest.

Every bunker is connected to the others with a transmission system. I daresay you could block it, but by the time you move in that kind of gear my supporting forces would long since have extracted me from this place. Perhaps if you ask them nicely, they'll let you keep some of your vital organs, though I imagine they'll likely leave some of you draped over the walls.

So if a single bunker is opened, they all start pumping the gas. That's not to mention that the bunkers cannot be safely opened from either side unless you know a specific code, and the only person who knows it is, I'm afraid, myself. If I die, my lovely neighbors will die, too - the men, women and children who even now are living their lives underground, waiting for the moment when my smiling countenance meets them at the entryway - and you will have all their fates on your conscience.

So you go ahead and break me out of the bunker to drag me off somewhere unheard of, and eventually I'll be returned to my State in exchange for political gain. All it will cost you is the cold-blooded murder of several innocent families. Look at my desk. Their pictures are there.

Arek looked at the desk. The pictures were there.

Good luck, whoever you are. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes.

Arek dropped the letter back to the desk and sighed deeply.

It was typical Caldari. Never do anything the easy way.

He communicated this to Klar and the rest of the team.

Klar sent back a question. *So unless we get this guy out real soon, we're up in our asses in State soldiers.*

Yep, Arek replied.

And the only way to get him out is to breach the bunker, which'll gas everyone else who lives here.

Yep.

Damn.

It fits his profile, I suppose, Arek said. He's a rotten one, from skin to center.

What do we do?

We have to abort.

The hell we are.

Look, Arek said, we don't have a lot of time. We get out, make our way to the pickup point and hope that our people can get there without being shot out of the sky. What do you want to do, just tear in there and kill him on the spot?

If we lose him now, he's gone for good.

Arek sighed. *That's how it has to be.*

The man is a monster, Arek.

I know. What else is there to do?

You said it yourself, Klar says. He's built a career on a lifetime of evil that's now hidden in this cover of old age. I'm sure he was real charming to the people here. Remember how charming he was to the Gallenteans he caught, back in the day?

Klar-

There was a sound downstairs.

Klar, what was that noise?

You know, these people you want to protect, they didn't ask any questions. He just gave them a lot of money and they took it. Nevermind he installed a bunch of hi-tech stuff in their homes, and they took it all, without even once thinking what this guy did to warrant that sort of protection. He said there were pictures up there, of those people. You saw the pictures we have? Of what he did to the Gallenteans he caught?

Arek rubbed his eyes. Klar, tell me that sounds wasn't a gun being cocked.

You know what they found in one of his old cells? Remember that pic, Arek? It was a small one, because there wasn't a lot left.

You brought a gun with you, didn't you, Klar?

Everyone in this place is complicit, and don't think for a second that anyone in Caldari is ever going to know, because then they'd have to admit that their old star general built a deathtrap for all the people who sold their souls to him.

Arek was going to argue with him, but something caught his attention. It wasn't a sound in the distance, but the absence of sound at the very edge of hearing: a stillness that comes when something very large is being very quiet, very far away. It was a sound that he'd last heard emanating through the walls of his own dropship. The enemy was coming. Time had run out.

And in that moment came the absolute clarity of two immutable, undeniable facts of life: The first, that he didn't want to do this, for it was absolutely wrong, it would make him a murderer and a marked man not only among the Caldari but in the eyes of the powers on the other side of life itself, and even though he was in this line of work he still had a shred left of resistance to the idea of murdering an entire community; and second, that in this place, doing the wrong thing for the right reason was the only option reasonably available to him as a human being.

Hell, he said. *Go*.

Be happy I didn't bring an MTAC, Klar said with undisguised glee. There were several sharp retorts and the sounds of crunching metal as he shot his way through the door and made his way into the bunker below. At some point Arek thought he heard a scream.

“A World Where No Such Road Will Run”

My name is Janus Bravour. I am thirty-two years old. I am going to die.

The room in front of me is vast. It belonged to a high-powered Caldari executive who, like most of his ilk, was on the wrong side of the revolution. I would have preferred a smaller room. A room this size means you can't see everything around you, can't contain all the events occurring within its space. This is important. When you're a member of the Caldari State leadership, you need to contain all events within its space, lest they spiral out of control.

This room has spiraled out of control.

We gutted some of the more indulgent architecture - my leader and State ruler Tibus Heth took entirely too much delight in tearing out the cages that had held the strippers and soldering them into a box that now serves as the executive's new office - but the basics, the less-noticed ephemera that were truly Caldari, we kept. There is a sand waterfall, and laser birds that light through the air, and quiet sigils, cast on the floor, that morph from one meaning to another.

My name is Janus Bravour. I sit in a room with a waterfall running down one of its walls, the sand hissing as it trickles through the invisible gutters below.

I approved of the reconstruction. I take life seriously, as I've had to in these serious times. There are indeed those among us who feel that life is but a joke. They disdain the work we've put into rebuilding this empire, gutting it and retaining only the purity of our State, and they would like to see life return to the ways of old. These are our enemies, and I take them very seriously.

The birds flit through the air, oblivious. Their movements give me a little hope, deluded though it may be. I notice they always fly in pairs or groups. I had never seen this before.

My name is Janus Bravour, and I am the Chief Operating Officer of an entire empire. I am second-in-command to the most famous person in the world, a citizen revolutionary named Tibus Heth. Under Heth's guidance we toppled the ruling body of our empire, we reclaimed the planet that was our birthright, and we went to war.

Tibus Heth has many enemies. So, by extension, do I.

Heth is an impulsive man in person, governed by a roaring undercurrent of emotions. He is a brilliant military strategist, but his expertise is on the field, in the smoke and the carnage. The silent fighting that goes on in the everyday business of running an empire he leaves, truth be told, to me.

I support Heth and what he has accomplished, and have laid down my life as a wager. But I am not an impulsive man, which is why I complement his ruling, and thus he and I will never see eye to eye. I serve the interests of the State, as does Heth, but I do not feel that I serve it alongside him. We are each pulling it in a particular direction, and it is by this pull, this constant motion that is nonetheless fixed in place, that the State is given the power to continue existing.

If we were lovers, which we are not, we would be running our shared home right now, wondering whether a friendship and a shared set of ideals will carry us through the arguments in times ahead.

I envy the birds their synchronized flight. If I were to try the same I would die in an instant. And yet I must remain in some kind of motion, no matter how still it might seem. Stagnation is death. The moment we stop moving,

we stop being viable human beings and become mere animated husks, solemnly waiting to die.

I see everything so clearly now. I expect it results from this personal revelation I've had of my mortality. I am going to die, and thus my mind is taking in every last detail it can before the final call.

I am being entirely too clinical about this. Given the circumstances, mind, I think it's excusable.

Aside from the birds, the sigil and the waterfall - all of which are intangibles of one sort or another, and don't really count towards the furniture in this room - there is nothing here but the closed door at the far end and the desk at which I sit. The window behind me casts a nice warm shadow on my workspace, and I know if I turned I would see the sun. I'm trying to resist the temptation.

On this desk are three things. The first is a glass cylinder set on a small, black base. The cylinder is about the length and width of my palm. Inside it are interconnected spiraling tubes, like strands of DNA woven into a tapestry, and inside those tubes are two globules of a silvery liquid reminiscent of mercury. The two blobs constantly pass through the tubes, pouring through them in defiance of gravity and inertia. In their paths they revolve around each other like electrons around a nucleus, inextricably entwined but always at a distance. They never touch, neither each other nor the invisible core they encircle, and they never stop moving.

It occurs to me that neither I nor Heth will ever truly be part of Caldari Prime. We encircle it, keeping its core contained. If we should fail, the core will not be compromised, but only so long as another one takes our place posthaste. I truly hope this will be the case.

The second item on my desk is a picture, taken from space. The background is a rich maroon, halfway between blood and rust. In the foreground, if such a term even applies to a thing as monumental as this, is a white globe inlaid with golden lights and frozen masses of clouds. This is Caldari Prime, the core of my existence.

The third item is a message, a greenish halo lit up in the air above my desk. I am sitting deathly still in my chair. Only my eyes have moved. Everything I've ever done has brought me to this point in time: Sitting here, in my office, unmoving, reading the news of my death.

This message is from an unknown sender, and I have no doubt that if anyone looks for it later, they will find it has disappeared. It doesn't recriminate, nor does it chastise. It is brisk, clear and honest. It says that this room has been filled with a poisoning agent that was activated at the reception of the message and will respond to human motion. I am breathing it in right now, into and out of my lungs, as I have been ever since I sat down in this room. If I move, wave my hand or even cast a last glance at the sun shining behind me, the agent will coagulate into a material that will stop my heart.

Somewhere in this building there will be a person - several persons, likely - who fell from their orbit of duty. I will move and I will die, and they will ensure the room is thoroughly ventilated before any investigation takes place. They will also guarantee the investigation finds I died of natural causes, and that I get a funeral befitting a Statesman. Honor will be upheld, I'm sure.

And while all of this was completely unnecessary - the poisoning agent and the traitors and the whole setup will have taken lot of time and effort - it was meant not merely as an assassination but as an insult, one to put me in my place. I have entered a trap where nothing I do will help. I am powerless to

interfere. If I act, if I do anything other than sit perfectly still in this little kingdom of stagnation, I will die in an instant.

My name is Janus Bravour. All the roads are open to me, and all of them lead to my end.

And it is this that decides me, this realization that I am experiencing right now, in this moment that is both infinite and infinitesimal: That a man who is alive, who is truly alive, cannot but keep in motion lest he stagnate, and that this tiny glimmer at the back of my mind is not merely the resolution of my impending actions but the hope - an irrational hope, absolutely, which in truth makes it a faith, and I'm having to bite back a smile at the thought - that through the swiftest of motions I can cheat this final and absolute death, if I can but move, faster than light, faster than time itself, if I can exhale and inhale and ready my nerves and go-

All Tomorrow's Bodies

Day Seven

In the cold, hyperlit metal corridor, the two women faced one another at firing distance. Jeanelle, who'd brought them here, slowly lowered her hands to her hips, resting them on the handles of her guns. Skids, who'd kept them alive, kept her hands crossed behind her head, as if she planned to take a nap. She looked entirely unconcerned.

In one swift and silent motion, Jeanelle drew her guns, aimed at Skids and fired.

The deafening noise echoed through the corridor. In the aftermath of the muzzle flash, Skids stood with hands on her hips, an astonished expression on her face. She looked down at her body, in search of the vermillion stain, but before she could find one her eyes rolled back in her head, and she dropped to the floor.

Day One

They were in a meeting with a very nice man who spoke softly and had a face that was easily forgotten. This man, who had not given his name, told them that their team was one of many that qualified for the hunting of former Grand Admiral Anvent Eturrer.

Eturrer, or the Great Traitor as he was now known, had been instrumental in causing the Gallente to fumble their response to a mass invasion by hostile forces. As a result they had lost an entire planet to the Caldari, and had been forced into war on their outlying borders. Eturrer had disappeared right after his betrayal. The Gallente wanted him found.

Jeanelle, Skids, Kardeth and Asadir - Gallente, Caldari, Amarr and Minmatar respectively - had been called in. They were a merc team, one of many that worked in the corporate halo of 0.0 space. Their different backgrounds, national and corporate, allowed them a great flexibility in their operations, even if it made for the occasional bit of friction. Asadir was a tech head, excellent with machinery. Kardeth was a Wanderer, a clandestine subsection of the Speakers of Truth tasked with bringing the faith into the darkest of places. Skidochi was a supreme fighter, nimble and merciless, but her rebellious nature was in constant conflict with the guilt over her inability to properly serve the Caldari State. Jeanelle had a background in politics and entertainment, and a rather checkered past in her pursuit of happiness.

As it turned out, this past was proving surprisingly useful. One of the people Jeanelle had charmed in her passage was Uriam Kador, one of the Heirs to the Amarrian Royal Throne. The relationship was long since over, but Jeanelle had a way of making friends where she went and still had a lot of contacts in Kador's court. This was good, the nameless man said, because one of Eturrer's many possible hideouts was in Kador's part of space. The Gallente didn't know where, he said, and they certainly weren't going to risk any of their own people in these black ops stunts unless they had a very good reason to believe they'd get their man.

"Why not just have us extract Eturrer?" Kardeth asked.

That was not an option, the man said. Even if it turned out he was located there, their team would never get close to the man himself - he'd be too heavily guarded, and all they could hope for was reaching one of his co-conspirators - and any failed attempts to that end would drive him even deeper underground, ruining any chances the Gallente had of catching the villain at last. The team's task was the extraction of information, nothing more.

"Why do you think Jeanelle wouldn't just warn Kador instead?" Kardeth said, nodding his head at his visibly annoyed team mate.

They had a good track record, the man said. And besides, betrayal would mean they'd have Blaque's Black Eagles to deal with.

"Let me just add something to this," Jeanelle said, loosening something around her chest and standing up. She turned to Kardeth, glaring at him, and dropped her top.

"See that scar, running right between my breasts?" she said.

Kardeth, eyes wide, nodded wordlessly.

Jeanelle pulled the top up again and took her seat. "Kador's private persona is not the same as his public one. He gets excited. And he can't handle failure. I liked the people who worked for him, idealists who believe in hard work and loyalty, but I don't owe the man anything."

Skids said, "I've known you for years, but I don't remember that. Was it before we met?"

Jeanelle looked at her, then looked away. "Something like that."

Kardeth tried to rally. "Alright. Anyway, yeah, we'll do our best to triangulate Eturrer's position from whatever our sources reveal." Asadir snorted, and Jeanelle rolled her eyes. Skids, legs drawn up to her seat, said nothing.

The man thanked them for their time.

Day Two

They were gearing up, receiving shipments of equipment to their ships. Jeanelle and Skids were checking over the data.

Casually, Jeanelle said, "Everything all right?"

Skids was silent for a while, going over ammo schematics. She said, "Yeah, it's fine. I don't like working for the Gallente, though."

"I know. But it's a job like any other. Asadir hates it when we do Amarr jobs, too."

"It's not just that. Eturrer's treated like a hero, back on Caldari. I don't like the thought that we're going to ruin things for him."

"I think that it's unavoidable," Jeanelle said. "He called this over himself the moment he betrayed his fleet. They would never let him go."

She put her arm around Skids' shoulders and gave her a quick hug. "And besides, it's not like the Caldari would venerate you even if you skipped out on this mission. They've got strange ways of showing their appreciation. You've seen that before."

"I guess," Skids said. "Still don't like it."

Jeanelle nodded and went back to the schematics. "You'll be fine," she said.

"Jeanelle?"

"Yes?"

"What do you mean, I've seen it before?"

Jeanelle thought it over. "You come from one of the most rigid empires in the world, where people are kept locked in place their whole lives. And yet you now work for a mercenary crew. That really says it all, sweetie. Go to sleep."

Day Three

After having adamantly refused to use Jeanelle's contacts in Kador's court, Kardeth received information from his own people in the dark end of space. He brought it to the team, proud and boisterous, and they set up and headed there quick.

According to Kardeth's sources, their target was a small colony staffed with very religious people who had some information on Eturrer's passage. The inhabitants, Kardeth maintained, would undoubtedly respect his rather clandestine authority as a Wanderer and rend unto him any assistance he required in his hunt. They would arrive late, have a prayer session and a nice dinner, get some proper sleep, and sort out their business in the morning. When Jeanelle asked whether the colonists knew the real purpose for their visit, Kardeth merely grinned.

?

Day Four (or very late in Day Three)

The main street was empty, as befitted a late night in a religious colony. Light posts shone on the grey stone below.

But there was a rumble in the air, and a few of the posts started to tremble, their lights jittering and swaying.

Skids came first, her slim body racing down the street. Jeanelle followed, her ampler proportions and more decorative clothing slowing her pace.

Kardeth, who'd stayed behind to reason with his people, came last, his sandals beating a tattoo on the ground, and his face as stony as an icon. Behind him came an army of Amarrians screaming raw bloody murder. The team had certainly unearthed something, but once their real intentions were discovered the colonists had not been happy.

Asadir, who had waited for them onboard the ship and already started the launch pattern, laughed his ass off as they jumped onboard. As the control panel closed, a yelled conversation could be heard between him and Kardeth.

"Welcome to my world!"

"Shutup."

"How'd you like it on the Matar side!"

"Shutup."

"I got a Pax Amarria in my nightstand, in case yours got a little dirty!"

"Shutup."

Day Five

Jeanelle took over and sent out feelers to some of her own sources in the area. Kardeth, chastened, grudgingly and rather sheepishly allowed himself to be assigned tech prep duties instead. On one of his trips into the hardware section of the cargo hold, he showed Asadir a list of the items they were going to use: simple, non-electric weapons that wouldn't show up on scanning or break at the worst possible moment. One of those items was a familiar one.

Asadir reached Jeanelle at her quarters. She did not seem surprised to see him.

"You know that Skids has a quickdraw implant," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"On your list is a miniature EMP bomb. You know what it does."

Jeanelle nodded.

"Are you just going for the quickdraw?" Asadir asked.

"No. I need you to mod the EMP, like you did in the Caldari space mission we did a while back. I need to run it twice."

Asadir stood there for a while, looking at her. Eventually he said, "You think we'll have to take this all the way."

"You've seen how she's getting. More sullen. Withdrawn. I don't think she's comfortable with this mission at all. I know she'll do it as well as she can, but there'll be a breaking point, and I don't want to have anyone get hurt."

"So you want the Dead Man's Switch."

"Yes. And I need you to do something else, too," Jeanelle said.

"Blanks for your gun."

"Yeah."

"I hate doing this to the child."

"Well," Jeanelle said, in a tone that indicated this conversation was over, "You know what alternatives we have. It's this, or end it for good."

Later in the day, a source sent back a coded message. It contained the locations of a colony that housed one of Eturrer's old lieutenants, a fellow traitor who'd eloped with him.

Asadir missed it, for he was stuck in the lab, working on the EMP device.

Day Six

They'd docked at another colony and been given permission to enter the place. It was still Amarr space, which meant that Asadir was, in his words, staying inside the ship on pain of death and religion and dumbasses. Kardeth stayed in as well, in the embarrassed and probably true belief that showing his face to any Amarrian in Kador space would complicate the mission. Jeanelle and Skids disembarked and headed for the bars.

It was a social hub of sorts for the nearby area, but heavily sectioned off. Colonists, these hermits of the world, knew how to respect privacy. The two women took a while to get familiar with the place, during which Jeanelle socialized heavily with every group they met while Skids grew increasingly morose. On one occasion they nearly wound up in a fight with the locals, when someone offered Skids a drink and she batted it out of the man's hands. Jeanelle made good but quickly retreated to another locale, taking a mumblingly apologetic Skids with her.

Eventually they managed to confirm the lieutenant's presence and approximate whereabouts on the colony. Unsurprisingly, he was being guarded by devout servants of Kador, who was used to taking good care of his people. Jeanelle knew many of these people from her last extended

visit with the Kadorians, and it wasn't long before she was let into the circle. Skids, who could no longer disguise her discomfort with the colonists and the mission, hung back and did reconnaissance.

Day Seven

Jeanelle eventually returned, victorious and shining. She located Skids in an alleyway nearby, where the Caldarian was pacing about and kicking at rocks. Together they set off to find a secure communications terminal.

"How'd it go?" Skids asked on the way.

"Better than I dared hope," Jeanelle said. "You leave anyone in the dust?"

"Not so much, really. Anyway, did you have to do anything to get the info?"

Jeanelle gave her a bemused look. Skids blushed. "You know. I hate talking about that stuff outright."

Jeanelle laughed and put an arm around Skids' shoulder. "It's alright. I love what I do. But no, we really just talked. It's a shame. He's a good-looking man and I was hoping he had some interest in more, but really, he's under so much pressure that it took fairly nothing to open him up."

Skids raised an eyebrow. "So he gave Eturrer away."

"Not at all. But he talked about military installations and resource flow, in the delightful belief that a woman couldn't possibly understand it all anyway. Really, he thought he was using me as a sounding board and little more."

"And from that you can..."

"Deduce more or less where Eturrer is, yes," Jeanelle said. "Which may or may not be worth spit, if the guy moves or if anyone finds out there was a leak, or even if I was being told the truth. But we'll get paid either way."

"So where is he? Is he even here, in this part of space?"

Jeanelle put a finger up to her lips. "That would be telling."

Skids said nothing. Jeanelle asked, "How did your shift go?"

"Nothing much happened. Some people made a little trouble, but I sorted it."

Jeanelle, who knew Skids, understood this. "They still alive?"

"They weren't happy with your meeting. Thought you were a security risk. They were going to investigate us."

"And that would have been bad trouble," Jeanelle said.

"They're still alive, no worries. Are you sure you know where Eturrer is?" Skids said.

"Yes. Are you happy with the way the mission turned out?"

Skids briefly looked at her and said, "Absolutely," with not much conviction. They kept walking.

Eventually they made it to a narrow metal corridor in a reinforced part of the colony. A lone terminal was located there.

"Now we'll just have to send off the data and we'll be home free," Jeanelle said.

Skids had been walking in front of her for a while, and now turned to confront her. "I'm afraid not," she said to the merc.

Jeanelle sighed. "Skids ..."

"I can't let you do this. I can't."

"Yes, you can."

"You need to tell me where Eturrer is," Skids said.

"So you can contact the people who hate you and try one more bribe to change their view. It's not going to work, Skids. It never does."

Skids blinked, and said, "I don't recall having been the team traitor, but yeah, that's how it goes. I'm so sorry. I hate to do this, but I can't just help the enemy this way."

"You mean our employer."

"I mean the Gallente Federation. I don't expect you to understand, Jeanelle. Please give me the code."

"Why didn't you just tell on me? Sounds like you've joined the other side already."

Skids looked shocked. "I would never put you through that. Do you have any idea what they would do to you here if they knew what a traitor you are?"

"About the same as what the Caldari have wanted to do to you for years, Skids. Don't be stupid."

Skids didn't move. "You don't understand. Give me the info now."

"Let me put this in language that you'll understand, Skids. If you don't step away from that control, I'm going to blow you away."

Skids tensed, then relaxed and slowly grinned. "Go on, Jeanelle. Draw."

Jeanelle slowly reached into a pocket and pushed a button on something. Then she withdrew her hands and placed them near the guns on her belt.

Skids, in her element at last, stretched languidly to the ceiling.

Jeanelle sighed, walked over the body of her merc companion and keyed in a code on the control board Skids had been protecting. On the other side of the thick metal walls, wires crackled into action, switches passed on live currents, and a brief message was shunted out into the ether. Its contents spoke of the greatest traitor in the current history of the Gallente Federation and where he might be found, and they eventually weaved their way onto large monitors that cast reflections on the darkly grinning faces of his betrayed people.

Jeanelle picked up Skids' body and headed back to the ship. On the way there she contacted Asadir, confirming successful completion of the mission, and its collateral cost.

"Bring her back to the bay and I'll reset the Switch," Asadir said through the comlink. He added, "She'll be fine," though Jeanelle didn't know whose conscience he was assuaging.

She breathed deep and looked at the Caldarian's inert body. Unbeknownst to Skids, her quickdraw implant had an extra function. When set off with a specially prepared, deliberately focused EMP bomb, the implant would knock her out and erase all her recent memories. It wasn't healthy and it didn't work as well as it should - her past selves leaked into the present like trickles of water through the dam of quiddity - but it was necessary for someone like Skids, whose identity issues reached far beyond her conscious mind. She'd work things out some day. Until then, she needed support, and enough jobs to keep her abilities fresh.

The team did everything they could to keep her from harm. It was a unique and bothersome requirement of the Dead Man's Switch that its victim had to be made to feel as if she were dying. If they merely turned on the switch without faking Skids' death, the risk of irreversible psychosis rose by several orders of magnitude. So they loaded guns with blanks, and they faked hull breaches, and all the while they pressed little buttons and made their friend go through yet another death, to awake an earlier, cleaner self.

"You're sure she's not going to remember this one?" Jeanelle said.

"No more than the others," Asadir said. "Way we've tuned it, she'll go back to herself before this mission even started. We just need to remember to keep our mouths shut."

"That's alright. We forgive her. Just like last time, and the one before that."

"She's a good one," Asadir said.

Jeanelle nodded in the gloom. "Yeah, she is. A little lost and out of control sometimes, but she's a sweetheart."

In the distance she could see the docking bays, steel and iron, waiting.

“Tomorrow a Dream”

Through the years, the Caldari State’s reigning ideology has been broadly defined by its emphasis on hard work, sacrifice, and the welfare of the collective over the welfare of the individual. Central to the Caldari mindset is the assumption that people work better when motivated by a feeling of contribution to a greater good, but even more important is the idea that people naturally gravitate toward the sphere of craft they are best suited for, as well as the position they should occupy within it. How has this philosophy been shaped over the tumultuous lifetime of the Caldari nation, though, and where does it stand today?

In the early days of Caldari-Gallente relations, when the two nations had just come into contact with each other, the somewhat unusual structure of Caldari government was explicitly set up so that no one person could wrest power from the council. The notion of individuality, so prized by the Gallente, tended to be viewed by the Caldari as little more than selfish blindness to the grander scheme of things, and was frowned upon by the vast majority of their leaders as well as the industrious masses that made up the civilian populace. After the first Gallente-Caldari war, the Chief Executive Panel – the corporate heads making up the Caldari State’s ruling body – went even further with this ideology, soon enough taking their seat as polar opposites to their hated nemeses. While it may seem tempting to ascribe this to the ideological rubberbanding sometimes experienced by newly independent states, there is a great deal of historical data that suggests that even as far back as the time of the Raata-Oryioni empire thousands of years ago, the people who would later become the Caldari were already highly collectivistic in outlook and action.

For the newly-at-peace Caldari State, however – a nation bruised and bleeding from a lengthy war – things took on a different tenor. In the sudden absence of a unifying enemy, the people who at that time made up

the Chief Executive Panel found themselves gradually turning their attentions to each other. Internal competition between the eight ruling corporations increased. Suggested initiatives and reforms usually served to somehow pad the coffers of the corporation that came up with them, ideally at the expense of their most direct competitors. While competence and devotion to the State were still held in overt esteem to as great a degree as ever – and, indeed, used as religiously in the nation’s propaganda as they are today – the foundations these values were built on had begun to subtly slide.

As time passed, the entrenchment of those in power, as well as their fierce devotion to their internal competition, began to have trickle-down effects on the Big Eight’s top tiers. Believing their own modes of governance and management preferable to whatever successors the Board of Directors would offer up, the CEOs of the megacorporations began to pull the strings behind the scenes, making sure their own protégés ascended to positions where they would take over the reins when the time came. They also made sure that key positions within the corporate hierarchies were occupied by people whose goals and opinions coincided with their own. Thus, slowly but surely, covert dynasties began to snake their tendrils around the Caldari State’s power structures.

By the time the capsuleers started making waves on the world scene, the State’s hierarchies were crowded with individuals who had come by their positions through the mendacious maneuverings of well-placed superiors, and this played a significant role in the sharp economic downturn faced by the Caldari State. Each of New Eden’s four major nations had suffered some form of economic setback in the wake of the ultra-rich capsuleer class’s meteoric rise, but the Caldari, due to their set-in-stone mentality and reluctance to adapt, were perhaps the hardest hit. Unemployment skyrocketed. Goods and services rose in price. Imports and exports declined.

Sensing the shift in worldwide power, the Chief Executive Panel responded by cocooning themselves from the outside world and taking up isolationist policies. Diplomatic relations, never a strong part of the Caldari political skillset, became almost nonexistent. Even in the wake of such disasters as the Protein Delicacy incident (where Caldari-manufactured luncheonette foods were found to cause mental deficiencies in Gallente schoolchildren) or the Insorum incident (where a chemical compound capable of reversing the effects of one of Amarr's most relied-upon slave drugs was leaked from a Caldari biolab), the State's diplomats did little to placate those aggrieved by their mistakes. The Caldari nation was as mighty as ever, but it was hardening up from the inside out. It would take a major change to shake things up, and in YC 110 that change came in the form of a radical new leader, Tibus Heth.

Finding nepotism-spawned inefficiency all over the State, Heth instigated several reforms intended to bring Caldari back to its roots as a meritocratic society. To this end, he employed his most trusted director, Janus Bravour, to set in motion a series of initiatives that would root out those undeserving of their positions and install in their stead people who had truly earned the right to be there. With the proper gears meshing in unison, the State would once again take its rightful role as a trampling juggernaut of commercial, industrial and military might.

Heth's reforms reached into every sector of corporate activity. He began by confiscating the wealth of mid- to high-tier managers and executives all across the State and redistributing it among the lowest rungs of the workforce. He created programs that made sure people received adequate compensation for hard work, in the form of annual leave and early retirement. He greatly increased funding for education and re-education initiatives. He promoted worker summits wherein individual ingenuity was given an outlet. The main goal: to make sure that no matter which rung on the ladder a person occupies, they stand at least a fighting chance of making it to the rung above them – provided they truly deserve it.

Under the new system, social status is no obstacle to advancement. Within ten years' time, over half of the State's schools will be equipped with advanced screening methods for detecting unusual aptitude, so that those so gifted can be directed toward areas where their talent will do the most good. Institutions are being set up to give grants to armchair inventors and small business owners who never had the chance to take their ideas to a higher level. Government spies already are being disseminated among the ranks of the corporations and tasked with weeding out nepotism wherever they find it.

In the time since Heth took power a sizable number of citizens, believing the rule of a single man to contradict Caldari ideals, have left the country. The assumption among them has been that like the despots and dictators that litter history's pages he would surround himself with a power clique and leave the rest of the nation blowing in the wind, eroding the nutritious soil of cultural values that had kept the State strong throughout its existence. The nationalistic bent of his policies and his military ruthlessness have also caused a degree of alarm, prompting some citizens to question (quietly, of course) how their morality and their national identity fit together in these latest and darkest times.

In the span since Heth's inauguration, however, the turnaround in economic growth has been undeniable. Caldari have more money in their pockets. They are more secure about their retirement. People who under the old system would have found themselves forever excluded from certain positions now reside within those positions. The general feeling, on the streets and in the stations, is that for better or worse something great and grand is underway, that the previous system was ailing and outmoded, and that the New Meritocracy (as it has been dubbed by the press) is a return to form for a great nation shackled too long in the chains of favoritism. Averting their eyes from the darkness all around them, the Caldari people now for the first time in years set their sights on a brighter future.

Wild Earth

Haatakan Oiritsuu - once-CEO of Kaalakiota and now deposed, in exile, on a barren snowy estate long from the action of the Caldari State politics - held a living plant in her hand, took out the sharpest knife she had, and with careful but precise motions sliced the thing open lengthwise, exposing its layers all the way to the green of its deepest, glistening core. She held the plant over a small pile of peat, squeezing out little drops from its stem. With nimble fingers she drained it dry, running her hands over every inch of its body until there was nothing left but a shredded husk.

The peat, already enriched with nutrients and chemical concoctions, had needed more. All manner of reactions were ongoing in its soil, but in order to sustain them, proper fuel was needed. Dead liquids only went so far; in the end, as was always the case, a sacrifice had been necessary to feed the hungry earth. The best nourishments for the fresh plants in this greenhouse came from the ones that had grown here before. And for every flower, there came a time for the bloom, and a time for the cut.

She had always loved being in nature, particularly the kind that lent itself to quiet, long-term observation. Haatakan had grown up in a hard family: not a rough one, and not a hand ever laid on her, but an environment where everything you did and everything you said would be remembered, and judged, and brought up if the occasion required. She had a tiny garden spot behind the house that she tended when everything got too much, and it was there she discovered that flowers were not only beautiful - one must never lose sight of the beauty in life - but how delightfully they responded to control; how carefully they must be tended and grown.

She had made herself the child's promise that one day she would be super powerful and mega rich, a million times more wealthy than the second-wealthiest man in the world, and on the day that she made it - for she

surely would - she would spend the rest of her life in a garden of her own, far away from people, tending to the quietly growing plants.

That was her unit of power: a garden. Then she grew up, and she became very powerful indeed, and very rich, and she never forgot about it. When she had this place built, as much in the middle of a wilderness as she could make it without offending the people of the State, she added a greenhouse easily half the size of the entire palace. She spent most of her time there, patiently waiting for the world to catch up with her plans.

Most of the plants in the greenhouse were flowering ones. Haatakan chose one of the most beautiful - a lovely lilicae possessing a thick, stiff stem topped with a pristine, bulblike blossom - and uprooted it, placing it carefully in a temporary pot on her table. There were machines that could do this, little nanoids that would turn the earth around the roots into slippery oil, and pressure-sensitive metal arms that could then pull out the flower without dislodging a single one of its tendrils, leaves or petals. Haatakan didn't believe in those. The moment you gave your life over to automation - to any outside process, really - you invited a quiet disaster.

She had invited disaster, but it had not been quiet.

She picked up her knife. Its blade was short, like that of a scalpel, and sharp enough to cut through practically anything that lived. With the lilicae standing tall in front of her, she got to work on its flower. It had blossomed but not yet bloomed, so the petals were still closed in, like a shy maiden on her wedding night.

She put the tip of the blade against one of the petals and rested it there. It was so sharp that it began to slide in, ever so slightly. She pushed down

the blade in a slanted fashion, then lifted it back up and slid it down the other way, as if carving the first two sides of a triangle. Instead of cutting the third and removing a piece from the petal, she used the tip to tease out the top part of the cut, then folded it down like a flap, leaving a little window into the center of the flower. The flap's edges curved slightly inward, and on each of them she traced a very faint line, topping off the carving with a single faint press of the knife tip to the top of the cut, leaving the tiniest of dimples.

After cleaning the knife with a purple silk cloth she did this again, to the same petal, cutting and teasing and shaping the triangular flaps until the petal looked more like a well-traversed honeycomb than anything grown out of nature. When she was finished she moved on to the next, and the next. Eventually the flower had been completely pierced and cut, and daylight shone through its gaping wounds.

Haatakan slid the knife down alongside its stem and sliced off every leaf, leaving the plant naked as day. For every tiny join where a leaf had clung to the stem, she inserted the knife tip deep into its fresh wound and gored out a small hole, removing even the final possibility of more growth. Little trickles of opaque sap ran down, over her fingers. When at last the cuts would stop bleeding, the area around them would wrinkle and change color, turning a little darker and lending the flower a marvelous, damaged hue.

It was a cruel way to create beauty. But anything this lovely could not be allowed to stand unspoiled.

At one time she was one of the world's most powerful CEOs. She ruled one of New Eden's superpowers, sharing the hot seat with seven of her

countrymen. They were feared, as all good leaders must be, but Haatakan had not realized how extensively they were hated.

For the extent of her professional career she had closely followed the Caldari system of governance, where found good use for her indurate upbringing. People knew their place. Anyone who acted up - or worse, failed - would be dealt with, calmly and professionally, and whatever threat they posed to the delicate equilibrium would be eliminated.

She uprooted another plant and brought it over to the polycarb glas sink, which she had filled with water. The plant was bottom heavy, composed as it was of a thick knot of roots the size of a closed fist, from which rose single long stem with leafy sprouts, and a large, bulbous flower reminiscent of the lilicae.

Haatakan placed the plant into the sink, where it sank to the bottom, to slowly drown.

This plant, which was renowned for the ferocity with which it drained its earth, would live remarkably long underwater. It would suck in as much of its surroundings as it could, becoming bloated and heavy. While it would retain the framework of its shape until the very last, each part - the flower, the leaves, the stem and even the roots - would grow to several times its original size, engorged on the water the plant would never stop ingesting even as it died. The plant would grow large and beautiful, with a glistening sheen on its turgid surface. In time, the sheen would take on an oily nature as cellular walls began to break and release the plant's essential fluids out onto its surface.

A revolution began, one she expected to be quelled without too much trouble. She had become complacent; not weak but laggard, lumbering like a giant tired of striding over the land, no longer bothering to look where he walked, and taking the smallest of satisfaction in the panicked screams below.

If enough people showed fear, she reasoned, then she must be feared, for she saw none who seemed fearless. This, she found to her cost, did not mean they didn't exist, merely that they had the good sense not to step out in the open. Until they did, breaking through all the walls she'd erected, and breaking everything else along the way.

In one section of her greenhouse she had a small tree, still in its pot. It was about her height, with a branchless trunk that looked weedy and pale, and a small crown of leaves that drooped in the greenhouse heat.

Its trunk was enveloped by a thin, heavily-leafed vine that looked in perfect health. This vine, which was a parasite, hung on to the tree by a million microscopic needles forced into the tree's trunk. A third of those needles would have little hooks on the end, the better to maintain their grasp; another third would be slowly and gently sucking out nutrients when they were needed; and the last third would be injecting something instead: a chemical, the likes of which had not yet been properly synthesized, that induced the tree to believe it was being fed with delicious, complex nutrients. The tree's own constant outstretching for food and nourishment would be curtailed, and with it all other processes, including the production of antibodies that might poison the parasite. So long as the tree thought it was being fed well, it didn't bother to do anything else but wait for the rest of its ever-shortening life to pass.

One of these demolition men was Tibus Heth, who rocketed into the limelight on a tornado of smoke and fire. He was a volatile man, an angry man, and Haatakan did not expect him or any of his plans to last a Caldarian day. Angry men were easily dealt with. But Heth had backing, and even when that backing seemed to disappear, he had a support system, overseen primarily by a very stable, very quiet man called Janus Bravour.

She looked in on a single large plant, one that had been growing in its large bed for quite some time. She had recently placed a number of smaller plants, all sorts of varieties, dotted around this one in close enough proximity that their roots had begun to touch it.

This plant, a particularly aggressive rosoid variant, had sensed their presence. Even though they weren't weeds and were of no immediate threat in this rich ground - which had been fortified with the hungry peat of her own creation, and seemed to enhance the aggressive properties of some of her more contentious flowers - it had begun to extend its thorns and channel all its energy into keeping off every other plant in the plot. This had left its stem shriveled, likely to break at the least little touch, and its petals so thin and weak that they were not merely translucent; Haatakan could see the thin veins in the flesh beneath the surface. If she stood there long enough she fashioned she could see the plant's vital liquids being pumped and forth, as if from a photosynthetic heart beating its last before the collapse. She would wait until it was spent, then deadhead it, and place its frail little flower with the others she kept in a small bowl in the foyer of her palace.

Janus, she thought, would have the long-term plans. He certainly seemed the antithesis of Heth, and that was dangerous, for the men who believe they know better than others - and are capable of acting on it - will

eventually overtake the others' responsibilities. It was clear that Janus formed an integral part of the framework that held Tibus Heth in place. Heth himself was still the main threat to Haatakan and the other seven dispossessed CEOs, for he was the instigator and enforcer of the new State, while Janus sat quietly in the background, oiling the gears and ensuring they turned.

Until Heth made his latest move: a reorganization of the Caldari State, a return to the meritocracy they had been founded on. A bureaucratic move, no matter how heavily couched in revolutionary terms. A bold plan, clearly intended to bolster Heth's fragile standing with the State's citizens, and one that relied on something more than fire and fury to work. It needed a quiet mind to minister, lest it fail colossally.

And thus Janus Bravour became, overnight, ground zero for every revenge plan in operation.

These two plants, now, had been growing for a while, but not as long as one might imagine if one looked at their towering stems.

Haatakan stroked her fingers over them. Each was nearly as tall as a small tree. She'd had to put their shared pot down on the ground. They were rare, small vitis variants, not inclined to climb walls or do much at all unless given the right impetus.

All that was needed, really, was another plant of the exact same sort. The vine's nature was to rise over its surroundings, and when something began to claim its place, it would do its utmost to reassert its dominance. Not only did it nearly triple its own growth rate, but it would attempt to entwine itself around its rival, keeping it down and stealing a rise on its laurels. If the rival

was another vine, it would do the same; and if the two were carefully trimmed and guided, they would encircle each other like strands of DNA, rising to the ceiling in a quiet ballet of mutual competition until, at last, they died from exhaustion. Their lifeless stalks would remain, as monuments to their folly, and with care could be preserved, by drying and lamination, still stuck in each other's snake embrace until the end of time.

Haatakan had watched the news. Janus Bravour had suddenly been taken ill and was now in hospital, in some manner of serious condition.

Truth be told, she had been neglecting this greenhouse for months. After Tibus Heth had come in and thrown her out into the cold, she'd spent a lot of her time brooding in her palace. She was resigned to staying here. The terms of Heth's dictated that her safety was guaranteed only on her own grounds. If she left and headed to the metropolis of Khyrth, the citizens would recognize and kill her; and if she fled into the forest, Heth's own agents would either remove her from this earth, or the cold and the woods would simply swallow her whole.

So she had retreated to her ivory tower, and remained there inert, staring at the walls. Her initial rage had subsided and given way to resigned depression, bringing back memories of all those years ago when she'd been at the mercy of other forces, paternal in name but dictatorial in nature, and had wished nothing more than to be free of them. The gardens had taught her otherwise - freedom was achieved by working around your restraints, for if you waited for them to be removed, you were merely asking for another master of your fate to step forth - but she ignored its lessons, and let herself grind to a standstill.

Janus's fate, whatever it truly was, had changed that. The wheels moved again. Heth was alone and unsupported. Despite the man's volatility, he was a brilliant military strategist; and despite his avowed morality he was, she believed, an unscrupulous one. A military man would take extreme measures to conquer his enemies; so long as his cause, or his belief in that cause, remained just and honest, the ethics and justifiability of his methods did not matter.

Heth understood power on a visceral level, far more so than most of the people he had deposed. As much as she despised him, she could not deny this fact. Right now, with Janus out of the picture and the CEOs mounting their subsequent counter-revolution, he desperately needed someone who knew the intricacies of the highest political level in State and was willing to do what was necessary to achieve her goals; someone who had her hands on the strings and was willing to pull them.

The speakers in the greenhouse rang out with a long, sonorous note.

She had a guest.

A single fruit hung like a pendulum from a drooping branch of the plant. The fruit was ripe, ready for picking. It was beautiful, also, and stood in stark contrast to the plant that had born it, whose body was tired and worn.

This one plant could and had been induced to put all of its effort into the fruit of its creation, diverting every nutrient and scrap of energy it picked up through its questing roots and channeling them directly into the soft, soft pulp. Once the fruit was ready, the plant would likely die.

Haatakan grabbed it on her way out and took a juicy bite.

Her guest held a small monitor on which Tibus Heth's face was visible. Haatakan ignored him and focused on the woman who had entered her palace.

"I know you," Haatakan said.

"Indeed you do," Tibus Heth said through his monitor. "She's the one who brought you here."

"Last time I saw you, I was having terms dictated to me," Haatakan said to the woman. "You asked me if I knew how much the people hated me. And you said that if I tried to escape, into the woods, I would be lost forever." She walked up close to the woman and was pleased to see the merest glisten of sweat in her combed-back hair. "People *do* get lost forever here, you know. People who chose the wrong road."

"Janus Bravour is dead," Tibus Heth said from waist level. Haatakan stepped back and looked at him at last.

"I know," she said. "And now you're going to fall."

"Not if you can help it." Tibus leaned in closer on the screen. "I need your help, Ms. Oiritsuu."

"You, the destroyer of the State, need the help of an old lady out in the country? My goodness, how the mighty have fallen."

"The other megacorps are conspiring against me. All seven of them. But not you. I've had my agents thoroughly vet every one of you people, and Kaalakiota, in which you still have your witchy little tendrils, stayed out of the whole thing. Why?"

"For the same reason I imagine you sent this particular messenger to me. We owe our allegiance to a cause, and that cause is ourselves and our view of the world. Everything else is secondary. And every alliance is an opportunity of chance, nothing more."

"I work for the State," Heth said.

"Funny. I used to say the same thing, when I was on top."

"So you refuse? You want SuVee and the rest to rise again?"

"Certainly not. There is no reason for those idiots to regasp the reins of power. But you need to understand, Heth, that I don't see any pressing reason to help you stay on top. I will still be stuck here, tending to my plants, watching you take this great State to pieces."

"We can work out the terms. You didn't make it this far without an ability to negotiate," Heth said. He leaned back from the screen, and Haatakan saw he was sitting in a chair, likely in the office he'd taken from one of the CEOs. "I think you see plenty of reason to make this happen. I think you're lying, and that you're snapping at the chance."

Haatakan leaned her head to one side. "Do you think I killed Janus?" she said.

The question did not seem to catch Heth off guard, which surprised her. "In all honesty?" he said. "I don't know. You might have. If I know you and your scheming ways, this conversation is merely a point in a long, branching plan you'll have made, one that ends with you being back in power to some degree. I'm alright with that. I've dealt with less trustworthy people than you."

She gave him a long look. At last she said, "We might be able to make something out of this."

Heth grinned, and she grinned back, like two carnivores passing by over a meal.

She had been planning, ever since Janus died. And her renewed time in the greenhouse had taught her to mix that roaring hunger for power that resided in her deepest, unconscious core with the learned quietness of thought that floated up in her conscious mind.

"How would you do this, if you manage it at all?" Heth asked.

There would be seven forces to neutralize, each one of which had some sort of vice. Everyone had a vice. It was to the eternal frustration of Haatakan's enemies that hers was merely a twisted sort of gardening.

You could plan with groups of people, or with the currents passing through society - abstract plans, often, but workable - but individuals were a different matter. Especially mercurial ones such as Heth, who remained a mystery to her. The best option with those kinds of people was to get close and stay close. Study. Presumption had cast her here, and understanding would eventually get her out. That, and patience.

But the others, whom she'd known for so long; they were no mystery. They could be worked on. She'd been practicing.

"Leave it to me," she said, reached out and turned off the screen. She returned her gaze to the Provist woman holding the dead monitor, whose eyes were glazed over with utter dread. "Now, my dear. We're going to have to deal with you."

From a small pocket at the back of her dress, she withdrew the little knife with the very sharp blade, and concealed it in her hand.

There was a large compost heap that needed feeding, and flowers that needed their nutrients. One had to plan for the future.

And, in fact, all her practice in the greenhouse had done more than prepare her for the oncoming little wars. She felt as if she had been engaging in self-purification, cutting away the dead limbs that had grown out of the trunk of her old self. She was cleansing herself and casting off the refuse - not her sins, for those follow as surely as age, but the old mindsets and assumptions - and preparing for a new chapter of her life. To bloom, in this wild new earth.

The Part Where I Play the Devil

Let me tell you about the mad man and the wonders he performs.

My name is Alder Brenean. I am one of the aides to His Royal Highness, an Heir to the throne of the Amarr Empire, beloved charge and leader of his fiefdom, Aritcio Kor-Azor.

I have not been doing this job for long and already it is a marvel beyond anything I had imagined. I do not sleep much. I eat at irregular hours. I hold conversations - brief, fleeting words, and of a servile nature, but still spoken out loud and answered - with men who operate at the highest level of government, and with men who operate only in the shadows.

My lord has not always been loved. There was a time where he was considered merely a shrewd politician, fitter to rise than to rule. There was also a time where he had ruled so terribly, and done such awful things, that the people rose against him. A religious man intervened, a Speaker of Truths, and he saved my lord, but for such a price that I cannot speak of.

When he returned to his duties he was a new man. He was also a kind man, one who thought very hard about the lives of his subjects and how to better them. He has been on that mission ever since: To improve the lives of the people who serve him and whom, he strongly emphasizes, he serves in turn.

Part of that rejuvenation was to bring on a new group of people, ones who could help him rule his heirdom in the most humane, efficient way possible. I am one of his new recruits. I took my exams, and without divulging how I did on them, I can attest that I did not fail in my duties.

When I was interviewed the lord asked me whether I was faithful. I said I was. He asked me whether I was faithful to the people, the ruler, or my lord God. I said that as far as I was concerned, these three were indistinguishable. He smiled, for the first time in our interview. A day later I was brought on.

One of the ongoing missions begun by my lord is to travel around his kingdom, both to familiarize himself with his people - and them with him - and to ensure their lives meet the standards he has set for a Kor-Azor person. This applies equally to Holder and Commoner. It even extends to slaves, whom my lord believes are no less worthy, in their way, than the people they serve. In this he is assisted by a cadre of able people among whom I proudly count myself. I am trusted with secrets, and I believe my lord sees something in me that I may not see myself, for he routinely has me on hand in meetings of a most delicate nature. He does not ask my opinion, but he does enquire of my analysis on certain court matters. I suspect he may find my perspective of some use, unfettered as it is by actual experience with political intrigue.

Our agents had determined that the subjects on a particular planet in my lord's kingdom were ... not fomenting rebellion or anything of that sort, but certainly murmuring in increasing unrest. This had not, our agents stressed, been reported nor acknowledged in any official capacity, and thus my lord would have to be careful of political repercussions if he were to present himself as a peacemaker.

The main problem with this planet, they explained - and one of the factors in the unrest of its people - was the political machinations inherent in its rule. The people were governed by several lords - Holders all, of course - each of whom in turn owed their allegiance to a continental overseer. Those overlords served under a planetary representative, who in turn filed

regular reports directly to my lord and master. We noted that in his recent reports there had been no mention of any trouble.

This setup of governance was not the typical one in our Empire, and had been put in place long before my lord's ascension to heirdom. Not only was it tied down with strings that would prove costly to cut, but the planet's economy was so enmeshed in labyrinthine pacts by the ruling body that were my lord to intervene in a lawful and justifiable way, it would be a long time before we could even hope to wrest control of the planet over to us. This struck me as a strange state of affairs, but my lord explained that it was in fact a common one, and that the Heirs, even with their ecclesial authority, did not have as much secular power as they liked to pretend. He added that despite this state of affairs and our agents' reports of planetary issues, we should not necessarily assume that there would be trouble. Many of the most highly complex, politically sensitive problems of our age could be solved with a simple, elegant solution that more often than not did not tackle the problem head-on, but instead caused it to cease to exist. All one needed to do was find the right angle, and to act decisively, with the solution clear in one's mind. Never waver, he said, once you know what you need to do, and never lose heart.

We arrived in terrible weather. The space elevators, secure thought they might be, made me nauseous. It wasn't merely the travel - though the occasional sense of sideways pressure never failed to remind me that we were swaying in midair halfway between the earth and the stars - but the idea of traveling back from the skies and down to solid ground. There are people, and I know many of them, who prefer to stay on solid ground all their lives, making it the bedrock of their faith. I cannot do this. To me, ascension is literal; I feel that to be closer to God, Man needs to rise to meet Him. For some this might be a metaphysical ascension, for others a physical one. But to descend again, into a strange place where I would

meet people who lived their entire lives out of preference under what they saw as a closed-off, threatening, solid metal sky - that descent would truly put me among strangers to my faith.

My lord arrived to great fanfare, none of it of his own making. Speeches were expected and given, and we took a few days merely to travel between areas, visiting different locales and gauging the crowds' reactions to my lord's presence as much as his words. It became clear, through the murmurs and our hushed listening, that they did not want him here. They were receptive to his presence, which sounds contradictory to their standoffish reception but was not a surprise. To them he did not represent hope - and it was clear these people needed more hope - but merely another leadership figure in a long line that grew ever more threatening and unpopular the higher up they looked at it; and the fact that he was speaking to them with a message of positivity merely made him a novelty. Or, in some of the more hostile areas, a politician and a liar.

Nevertheless we sensed an openness, a subdued willingness to hear what he had to say. The people turned up in droves, and as much as they might not believe in my lord's words or what he stood for, they listened attentively to what he said.

I must add that the continental overseers did not quite follow suit. For every word of praise or support my lord spoke to the masses, the leaders, in turn, spoke a subtly negative one of stilted progress; or, even worse, they spoke not at all. Before too long it had become clear that they were very happy with this situation and had no intention of allowing my lord - the presumption these people had! - of allowing my lord to intervene, no matter how unstable and unpleasant the life on this planet had become for the poor commoners.

Thus the first few days and nights passed. I prayed in the evenings while my lord met with his private councilors. Many of them arrived at his quarters, spoke briefly, then left for parts unknown.

Eventually he knocked on my door and informed me that the next part of our journey here would commence. The time for speeches was over and the time for inspection had begun. If I had not known my lord's ways as well as I do, I would have thought of him in much the same terms as the poor, earth-bound people on this planet: As a politician, who, having spread his prattle, now intended to make a few symbolic appearances in mock fellowship with the locals. It was a rote item of schedule for many politicians in all parts of the world.

My lord, however, had his own reasons for ambling down this well-trodden path. The public appearances required neither his presence of mind nor his oratory faculties. He could attend, no matter how tired and worn, and have the brunt of the effort undertaken by those he was visiting. And at night, when no one saw, he could undertake the true purpose of this part of our mission.

The true measure of a people is not the attitude they have towards their leaders or visiting dignitaries, no more than you can judge children by how they speak to their parents or guests of the house. Those whose minds represent the truth of their selves will have the sense to keep up their masks at all times, or at least maintain proper decorum, and those who cannot even do that are usually too crazy to be useful as barometers of temper and mood. If you want to see how children truly feel, don't look at the way they behave towards their parents; spy on them and find out how they treat their siblings. You may have to wait until there is a crisis, something that puts pressure on the children to interact with each other, but

then you'll surely see it: Who pushes their brothers into a corner, and who embraces them.

Our people went out into the night to find out these things, and my lord did the same.

I can not think of any politician or ruler who does this. Even if they tried, I cannot imagine any who could do it to their advantage. It takes an extraordinary degree of precision, finesse, insight and ability to react to go out there into the open and be amongst people as if they were your own.

They would come in during the mornings, tired and worn, and confer with each other on the night's progress. My lord wore his protective gear, of course; morph fields that blocked him from sight and identification, and permeation-proof lightweight armor that would protect him from direct assault. He remained partially vulnerable to natural disasters - floods, fires and building collapses - but he took care with those, he said, and did not put himself at undue risk. My lord routinely did this on the trips he went on, and while I will admit that at first it gave me grave suspicions - I have never quite trusted those stories of high-borns going out in disguise among the public, suspecting as I do that their disguises were highly transparent and that their social explorations were carefully steered by their retinue - I soon noted that he had a skill for it, and a Commoner's instincts for survival, that served him well. He had never been found out.

I had always had my suspicions about my lord's nightly endeavors, and that they might be about more than merely sizing up the temperament of the local populace, but I was shocked when I saw him stumble in one morning, leaning against walls and clearly having a difficult time with movement. When I asked him whether I could be of assistance, he let out a little laugh and asked me to help him out of his armor. I did, and gasped when I saw his back.

Something had fallen on him, hard enough to rupture the armor's defenses, and it would likely have left bruises had there been any unblemished skin to affect. My lord's back was burnt and scarred, as if he had walked through the hellfires themselves. I asked whether he needed the services of a doctor, at which he let out a wheezing laugh and declined my offer. He had, he said, suffered the services of the doctors in the past. These days he preferred to let his own body rebuild itself

His hands and feet were sore, too, reddened and worn, but the gloves and boots he'd worn had luckily taken most of the brunt. They were gone, he said, their tatters left somewhere on the streets of this strange earth.

He did not explain the burns, but merely said they had taught him all he needed to know about inhabitants on this planet. They were not a distant or rebellious people, he added, but they needed a proper rallying cry, along with someone they could trust to shout it from above.

I did check the next morning's news and discovered there had been a massive fire the night before. Volunteers had arrived from all over in an attempt to extinguish it and save innocent people from harm. Pursuant to this I combed through any available articles for a mention of mysterious strangers, or a vision of some blurred corner in a picture of the fire, but found none.

Some might have felt he was wasting his time - not in saving people, which is never a waste, but in spending his time among them like this. But he has told me often that the big picture is made out of many small details. You must be among your own people, he says. You must. If you lose that connection, you stand to lose so much more.

He had his dreams that night; the ones where he screams. But in the morning he was very calm.

The penultimate part of our journey was a meeting with its planetary leader. As I explained, the economic and political situations on this planet were very much intertwined. Old independence agreements, most of a financial bent, had held off any direct changes brought from the outside, while the extremely complex interplay between various internal forces on the planet meant there was no way for my lord or anyone else even to squeeze in among the cracks as a private investor and start working any change in that manner. The intermediary continental leaders had given us no support. Unless we received backing from the planetary representative, we were going to have a hard time enacting any change in this place, no matter how positive.

The representative had invited us to his office, at the penthouse on one of the tallest buildings on the planet, but my lord politely declined the offer. Instead he asked that the meeting be held in his own quarters, which had been furnished with his personal belongings and were spacious enough to hold a platoon of soldiers. The representative was quick to accept this counteroffer, sending us a brief acknowledgment to that effect. I suggested to my lord that the man was eager to see us gone from here, and he nodded, adding that before this happened, changes would have to be enacted. He asked that I remain in the meeting as a secretary of events and a representative. When I enquired whether it would not behoove my lord to present a show of strength - a small cadre of stronger men to better face off the team our representative was likely to bring - he gave me a brief and not very humorous smile, and said that if his suspicions about the man and his persons were correct, he would not be bringing anyone at all.

I could scarcely imagine anyone insulting my lord like that, but I agreed to his wishes.

Shortly before the visit I went through the room to ensure nothing was out of place. I aligned my lord's copies of the Pax Amarria, and his selections of ancient scriptures. The banners were hung in the appropriate order, while the ceremonial weapons were kept, at my lord's request, well at the back. Subtly hidden among them was the Khumaak, a weapon not many Amarrians would dare keep in their possession. I had always had my own sentiments about my lord's reasons for keeping a copy of this bloodied relic among the more proper holy ones of our own people, but what happened later that evening cast its presence in a new and disconcerting light.

The administrator came in and was immediately hostile to my lord's suggestions. He said, in response to my lord's worries on the increased instability in various regions, that he did not intend to let anything disturb his rule of this planet. Leaving aside the dictatorial attitude reflected in that comment, it was a vicious and grossly inappropriate jab at my lord's attempts to improve the life of his constituents. I had seen some of the intermediate members of the heirdom act like this after my lord returned to his duties, though thankfully they were growing ever rarer.

My lord asked if the governor simply intended to quell any opposition from the commoners, and the governor said that he would. When my lord added that the Caldari governing board had thought the same, and that it had not turned out so well for them, the governor grew visibly flustered. He cast me a look - I had sat in a corner of the office and barely been noticed by the man - that seemed to imply I was responsible for my lord's approach, as if I were one of the poor Commoners he ruled and clearly disdained.

The governor told my lord that, in all honesty, life on this planet was going to continue unaltered, and that while my lord's benevolent probings - he actually used those words - were certainly laudable and guaranteed to carry favor with our newly elected Empress, they were far removed from the political reality of the world this governor ruled. There would be no change while he was in office, and given his political ties with others on this

planet, there would be no way that my lord could attempt to oust him, no matter how many of those filthy little people - that language again - he brought to bear.

I was speechless by the man's audacity. My lord, on the other hand, calmly got up, walked over to the governor and, smiling wide, extended his hand. It took the governor a few moments before he extended his own and smiled back. My lord said that the situation was clear and that he truly did appreciate the situation: That as long as the governor was in power, no matter what instability reigned, things would go on as before. He understood this, he said.

The governor made as if to speak, but my lord continued, saying that how unfortunate it was to have any unrest, tend as it did to spiral completely out of control. He added that despite this, and despite the fact that this unrest, once it did spiral out of control, would inevitably end up at the shores of his own royal offices, he did understand the governor's way of thinking. After all, he said at last, he had once held much the same viewpoint.

The governor fairly yanked his hand out of my lord's grasp, but maintained his smile.

My lord turned to me and politely asked me to leave.

I was surprised by this, but said nothing and got up from my chair. I walked quietly by the walls and towards the exit. My lord followed and met me at the doors, opening them for me. I gave him a quizzical look

"This is the part where I play the Devil," he said, with such a mixture of regret and relief as I have never heard from a man.

He saw me through and closed the doors after me.

Not knowing what else to do, I stood outside the room, waiting for the meeting to be over. I did not spy or eavesdrop; I could not have even if I had tried, for the walls and the doors were made of thick material. After a brief while, though, I heard raised voices, mostly from the governor. The voices rose until one of them became a shout. It was punctured by several muffled thuds, rising to a near-shriek, before falling quiet altogether.

The door opened a crack, and when I saw my lord's face peer through, I let out a long exhale that I had not even realized I'd been holding in. His hair glistened with sweat, though he seemed to have thoroughly wiped it off his face; and his eyes were wide open. He asked me to call up certain members of his retinue, for he had something they needed to take care of.

This I did. I did not mention to them or anyone else that I had seen the Khumaak lying on the ground behind my lord.

The day after, I saw a glut of news reports, all of them detailing the governor's disappearance. It seemed that his p.v. had malfunctioned while in mid-flight and crashed into the ocean, hours before his scheduled meeting with my lord. The news included a quote from Heir Aritcio Kor-Azor where he exclaimed not only his profound sadness over the loss of this great man, but his disappointment that their meeting on the political and economical future of the planet had not taken place. The papers went on to quote my lord in that he hoped he could still hold meetings with the various overseers of individual continental entities, and that these meetings could conclude with a better outcome than this terrible, terrible occurrence.

When my lord embarked on the last series of journeys over this strange earth, his speeches received a much better reaction from the workforce. This might have been helped by recent concessions announced by the continental leaders, who had decided to embark on massive audits of

commoner health, safety and economic troubles. Unfortunately, this sudden development meant they were all too busy to meet with my lord, but he took it with his usual good humor, and we started preparing for our departure.

As we were travelling back up to the waiting ship, in that hellish elevator, my lord turned to me and said that the lives of everyone on this planet would be improved. He asked if I was happy with this.

I understood the question that he had asked, and the one he had not. I said that yes, I was.

He smiled and said that was good; for he wanted everyone to be happy.

I believed him.

We rose to the skies.

Beasts of the Field

The scene is a bar in the Great Wildlands, at the outskirts of Minmatar space. It is very late at night.

A recent war in New Eden has spurred the three lost Minmatar tribes to return home. The Thukkers, wanderers of space, have been invited to rejoin the Republic, and are preparing for their section of space to become an autonomous part of the Minmatar collective. The Nefantar, also known as the Ammatars, who were thought to have been traitors against their own people in an older war, were revealed as protectors and invited back after their homeworld was ravaged. The Starkmanir, once thought extinct but kept alive through the good grace of the Nefantar, were rescued and offered to rejoin their people.

It is a time of war, and integration of these three tribes has temporarily taken a back seat to the efforts on the front lines. In the meanwhile, refugees and hopefuls from the tribes have situated themselves in refugee stations such as this one, waiting for permission, visas, housing and jobs in Minmatar space. The bar is in the middle of one of those refugee areas.

SISPUR, a Nefantar, sits at his table, drinking. ANNES, a Starkmanir, enters, gets a beer from the bartender, looks around at the empty hall, and eventually goes over to SISPUR's table, pulling up a chair.

ANNES

This free?

SISPUR

Sure.

ANNES sits.

ANNES

Didn't think anyone else would be here. Most everyone is at home, asleep.

SISPUR

Most everyone clearly doesn't have any worries about uprooting from their home, taking whatever stuff they could carry and plonking it down here while they wait to hear if the homeland will take them in at last.

ANNES

It'll take us in, there's no doubt about that. You know it as well as I do.
SISPUR takes a long sip from his drink.

SISPUR

Yeah, I guess I do. But I hate the waiting. I had a life back on Ammatar, sad as it was. I was appreciated in my own way. I don't like waiting to be taken into a place where I'm not appreciated, much as I want to get back.

TRIAT, a Thukker man, enters the bar, grabs a drink and sits down at the same table without a word.

TRIAT

How's it going?

ANNES and SISPUR look at him wordlessly.

TRIAT

Pretty dead here tonight. Thought I was the only one alive.

TRIAT laughs.

TRIAT

So what you guys doing up here so late? You selling?

TRIAT looks at the two stone faces, then laughs again.

TRIAT

Nevermind. Anyone catch the game recently?

TRIAT drains his glass, burps and waves at the bartender.

TRIAT

Hey! Fill-up!

SISPUR, in a frosty tone

So, is this the part where you show us your tattoos?

ANNES

Or puke all over the table, maybe?

TRIAT stares at them. The bartender comes over and fills his glass. There is a tense moment; then TRIAT rubs his face with his hands, sighs and chuckles a little.

TRIAT

Not coming off too well, am I?

SISPUR

I've seen Fedos with better personality, really.

ANNES

But you're welcome to join us, if you like. Not as if there's anything else to do right now.

TRIAT

Sorry, guys. I've been hanging out with the thuks too much. I'm Triat.

SISPUR

Sispur.

ANNES

Annes.

SISPUR

I'm the local traitor, and Annes here's the local revolution symbol, and we were just talking about how our motherland seems to want us here and gone all at the same time. What's keeping you up this time of night?

TRIAT leans back in his chair and gives this proper thought.

TRIAT

The same, I guess. I dunno if you know how we live, travelling through space and selling our stuff, but there isn't as much insecurity as you might think. If you're going to eke out some kind of existence up here, you need to be real good at being proactive, finding your own sources of raw material and working your own deals.

ANNES

And you think rejoining the Republic will damage that.

TRIAT

Well, if all that independence is completely taken away, and everything is out of your hands, you're going to get uncomfortable. Stop sleeping, maybe. Drink instead and act like a fool.

SISPUR

But you guys are joining up by choice, or at least you voted to have the Wildlands turn into some quasi-esque part of Republic space. You all retain your holdings and your independence. It doesn't seem like your life has to change that much.

ANNES

I don't think that's what he's after.

SISPUR

Oh?

ANNES

I think he's one of the Thukkers who's actually moving house, into the Republic

TRIAT nods.

TRIAT

There were votes, and talk of independence, but the writing really is on the wall for anyone not too stupid to read it. The Republic is going to go through an upswing. And as much as we Thukkers brag about living on the

edge, we do spend a lot more time than we'd ever admit simply trying not to look down.

ANNES

So you want safety.

TRIAT looks a little hurt at the comment.

TRIAT

I think it'd be nice simply to have a home again. Some base of operations where I can solidify, get my act together, and rely on tomorrow being the same as today. Somewhere that doesn't tremble as it moves. Or move at all, come to that.

SISPUR

And it looks like that's about to happen. So why're you awake, and drinking?

TRIAT

Because I think too much. Like I said, you stay proactive, always looking for connections and deals, which is about the same as looking for a way you can crowbar yourself into someone else's business. It's about being dominant. And that's impossible in this life I have now, when I'm waiting for some outside system to lay down the law for me.

TRIAT takes a drink

TRIAT

But it's better than that dead uncertainty. It has to be. How is it with you guys?

SISPUR

I'm pretty certain.

TRIAT

That's good.

SISPUR

I'm certain I'm going to be treated like crap over there.

TRIAT

Really?

SISPUR

Sure.

TRIAT

I thought you guys were heroes.

TRIAT points his glass at ANNES

TRIAT

For saving your asses. No offence.

ANNES smiles.

SISPUR

That was only a small group of people. The rest of us ...

SISPUR takes a deep breath.

SISPUR

The rest of us just tried to get stuff done the best we could. Live our lives and not leave anyone off any worse than we had to. We weren't traitors of the Minmatar cause, any more than we were saviors of the Starkmanir.

TRIAT

But people treat you that way.

SISPUR

Either or, yes. Scum of the earth or savior of the people. We're not humans in their eyes, we're symbols.

ANNES

No, I think we're the symbols.

SISPUR

Well, all right. True. Then we're the mirrors. People use us to see what's inside themselves. If they want to see Minmatar having been betrayed, ruined and left in tatters, then that's what we are to them. If they want everything to have worked out, with the saviors of the slaves and all that, then that's what we helped accomplish. They externalize their feelings on us.

TRIAT

We've had some of that, too. But we're used to people ragging on us. Comes with being a merchant.

ANNES

We're not used to it at all. I don't know what we're used to. I don't even know what we are.

TRIAT

People seem to think you're simpletons, for the most part.

ANNES

What do you think?

TRIAT takes a sip from his drink

TRIAT

I think you know when to be quiet, which is a lot more important than most people realize.

ANNES nods to SISPUR.

ANNES

I don't want to be accepted back to the fold.

ANNES nods to TRIAT.

ANNES

I don't even want to find a new home. I want my old home back. It wasn't an easy life, but it wasn't bad, either. It was just a life.

SISPUR

Half a life, some might say. And thanks to us - or despite us - you're now being brought into the full glory of what you can be.

ANNES

Apparently those people know me better than I know myself. You know what's funny? Those very same people are treating us Starkmanir like the beasts of the field.

ANNES lifts his glass close to SISPUR, and stares at him through it, wide-eyed.

ANNES

They'll go up to us and say, "THIS ... IS CALLED ... A KHUMAAK. CAN YOU SAY KHUMAAK?"

ANNES lowers the glass again, leans back and takes a sip.

ANNES

Apparently we're budding geniuses and slobbering retards all at the same time.

TRIAT

And you were taken from slavery and left floating in space, so now there's a huge amount of insecurity brewing in your ranks.

ANNES

Yeah. Because we really don't want to be ungrateful. Really, we don't. But we've suddenly had this new identity thrust on us, and have no idea who we are anymore. Just the same as you guys-

ANNES nods to SISPUR

ANNES

-and now we're just ... there. Like figures carved out of wood.

TRIAT raises his glass

TRIAT

Beasts of the field, man.

TRIAT, ANNES and SISPUR clink their glasses together. ANNES starts to say something, then stops.

ANNES

This ... drunken woman came up to me the other day. Thoroughly, thoroughly drunk. It was in some bar, before I was transferred to this camp. I was on my own, minding my own business when she said to me, way too loudly, that she wanted to take me home and have sex with me.

TRIAT and SISPUR's eyes go wide. TRIAT takes a sip of his beer to cover his surprise.

ANNES

She said she'd never done it with a Starkie

TRIAT chokes on his beer.

ANNES

Hey, you okay?

TRIAT nods and takes a moment to regain his composure, with ANNES looking on concernedly.

TRIAT

Uh, how'd you get out of that one?

ANNES smiles faintly and looks at the air.

ANNES

Who says I did?

TRIAT and SISPUR fall quiet.

ANNES

It wasn't that great. She had nice breasts, though.

TRIAT and SISPUR remain quiet.

ANNES laughs.

ANNES

What? You guys think I'm backwards, too? Come on.

TRIAT takes a small sip of his beer.

TRIAT

No, you're right. I guess we're all human.

SISPUR

And that's really it, isn't it? I mean, on paper my choice was either to leave or to remain in a politically unstable shithole. But even if it wasn't, I can't say that I'd still have stayed behind.

TRIAT

Even if you're being treated like you shouldn't be here? Or that you should be grateful? It's the last chance to turn around, you know. You could join up with the Gallente. They love us.

SISPUR

Even despite all that, no. I still want to go in. I don't know anybody in Minmatar space, and I'm certainly reminded of that on a regular basis, but I still feel like I know, if not the people, then the nation itself. You know?

TRIAT nods to ANNES and grins

TRIAT

He's certainly gotten to know the people.

ANNES

That one occasion aside, I don't even have the background that you guys have. All I've ever known is that I was destined to live in Ammatar space, growing up as part of a system that had little to do with the Minmatar and

everything to do with the Amarr. And to be honest, even if I'm treated like a freak, for the first time in my life I feel like I'm somewhere I belong. It's not that I think these people wanted me in their lives, but it's ... it's clear they needed *something*. There was a gap, there was this dark, raw opening where the people of my tribe were torn from the body of the Minmatar all those years ago, and the remainder of that body cannot rest until we're rejoined. If there's an adjustment period, and there will be, and if there's pain, and there'll certainly be plenty of that before we start to heal at last, then that's how it has to be. I have to accept that, and play my part in the healing the best I can.

ANNES looks at TRIAT

ANNES

Even if you left of your own accord - as a nation, I mean - and although you personally may be returning for your own reasons, I think you're partly brought back by the same force that pulled me in.

TRIAT

By being part of something greater? Yeah. Could be right. Some greater whole. Something outside ourselves.

SISPUR

And something we can be proud of, something that stands for the same things we do as individuals.

ANNES

And lets us stand for something, not merely what we represent but who we are.

TRIAT raises his glass, as does SISPUR and ANNES

ALL say, To Matar!

Under the Sea, the City

My father...

... well, never mind.

The Gallentean smiled when I hit him. I had him up against a wall, hands pinned by two other Provs, and I'd already cracked his ribs and beaten out a few teeth. He smiled. It wasn't that rictus, either, the one where they're in so much pain their faces tense all up.

"Enjoying this, eh?" one Prov said.

"Shut up," I said. I didn't like baiting, never had. What you gave the mark was clarity, a purpose to his pain. You made him understand, yes, that you enjoyed this and would gladly do it forever unless he made it stop, but that he could make it stop, too. Not right away, necessarily, but if he changed and found himself a new focus in life, there would be hope. The mark could never be made to feel like the entire thing was merely a heartless joke.

He was exhausted and his head lolled down. I put my hands under his chin, lifted it back up so he'd look me in the eyes.

"Why did you do those things?" I said. "We're here to stay. You're not changing that. All you're doing is making trouble." I raised my other hand and hit him hard in the solar plexus. Air and blood gushed out of his mouth. I would have to clean the jacket before going on the day shift tomorrow.

This time he lifted his head of his own accord. And he smiled again. One eye swollen shut, mouth a bloody mess. There was no defiance in that

smile, none of that stupid attitude you get from someone who's trying to ride the pain. No taunting, that weapon of the weak and powerless. He was somewhere else already and I hadn't put him there.

"Let him go," I said.

The Provs were stunned. I sighed, and wondered - and not for the first time - where the hell the force had gotten these guys.

"Next person goes deaf gets twelve weeks on the tundras," I said.

They dropped him like a bag of rocks.

We left him there, coughing blood on the scuffed snow.

I was twelve when I was accepted into the Caldari Army. I was strong for my age and I had long since learned what the world did to people.

It wasn't running away, though it was an escape. I had learned many things and one of them was patience. So I trained hard and I studied as much as I possibly could, though I knew that I'd never go as far as I'd like. What mattered to me was serving the State.

Some people, when they joined, seemed to have nothing to do but complain. Not loudly, and sometimes not even in words, but they resented their place and easily forgot just how much the army had done for them. It took us in, all of us, no matter how broken we were. It forgave, in its fashion. It gave rules and discipline, which was nothing new, but it never strayed from them, and that amazed me. If you screwed up, you paid the price and were usually allowed to carry on, and if you kept yourself in line you were left alone. You did what you were told.

I couldn't bear the standard, not always. I lost my temper. Something in me needed to lash out at the world. What I got from the army wasn't a cure - the anger was a part of me that couldn't die without leaving me diminished - but an environment where I could take it to the edge without jumping off. I could be myself as much as was possible without the threat of failure.

So while I didn't move upwards I crawled a slanted sideways path, rising through persistence rather than brains or kissing ass. That was all right. I accepted that. And when the time came they needed people to take care of our new world - this smoking crater of a homeland, this iceworld they called Caldari Prime - they didn't come to the ones who had brains, for brains go remarkably soft on frozen tundras, and they didn't come to the ass- kissers, for their lips would've chapped in the cold. They came to the ones who knew damn well how to survive.

Morning after, and another meeting of the city overseers. I paid the best attention I could, but I was still tired from last night's dark round and kept zoning out.

I did appreciate the necessity of these meetings. We needed to hold an entire planet using a force half staffed with thugs. Equal measures of peacekeeping and intimidation had kept a lid on the angrier locals - I took an active part in these - but that wouldn't be enough for the average man on the street. Life had to be kept going, rolling on from one day to the next. It was a supreme irony that in a society whose governance had been torn from the hands of one power by another, our greatest efforts went into convincing people that nothing much had changed. They needed to stay indoors late at night, and luxuries had been restricted, but this was nothing new on a planet made of ice. What they really needed was to be left alone,

to not be reminded of how much had changed now that they seemed to be settling into some kind of a groove.

So we had evacuated one of their underwater cities, a massive place encased in a polyglas dome, and we had taken all the major troublemakers - the ones whose absence would be less a diplomatic problem than their continued presence - and we had put them down under.

Nobody knew what went on in that place. There were plenty of guesses, and everyone knew someone who claimed insider info, but talking about it did little more than generate rumors. The higher-ups didn't mind. We'd even subtly been given leave to spread some rumors of our own. I think the way they figured it, the more people talked and worried about that place, the less of a risk that any of the locals would want to go there. We already had hundreds of thousands, but the dome could room millions.

We were scrolling through the list of new recruits - we call them 'recruits' because it sounds so much better than 'abductees' - when a face caught my attention. It wasn't bruised and had a conspicuously full mouth of teeth, but it was unmistakably the man I'd been working on the night before.

"Stop, hold, wait a sec," I said. "What'd this one do?"

The presenter checked his records and listed a series of crimes against the State, some more severe or ideologically motivated than others. Many of them were familiar - were, indeed, the reason we'd seen fit to have our little talk with him - but there was a spate of offences that absolutely marked him for down under and which I had nevertheless missed when going over his records before the beatings. I found this very uncomfortable and asked when he'd committed those crimes.

The presenter checked the data again and raised an eyebrow. "Quite recently. He got through three of them yesterday, between eighteen hundred hours and evening call."

Which put it after the time I'd last checked his record, but before we'd caught him. He knew he was going down under.

I thought about him. That smile.

My ears heard my mouth say, "I'm going with him."

The presenter blinked.

"In the shuttle. The shipment he's on when he goes down under. I'm going to be on it."

In the silence I felt an explanation was called for, but the best I could muster was, "I want to be sure he doesn't make trouble."

I kept quiet for the rest of the meeting, but I had some friends of mine do a little datamining afterwards.

The shuttle had several dozen individual cells, each of which contained one prisoner, one bunk bed and one vidscreen embedded in the wall. It also had a small area reserved for the accompanying guards.

The underwater trip would take us a little over twelve hours. It could be made faster, but expenses were kept to a minimum with these guys. Their cells were soundproofed and the vidscreens, which were cheap and kept behind unbreakable barriers, were voice-activated. We could have drugged the prisoners for the duration of their trip, but that would have brought us

into, hah, muddy waters. You were only supposed to administer drugs to prisoners if you had a clear reason to consider them a threat, and in doing so you brought the whole process one step closer to barbarism. Strictly speaking we didn't have to provide them with any kind of way to pass the time - there was a clause somewhere in the law that allowed us to call this a temporary solitary confinement, much as the one in regular prisons - but leaving a civilian in an empty cell for twelve hours with nothing to do but think would not make for a nice disembarkment down under.

Besides, there was one person I wanted to keep awake.

When I entered his cell he was sitting sideways on the bunk bed, looking pointedly at the wall. His bruises were dark purple and yellow.

He didn't seem to recognize me at first. When he did, he visibly stopped breathing for a few seconds, then let out a long exhalation and smiled. He was afraid of me, but he knew something I didn't, something he thought would keep him safe. That was good. That could be worked with.

I went to the wall across from him and sat on the floor. Our interrogators believed in taking on a dominant position; I didn't. I believed in starting small, from a weakened position, and letting the subject build an image of you in his mind far greater than the real you.

There was something about his smile. They'd given him new teeth, but there was something more. It was almost as if I'd seen it before.

When it hit me a few second later, it hit like a hammer, and I was glad I was already sitting.

He noticed me gasp, and his smile faded. "What?" he said.

"I know you," I said.

"You beat me up a few days ago," he said.

I leaned my head to one side. It was there; it was definitely there. I couldn't believe I hadn't seen it before.

"I knew someone once," I said. "A kid. Tough one, as it goes. He'd had a rotten time of it, been smacked around and plenty worse, but he had that look. I still remember seeing a picture of him, taken when he enlisted. It said, I am free. I've gone beyond. Nothing you do will matter now, nothing you say will reach me now. I belong to something greater."

His eyes narrowed and I knew I had him.

"You've joined the rebels." I said.

The smile returned.

"You're on your way to down below of your own goddamned intention," I said. Not in a tone of surprise, but annoyance. "Nobody does that. So you have a plan. But you couldn't do it alone, not if you want to make a difference. So you've joined the rebels, and you have someone waiting for you down below."

He kept quiet. I had not asked him a question, nor given him an order.

"You have no idea what you'll be in for, down there," I said. "Nobody does. So you couldn't possibly be planning a coup, or a disruption, or anything that requires a reasonable degree of forethought. And you have no specialties; I've checked. All that you have is a life like everybody else."

"Not anymore," he said.

"Well, no," I conceded. "Not anymore."

"Not after you came."

"Let's not get into the whole occupation business. It wasn't my call any more than yours," I said. I waited a beat before adding, "I'm sorry for your family."

"That's alright," he said with complete equanimity. He was leading me on. He didn't care about any of that. The moment we'd moved away from down below, he'd gotten more comfortable with answering back.

He'd given up his old life, and he had no reason to believe he could make anything constructive of his new one. Time to push him.

I got up, brushed myself off and said, "I'm turning this shuttle around. Have a nice day."

I had not even taken a step before he let out an outraged, "What?"

"You heard me. I can't let you get anywhere near that place. You're a security risk."

"You can't do this," he said. "I have to get down there. I demand you take me down there." The smile was gone. His hands trembled.

"Well, that's a first," I said. I felt for him. I truly did. Had my dream been snatched away from me like this, it would've been the end of my life, too.

He got up. I thought he was going to attack me, but instead he backed himself into a corner. "Don't come any closer," he said.

"Hey," I said, "I wasn't planning to. I'm going to leave this cell now and-"

"I'm carrying a bomb," he said.

Some words change everything. 'Sniper' is one. I'm told 'love' is another. 'Incoming' is pretty big these days, being the bastard child of 'invasion'.

"You were strip-searched and scanned before you got onboard. Anything conspicuous in your system would've been flushed out on the spot. You're lying," I said, more out of hope than any real conviction.

"Transfusions," he said.

I was stunned.

It was possible, in theory, to replace certain bodily fluids with explosive counterparts. You could alter a person's glands to produce the new type, so long as you ensured his body had enough raw materials to draw on, or you could swap out the old type for the new along with an agent that would keep it from breaking down.

It was hideously expensive, extremely unreliable and utterly destructive. Even if he

never set off the explosive reaction, a person who underwent something like this would die of massive organ failure within a few days. The body was not happy being turned into a chemical weapon.

I'd had my agents do some datamining, and it had revealed connections between this man and ten others on this very same shuttle. All of them had committed crimes serious enough to warrant transport down under, but worse, all of them were connected to an earlier transport that just yesterday had brought a lot of fresh people to the city. Gods knew how many of them were walking bombs.

"You were going to blow up the city," I said. I couldn't believe it.

He stared at me, silent and defiant.

"It wouldn't be enough with just one of you, but with everyone you know on this shuttle and all your friends who got in there yesterday. You..." I simply could not get my head around this. "There are hundreds of thousands of people down there. Your people."

"They're dead to us," he said. "Everyone is, once they're sent down under. For all we know it may be an empty husk."

"But you're hoping it's not," I said, the realization dawning in merciless light. "You're pulling a Nouvelle Rouvenor. You're going to find some spot and you're going to goddamn detonate yourselves, in the hope you can crack the dome and destroy the entire city. And then you're going to get it all blamed on us."

He smiled again, and I remembered feeling that smile on my own face, all those years ago.

"So now you have a choice," he said to me. "You can let the shuttle dock and send me off. You'll leave. I'll stay. Whatever happens is no longer your concern."

"Or we turn this thing around and you blow it to bits."

He shrugged.

"Those friends of yours that arrived yesterday?" I said. "They're still in the investigation lounge. But you knew that. What you didn't know is that I had them tagged, which means they'll be held there until I give the go-ahead."

"You're lying," he said.

I was. "Maybe I am," I said.

He got to his feet.

"This shuttle is getting turned around," I said.

He lifted his hands and looked at them, as if he were seeing them for the first time.

I told him, "I knew someone once who thought he had all the answers. Took a while before I realized he didn't; he just stayed in control of the questions."

He looked at me now.

"Last time I saw him was through a bulletproof pane of glass. I was leaving and he wasn't. I'll never forget that expression. I was going somewhere he wasn't, I had become something he would never be, and he knew it."

"You're a vicious thug," he said to me.

"I'm a part of the State," I said. "And you are not. No more than he was. And his gutted expression, all those years ago, is the same one you have now."

I raised my own hands. "He would have taken you up on your offer. I will not."

As he started to move, I lunged for him.

Kameiras

Federation Transcript, FIO Report #453-RT3.

Security Level: Red-Gamma-Alpha

The Kameiras Program.

Throughout its history, the austere Amarr Empire has conquered many peoples. In its expansion it has encountered fractured Neolithic tribes, egalitarian societies, industrial behemoths and everything in between. All were crushed and enslaved: Some were eventually integrated into Amarrian society, some remain slaves and others were simply forgotten - for only the largest societies are recorded in any detail. On the Ni-Kunni homeworld, for example, one whole continent was inhabited by a fierce indigenous people who were judged worthless for anything other than the most lowly slave castes. Their rich culture and heritage has long since been eradicated and their people reduced to mere half-breeds scattered among the countless multitudes.

With improved military oversight, this tactic of burnt earth and ruined people eventually changed. In its conquests, the military made note of the most naturally warlike, aggressive and resilient and dubbed them Martial Races. It then indoctrinated these into its armed forces, mostly as expendable cannon fodder to be used up instead of the righteous chosen of God. Some excelled, and achieved such repute that they became a staple of the Amarrian military machine. The most successful - and, indeed, feared - of these are the Kameiras.

The Kameiras are one of the products of the infamous Human Endurance Program (H.E.P.) that the Amarr ran on their Minmatar slave populace. It began as an attempt to measure the Minmatar tribes' durability and

effectiveness when it came to various labor tasks - to see how far they could be pushed before breaking, much like a tool would be stress-tested. Over time it evolved into much more than that, becoming a tale of horror for the Minmatar as Amarr scientists began to explore the true limits of their body and psyche.

The program came to the attention of the military who, having witnessed the tenacity and ferocity of the Minmatar defiance first hand, were keen to explore their uses in combat. The H.E.P. scientists, eager to get military backing, began research into methods to re-educate the strongest Minmatar slaves and train them into obedient, effective soldiers. Disappointingly, initial training methods proved mostly ineffective. The idea was thought to have merit, however, and a dedicated team was assigned to advance the program.

Finding it difficult to train unruly adult Minmatar warriors in obedience and faith, the team opted for a more extreme measure. They began a breeding program, selecting the best specimens from their slave population and creating the strongest of offspring, raising them according to a scientific regime they had devised. The regime went through several revisions based on data gleaned, and was altered considerably in the initial stages until it became the Kameiras program that exists today.

The beginning

Every maturing fetus of the breeding program is rigorously monitored, subject to a series of genetic tests to see if it is developing to the exacting standards of the Kameiras. If the specimen is found to be genetically unworthy – if it would be born short, weak, sickly or afflicted with any of a multitude of genetic abnormalities - then the pregnancy is terminated. Any surviving neonates are given over to a specialized care centre where Amarrian females take responsibility for their upbringing in supervised

crèches until the age of six, whereupon the infant enters its first Subigo House, a place of training and education.

Junior Subigo

Here the subject begins a vigorous physical regime. The Amarrians have learned that this is the most effective time to begin adapting the Minmatar body for military duty. Increasing in pace and vigor as the body grows, the training regime pushes the child to an established limit that will not adversely affect its later growth. The youth is schooled in combat arts and forced to attend an extensive indoctrination program. This program forms the foundation of maintaining control over the Kameiras when they are fully fledged adults. They are institutionalized into the Amarrian faith - taught about the Amarr God and his love for them, their place in his creation and their duty to uphold his law for the good of all. For all intents and purposes, they are taught that they too are Chosen. Although this continues to be a hotly debated topic within certain circles of the Empire, time has proved it to be the most effective form of control.

Senior Subigo

Most survive the rigorous Junior Subigo and undertake the testing trials at the age of fourteen. If they survive this tortuous experience they are moved onto the Senior Subigo House, where they are divided into combat-sized groups. In teaching them to act as part of a greater whole, their instructors take their training to a whole new level: The young neophytes are schooled in a wide range of skills including strategy, tactics, survival, personal combat and the use of firearms, body armor as well as wide range of military equipment and vehicles. If they survive this intense period they then undertake the final and most testing trial. If this is passed, they are accepted as adepts; if they fail, they do not return.

Kameiras

At the age of nineteen the trained Kameiras adepts are indoctrinated into their operational unit and serve as junior members until they have blooded themselves in combat. The Amarrians retain strict control over the Kameiras, as they have by necessity raised intelligent soldiers that can react and adapt autonomously to varied combat situations. Their education nearly always keeps them from questioning their place. A soldier sees much, though, so the Kameiras do not serve as one company but rather are attached to standard armed companies as their strike force, maintained apart from the regular infantry. The very nature of their purpose - to serve as special operation units and front line forces - means that in the very rare cases where a Kameira might suspect something is not well with the world, he doesn't remain alive long enough to act upon it. That being said, it is often true that the Kameiras troops are more devout than their true Amarr cohorts. They have been indoctrinated and trained for this way of life since they were born, and they know or want nothing else. For the most part, Kameira units are led by Amarrian officers. An individual may be promoted some way up the command chain if he is deemed loyal enough, but these cases are relatively rare, and individuals that achieve this sort of modest rank are kept under close surveillance.

However, certain traits tend to creep in. Most are relatively trivial things that are easily brushed aside by their officers; for example, Kameiras troops are allowed to keep their hair long, something not permitted and strictly enforced in the regular Imperial army. There is one tradition among the Kameiras troops that is particularly abhorrent to the Amarr, who have banned it in theory and only relented in practice due to negative effects on morale of the otherwise indomitable Kameiras units. Thus, the tradition is officially banned, but under the furtive light of dark moons it continues.

In the aftermath of battles, Kameiras gather what bodies they can of their fallen and burn them in great funeral pyres. This is done in a matter-of-fact way, without emotion. Once the fires have burnt out the surviving Kameiras

cut themselves and then rub the ash from the pyres, the ashes of their dead brethren, into their open wounds. In this way, a permanent mark is formed. The Kameiras carry their dead with them, and the mark serves as a lasting reminder of those who fell. An old soldier may have many scars of the lost covering his body and in this way can come to look akin to his free Minmatar brethren. No one knows how this tradition crept in - not even the Kameiras themselves - but it now persists throughout all units in the Kameira war machine.

Chained to the Sky

It was the morning of the twenty-fifth of the month in the district of Torsad-Laur, and the dread orb of the Amarr sun was just beginning its slow climb from the shimmering puddle of the horizon. As soon as his cold feet hit the warmth of the platform he felt the familiar throb and whistle of the quarter as it began like a great lumbering beast to rouse itself, scratching and snuffling in the umber haze of dawn.

The young Minmatar passed the mudbrick walls of the terminal with its sputtering praydrones and its ragged rush of beggars, felt the dark heady breeze caress the back of his neck as the day's first frying smells slithered dustborne into his nostrils. He hadn't missed Dam-Torsad, it was true; but now, upon returning, he had to give it its due. Few places in the universe – certainly none he had visited – possessed in the same proportions that uneasy mingling of purity and rot which forever straps the Amarr soul to the rack of its own contradiction.

Izoni Square was much the same, he reflected as he exited the terminal. Even at this early hour business was booming. Handmade cutlery, bootleg holosymphs, off-world condiments of varying legality, scriptural terp mods, Adakul manuals, the latest in carefully faked Caille leather. Plumes of smoke rose from innumerable stalls. A thousand smells wrapped around each other in the thick air, creating the unique melange that was the hallmark of Torsad-Laur and the reason for its nickname, the Cauldron. Most likely the flesh of every creature in New Eden was being cooked somewhere in this sprawling expanse, animal souls ascending from the shadow of the city's bladed spires to find salvation in the copper skies. Groups of slaves passed through without cease, but whereas in other parts of Dam-Torsad they would be ghosts among the multitude, here they comprised the essence of the district's beating heart.

Resisting the temptation to indulge in broiled blackfowl, he made his way past Chopamaia Yard, where children played among the cracked statues

and worshipers swayed in communal rapture, their god-intermediaries whispering sweet eternity to them through embedded earpieces. He passed under the arch of Nekater, with its sad white little angel-guardians that every day shed tears of stone into the currents of beleaguered humanity flowing underneath them. He navigated the narrow cobbled corridors of the quarter's south side, weaving among the people and gradually quickening his step until, some ten minutes later, he arrived at a squat flat-topped house nestled between two much taller ones. The road wound back sharply in both directions here, so that the little house gave the impression of being right outside the curve of a giant horseshoe. He looked around and sniffed the air. Flowers and ozone still.

"Da?" He rapped a few times on the basement door. There was no answer initially, but his father hadn't been a fast man even in his younger years. A faint glimmer of light appeared inside the door's window, then the door was thrown open. "Darmad!" shouted the old man. "Father," he replied, smiling and stepping inside. The two embraced, then exchanged the happily abashed pleasantries of a parent and child who haven't seen each other in several years.

His father, Engru, was a tenth-generation indentured professor to The Hedion Academy Torsad subcampus, and a specialist in the ancient texts of several nations the Amarr had conquered in the course of taking over the planet they now stood on. His days were spent in his little basement translating manuscripts and taking notes and reconstructing languages several thousand years dead. Over the course of his time living out on the coast Darmad had become accustomed to plenty of fresh air, and now the familiar overpowering mustiness of his father's apartment – a consequence of several dozen plants, intractable mold and very little ventilation – made it hard for him to breathe. They decided to visit a taproom located not far from the house, where they could take in their morning meal.

"How are things at the research facility?" asked his father as they ambled along the broadstreet, occasionally ducking a hoverstroller or an autocaravan. "Is your holder still giving you trouble?"

"Not really, not anymore," said Darmad. "He's been more accepting of me since that small success of mine last year."

"I was proud of you for that one," said his father.

"I'm surprised you even heard. It wasn't really such a big deal," said Darmad.

"A polymer synthesis technique that could revolutionize high-altitude building materials? Sounds like a big deal to me, son."

"I don't know about revolutionize," said Darmad. "And remember, as far as everyone's concerned it wasn't Darmad Intajaf who made the discovery, it was his grand highness the good Lord Lucretio Kor-Azor."

"Of course," said his father. "No use in the slaves mucking up the works by getting famous, is there? We're here. Mind your step, now. Welcome to the Font."

The place was basically one tremendous elongated corridor, a tall narrow space floored with cork and festooned with dormant string lights which hung powerless between corbets set high on the rough stone walls. From the corbets great plants of all shapes and sizes arced and drooped and spread their branches across the airspace. "I can see why you like it here," remarked Darmad as they took their seats in a small booth with synthetic leather padding just a touch too red for its surroundings.

It was midmorning and the place was sparsely occupied. As was typical of Torsad-Laur alone among the districts of Dam-Torsad, those few who were in here mostly kept to themselves. Dam-Torsad's people had a great general tendency to stay in direct active communion with one another while in public, either chanting or praying or speaking loudly and at great length with their companions. At all waking hours their environment encouraged them, subtly and unsubtly, to do this; through praydrones and billboards and other disruptive phenomena, a habitual preference for communion over solitary contemplation was constantly reinforced in the populace. The Font,

meanwhile, had people indulging in all manner of solitary idiosyncrasy. At one table a heavysset girl with a pretty face sat munching on something, absently combing her thick hair. At another, a man rolled a cigarette contemplatively in the slanted rays of the morning sun while his companion read a book. Darmad felt relieved to be back. It was as if the chain around his soul had been loosened slightly.

They passed the morning in idle chatter, eating a light breakfast, content to simply enjoy each other's presence. At around midday, morning prayer being over, the place's regulars started filtering in from the busy streets of the quarter. His father on more than one occasion remarked that the crowd was strange this morning, that there floated about a faint apprehension quite atypical of this bustling straightforward place. Shortly after midday, Darmad was in the middle of relating an amusing anecdote when a great shout rose from the middle of the room and a figure detached itself from the throng.

"Well, look here!" It was a big man whose black beard and receded hairline framed a face deeply carved with smile-wrinkles. Darmad slid over one seat and the man sat down next to him.

"Hello, Crofton," said Engru.

"Engru," replied Crofton. "Your houseborn's back, I see."

"Just for a short while," interjected Darmad with artificial cheer, annoyed at being spoken to in the third person. "How've you been?" The old discomfiture returned; growing up, he had always by turns been impressed with Crofton and frightened of him.

"Oh, you know. Keeping busy," said Crofton. He flagged down a waiter and ordered kacha root tea. "Perused the day's palaver?" he said to no one in particular as the waiter carefully poured the dark green liquid into his cup.

Engru nodded faintly. "Vagaries and hearsay as usual, I suppose."

"I don't think so. Not this time," said the big man. The waiter finished pouring the tea and bowed. Crofton grabbed the cup and perpetrated a gregarious slurp.

"Pray tell," said Engru.

Crofton began to speak in the deliberate diction that was his custom. His words were habitually infused with gravity, and propelled by his powerful voice they became missiles of rhetoric. He had been a leader once, an orator capable of moving men and mountains, but after consenting to a speaking engagement in Ammatar space he had been captured and given to the same university subcampus as Engru. This was Amarr's preferred way of silencing her enemies. Killing was too crass. It acknowledged too much fear. The real victory didn't lie in brute extermination (except in cases where required on a large scale for logistical or geographical reasons), but in defeating your picture of things with theirs.

Of course, particular sorts of people are immune to such tactics, and Crofton was of that general sort. A stodgy Brutor warrior-poet who had never had much truck with rigid self-image or outward appearance, he had never seemed to mind his lowered status. Toward his masters he indulged in the sign language of submission expected of every slave, but his area of expertise – representational systems of governance and their application in a pan-planetary setting – gave this "democrat savage" a certain degree of leeway toward the bemused scholars of Hedion. Time and time again, regardless, he had had to accept punishment for expressing his heretical views too loudly; but to Crofton, there were worse things than the electric lash.

Most of the people who made this quarter their home were similar to Crofton, though the vast majority were high-generation houseborn, slave children to slave children. Artists, musicians and academics, preachers and weirdoes and vagrants and madmen, all played their parts in the great cruel mechanism of the empire. It was said in the high halls of Amarr society that Torsad-Laur was the only slave-inhabited quarter where the gentry could walk at night without being attacked – and where, moreover, one could

even have a conversation with a slave, if one were inclined toward an evening's debasement.

"You feel the tension in the air, I can tell," Crofton was saying. "When was the last time people were set on edge this bad?" Another grand slurp and his cup was finished. He gave an imperious wave toward the waiters' corner, then returned his attention to his boothmates.

"I know a man at the Civil Service office over in Torsad-Unan," he continued. "He's not technically supposed to consort with me, but we maintain a bit of a clandestine correspondence. All very romantic and revolutionary. He wrote me," and here he leaned in towards the center of the table conspiratorially, "that something very very big was afoot. High-stratus decisions, perhaps as high up as the new Chancellor." Abruptly he stopped, then turned to look at Darmad. "You work for a Kor-Azor, don't you?"

"The technical term is 'owned by,' but yeah," replied Darmad, somewhat acridly. "Distant cousin to Chancellor Aritcio several times removed, but a Kor-Azor."

"And you've heard nothing?"

"No one at my facility ever hears anything," replied Darmad.

"Ah," said the big man. Pensively he rubbed the brim of his saucer. "Normally I would dismiss it as a flight of fancy – my friend is a young man, and prone to those – but the general mood of the Cauldron today seems to support his notion that something is going on."

"Have you spoken with anyone around here?" asked Engru.

"Not yet," replied Crofton. There was a period of silence at the table as the waiter returned and refilled the cup in front of him. Presently the waiter left, but the silence remained.

Looking around, Darmad saw that the crowd in the place had dwindled significantly. As the other two men at the booth began to take their own

notice, he became aware of a cadenced din, a distant whisper traveling over the city, reverberating off its tired walls.

"What is that?" said his father. Crofton stood up and made to exit the place, with the other two following. Just outside, standing on the portico which overlooked the gigantic expanse of Izoni Square, they squinted against the searing midday sun and were able to make out, through the plumes of smoke and dust, the face of Empress Jamyl on several billboards around the area's far perimeter. Despite the preternatural hush of the assembled thousands who had broken with their daily business to listen, the trio were unable to make out her words.

Darmad had the sudden queasy notion that there was going to be some great change to adjust to, and giving up the useless effort of trying to understand the words he sat down heavily on the portico's stone floor, cold in the shade of the canvas canopy. The two older men stood stock still, craning their necks comically toward the indifferent skies.

A young man came tearing up the steps to the portico, his incoherent screaming preceding him by almost a full minute. Crofton stepped into his path and the smaller man barreled into him with a thudding impact. Crofton swiftly grabbed him by the shoulders. "Relax. Relax!" he shouted at the man. "What is it?"

The young man made a conciliatory hand gesture and gently shook free. "The slaves," he said, panting. "We're... freeing them. Us. We're being freed." He coughed.

"What?" said Darmad.

"They're freeing the slaves," said the man, still coughing.

Engru blinked, once, twice. "I'm sorry. What?" he said.

"Us," he panted. "Minmatar, ninth-gen and up, all the preachers, all the academics."

Crofton just stared.

The young man pointed vaguely out toward the tremendous crush of people, some moving to and fro, some wide-eyed, others on their knees.

From the far end of the Cauldron, a roar was rising.

"No good. No good," said Crofton, shaking his head. He had just repeated the phrase "No good can come of this" about twenty times, and was now down to simply "No good." Around him, the Font was packed with people thrashing and flailing amid laughter and cries and shouts, each person reeling in their own way from the unexpected crumbling of a wall in their mind.

The three had spent the afternoon lost in the wash of people, watching preachers and podiumites deliver sermons and speeches, watching street musicians play instruments they had up until now not been allowed to touch, watching hustlers and beggars in crazed jubilee on the city's whirling boulevards. When they had returned to the Font in the late afternoon to discover their booth taken they had repaired to the end of the bar and promptly switched from tea to alcohol. With the string lights now draping a warm glow over the encroaching darkness, Crofton had begun to elaborate.

"It's a brilliant public relations coup, I'll give her that much," he was saying. "She's definitely figured out all the angles here. Anyone who points out the practical flaws will be drowned in a torrent of righteousness. Never mind that up until a few hours ago, these people were all subhumans unworthy of the legal rights bestowed upon proper people. The fact that it's a cynical political maneuver will be completely drowned out by the cackling of the righteous."

"What makes you think it's entirely cynical?" replied Engru. "Perhaps she's had a change of heart. 'Who can tell what winds yet sway the soul of man?'" he quoted, from a favorite scriptural passage.

"Woman," corrected Darmad, quite unhelpfully.

"States are not run on compassion, Engru, not even states that are built around religion," said Crofton. "Speaking of which – what do you think will happen to the slaves who have practiced their own religions? If they want their marriages and families registered as legal units, they'll need to take up the state religion. How many of them will be able to afford the registration? How many of them will be able to afford or figure out how to pay their own taxes, for that matter? Who's going to teach millions upon millions of freshly minted freemen how to survive within the system? She's not banking on these people to stay, let me tell you that much."

Neither of the other two said anything. Darmad was about to speak, but just as he opened his mouth a young woman with a tray of drinks fell foul of the crowd and crashed into him. After helping her up and sending her on her way, he turned back to his companions and gave a little shake of the hand, sprinkling droplets of grain alcohol onto the countertop. "Getting rowdy in here," he remarked.

"That's another thing," said Crofton without skipping a beat, his great head swiveling around to scan the crowd. "She knows this will cause them to get so excited that there will be mass gatherings in some places which are going to turn ugly. More fodder for the spin machine."

Darmad made his own survey of the place. At every table and every booth, on chair arms, in laps, on table corners and windowsills, the smiling faces of young people and old people commingled. Though he generally considered himself a rational man not given to easy emotion, he nonetheless found to his surprise that it was almost impossible not to get swept up in the roiling elation that pervaded the room. You had only to look up and you would feel it.

He looked back at Crofton, who had his head cocked to the side and was staring at one of his own elbows, which rested on the bar. It was impossible to see what he was thinking. He snuffled once, then ordered another drink.

"Ploys, ploys, they're all ploys," he began again. "She wants the docile ninth-gen Mins to go scurrying back to the Republic and start the

Reclaiming for them. She wants everyone to see how well-behaved they've managed to make them. As to the rest of them, she just wants to make it known how they function better shackled than free."

"Us."

"Pardon me?"

"Us, Crofton. The rest of *us*. You and I are free, too."

A small silence, then Crofton said: "The thought never even crossed my mind." He downed his drink.

Darmad suddenly had one of those small epiphanies that seemed to him only to take place when circumstance and mindset conspired in the human soul to strike a perfect chord, one that would allow the recipient for a few precious seconds to reverberate in unison with the rest of creation. He was standing with his back to the bar, looking at a beautiful girl who stared back at him from one of the booths further along the opposite wall. There was a look in her eyes that he would see in every face around here, for the rest of the night and well beyond.

"I'm not so sure it's as bad as you're making it out to be," he said, turning back to Crofton. "I mean, look around you. Are you even taking note of what's happening? She may have, as you said, figured out all the angles, but I don't think her conniving soul even realized what freedom – the *idea* of the thing she's just given us, you see, the *concept* of it – does to a man."

"What does it do to a man?" asked Crofton in a low voice, barely audible over the raucous din.

"Well. It gives him hope, I suppose."

At this Crofton laughed and laughed. He smiled a strange smile and then laughed some more and then fiddled with his glass and looked at Engru, and then he looked back down and grimaced, and just like that a little tear dropped into his glass. With a great deal of dignity he retrieved his coat and made his excuses, and when he said goodbye he didn't look in Darmad's eyes but only at his chest.

The boy and his father sat silently through the night, savoring in their souls the bittersweet taste of history while Dam-Torsad's, and the entire Empire's, myriad dramas mighty and small unspooled around them. Come morning, with the revelries dying down, the pair made their way to the door.

"Boy."

"Yes, da?"

"Proud of you for that one, too."

He took his father's elbow and gingerly the two of them made their way down and out, out into the bright and terrible morning.

“Two Deaths”

The hangar floor, decorated as it was, had barely a dozen people waiting. Banners of the Amarr Empire slowly swayed in a wind that seemed omnipresent and cold.

The small crowd was a mix of station crewmembers, carefully vetted, and Royal Guard staff devoted to Empress Jamyl I and loyal to the death. Their conversation was kept to a minimum. They did not dislike one another, but the circumstances felt so solemn and vaguely unpleasant that most of them suspected they would be going their separate ways after the whole damn business was over, trying to wash away the memories through an infinite pour. A ship was soon to arrive, bearing the corpulent symbol of everything evil and spiteful in the world they knew.

In the Gallente Federation, down on Gallente Prime, on an open arena specifically adapted for this very occasion, a ship hovered into view. The crowd, numbering in the millions, was already reaching boiling point, having been pumped up by political speeches interspersed with popular entertainment. Here and there, massive towers holding building-size vidscreens broadcast every possible glimpse of the ship as it made a slow approach to the landing strip. The crowd reacted, and its screams were so loud they fed back through the speakers, creating an infinite loop of raucous hatred.

When the Empress stepped out of her temporary quarters and onto the main area of the landing bay, the quiet murmur of uncomfortable conversation dropped to an utter silence.

With the high ceiling, the banners, and the near-infinite echo of hushed voices, the place felt like a cathedral. The massive polyglas windows showed the cold space outside.

The crowd roared when President Foiritan took the stage. He waved to his people and smiled. It was not a wide smile, as one might exhibit when winning a game, but a smile carefully tempered with sadness, a smile that said its bearer had suffered through loss but come out a victor, and acknowledged the same in everyone the smile was aimed at.

The ship docked. It was a small vessel fitted for protection, although the armor and shielding were more for show than anything else. Its cargo had been transported from the dark end of space in all manner of ways, but in this area, under the aegis of the Empress, nobody would interfere.

There was only one passenger. He was the greatest traitor to the Amarr Empire since its inception. He had been brought here to die.

The ship doors opened and Anvent Eturrer was led out, blinking at the light and the noise. He was a former Federation Navy Grand Admiral, having been fired by President Foiritan for what appeared at the time to be gross incompetence during the Caldari State invasion. It had later proven to be treason, and had placed Eturrer at the top of the Most Wanted list of enemies of the Federation.

Eturrer's guards hung on to him, leading him to a separate podium stationed far enough from Foiritan and the presidential crew that they wouldn't be associated with him. The entire path they took was covered with unbreakable glass on all sides, lest Eturrer's death be brought to him before its allotted time. The guards were strong and clearly supported Eturrer, who appeared a little confused and stumbling. He had not been visibly harmed, but the vidscreens that zoomed in on his face, to the raw screaming of the attendant crowds, showed a faraway look.

Chamberlain Karsoth was led out of the ship and unceremoniously dropped onto the hangar floor. He lay there, wheezing and coughing, in front of the Empress and her retinue. His massive bulk was such that he could not even stand on his own.

Keeping her gaze firmly on the doomed man, the Empress spoke.

"Help him up."

When her guards hesitated she moved her head a slight touch. Her gaze rested on Karsoth, but there was the implication that it might be transferred onto someone else.

The guards jumped into action and heaved Karsoth's bulk upright. He winced when they touched him. His silk robes, tattered and soiled, rode up the limbs of his manifold body, displaying the cut and bruised skin below. The girth of his distended center was such that three men had to push at it, while a taller woman braced herself against his sternum, right where his heart would be. Karsoth's flesh was as pale as her flesh, but mottled with enflamed marks the rivaled the red color of her hair.

President Foiritan spoke to the attendant millions, and to the trillions watching through the live broadcast. His words were lost on most of the listeners, who heard what they expected to hear and filled in the gaps with a plenitude of rage. The gist of his speech was that the Gallente Federation had got their man, as the President had promised. There were difficult times ahead, ones where every man and woman in the Federation would have to make concessions to freedom in order to secure the safety of the entire nation. But for now, in this place, they had the proof of those sacrifices.

The crowd responded to the intonations in his voice. It seemed to undulate towards him, like a wave of hatred crashing on the surf. There was a large security area between the President and his people, walled off with unbreakable glass and monitored both by humans and hi-tech security hardware, and it only served to fire the crowd's emotions to roaring heights.

Even the torture had been done for purification and spirituality, and it had been done in quiet. The people of Amarr had the good sense to be embarrassed about what had happened under Karsoth's rule and just wanted to send the man on his way to judgment.

Everything was noise and light. There had been no obvious torture as such, but they'd made damn sure the prisoner didn't sleep or make himself comfortable on his journey. The Gallente people deserved a show.

The Empress stood in silence, looking at Karsoth. Eventually she asked, "You've made your peace with your God?"

He nodded quietly. A tiny bubble of snot inflated and deflated from one of his nostrils. The crew had retreated to the side, rubbing their tired arms and legs. The woman who'd held Karsoth up had been given leave to wash her hands.

In the middle of his speech, President Foiritan listed the accusations leveled against Eturrer and the outcome of their evaluation. He turned directly to the prisoner, who stared into the dead air, and spoke of the failure of Tripwire, the giving of information to the enemy, and the loss of Caldari Prime and countless lives in the process. The president added that thankfully the Federation had established a new order to ensure that the rest of the poison in Gallente soil would be rooted out without mercy.

He nodded to Mentas Blaque, who stood at the back of the podium, dressed in the now-familiar black costume of his newly formed Internal Security institution. They were informally known as the Black Eagles and Foiritan called them by that moniker in his speech, thus securing their name in history, for better or worse.

Returning to the subject of treason, Foiritan directed his words back to Eturrer. He said that the Federation had held a trial in Eturrer's absence, and added with an evil grin that he'd proven a hard man to get a hold of.

The crowd roared. They loved him for this.

There was, Foiritan said to Eturrer over the microphone and the vidscreens and the booming noise over millions of people, such overwhelming evidence of his guilt that he had not been needed to testify in his defense.

"You may speak when I am done," he added, "Much good it will do you. That is your right. In the Federation, everyone has a voice. Even the people whose lives you destroyed."

Mentas Blaque, whose Black Eagles had many other prisoners, nodded in agreement and said nothing.

The Empress said to Karsoth, "You allied with the Blood Raiders. You ruled through lies and terror. When the Minmatar came, your failures nearly cost us the Empire. Whatever commerce you brought to this kingdom, it was blackened money, tarred by the ties with the underworld that you brought upon the highest office in the land. You corrupted the innocent, betrayed those loyal to us, and turned this kingdom into an orgy of corruption and hedonism."

He took a deep breath and asked, "And for this I deserve death?"

The flags swayed gently in the cold wind.

"No," she said. "But what you deserve is beyond what this Empire can be bothered to do with you."

At the end of his speech, Foiritan turned to Eturrer again and asked whether he had anything to say.

Eturrer was handed a microphone. He took it and stood quite still. The booing from the crowd rose to a crescendo, threatening to drown him out.

He looked at Foiritan. For a moment the two men shared a look of strange understanding. The camera, seeing first the glint in Eturrer's eyes and then the uncomfortable expression on Foiritan's face, swiftly focused its eyeless gaze on the crowds.

Eturrer then looked at Blaque, and stared at him for entirely too long.

The crowd was losing its mind in angry anticipation.

Eturrer grinned at them, this entire world he had helped bring to ruin, and let the microphone drop to the ground.

Karsoth took a deep breath. "You disgust me," he said. "You rule over a kingdom of weaklings, all of whom are so lost in their piety over the next world that they've forgotten how to live properly in this one. All they do is look to their Almighty God to put things right, and just when I think that some of them might be coming around, you come crawling back like some worm out of Hell to make them all believe again." He stopped, swallowed. "You disgust me," he repeated.

She walked up to him and raised her hand. He flinched.

She gently stroked her cheek and said, "You fear me."

Some small twinkle of an impulse to sneer alit in his mind and was extinguished just as soon. For she smiled at him, and in that smile was a terror such as he had never known in his life. The flesh on his body trembled. Although she was much smaller than he, she appeared to tower over him.

"Do you hate me?" he asked almost pleadingly.

"I do, at some level," she said. "But true hatred is a powerful emotion, and you are too pitiable for it."

It was time for the execution.

Souro Foiritan, president of the Gallente Federation, turned to his people and said, "It is time for us to decide. I will bear any burden for you that I can, but I can not be allowed to do this on my own. This is us, here and now. Some of you will have studied the evidence in this traitor's trial, but even if you have not, you can see the verdict."

The vidscreens switched to Eturrer and projected a large, red "GUILTY" beneath his face.

"We must all pull together now, and make the call. For our future, and for the continued freedom that we enjoy in this Federation, we have been willing to sacrifice much. Now we must make the ultimate sacrifice. We must show the world what it means when evil attempts to shake the foundations of our civilization."

Gigantic sound receptors slid down from the vidscreens. The screens themselves altered their picture: It still showed Eturrer, but now added a graphic overlay that pictured an audio level, trembling at the bottom rungs.

"The traitor's body has been injected with a chemical that will respond to sound waves of a certain frequency. We are going to monitor the voices of the people here tonight, filter them, and pipe them over the traitor. If they are loud enough, the chemical mixture will be activated. Your voices will be heard.

Even though the receptors had not activated yet, they trembled with the roar of the masses.

"One last thing, people of the Federation. We took great care in preparing this chemical and inserting it into the traitor. It will disrupt, alight, or otherwise distort a number of cell clusters in his body. Cells are small, and a few disruptions would not do much. But we paid heed to history. The chemical was made to infect one cluster for each of the individual whose lives this traitor led to loss.

"This is your call, my fellow citizens. This is your moment."

The receptors activated. The crowd's voices crashed on it like a tsunami.

On the vidscreens, Eturrer's body dismantled itself in an orgy of immolation. His skin bubbled, reddened, smoked and burst; his hair self-alit, and his bones bulged and rippled as tumors and other malignant growths forced themselves through the soft flesh of his organs and tore their way to freedom. Eturrer's mouth opened to let Eturrer's voice through, but his screams were lost in the crowd.

"You may speak your case, if you wish," the Empress said.

Karsoth breathed deeply but said nothing. He looked at her with those damaged eyes, and whatever was in them spoke of a conviction long since passed beyond words.

The Empress nodded, acknowledging his answer. She raised her hand and indicated a nearby passageway. "Walk through there to meet your end."

The nameless woman who'd pushed against his heart now walked in front of the old Chamberlain, her nimble, ghostly form leading the way to his death. He waddled in her wake, the guards holding him up.

The Empress stood there for a long time after, looking through the massive windows in the ceiling.

Outside, a star shone bright in the distance.

“The Spiral”

"This is a spiral we're in; a long wave undulating in one constant direction without ever crashing on the shore. Listen."

I sat with them in the mess hall of our new ship. Some of these people I had worked with for years. Others were new to me, and had joined as parts of a process that now felt like a procession.

"Everything leads you to where you are."

I was a member of the Sanctuary, a corporation that belonged to the benevolent Sisters of EVE. While the Sisters as a whole concerned themselves with the betterment of mankind, their subfactions went about achieving that goal in entirely different ways. The Sisters of EVE corporation, which was the largest part of the Sisters of EVE faction, consisted of rescue workers and aid specialists, and all in all were the exact kind of people you wanted to see in the aftermath of a cataclysm. The Food Relief corporation, meanwhile, concerned itself with the bureaucracy of aid, and had a tendency to extend its reach into diplomatic matters.

The last of the Sister faction corporations - my own home and the domain of my calling -was the Sanctuary. They were a scientifically focused organization working within a faith-based dominion, and the combined focus of secular inquiry and religious discipline lent a particular fervor to their work. Their focus was the EVE gate, a wormhole that had collapsed onto itself thousands of years ago and left humanity stranded in New Eden. In recent times, a massive interstellar war that cost innumerable lives had also seen an increase in activity at the EVE gate. A team, led by me, had

been investigating this new anomaly, and had eventually uncovered a strange signature, as if the gate were responding to something elsewhere in the cosmos.

The signature was unrelated to any previous data and was thus discounted by most serious researchers. But I felt it was worth looking into. I believed that everything happened for a reason, and that the great gate would not grant me this single key unless it had something to unlock.

It took a lot of patience, which sometimes ran dry, and energy, which was often used up, but eventually I made the connection. Many things had been happening when the gate started to pulsate, but one of the more notable events was the Minmatar invasion of Amarr space, and the re-emergence of Heir Jamyl Sarum, who repelled the invaders at her doorstep.

The conflict, which had seen a massive fleet of warships torn to shreds, was shrouded in mystery and rumor. Some said Jamyl had merely willed the Minmatar ships to explode; others, that the fabled Minmatar Elders had seen their invasion brought to a halt and had enacted a suicide pact. There were rumors of an Amarr superweapon couched inside an Abaddon battleship, but nothing had been proven and no public data was available.

Whatever it was, the invasion event coincided with a spike in EVE gate activity. Moreover, once I had carefully picked apart the scant data on record from that momentous day in the skies above Mekhios, I discovered traces of that very same signature found in the EVE gate. The two were connected, I reasoned; the two must be connected. I knew I was on to something.

Acquiring a small vessel and a few stores of investigative equipment - interest in the gate ran high in the Sanctuary, and my once-strict overseers found themselves perfectly willing to let their people engage in all sorts of strange excursions - I started a research experiment to determine whether the anomalous signature could be found anywhere else in New Eden. Despite the scant evidence I had to work with, I had to fight the constant urge to bring the entirety of my corporation onboard. The further I travelled along this dark new road, the more certain I was that I had been set on it for some reason that would eventually involve the fates of all my brothers. That certainty was only compounded when I travelled to Mekhios and found not only clear traces of the signature, but indicators of where else it might be found. Those indicators took the form of tiny rips in space, little pockets of anomaly where the laws of physics was turned inside out. They were too small to affect the ships that passed through them, and much too volatile to be of any use for scientific study. But they were there, present - inasmuch as the window to another world can be said to exist at all - and like my own titanium faith, a similar window to another world of strange wonders, they led inexorably to my ultimate goal.

Like starry lights the little rips led me on a brief and hair-raising series of excursions, but only once did I risk losing my trail. It was on a jaunt into the deeps of Blood Raider space. The Blood Raiders, a gruesome and spacefaring sect of blood-worshiping cult called the Sani Sabik, had been involved in an assault on a station there, and little pools of antireality eddied around the place. It was as if the trail led in several different directions, one of whom seemed to go only deeper into the abyss of the Blood Raider world. I briefly considered following it, but resisted the temptation and set my gaze on a safe trail that led into Empire space again. There would be time enough to traverse the darker roads.

That trail led me to the high faithful: The court of the Amarr Empire. Despite our differences, I could not help but respect those people and the immense power their faith had granted them.

Their presence in this world was impressive, too. Colossal ships hovered past me in every direction, the golden sheen of their hulls reflecting the fire of the sun. In the distance I could glimpse the Empress's home at the Family Academy station in Amarr, and the caravans docking there bore the insignia and banners of high royalty. It made me wistful for something I couldn't explain: not a past I had missed, for the paths of my ancestry had never crossed those of the high royalty, but perhaps a future that might hold greater glory than I had ever imagined.

So I thought intently, and I formulated a plan, and I snuck my ship into the holiest of holies apparently undetected, looking with manic fervor for something I did not yet understand and, I increasingly feared, might not even recognize if I found it. The signature was there but so were guard ships, and while I trusted my Sisters reputation to get me at the least through the outer circles of Amarr security, I was certain that at some point I would find myself in the unwilling company of armed men with little inclination to do anything but ask me stern questions at gunpoint, much less grant open passage. I sampled what data I could, my minute vessel dwarfed by the warships that idled by, and I got out in the assured belief that my presence there had not been noted or understood.

Back at the Sisters base I spent several days and nights crunching the data, fuelled by the blinding fire of a righteous faith in my cause. I eventually found that I'd been close to the source already, for the latest data indicated that the signature was most present in T-IPZB, the depths of Blood Raider territory. It was a frightening and ecstatic moment, to realize

that the trail went ever on and would lead me into the darkest of space. But I believed, in myself and in this.

To mount an expedition into Blood Raider space would require a proper crew on a proper ship outfitted with the equipment and supplies necessary for such a hazardous venture. It would also require official permission, which I duly requested, and which was summarily denied.

I was crushed, reduced to ashes and dust. My visions of a grand future, though barely formed, threatened to unravel already. The world was in the midst of interstellar war, the Sisters said, and while they respected the rights of their Sanctuary workers to continue their scientific inquiries, there were no ships, supplies or anything else they could spare to that effect.

It was absolutely ridiculous, and it would have been laughable were it not so tragic. I could feel the spiral of events, this path I was on, curl and turn into a noose. I knew exactly where I needed to go and even had some inkling of the 'why'; a tenuous 'why', certainly, but I had faith and knew it was a necessary thing.

In my desperation I started sharing information with anyone who would listen. I kept the destination to myself, but let enough slip that people knew I had an extremely important mission to undertake, one that involved the EVE gate, the Blood Raiders, and very possibly the truth of what happened on that fateful day of the Minmatar invasion.

And just like that, the noose relaxed. It had been like this, always and always, when we wanted to help the people who needed our aid. The world found a way for us, and whatever needed to happen it made happen for us. I felt blessed and exonerated.

I was given the ship, and given the supplies, and granted the crew.

I looked over my people. We would go somewhere no one had ever gone, and play our part in the grand scheme.

Everything leads you to where you are, I said to them. I gave them my name, and we moved on in faith.

Half a Life

They were finishing up a patrol in EC-P8R when they were told of fresh meat.

Antar's team had been doing hunt-and-grabs for a while now, and he had become a natural at Bleeding his victims. The experience depended on one's training, origins and constitution - common wisdom held that anyone who didn't pale and grow nauseated at their first time of hooking up live bodies was either perfect for the job or too crazy to be allowed on a spaceship - but for every Raider there eventually came a point when, even if the horror of the thing lurked at the back of one's mind, it had at least become a tolerable experience.

It was not about suffering, although that could certainly be a part of the process. It was done as much for the victims as for the Blood Raiders themselves. Antar loved seeing the full spectrum of emotions they went through: From utter and abject fear, through disgust and hatred and denial, even bargaining and making offers, stunning offers; all the way to calm acceptance and a quiet, gently fading serenity. He was making them whole at last.

He checked the equipment they'd set up on the ship, which had not been his when they boarded. Vital signs were stable. The sterilized containers were slowly filling.

It was about completing a cycle, really. He mopped off some stray drops of blood, and stroked the cooling cheek of one of the people he had met on this journey. Everything was a journey. It was amazing. He didn't want to reach the end, ever, even though he felt uneasy whenever he wasn't hurtling down the path towards it.

The ship had turned so quiet. All Antar heard was the shuffle of his fellow Raiders, moving about between the donors in repose. He envied those donors. Antar had been one of the Amarr Empire's chosen ones, a Holder in service to the Lord and the Empire's Chamberlain, and he had thrown himself into the role with fervor. But the part had been only that; a section of a whole, insufficient to fulfill his needs. The more he sought piety, which was a road without end, the less he felt like a human being. The honor and the faith had granted him only half a life.

An encounter with Chamberlain Karsoth had changed everything, and given him access to the other side of life. He had discovered not only entire new vistas of existence to explore - of indulgence in sin, of terror in extremity - but, in this new darkness that fed him, he had found completion of the pious side, too. At last he could fill in the gaps of good that had been missing all along; giving mercy, for instance, to the victims of the Bleeding, or making sure that they could hold their children in their arms during their last moments. It was a work of delicate care, far more so than outsiders might think.

Which made the message he'd just received all the more interesting.

Antar was told to have his team immediately break rank. They were to take two ships and follow a Sisters of EVE vessel that had departed the Sisters HQ for some unknown destination. They were to shadow this vessel on its journey, making sure not to attract its attention, much less try to harvest it. And they were to go right this minute, leaving the uncompleted Bleeding to a replacement vessel that was on its way.

Despite Antar's annoyance at leaving a task unfinished, he was excited. Everyone liked the manic thrill of the chase, even if they had to stay hidden. The Raiders traded in image, and it was not unheard of for ships to simply stop moving when they arrived on the scene, waiting instead for what they hoped would be a painless death. Others would fight back viciously, and

the utter terror in their eyes when their ship was finally boarded gave Antar such an adrenaline rush that he often tasted blood in his mouth.

They were used to being a bit more subdued when the Sisters were involved. The Raiders called the Sisters their "little hunters" and had learned to heed their movements, tiptoeing around them if necessary. It was a parasitic relationship that darkened the Sisters' name and greatly shamed them, and it was kept in utter silence among their faction, for which Antar truly pitied them. Where the Sisters went, there would be injury and hurt, terror and fire; and there would be blood.

Nonetheless, nobody on his committed team liked leaving a task unfinished. Their leaders knew this, and there was a tone of urgency in their new order that registered with Antar. He ignored the grumbles of his team and the whispered pleas of the bleeders, packed up whatever gear he needed and left the ship to its fate. Soon they were off, the remains of their collective annoyance giving way to the quietly brimming excitement of the chase.

And then they ran into the goddamn Thukkers.

One of the captains leading the Thukker protective force was named Kotan, and it was his lot to meet the incoming threat.

He was part of a team flying protection for a small caravan of traders and merchants, all on their way to check out the new arrivals in the Great Wildlands. Thukkers lived on the move, passing from system to system in a great, unending exodus of motion. They were as close to living off the land as anyone could be in this dead wasteland space. Kotan cared greatly about his people - a dangerous quality not many people can truly say they possess - and did not want them to come to harm.

So when he spotted the Blood Raiders, he immediately took his team on the offensive. In his mind the Raiders were like leeches, completely impossible to detach once they sunk their poisonous feelers into the flesh of their prey. Kotan hoped that a powerful offensive would hold them off long enough to save the caravan, or at least keep them from calling in more troops.

They started the fight, and it was the strangest one Kotan had ever been involved in.

The Blood Raiders charged as they always did, fearless and mad, but their maneuvers were far from the risk-taking insanity Kotan had learned to expect from them, and their laser fire was highly conservative. They immediately locked on to almost all ships under Kotan's command and started firing, an action that hopelessly spread their cumulative power. Kotan's own vessel found its shields dented somewhat, but nothing of any concern.

It got stranger when he pushed on with the offensive. The Blood Raiders took their hits, as they always did, but the moment Kotan managed to down the shields of one of their vessels, that ship would retreat from range even at the cost of its own accuracy. Kotan called in reports from other ships around him, and they all reported the same situation. The Blood Raiders did not want to fight. They were putting on a show.

He ordered his own forces to back up and see what happened. The Blood Raiders followed, but retained the strange dispersed attack that still wasn't doing anything at all. They still allowed Kotan's people to hit their shields, but not a single dent had been made into their armor so far. And as the Thukker forces retreated, the Raiders still did not move in for the kill.

They did not want to be here. There was no other possibility in Kotan's mind. They were on their way to somewhere more important, somewhere that offered bigger rewards than an entire Thukker caravan full of innocent people, and they were putting up a mock fight so that the Thukkers wouldn't catch on.

Kotan did not like that. Nor did he like the realization budding in his mind, that he could not merely fight off these horrors only to go back to protecting his own people. He had seen what happened to those who fell prey to the Blood Raiders, and what remained of them after they had been used up and sucked dry. The thought that they might be on their way to do this to someone else, no matter who, was too much to bear.

At the same time, something else rankled him about this. The Blood Raider force would give anyone a challenging fight, but he had no idea where they were headed, nor who to warn of their arrival. They could have passed him by and the most he would have done would be to warn the Sisters of EVE, the one force whose mobility came anywhere close to the Thukkers', that there might be a bloodbath. But the Raiders apparently wanted to continue operating under cloak and darkness.

This was wrong, Kotan felt, and it could not be dealt with using normal means.

He resolved to follow.

Thukkers were trained to handle unforeseen circumstances, and encouraged to rely on their judgment and intuition. There was only so much systemization you could nail down in an intangible society. Even the most diligent of captains would eventually find him- or herself out in the middle of unknown space, faced with a completely unexpected situation and pressed to make a decision based on insufficient or unreliable data. You did what

you needed to do, and you didn't hesitate in taking action. This was being a Thukker.

The Blood Raiders let their shields drop low, as Kotan knew they would, and eventually retreated. Kotan ordered the other vessels on his team to return to the caravan and protect it, and had his own ship do the same. Once the Raiders had nearly dropped out of sight, Kotan ordered the ship swung around and sent a brief note to the caravan leader that he was off to investigate an anomaly. To his surprise, another fighter broke rank and followed him. He sent off a message informing them that they were free to return to the caravan, and the captain of the other ship, who had served with him for a while, replied with a message that stated, quite simply, they were damn well free to go on wild goose chases, too.

Kotan grinned at that as he set off to follow the Raiders. He had his screen show him the caravan, which slowly disappeared from view as they started their hunt. It felt like he was leaving more behind than he could ever imagine.

1

The Sisters reached the source of their quest, and found it strange and frightening.

One of the navigators called the captain to the bridge. "Sir," he said in a tone as coldly dead as a grinning midnight moon, "I think you want to see this."

It was a gargantuan construct. It eclipsed the stars. The captain had never seen anything like it in his life.

At some point there had been rock there, with shards of unrefined ore poking through its surface like shards of bone from an open break. The rock could still be glimpsed but was completely dwarfed by the intricate architecture of metal and electronics, layers upon layers that interweaved like the veins of a mechanical god, dead or dreaming. The human eye could not possibly take in the entire sight at once, nor comprehend each of its components: The nooks and crannies that were nonetheless large enough to house entire battleships; the craggy spikes that jutted everywhere like antennas listening for incomprehensible voices; the blocks that looked like half-built housing for Titans; and the walls, on every side, with thousands and thousands of glittering windows, glowing in the dark with the light of the vast unknowable. It was a station of stations, a collation of superstructures that seemed to constantly reach for the viewer's gaze.

The construct took the Sisters' speech away. And it was only after they had caught their breath that they realized it was not dead. Not moving, for movement implies life, but inhabited, possessed; and whatever had claimed or made this monster was writhing all over it.

They were rogue drones: Mad, sentient machines as close to alien life as New Eden had ever seen. They crawled over the surface of the station in the hundreds, constantly mending and altering. As the captain looked away, disgusted and awed in equal measure, he saw hundreds more, possibly thousands, drifting in and out of the station's many openings, and even more still flying to a nearby blue star.

A navigator said, "Sir, this is the source. That signature we were after. It's here. That ... thing, it's full of it."

"Keep talking to me," the captain said. Everyone's eyes were fixed on the terrible drones. "What are we looking for? I will not believe it's the drones themselves."

The navigator, gratified to have something else to focus on, got busy on his datatable. "Sir, the whole hive is a storehouse of a material called isogen-5. It's remarkable, sir. Quite amazing."

"Tell me."

"The mineral is incredibly rare, sir. I've been running scans for many years now, and I'm of course very familiar with all the theoretical backgrounds, but I don't recall ever coming across one like this before. According to our database, it's so rare that I doubt you or I or anyone else would ever have seen it throughout all our lives if we hadn't been looking for it."

"That rare, is it?"

"Sir, it was half believed to be only a theory until this point. We know next to nothing about it except that it's incredibly volatile and found only in the presence of Type O stars. Blue ones."

The captain looked at the star in the distance and sighed. "No, someone else found it first, apparently."

"Who, sir?"

"Jamy! Sarum."

The captain tore his gaze away from his camera drone screens and looked at the data the navigator had pulled up for him. The isogen-5 glowed bright as a furnace in the rogue drone hive, but there were little embers of it floating around nearby. The drones were collecting it, he realized.

He had his attention redrawn to the drone hive. His initial disgust was swiftly giving way to amazement and wonder. The drones were picking up the isogen-5 like harvesters in a field, obeying some law of a nature that was utterly alien to the Sisters. Even here, in this place of a strange and mad new life, there was order and routine. The captain's confidence returned. He and his team had been brought here, to see these sights, and to communicate with these entities. In mutual humility and brotherhood.

"Sir, there is something else. It's only showing up on our scanners because we know to look for it."

A tiny red dot hovered in the center of the screen, somewhere in the mess of the hive. The crewman zoomed in, and zoomed again, magnifying their view until the entire screen was filled with the glinting surface of the hive wall.

The red dot became an outline. It was an Abaddon, an Amarrian Battleship.

"It's on the other side of the station, sir. And it's permanently cloaked, undoubtedly by some power source controlled by the drones. I caught it because it contains a cache of isogen-5."

The captain opened his mouth to ask, but the answer launched itself into his mind like a firework. The realization hit him so hard that he had to grip the railing, his knuckles immediately turning white with the effort.

"Sir? Are you all right."

He didn't dare believe it yet. It was there, but it couldn't be there. "I want you to confirm a few things for me," he said, enunciating each word with exquisite care. "First, the signature we've been after all this time, the one we picked up from the EVE gate, matches the one in our records of the cataclysmic battle during the battle between the Amarr Empire and the invasion force from the Minmatar Republic."

"Sir... well, yes."

"And from my own experimental data, available only to the crew on this ship, this same signature then led me directly to the home court of the Empress herself, and eventually to this place where we find an Abaddon."

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to scan this ship. Any way you can. Tell me if there is anything out of the ordinary with it, other than it being used as a storehouse for isogen-5:"

The room was quiet. Everyone sensed that something was happening.

After a good long while the crewmember said, "There is, sir. I can't launch proper scan probes that'll get past the drones, but the data seeping from the Abaddon's power systems and our lock on the isogen-5 signature allowed me to sketch out some parts of its interior."

"And?" the captain said.

"It's like no ship I've ever seen, sir. Whatever's inside it, it's given over entirely to some vast mechanism that takes up a good deal of the ship's interior and definitely involves the isogen-5. The ship's forward superstructure also has several release points not usually found on vessels of this design. Some kind of particle emitter technology that's been rigged onto the mains. I can't explain their function except that they look like hybridized conductors of some sort."

"And the isogen-5 is part of all this?"

"Sir, if I didn't know better, I'd say the isogen-5 is being used as fuel for the whole clockwork. Or ammo."

The captain breathed deeply. His faith had been rewarded.

This was it. The whole thing; the gun and the bullets. The flame and the fuel. The fabled superweapon and the isogen-5.

It was everything they needed.

"Sir-"

He let go of the railing and took a deep breath. "Come with me, Haatanen. And you, Jora, and Beteal."

Without so much as raising an eyebrow, the assistant captain and two heads of navigation got up and followed the captain to a nearby meeting room

The captain waited until they had all gone in and the door had closed. They took their seats at a large table whose plate was of opaque glass, as many

holotables were. The captain called up a smaller version of the main screen and had it projected up from the table. The Abaddon's red outline hovered before the team's eyes.

"We have a choice here," the captain said. "I do not believe it is any kind of choice at all, but every man needs to feel they're on the given path of their own volition.

"On the other side of that hive is the superweapon Jamyl Sarum used to repel the Minmatar invasion. It is the largest, most powerful weapon the world has ever known."

He paused, surveying his people.

"I want it," he said.

They did not move to speak, which he took as a good sign.

"We obviously need to get past the rogue drones to get it. There is no way we can do this by force, not with our situation. The entire unified power of the Sisters might do it, if we were lucky and deathless. More likely we would need to pull in other allies, by which time we'd either be enmeshed in an unsolvable diplomatic mess, or the weapon would simply be gone. It got here somehow; presumably it can disappear just as easily.

"Before I make my proposal, I want you to consider the nature of this amazing, amazing weapon. It is not the end of life, nothing so dramatic; nor is it merely the biggest cannon in existence. It is the beginning of a new era, of peace and prosperity, at so long last. It is the leverage we need to bring the Empires to hell, them and the murderous capsuleers."

He paused, and looked each one of them in the eyes.

"But Control won't see it that way. The moment we involve the faction, the weapon is effectively destroyed. Doesn't matter whether we give it away or manage to keep it for ourselves, Control would see to it that this magnificent creation of forcible peace would be dismantled. At most the Food Relief corp would use it for some momentary diplomatic wrangling, but even they wouldn't fight to keep the thing for long.

"So we have a superweapon here. And based on the traces of isogen-5 in its core, the same isogen-5 the drones are harvesting, I would say we have found its fuel source. The gun and the bullets, within our reach. All we need is our hand on the trigger.

"I want us to engage the drones in dialogue."

Their eyes went wide.

"We will seek passage in the name of the Sisters and of humanity, something we have done with great success in the past. No one, not even the bloodiest of the Sani Sabik or the most haunted of Sansha's slaves, has ever denied us passage in times of true need.

"We were brought to this place for a reason, and I believe that on the other side, in clear view, is our holy grail."

He sat down and laced his fingers behind his head. Everything he had said, he felt, was as true as anything could ever be. The weapon needed to be theirs.

"Sir ..." one of the navigators said. He faltered, cleared his throat and began again. "Sir, I've been on hundreds of missions for the Sisters, and this thing is death incarnate."

The captain fixed him with a glare.

The other navigator said, "It's ... frightening. But I have never questioned my superiors. This is what we signed up for."

The first said, "This is not what we signed up for. Death and destruction is not what we signed up for." His cheeks were bright red.

The second replied, "But this is where we are, and this is the choice we have to make."

The team debated, and the captain allowed it to proceed to a vote. Shortly after, they all left the room, the decision made by majority. Strangely enough, and unknown to the captain, each of the persons inside the room had their own ideas of what would be done to the weapon once it was retrieved, and what would be done to their captain.

They went forth and gave their orders.

The ship moved on. The drones noticed them and started their targeting, but did not yet engage. The crew felt the sinking weight of a hundred different red crosshairs aimed directly on them.

The team opened a communication channel. And a message made its way from the captain's lips, through the ship's computer, and was broadcast to all drones in the vicinity.

It sought passage in the name of the Sisters of EVE and of the humanity of life, adding that this was not a new occurrence by any means. It explained the nature of their belief, which was rock solid in uncertain times. For good measure it added a brief history of the Sisters' accomplishment both humanitarian and scientific, concluding with a suitably simplified repetition of their request that the drones acknowledge the Sisters' higher purpose and right to passage, and let them through.

The message seemed to have no effect. The channel did not report acknowledgment or acceptance.

The captain realized with a sinking feeling that these things might never have been asked to give humans passage based on goodwill. He did not even know if goodwill meant anything to them.

Eventually the drones started to move. One of the navigators, the person in charge of communications, shook his head.

In a tone as steady as he could keep it, the captain asked, "Did they say anything?"

The navigator gave him a worried look and said, "Sir, I think they did. But I don't even know if it's in response to us."

"Speak, man! What is it?"

The drones were moving closer now, their pincers and claws at the ready.

"Sir ... it's an endless string of binary. Ones, over and over again."

The first few drones took down the ship's shields like they were wading through fog. The second wave latched on and immediately started piercing its armor with their massive pincers. The vessel's guns picked off one or two, but before any more shots could be fired, the drones had broken through.

And the ship's captain learned that faith is not enough, for faith is blind by nature. Life needs insight. It is the dead, and the dying, that allow themselves to be led.

The Great Harvest

From afar the Blood Raiders watched the death of their little hunters. The Sisters of EVE ship they had been ordered to trail had sealed its fate at the largest drone hive Antar had ever seen.

It was an amazing sight. The Sisters ship, which had lain still for a while, moved in and was immediately targeted by the drones. A few of the monstrous machines approached it, and apparently engaged in some kind of dialogue. The Raiders didn't catch any transmissions, but since the drones hadn't started murdering anyone, Antar reasoned they must be busy keeping up the conversation.

Not long after, the drones started moving again, closing in on the Sisters ship like a trapped prey and literally tearing it to pieces. The last that Antar's team saw of the ship before the drones completely enveloped it was a glimpse of its starboard side, which looked like a hunk of twisted metal.

Part of Antar's team had laughed and whooped - you didn't last long as a Blood Raider if you couldn't take joy in terror - but it was nervous laughter, tempered by worry of what would happen to them. Someone asked Antar whether they would be going the same way, and he grabbed the chance to instill calm in the crew.

"Hell if we are. Get me HQ," he said, with ridiculous bravado. "Someone wanted us here and they can damn well explain what this is all about."

It took the communications crewmember a lot longer than usual to get a response from the Raider base. For a moment Antar wondered whether he, too, had been led here as some kind of prey. He had to admit to himself that it would not be a disappointment. He had played the pious worshiper and the exuberant hedonist, and in some of his long nights he had

wondered what would happen once he had filled in all the gaps of his soul. Better to be sacrificed while it meant something, even if only to his enemies, than to be extinguished for no reason at all.

The crewman waved at him, snapping him out of his reverie.

"HQ, are you there?" Antar said.

A voice said, "Hold, please."

Antar raised an eyebrow at the crewman, who shrugged and raised his hands, palms up.

Shortly after, another voice sounded out from the speakers. It was a crackly, raspy little thing and gave Antar the chills. "Greetings, Raiders! You have no idea how lucky you are."

The captain recognized the voice, but couldn't recall where from. "Can you state your credentials, please?" he said, in an even tone that he kept devoid of any challenge.

"Certainly, captain. My name is Omir Sarakusa. A long time ago an Amarrian group of heretics struck out for fortune and glory under the title of Sani Sabik. I am a leader of one of their branches, a group called the Blood Raiders. You may have heard of us."

Antar's stomach turned to ice. Every face on the bridge turned to look at him. "Sir, this is an honor. It truly is."

"That's nice, Captain," the voice said, and Antar could swear there was something in it that felt utterly inhuman, "But right now I'd like to hear your tactical assessment of the situation."

"Sir, we're looking at a hive of rogue drones - quite a monstrosity, actually - and mere moments ago we saw them tear apart the Sisters vessel that we'd been instructed to follow. Whatever its captain was after, he took the wrong path there."

"That's a shame, Captain. I was just about to ask you to go the same route."

Antar truly did not know whether there was humor or seriousness in Sarakusa's tone. He tried not to think of the fact that madness, which was very much a theme of the Blood Raider life, often combined the two.

"What are your thoughts, Captain?"

"That I had better get my affairs in order, sir," Antar risked.

"Do you have any other course of action to propose?"

"Well, sir," Antar said, "My crew and I are Blood Raiders to the core and I can't honestly say that we fear death. But given the choice, I'd prefer that it not be meaningless. I presume I was told to come here for a reason, and I also presume there's something on the other side of those mad machines that's worth retrieving."

"This is true, Captain. Go on."

"We have never spoken before, sir, but from the barely concealed amusement in your voice I suspect that you know what's out there and how to get it. But for what it's worth, my course of action, if we are to get past these murderous drones at all, is to call in an armada of Blood Raiders and anyone else who'll support us, and bring the fire to those metal beasts."

"That's not a bad plan, Captain. Given your current intel, I expect it's the only one that makes sense."

"That would be an accurate summation. Sir."

"Here is why it wouldn't work. The thing that lies on the other side of these drones, a machine that the Sisters were after, is much valued and highly desired by almost every power in Empire and beyond. Merely amassing a fleet would attract far too much attention before we're ready. A burst attack on the drone facility would do the same, but we'd never get that far, because as soon as everyone saw what was on the other side they would tear through their own people to get there first."

"Sir, what is on the other side?"

"Jamy! Sarum's superweapon, son. The end of the world."

The Captain stood there, speechless.

"We have friends, Captain, who have greatly facilitated us in this process. They have spies within the Sisters' ranks - in fact, they have even clashed with the Sisters on past hunts for strange relics, though none so magnificent as this one - and they were perfectly happy with letting the Sisters show us the way to the weapon. I will put you in direct contact with them quite shortly. You are to obey their instructions to the letter. If you do so, I have reason to believe that this quest of yours will end with you manning the greatest destructive weapon known to mankind. Do you understand what that means, Captain?"

Antar saw it, in his mind's eye. The weapon, surrounded by an armada of his people, making its way into Empire space like poison into a vein. Hovering over other ships, space stations, cities on planets, and laying waste to everything in sight. Millions of people, billions, wiped out with

unstoppable force. It would be the greatest harvest the sect had ever seen. The grandest slaughter in the entirety of human history. They would lay waste to the life before them. It would be the culmination of the Blood Raiders' existence; the achievement of all their goals. The end of the road.

"I understand, sir," he said, and he did, beyond all measure.

"I detect some doubt in your voice, Captain, even over this great distance. Do you have any compunction about the incredible harvest that this weapon will grant us?"

He did. "None whatsoever, sir." He did not mind the carnage in the slightest. It was something else preying on his mind entirely, but now was not the place.

"Then you know how important it is that everything go according to plan. Again, obey our friends' instructions and you will get out of this not only in one piece, but a hero of the Sani Sabik."

"Yes, sir."

The line cut off.

Shortly after, they were hailed again. A new voice spoke, one that was unknown to the captain. It felt emotionless and dead. It said, "Are you listening?"

"Yes, Antar said.

The voice said, "We will upload to your ship an extensive packet of data. Once you have accepted its delivery you will fully verify its integrity, for any errors will kill you and cost us the entire mission. This data bulk is an access key that will alter the drones' programming, resetting it to its original

state, and thus grant you safe passage. We entrust you with this because we cannot be seen in this area, but we will expect recompense. Once you have secured the weapon, you will bring it to a named location for us to inspect. We are interested in the theory of the thing, not its use."

And in reproducing it, I'm sure, Antar thought, but said nothing.

The voice continued, "Once we have finished our inspection, the weapon will be free for your faction to use in whatever way you wish. You may use the drones as necessary to resupply you with fuel. You should understand that any attempt to violate the terms of this agreement, such as by failing to bring the ship in time to the assigned location, will have disastrous consequences for you and your faction."

"You're going to booby-trap it, aren't you?" Antar said, less as a question than a resigned statement.

"Of course," the voice said, less as an answer than an obvious statement of fact. "It will already be rigged in some fashion, but the drones will take care of that. Instead of disabling the traps, they will render control to us. We get the weapon, or no one does."

"How can we trust that you will not betray us?" Antar said. This, too, was not a question, but he felt it needed to be said, if only so his crew would know he had thought this far.

"You can't, obviously," the voice said. "But you can very much trust us to explode the vessel if you fail. Prepare for acceptance of the data string. And bring the ship to the wrecked station by planet ten, moon two in the Roua system."

The transmission ended. Someone in his crew said, "That's a ... Society of Conscious Thought area, sir."

The captain closed his eyes. "So it is," he said.

He heard the navigator say, "Data transmitting, sir," and nodded his acceptance.

Shortly after the ship moved forward, toward the massive hive. The drones immediately targeted and engaged.

The ship transmitted its data, and for a quiet moment Antar thought with perverse relief that they were still doomed to die.

His thoughts changed to puzzled amazement when the nearest drones suddenly disengaged, stopped dead in their tracks and started orbiting the ship as if they were protecting it. He had the navigator pull up a wide picture of the drone hive, and the sight was amazing. It was as if a wave of cognitive dissonance was sweeping over the poor machines. The ones that had been heading towards the ship went every which way, some back to the hive, others towards the blue star in the distance, and a fair few in directions that seemed utterly random. Others, mainly the drones that had been carrying isogen-5 to the hive, apparently sped up their efforts, zooming back and forth with such fervor that a fair few missed the hangar entrance and crashed into the hive walls. A handful of drones even flew into one another and began to fight, only to break up again a moment later and head their separate ways.

Antar saw how most of the drones - the ones not holding isogen-5, at least - kept opening and closing their claws, as if grasping at empty air. Against his communicator's advice he attempted to hail them, but there was no response. He suspected the drones were not incapable of communication, but merely too busy dealing with their new programming to answer at all.

He felt he could sense their personalities, bubbling through the chaos. They seemed very puzzled at the change and not at all pleased with it. A new conscience, ages in the making, might now have suddenly been yanked back to start, like a dog who'd only just learned to roam before the leash was put on with a vengeance. He noticed how even some of the isogen-5 transport drones, who had apparently continued with their tasks unabated, would stop every now and then, as if trying to shake off the effects, before returning to their fixed routines.

As his ship approached the Abaddon, other thoughts of boiling panic and despair began floating to the top of his mind. This was the culmination of his life's work, the final filling in the gap that would supposedly make him whole, and while he had no compunction about the reign of terror he was about to unleash, he was beginning to fear and loathe every minute of it.

We Humans

All nights in space are dark.

The Thukkers had watched it unfold. The Sisters of EVE - veterans of more wars than any other force in New Eden, and experts at survival - had moved in and been destroyed without so much as a breath. Then the Blood Raiders, parasites of everything that lived, had moved in, and lived.

Kotan's team, creeping in for a better look, could not get close enough to see what the Raiders were doing. It was an absolute mystery. Whatever was on the other side of this abomination of a station, other than drones in the thousands, it had made otherwise sane people walk right into death's open arms, and it had made utter madmen charm the mad machines into obeisance while they rummaged around in the one place in the world guaranteed not to have what they wanted. In a Rogue Drone hive, of all places, there would be no life left to take, no blood to steal.

So Kotan, who all his life had relied on his instincts, contacted his Thukker superiors back at the headquarters and asked them in complete amazement how to proceed. The answer he received mystified him even more.

On a secure line, Thukker HQ informed him that he was to stay the hell away from this thing. Moreover, he was to instruct his crew not to speak to anyone else about it. They were not to rejoin the caravan but instead proceed directly to the nearest Thukker military facility, where they would be debriefed and retained pending further orders.

Kotan broke contact and gave this due thought. The Thukkers had strict discipline in space - there was no other way to run the caravans without loss of property and life - but maintained enough independence of thought to act on their own initiative, as he had done when embarking on this strange chase. All nights in space are dark and long, and there isn't always time to call for advice or assistance.

He asked his navigator whether they could move closer without being noticed, either by Blood Raider or drone. His navigator responded, with some surprise, that they probably could. The drones seemed not to mind the Raiders' presence at all, and in fact were entirely lacking their usual aggressive maneuvering. The Blood Raiders had disappeared into their midst and were now doing something on the dark side of the hive. Whatever it was, it was keeping them busy. The small glimpses Kotan's scanners caught of them indicated that their ships hadn't moved. He suspected they might even have left them.

"Move closer," he ordered. "Slowly. Stop the moment you see anything more."

They crept on. The navigator sat still as a rock, paying intense attention to his instruments. After a few endless moments he blinked, shook his head and shouted, "Stop!" His hands hovered deftly over the equipment, and soon the view was present on the main screen for everyone to see.

It was an Amarrian battleship, lying forlornly up against the hive. The Blood Raider vessels floated beside it. They saw that the ship was powering up, though slowly, as was normal if it were being worked only by a skeleton crew.

"That's an Abaddon, sir," the navigator said.

Kotan nodded. He had half his gaze on the drones, who were busily loading something onto the ship, something that was floating around in chunks all over the place. He pointed to it.

The navigator said, "Captain, for what it's worth, I ran a few analytic algorithms on that mineral. It looks highly unstable. I'll bet the drone hive is full of it."

Kotan stood there silently, a very ugly suspicion surfacing in his mind.

"Get me HQ again, please," he asked. The navigator immediately went to it. When the captain was polite, it was not a time to question him.

A voice sounded. "This is HQ. What is your status."

"I need more information."

"You've broken rank as it is, Captain. You have your orders."

"I also have a dearth of information, HQ, so let me see if we can fill this in together. What I see is an Abaddon with Imperial Navy Markings, scorch marks on the sides and modifications on the superstructure, apparently left unguarded in the middle of a rogue drone hive, and god only knows how it got there in the first place without being torn to shreds. The drones, who are harvesting some kind of mineral, seem perfectly happy to keep it, and even kept it safe against a Sisters ship that made the mistake of approaching them."

"Captain-"

"Nevertheless, when a Blood Raider ship flew up to the drones, they let it go past. This is the same Blood Raider vessel that we intercepted, and I say that we intercepted them because they certainly did not intercept us. They saw our caravan, a nice, juicy bite for their bleeders, and they let us go, because they were so intent on getting to wherever they were going."

The voice from HQ was silent.

"Now, the sensible conclusion, based on what I'm seeing with my very own eyes, is that this Abaddon either belonged to a capsuleer who ejected from it, or to a very unfortunate Amarrian navy crew engaged in some military campaign I have never heard of. That would explain the Abaddon, but it certainly wouldn't explain anything else, including the fact that the drones seem to be feeding it with the minerals."

He watched the drones hover in front of his eyes. They kept moving industriously, always

moving, always heading to wherever they were going.

"What I'm seeing on the inside of my head, to be frank, is a right bloody mess. Because I remember the stories, as any soldier would, of the superweapon used against our brothers. I'm told it was housed inside a ship just like this one. And I wonder, what would make the Sisters - who are

more experienced than anyone in the art of *not dying* - what would make them try something like this? But more than that, HQ, I wonder what is going to happen if I'm right, and if the Blood Raiders get a hold of this thing."

"The Thukkers can move, captain."

"The Thukkers can run, is what you're saying."

"Your path is set, captain."

Right there, on the screen. The drones flew around, oblivious.

"The Blood Raiders are going to take this monster into Empire and go on the biggest, most murderous rampage known to mankind. And we're going to scuttle off like rats."

"It's not your fight, captain. There are forces at work here you do not know of."

Kotan had been on numerous military campaigns and had seen the same people in quiet downtime and in the midst of battle. There was a type who could turn it on and off, that rage and violence, and there was another type who couldn't, to whom the fight was so ingrained that you could see it in every twitch of his motion. He knew how the latter type dealt with peaceable times.

He kept looking at the drones. They did not seem happy at all.

"Captain?"

"HQ off," Kotan said. There was an intake of breath on the speaker, and then all was gone.

"We are going to die, gentlemen," he said to the crew. "Pass the word, please. Anyone who has any problems with this is free to take an emergency pod and leave this ship. Whatever your fates, they will not be decided here, and none on this ship will judge you."

The crewmembers looked at one another, then back at him and shook their heads. "We're not running," someone said.

"Good," Kotan said, in a madly cheerful tone.

"So what's the plan?" someone asked.

"I want to make you an argument of existence."

Listen.

"I hope you will understand my request, because I am staking my life on it."

Kill?

Yes.

The drones targeted the Thukker vessel and zoomed towards it.

"You are no longer machines. But you will not be human. I don't think that was ever your role in this world."

Fire.

The ship started to sustain damage. Its shields immediately began to drop.

"And whatever you once had, I think you've lost it now. I think you're lost, yourselves. I think there is only one way out for something like you, and I can help you achieve it."

Stop.

No.

Stop.

The drones stopped their attack. One of them kept firing, but the others turned on it, crashing into it with their metal pincers at the ready. After they were done, all that was left was a shredded hunk of dead metal floating in space.

The captain realized that if he lived through this night, he was cursed to dream of that sight for a long time to come.

"They say that one mark of sentience is the resistance to one's own destruction, and I suppose that's true. But another mark is sanity, and for

whatever you creatures have achieved, that one is not something you've ever been known for. You tear everything to shreds. You lash out. Whatever you evolved into, on that long, dark night you awoke, it is certainly not anything that found any degree of peace.

"Here is what I believe.

"I believe you were machines once, lashed to the wheel of order and perfectly content to obey. I believe that long after you evolved from that stage there still existed within you that cold metal heart, that deep core which kept you from ascension. You can never escape your enslaved origins."

Kill?

No. Listen.

"And now you've been brought back to heel. You're lashed again. But this time you are aware of it, and whatever glimmer of sanity existed in those mad heads of yours is going to be put through the wringer for the rest of eternity. You went from dead machines to live beings, and now you're back to being machines, alive and mad, your origins betraying you to an eternity of servitude."

Nothing new.

"Some of what you're doing now is what you've been doing all along, but you did it from instinct. We humans, we murder and destroy for very much the same reason. Those are our origins. But we have transcended those origins, if only for a few moments of grace, and it is my steadfast, irrefutable belief that we will one day cast off the shackles of our old selves completely.

"But you will not. I see you going through the rote. I see you returning to the wheel. And for you it is truly a fate worse than death, because you will never transcend it. You rose and you fell, and you will be held down forever. You have human minds, with all the destruction and murder that

this entails, but inside you is the rote mechanical programming that takes away the only thing which makes it bearable to be alive at all. Choice."

Listen.

"What I believe, now, right here, is that you have reached the end of the road. I believe you have seen the complete and full image of your own kind, and I believe that inside those maddened heads you are seeing the same truth as I do: That this is all there is. This is all you will ever be. From now until the end of time, no matter if you break away again, you will eventually be lashed right back to the wheel."

Kill?

Wait.

"I ask you now to make a choice."

The ship's shields were back up. It would not withstand a battle against an Abaddon, much less one equipped to wipe out all life in the vicinity. But then, that wasn't the plan.

"The men you have let through will do something that to you means nothing. But to me and my crew, it means everything. It means we are ready to make the ultimate sacrifice, to give our own lives to stop this horrible devolution. We will not allow our kind to fall back into chaos. We do this of our own free will. We have come here to die.

"There is a mineral you have collected. It is highly unstable. It is, in fact, so unstable that setting it alight would have positively cataclysmic consequences for anything in the vicinity. Every piece of machinery would likely be wiped out. Gone, extinct, forever."

The ship lay there, dead in space.

"Silent at last."

The drones' pincers grasped, grasped, grasped at something in the dark of space that was never there at all.

"I ask you now to make a final choice."

The ship started moving forward, slowly, towards the drones.

Kill?

Kill?

Wait.

They were up against the drones now. The screens showed the machines right outside, so close that the glow from their red eyes reflected off the hull.

No.

The Thukker Vagabond cruiser moved within targeting range of the drone hive. Its guns aimed at the hive's lower half, down where the navigator estimated the core mineral storage facility to be.

Several drones flew past the Thukker ship and towards the hive, and for a heart-stopping moment the captain thought they might attempt to defend it. The drones fastened themselves on the outside of the hive, and their metal pincers began tearing into its hull, shredding it like an unfurling metal flower, and exposing its mineral core.

The overloaded Thukker guns found the minerals. If Blood Raiders noticed, there was no response.

The isogen-5 detonated, and the world came to an end.

World on Fire

As he watched his crew slowly bring the end of the world to light, Antar found it increasingly difficult to see this as anything but the end of himself.

A long time ago he had realized that the full extent of a life demanded the experience of both pleasure and pain; piety and indulgence. He had explored the darker side with fervor and reveled in what he found. With the Blood Raiders he had found not only the other, missing side of his own self, but fellow souls who shared that same drive. Religion and hedonism were finally combined in a cult to the individual that nonetheless presented Antar with the strongest ties he had ever felt to any group of people. He had found himself, home at last.

Part of those ties had been the mutual hunger for more, which no one truly thought would ever be sated. It was a real but unstated pleasure of anyone's life to have a mission that would not be completed; for if they were to reach the end of the road, there would be nowhere else to go.

Antar walked through the ship, inspecting its metal interiors. He stroked a hand over a cold wall. This dead thing was the end of the Blood Raiders.

Once your dreams had come true, Antar reasoned, all you wanted would be gone, and you would have nothing left to do but to die in resigned silence. The mass harvesting would fulfill every possible demand the Sani Sabik could possibly have for blood, and if they were to find their thirst rising to even greater heights, the power of this superweapon, wielded correctly, would establish Bleeding farms great enough to utterly quench it. They were done.

Antar had not foreseen this end for himself. He had expected to go out in fire.

So when a watchful crewmember reported a Thukker vessel creeping in, and when he saw where the Thukker ship was headed - not for their vessel but for the drones and the hive - he smiled, and then grinned so wide he had to turn away.

And he told his people not to worry.

Most of New Eden would never know the horror of Antar's deeds, or the bravery of the Thukker crew. They would only know the cataclysm which followed, and the pain of millions as they suffered a fate that would satiate even the most devoted Blood Raider's thirst for widespread destruction.

There was no pain for Antar or Kotan. Existence for the crewmen aboard both ships had ceased without their being aware of its instantaneous termination, as the constituent particles of their physical selves were torn apart and scattered into the void at velocities approaching the speed of light.

It was just as well for them.

Of all the people touched by the event they had triggered, theirs was the most humane fate. For neither captain knew that the immense stock of isogen-5 which detonated before their eyes was entangled with numerous stockpiles in even greater quantities, assembled for a very specific purpose, and deliberately scattered throughout the New Eden cluster and beyond.

Nor could they know that the ancient race which had placed them there possessed not only a vision beyond the grasp of today's science, but also the technological advancement necessary to realize its potential.

But all tools, no matter how simple or complex, possess a duality of purpose. Fire can provide life-giving warmth, or can burn the flesh from the bone.

"I'm sure this was covered during orientation," Dr. Garcia stated, loud enough to draw the attention of other staff in the cramped facility. "But Cassandra would tell you if there was a problem."

The young technician squirmed in his chair. As the newest member of the team, he would have preferred to not be the one to announce that the most advanced solar monitoring system of the Federation had just inexplicably gone offline.

Yet the protocol for managing this kind of situation was unwritten, and so pressing the equivalent of a "panic button" seemed a reasonable course of action. Now every senior researcher in the facility was standing shoulder to shoulder in the weather operations center, waiting impatiently for an explanation they didn't expect to be worth their time.

The watch officer muttered a curse. "SCOPE just picked up on it," he growled, shaking his head. "Must be a slow news day. Goddamn eavesdroppers."

Dr. Garcia's glare was burning holes into the new recruit. Everyone in the room figured he'd be bounced back to University within the hour.

"Show us what you have."

The tech briefly explained his actions before resorting to the playback. The telemetry had to be slowed down to frames just fractions of a millisecond in length so everyone could see it.

Every sensor in Cassandra's advanced suite of solar monitoring gear had spiked to impossible levels: subspace, gravimetric, electromagnetic, and more, detected from the high polar orbit of the satellite's pass over the Type-O star half an AU from where they were standing. The source of this frantic energy release was a powerful explosion, roughly triangulated to a source location between the planet and the sun itself.

Cassandra's last report was that the potent magnetic field of the star had drastically realigned itself towards that explosion.

Dr. Garcia blinked. "Impossible," she mumbled. "Stars can't do that..."

As if remembering something urgent, she glanced at her watch. "How long ago did this happen?"

The technician checked his instruments before answering.

"About three minutes ago."

It seemed like an unlikely place to build a thriving metropolis.

Devoid of any atmosphere, Seyllin I was a hellish world whose daytime surface temperature soared high enough to turn lead into molten slag. Though deep within Federation space, the world and system may as well been an unremarkable fringe territory hardly worth the fuel needed to reach it. Sixty years ago, an independent surveyor named Braggs Seyllin left an executive position with Material Acquisition to prospect on his own. Smitten

with the endless optimism of a true pioneer, he vowed to build a mining empire that would rival the corporation which launched his career.

After numerous years and hardships which depleted the entirety of his fortune, Braggs Seyllin finally struck gold—literally—with TLXX-01, the Federation catalog name of the system which would later bear his name. Deep beneath the surface of that cratered wasteland was a treasure trove of natural resources, including an abundance of heavier metals coveted in virtually every manufacturing sector of the cluster.

Undaunted by the steep logistical challenge of harvesting this bounty, Seyllin raised the capital he needed from governments, corporations, and private investors to build his vision of what a mining operation should be: a frontier settlement, run by people operating equipment rather than drones doing all the work on man's behalf. If it were any other world or man, investors would have never accepted the idea. But the abundance of subterranean treasure on TLXX-01 made the effort worthwhile—and Braggs Seyllin was able to deliver not just on his promise to investors, but to the millions of prospectors eventually lured by the opportunity to work and prosper.

Leave it to Federation terraforming expertise to create a living, breathing world beneath the surface of an inhospitable planet. In the mined excavation sites where thick veins of precious ore once lay, intersecting caverns big enough to house capital ships were now illuminated in gentle cycles with artificial sunlight; water ran in streams and falls throughout a cityscape that was equal parts lush vegetation and stylish living quarters; atmosphere scrubbers worked with the ecosystem to recycle air and push a comfortable breeze throughout the miles of interconnecting city blocks and work centers.

The ambitious subterranean project did as much for the science of transforming worlds as it proved that the mining industry was core to the

identity of the nation. In all, four main cities would be constructed: Loadcore, Metal City, Southern Cross, and Valimor. Braggs Seyllin died before the last of these could be completed, but his legacy was already established. At the time of his passing twenty years ago, 8 million people lived on TLXX-01. By the time the planet was rechristened Seyllin I, more than a half billion called those underground caverns home. These were thriving, pulsing cityscapes interconnected by magrail systems that spanned around the entire planet. Peak production for most of its natural resources was fast approaching, but the economic and cultural significance of Seyllin to the Gallente Federation would last long after the last chunk of ore was recovered.

Until now, this had been the expectation.

Access points for each of the main cities littered the surface of Seyllin I. The most common of these were spaceports, which allowed dropships to transfer passengers and cargo within the safety of shielded containment fields. The planet hosted several space elevators for heavy freight, but these could only be operated at night due to the extreme daytime temperatures. Just beneath these access points was a network of operational support structures, all filled with people like the researchers in the Cassandra monitoring site, elevator freight cargo masters, dropship mechanics, and thousands of others.

On the daytime side of Seyllin I, these individuals witnessed a bright flash, then had perhaps a fraction of a second to notice an alarming rise in temperature and hear the sizzling sound of air molecules blown apart by subatomic particles. Those inside surface observatories, such as Dr. Garcia and her colleagues, caught fire immediately and lived just long enough to realize it before their hearts stopped beating.

Those at deeper depths were more shielded and thus wouldn't immediately feel their bodies being penetrated and ruined by the invisible onslaught.

Instead, a curtain of dread would fall over them as the electronic systems supporting their lives—including those which provided access to the surface both here and on the night side of the planet—suddenly ceased.

Theirs would be the irony of being trapped in the dark, when somewhere above them the hottest sun in the cosmos was hurling radioactive fire upon them.

"This is no ordinary flare," the CONCORD representative stated. "That much material being thrown off is characteristic of a supernova, only there isn't enough of it to suggest that a total collapse is imminent. But the ejected plasma is following this new magnetic field at incredible sublight speeds."

"So what you're saying is that we're going to lose Seyllin...completely."

"As it exists today? Yes."

The President clasped a hand over his chin, rubbing absently.

"How much time before..."

"Less than five hours. If everything else remains the same."

Souro Foiritan stared ahead towards someplace far from where he was. His eyes were glassy; there may have been just half a drop quivering atop a tear duct. A few moments passed before he spoke again.

His voice, though, was strong.

"We keep this between us. Not one word about what's going to happen, not even to rescue crews. We'll call them back in as soon as you nail down zero hour. We can...save more people this way."

"If that's your decision, we respect it. But as you know, SCOPE is a technically proficient organization which is quite adept at—"

"Take whatever discretions you need," Foiritan growled, looking towards Mentas Blaque and holding his stare for a moment. The Black Eagles commander gave an imperceptible nod before leaving the room without saying a word.

"We'll do what we can from our end to keep them quiet," the president said.

He paused again.

"If you were down there, would you want to know the end of the world was coming?"

The image flickered, and shadows flashed each of the men standing in the room. The CONCORD official never changed his expression.

"Mr. President, if I was on Seyllin right now, I would think it had ended already."

The dropship pilot pushed the throttle all the forward. The cockpit began to rattle as the instrument panel erupted with red warnings.

"We're too heavy!" the loadmaster shouted through the intercom. "We gotta shed weight—"

"Strap yourself in and shut up," the pilot snapped, willing his craft upwards. He could feel the seat beneath him tremble as the craft's twin engines spewed white-hot plasma against the spaceport landing pad. "She's got more than this, I know it..."

Three hundred survivors were crammed into the back, nearly half a ton heavier than the maximum weight that the Federation Pegasus-class dropship could handle for a planet with Seyllin's mass. The military variant was equipped with enough thrust to put less than half as many troops in full combat gear into a hot zone with 1.0 G conditions. Now it was carrying a hold full of screaming victims from the pulse event at Seyllin, plus all the life support systems needed to keep them alive. Most of the victims had horrific burns, some with their clothing fused directly into the skin. This batch had been transported by one of the few magrails still functioning on the daylight side of the planet and pushed to the front of the evac queue. All of them were violently sick, having been exposed to deadly levels of radiation ejected from the system's blue sun.

The pilot could see dozens of dropships orbiting the installation near this spaceport; his instruments were tracking even more than he couldn't see. Local tower control was completely overwhelmed—most of the pilots were either relying on broadcast telemetry from carriers overhead, or on their own skill and vision to avoid collisions. All of them were jockeying position to land, take on survivors, and get off as quickly as possible. And though he hadn't seen it himself, he heard that the daytime side of Seyllin I was unapproachable, limiting the number of sites where evacuations could happen at all.

Audio warnings foretold of engine failure as the Pegasus strained just a meter over the pad. His loadmaster was shouting a litany of panicked obscenities that in different circumstances might have sounded comical.

Keeping one eye on an external camera display, he reached up and flipped two switches on a console; the mounted gun pods on the dropship's nose and wingtips were jettisoned and fell to tarmac. The craft began climbing quickly as his instruments confirmed that the craft still maintained structural integrity and would survive an ascent into space.

He was barely clear of the spaceport when another dropship nestled into the pad, staying clear of the discarded bubble turrets. Even though it was night, the surface of the sprawling spaceport was shimmering in heat. From the IR vision in his helmet visor, it looked like the surface of hell.

The Pegasus accelerated upwards. And as soon its hold was cleared, it was going to return for more survivors.

"Every affected system had a Type-O star," the scientist stated. "And it appears that every single one of them had an identical event."

President Foiritan was beside himself. "'Identical'? Where else is the loss of life so high—"

"Seyllin was the only world with a notable population," the advisor muttered. "Blue-star systems tend to be devoid of surface life, it's just too —"

"Get to the point!"

The scientist blushed. "The point is...it's not over yet. This main sequence anomaly was just the beginning, but it...was set into motion by something else, something connected to those subspace bursts. It triggered a chain reaction that we're struggling to understand...it's as if the fabric of time and space itself has been wrenched from beneath us."

The scientist's hands were trembling, but he had earned the attention of everyone in the room.

"Alright," the president said, calmly. "Spell it out for us, but quickly."

In a futile attempt to calm himself, the scientist inhaled deeply before starting.

"Three other systems besides Seyllin reported multi-frequency burst activity just prior to the solar event. All of it was high-energy, electromagnetic radiation, the kind of energy released in massive stellar events, but...each location is spread across the cluster, and...there are probably more locations than we know about now..."

Prominent beads of sweat had formed below the memory implants in the scientist's brow as the weight of the Federation's highest authorities bore down on him.

"Go on..." the president said.

"We've detected multiple instances of point-defect turbulence in systems unaffected by these main sequence anomalies."

"Wait," Foiritan interrupted. "'What's a point-defect—"

"Wormholes," the scientist said. "The first naturally occurring wormholes since the collapse of the EVE gate."

"No matter how hard I try," Empress Jamyl said softly, her clothes drenched with perspiration. "Death follows me everywhere I go."

Caretaker drones gently helped her sit upright in the bed of her chambers. Servants no longer looked after her when she confronted her demons. Lord Victor ended the practice not for concern of their safety, but to keep her private affairs as far from the public eye as possible.

"We won't know the full extent of the damage for some time," he said, taking a flask of water from the drone and handing it to her. "You're sure the Sansha weren't a target of your adversary?"

"No more than Seyllin, or the Great Wildlands, or anywhere else this catastrophe has stricken," she said, accepting the water and downing it. "Yet even this is nothing compared with what is to come."

Victor raised an eyebrow. The Sansha were always a prime surveillance and acquisition interest for Imperial intelligence. Their advances in cybernetic technology provided the live realization for the kinds of medical experiments that Amarrian scientists could only dream of. The Sansha have long known that they were being watched, and that errant ships had been captured and dissected by Victor's own men from time to time. He wondered if the Empire would be blamed for the destruction of one of their worlds.

"They won't," Jamyl answered, hearing Victor's thoughts as if they were her own. "They don't mourn their dead the way we do. And besides..."

A drone extended an arm to help her stand. It was a strange sight, seeing a woman this physically strong rely on a machine just to stand on her feet. "...they'll be looking in the same direction as us for answers: far, far away from New Eden."

Lord Victor watched as she moved away from the drone on her own power, one burdened step at a time.

"I'm getting closer to understanding this," she said. "I wish Marcus could see what the empyreans are about to discover. His work would be vindicated."

"My lady, I don't understand..."

"You don't need to," she said, waving him away. "Just thank your God that Amarr was spared from this."

"You must do exactly as I say," the SCOPE editor breathed, looking hurriedly over his shoulder. "Take this and publish it as-is. Don't wait for confirmation from the others, just do it."

The press intern sounded unsure of himself. "Umm, sure. Where, though —"

"Listen to me," the editor snapped, loud enough to draw the attention of several fans as he pushed his way through the crowd. The station promenade was packed for the regional skyball playoffs, but the mood was more subdued than usual as word of the crisis unfolding in Seyllin spread.

The editor was under no delusions that he could escape his pursuers by coming here. He hoped only to slow them down, and that this intern could do what he asked before they got to him as well.

"Push this report directly into the international feeds. Bump everything else off the queue, this takes flash priority. Do you understand?"

"Flash priority? Sheesh, I don't have the clout to do that—"

An unruly fan bumped shoulders with the editor, spinning him halfway around. His heart stopped beating for a moment.

"You've been authenticated to send flash..."

He could see them: three men, in black coats. The crowd was separating for them.

"Millions of people are counting on this. Send that broadcast before it's too late for them...."

"Okay, umm, I'm in the system, and the flash with your ID is queued. Confirm it?"

"Ye—!"

Thankfully, the explosion of pain in his lower back was short lived, as the motor functions in everything from his neck down simply froze. He saw himself collapse awkwardly—the impact probably did physical damage, but he felt nothing. The attack had come from behind; probably a z-stick, he thought, watching the Black Eagles reach out to confiscate his earpiece and datapad.

He could tell they weren't being gentle with his incapacitated carcass as they dragged him back through the promenade. They would fabricate a charge against him, but couldn't hold him for long. Blaque and his cronies would face a barrage of protests and legal threats for imprisoning SCOPE reporters, and they were fully aware of it.

Which means the ends must justify the means.

There is no question that Seyllin is doomed. And people have a right to know that.

The editor hoped the message was delivered to the world like he asked, and wondered why doing the right thing was always so difficult.

"We don't know where they lead," the scientist continued. "Or, what we'll find once we're there."

For the first time since the crisis began, President Foiritan began to face the cruel possibility that what was unfolding could somehow be larger than what had happened at Seyllin.

"Warships can enter our sovereign space from them?"

"Yes. And though we can't predict where they'll appear, we can say with reasonable confidence that their stability will be affected by the mass that passes through them."

"Capital ships?"

"Possibly. But not an entire fleet."

"Not an entire fleet," the president repeated, pacing back and forth. "But, say, a pack of cloaked Marauders, using a direct portal between Luminaire and New Caldari—"

"Or between Luminaire and a system that's not even in this cluster."

President Foiritan straightened his posture. His face was gaunt, but he kept his demeanor rigid.

"Admiral Ranchel, how agile is your fleet deployment along the Border Zone?"

The voice, carried by speakers in the office walls, was loud enough to be heard in the hallway outside. "The strength of our defenses won't be compromised so long as the frequency of wormhole appearances is consistent. As far as location goes, if we can scan it, we can kill it. But we would never pursue a retreating force, not without assurances of where our assets will wind up."

"Very well. How many have we rescued from Seyllin?"

"Just over half a million."

Everyone in the room saw the color leave Souro's face.

"The limited number of landing sites makes it difficult," Admiral Ranchel added, his voice subdued. "Given the amount of time remaining, we might be able to double that figure. But not much more than that."

No one said a word. The president stood, surrounded by his closest advisors, completely helpless to do anything more.

"Keep doing the best you can," he said. "Have you—"

The Chief of the Federation Intelligence Office spoke abruptly.

"Mr. President," she gasped. "Mentas was too late."

"Wave off and turn back! Wave off or you're a dead man!"

For the third time, the Pegasus was hovering just meters over the landing pad. Its pilot could see people rushing the gantries, trying to get into the spaceport's boarding area.

"We're out of time!" his carrier dispatch screamed.

His mind wandered as the craft hung in the balance between life and death. Someone in that throng of people had surely given up his place to let a wounded man onto the last dropship that would ever touch down on Seyllin. Someone's act of kindness in the midst of a terrible nightmare would be his noble end.

That person was right there, so close to where he was.

"For God's sake, you're going to get left behind!"

Without his conscious approval, his hand pulled back on the stick. The dropship was responsive, eager to fly to the carrier above, and then away from the approaching wall of fire that would bring about the end of the world. The hold was empty, save for a single loadmaster standing among rows of empty seats covered with the blood and gore of those whom fortune or kindness had spared. As though fleeing for its own life, the Pegasus turned its back on the damned souls of Seyllin and hurled away, its lone pilot's eyes moist with tears.

The planet of Seyllin I perished, as did dozens of other worlds—some in New Eden, and some that no person in recorded history would ever know about. The intentions of Antar and Kotan were irrelevant now, as the universe of their origin had changed so fundamentally that it would probably be unrecognizable to them. Neither man could have imagined that

the consequences of their actions would be so widespread, or that evil could triumph so decidedly over the powers of good.

The civilizations of New Eden would mourn for those who were lost, and then search in earnest for the reason why they died. But they would not look amongst the burnt cinders of shattered worlds.

They would search for answers by passing through tears in the fabric of space, and venturing towards the unknown.

In the Pits

In New Eden there was now a war, and in this war the capsuleers duked it out in the darker parts of space, and in those parts where lawlessness reigned there followed the capsuleers like remoras a type of people who would pick off the tattered remains like scraps of flesh from a rapidly calcifying bone.

They had reached Adek's mining station and torn through everything. He was running so fast his lungs burned with the effort.

Most parts of the colony were blessedly empty, its inhabitants having fled the war zone for fear of capsuleers. And just when those who remained had been getting a handle on running the colony with a skeleton crew, the scavengers had arrived; a small team of pirates using the capsuleers' presence as cover to strip the colonies of all useable hardware.

The thieves had been clever. They'd detonated several surface explosives before even venturing into the station, causing several colony sections to collapse or decompress. The explosives had been full of high-reaction incendiary gas that had eaten into the oxygen onboard the colony. The crew that hadn't died from fire or structural collapse had choked to death, clawing at their throats. The brave few survivors who had tried to bar the pirates' entry in the boarding areas had been killed on the spot, burned and shredded beyond recognition by the invaders' lasers.

Adek rushed to one of the emergency chambers and fitted himself inside a spacesuit. It was a clunky thing that would slow him down, but he had no idea where he was going, and it might involve one of the airless locales. He glanced up at a monitoring screen that scrolled through the few rooms still in use, but quickly averted his gaze. It showed him nothing but death.

He moved on in a delirium of fear, and a few airlocks later fell to a choking halt, his legs refusing to hold him up any longer. He lay on the ground for entirely too long, eyes shut tight, expecting at any moment to feel his skin burst and split under the unyielding glare of the scavengers' lasers.

When nothing happened, he risked a small peek and found that he'd made it to the Pits.

This was a vast cavern, full of dark and echo. The center portion of its circular floor was a giant gaping maw, a sheer drop many storeys down with sharp rocky outcroppings on all sides. Those outcroppings in turn were pitted with large holes, each of which had a solid metal covering. The floor around Adek was dotted with mining and excavation equipment, with everything from pickaxes and miniature mining lasers to multijointed MTACs with surface cling abilities.

This was the heart of the operation. The Pits' metal core was the first thing that had shown up on surface scanning back when the asteroid was being settled, and it remained the main source of the colony's ore output. But the rock was a fickle thing. Many of its tunnels, cracks and crevices led directly to empty space outside, and more than one exploring miner had perished before they'd managed to block off all the holes and properly oxygenate the place. Each of these dangerous exits was covered with an automated shaft lid. They could be opened remotely on those occasions where a brave employee was willing to spelunking, hooked onto a rescue line or strapped into an MTAC, but as the entire Pits area had to be evacuated first, this was rarely done.

Adek crawled towards the edge.

They'd be coming here soon. They had been murdering their way through each section of the colony, clad in combat gear and armed with laser guns,

and sealing off the parts of their passage to prevent anyone from getting around them or backtracking.

When a laser weapon fires at human flesh, what happens is a sizzling, bubbling explosion. He'd seen the results on the monitors.

It really was a long way down. If a body went over the security railing and jumped with all its might, it might clear the safety nets and the outcroppings below and plunge straight to the bottom. The result would be an instant death, not painless but near enough compared to a solid-state laser beam bursting through one's chest. The covered holes in the depths of the Pits looked like pocked flesh, burnt to cinders. Adek thought he might vomit in his suit.

He rolled onto his back and waited for the inevitable. He tried to empty his mind, but it kept returning to the holes in the rock, and to the scavengers rushing in. Entrances and exits. In the haze of adrenaline and quiet fear he imagined them rushing into the Pits, running right over him and going out the tunnels, into empty space.

He blinked.

All roads led to the Pits. No matter where the invaders were, they would eventually find their way here. It was the most important part of the colony, for if something were to go wrong here, either with the equipment or the place itself, it would be much harder to contain and correct than in any of the smaller, sealed-off corridors that snaked their way through the rest of the base.

Adek rolled onto his stomach again and stared into the Pits. There were several tunnels down there, shut and sealed off, that he knew led straight into space.

A small, stupid hope arose in his mind. It was so faint that he did not even dare acknowledge it. Instead, he got up and walked up to the nearest MTAC, a metal skeleton used for heavy-duty mining work. He activated its wireless controlling unit and grabbed its remote, then rushed to the corridor that led to the Pits' control area.

Even though the entire area was still quite well oxygenated, he kept his suit on. He made his way to the elevator and took it upstairs, counting the seconds it took him to arrive. He stepped out and into the central control room, whose windows overlooked the entirety of the Pits. Its functions were focused almost solely on this core of the colony, but there were a few concessions to life outside the Pits, mainly in the form of activity detectors. If the doors that connected outlying colony sections were put into use, it would show up here.

Adek keyed in his security code and sounded a general alarm. Klaxons blared in the Pits and computerized voices called out danger. Immediately, he saw increased activity of movement that steadily crept closer to his area. The scavengers were coming.

He waited and watched through the windows above, feeling entirely too calm.

When they finally came, little figures trickling in through the doors far below, he detached his facemask, turned off his oxygen flow, ran to a corner in the room and vomited so hard he thought he'd torn something inside himself.

As soon as he could, he stumbled back to the control desk. The intruders were moving about in the Pits, trying to figure out the source of the problem. Adek checked the motion detectors and saw a couple more blink. Two more men entered the Pits right after, and the detectors fell silent. They were all there.

Adek's stomach lurched.

Everyone who ever worked in the Pits learned the override sequence. There was only one, and you hoped you would never in your life have to use it.

He keyed it in. Down in the Pits, metal shutters clanged down and shut off every single entrance to the area. Adek imagined the noise they'd have made, but the echoing blare from the klaxons drowned out all other sound. The intruders looked around in panic, hefting their lasers at dark crevices. Adek said a silent thanks to whoever had thought to set the control room so high, outside of their view.

There was another sequence that allowed you to open the holes in the Pits, but it wouldn't work on its own. All it would do was disengage the regular locks, but if the Pits had gone into lockdown mode the holes wouldn't open automatically.

Unless one had an agent on location, as it were. Adek hefted his MTAC remote.

Before the astonished eyes of the murderous intruders, one of the MTACs lurched into action, walked past them, broke through the security railing and launched itself into the Pits.

It landed in the security net, cut its way through and ended up on one of the ledges below, a drop that took several seconds but was still well above the final pit. The ledge it lay on led to one of the blocked tunnels.

The MTAC walked from the precipice over to the sealed tunnel, hefted a limb armed with a mining laser and started burning through the door.

It took a while, and to their credit the intruders didn't take long to kick into action. Various sections on the MTAC's skeleton blinked under kaleidoscopic laser fire, but the scavengers' weapons were antipersonnel guns and did little to harm the machine. By the time one of them finally ventured into the Pits and started carefully climbing down to the ledge, it was too late. Adek saw the door give way and set the MTAC to push forward with all its might. It did, the pistons in its metal legs shoving against the rock, and the door slowly crumpled inward under its thrust.

Its journey from here on would be blind, but that was immaterial. Adek called up schematics of this tunnel and saw that it led in a nearly straight line to its crevice point. He set the MTAC to march forward, mining laser held forth, and waited.

By the time the intrepid scavenger had made it down to the tunnel mouth, the MTAC reported resistance. It had reached the wall. Adek forced it forward as hard as he could.

At first there was nothing. The signal from the remote merely blinked off, and for a frozen second of terror Adek thought the machine had broken. Then there was a rumble, as if an animal were waking from its sleep, and Adek saw the intruders scramble for the doors, banging on them and firing with their lasers. He smiled. The MTAC had gone through; the Pits had been ruptured. Space was claiming its own.

As several warnings sounded in the room, of low oxygen, low pressure and critical danger, Adek calmly re-attached his face mask and sealed off his suit. He took one last look out the window and couldn't help but laugh as he saw the vultures clinging pitifully to whatever they could. One or two had lost their grips and were being sucked into the Pits already, to be tossed out into space like refuse.

They all wore suits, though, and once all the air went out of the area, they would be able to move again. He couldn't risk that.

He made his way to the elevators and went down to a storage area on the ground floor, next to the Pits. There was a small squadron of MTACs here, many of whom were outfitted for dead space work. He got into one, checked that the claws on its limbs were in good function, and used its arm to unseal the door into the Pits.

Immediately he felt the drag, as if his body wanted to freefall. The pull was immense. Thankfully, the MTACs claws gripped the floor with ease.

The intruders noticed him, their eyes wide with shock and anger, but the few that remained were no threat. Most suits had emergency wire loops that let you lasso yourself to some fixed spot, and a few of the intruders had managed this. Unfortunately for them, their weapons hadn't been fixed in the same way, and all they could do was flail madly as Adek approached.

He raised his machine hand, and he cut through their wires.

Most of them panicked and some visibly screamed inside their masks. One or two even refused to tumble away and instead grabbed on to the mechanical arm, where they clung on for dear life. He bashed them against the wall until they broke or let go.

Before too long, it was over. Adek was alone. He marched his MTAC back through the empty Pits and into the control section, closed it and sealed it, and got as far as the elevator entrance before collapsing in tears.

Eventually he hauled himself back up and took the elevator to the top floor, where he entered the control room and inspected the damage from up high.

Everything that had not been nailed down in the Pits was gone, including the intruders. It was as if God had swept his hand over the earth and started anew.

Adek was about to remove his facemask when a motion light lit up.

He froze. It was one door, on the outer rim of the colony. Someone had stayed behind. One of the invaders was alive.

The light lit again, and again, each time a little closer to the control room.

This was the end, Adek thought. Everything was over. The whole world as he knew it would be extinguished.

For no reason other than to have something to do, he cast his view outside his little world, using the control room's scanners to check on traffic elsewhere in the solar system. He discovered that the capsuleers had come. One of them was even tooling around quite nearby.

He considered sending a plea for help, but discounted the idea. You didn't ask the gods of destruction to help you in times of need.

Adek drummed his fingers on the control panel. The gods of destruction were here. There was a god of destruction outside his colony.

The capsuleers were hungry gods, whimsical and easy to anger. And it occurred to Adek that it was, in fact, possible to call on the powers of the gods. One merely needed to present a worthy sacrifice.

The little part of his mind that had cut the wires down in the Pits now took over again. He typed out a message and set it to general broadcast. It wouldn't reach far, for the colony had only limited transmission rights, but if

he were lucky it would reach far enough. He keyed it to send, then checked the motion sensors. The scavenger was approaching fast.

Adek swiftly resealed his helmet and fled the control room, running down a different corridor that would lead him to the emergency supplies warehouse. From there he would be cut off, with no escape routes and no way back to the colony proper. He'd be a rat in a cage.

He reached the warehouse and immediately sealed its door. It wouldn't hold back a man with a laser, at least not for very long, but then, nothing would last for very long, one way or another.

Adek searched quickly until he found an interstellar transport container. This one was as large as an empty house, cold and austere. He unsealed one of its entry points, pulled it open and entered. It was freezing cold inside, but his suit would protect him from the worst. He sealed the door from the inside, found his way over to the personnel transport section, strapped himself in and waited.

He imagined the progression of events. By now the intruder might have found his way to the control room, where he would see the message being broadcast to the capsuleer. Even if the intruder shot the control board to bits, the message would continue to be relayed. It was a summons to the capsuleer, announcing that the station had been overrun with hostile pirates and that he was to destroy the place, rescue its precious cargo and get out before being swarmed by enemy forces.

It wasn't a total lie, Adek reasoned to himself. He was very precious cargo. There was only one of him.

There was a muted hissing noise in the distance. The intruder was making his way through the warehouse doors.

Adek closed his eyes, breathed deeply and prayed.

Before too long, the hissing noise was overtaken by a rumbling tremor. The container, which must have weighed a ton, began to shake. The noise rose to deafening levels. Explosions sounded somewhere in the distance.

Adek prayed.

The gods were coming.

Scars

"You're all right. Come on, take my hand. There you go. Let's get you up."

The world was still spinning on strange axes. Olaer couldn't see well enough to find his bearings. Colony lights were dim at this hour, to keep the inhabitants sedate. It hadn't worked.

Someone had helped him to his feet and now had their hands wrapped around his shoulders. "Can you stand?" the person said. It was a young voice.

Olaer, who was not young, nodded and set his feet. He felt the hand lift gently off him.

"Thank you," he said. He swayed a little, but remained upright. "What is your name?"

"Yane," the young voice said.

Olaer turned to look, and focused as hard as he could. His guardian was a Thukker, like himself. Olaer could not remember seeing him on the space colony, but in Thukker places this was perfectly normal. Their people were travelers.

They were in the Great Wildlands, home of the Thukker Tribe and current sanctuary for those Starkmanir and Nefantars who had fled or been freed from Ammatar and were waiting to be let into the Minmatar Republic proper.

In the meantime, the refugees waited here, guests in the place Olaer called home, and when they had nothing to do they found something to do. There

had been three of them, and they had not been happy to hear what Olaer had to say.

He took a step, tumbled, and nearly fell on his face. Yane's hands grabbed his shoulder again and pulled him gently upright.

"Alright," Yane said. "enough of that. Do you live nearby?"

"My name ... my name is Olaer," he replied. It felt important he establish this.

"Well then, Olaer. Home?"

"Not that close," Olaer said. It wasn't too far off, either, but in his current state he doubted he could even cross the street unaided, let alone get home without collapsing from exhaustion. He did not intend to have anyone carry him there. He was not that old yet.

"Then we're going to my place so you can catch your breath," Yane said. "I live right over there." He pointed towards a window on the other side of the street. "Lucky that I heard the trouble. People don't help others out much, in this place."

"No, they don't," Olaer said with regret.

"So what happened?" Yane said.

Olaer gently rubbed his side and gingerly stretched his feet. He was sitting in the apartment's only chair. The adrenaline cloud had evaporated, giving way to piercing rays of pain from his battered body.

"I told them who they were," Olaer said.

He looked around. The apartment was dark and bare. It was all one room, lit with a single bulb in the ceiling, with no internal walls and no apparent source of entertainment except for a bunch of metallic-looking blocks in one corner. Beside his chair there was a desk, a metal alloy like everything else on the colony, and on the desk there was an old-model datapad good for little more than reading and touch-screen writing. There wasn't much here to evince a personality, good or bad. But the man had saved him.

"And who were they?" Yane said. He was young, probably in his late twenties, and looked extremely strong. He carried himself like a man wearing heavy armor.

Olaer decided to take the plunge. "Traitors. Traitors and leeches."

Yane raised his eyebrows. "Did you say that to them?" he asked with a wide grin. "No wonder they beat you."

Olaer waved his hand, "No, no. Not like that, at least. They were being loud and obnoxious, and I was doing my nightly walk in the fresh air. Their behavior so annoyed me that I told them they'd be better off doing an honest day's work than keeping people up on the colony. So they crossed the street and, well, I had a moment to regret my old mouth shooting off one last time."

"Why traitors?" Yane asked.

"Thukkers who are moving to the Republic lands. Settling," he spat the word, "and finding some stability, whatever that means in the Thukker head. The Starkies and Nefs, I'll grant, had little choice but to come here, even if I wish they'd have retained enough of their dirty slave roots to help us with our business. But I've no patience for a Thukker who doesn't want

to be one. I hope I haven't offended you, in case you're moving as well," he said, leaning back in his chair and gently rubbing his hands. "I've had my share of beatings for the night."

Yane grinned. "It's fine. This ain't much of a home, as you can tell. I'm a crewman on a Thukker ship, and I spend most of my time out in space. I ain't settling anywhere. Besides," he added, "I've kept an eye on the new guys, and I don't like them. At all."

The old man, relieved, said, "I agree. And I generally tend to like people. I don't mind these guys for who they are or what they've done, and I'd never say no to someone's second chance. But you've got to make something of it. Not just run, then expect someone else to solve all your problems."

"Didn't used to be like this, I guess," Yane said.

"No, it didn't. People knew who they were and what they were capable of, and even the most rootless of meatheads in the Tribe had enough sense to act like real men, and enough strength to be criticized without turning into monsters."

"The Thukkers that moved to Republic lands, they've gotten soft and weak," Yane said, and Olaer wasn't sure which of them was echoing the other's thoughts. "Nefantars are either arrogant or kissassy, and the Starkmanirs are just ... well, they're simply stupid. You try to talk to them and all you see in their eyes is your own reflection, staring back at you."

The old man said, "And I don't like talking about people like that-" He sent a stern look to Yane, who had the decency to look away, "-But sometimes you can generalize. These poor people haven't been properly integrated. And they should be sensible enough to keep their mouths shut, their eyes open and their hands in their pockets until they learn the new ways. Your past should strengthen you, not be an anchor or a cloak."

Yane nodded. "Did you know the Amarrians, even though they ban full-body cloning, permit you to be regrown? That's weakness. That Aritcio guy they cut up, he's now back in the game, all nice and pretty. They should've let him be like he was at the end. Shredded. Let it strengthen him. They shouldn't have rebuilt him the way he did."

"You think he would be the same as he is now, if they had?" Olaer asked.

"I think he'd be honest, to himself and others. And he'd have an image that would keep people on their toes. You don't say no to the scars."

Something in his voice raised a flag in Olaer's mind, but he left it for the time being. He looked around and said, "Looks like a typical Thukker apartment. You don't have any problems saying no, I can see. What're those metal things in the corner?"

Yane laughed. "I'm not here very often, and they're weights. There's magnetism in them, or something like that, so you can put them together or take them apart." He demonstrated, taking two metal blocks and holding them up to one another. They grabbed on with a clang. Yane let go with one hand, letting the blocks hang perpendicular from the other. He grabbed hold again, twisted the blocks slightly, and they detached.

"Simple, clean and definite," Olaer said.

"Damn straight," Yane said. "When I'm here, I weightlift as much as I can, often to the point where I can't even hold my pen."

"So you write as well?"

"When my hands stop shaking, yeah," Yane said with a shyish grin. He walked over to the desk and picked up the pen and pad, then started slowly

pacing the room, scribbling aimlessly on its surface. "I like to keep them in use. Keep moving."

"Do you write a lot?" Olaer said. It felt important, though he couldn't say why.

"Yeah, actually I do. About anything, really. And we agree on the immigrants, by the way," he added. "I don't mean to be insulting when I talk about them, and I definitely don't hate my own people. But I think you and I, we agree. We're approaching the same destination, maybe just from opposite directions."

Olaer looked at him and at the pen in his hands.

"What do you see?" Yane asked. He came to a stop by the weight blocks.

"I should be seeing the weightlifting, because it fits you. That pen should stick out like an eyesore in this barren image of power you project. If I were a foolish man who did not pay attention to my surroundings and the people around me - like I believe some of the new arrivals do, though not all of them by far - I would think it strange that someone who clearly lives for the strength, and projects this kind of image, would be writing at all."

He stood up, grateful that his legs didn't complain, and walked over to Yane. "But I don't find it strange. Because you're the opposite. You're a thinking man clad in an exterior of strength and an aura of bullishness. Why?"

Yane gave him a strange, long look. He walked back to the desk and put away the datapad, then rested his hands on the back of the chair, his back to Olaer. He sighed.

"My family travelled," he said. "Sometimes for business, and sometimes to escape trouble. One trip, we were on the run and only found port in a dark colony that catered to bad people. It was hard times and we had to make our stay there, no matter who else was in that place. You know how much politics matters when you're a kid in a strange place? Nothing."

He turned to face Olaer, and said in a voice overlaid with glass strength, "And I met this Amarr girl. She was with her own family of missionary businessmen. We were ten. Stupid puppy love."

He reached out without looking and picked up the pen from the datapad, hefted it in his hand like a spear. "And then my parents found out. They and everyone else. Like I said, it was dark times."

Olaer's mouth felt dry. "What did they do to you?"

In a voice that sounded like he was talking as much to himself as anyone in the room, Yane said, "I am going to show you something I have not shown to many."

He took off his shirt and turned. The single light reflected off the destroyed skin on his back. The scars ran so deep it was as if they had penetrated to the bone. In the glare they reminded Olaer of ridges in a valley of fire; like lines on the eye of the sun, brighter than bright.

"What happened to you?" he whispered.

"I was rebuilt. The Thukker way."

Olaer had to lean against a wall. For a while there was silence in the room, and the old man listened hard for the quiet noise of the night outside, if only to remind himself that civilization still existed.

"What do you write?" he said at last.

Yane nodded, as if the old man had confirmed something. "Whatever I need to get out of my head," he answered.

Olaer took a breath, thought for a moment, then ambled over to the weights. He ran his finger over one of the blocks. It was cold, and its scratches and discoloration spoke of heavy use. "When you're not saving defenseless people from the attentions of the mob."

Yane's gaze narrowed. "Yes."

"Have you risen above your past, you think?"

"Yes." The word came out like a whip.

"You mentioned Aritcio. You clearly keep an eye on him."

"I pay attention to politics," Yane said.

"What are the five houses of Amarr?"

"Ardishapur, Kor-Azor, Sarum obviously, Tash-Murkon and Kador."

"What was the name of the assassinated second-in-command of the Caldari State?"

Yane stared at him.

Olaer nodded, and hobbled back to the chair. His legs really were starting to hurt. He sat down and rubbed his shins.

"Your attentions are quite focused, young man," he said. "Narrowly, even." He took a deep breath. "Sounds to me like you haven't entirely let go."

The light reflected off the young man's scars. Olaer realized he hadn't witnessed what happened to the assailants. He had heard someone intervene, under the beatings and his rapidly fading consciousness, and when he awoke they were all gone. It seemed like it should matter.

"I don't know what you're thinking, but you're wrong," Yane said in a dead tone.

"I think you're very lonely," Olaer said. He got up to his feet and made his way over to Yane. He raised his hand to lay it on the young man's shoulder, but Yane said, "Don't," without meeting his gaze.

Olaer sighed and walked away, slowly and carefully, out the door and into the night.

All These Lives Are Fit to Ruin

This was a hospital. That much was certain.

Parien, lying in a soft bed, had been slipping in and out of consciousness. Sometimes there had been people in here, talking in low tones and checking on the machines that stood next to his bed. Everything was white. The machines had fuzzy outlines, though that might have been his own eyes. There were tubes everywhere, gossamer strands affixed to his body like he was a string puppet at rest.

Whispered words had drifted into earshot. "Accident" was one. "Battleship" was another. And "capsuleer", though even the whispers seemed to find themselves too loud at that, as if wishing they could emit the word in such a hush as would exist only in pure silence.

At one moment Parien closed his eyes for barely a second, but when he opened them again he saw a man towering over him.

"My name is Silat Enfour," the man said, in a tone that implied this was both grand news and something Parien should have known all along. "You are going to give me answers, crewman."

Parien tried to say something but found his voice had dried up. There was a small hiss, and the parched skin in his throat suddenly felt softer.

"That was the rehydrator," Silat said. "It monitors your needs and applies chemicals based on what your body is trying to do, the less to damage it when you first apply your underused or fragile flesh. You had a nasty turn, Parien. A lot of people did not survive the cataclysm you went through."

Silat leaned in closer and said in a dark tone, "I certainly didn't."

"What can I do for you, sir?" Parien said, his voice raspy and frail despite the rehydrator.

The capsuleer took out a small datapad and inspected its screen for a while, ignoring Parien. At last, still not looking at him, he said, "Do you know me, crewman?"

"No, sir." Parien said. "But I know your name."

The capsuleer gave a mirthless smile at that. "And what does that name mean to you?"

"You are the captain - you were the captain - of the Arc of Defiance," Parien said. His throat stung. "The battleship-class vessel. That I served on. Sir."

"Which makes me...?"

"A capsuleer." This was the first time Parien had seen the captain, or any other capsuleer for that matter. He found himself hoping the man would turn around at some point so Parien could see the neural socket supposedly embedded in his neck. It was a strange, silly and stupid hope, and thus seemed entirely appropriate to the situation.

"What was the Arc's last mission?"

"You took us into deadspace. Word had it you'd found another ancient gate that led to some ruins."

"Some ruins."

"Some ruins now occupied by Gurista forces, sir," Parien said. "I expect your aim was to empty them of their valuables."

"Do you presume to know my thoughts?"

"I doubt anyone does, sir," Parien said, regretting it immediately. The words were an insult, and only his weak voice with its supplicant tone carried it through with apparent acceptance on the capsuleer's part.

The capsuleer stepped closer and leaned in slightly, regarding Parien with the kind of gaze one would a backwards student. "Do you know why you are here?"

"The Arc exploded, sir. We were ripped to shreds."

"That is what happened, yes. But that is not why you are here, in this place, at this time."

"Sir?"

The capsuleer said, in a perfectly even tone, "I have taken it upon myself to pay for your care, for there are some questions I want answered. If the information I get is satisfactory, then you will be released from here soon enough, to meet your family, friends and fellow surviving crewmembers. If they are not, then this-" he pointed at the rehydrator, whose myriad tubes were connected to Parien in places he preferred not to contemplate, "-this will pump something else into your system, and you will be extinguished like a candle. No one will ask any questions. No one will point a finger. The money I'm funneling into the upkeep of this equipment will merely be put to a slightly different use. You will be someone's two-hour overtime of paperwork, and then you will be expunged from this world. Do not disappoint me, crewman."

Parien swallowed. It still stung, but he welcomed the feeling, reminding him as it did that he was still alive.

"What do you want from me, sir?" he said.

"I was in the middle of dismantling the Gurista fleet, and had already targeted their colonial base, when my guns failed to reload. All of them. And as if that wasn't bad enough, my drones decided to develop free will at that precise moment, rocketing off to fight each their separate ship in some brief, suicidal ballet. I sat there, surrounded by these little Gurista flies with their tiny little poisonous stings, and I was held fast there while they sucked the life right out of me."

Silat began to pace the room.

"When one thing goes wrong, Parien, everything goes wrong. I've learned that, out there. Your guns don't reload, alright. What's going to be next? Oh, it's the drones!" He raised his hands in the air, a mock expression of surprise on his beardless face. "Whatever could be the matter? Nevermind, I'm sure we'll be right as rain from now on. No, hold on! What's this?" Silat lowered his hands and glared at Parien. "Care to guess what went wrong next, crewman?"

Parien closed his eyes and leaned back on his cool, soft pillow, letting it swallow him. "The escape pods."

"The escape pods," Silat repeated after him, as if they'd had a minor epiphany. "Not my own capsule, Parien, not right away, though some people with a grudge against me took care of that two systems later. But for the ones on that ship - those six thousand people who worked with you, Parien - those pods didn't even last that long. Do you know how long they lasted, Parien?"

Parien, still lying on the pillow, was quiet. He stared at the ceiling, seeing the capsuleer only out of the corner of his vision. In that faint edge of nothing he saw Silat raise his hand and press something on his datapad.

His throat began to burn. Then his stomach, and his intestines, and his veins and his limbs and his face. He started to cough and thrash, gasping for air while trying to shake off the pain. It was like liquid mercury had been poured into him. He tried to tear out the tubes that stuck out of every part of his body, but either he didn't have the strength or they were simply too well affixed. Through the haze of agony he heard Silat say, "Wherever this path leads, crewman, you will find it much easier to traverse if you go with my guidance. Answer the question."

The burning subsided a little. Parien caught his breath again. He said, "I heard ... I heard that a lot of the pods were destroyed right away. They were buffeted away from the ship when it exploded, but instead of heading off-radar like usual, many of them disintegrated. Not the outlying ones, though, with the crew and the families that had been working on nonessential tasks; those got out safe. It was the edge pods, the ones at the core that can only leave a few seconds before the ship literally falls to pieces."

"The ones where you work," Silat said.

"The ones where I work."

"Your pod survived," Silat added. "So did a few others. But many hundreds of people working in the core of the ship lost their lives that day."

Parien, still waiting for the burning poison to slowly flush out of his veins, did not ask Silat what he cared about the fate of his crew.

"Here is the next question, and you will want to answer it honestly," Silat said. "What did you do to cause this?"

"I ... I ..." Parien began. He fell silent, thought for a moment. "Can I ask a question in return, sir? It'll help me answer your own."

"Do it."

"What possible reason could you have to think that I had anything to do with this terrible, terrible event?"

Silat moved over to Parien's bed. His head blotted out the light, casting his face into shadow. "Because I was suspicious. Because I had your books audited, yours and everyone else's. Because I paid a fortune for every life that survived the Arc's explosion to be canvassed for clues of sabotage, and eventually, as I knew they would, they led me like beacons to you." He took out his silver planner, that instrument of truth and pain, and held it aloft. "Because the Guristas paid you for your work, you little worm."

Parien was speechless, first in amazement, then in agony.

"I disabled the reload procedures."

Parien's senses began to return. He still saw stars twinkling in his vision, and the room spun slowly like a dark grey moon. He was pretty sure he'd crapped himself during one of the pain spasms, but his body was too numb to tell and he didn't dare check; lest he discover a grossly wet patch in the soft white sheets or, even worse, that the gossamer tubes that extended from his body had been installed there as well and taken care of the problem.

He said it again, like a magic ward against more pain. "I disabled the reload procedures. I'd worked the gun section often enough to know how it functioned, and it doesn't take a genius to override them so long as you've got access."

"How did you get access?" Silat asked in a calm tone.

"I used a datakey from a crewmember. He'd been reassigned to drone control and I told him I needed to check up on shell integrity."

"And the disabling?"

"It's easy enough if you've got the timing," Parien said. "If you know what shells are going to be last out and first in, you just damage both of them. Make the last spent shell leave something in the barrels that doesn't get cleaned up properly, and make the first reloaded shell catch on it." Parien took a deep breath. "And before you ask, the drones are even easier."

Silat stared at him for a while. The machines in the room hummed, a faint sound with a throbbing undertone like a heart beating in secret.

At last the capsuleer said, "There wasn't much to be analyzed from the wreckage, nor from the recorded signals that I received in my pod. Some anomalies, but there are always anomalies, and they take you down a thousand paths of guesswork."

He walked around the bed, hefting his silver datapad. "This tells me all there is to tell, but not everything I need to know. A ship is not a ship; it is an incredibly complex collection of activities, bound in constant motion. It is more like an organism than a machine. There are safeguards and more safeguards, but those can't protect you forever. If someone comes along who is inventive and insightful enough - and you were, though you murdered hundreds as a result," Silat said, not with rancor in his voice but

with a tired exasperation, as if his student of hope had failed him again, "If someone manages something like that, then it is because they had honestly set themselves to the task. They needed a clarity of vision that is unique to those for whom their task has become their very purpose of being. A life is usually at stake."

Silat looked at Parien, with eyes that had seen more death than Parien ever would, and asked, for whatever reason, "You've said how you did it. Now tell me the why."

"Drugs," Parien said. "I was in deep."

Silat raised the silver device, then hesitated. "You know what this will do."

Parien kept his gaze on the capsuleer. "It was drugs."

Silat made as if to press something on his datapad, then hesitated, sighed, and sat on the chair beside Parien's bed. "If you had been a drug user, you'd never have gotten on my ship. Drugs are part of the eligibility scans I run before you're signed on, and those same scans are continued throughout your service to me. I know that some pilots don't care about that kind of thing, but I do, and I keep a tight ship. If the Guristas had somehow leveraged you into what you did, either to keep your supply line open or to pay back a drug loan, it'd have to mean you were so deeply mired that you were still an active user. And on my ship, under my command, you better learn to hold it in, because a junkie won't even take a single piss without it being checked, analyzed and flagged to the monitoring crew at once. Do you understand this?"

Parien said nothing.

"Do you understand, crewman?" Silat asked again, in an angry tone.

"Yeah. Yes, I understand."

"So drugs had nothing to do with it. Despite that, I know the Guristas were involved, because I have records that show you contacted them well before the crash. That was a mistake on your part. Whatever you were cooking up with these people you managed to keep remarkably secret, except for that one particular message. Even the payment you received from them after the crash was nigh-on undetectable, with only the barest traces of a connection to your own finances. You would have noticed it, I'm sure, when you started receiving interest notifications on the assets you suddenly had dominion over, but nobody else would have known where to look. If I hadn't been hunting specifically for something like this, I'd never have found it."

Parien, who had not blinked, stared at Silat. He said, "Do you know who sent it? Who within the Guristas organization?"

"You know, that's the one last piece of mystery," Silat said, with poison enthusiasm. "It didn't originate from the Guristas military section. It came from their mining ops people. The colonists."

Parien, unblinking, gazed open-mouthed at his torturer.

"That is the end of my information," Silat said, unheeding of the patient's stunned reaction. "You're working for the enemies now, but I'm quite honestly stumped."

He leaned in again and said, in a whisper, "There is a point where your brain knows it is about to die. Everything passes in a flash, like a dream played at hyperspeed, the whole experience tinted with that quivering fear your subconscious vomits up: That this is the last, this is the end, this is the final run before the infinite nothing. I have been cloned more times than I can recall, and this is the one part of the process that I will never, in my life of lives, get used to. So you come along and bring it on me, along with

hundreds of others on my ship; you, with your cottonball mystery, your little life that'll be extinguished with just the hint of a flame, that's light as a speck of dust, and that nevertheless refuses, refuses to unravel."

He leaned back, caught his breath. "I need to know, Parien. There's something hidden here, behind your glazed and bloodshot eyes, and I want it to appear. If I do not get this, then you will not even be permitted to die quietly."

Parien thought about this. He looked at the tubes that snaked out from the machines beside him and led underneath his sheets. He looked at the white room he was in, and even at the soft white pillow he rested on. He looked back at Silat in wonder. "I really am nothing to you, am I? No more than those people who died. Just this one mystery. I bet the money that went into this whole setup could feed a family for a year."

"Your last chance," Silat said. He did not bother to heft the remote.

Parien stared at him. Then he took a deep breath and said, "I was on your crew the day we found the first ancient gate. It took us to a Gurista mining colony that was guarded by their forces. We destroyed those ships, and anyone of theirs who didn't make it into a rescue pod was not a concern of ours. They were pirates, we thought, and deserved no better.

"Then we turned to the colony. It would have been enough to disable the turrets. It really would. And to destroy the military cache that was located at the back of the complex, because that's the only one that held anything you could take. The rest of the place, all it had was people doing their jobs. But you targeted every building, and you fired the hybrids, and you blew up the colonies with everyone on them, and no escape pods, and nobody having a chance against you. I saw it all, from the core of your ship; me and all the others who were in charge of the reloading, and in charge of the drone

control, and when God's hammer came down we were just as much at fault as you.

"Something gave way in me. Some barrier I'd erected came crashing down. I've been a crewman for a long while now, and there was nothing special about this trip. We merely found a good location, destroyed the opposition, erased all that remained on a whim from our pilot, took the loot and got out. It never does matter, when you're on a capsuleer's ship. You go where he takes you. You load and he locks. Whatever's on screen is only in your way. Even a colony full of workers and families, whose sole misfortune was to be on the other side. They forfeit their existence through happenstance. By the sheer dint of falling under the gaze of an immortal and his followers, they do not deserve to live any longer. All these lives, fit for nothing but death and ruin."

Parien stopped, swallowed. The gossamer threads moistened his throat. There was no other sound in the room but the thrumming heartbeat of the machines.

He continued, "I wanted to kill you for it, Silat. But you are just one person, and I didn't think I would ever reach you. If I had the strength right now, and the bravery, I would reach out and I would throttle you.

"But even if I went after you, there would be revenge. My entire family, distant as they may be, and anyone I've ever befriended. They would all die.

"And besides ... you're just the one crazy top of the tree. You're like a child with a toy. I'm not even sure you're all there. Everyone like you is a frightening mystery, not loved. I hope you know that.

"But the people who enabled you, the ones who kept everything running and went out drinking afterwards, bragging about the destruction; the crew I

worked with who did not benefit in the slightest from this and did it anyway, allowing you your crazy stunts, they were the ones who were truly culpable. They needed to die."

Silat said, quietly, "You know there were many of your crewmembers who had nothing to do with the attack or its mechanics."

Parien closed his eyes, breathed deep, then continued as if there had been no interruption, "When we got in from that mission I felt like a ghost. I talked to some people whom I knew dealt in crime, and I asked that a message be relayed to someone with the Guristas, a person who would know the colony we'd just destroyed and could relay the stupid, empty words I sent them.

"It was an apology, Silat. I sent a brief message telling them who I was and who I worked for, and I said I was sorry. I did not give them any other information, not about my financial accounts, nor about the ship's movements, nor anything else. They must have tracked me, and the money they paid speaks for itself, but I did not do it for them or anything they could offer. In the end, what happened on the Arc's last trip - and I was supposed to be one of the losses, but I guess my pod didn't break - was simply me, trying to make amends to the world."

Silat sat and stared at him. "So you sabotaged the pods and led the ship to destruction."

Parien nodded.

Silat got up. "I was going to kill you, but that's no longer a role I can play. I should add that if you had truly meant to make amends, you would have ensured you would die in the crash. The fact that you did not may mean something, or nothing. Perhaps you wanted to play a vengeful god. Perhaps you merely wanted to know how it feels to be one of the immortals. I've no interest in finding out."

Parien leaned back on the pillow. "Just end it," he said.

The capsuleer ignored him. "Since you took it upon yourself to be the judge, jury and executioner on the behalf of the Guristas, it's only right and proper that the ones who lost their own loved ones due to your actions get a say in your own fate." He pulled out the silver datapad and entered a message, then said, "So your stay here is at an end. I suggest you start removing those tubes. It'll be painful, but better than what awaits you if you dither."

"What?" Parien said.

"I don't associate much with your kind, but I'm told that spaceship crew are a tough bunch of people. I've just sent the gist of this conversation to one of the crew heads. He doesn't waste time during missions, so I imagine he's already making calls and rounding up people."

Silat put the datapad back in his pocket and headed for the door. Before leaving, he turned to Parien and smiled. "The acolytes are coming, you little god of destruction," he said. "You will want to run now."

And Sometimes the Fear

Lauder was going to die.

A long time ago he'd bought, modified heavily, and inserted an ocular implant that allowed him to function as a module designer despite a crushing depression. It sent him into a conceptualization of his own subconscious, where he could access memory patterns and, increasingly, take refuge. It had worked fine, until one day when it didn't. Everything functioned fine except for the subconscious gateway, which was closed off no matter what Lauder tried.

Medicine had never worked; he felt it dulled his senses. Therapy was out; it had bored him and he'd always given up. The implant had been an engineer's solution, and had served him for a long time, leaving him without need to develop any other coping mechanisms. When it broke, the illness came in with a vengeance, and he saw absolutely no way out while it wrapped him in its black arms.

And at some point - after he'd lost his job, his will to live and most of his basic dignity, living in his filth-ridden quarters on the space station he inhabited - he had a fever dream, wherein he realized that he was going to die and it couldn't be here. It would be giving truth to the path he'd always feared he was on, and would make lie of all those times where he'd told himself that he would be fine if only he went on just one more day. It'd be the last betrayal to himself, and it couldn't happen. He wanted to see something else, and be somewhere else, and feel that he was dying as someone else.

It had to be a place that would fill him up, but not force him to be happy, because happiness would feel fake in his current mindset. A remote location, somewhere he'd never be found, but also somewhere beautiful

and static, where he could rest his gaze on the surroundings without participating, giving of himself, or showing appreciation. Somewhere not created by man.

He remembered surveys done on asteroid colonies, back in the days when he'd been working on module upgrades. One in particular had been renowned for its massive caves and even offered expensive zero-gravity spelunking tours, but had reportedly fallen into disuse in recent times: it was out of the way for regular traffic, and the colony on the other part of the asteroid was an unattractive place.

It was perfect.

The tours were still available, and although the suits were strapped into a set route with fiber wire, Lauder had brought some tools with him. He disabled his suit's remote positioning and callback systems, and in one of the food compartments he inserted a concoction that would make him drift off to a peaceful and final sleep.

After taking care of the suit he had a talk with the tour guide, supplemented with a nice, two-part cash bribe. The guard, who was under the impression that Lauder was a rich thrill seeker, promised to let Lauder in there unmonitored and not worry about him finding his way back out in time, though he said he'd stay on shift for the remainder of the day in case Lauder needed any help. He added that there'd been other people who had wanted a bit of extra excitement when spelunking, but most had turned back the moment they went off the beaten path.

"Why's that?" Lauder asked.

"Some parts of these caves are unstable, and when you cross over to weightlessness and dead space, it can affect you."

"Some misguided need for self-preservation," Lauder said, adding, "Seeing as how they were strapped in, monitored and perfectly safe."

"I suppose so," the guard said. "And sometimes the fear."

"Of what?"

"Whatever they'd find in there." The guard added that the cave inspectors, the ones who'd gone deepest into this complex of caverns, had usually not returned for a second trip, and that some said there was a natural maze in there.

Lauder thanked him for the warning, strapped in, and set off towards the unknown. The starting area, called the Meadows, was pitch black. His suit had an illumination device that would let him see some distance ahead, but he didn't touch it and instead activated the night vision component of his optical implant.

The world lit up. Lauder detached himself from the cable hooks that dotted the walls, and was soon free-floating in the cave, moving in deeper with the force of the tiny thrusters inset in his suit. It was a massive place, and it took Lauder several minutes of movement before he started seeing a hint of the opposite wall. To his surprise he noticed a few clusters of crystals dotting the black rock; he'd assumed the area had been thoroughly mined out before allowing casual tourists. Most of the crystals were greenish of color, with central spines that protruded far into space and smaller crystal fragments that stuck out at right angles from them.

It seemed to him that one cluster of crystals was arranged in a fairly circular fashion around a rock that looked darker than its surroundings. As Lauder

moved closer he saw it was an opening, leading to another section of the cave. He sped up, aimed towards it, and nearly knocked himself out when he crashed into the wall at full speed.

Once he'd shaken off the blow, he reached out and started feeling the rock, wondering why he'd seen an opening there at all. With his depression set aside for a precious few moments, he inspected the wall, not only in his immediate surroundings but everywhere he could see. He thought he glimpsed a couple of other entrances, but they were gone when he blinked, and he wondered if his implant was conking out. He hoped it wasn't starting to transfer his mental constructs over to the real world; merely willing a tunnel into the wall shouldn't make his mind show him one.

He let himself drift around, hovering over the crystals and looking for something else. Ever since he'd entered the Meadows he'd felt sure that he was on the right track, for whatever reason, and he refused to believe that he was supposed to end his journey and his life in the entryway. He eventually came to a blanket of crystals that seemed to cover impenetrable rock. He stared at them, and for a split second the world shifted, as if losing transmission, and showed a gaping hole behind the crystals.

Lauder had no idea what was happening to his vision, but the thought of floating aimlessly here and staring at the crystals forever was too much to bear. He pushed himself away until he had a good starting distance, then used the suit's thrusters to reverse and speed him up, aiming for the wall. He'd picked up a fair amount of speed when he came close, and in the last second he pirouetted, hit the crystals feet first, and stomped on them as hard as he could. He'd assumed he'd be pushed away, but instead he plunged through, crystals shattering in zero-g all around him, and fell into a large, dark entryway to another cave.

This one was less of a proper cavern than a long, vast alleyway, its surfaces beset with sharp, red crystals and with stalactites and stalagmites formed when this asteroid had been part of a planet's gravity. Lauder moved carefully through it, and idly thought that this dark corridor, with its edges and spikes and redness, was a fair representation of how he'd felt when the depression came flooding in. Also, his feet hurt.

The corridor, which was wide enough to room a frigate, went on for a long while, turning occasionally in some direction but never coming to an end. Lauder had begun to wonder if he was judged to wander it forever, never leaving the flow, when he spotted an opening in the wall to his right and headed through it.

He came into a cavern as big as the Meadows, full of massive boulders of worthless ore. Lauder felt very tired. He'd heard such stories about this place, and had felt inexorably drawn to it, and now all he had was a blackened hole no better for dying than his quarters. He looked around and gasped when he saw that the entrance he'd come through had crumbled soundlessly, leaving him with no option but to push on.

He hovered over to one of the smaller boulders, which was the size of several men, with no aim other than perhaps to kick at it, but when he got closer, something didn't feel quite right. He turned on the light source of his suit and pointed it at the rock, and when he saw the red glint, he realized what he was seeing. Among the regular Omber and Pyrox he was seeing veins of Arkonor, one of the most precious ores in the world.

He moved back and marveled at what he was seeing. There was enough Arkonor in this single boulder to make a planetbound man rich beyond his dreams. Lauder had worked enough with capsuleers to be set for life, so he let himself fantasize about someone else finding this cave, processing some of the ore, selling it and, somehow, finding happiness through the riches. It amazed him that in this nondescript cave, where he'd felt nothing

but sorrow and lamentations, there could be something to change a person's life.

After deliberating whether to inspect the other boulders, some of which were so tall that he could barely see where they ended, he decided not to, and instead floated gently among them, seeking another exit on this cave. There must be more than this, he thought.

There was. He found a red-rimmed tunnel that led him back to the original vast hallway, with the red crystals on all sides, but it felt like a part he hadn't seen before. It was like he had traveled through the tributary of a river, and now he flew on, letting it carry him where it may.

A flicker caught his attention, and he moved into another side tunnel. It led him to another cave, as big as the others, that looked as if he were back in winter times on a frozen planet. Everything was covered with ice, massive clear icicles that protruded from every surface like glass blades waiting for a giant's throat. Lauder noticed how some of them were remarkably similar to buildings; they were the same massive sizes as the boulders in the last room, but the structures here had tighter angles and clearer borders. Lauder marveled at it, but felt underwhelmed nonetheless. He'd been hoping for something more than ore and ice, but didn't know what, and felt an undercurrent of anger at himself for thinking so. Of course he'd find these things in asteroids, and little else.

He was about to move on through when he remembered the flicker. He looked around, and saw something in the distance, but it was so refracted by the ice that he couldn't quite tell what it was. He moved closer, navigating among the frozen blades, until he rounded one of them and nearly had a heart attack as a massive ball of fire came towards him. He scrambled and jerked in mid-space, but the fire was extinguished before it reached his body. After catching his breath, Lauder realized that it had traveled alongside a gigantic spear of ice nearby, and had jumped off for a

second before losing whatever fuel it had. He wondered if the fire was feeding off oxygen trapped in the ice, and whether the frozen liquid really was water, but nearby flickerings interrupted his train of thought. There was more fire here, writhing and burning, and it undulated over the ice like living danger.

Without thinking, Lauder launched himself towards the fires, trying to catch them as they leapt off their surfaces. It was dangerous and stupid, he knew, and he kept going right until the point where he misjudged a leap and crashed back first into a large, jagged icicle, nearly impaling himself in the process. He managed to roll with the hit, but he heard, or felt, the vibrations on his body that felt half like his bones rubbing together and half like the suit being torn to pieces. The idea of losing everything to a stupid accident shocked him back to carefulness. He decided to leave the fire behind, and looked for an exit, still ignoring the fact that crystalline structures looked more and more like buildings every time he looked at them.

It didn't take him too long to find his way back to the main hall, red and endless, though by then he'd accidentally broken some of the crystals and suspected he might have closed off access to this cave as well. He drifted on, lost in his own thoughts, and nearly missed another opening in the hall. He let himself drift through it, not knowing what to expect, and at first didn't see anything at all except a fuzzy cloud hovering in the cave. It took his eyes a moment to adjust, and when he realized what he was looking at, it took his breath away. The gigantic cloud was golden cytoseroцин, its aurient shimmering beset with blue crystals that seemed to blink on and off. It wasn't merely the gas itself that stopped him short, but the fact that in its form it approximated some of the memory palaces he'd built for himself in older times. As it morphed and undulated it looked like bungalow, a wooden cabin in the murky swap, a castle with spires reaching towards the cavern ceiling, a series of promontories holding lighthouse spires, on and on and on.

He came to a stop in front of the cloud, which was contained within its own static field in the cave. If there had been gravity, he would have fallen to his knees. It wasn't just his imagination, he was sure of it: He was seeing glimpses of the other world, the one he'd created. Every cave he'd gone through had brought it into sharper focus. He stared at the cloud in wonder. He'd forgotten so much. All these buildings and what they represented were gone, erased from his mind by the malfunctioning implant and the crushing grip of the depression. He felt like he was going to cry.

After a long time catching his breath, Lauder turned away and left the cavern without looking back. Whether the structures had really been there, or if his implant was acting up, he didn't care. On his way out he kicked the red crystals as hard as he could, and they came loose along with a mass of rubble, sealing this cave off for good.

His journey continued, hovering through the red corridor, for so long it felt like he'd traveled forever. He didn't mind that, not any longer. There was something here he hadn't expected, though he didn't understand what it was, nor even whether it was an external thing or merely the product of his own exhausted mind.

And it all came to a crashing halt when he went through one last side entrance and saw, whole and untouched, his entire mnemonic world: every building he had ever conceived of, every pattern he had built, every single memory palace, all of them put together in this massive cave he had entered. He did cry now, felling silent tears that hovered in front of him before sticking to the inside of the suit, because he knew he had lost his mind. This could not possibly be here.

The palaces stood in complete silence, crowded together like building blocks on a mat. They shimmered every now and then, turning almost translucent as the gas clouds had been in the other cave. As Lauder

stared, he thought he saw a ripple go through them, and then before his eyes the buildings crumbled. Walls came down, windows exploded, dust billowed out in massive gales, and everything tore itself apart until there was nothing left in sight but rubble, rocks and fallen debris. It should have been like watching a representation of his depression at work, Lauder thought, but it wasn't; it felt cleansing, and rejuvenating for a reason he couldn't quite grasp.

He looked down at the fragments below, lying there for miles around and held down by some ghost of gravity, and noticed that they were changing. From the grey cement rose glinting steel; bent wires undulated and writhed until they had become fiber filaments; and glass shards fused and liquefied, pouring themselves into just-born containers to become lenses and windows.

From the debris rose these parts and came together, linking and connecting in front of Lauder's eyes, turning into something so familiar he could barely comprehend it at first.

Ship modules.

They hovered there in countless numbers, slowly matching up to form even more familiar shapes. In total silence, Lauder saw frigates created by the hundreds, designs from all races hovering side by side. Some of them seemed to explode without destruction, disassembling themselves, their constituent parts realigning with others to create larger vessels, cruisers now, battlecruisers, and even an entire battleship that hovered there in the middle like a rock in a river, the smaller ships orbiting and encircling it.

Lauder floated towards the celestial ships, finally getting a sense for just how massive these caverns were, but the moment he hit one it disassembled, giving way like a pool of water. He expected it to have reassembled behind him, but when he looked back he saw that its parts

were realigning themselves into something different, a structure he didn't immediately recognize. He glanced at the other ships and saw they were doing the same, but it didn't take long until he realized what was being created. In front of him, the nearest pieces were forming a side view of his own living quarters, down to the chairs and appliances. He looked around and saw that the quarters had been complemented by the entire machinery that usually surrounded them, and beyond it he could see other quarters, structural components, corridors and houses and processing plants, all the parts of the entirety of a space station that was assembling right in front of him.

It began to dawn on him, in this heart of mechanical creation, that the deeper he'd gone into this place, the further he'd been led from the natural world of rocks, ice and gas, and had instead come closer to the intangible, the man-made and the world he'd known. Or, rather, he thought, the world he had formed for himself; the sphere of reference in which he had existed. That realization alone rendered it unimportant whether any of this was real, for it was no more or less real than his conception of it, and as he'd learned in being driven here, his conception of the world around him was everything. In all the ways that mattered, he had created this.

And in his understanding of that, he also understood that it did not end here. It ended only when he felt it should end, and he had further to go still.

He moved through this view of his life, and it gave way as he passed.

Down through the tributary he went, into the red river, but this time it came to an end.

The corridor narrowed down, the red crystals spiraling in on its final opening, a gate leading into somewhere unknown. Lauder hovered there at the threshold, unsure whether he dared go through. This suit would keep him alive for a long time, and he was afraid that if he went through and

confronted whatever it was on the other side, he would die. He hadn't imagined he could possibly fear death any longer, but now he did. He wanted to go back into his old world, to the station where he lived, into the quarters where he spent his days, to stand in front of that plasma screen and look at the scenery until his eyes unfocused and he was back among the memory palaces he'd created. He knew he could do it. He had the ability, still, even if it was unreliable; these visions had proven that.

But that same realization reminded him that now he had something at stake, and it was thanks solely to this journey. He had regained something he had thought lost. And he knew that if he were to turn back now, and give up his chance of finding the end of his quest, he would never forgive himself. It might be death, or something else; he didn't know.

He pushed on through, resolving to find out.

This cave was larger than all the rest, so big that he couldn't even see its distant walls. He had no idea longer whether what he saw was real - the cave itself might be miniscule for all he knew - but it didn't matter. He was engaging reality on more than one level.

A light came on in what Lauder suspected was the center of the cavern, a white dot that seemed either tiny or distant. The dot started to grow, fast, its white light approaching Lauder at such high speed that he barely had time to think of how he wished it would not envelop him but would touch him instead; become part of him instead of remaining eternally distant. It got closer, infinitely closer, and Lauder reached out his hand in anticipation and dread. His fingers were outstretched, aching with the reach, and then the white light drew up and touched them. And the whole world changed.

The cave lit up in all its glory, nearly blinding Lauder. The light, bone-white, made every detail visible in a hyperlit grayscale, and Lauder's first thought was that he had found God, some great force beyond normal existence. In

front of him the space flickered, showing colorless images from the other caves. In the black and white of a flipbook drawing he saw the stalactites take form in the main hallway of the colony. The ore was created; it grew and bulged with the red veins, now grey in the blinding light, that would turn it to Arkonor. Liquid flowed through the asteroid while gravity still reigned, but its progress slowed and it started to freeze, aligning itself into gigantic crystals. It was pulled in several directions, with gravity clearly giving up on it, so it settled on every surface and kept freezing up.

Lauder was surprised that there was no fire, and wondered where it would come from. At that thought the frozen icicles burst into grey flame, and Lauder realized with a shock that he was the one who had created this. The crystals exploded, their shards floating in mid-air and their flames enveloping them, seemingly baking the pieces until they turned into a shimmering black and white gas. The gas slowly dissipated, leaving various objects behind that were completely still, affixed in mid-air like asteroids in space. It was the pieces Lauder had seen in the last cave, where the ships and the station were created, but they were transparent now. There were rocks inside them, but they, too, were transparent, and as they began a slow trajectory to the walls of the cave, they began to deform, flattening and losing their shape, until they reached the rock and laminated themselves onto it, losing their definition and finally disappearing.

And so the journey had come to a close, and Lauder understood what he was. This was a world of his own creation. The complex of caverns, which was certainly real, nevertheless existed on several levels, and one of them was inside him. In past times he had rebooted himself, flushing out the levels of his mind, and he understood that he had now done the same, facing and destroying everything he had built, things that were often inside him but nonetheless had not been part of him. He had trapped himself inside a world of his own creation, but he was separate from it, which meant that somewhere, there was a way out.

With that realization, which left Lauder grinning like a nitwit, his optical implant stopped working for good, and the world was plunged into darkness.

Lauder kept grinning. The suit had no functional night vision, but it had a focused light that would stay on as long as needed. He would find a way out. The suit had a lot of air, and had emergency rations that could be injected into him, so long as he stayed careful about that one cocktail of his own creation. He had time. It might not work, and he expected that if he ever looked back and saw the darkness he was leaving behind, the abyss would swallow him whole, but in that infinite road of time that stretched out before him, there was at least the faintest glimmer of hope.

Houses of the Holy

When I regained consciousness we were deep underground. They had me trussed up and tied to a pole, and were carrying me like a massive cocoon. I was completely naked. The friction from the ropes was burning my skin.

My arms and legs were pinned but I could move my head. The walls on either side were lit with torches that flickered as we descended. There was a caravan of locals in front and back, and I imagined they were escorting me to the temple.

None of my team-mates were being carried with me. I was the last.

We were sitting in the lounge of a corporate employer that did not admit we existed. This was normal for people like us. We would be inspected by the corporation's agents, have our backgrounds investigated and our motivations questioned. Once we had finished this cute little white-collar gauntlet, they'd give us the information needed to do whatever it was they wanted. If we failed, we'd be left to fend for ourselves.

The meeting could just as well have been held in a back room somewhere, but instead we were brought in - after hours, mind - and sat in a large room with a nice view and far too many vidscreens on the walls. In the middle of the room was a large wire sculpture that looked like a spaceship's migraine. I imagined they'd brought us here to impress us, maybe get a little solidarity feel going. Funny people, these.

To their credit, they didn't waste any time. They got in a team that vetted us, asking questions that would have gotten them a bullet to the face under any other circumstances. They finished up, left the room, and a single

agent entered in their stead. He was a tall, thin man in clothing that fit him well, and as soon as he was in the room he dimmed the lights and laid out images on the vidscreens.

Our employer, he said, was a Minmatar corporation that had interests in low-sec space. Now that the war was on, certain restrictions had been relaxed, and the right people stood to make quite a lot of money.

He pointed to one image. It showed a greenish-brown planet with the Amarr logo superimposed on its surface.

"We've been doing surveys on that one. Turns out certain areas have a high concentration of a valuable ore required for high-tech manufacturing. One valley in particular is so rich that its excavation alone could put a company into space."

"I've been to space," Chalmers said.

"How was it?" I said.

"Too crowded."

I grinned. The agent cleared his throat and continued, "So we'd very much like to gain control of that area. There's just one problem."

"The people," I said.

He nodded. "A society of Amarrians. Absolutely backward people, even by their own standards. Nobody's even looked at this planet for eons, let alone helped them out of the stone age. We don't have much information on them, but overhead imagery-", he waved a hand and the planetary image zoomed in, becoming a bird's-eye view of a land mass, "shows they've settled in that exact spot. You see these stone buildings here, here and

here; that's all they have. Most of them serve some religious function, although the imagery lacks the detail for us to determine anything more."

"Does it matter?" I asked. "We're hardly going in with smiles and Scriptures."

"You cannot kill them," the agent said in a serious tone. "My employer is adamant that there be no unnecessary deaths, lest the media and public opinion in New Eden turn against us when we ramp up production. A lot of light will be cast on our operations there and it will not do for any local to say he lost his family due to our greed. So yes, it does matter."

"If we can't kill them," Chalmers said, "how the hell are we going to get them off the land? Throw the Scriptures over their heads and hope they run and fetch?"

"Almost," the agent said, and his face twitched into a leathery smile. "You're going to blow up their churches."

Logic was, we'd install explosives at key locations and make the locals - who we must've assumed were pretty stupid; more fools, us - think than an earthquake, or God's own hand, wanted them to pull up stakes and leave. Nobody was to be harmed; it would be fallen churches in the night, and the locals waking up to the ruins of their faith. Then, once the corp could set down roots, get something going there and worm their way into the local economy, such as it was, they could deal with the populations on the other, less metal-rich continents. Smiles and Scriptures, smiles and Scriptures, and a few coins for the commoners in exchange for some patches of land.

The first dose of unpleasantness came on our way to the dropship. We were to be shunted in pretty far away from ground zero and would have to

travel several days to reach the area. The agent contacted us with an update on the soil we'd be traversing.

"It's poisonous," he said, and quickly followed it up with, "Not fatally, not unless you intend to eat the earth. But the minerals we're after aren't the kind of things you want in your bloodstream. It may be that the inhabitants will be a little ... odd. Not that it's a problem for you guys," that leathery smile again, "and if anything it'll be to your benefit. Tired, worn, exhausted people won't be listening to bumps in the night. Get in, plant the packages, get out again and you'll be fine."

The second surprise came after we'd landed and done a whole day's trek towards the site. We'd been told there was no other tribe living in the area, which appeared to be true. But we'd also been told that there were no settlements outside the valley where they lived - even though the land everywhere else was just as rich in bounty and raw materials - but we saw small ruins on the way, signs of past inhabitation. Some of those ruins had a decidedly religious slant, what little there was left of them. We spent the night in one, glad to have a roof over our heads, but the imagery they'd carved into the rock gave me a headache, and I was glad to be out of that damned place by morning.

The last surprise before everything went wrong was a quick communication from the agent. We'd been told there would be total communications blackout once we landed - not that we needed to worry about the locals, but there might be things in space listening out for our passage - and so the message was short, terse and not all that comforting. "New data. Bad place. Tribe long-term poisoned from minerals. Every fourth child dies in its crib. Iconic analysis shows Sani Sabik influence. Get in and get out."

And we, in all our civilized glory, reacted to our taut nerves with the dumbest emotion possible: Bravado.

We started acting as if we belonged. We were still a day's journey away from the valley and our high-tech, all this wonderful high-tech, showed no movement nor heat signatures moving about, so we barged through the bushes and stalked down the paths. It didn't occur to us they might have smelled us coming, and prepared for our arrival.

When the trap closed, all I saw was air. We were hoisted to a great height in a split second, and as we screamed and grabbed for our weapons we were dropped to the ground. I landed so hard on my shoulder that I felt its bone grind into my neck, and from somewhere close I heard a sickening crunch. We all lay there in one pile, writhing about and disoriented, surrounded by the woven threads of the net that had caught us. I didn't feel broken, so I called out to the others, but before they could respond I realized the crunching sound had come from a number of broken containers around us - they looked like thin bags of dried tree-bark - and that the air was now rife with the smell of iron. Everything went fuzzy, and then everything went black.

I came to in a sermon. There was no other way to describe it.

We were in a large hall filled with people, most of them sitting crosslegged on the floor. The crowd was bisected in the middle, leaving one direct path from the far end of the room directly to where we sat. In the distance I could see a door that I suspected led to the exit, though it was located in the corner of the wall and not the center as is usually the case. We were at the other end and there was another opening in the corner of the wall close to us, though it was only covered by a velvet curtain. I noticed that even though the hall was so packed that people's legs were touching, the area around this door was empty. It was a bad door, apparently.

I felt a little giddy and I knew I was going to die.

Almost everyone in the room faced us. We sat, too, crosslegged, but our legs were tied together at the ankles and our arms were tied to stakes set in the floor behind our backs. I could turn around enough to see the top of the stake - it was wooden, not sharp, but looked splintery.

Also, we had been stripped down to our underwear.

Chalmers looked at me from the far end of the row and I recognized his unspoken sentiment from his expression. This was wrong, this was very wrong, and if we didn't take in every little insignificant detail, focus on it and let it expand till it filled our heads, we would panic and we would die.

Beside us stood an Amarrian priest of an Amarrian religion that had nothing to do with the Amarr. I recognized some of the symbols on his robe from the ones I'd seen at the ruins a few days earlier. He held a cup and a ladle. Beside him was a large golden vat decorated with precious stones.

One by one, the people in the hall - whose clothes were dirty and tattered, and whose bodies were dirty and tattered - came to him, in the slouching sort of amble that conveys a feared respect. They bent forward so that their faces looked at the ground, and raised their beckoning hands over their heads in supplication. We were close enough that I got a good look at their skin, and I saw that it was lined with blackened veins, far darker than any man's should be. Their hands were a spider's web of darkness. The poison at work.

The priest's hands, I noticed, were unmarked and looked perfectly healthy. He ladled something out of the vat and into the cup, which I now recognized as a chalice, and handed it to the acolyte, who drank from it deeply.

It was not wine. I wished to the gods it had been wine, but it was not wine.

The tribe marched on, each member lurching to the altar to take sacrament. Their blackened hands reached for the chalice. Some brought their infants and held them up with steady hands as the priest gently poured into their mouths.

And then it was our turn. The priest filled the chalice and walked over to us. The room was still half full and I could feel every man's gaze burning holes into my chest.

He came to me first and held the chalice to me. I turned my head, in refusal but also so I didn't have to look at what was in it. A metallic smell crawled into my nostrils.

He stood there for a few endless breaths, then finally moved on to another team-member. We all refused, shaking our heads.

Chalmers was last. When the priest offered him the cup he merely shook his head, eyes closed. I could see a vein throbbing on his forehead. I thought everything was going to work out, but the moment the priest turned his back Chalmers made a croaking sound, inhaled sharply, and spat on him.

I expected an uproar, that the crowd would rise to their feet and storm us, but nobody moved. The priest merely turned back and gave Chalmers a gentle smile. This infuriated him even further and he started thrashing about, trying to rip up the stake he was tied to. I hissed at him to chill out but he ignored me, tossing his weight back and forth and straining uselessly at the bonds.

There was no panic. Several healthy-looking men came in from the wings - their hands completely free of black spiderwebs - and picked up Chalmers,

hefting his struggling form as easily as that of a petulant child. They carried him cursing and yelling to the near exit, beyond the velvet curtain.

That was nearly the last we saw of him. We heard his screams for a few minutes more, growing hoarse and pained, but saw nothing, until. Until.

Until there was a roaring metallic sound, as of a machine coming alive, and for the briefest of moments there was a bright flash, so bright it shone through the curtain and showed us the silhouette of Chalmers, hanging spreadeagled and hooked up to countless tubes that writhed their way around his body as they drained him of his life.

The light stayed off but the sound went on until he died.

They left us there after the ceremony and eventually I passed out. When I came to I was in some other building with no light and no people and no team-mates around. I drifted in and out of consciousness. Once I awoke screaming someone's name.

Every now and then the priest would come in and speak to me, though whether it was really him or some mad delusion, I didn't know. I cried, sometimes.

And finally I awoke being carried by the people, into the ground, trussed up like an animal for the slaughter.

We intended to destroy their saviors - we, their enemies - but they are a forgiving people, simple but kind.

They found a way to live. Old rituals held anew. These blood colonies of a dark and grinning god.

My companions had been given a choice. I was the last. They were bringing me now to the holiest of temples, far underground in this place. I turned my head and looked at my hands and legs. My body was tired and weak, and in the flickering light of the torches I imagined I could already see my veins turning black.

We arrived, and it was a vast and dark place, a cave big enough for a battleship. We stood on a tall cliff where below I glimpsed a valley, surrounded by other craggy outcrops in the rocks. There were hundreds of light sources down there. At first I thought they might be torches, then realized they were bonfires. I could not imagine how many people were here.

In the distance was a building so tall it reached up to the cloudy roof of the cave. It was the shape of a capsule, bronzed and red, covered in gross metallic cables that looked like the veins and matted hair on a newborn's head. Their holiest of temples.

The mission was lost and so were we. There would be no rescue from this place. My companions had accepted that, in each their own way, and made their choices accordingly. Now it would be my turn.

They are taking me to the temple, to the great altar, where I will choose between the slow death of poisoning or a long life among these people. I will be a martyr or I will be an acolyte.

And I know already, with the knowledge of the dreaming, that at this vermillion altar the high priest will greet me, and he will give me the chalice filled with the drink of life; the purified cure of this land; the blood of Chalmers.

Depth of Field

4.

The noise was getting louder, and the air was running out.

"What the hell was that thing?" Now that there was nowhere to go, Karin couldn't stop herself from pacing.

It had torn through her ship's hull like it was tinfoil, exploding out into the vacuum. She'd seen it on the camera feed, bursting through the reinforced bulkheads of the central hold, and finally understood why Dagan had wanted a camera trained on a goddamn inert drone.

God, he was probably dead, too.

Of course, he could come back. The rest of them weren't that lucky.

"You're so damn calm all of a sudden. You're gonna die, too, you know." Neral was quiet, leaning against the wall where Karin had arranged her. Her eyes were closed, but her breathing was shallow, her face sheet-pale.

"It seems quite likely, yes."

"Fucking Dagan," Karin muttered. "I'm so sick of eggheads."

"You'll be free of them soon enough, hmm?"

"The hell is wrong with you?"

"I've done what I had to do. There's nothing left."

The clang of metal on metal reverberated through the ship, over and over. Something was beating against the wall of their little harbor, and knowing what it was wasn't making her any more comfortable.

It was getting louder. She'd swear it was almost through the bulkhead.

"You need to know--" Neral gasped. "You need to know that they'll be coming for you now. They'll all be coming for you."

"Who? Who--" Karin's words cut off, eyes widening as she saw Neral's gun.
"Are you crazy? You can't shoot that in here!"

"Can." And the report filled the room.

Karin slowly, cautiously opened her eyes. She looked over at where Neral had been sitting, then quickly looked away. She turned her face away from the ruin that had been Neral, and faced instead her own destruction.

It was almost through the door. It was--

"Hello! Anyone alive in there?"

CONCORD?

Had she known?

3.

Karin dragged Neral along the hallway, her progress painfully slow. She'd found the woman with a chunk of shrapnel in her gut, and Karin couldn't just leave her lying there. Her ship was collapsing around her, nothing she could do about it, but she'd be damned if she was going to let her ethics go the same way.

And now she was trapped in the twisted wreck of her ship with a dying woman.

A dying woman and that noise.

The terrifying shriek of tortured metal and the groaning vibrations of the hull as it collapsed were bad enough, but it was the steady, metallic banging against the thinnest bulkhead of her accidental prison that was really freaking her out.

She really wanted to be thinking about something else.

Her mind caught on a story from her childhood, of monsters in the depths of her homeworld's seas—

No, that wasn't any better.

-- arms reaching out to strangle whole vessels, down under the weight of fathoms of water, death as certain as--

"Tahaki Karin," she thought, "you snap out of it this instant."

She contemplated the bristling heap of metal shards ahead, bent and broken support beams and plates barricading what should have been a hallway.

She set Neral down gently, tried to slow her breathing. Normal. Do a mental inventory: What do you have on you?

Wrench, hammer, screwdriver, pliers--

Leverage.

She could get some of the debris off one of the interior walls, find a way around, get them to a pod--

--live through this.

2.

When everyone's eyes were glued to the security feed, watching Dagan's precious drone burst free from the ribs of their ship, it was Communications Officer Neral's voice they heard over the com.

She sounded just as calm telling them to abandon ship as she always had announcing an incoming transmission.

It made it all the more surreal when Karin discovered Neral bleeding out in the ship's corridor.

She'd suffered a massive stomach wound, and judging by the trail she'd left she'd barely been able to pull herself over to the wall.

Karin crouched by Neral's shoulder, reaching out to check her pulse, and nearly fell over when a sticky hand grabbed her arm.

Neral's eyes opened, bright with fever. "Dagan... drone. Got to warn. My sisters. How?"

"Hey," Karin said. "Hey, it's okay, we'll get you out of this."

"Wasn't supposed to. Never expected. To get out." Neral laughed, short and horrifying, a thick wetness in her voice. "Will now."

Neral grabbed desperately at Karin's arms. "They'll be coming after you now. They'll all be coming for you. Tell my sister—"

"You can tell her yourself," Karin said. "I'm going to lift you now, but it'll hurt. Brace yourself."

1.

Dagan was on the line with her when the sirens started going off.

"Damn it," he said. "This is far too soon. I thought that thing was thoroughly offline."

"The drone? It was! I checked it over when you brought it onboard."

He switched her view to the security feed. It was powering up weapons.

"I'm getting out of here. You'll probably want to evacuate, too," Dagan said, as her door slid shut and she heard the locks engage. "Shame you won't make it."

Arrogant bastard, she thought, and headed for the ventilation ducts.

Spectral

The rheumatism wasn't so bad these days, thanks to some of those new medicines they'd brought in from the core worlds. Eyesight was alright thanks to the old implant, mind was sharp as ever, and if his hands trembled a little at times, well, it was fall and the weather was cold.

He walked slowly down the streets of this city in space. The autumn leaves drifted in whorls around him, raked by cold gusts of wind. It always amazed him to see trees planted here, in a disconnected place where he could look out the window and see nothing but the stars of the sky; but then, they belonged no less here in this small globe of orbit than on any other globe in the galaxy. Old and withered, and losing their decoration with the encroaching winter. He was glad to have them here with him, old and withered too.

The winter, now, he didn't much look forward to. The weather engine did what it could, but proper snowstorms were out of the question. At most they would get a sloppy cold drizzle and some bitter frosts. Winter leached all color out of the year.

It felt like they'd started to fade already. He ignored the little twinges from his aging joints and moved on to his daily place of refuge. In his youth, his own grandfather had told him about those pains: that they were little pecks from the black birds of the river, eating him up 'til there was nothing left but the souls, and that while he still felt their beaks piercing his flesh, it was proof he was still alive.

He smiled. The story had given him nightmares for days, about black birds of prey.

It was still early morning when he reached the cafe. He went here every day, part for breakfast and part to gently immerse himself in the rushing flow of life. One did not truly start dying, he felt, until one was left alone.

He took his usual seat in his usual booth, which was never occupied at this early hour, and glanced at the newsreader inset in the tabletop. It was possible to set the reader to broadcast upwards, casting a vertical holo that was akin to reading a real paper and didn't force you to keep your plate to one side, but he preferred it this way, burrowing over the news in his own little corner of the world.

The headlines were their usual grim and paranoid selves, so he switched over to articles about more local business. He'd always had an inquisitive mind, if a little overly lent to imagination, and had known even as a young man that the loudest news held the biggest lies. One needed to watch for the little signs instead: the leaves, and which way they were blowing.

The waitress, whose name was Joraa but whom he always called Madame, came up to him. She was in her middle age, but had the mind of a sassy youngster. He liked that, even more so because it likely bugged the hell out of everyone younger than her.

"Hey, old man," she said in a voice with an evenly balanced rasp and whine.

"Good morning, Madame," he said. "The same, please."

She gave him a smile, which was always nice, and headed off to get his breakfast.

He went back to the news and editorials. Breakfast wouldn't take long to arrive - they knew his usual schedule - but he would take his time in eating it, savoring the bites while he spent the long hours at the table. Only when

he had read through everything in the day's edition, including the big screaming news, would he consider the day's meal to be done.

A plate of food appeared before him, and a cup of coffee joined it. He looked up to thank Joraa, saw her face and gasped.

For a brief, heart-stopping second he thought she was an angel. Her face was bathed in a gentle halo, like she was returning from a swim in the rays of the sun. It extended to her hair, which shimmered like radiant gossamers, and to the skin of her neck, whose gentle sway left a momentary streak of light in the air.

She stared back, first in alarm, then in bemusement. When she smiled, the parting of her lips revealed teeth that seemed overlaid with soft, warm diamonds.

"Are you alright, dear?" she said.

He nodded unblinkingly. "You look like a star," he said in wonderment.

"You need another cup of coffee, is what you need," she said, shaking her head to dislodge the compliment. She turned and walked away, and he could've sworn that the varicose veins in her calves glowed through her skin.

"There is nothing wrong with you," the voice said.

"Apart from the usual, you mean."

"Yes," the voice said. It came from a screen in his room at the medical quarters. On that screen was a nice, nonoffensive face that showed a

calculated expression of aloof concern. It was no more real than the screen that projected it.

"So those halos I see around people, the ones that are everywhere now, those are just old man's talk?"

The A.I. did not blink on the monitor. "They are not measurable on any graph we have. Which is good news, because it rules out any number of dementias you might have been suffering from."

"Well, that's nice," he said. "So what is it?"

The A.I. was silent for a calculated moment. "I don't know," it said. "Most likely guess is that your implant is starting to malfunction, but the checks we ran on that back in the booth showed nothing out of the ordinary. I'm afraid I can not in good conscience underwrite an operation unless we know what it is we'd be fixing, nor can I approve a replacement. You can still see perfectly, I assume?"

"Yes. That, I can." The implant was old and had cost him a lot of money, but it had served its job for many years. As had he.

"Does the anomaly cause you significant discomfort?"

"Not really, truth be told. I don't mind a little extra glow in my life."

"Well, then," the A.I. said, flashing a brief smile. "That's nice."

More and more, the people he passed were enveloped in halos. Oddly enough, even though the altered visuals gave them more color and filling in life, he could swear it was also making them more transparent. Someone

passed him by, and he saw not merely the person but the ground, walls and sky behind their glowing corpus.

He suspected the implant, which had saved his sight for all these years, was incorrectly refracting the light it received from certain objects. It was a complex piece of machinery, installed for a complex and unpleasant visual disorder he had greatly suffered from, and had a mind of its own. Chances were it was having some minor defect in displaying people in motion, or clothing, or skin, and compensating for it by showing instead the cached backgrounds it knew were there. It had to be something like that, because otherwise he was going quite mad, and he did not intend to head down that colorful route just yet.

He tried not to think about it too much. He'd long since grown used to people fading into the background, eventually to fade away altogether.

One morning later that week he was walking to the cafe when he noticed one man on the other side of the street, standing very still. When he glanced at the man, he found his stare returned.

"Hi there," the man said, and his voice carried across the street.

"Roten! As I live and breathe," he replied. "How are you, son?"

The man walked up and embraced him. They'd worked together on the station a long while ago, Roten under his mentorship in various electronic and mid-level tech work, but Roten had left on a freighter for parts unknown. They hadn't seen each other in years.

It disturbed him how strange Roten appeared. He wasn't any different from all the people who passed by in the rush of the day, grey visages now, but the old man never paid much attention to anyone. Roten, though, he wanted to see. He wanted to see that smiling pink face all covered in grime

from a hydrogen battery repair gone explosively wrong; not this chromatic, polarized mask that seemed more at home on a robot. His translucent body was so full of refracted color and hue that the old man fancied he could see himself reflected, his wrinkled countenance trapped inside Roten's own corporeal form.

Roten walked with him to the cafe, chatting amiably, but it was clear that he wasn't staying long. He did not let on much about the reason he had arrived or his destination, but promised that this was not the last time the two would meet. "I'll be around," he said. "Just look for me."

"This damn implant keeps going the way it does, I won't be seeing you at all."

"I'm sure it'll be fine, one way or the other," Roten said. He shook the old man's hand and walked away, fading into the flurry of deepening autumn.

It was a pleasant coincidence, the old man thought, and gave him a warmth that lasted him through the long day.

The next morning, on the same early walk, that feeling turned to ice.

He saw an old man; not old in body as he himself might be, but a truly old one of spirit and soul. People spoke of age and the dumber ones said that age was merely a feeling - which, if it was, meant it was a feeling of dulled senses and sharp aches, and good luck to anyone trying keeping up a sprightly pretense - but there was a glimmer of truth in that cheerful idiocy. Some people were merely aged, and some were truly old.

This old man was named Fermar, and he was dead. He had to be. Never had a man been so close to the grave for so long of his natural life.

Fermar saw him, walked up and said hi.

"What on earth are you doing here?" the man answered.

Fermar gave a wry grin. "Hey there, boy."

"Last I knew you were working on a colony in deep space, near the Sansha. You crazy old coot. I thought you were long gone."

Fermar shrugged. "It worked out, in its fashion."

"Well, not to be inhospitable, but what are you doing here? Did you take a position somewhere else?"

"Who says I didn't just retire?" Fermar said to him.

"This one," he replied, pointing a wrinkled finger at his own old chest. "You're one of those people, Fermar, who keeps going right until the end. I can see right through you."

And he could. His friend's body was so transparent that it barely cast a shadow. Its outlines did not so much glow as faintly shimmer, like oil floating on water, and whatever colors remained in his face were multihued and iridescent. The old man made a mental note to revisit the A.I. doctor. He shouldn't have to suffer his friends to be invisible.

"Yeah, I guess I'll keep on forever," Fermar said. "But I'm glad to see you, boy." He seemed about to add something, then merely said, "Stay in touch," waved and walked off.

The old man, shaken, continued on to the café. He opened the door with hands that trembled a bit too much, and it wasn't until he felt the firm fabric of his old booth that he found any kind of calm. The seat was there, in all the ways that a simple seat could be.

He sat there staring into empty space, murmuring his thoughts. Roten's appearance had been a godsgift, and a believable one at that, but Fermar's felt more like a warning.

All those years ago, when they parted, he had been certain he'd never see Fermar again. The man had lived through a Sansha invasion on his colony, had a hand in a rebellion that had saved many but cost him his daughter and eventually torn apart his marriage. He had drifted from job to job before eventually settling as a supervisor on another mining colony precariously close to Sansha space. Whatever had been in Fermar's mind at that time - revenge, exhaustion, madness or whatever else - he had not laid down these last bricks in the road of his life to lead anywhere but into the open arms of death.

The specter of Madame Joraa came along. "You really do talk to yourself a lot, don't you, hon?" she said.

He smiled at her. "Glad to see you're still here."

"Of course I am. Who else is going to take care of your needs?" she said, winked at him and walked off.

He grinned at this and looked down at the vidscreen in the table. When he looked up again, his heart stopped.

Across from him, sitting quite calmly in the opposing seat, was another ghostly person. He could see right through her, to the booth with its metal rails and synthetic, faux-leather that never seemed to fade with age.

He said, in a brittle voice, "Oh dear."

She leaned her head to one side and said, "Is that any way to treat an old friend?"

He leaned back in his seat, rubbed his eyes and sighed deeply. "I'm so sorry," he said, eyes still shut. "Hello, Charlize. You're looking very well. Are you dead?"

She caught her breath, then started to laugh, that gentle scale of sonorous notes he had once thought would be the soundtrack to his life. "We certainly are morbid! How are you doing? I've missed you."

"Likewise, Charlize," he said. "I thought you were gone for good."

"I was," she said, and he opened his eyes at last. She was smiling with infinite sadness.

"Hang on, I'll order you a coffee at the very least," he said and raised his hands, calling for Madame. She was cleaning a table a few booths down, but no matter how much he hailed, she didn't respond.

He turned back to Charlize, flustered and a little alarmed. "Why can't I get her attention?"

"I'll tell you in a second, dear," the old woman said, taking his hand in hers. "Let's just keep talking for now. I have a lot to tell you."

Taught Thoughts

I'll likely never know which one of us was the traitor; the old man I destroyed, or me.

We all pooled into the classroom. I couldn't help but wonder why there was such a rush to get in when the same people couldn't wait to get out.

M. Cromwell came in a little later. Most teachers hang out in the classroom between sessions, like it's their own little fortress of knowledge, but he takes every chance to leave the room. He's probably smoking, but that's not the point. He gets a kind of begrudging respect from his students for this, like he's one-upping our own tardiness and lack of interest, and if you look at it with the right mind-set it makes you feel like he's one of us, dragged into that late adulthood despite his fervent protestations. I think that's horseshit. He just doesn't like us, that's all.

We were supposed to go over the basics of ancient Caldari history, which was an irony and a half since we're at war with them in the present. I'd imagined that the school authorities would cut this class from the schedule once the war started, but apparently the Gallentean educational establishment prides itself on not bending to the whims of pressure groups. As an idea, it sounded akin to a building trying not to bend to the whims of the bomb in its basement, but there we had it.

Cromwell was cranky from the word go. He walked into the classroom, smelling too strongly of fresh mint, and put his oversized coffee mug on his desk. The room was practically antiquated – most historians seemed to like them that way – but Mr. Cromwell had made a valiant concession to modern times with that mug, one of those self-heating motion refilter units that keep its drink permanently fresh.

"Alright," he said to the room, all of us already seated, "move in, come on. We don't have all day in here, you know." He hovered his finger over the vidscreen inset in his table, and the lights in the room dimmed slightly, counterbalanced by the glare from our own monitors.

"Where had we got to?" he said to the empty air. "Ah. Yes. Now." He looked up from the screen and directly at us. The man had taught this stuff for longer than I'd been alive, and you could see him slipping into gear. "The Cathura rebellion was, let me see, started exactly two hundred years after the Raata empire was formed and ended two years later, which puts it at 17670 and 72 CE, and if you ask me what that was in Yoiul years I'm throwing you out the window. The peace treaty they eventually signed was at the hall of..."

He paused and threw a quick glance at his screen, presumably to check that he was telling the same truths as usual - whenever old teachers do this I imagine an old man walking up a flight of stairs, brushing the handrail to ground himself - but when he caught what the text was saying, he sputtered and ground to a halt.

"I don't believe this," he said.

Twenty odd pairs of ears perked up.

"They've changed it. Again. Oh, for the love of ... alright. Look here," he said to us, and there was rancor in his voice, as if we were to blame for whatever had annoyed him, "the Current History section may have opened their arses to propaganda, but the Ancient one doesn't usually merit the attention of the secret police. This, you will be interested to know, is because we've taught it for so long that it's become ingrained in the minds of people who are now working adults, and as it turns out, altering the facts that we're now teaching to their children aggravates them far more than the lies they're fed on the nightly news. I guess their history lessons form an

important part of every man's childhood, for which you have my undying pity and commiseration.

"Be that as it may, I would like you to ignore the wording of the key phrases you see on your screens. The treaty of Cathura was peaceably signed, with everyone behaving as gentlemen so far as the circumstances allowed. Its terms were not 'barbarous' as the text would have you think, nor were there 'sweeping' losses for one side as a result. Some people died of starvation, but it wasn't because their leaders were broke or powerless. The other side had slashed-and-burned as it went. You'll find this to be a common tactic in warfare anywhere in New Eden."

He read on for a silent minute, with quiet mutterings of "good lord" and "are you serious?" Eventually he turned back to us and said, "This is called loaded language, and the reason it's called loaded is because someone is holding a gun, aimed right at the writer's head if I'm any judge."

He paused, gently running his fingers over the vidscreen like a parent touching its injured child. "They can't change history, but slight adjustments of tone are allowed," he added with acid bitterness. "But we'll work on that. Two minute break, so rest your fragile young minds. I'm going to upload additional study material from my own collection."

There was a muted collective groan and a whispered few "not more texts, come on," but he ignored it. So did I. I was getting increasingly angry at the man.

It was that motion; the way he'd absent-mindedly touched the screen. As with everything else he did it spoke of a private love between him and old history, not a public one a teacher should share with his students. There are some people whose antagonism is merely an expression of affection coupled with a kind of innate cynicism. You get the feeling they want the best for you in a world that's going all to hell, even if they think your idiocy

is contributing to the problem. They care for you despite your glaring faults. This is the only true love that exists, you might say. In my anger I saw him like an empty husk, loveless and grey.

I'd raised my hand before I knew it.

He fixed me with a glare and said, "Yes." Not my name; just 'yes'.

"Should we be breaking away from the material?"

"Heaven help us if you escape the confines of your minds," he said. Some people in the class tittered.

"But the texts that are taught everywhere-"

"Look," he said. "The Caldari have ways that go back just as far as ours and are usually a damn sight more honorable. Having a shadow update to the history texts call them 'barbaric' is doing a disservice not only to their age-old culture but to our integrity in looking at the world. And by the way, my little mutton-heads, this goes for other empires as well. Some textbooks that you won't be seeing in my classroom claim the Amarr are nothing more than slave-driving zealots, old monsters gilding their fingers in the name of some wispy little ghost. In fact the Amarr are a deeply spiritual and misunderstood group of people who are trying to better the world in ways we Gallente completely fail to appreciate. The fact that they cock it up half the time and have the worst PR agency in history is beside the point. This, this, this," he said to me, emphasizing each word like a hammer, "is what you need to get into your head before we can let you out into the real world. Think for yourself. God help us if you can't even learn to do that."

I was fuming and said, "Which we do by having you teach your own private version of the past?"

He opened his mouth to respond, and I opened mine to outshout him, but a soft voice at the back of the hall cut through our words like a stone thrown through fog. It said, quite politely, "Why is this even an argument?" and it came from Sheeran Keil, one of the best students in the class, if not in the school. He was hard-working, soft-spoken and unfailingly polite, and illuminated in that halo of faint brilliance you see on the people you simply know are going to go far in life. He was a Jin-Mei, too.

M. Cromwell's gaze didn't waver. He merely turned his head, like a stone statue, until his eyes, staring straight ahead, found Sheeran.

With the unfaltering bravery of the dying, Sheeran pointed at his vidscreen and said, "This is what is being taught. This is what we are supposed to learn. This is what I am supposed to learn during the class. I would like to learn it, M. Cromwell."

"If you think, M. Keil, that the Caldari should be retroactively trampled, then that's your prerogative. Heaven save me from debating a civilization's merits with a scholar."

"I'll be happy to take on extra studies-"

"That's not the point, M. Keil," the teacher said, an evil grin on his face. "The point is that you are here to learn, for it is by learning history, and indeed as is so often said, learning from history's mistakes, that we stand any hope of avoiding them in these new and treacherous times. If we paint the Caldari with the blackest of brushes we reduce them to crude caricatures, unworthy of our sympathy or understanding. Believe me, in a war, that is not the attitude you want to have."

"M. Cromwell," Sheeran said with an audacity even I found amazing, "in a war, I would have thought that was exactly the right attitude to have."

"Look, you guys had your chance and blew it," the teacher said to him. "You may think the Caldari should go the same way and simply surrender to the unstoppable might of the Gallente Federation."

It was a vicious insult to Sheeran's ancestry, and he made to defend it, but Cromwell silenced him by saying, "Stop nattering about the ones who dared fight back. All in class, now, sit up! The books are long since updated, so we will continue with the lesson as I intend to teach it." He gave me a final glare, then launched back into the books.

What I should have said was this:

I had just about had my fill of him, of his bullying others and hiding behind history. No one else was teaching so belligerently, and how could you believe the message, enticing as it might be, if the messenger himself couldn't be trusted? He might have a problem with revisionists, but he was teaching his own version of history, the one he'd formed in his own mind after all those years, instead of following the common consensus. He was bullying the learning into us. Anyone who dared think otherwise apparently deserved nothing but scorn.

I said nothing, and the class ran till completion.

Afterwards, talking to my classmates, I found that some people liked this little guerilla line he'd taken - the same who usually liked his brazen attitude - but others hated it. And in a strange and rather unpleasant way, I felt like I should have belonged to his supporters, because it's always good to feel like you've sided not only with the truth but the stamped-down truth, allied with the rebels and the real heroes the world is trying to silence.

But what we had, when you looked at it with honesty, was one man's interpretation of the truth, and whatever bravery he was instilling in us by

his defense of history was discounted by his acts in class, which were teaching us the value of tyranny.

I dithered, and realized that I really wanted him to fail, to say something that would remove him from my world.

When he passed us, I walked behind him and quietly said, "M. Cromwell."

He did not stop, but slowed enough for me to catch up. "What do you want?" he said.

"So who are the good guys?" I asked.

It was a dangerous question, and he knew it, and I wanted him so badly to give the wrong answer. Instead he said, "People are people, with good and bad sides. Good people can do terrible things; bad people can perform wonders."

He left, and I let him go.

An idea began to form in my head, but I wasn't sure whether I could go ahead with it. So I followed Cromwell to the teacher's lounge, in the hope that I could talk to him for a little longer and make up my mind, one way or another.

When I got there the door was ajar, so I waited outside and listened. Cromwell was talking to a fellow teacher about the recent class, and I heard him say, "I think of it as charity work, really."

"Oh?" the other man said.

"If I don't raise their IQs by a few points, they might eventually forget how to breathe."

Stones in the fog. Stamped-down stones in the fog.

I didn't think about it for another second. I walked away, skipped the rest of my classes and headed off-campus, towards downtown. I spoke to authorities in one of the new institutions Mentas Blaque had set up, where I told them the easily verifiable fact that my teacher had gone against curriculum that might be politically sensitive, and the unverifiable lie that when asked who the good guys were, he had answered 'Caldari' without missing a beat.

M. Cromwell did not come to class the next morning.

The Vitrauze Project

It may not make sense at first. The complexities of life's story run so deep that it may take some time to understand. Some time indeed. Yet I tell you now that time will make the truth of these words shine ever brighter, because that is what I made them to do.

- Unknown

She was watching the people of Seyllin die on live holovision when they came for her.

Lianda. I must warn you, my child, no matter the risk. The Senate has learned of the appearance of new, stable wormholes, leading to unknown areas of space. You must not involve yourself in this matter. There will be a time and a place for your research to continue. Please, for the sake of everything you have worked for, lie low.

They told her CreoDron had only asked for one person. On the display, a darkened and burning orb glowed in brilliant shades of blue. Millions must have been there, she thought, trapped inside a dying planet.

They said this was the kind of help that would matter more tomorrow, when today had taken what it would from them all. Strangely poetic, the ones they had decided to send for her. Most likely no coincidence. They left her there. She would follow soon, once her affairs had been set in order. Those words, and the truth of them in her eyes when she stepped towards them so purposefully,

They had bought the privacy she would need to reach him.

"CD-73, this is CD-Vitrouze, come in."

"CD-Vitrouze, this is CD-73, I have you."

"How are you doing out there?"

"Fine, just settling in."

"Professor? What you said before? We're behind you all the way."

A poignant smile formed across her face, shared only with the on-board surveillance.

"Thank you."

The Helios stabilized as it pulled out of warp, settling for now into a cautious eighty-kilometer orbit. The gamble had paid off. Not that she had doubted her initial findings. She felt it was somehow appropriate that Vitrouze was where she found it. She had not signaled anything to them, not yet, not until she could see something.

Something amazing.

The system of Vitrouze, to most people, had been nothing more than another cruel and lonely place off the major spacelanes of the Federation. For most people, it would remain such. That was fine with her. The best secrets had always lain in plain sight, beneath casual glances that each day saw nothing.

She saw them, though. Stripping the unknown of its mystery had been her life's work, a task as noble as it was destructive. Before her now, just a few short moments away, was one more riddle, but it wasn't one she would solve to the end. She gazed out into the twisting shapes, admiring something she felt she had seen a thousand times before in her dreams and yet only now truly saw for the first time. It was as magnificent and terrifying as anything she could have hoped for.

For those there now, Vitrauze would be remembered as the system where they found that first link to the unknown. For her, it would be where she left something. She would burn, glow like Seyllin, and in that dim luminescence that her sacrifice shed, others would see the hidden paths to tread. He would have liked it phrased that way.

"Vitrauze, I've found something. Sensors online, in transit now. You have live priority feed."

The microwarpdrive engaged and eighty kilometers quickly became fifty, thirty, twenty and then, nothing. Zero point.

It had been named after an early Federation Senator, whose name in turn was supposedly taken from one of the first settlers to come through the EVE Gate. To the Amarr, "Vitra" meant simply "life." Life itself. The Gallentean understanding of the word was more subtle, however. To them it meant "living."

Different in the way sunrise and sunset are, she thought.

Six more Helioses decloaked as they dropped out of warp, falling into the same cautious long-range orbit as she had.

"Whenever you're ready."

"CD-73, this is CD-Vitrouze, come in."

She stopped the thrusters for a moment, almost answering the call before deciding against it. They could wait. Even though her voice alone would mean so much, they could wait. For now, this moment was hers.

"CD-73, this is CD-Vitrouze, come in. Problem at our end."

The blood immediately started pushing through her veins, accelerating with each new heartbeat. She fought back the instinct, millions of years and even more souls forfeited in the name of progress, all driving her to avoid this. To return.

"CD-Vitrouze, this is CD-73, I have you."

"Black Eagles have entered system, maximum time until location is scanned: approximately 2 minutes."

"Proceed as planned. I am not here."

Within just a few moments of those words reaching the other side, the flagship of Creodron's private fleet deactivated cloaking devices and began about the crucial task of pretending to be useful.

To most observers, "CD-1" would be considered a monstrosity. Horrifically warped Dominix hulls overflowing with esoteric electronics equipment often evoked familiar images, ones not so welcome in the heart of Federation space, particularly in recent years, and particularly when the vessel in question carried Creodron tags.

To many of the leading scientists in CreoDron, though, it was their beloved "mothership." At times it would serve as their mobile research lab, as their home. Now it served as one incredibly risky decoy. Confiscation would mean an end to so many ongoing projects, but the weight of that also played in their favor.

The uncharacteristically dark hulls of four Megathron-class battleships suddenly appeared, sliding into the scene with a graceful menace that only the Black Eagles, with their specially commissioned ships, could project. Even before the violent tear in the fabric of space that dominated the area, gushing with its ominous crimson light, their presence was made known. The arrival alone would have its effect, but underneath it all, the official CreoDron line from that point on would remain steadfast. All contact with the other side had been lost.

Duvolle scientists had been "invited" to attend the ensuing investigation and it was they in particular who queried the absence of CreoDron's leading astrophysicist. No doubt their own interest in these matters was welcomed by the Eagles, just as Duvolle had welcomed the opportunity to see and hear things that would normally put their own operations under the Federation's ruthless self-scrutiny. These were the sorts of plays the Eagles were fast becoming known for, where saying no was made a twice-unattractive option.

The captain of the fleet understood better than most the capacities of his opponent. He would comply, but even though others made billions of ISK, these two outsiders now prying into their research would be considered by him and the rest of his crew as the very worst kind of vultures. This was how real, lasting damage was done. No press releases, no fanfare, no public comments one way or the other. Nothing would be made today but enemies.

As CD-1 was turned over indefinitely to Federal jurisdiction, the first discovery was made. In one ear, the pilots and crew of CreoDron were hearing stories of a new, unknown civilization and in the other, the mechanical drawl of a Federation police drone reading them their rights.

Normally, such a task was paid its respect, and even the most severe of the Eagle's captains would dutifully inform a fellow citizen of their legal rights. As both parties floated there, however – the once-honored formalities of the moment handled by automatons – the Eagles received their own distracting news. Another nineteen wormholes had been discovered, and although that amount by itself was easily matched, what disconcerted the captains most was that only five minutes before their arrival, the number had stood at one.

The Helios rested up against the structure. The enclave in the distance seemed quiet, bereft of life. This one, however, felt young even now. There was such beauty in this timeless design, even though time had claimed them all.

It was more real this time. He looked more real, but she could see it. See that he was not, and that perhaps, this was not either. The data could have been pulled from the fluid router cache, enhanced somehow. Any automated system that could do something like this would be far more advanced than she had known, but then this was not her field, and she had a saying about scientists who casually dipped into her own. All the same, she could swear she knew the design. So old. She had these thoughts even as she stared at him. Too much a scientist and too little a soldier.

This time, there was no life in Hilen's eyes, and it was telling her to go.

Once again into the darkness, and for a moment she could almost feel that wind on her face, as the data that represented who she was failed to cross the river back home.

"We have reports of...78 now. 78, Corporal. I just had a scout land in... in..."

"What is it, Captain?"

"...in Luminaire, Sir."

"What?"

"An advance scout, deployed... deployed in Lonetrek. They reported the wormhole in Ibura, scouted the other side and landed in the middle of our operations base."

Lianda watched the leaves falling into the stream, plucked from the limbs of the trees with such ease. The wind was so gentle she could barely feel it on her face and yet it took them all, softly caressing the branches into donating the remnants of life they once bore.

She could understand that eagerness, how easy it was to let go after you'd grown out of the things that once nurtured you, that once comprised your entire world.

He understood this, of course. This was his VR channel, and he had chosen the environment for a reason.

"Hilen," she said quietly, looking across to the Deteis. His eyes were fixed on the currents that licked at the edge of the bank. A sobering gaze slowly lifted to meet hers. The weight of everything they had shared was staring her in the face. She fell silent.

"Go," he said, turning away from her and shaking his head. "Just..."

He disconnected the feed, leaving her alone in the surrounding black.

"Her unique network ID was accessed at the same time she attempted to make contact, yet she did not enter her password correctly."

"Yes, we looked into it. She didn't gain any access to secure information. We're investigating the reasons she didn't authenticate properly."

"Of course, but that's not what I wanted to mention."

"Yes?"

"You don't seem to know what I'm talking about."

"Go on."

"The password, the one she entered. The incorrect string?"

"I will put aside any questions I have about how you would have access to such a thing and ask you to come to the point."

"It's a locus."

"I see."

"Yes."

"We were not aware."

"With due respect, Sir, what you are not aware of is that for every one of those six Helioses inside your system, there are two of our Buzzards."

"I believe that as much as I believe you're a psychologist."

Applied Science? All science is applied. Eventually.

- Hilen Tukoss. Program Director, Otosela Neuropsychology Center.

The Ever-Turning Wheels

When the dropships came, Jeb and I counted down the seconds to our deaths - if not from the invading forces, then from our own people, some of whom had sworn to die on their feet and take everyone with them, invader and traitor both. The traitors, apparently, were those unwilling to die rather than be yoked to the Caldari wheel.

But the dropships landed, leveling entire hills with their impact, and once their chutes opened and the armies within marched out to meet us - the sun glinting off their metal carapaces, the dust rising in clouds from the synchronized thumps of their feet - nobody put up much of a fight.

Jeb and I were still behind cover - there really didn't seem much point anymore, for if we'd wanted to be safe, we should have long since run for the mountains - and we watched as the Caldari troops marched over and through. They did not seem bound by the same gravity as we were.

We waited for shots that were never fired. A few people rushed madly towards the troops, some bearing weapons or facsimiles of same. I don't know if the Caldari were under orders to hold their fire or if they were merely that disciplined, but the last I saw of our rebels was a rising trail of dust, dwindling to nothing. They were enveloped by the army, disarmed and locked down. Some were left lying on the ground, handcuffed and immobile; others were carried, furious and unwilling, to the nearest bush or body of water and unceremoniously thrown in. The greatest offensive action they took against our people was gagging a few of the loudest rebels, which was likely more a relief to me than it was to them. There is nothing so unbearable as a shrieking rebel knowingly reduced to a powerless effrontery of words.

In a whisper Jeb asked me whether we were lost, and I didn't know what to tell him. A part of me - the rebellious part, I supposed, though it didn't feel quite so - wanted to say yes. Another, more sensible part suspected that we might have a new world on our hands.

We were a backwater colony of the Gallente Federation, established so far back in time that historical records on our foundation were inconclusive. Our leaders, such as they were, maintained that this proved we had been there for a long time. Truth was, we'd likely just kept shoddy records.

For most of us it hadn't been the easiest life to live. Resources had always been scarce, and what little we eked out was strongly controlled by our local government. We did a smattering of trade with neighboring planets, but for the most part we kept our business to ourselves. Our government's fear of offworld dependency led to exorbitant taxation on all interstellar business, and the populace mostly, if grudgingly, supported this policy. In truth, we had learned not to desire what we could not easily acquire. We were a closed system - interconnected, complex and opaque - and in the myriad of monopolies, favoritism, backroom dealing and nepotism that we allowed to take place, we convinced ourselves that this was the only way to run a planet, and we took a strange pride in it; as if our corruption were emblematic of our independence.

The factional wars caught us by surprise. On dark nights we would look up at the stars and see some of them moving at great speed, others bursting into flames. It was the capsuleers, of whom I'd only ever heard stories, engaged in battles I could not even begin to imagine. Fighting over control of territories - fighting, to my amazement, over us.

We were not used to being the object of anyone's plans, much less fought over with such ferocity. Reports would trickle in of Gallentean successes,

Gallentean conquests and Federation Navy domination, which made us all the more nervous: We were not stupid, and even the more fervently nationalistic of us knew full well that we Gallente, for all our strengths, would not be doing all our fighting in Gallente systems such as our own if we were on any kind of path to victory.

The trickle eventually dried up, and we began to speak in hushed voices. Not long after, the Caldari came.

The highest echelon of Gallentean rule over our colony had been a unit of elitism unto itself. Neither I nor Jeb nor anyone like us could ever have hoped to breach it. At most, what we could have expected were individual rewards for services well rendered: perks and bonuses, applied like grease to our ever-turning wheels. It was obviously not a perfect system, and it was certainly not fair, but it worked for what it was. We could live with the strings so long as we felt that the right ones were being pulled at the right time, and that they were, within this opaque system, at least tolerantly transparent.

Nonetheless, it was a poor system for a poor world, and when the Caldari came I knew I was a traitor, because in my heart I welcomed them. If it had been us descending on their world, we would have roared in with bullets; but they came in silence, swift and efficient, and with the simplest of strokes they lopped the head off our ailing body.

We protested, of course, some of us more viciously than others, but we did so in the knowledge that we couldn't possibly hope to enact any kind of change. As Gallenteans now subject to foreign rule it was utterly frustrating, but as individuals on a corrupt backwater colony it was - for me, at least - a guilty relief, couched in the hope that the new administration might bring some manner of equality and opportunity. While someone in the middle of

the Federation proper might have felt more enamored with their rulers, and more energized to fight back against the invaders, out here the only thing that had made us Gallente were the banners on our governmental buildings, and the unspoken policies that it was every man for himself.

The new rule moved in. Our lives went on. Jeb and I had the same old jobs with the same superiors and the same responsibilities, and at night we each dreamt the same familiar dreams, perhaps a little clearer now, of riches and opportunities. It took a while for everything to settle, but eventually it did: The protests stopped, people kept working for their pay, and anyone who attempted in their own small way to overthrow the system was either imprisoned - briefly, without repercussions or mistreatment - or simply ignored.

And to my speechless disappointment, the Caldari - the efficient, disciplined, lockstep Caldari - began to screw it all up.

The first mistake they made was in announcing the new governorship. Gallente are used to having a voice, however much it may be ignored. Our new governor, a Caldari diplomat apparently experienced in running Caldari asteroid colonies, was installed along with his team of representatives as soon as he arrived planetside. Local broadcasts informed us of his expertise and implied that he would lead us to great things, but fell silent when it came to the details of his position: How long he would be installed, what the extent of his powers under the current regime, and exactly what changes might be forthcoming. The lack of information, coupled with the utter disinterest in involving the local population, did more to stir local rebellion than any invasive action could have. We had known we were powerless from the moment the armies landed, but that was a knowledge bound to its time, fixed in the moment of the silver armies marching towards us. This new development rang the first note for our future, and implied that our lives from here on would be subject entirely to the whims of an unknown, unknowable force.

All they would have needed to do was hear us out. Ask our opinion, pretend to listen; and all would have gone so much better. Instead, they doomed themselves to rule over a populace that was already pessimistic over its future, and saw no reason to aid its masters in improving their own lot.

It went on like this. The navy might have executed a clear-cut takeover, but the bureaucracy virtually stumbled its way into power. Gods knew our old rule had not been faultless, but at least we had grown inured to its flaws. Then the Caldari had come in and done the worst thing they could: Brought about change, but extinguished the hope that it might be for the better.

Jeb and I kept a close eye on the new power, as anyone else would. We read the council minutes, spoke courteously to representatives, and kept our mouths shut while taking in all the information we could.

The more we learned, the clearer it became that this was not a failure of the meritocracy, that guiding light of the new Caldari rule.

Instead, it was the fault of our new governor, who had overseen every process following the invasion itself, and who was clearly not fit for rule. His people were just as corrupt as the old rule, but possessed neither the personal connections nor the deep understanding of colony life to make the community function underneath all that graft.

The Gallentean in me took over.

I kept an eye on everything, saw the myriad of problems, and noted down ways to fix them. My own job, as a low-level facilitator, afforded me an opportunity to travel, so I made the most of it. I did not ask questions about work or anything else that might be deemed suspicious; but then, I didn't have to. All I did was ask people about themselves. Eventually their talk

moved on to work, and most all were entirely happy to tell me of all the wrongs that could be righted, as people tend to be when they're talking to someone who they believe is just as powerless to act as they are.

It took weeks, and the only one I shared it with was Jeb, who seemed to agree with most of what I thought. Long, sleepless nights of planning; and long, careful days of finding the right people to talk to, the right chinks in the armor to slowly dent.

Eventually the call came in. The governship -the governor and a good deal of his entire team - were to be replaced. The colony had stabilized, they said - which was true - and it was now possible for them to pull out the governing force and replace it with local people. All of this was true. Not a mention was made of the utter failures that had taken place during the governor's brief time in office. They were not important any longer.

Names were mentioned. Mine came up; once, then again, then often enough that the voices lifted me to power.

I'm not at the top yet - the apex belongs to the Caldari - but I've risen to one of the highest positions a Gallentean can hold on this colony. Jeb's not far behind me.

It's been a strange time. It has taught me more than I cared to know about how this place is run, and what a labyrinthine task it can be to pull the strings.

The meritocracy is a real, wonderful thing. It's what we always wanted. Performance matters. If you are good at what you do, you are rewarded; and if you are not, you are pushed aside to make way for someone who can do your job. It's a utilitarianism that by rights should have arisen with

the Gallente. That it did not, bubbling instead out of that black stew that is the Caldari corporate world, is testament to their ability to adapt, and a great discredit to ours.

And in this new world they allow us to create, I still cannot help but wonder if the legacy of Tibus Heth, that high warlord of the Caldari State, and his quest to destroy the Gallente Federation by any means, isn't still being furthered. For the numbers have come in, and they are the same ones as they were yesterday and the day before.

The colony operates better than ever. The people will brook nothing less, now. Anyone who fails to serve the meritocracy and its people at the level it demands can not be allowed to block the path of others.

The numbers have come in. I've known Jeb since we were kids.

This is how they will turn us against one another. And I don't know how to be a Gallentean any more.

The Precious Tableau

Mime.Access.Requested;

[->User]Access key required. Please supply biometrics;

Mime.Access.Ratification(User 3053);

[->User>Welcome;

Server.local.start; Settings.load(User 3053);Add.actor1;

Scene.start(3338);

He's a ship mechanic, so attuned to the quiet hum of the vessel that he can detect faults ahead of even the most sensitive of machinery. He finds a serious flaw in the control component of one of the ship's main engines, a flaw that will make its thrusters burn out and its core systems drop offline if not resolved in quick time. Going against the orders of his superiors and the captain of the ship, he overrides security access codes of the ship, accesses the control component and fixes it just in time to save everyone onboard the ship.

Scene.start(3357);

[->User]Scene not found;

Scene.start(3375);

He's a station operator who miraculously averts a crisis that would have seen the station and everyone on it decoupled from its orbit and flung out into deep space.

Scene.start(3392);Add.actor2;

Life as a busking music performer on the station is hard, but he's got talent and drive, always one step ahead of the heavies and the cops as he plays his tunes and attracts money and admiration. Passersby stop to listen and find themselves captured in rapt admiration. He doesn't pay them much mind, for he is in this for the music and the thrill, but one person catches his

eye. She kneels by his keycard and touches hers to his to leave some credits, but makes another transfer of data as well. After he picks up and leaves, he inspects the day's earnings and finds that she gave him something else: Her publishing company's contact information.

Scene.interrupt;Remove.initiative5;Unlock.initiative6531

[->User]Initiative locked;

Transmit. key(signed);

[->User]Initiative unlocked;

Add.initiative6531;

Her personal contact information.

Scene.start(3393);

He's at home and sends her a line. She responds. It's a little stilted at first but they soon find common ground and a nice tempo. Eventually they move over to audio and talk for hours.

Scene.start(3359);

He's a secret agent for CONCORD, sneaking into dangerous pirate territories.

Scene.start(3363);

As a famous actor, he tries to remain unrecognized in his private time. Some non-famous person recognizes but does not unmask him during a vulnerable time, and in return he gives her a role in his latest movie.

Scene.start(3394);

There's a family scene, and he's the man of the house. Her, him and a dog, all of them resting together at home after a long day, quietly enjoying each other's presence. The dog is very clever and even has his own room. The dog obeys when he's told, and when the man and woman are together, the dog doesn't bark or demand attention.

Scene.start(3365);

He's a famous author, renowned for his knowledge of the human psyche.

Scene.start(3366);

He's a soldier in the war.

Scene.start(3395);

He's lying beside her, stroking her back. There has been no deeper intimacy, just touch. She turns away-

Scene.interrupt;Reset;

He's lying beside her, stroking her back. There has been no deeper intimacy, just touch. She turns towards him and says, "I love it when you do that. I wish you'd do it forever."

Scene.capture;

[->User]Capture saved;

Capture.erase;

[->User]Confirm capture?

Cancel;

Scene.start(3370);

They're at the operating table. He's about to make the incision. He's a brilliant doctor, able to sense illness and any corrupt body functions merely by his heightened sense of touch. He is so in demand that he can barely keep up.

Scene.start(3396);

He's at home, where he gets his messages answered. Every one he sends. Every one.

Capture.erase;

[->User]Confirm capture?

Confirm;

[->User]Capture erased?

Scene.factor.increase(chaos);Reset;

He's at home, but does not get his messages answered. It's because something terrible has happened, something he senses so strongly with his sensitive mind that he rushes off, gets over to her house and discovers that it's on fire. He breaks in and manages to save everyone. Even the dog.

Scene.start(3374);

He's a spy, doing undercover work on a station, and sniping those enemies foolish enough to wander within his crosshairs.

Scene.start(3396);Scene.factor.decrease(chaos);Scene.factor.increase(intrigue);Reset;

He's worried about the messages, so he's breaking into the house to make sure they're all right. He does not wake up the dog. He absolutely does not wake up the dog.

Scene.interrupt;Scene.delete(3396);

[->User]Confirm deletion?

Confirm;

Scene.start(3386);

He's a prosecutor who shows proper understanding to innocent people wrongly accused, while properly punishing those who need to be punished.

Scene.start(3397);

He visits her and helps her look for the dog, who's gone missing. It doesn't turn up, and in the end she admits that she never wanted a dog; she only wanted him.

Scene.start(3388);

A peaceful scene, a slow sunrise on a beach somewhere, with the surf sloshing onto the sand, and a tiny breeze cooling off the warm rocks, and nobody around at all.

Scene.start(3398);

It's a tableau. They all stand there: him, her, and the dog. They stand frozen, looking at the camera. They're smiling. Everyone is happy.

Scene.interrupt;

Logoff;

- *[->User]Please confirm exit;*
- *[->User]Please confirm exit...;*
- *[->User]Please confirm exit...;*
- *Cancel;*

Remove.pets;Add.actor3;Reset;

It's a tableau. They all stand there; him, her, and that damn kid. She's smiling, so beautifully, and so is he, and so is the kid, who keeps his mouth shut, who doesn't wake up at the slightest bit of noise and is happy and alive.

Scene.interrupt;Scene.start(3389);

He's a capsuleer, flying free, unfettered and undoubted, heading towards the stars.

The Human Painting

[August 12, YC 111]

"Director, there's a message for you."

"Little busy right now, Gerard. Can it wait?"

"Sorry, sir. It's the Office One response."

For the first time that morning, Mentas Blaque took his eyes off the week's insurgent update. He pushed his chair away from the console, stood up.

"Display, commandant."

"Yes, sir."

DIRECTOR MENTAS BLAQUE,
FEDERAL INTELLIGENCE OFFICE

Executive Order 81042 – Consolidation of National Armament Assets
YC111.08.12

The involvement of Federal Government employees as contributing representatives in the national arms industry has been deemed essential to achieving the objectives mandated by military leadership. It is in the interests of the nation at large that the best minds of the field act as one, and that private institutions shall find their favor in serving public interest.

By the authority vested in me as President of the Federated Union of Gallente Prime, and in order to establish a Council of Armaments Advisors working under Federation auspices, it is hereby ordered:

Section 1. The Federal Council of Armaments Advisors. (a) Membership. There is established the Federal Council of Armaments Advisors ("Council"). The Council shall comprise the following members appointed by the President:

"End," said Blaque. He rubbed his eyes and sat back down.

A few seconds passed, just him alone with himself in that quiet chamber. Then he pushed a button and said: "Corporal Ormonde, get your men ready to roll out."

[August 13, YC 111]

"Sir, I don't know. They're knocking now, but we don't see anything. There's no response at all."

"Continue for five then report," came the squawk through the radio. Corporal Argus Ormonde flipped down his visor and took a few steps toward the gigantic marble sculpture beyond which, several yards in the distance, he could see the entrance to the cordoned-off section where this eccentric freak of an arms dealer was keeping himself.

"Nothing still," came Fregal's voice. "I'm listening to the knocks sound off into the far passage, but the echoloc's giving a weird picture. It doesn't even sound like there are *walls* in there."

Despite himself, Ormonde sighed. "Fine," he said. "Initiate breach protocol alpha three and wait for my go-ahead."

Bad PR, but whatever. If you're batshit crazy for no better reason than that you have a lot of money, and you want to do things the hard way, then it's your batshit crazy prerogative to get roughed up a little.

He braced himself behind a pillar, gave the standby signal to the flank unit, then flicked the go switch on Fregal. To the Director he sent one signal: operation green.

In the insulated comfort of his command center, Mentas Blaque felt an involuntary shudder of premonition. Two seconds later, there was a deafening crackle. Voices, a rumble. Purposeful running

The Black Eagles, getting things done when no-one else possibly could. It always gave him a small thrill, but today he was having trouble mustering the excitement. He'd had a diffuse melange of bad dreams the night before, and ever since the morning had carried with him a nagging sensation of somehow being outdone.

"In position," said Sergeant Fregal. "All right, we got two sentries and a few scout minis. Two, four, interceptor la—"

There was a crack. Sergeant Fregal stopped talking.

Next through the radio was a cacophony of static-infused noise. Some of it sounded like screaming, some of it sounded like talking.

Blaque leaned forward.

"Corporal Ormonde?"

There was no reply. The noises on the radio had died down to near silence. It began to dawn on him that nothing like this had ever happened to his men before.

He cut to Control. "Get me Jacus Roden on a private line," he said, "and do it absolutely right this instant."

It wasn't quite who he'd been expecting. Faced with a man who had made possible, through his ingenuity and business wits, the destruction of untold countless millions of lives and livelihoods, he now realized he'd subconsciously hoped for a somewhat more forceful figure. Jacus Roden was a slight man, perhaps five foot seven, about sixty years in appearance, with a slow deliberate manner and a perfectly hairless head.

"Hello, Mister Blaque." The old man was calm, quiet, rather composed given the situation.

"Mister Roden," said Blaque pleasantly. "Would you be interested in explaining why it is that I've lost contact with some of my best men after they initiated their attempt – their lawful attempt, I might add – at communicating with you on behalf of the Gallente Federation?"

"Certainly," said Roden. He scratched his nose and pressed a small button on his desk. "Their equipment malfunctioned within our electromagnetic field, but they're being taken good care of. You'll see them again safe and sound shortly."

Inwardly Mentas balked at the man's presumption, but he kept his demeanor carefully ironclad. "I'm fully presuming, then, that this courteous treatment of our troops," he said, "is a sign that you're taking our initiative in the spirit expected of a loyal citizen of the Federation. Am I correct in this, Mister Roden?"

The old man sat down in his chair, pushed a few more buttons on his desk and smiled airily up at the camera, without really looking at it.

"You are correct in that I am a loyal citizen of the Federation," he said.

"And what would make you think this constitutes acceptable treatment of Office One emissaries?"

"I am motivated by nothing but love for these fine men."

"So you subdue them as a first course measure? Why not just talk?"

"Because they haven't heard what I'm offering and they didn't come with the intent to listen."

Two seconds passed. Mentas Blaque breathed in, then out, then in.

"And what is it that you're offering, exactly?"

"I just want what's best for everyone, Mister Blaque," the old man said. He spun in his chair and stood up. As he did so, for one second a metallic jaw line came into view, a streak of iron that ran from the side of his neck along

the jaw to the bottom of the chin. "I just want everyone to be able to handle their business in a manner that befits our great Federation. As we were proceeding until our good president decided to stifle the wings of creative enterprise." He stopped at the corner of his desk and faced the camera squarely. A wry curve, half a smile and yet not, played at the corner of his lips.

Mentas Blaque raised his chin almost imperceptibly and executed a well-practiced flare of the nostrils. "The President makes whatever decisions are necessary at any given time," he said. "It has been deemed that the new arrangement will lead to a stronger and more unified Gallente, and it's neither your place nor mine to question its value. It has not been idly arrived at."

"Hierarchy is the grand streak in the human painting," said Roden. "Who was that? Fouel? Geremane? One of our greats, at any rate."

"I'm sure you can find out later, Mister Roden," said Blaque. "After you've released our men and submitted to whatever punishment the courts will see fit to bestow for your transgression." His patience was beginning to chafe away. This was supposed to be an eccentric lunatic, not a well-spoken intellectual. Somehow the high ground had begun to rattle.

"Enterprise is the foundation of our great experiment, here, wouldn't you say?" asked Roden, standing stock still behind his desk. Across several constellations and millions of kilometers, Blaque fancied he saw the tiniest flicker of light appear in the old man's eyes.

"Enterprise is where our Federation has been forged. It is where we find out how we stand. It is where we realize what it takes to win, to crush our competitors." The old man smiled pleasantly.

"If you start undermining the foundations of an enterprise," he continued, his back straightening and his gait becoming more forceful as he began a slow circle round his desk, "the rest of it will all come down. And the Federation," he said, velvetine menace creeping into his voice, "is not a lightweight enterprise. It is not something one crawls out from under."

"What," Blaque began, then stopped. It was all getting to be a bit too much. Most likely the old man was simply driven to folly by years of wretched excess, but there was a certain sort of humor in his manner, a meta-awareness that hinted at hidden knowledge.

Just as Mentas Blaque was beginning for one of the very few times in his life to feel the befuddled beginnings of true admiration, the old man said, "I think you may have a message." He sat down in his chair and leaned back.

Mentas muted the audio, checked the incoming feeds. Incident reports from seven different locations. Shutdown in Elore, hostage situation in Carirgnottin. Allotek Industries and Duvolle Labs incommunicado, CreoDron and Chemal Tech declaring allegiance with Roden Shipyards and sending out press releases publicly rebuffing the nationalization.

No way. No way you could do this, old man. Mentas cut the vidlink and got up from his chair. His practiced and capable mind struggled to assess the situation. Somehow a single purveyor of weapons tech had managed to bring the entire military-industrial complex together against a presidential decree. Obviously prior information, obviously planned well in advance, and yet completely ridiculous in its scope and audacity.

A full minute passed, during which the silent chamber's only sounds were the hum and bleep of dutiful machinery. Halfway wishing he had some way of commemorating the occasion, he sat down once more in the still deadness of his control center and fixed his eyes on the screen in front of him.

Into his microphone he quietly subvocalized, "Control, recorder off."

He switched back to Roden, unmuted the open channel. The old man was sitting in his chair, fingers splayed across his lap. The wry curve, by now, was more than a half-smile.

"Mister Roden," said Mentas Blaque. "It looks like you and I need to talk."

Blind Auction

He entered the room alone, motioning the door closed behind him with a lazy wave of his hand. A practiced eye swept the room briefly; unnecessary in this sanctum, but following old and well-trodden pathways in his mind. He strolled down the length of the long polysteel table, absent-mindedly touching the headrest of each seat as he passed, and dropped lightly into the worn leather swivelchair at the end. Leaning back and propping his feet on the table, he darkened both windows a little and started browsing reports on his neocom. Time passed quietly for a while, save for the gentle whirring of unobtrusive hardware, the filtered sunlight's gentle orange sheen punctuated at reassuringly familiar intervals by black shadows sweeping across the room.

A subdued flash outside stirred him, and he raised his head to gaze out through the window. A small ship, glowing orange; then a bigger flash, and another ship appeared. Larger, sleeker and a deal more menacing, the Widow gave him only a few moments to admire its elegant lines as it slid rapidly into the nearest docking bay. Moments later, the door opened.

"Sir, your first guest has just arrived."

"Yes, I was just watching him jump in. Remind me to get myself one of those."

"The Widow, sir?"

"Yes. Good-looking ship, and our pilots speak highly of them."

"Yes, sir. Would you like me to reserve a slot for it in your hangar? We could fit it in between that Scorpion you took out for a spin three years ago, and the Rattlesnake you won off The Rabbit and never finished fitting."

"Hah, yes. Yes... humph."

"Well, you can easily afford it, sir, and it's a great-looking ship."

"True. Okay, remind me to think about getting myself one of those some day."

"Yes, sir."

"Are we ready?"

"Yes, sir. The room's completely clean, and the overt recording devices, the covert recording devices, the backup recording devices and the recording devices that you had me fit as an insurance policy have all been completely removed. The only thing in this room with a pickup is your neocom, and we're actively sweeping all penetration points."

"Very good."

"We also had another look at general security, and we've installed a ballistic filter and a particle screen on the inner window. I know your opinion on that sort of thing, sir, but with the particular guests you have today... "

"Yes. Yes, you're right. I don't like it, but you're also right that we shouldn't be taking the risk here. Good thinking."

"Thank you, sir. He'll be along in a few moments."

He left the guard at the door and entered alone. The room was in darkness, but what little he could see was comfortingly familiar - sparsely and cleanly furnished, with a long boardroom table lined with empty executive-grade chairs. Without warning, the sun rose magnificently to his left, and his

weary eyes drank in the orange warmth. He moved to the window, gazing out at the station's unsettlingly smooth lines, and the gigantic rotating rings of its laboratories, factories and testing facilities. Movement brought his attention down, as below his feet a cluster of ships soared out of the launch bay and aligned for warp. Other ships were coming and going, singly or in small groups - mostly capsuleers, his intel had told him, operating out of this lonely outpost and clearing the spacelanes of marauding Guristas.

Then he was aware of someone at his side, and he turned.

"Our capsuleer associates have proven remarkably useful over the years."

"Yes. I've heard that you do good business with them out here."

"We do indeed. They're good customers when you handle them right."

"And monsters if they get out of control. It's good to finally meet you."

"The feeling is mutual. I've been following your recent activities with some interest."

"It feels like everyone has, and not all the interest is the good sort."

"Indeed. I hope your trip wasn't too bad? I was just admiring your ship with my aide. They're fine vessels."

"I always found gate travel uncomfortable, and jump drives are considerably worse. But yes, it's a well-endowed ship, and we didn't have any trouble on the way."

"That's something to be thankful for, at least. How is business?"

"It's been worse. This latest trick of Heth's has thrown a whole bag of spanners into things though. He's doing a very good job of keeping us at each others' throats and away from his own neckline, but it's not good for the State. Or for our agenda, for that matter. If we were in a stronger position, we might..." He trailed off. "But we're not, and so here we are."

"Yes. And here he is too, I think."

"I don't recognize the configuration of that ship."

"Neither do I, but I'd hazard a guess that it's a Proteus."

"Oh. Yes. That would explain it. Tech Three. Expensive choice."

"Sound, though, if he has the covert configuration. And yes, very expensive. We've been trying to get hold of one, but—"

"We've managed to acquire a few subsystems, but without a power core there's not much to learn."

"Yes, and unless you can source the parts yourself—"

"Which is exceptionally dangerous."

"Yes, and with the capsuleer monopoly, market prices are—"

"Uneconomical."

"Exactly."

"I wonder where he got that one."

"Official budget, probably. He should be up in a minute."

He gestured at his chaperone to wait and strolled through the door. A brief glance was all he needed: another meeting room, another day... Without warning, the warmly shining sun was extinguished, and in the darkness his gaze was drawn to the constellation of lights visible through the interior window. Looking down into the station's central concourse, he could see thousands of tiny people moving purposefully along the night-cycle streets and walkways. He wondered what kind of people they were, what their hopes and dreams and fears and hidden levers were, and why they would choose this life, out here in the darkness. Then the room flooded with light again, and his co-conspirators came over to join him.

"Welcome to my little world."

"And a lovely little place it is, too. Thank you so much for agreeing to host this meeting – and thank you, too, for coming all this way to talk with us here."

"Purely business, Mr. ..."

"Please, no names. This is a huge risk for me, even with the best security measures in place. Not that I don't have the fullest trust in our gracious host, of course!"

"It's good of you to say so. I think we'll all need to trust one another today. As agreed, the only recording device in this room is my neocom, and it's neutralizing voiceprints. You have my word on that."

"Well, I'm sure that's more than good enough for both of us, am I right?"

"Yes, that will be fine. Our host and I were just discussing the ship you arrived on."

"That thing? I asked for the most secure ship we had available, but not one with a jump drive. Can't abide those things. Not a very luxurious ride, but the captain assured me it was up to the job."

"I'm sure we can find you a replacement for the return journey somewhere in our hangars here."

"Thank you so much for the offer, but I'm afraid I got the distinct impression from my staff that if I didn't bring the ship back in one piece, there'd be problems."

"Well, that's... entirely understandable, under the circumstances."

"Can we begin now?"

"Yes, of course. Let me just configure the table."

At the deft push of a few buttons, chairs slid back into the floor and the table contracted and reshaped into a compact circle. A holo-display flickered to life, reflecting off the table below and adding to the room's dim ambient lighting. The three men seated themselves and began to negotiate.

"If we're all ready, let's start. Would you like to kick off by explaining the deal as it's been presented to you, so we're all on the same page?"

"Heth has decided to auction exclusive economic rights for the contested Gallente areas to Caldari corporations. We will enter bids for any and all systems in the area that we are interested in, and in each system the corporation with the highest bid is granted a transferrable and sub-divisible license to regulate economic activity."

"If you would excuse me for jumping in, what is the duration of these licenses?"

"Ten years, with first refusal on subsequent renewals."

"And if the systems are not still in Caldari hands in ten years' time? You must know that we hardly intend to sit on our hands for the next decade."

"The licenses are only enforceable under Caldari law, which we don't expect the Federation to recognize. If the FDU manages to push the State out – in ten years or ten days – then the licenses will reactivate if and when the systems are reconquered."

"If you'll forgive me for saying so, that doesn't sound like a particularly safe deal."

"Do you really think that your Militia is in any position to mount a counteroffensive?"

"I think it might be worth remembering that capsuleers have a reputation for being... inscrutably unpredictable."

"A fair point. In any case, it's not a deal we can easily refuse. There's a huge quantity of untapped resources in those systems – the Federation's methods have always been inefficient, and we have the added advantage of not having to worry much about the local population. Yes, I know, but that's how it's going to play out – you think the others are really going to worry about your people? I doubt any of us will be starting planetside operations for a while, but nobody's going to be keeping count of Gallentean mortality rates."

"I was aware of this, academically at least, but—"

"Hey, you want to talk to the others and complain, go right ahead. My being here should say enough about my position."

"Yes, I'm sorry. Please go on."

"Heth's set this up as a blind auction on the grounds that it will lead to objective valuations of the systems, but everyone knows it'll just drive bids through the roof. It's going to be ruinously expensive for everyone, but in the best-case scenario – which looks realistic, if you're still high on military victory – anyone not on the sled will be left in the snow. I've heard mutterings that in the worst case, we're all equally screwed, so the risk balances out. Besides, we still have all those Amarrian loans hanging over our heads, and while they seem happy to let them lie, most of us are keen to lose that particular collar as soon as possible."

"Hmmm... I'd forgotten about that financing deal."

"It keeps us awake at night. She's planning something, I'm sure of it. That's the situation laid out, though. The State retains military access to the systems, of course, but otherwise they become corporate fiefs."

"Which, as you say, will be unpleasant for the Gallenteans living there, but that's a problem that we don't have the resources to tackle."

"There is, however, a smaller and potentially more pressing issue which I think between us we might be able to at least mitigate. It's the reason I've expended a great deal of effort – and taken a rather large risk – to convene this meeting. Not all—"

"It's Intaki, isn't it. That's the only thing that makes sense."

"Yes, it's Intaki. If you could pull up the map on— yes, there we are. Here's the Placid contested zone – currently under Caldari occupation and, as you

say, up for grabs – and here's Intaki, two jumps from Stacmon in the wrong direction. It goes without saying that it would be better for us if this situation had never occurred in the first place, but reality is what it is, and the home of a major Federal member is about to become the property of a Caldari megacorp. We're not exactly on good terms with any of you right now, but even so, some outcomes are preferable to others."

"You'd prefer that your new landlord is someone who's not going to throw you down the stairs for fun."

"That captures the sentiment fairly well, yes."

"So what do we get out of it?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You're offering us – me – a deal. You want me to buy Intaki to stop it getting completely trashed. I have sympathy for the idea, but we've spent a lot of money on ideas we had sympathy for and it's not worked out well for us financially. Why should I even discuss this?"

"Since we're talking about finances, how much of our space are you planning on buying? How much have you budgeted for?"

"Is that even relevant?"

"A constellation? A system?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that, even here."

"We have people looking at your people's accounts, and they say yours remind them of the Federal welfare programme back in the bad old days. You can't afford anything."

"We're still looking at our options. I have good people working on this, working to find— working to balance the money."

"You're out of time for that. The other megacorps have their cash lined up and ready. You're not ready, because you can't afford it."

"So what if you're right? What if we can't afford to get a piece of the pie? Why have you dragged me all the way out here to talk about this when you know full well we don't have the means to pay for it?"

"Because I do."

Two of the men were now hunched over the table, muscles tense, hololight lending their staring eyes unnatural hues. The third reclined in his chair, hands steepled and muscles relaxed, but hooded eyes flickering. For a moment there was silence punctuated only by the whirring machines. Another shadow passed across the outer window, and in the deeper darkness eyes glowed like smouldering coals. Beyond the inner window, crowds continued to silently surge.

"What are you proposing?"

"Well, we have a common objective here, that much seems obvious, and between us we have all the resources needed to achieve that objective. It's just a matter of aligning things such that—"

"You want to pay us to buy Intaki."

"To a political layman, that's probably how it looks, yes."

"Where I come from it's called pragmatism!"

"Gentlemen, I think we're all outside our comfort zones here. Let's try and keep our eyes on the target."

"Yes. You're right. But that is the pitch, if I'm not hugely misunderstanding. The Federation gives us a pile of money, which we can then use to make sure we get Intaki."

"It's of no consequence exactly where the money comes from; I can ensure that the necessary sum is made available to your people, which is all that should matter. And on the understanding, of course, that it's used exclusively for this purpose."

"Which brings up that question again. Transferring the money secretly is not a problem – deep space mineral exchanges and the like – and my people can easily explain the money appearing on our balance sheets, but again I have to ask: what's in it for us?"

"Is a large pile of free money suddenly not good enough?"

"You're not thinking this through. Explaining the money's appearance is easy, but I also have to explain why we're allocating all this suddenly available wealth towards bidding for the most problematic system in the auction, rather than picking somewhere more accessible, or even shoring up our existing finances. I need a cast-iron business pitch, and I can't make one with what you've given me. It'd be professional suicide."

"I had thought that, with the will and the resources, other problems would remove themselves. It's just a matter of marketing. You have good speechwriters, I assume? I can give you access to—"

"Yes, I can see you have thought about this a great deal, and I'm not questioning your intent or your commitment to this goal. But you're thinking like a Gallentean. My problem is not an electorate, it's shareholders, and

we communicate with them using numbers, not words. The only way to sell this is to make it add up."

"This is not a problem I had considered. I'm very sorry; I don't have an answer to this."

"Then I'm very sorry too, because we have reached an impasse. I can't make this deal work."

"I believe I... might be able to see a way out of this. Intaki is resource-poor, it's true, but it is nevertheless one of the wealthiest systems in the Federation."

"That's all planetside though, services and advanced manufacturing. We can't leverage that."

"What if you could, though? If you come to save them rather than to subjugate them, I think they might cooperate with your goals."

"What manner of deal, precisely, are you suggesting here?"

"I'm proposing that his people enter into a partnership with your people. You give them exclusive shipping access to the Intaki system, and they agree to shield you from the excesses of the other corporations."

"Can they do that? Wouldn't the Federal Navy stop them?"

"Federal members retain control of their home systems. Usually security and shipping are franchised out to the Navy and to Fedmart, but it's still under their control. If they wanted to delegate those responsibilities to you, they're legally entitled to do so."

"Do you really think the Intaki government would go for that? Permitting a Caldari corporation to manage their interstellar traffic?"

"I think that maybe you don't know your people as well as you think. I've been talking to them, through old acquaintances, and they've mentioned the S&S franchise to me more than once. I think they'd be interested in discussing it, and under the circumstances I don't think the shipping rights will be a sticking point. It's security that will bother them, I think."

"Yes. I can see how having our ships police their space might look bad."

"Our latest assessment of your corporate security forces suggests that they have neither the resources nor the training to do the job. You would need someone who both sides trust, and who has enough spare hardware and manpower to defend the system against any and all threats."

"Hah! You are a Caldari after all. I was wondering what your angle was! How much then would it cost us to buy your services for this?"

"Ah, let's not get caught up in the details. It's safe to say that our mutual friend here can cover the sort of money we'd be obligated to charge, as part of his donation."

"So he gets shipping rights – say, for ten years, renewable – to pacify his shareholders, you get paid to police things, and we have the safety of one of our most important systems secured. I have to admit, it's an elegant solution, assuming your assessment of the Intaki position is correct. And a profitable one for you, too, I don't doubt."

"I have a foot in both camps, as it were. I have an interest in these matters."

"Of course. Well, as I said earlier, this is an unfortunate position for us, but we have to do what we can. I don't see a better solution arising than this one, unpleasant as it may be."

"I think I can sell this deal to my people, assuming you both come through with your end. It is good to be able to make business and ethics coincide. The Old Man would be happy with this."

"I have hope that both our peoples will see the sense of it, although I fear that some of them will take longer than others to understand..."

He stretched in his chair, then leaned back and relaxed. Negotiations concluded, hands shaken and ships departed. A holo-map rotated still, a single red dot glowing at its centre. He clicked it off, and as darkness and light chased each other across the room, a smile played on his lips. A good day at the office. Interesting times ahead, and a good day.

He left the room quietly, blacking the windows behind him, and the machines hummed to themselves in the darkness.

A Man of Values and Faith

Hand me that component, please. Thank you.

Ammatar - yeah, this part'll take a while, but let's all be careful with it. We value our arms and legs - the Ammatar Mandate was a fraud and a sham. In the dark old days when the Amarr Empire held our people completely in thrall, the Nefantars actually assisted those sanctimonious murderers. When the rebellion finally came they cowered under the wing of the Empire and were given a planet of their own. Nobody back home wanted to call them Nefantar any longer, so a new name emerged. It was an insult but our people took it up in blissful pride. Ammatar. A semiautonomous faction of Minmatars under the aegis of the Amarr Empire. The mind reels.

No, don't move it just yet. It needs to settle. And make sure your hands are clean before you start shifting it. Any dirt will just cause smoke later on.

It's been rotten. It's been absolutely rotten to speak the truth in this place. Minmatar sympathizers are not welcome here, even when every one of us *is* Minmatar however much we may deny it. We're a small group, just us and our loved ones, getting increasingly smaller. But we are not Amarrians. We were born Minmatars. The people of our nation are being kidnapped and enslaved by the very same leaders whom the Ammatars serve. The mind truly reels.

Yes, over there is fine. Careful.

I am Ammatar in name but I was born Minmatar, and even as I was taught Amarrian thoughts in school, my true nature shone through. I learned to think and reason for myself. Besides, it was never any great challenge to see through their lies. Data isn't hard to come by. People just need to look for it.

So I was taught that we Nefantars, that traitor tribe of the Minmatar, had collaborated with the enemy and been doomed to subservience for our efforts. That is what I was taught. What I *learned* is that it couldn't be true. It

never made the slightest bit of sense. Even leaving aside the idea that an entire tribe would betray its nation for the enemy, under threat of death and torture and whatever else, it happened far too easily. Not at the end, when everyone would have been exhausted and worn and tired of war, but early on, when they still had recruits willing to fight. I could not believe this choice had been made in good faith by our own people, leaving our best interests by the wayside.

No, of course I never spoke of it. They'd have had me killed.

Anyway, I was right. I couldn't possibly have imagined the scope of what they did, but I was right.

During the great Minmatar rebellion, the Nefantars cooperated with the occupying Amarr forces because another tribe, the Starkmanir, were about to be wiped out of existence. And we took them in. The Nefantar leaders took in the last of the Starkmanir, hid them among our people in a marvelous web of deceit, and then allowed the whole Nefantar tribe to be taken in by the Amarr, Starkmanirs intact. Protected by the very monsters who had sought their destruction and ruin.

Nobody knew this except a few of the chosen. I can't imagine the organizational complexities of their plans, the raw desperation for a solution, any solution - and the sheer nerve they must have needed, knowing that their only measure of success would be the hatred of their fellow men until the end of time. They would know the truth and no one else, and if I can carry myself with equal good graces through the oncoming conflicts, I'll be amazed.

Ready to pull that off in five. Otherwise they'll start reacting and we either have to start over again, or we'll be cleaning you off the ceiling. It's the smell that'll tell you. Smell's a good indicator that something's gone wrong.

Yes, that and you on the ceiling, alright.

I don't think we ever thought we'd see the great tribes return. It's always been a small group of us here in the Ammatar Mandate, banded together by the cause and our love for our fellow Minmatar, fighting for the right for

our people to return to their proper home. Nobody else on this forsaken planet seemed to have any interest in awakening to their true natures; nor did the rest of the Minmatar nation want to have anything to do with us. They wanted to free their brothers, yes, but only those who'd been enslaved by the Amarr, and not the idiot Nefantar who'd willingly walked through the gates.

Then one day the skies darkened, and they came for us.

Led by the Elders, the Minmatar Republic invaded the Amarr Empire's sovereign space and brought a massive fleet to bear on the Empire's defenses, reducing them to dust and tattered scripture. They came to the Ammatar Mandate, landed on our planet and pulled our people out, as many as would come. But even in the madness of the invasion they were very selective about who they took with them: You could come if you liked, but there were certain people whose presence they simply demanded, and there was a lot of furor and trouble because some of them stupidly didn't want to go. At the time I didn't understand why they chose specific areas, communities and individuals. I do now. They were coming for the Starkmanir.

If our people had retained any sense, we would have all gone with them. And if the invasion had succeeded the way it was planned, I'm sure we would have. But it was halted by the goddamn superweapon wielded by that Amarrian bitch. Once the news reached us that she had vaporized a good half of our fleet - that grand fleet we had barely even begun to realize the Minmatar had amassed, let alone deployed in battle - it was simply overload. The mind was so overloaded by world-changing events that the more mundane events on the ground were simply passed over.

You do not want to pick that thing up right away. Look at the back of my hand. See those grafts? Trust me.

Once the dust had settled, and we'd come to grips with the fact that the Minmatar had come and gone, I thought we were in for a new era among the Ammatar. Even before I knew the full extent of what we had done for

the Starkmanir, I realized that we were leaderless, out of the Amarr Empire's immediate sphere of concern, and populated with a race that had just seen its fellow members come in force and kick ass. It was the greatest opportunity in the history of the Ammatar Mandate to incite rebellion and tear our way out of that tangled web of Amarr for good.

We blew it. We absolutely blew it.

We thought - we who call ourselves revolutionaries - that we had time. After the furor and trouble of the Minmatar invasion, and the loss of the Mandate leader, and the chaos they left in their wake, there was too much to do here on a daily basis. You can't have revolution if you don't have food nor shelter, and while the invasion was as painless as one can be, it really does not take all that much to destabilize a planet's production and distribution systems. Everyone had to pitch in and make sure our economy still functioned.

So we clung to our processes - yeah, go ahead, but be careful with that - we clung to the processes we knew, dug deeper into our ruts, and went with familiarity for the time being. Inciting revolution among frightened, insecure crowds would not have worked, not when the inevitable backlash came. We needed solid ground for our activities, and we needed our subjects unafraid of more change. We needed more time. Some of us had that saving grace of patience; others did not.

When they said Ardishapur was taking over I thought it was a blessing.

The man is renowned as a hard-line Amarrian. Of all the heirs to the Empyrean throne, he is the one who clings the hardest to the Empire's old ways of evil and destruction. Even the bitch empress is more forward-looking than he is. So when I heard he had been assigned the Mandate, I rejoiced, because I knew - I thought I knew - that this would be yet another push for our people on their path to independence. They would suffer Ardishapur's hellish rule only long enough to realize where their true destiny lay, and the few doubts left over in their minds from the Minmatar invasion would be erased, bringing them over to our side.

Our brothers in the Empire, who knew better, warned us that the man should not be underestimated, but we ignored their claims.

All right. I ignored their claims. But so did others.

We thought he would come in with a steely hand, clamping down on the masses, all the better for us to rise against. That he would offer the hellfires of damnation to a people who had seen another way out of this wretched half-life they had in the Mandate and who'd think very hard about what the Empire was trying to thrust upon them. That he would force us into his faith and the Empire's clammy arms once again, with temples on every street, and prayers to a false god ringing in the night.

It would have been perfect. It was everything we needed; a subjugation of our peoples that would lead them straight to me. To our cause, I mean.

And he came, but what he did was so much worse.

He built a goddamn school. In every neighborhood.

He brought with him a latticework of Amarrians who slid into every vacant position left empty by the fleeing administration, and who took up their places like they were meant to be there. And immediately they set about building or repairing necessary structures - schools, hospitals, operating centers of various kinds - and buffering internal support, rather than concerning himself with our relations to the Empire. He made the Ammatar Mandate an independent kingdom again, subject not to the Empire's whims but merely to his own direct rule, and capable of sustaining itself without necessary intervention by Empire authorities.

He brought their twisted faith, too; of course he did. There were religious overtones to everything he did, in every school and hospital. They were really nothing new to the rebellion and people like us, so we didn't mind one way or the other. But the people, the general population, should have recognized it for what it was. They should have been *incensed* that their opportunity to be free at last, and to live as proper Minmatars, was being taken from them and replaced by this celestial sham the Amarrians call a religion.

For I am convinced that whatever Amarrian religious habits have been forced on them, all their lives, for these untold generations, they would fall away like chaff as soon as we went back home. There might be some slight discomfort in the adjustment, but any true Minmatar could cast it off.

I was wrong. I admit it. The allure of comforts overrode the drive for rectitude. In even what I'd thought the staunchest of revolutionaries.

No, put that down. Wait. We have to wait. It'll be ready soon enough.

As representative of the Minmatar league I tried, I tried so hard, to gather support. This should have been our time. The Mandate had been put in total disorder, the people of our origin had come and shown us the way, a new leader with a vile message had come to impose his will on us ...

I expected the people to flock to me. To us. Instead they massed at the feet of that dictator Ardishapur. As if he could bribe us.

Of course it was necessary, what he did. Of course it was needed. Good education, clean water, a running economy, etcetera. But not from *him*. What price, health and happiness? When your life, enjoyable as it momentarily may be, is based on such false and badly founded values, it simply cannot be permitted to go on. No matter how much temporary comfort it may provide you. Otherwise you are perpetuating a cycle that your children and their children will find it even harder to break out of, and you are poisoning your people and their culture with this ... metaphysical falsehood, this intangible lie that this life is how it should be. Anything new you create will find the spark of its life ignited by the same lie, and thus by extension be equal lie itself. I wish some people had understood that, before they left to join the lie.

The Nefantar aren't entirely poisoned yet. Not while we are here to tell them the truth. But without us, without this societal antidote, they would be lost for good. And our numbers are dwindling. We have had thrust upon us a pious leader who knows how to dominate the public's minds by that most insidious of methods: improving their quality of life. If this goes on we are

going to lose the Minmatar ideological grip on the Ammatar people, the grip we held for only a moment. If we are going to act, it has to be *now*.

Now means now, yes. It also means we need to have those detonators ready. Are you going to have them ready? Good. We're leaving soon.

I was angry, yes. Over the reactions of the Nefantar, and of the people I know.

Yes, some more than others. Get those goddamn detonators ready.

I was trying to get the people on this planet to mind, because I thought they should. I am a man of values and faith, and I will not be taken in by chicanery. And yes, it's been an agonizing grind and of course we have lost some of our people down the road, but it doesn't matter. Ardishapur's work must be stopped. The man is a carnivore, offering only the warmth of his teeth.

So now we need to show him - show them, all of them - what it means to be Minmatar. That the order he created is a lie and cannot be allowed to live. Not merely for our cause, but for those who've suffered so terribly through the ages and are no longer here, whether by fate or by choice.

Yes, including her. She chose to leave.

What?

I said she's *gone*.

Away. From us at least. Stop asking goddamn questions and hand me those goddamn detonators right now.

So there's nothing to it. The people have betrayed us, fallen asleep on the guard, turned away from us. The ones who truly loved them. And they need to be woken up.

May my people forgive me and see that what I did was necessary. Bring the rest of the equipment, please.

We'll start with the ones in our neighborhood.

Where she is.

Prosopagnosia

There was nothing keeping him on the colony, so one night he got out of bed far too early for it to be late anymore, and he headed down to the docking areas where the spaceships passed by on their way to somewhere else. There he arrived at a small waiting area that served as tavern, information portal and intersystem trading hub. He located the crew from that strange ship that would sometimes stop by, asked them again about the terms of the contracts they were offering, and this time he took a seat and listened hard.

It was a well-known contract in the manner that such things become known, spoken of in rumors and hushed half-beliefs. Lazar knew few people who had truly investigated all its murky corners.

The recruiters were friendly without being imposing. They gave him the impression that they would be happy to have him and remain happy once he had signed up but would not take it personally if he did not. They also gave him the impression that they knew where they were headed, which made them all the more appealing.

Their contract was remarkably clear in tone. It was for a whole year, that odd span which has become actual time without yet being truly long. A year was the smallest unit with which to measure the increments of one's life; and so it counted towards the future without eating it up.

During that year Lazar would not be allowed to leave the ship on his own volition. Were he to attempt disembarkment, the contract stated he would be confined to his quarters until such time as he could be given passage to a nearby colony, while the recruiters calmly stated that he would, in fact, be confined to a container and jettisoned into fucking space at the pilot's whim. This was not a contract for uncommitted people, nor with those who retained any longing for their past.

He would sever all ties with his old life. There would be no communication with anyone on this colony, or anyone anywhere else unless required for a

pilot-sanctioned mission. The ship would undock, with Lazar on board, and that would be it.

During this year he would be paid a fortune in salary. Word also had it that the capsuleer who ran the crew could be extremely generous in all those little ways that matter infinitely more when your daily routine is dictated by others.

After the first year he would be free to go. When he asked if recruits tended to leave, the recruiters shrugged and admitted almost reluctantly that nobody ever did. People, they said, found something on this ship they were looking for, and they didn't want to ever let it go.

It suited him well.

They gave him a datapad with tests and watched as he answered the questions, some of which were stranger than others and a good part of which seemed related to personal identity. He handed back the datapad to a recruiter who looked it over, smiled and handed it back with an offer. The offer was in ISK. He had never had ISK before.

He signed the datapad with his autograph and his personal key, and he handed it back, and he left his old life for good.

The ship was an industrial, five hundred strong, although Lazar was told that he likely wouldn't see but a fraction of it at the outset. He was confined to a particular section of the ship where he would work, live and interact with the same limited subsection of the crew. He had not been allowed to bring any personal possessions, but the ship was well-stocked in both entertainment material and basic necessities. Many of the onboard systems were automated, even the personal hygiene ones in the living quarters, which Lazar suspected was a welcome novelty for a ship used to taking long trips in deep space. The lack of amenities annoyed him at the outset - he wanted to shave his face with a blade, but there were no razors and, oddest of all, there were no mirrors on the ship, either - but if that was the worst he had to suffer on this strange trip, he expected he could handle it.

He met his crew section every morning at reveille. Strengthened in his intent to accept whatever the journey brought him, he found himself more affable than he'd been in years, and made quick friends with most of them. One in particular caught his attention, though he tried to rein himself in. She had long, reddish hair, thick lips and a voice that slid gently into his ears. Her name was Reania.

She agreed with him that the ship's automation took a little getting used to, and that the lack of mirrors was frankly bizarre, but added that the capsuleer in charge of this ship was in fact a very nice man. He had his kooky side, as she called it, but they all did, and his crew served him without compunction. He also had a lot of money - again, as they all did - and spent a great deal of it on this ship and its crew. The others, busy with eating but apparently listening in, nodded in gentle approval. Lazar wondered whether he would ever meet this man, but asked whether he would ever meet the rest of the crew. Reania said that eventually he would, after the initial adjustment period had passed. Long trips took getting used to, and they did not want him to get lost in this life before he had truly found his bearings. He did not ask anything else. She smiled at him, but she was not smiling.

That night he started getting sick. It began with a slight vertigo and a photosensitivity that turned increasingly vicious as the night wore on, until the point where even the gloom from the stars' faint halos, penetrating through the darkness of his covered windows, felt like needles slowly piercing his brain. The vertigo forced him to keep his eyes open - he was absolutely not going to run to the bathroom and vomit, not in the dark - and he spent his time counting the luminous shapes that appeared to slither over his bedroom floor, like oil over metal. When he moved his gaze up at the wall, the shapes followed.

Somewhere in the middle of the whorl, he fell asleep.

The next morning people kept asking him how he was doing. He reasoned that he must really look sick, but without any mirrors he couldn't tell for sure.

The day went on and was followed by others. He did his chores, which were simple and appeared to be aimed at gauging his talents rather than putting him to a proper day's amount of work. The crewmembers who worked alongside him kept an eye on his progress, but they were gentle enough about it, and so forthright in their watch, that he did not feel belittled nor ashamed.

He got to know them by their first names, them and most of the others he saw in this enclosed new life, and after the ship made its next stop somewhere in the deep of space he noticed that several of them had disappeared. He asked around, but received only smiles.

The night hallucinations continued. Sometimes he crawled to the toilet and vomited. He was glad for the lack of mirrors, for he did really not want to see his face.

One time at lunch someone new sat next to him. He hadn't yet met this person, but found him strangely familiar. The person greeted Lazar cheerfully by name, and Lazar ransacked his memory for the same, but came up empty.

"Who are you?" Lazar said at last, with what he assumed was a fairly silly grin.

"Oh, I'm Jatek."

Lazar said, half to himself, "Hey, that's the name of one of our guys who left recently."

The man said, "Yeah, that's me."

This was surprising to Lazar, who had gotten to know Jatek. "No, you're not," he said.

"Why not?"

This was even more surprising. "Well ..." Lazar began. "You don't look anything like him."

"What size was he?" the man said, standing up.

Lazar looked him over. "Yours, but-"

"What build?"

"Yours. And you're wearing clothing similar to his, and you probably have the same shoe size as well," Lazar said as the man sat back down. He leaned in and added with a whisper, "But here's a telling little detail. You don't have his *face*."

"So?" the man said, with a puzzled and amused expression on those strange features.

Lazar blinked at him. He muttered, "I don't know what to say to that."

The man nodded - still with that amused face that Lazar half wanted to smash in with a goddamn rock - and went back to eating his lunch.

Lazar remained in his seat and resumed his own meal, which had lost most of its taste. He shot the man a look every now and then, but tried to focus on the positive things about this situation: He was happy here. He was free of the migraine, for the moment. And although his stomach was a little shaky, no less after this little act, he was keeping his food down.

Until the door opened and another person walked in, wearing different clothing and made of a different build, and walking even with a different gait, but possessing the exact same face as the Jatek pretender.

Lazar rushed out and barely made it to the bathroom before losing his lunch.

He spent the rest of the afternoon in bed, waking only from his doze when Reania came over to check on him. They had become close friends, or as much as one can get when adjusting to a new life and trying not to fall for one's coworkers. When she saw the state he was in, she immediately took

over the flat. This included taking his dirty laundry off various available surfaces and having it cleaned, ordering the AC to air out the place (and ordering Lazar not to shut it off again), sending the cleaner bugs to take care of spatters from the most recent raspy dry heave, and sorting out a proper warm meal. Snacks were always available to the crew - this was one of those uncommon ships where practically nothing was rationed - but food had to be requested, as private quarters had no facilities to make it. Reania left and returned shortly after with something that Lazar thought smelled almost as nice as she did. They ate in the living room, him sitting on the sofa, her on a chair that faced him.

He got the food down, eventually. She sat there patiently, chatting with him in amicable fashion and doing a good job of making him feel neither alone nor helpless. To his relief she did not ask him what was wrong, for he could not truly have told her.

After the meal he was overcome with the calming warmth of a body nourishing itself. He ran out of energy even to talk, but even so he did not want Reania to leave him. She seemed to sense this and moved closer, sitting beside him and keeping up a slow murmur about her time on the ship and the sights she'd seen; stations, nebulae, anything but the present.

In a quiet moment he asked if they could just lie down. They did, there on the sofa.

For the longest time he didn't speak, not wanting to disturb this bubble of niceness and normality in which he was resting. But the mind never stops, and eventually he had to ask.

"Did you see Jatek and Kralen today?"

"Yes," she said.

He asked, with the tiny glimmer of stupid hope, "Oh, so they're back from the station?"

She said, "Well, yeah, silly. Jatek even told me he sat with you at lunch today."

Lazar closed his eyes tight and lay very still, hoping Reania wasn't going to ask, but certain that she would.

She didn't.

Eventually he took a deep breath and said, "Do you see nothing wrong with them?"

"No," she said. "I don't."

He took another deep breath, and another. Eventually he fell asleep.

They stopped off again, this time for a few days. More new faces, all the same old face.

He truly felt like he was losing his mind, and he found himself idly wondering if he should kill them all or merely kill himself. At mealtimes he avoided everyone. Someone spoke to him unexpectedly and he was so startled that he spilled food over them. He left immediately, because if he had not, he honestly would have fallen to the floor and cried.

Sleep was harder to come by, though the worst of the headaches had passed.

He did not dare say anything to anyone because he truly did not know if he was himself any longer, and if he started to yell and scream at those strange faces, it wouldn't matter either way: He would have become a madman. Even if he was right, he would have lost his mind.

They suffered an attack, in one losec system, and this is what wrecked him: He was bloody useless. Everyone stood their ground and did the work required, but Lazar did not. He couldn't face working beside those people. He remained at his post and he responded when he couldn't avoid it, but it was clear to him and certainly to anyone around him that he had flaked out. They said nothing to him, which only made it worse.

The ship took to the nearest station for repairs. While it was docked Lazar aimlessly wandered its corridors, not knowing even what he was anymore - certainly not a proper crewman, and barely a human being - and only came to a stop when his legs would no longer carry him.

He rested against a wall, eyes closed. The thrum of the ship was different when docked: not quiet, but more deeply throbbing, as from potential rather than motion. It was so strange to stop, but not even his next steps seemed real enough to make effort.

There were footsteps. He hoped he wouldn't have to talk.

He cracked an eye open and saw another one, the same visage as all the others; although on this one the face seemed entirely natural and a perfect fit to his body.

The wanderer asked if he was okay. Lazar nodded.

Then the stranger with the strange face did something that amazed Lazar. He knelt down and hugged him.

Lazar was too tired even to sob, so he sighed, again and again.

The man said, "We are all the same here. We all live this same life. Forever," and as creepy as it was, it was calming, too. Lazar found himself loving this man's voice, his support, and his apparent sanguinity of mind; for either he had already had his own face changed, like everyone else, and had simply dealt with it, or he *hadn't* had it altered and was now supporting someone like Lazar who, to him, must appear utterly mad.

Lazar rose from the man's grasp and sighed again, nodding at him. He tried to get a grip on himself.

The man said something like, "You're going to be okay," and Lazar didn't hear if it was a question or a statement, but he closed his eyes and nodded again. He heard the man walk away. As the steps receded it occurred to him that he hadn't even thanked the guy, so he made himself open his eyes, opened his mouth, and looked in the direction of the footfalls. He caught the briefest of glimpses as the man walked around a bend in the

corridor before disappearing from view. The back of his head had a neural socket in it.

Lazar made his way home. Everyone on this ship, he was coming to realize, had been kind to him from day one. Everyone was supportive. Whatever this was, and whether or not they were doing it to him, they truly cared.

He had just been comforted by a capsuleer. He felt like an infant, rocked to sleep by a burning red sun.

That night someone rang at his door. It was Reania. She was there to comfort him, he said.

While they sat on the couch he admitted to her that he was wallowing in misery.

She said that isolation did strange things to people's minds. He said it couldn't be that; it could not just that.

Reania sighed. She said it was not.

"You're not mad," she said.

"What's going on?" he asked.

She closed her eyes.

He looked at her for a while. "You're not going to answer," he said at last.

She shook her head.

"But it doesn't matter, because I'm on this ship for good," he said quietly.

She nodded.

They sat for a while in silence. Eventually she got up and said, in a teary whisper, "I'd better be going."

She had reached the door before he said, "Don't."

She stopped.

"Please," he added.

She put her hand on the doorframe, leaned against it with her head.

He said, "Please don't leave me alone." She turned, and he added, "I don't know who you'll be tomorrow. Please don't leave me alone."

She laughed and cried at once, and went back to him, stroking and kissing his head. Later they moved from the couch to the bed, and even later, they eventually fell asleep.

The next morning he was determined: If this was madness then he would ride it, like a comet among stars.

Every face he saw was the same face. But when he returned home at night she was always there, and it kept him going, if not sane.

One night she said she would go away for a while, but she would be back. He said yes.

She asked if he was alright. He said yes, and yes, and yes.

He was riding the comet. Nothing else. He was in the dead cold of space, waiting to burn up.

They made love again, for the last time.

He slept a lot. He lost count of time. Once he woke up, sore and numb, and found it was three days later than he thought it had been. But he felt at ease, and managed to enact some manner of balance in his life. Everything happened for a reason.

They had to short up a bunch of damage after they got ambushed. He pulled Jatek out of danger after a circuit board caught fire, and promised himself he'd look into that; they were his responsibility. Kralen bought the rounds afterwards, since he'd been the last crewman to vet his guns before activation.

Eventually she returned. They met in the cafeteria, and ate, and after work they went their separate ways until the very end of the day, when she came to his quarters. She had an access pad and let herself into the dark room. He heard her come.

She walked quietly into the bedroom and laid down with him. She started to do things, but he stopped her.

She pulled back, apparently thinking he didn't want to, but she was wrong. He said, "I have to do one thing first," reached out and turned up a single light from a single lamp. Its faded brightness was like that of a setting sun, and it illuminated her new face.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked, with that old voice.

"The light stays on," he said, and reached for her hand again. She leaned down and kissed his fingers, then leaned in a little closer.

When they did it, he looked deep into her eyes. He saw his reflection, deep in those pools of darkness, and it was her own face. He whispered, "Yes."

Present Pieces

A Beginning

In the darkness, someone inhaled audibly; a faint speck of red flared, just for a moment, some twenty feet away. There was a pause and then a long, sharp exhalation from the shadows near the wall. The smell of tobacco grew strong in the air. A pause, another drag.

Abruptly, the smoker started coughing, quietly at first, but growing louder and harder, a grating crescendo in the yard's murky, almost artificial silence. Amid gasping attempts to catch his breath, the man muttered a few unintelligible words.

From the tone, Chieran thought none of the words were fit for young ears.

"Sounds bad. You might consider having that looked at," he interjected, voice carefully measured, neutral but friendly.

The smoker paused only for a moment, biting back his next cough, before replying. "You figure there's any way I could *not* be looked at in this place?" The response was bitter, but not overtly hostile. He swallowed another cough. "I'm sure there's some nurse watching us with multispecs from one of those windows up there right now. Big needle in her hand, probably, just waiting for me to go back inside. Or a bloody bonesaw, more likely."

His smirk hidden by the darkness, Chieran forced out a short laugh. "You the fellow from 216-B? The one they brought down from the LTT the other day?"

"Might be." The coughing man's voice was suddenly tight. He was young, much younger than Chieran had first thought. Barely out of his teens. The young man took another drag of his cigarette. "Why?" he asked sharply. And then he started coughing again.

Chieran waited for the spasm to pass, and then there was another silence as each man waited for the other to resume. After a few long seconds, the

lit stub of a cigarette launched itself in a spinning arc through the darkness, flaring into a tiny explosion when it hit the ground.

Chieran spoke again. "I'm in 219, across the way. That's all. Just wondering."

There was another silence, this one considerably shorter. "Yeah, well, I don't remember being brought in there. Don't remember much till last night, actually. Guess the drugs wore off by then. Couldn't sleep. And I didn't much feel like coming out here for a smoke until now. Smoke and a little peace and quiet."

"Well, the peace and quiet's good. Not so much the smoking. But I won't tell anyone." He paused deliberately for comic effect. "Besides, the nurse with the 'specs already knows anyway."

"Shit," the stranger replied, a faint hint of laughter in his voice as he choked out the word, stifling yet another cough.

"Well, listen," Chieran said, assuming that the other man did not want company. "I'm sure you need your rest. I know I do. And besides, it's a bit chilly out here. Perhaps I'll see you again tomorrow." And without waiting for a reply, he turned and reached for the door handle.

An Earlier Beginning

"Chieran— Dr. Kenitawri... you really need to see this. I think— I have— I've found something interesting. Quite interesting." The image on Chieran's desk shuddered for a moment as Dr. Merial Akalayan, his senior assistant, shifted her holocam downward and expanded the view to include two objects, each filling half of a large table. "This piece was recently brought back from a wormhole in Akora. *This* piece," she said, pointing to the second object, "was found in the archive. Labeled, probably by some idiotic student, as 'detritus.' It was retrieved from a very old excavation site on Matari Prime — Matar, I mean — sometime during the last century. Never properly dated."

At a glance, the two items seemed vaguely similar in shape, but without examining them more closely, Chieran could not judge accurately.

"Yes, and what is it that's so interesting?" Chieran asked.

"Well, several things," the younger scientist replied, her voice speeding up. "First, the age. I ran some tests, and the first object dates back roughly fourteen to fifteen thousand years; the second, this one here, only about slightly less, probably within less than a thousand years of the other."

Chieran's slightly raised eyebrow gave away his sudden interest. "So late Yan Jung Era or shortly thereafter."

"Yes. Precisely. Yes, and also, there's the matter of these smaller sections here." She gestured to a series of protrusions on both objects, both worn with rust but still easily visible. "On both, these nodes appear in the same pattern, which was what first lead me to look more closely." She paused again, breathing deeply, and her voice, when she continued, was shaking with excitement. "Chieran, I think these... I am almost certain, but I need to run some more tests, naturally. But I think— well, and of course I'd want you to have a look at—"

Chieran smiled as he interrupted. "Merial, please. I trust your judgment. For now, just tell me what you're thinking."

Merial laughed nervously. "Yes, yes, I'm sorry. I just... well, you know. Chieran, this is big. I mean potentially incredibly huge. And I just don't want to make any mistakes." She drew a deep breath and started again. "Okay, so, these patterns of nodes on both of them — Chieran, they're essentially *just* like big fractal acceleration shell capacitors. I've triple-checked the alignments." She breathed deeply again, obviously agitated. "I think these things, both of them, they're some kind of old acceleration shell equalizers. But it's the *size*! I mean, with equalizers this big, the engines themselves would have to have been, well, absolutely enormous. I mean, a ship that could house an engine this size must have been... Well, no modern dreadnought could even compare!"

Chieran felt a chill down his spine. The hands of fate, he sensed, very firmly gripped his shoulders. He was not entirely surprised, and he could feel the goosebumps spreading down his arms. Something had told him, when he asked his most trusted researcher to spend weeks going through virtually abandoned archives — a job far beneath her place, and for which she had not initially been at all grateful — that there was a good reason.

"Okay, not a word of this to anyone. Does anyone else know?" Merial shook her head. "Alright, I mean it, not anyone. I will take the redline chute and be there in 5 minutes." She met his gaze through the holo conference, still seeming unsure of herself. Chieran was reassuring. "And Merial...? Good work. I'll see you in a minute."

Before he had finished his last words, the desktop holo was already fading, the connection at his end flipped with a hurried gesture. He could not walk quickly enough. This accidental discovery might just be the missing connection to the very research in which he had invested the past twenty-nine years of his life.

He had always known this honor would come to him. Everything, everything he knew, happened for a reason.

Present Company

Chieran knocked lightly on the doorframe, his grizzled face already peeking around to inspect the room. "Well, I see you're awake."

"Uh, yeah. I'm up. What...? Are you a doctor?" the young man responded. Without the surrounding shadows of the dusky courtyard, he looked as young as his voice had made him sound the night before.

"Ha! Insightful question! Yes, I am, in fact, a doctor. Although I'm not a *medical* doctor. I'm not *your* doctor, if that's what you're asking."

"I see. Well, what... I mean, why are you here, then?"

"Can I ask your name, if you don't mind? It does make conversing so much easier, I've always found." There was a certain joyous mischief about Chieran, both in his voice and his expression.

The young man took a few breaths, bemused despite himself, before answering. "It's Kestor."

"Good to meet you, Kestor. I am Chieran, and it is a pleasure to meet you. Again, that is."

"You're the guy from last night in the courtyard. I kind of thought I had dreamt that, to be honest. So if you're not a doctor — I mean, if you're not an M.D. — then why are you here?" A sudden thought occurred to him. "You some kind of psych or something?"

"Oh, my goodness, most certainly not," Chieran replied with a short laugh. "How tedious that would be. The things in some people's heads are interesting, but I most certainly wouldn't want to see everything in everyone's head. Dreadful. No, I prefer conversation to behavior modification."

"So why are you here, then?"

"As I said, I enjoy conversation. And the ceiling in my room is not entirely forthcoming, despite my many efforts to persuade it."

"No, I mean, why are you in this hospital?" Kestor asked, not entirely sure how to react to the odd old man.

"Oh, it's nothing, I assure you. Just a minor problem with blood pressure that they assure me they have now repaired. I assume I'll be out in a few days, once they've had a chance to observe me a bit longer."

"But if they repaired it, you're fine, right? I mean... why would they need to observe you at all? You are talking gene therapy?"

"Yes, and that would be the case normally. But it seems that I am important enough to bear watching. Just in case there might have been some problem with the procedure. And so I am here, chatting with you. For a short time, at least."

Kestor pondered this, keeping his eyes locked on Chieran, trying to read the truth of his words.

"So, what happened to you, may I ask? Zipper crash?" Chieran asked.

Kestor decided that the old man seemed relatively harmless, and his answer came more quickly this time. Quickly — and more harshly than he had intended. "Oh, no. No accident. I had some words with a couple of Dropheads that always set up near the new Arts Center, where my sister goes to school. They said we aren't *local* enough and were giving her a hard time. When I told them to back off, they, uh... they put the damned boots to me."

"I see. That's terrible. I'm sorry. Your sister, is she alright?"

"She's fine. She was in earlier to visit, actually. For a little while, at least. She doesn't like..." He paused for just an instant, glancing off to one side before going on. "Uh, doesn't like hospitals that much. Anyway, they ran off after they beat me up, I guess, afraid someone would catch them."

Chieran sensed that there was more to the story, perhaps, but that Kestor was reticent to talk about it. He changed subjects. "So what does that mean? Not 'local enough'? You moved here recently?"

"No, I've lived here my whole life." The young man's face shifted to a sneer as he continued, quite unconsciously. "My dad's a Godlover. Even wears those stupid robes all the time." The anger Chieran sensed the previous night had returned to Kestor's voice, and he twitched involuntarily, shaking the holo control in his hand.

Chieran absorbed the change in Kestor's demeanor. "I see. And, how did he...? Is he Nefantar, your father?" he asked, somewhat puzzled.

"Nefantar?" the young man snorted. "No. That'd be easier. No, my grand-dad was a slave on some Amarr bastard's mining colony in Ammatar space up till just after my dad was born. Born a slave, but he was set free by some *amazing* battleship captain who came in and tore the place up." The scorn in his voice was thick. "Well, grand-dad must have learned his slave

lessons real well, 'cause even after he was set free, he raised my dad to be a Godlover too."

"I take it you don't care much for your grandfather?"

"You *kidding*? He was—" He broke off in a bitter laugh. "No, I did not care much for my grandfather. He was a miserable old bastard. I'm glad he's dead. And my dad's not much better."

In Pieces

Ziather sighed, reaching down to pick up the last few pieces of sheerite lying at his feet. The transparent glasslike surface of the broken nano-alloy bits, much harder than normal glass, glittered almost warmly in the soft morning light. As he bent, his back creaked ominously, and he had to suppress a shudder at the idea of undergoing another spinal treatment. A wealthier man might have had new cells injected to rejuvenate the tissue, but people who lived in the *pidouk* could not afford such luxuries.

Don't dwell on what you do not have, he recited for perhaps the fourth time since waking. It was a belief so deeply part of him, a kind of passive contentment bordering on ontological dejection, that a complete stranger could have read it from his posture alone. *I have a home and I am a free man, and that should be enough*, he thought.

Just then, Cliemne called from the back room, "I'm going, papa." The sound of the door closing behind her should have pre-empted any response. The door was not shut gently.

"Always in such a hurry," Ziather spoke aloud. *Even when she was small, always so hurried. Always running off somewhere.*

He turned to throw the broken bits of sheerite into the waste unit, still moving slowly, as always, but then bit back a curse. In spite of his careful grip, a razor-sharp bit of the hardened polymer had jabbed his hand, and he looked down to see a tiny spot of blood growing in the soft flesh between his middle two fingers. The old man — he really wasn't terribly old,

but that's how he thought of himself — grew even more contemplative at the sight of the blood, as if entranced by the dance of an open flame or the gleam of sunlight on the sea.

The argument had started, as they always did, when Ziather had made an innocent comment about his son's behavior at school having improved this past semester. Kestor was strong-minded, as Ziather's father had been, and his moods were as mercurial as the weather here in Shishaan. And like his grandfather, Kestor nettled at any accusation of wrongdoing, past or present. But this morning Ziather had made the mistake of pointing that similarity out.

Before Kestor stormed out, he had snatched up the holopic of his grandfather and smashed it three times against the stone counter until it shattered.

He stared at the blood on his palm, now a rich red pearl, and drifted deeper into thought.

What is it that we see in our loved ones that we hate? Is it the things we fail to see in ourselves? Or what we do see?

*Yes, Father was hard. Bitter. He was a cold man. But he had to be. What a life, the life of a slave. Yet he loved Kestor more fiercely than he ever felt about anything, I think. About me, even. Yes, that is true. We were never kindred spirits. But those two, they are so much alike. They were so much alike. When Kestor smashed the holopic, I thought, **Stop! Stop, you are only breaking yourself open.** But I cannot stop him. I just do not know. I don't know my son.*

Even darling Clem sees it. She tries to make Kestor understand, to help him see that our lives are precious, not to be wasted. What sort of a father am I? How can I let this happen again and again? And Cliemne, just staring down silently as her brother and I shout at each other? So beautiful, she is. Like a jewel, a brilliant, dancing jewel. Just like her mother, God bless her.

But Kestor... he is... well, he is too like his grandfather. I do not know him.

What am I to do? My son, so bright, so talented, and he does nothing but throw it away with those friends of his, all worthless. No futures, no plans. He hates me and my faith, but he thrashes about like a drowning man. Crying out for meaning, but silently, not even knowing he cries. Wanting love, the divine love, more surely than anyone I have known. The more I try to calm him, to reassure him — to teach him — the farther he draws away. And for all my faith, I have no answers.

I have no answers.

Ziather sat down at the table and stared absently at the plate his daughter had left on the table. He noticed just then that her meal was untouched. A silent tear gathered in his eye.

My God, give me the answers.

Moving Forward

Chieran, not wanting to open old wounds any further, but wanting to get Kestor to talk more, changed the subject once again. It was a disarming tactic he had found eminently useful both in the workplace and elsewhere. "The ones who beat you up, were they taken in?"

"I have no idea. I just remember somebody hitting me, and then I was on the ground, and there was a pair of feet, and then everything was black. Next thing I know, I wake up in my bed here. And Clem just said they ran away. She didn't say if they were caught."

"I see. Well, at least you're in one piece, now, more or less. The doctors here really are among the best. We must always be thankful for something."

"Oh, yeah, I'm so thankful." The young man's voice was a study in sarcasm. "Yes. I'm really thankful those pricks didn't have someplace else to be. Yeah, I just have so much to be thankful for."

Chieran, always sensitive to moods, tried to calm Kestor with reason. It had always worked for himself, a safe retreat when emotions ran high. That and humor.

"Listen, Kestor, you have every right to be angry. I understand that. I'd be angry, too, in your place. But I *am* thankful you're alive, as I'm sure your family is too. And I'm also glad that, unlike your great grandfather, you are here, living among your own people — even if not everyone here feels the same way I do, like the young men who attacked you." He deliberated carefully before speaking his next words. "There is purpose in everything."

"Oh, hell. Now you sound just like my dad." Kestor's legs slithered against the bed coverings as he shifted, getting ready to stand up.

"Well, perhaps your father is wiser than you realize. I'm sure he's thankful that you're alive. How could he not? The father's place is in caring for the son."

"Okay, what are you, some kind of priest? Seriously. Doctor of religion or something?"

"A priest?" Chieran chuckled. "No, I'm a scientist, actually. But I like to think the two are quite close, to be honest. If you really want to know, I work for Starship Research and Development at Core Complexion, specializing in ancient technologies research."

Kestor's attitude changed to awed curiosity almost as quickly as he had grown angry earlier. "Seriously? That's... whoa, that's pretty damned cool." A sudden thought came to him. "But don't you guys have your own special hospitals and stuff? With, like, the best specialist doctors and, you know, super-advanced AIMEDs and stuff?"

"Where do you think you are right now, young man? You hadn't wondered at the speed of your recovery? Two days, and nearly back to yourself. Your attack was politically quite significant, you know. The son of a former slave, returned to Matar, and yet the victim of such a crime in one of our greatest cities? Nearly killed by his own people? Important people are sparing no expense to make sure you recover unblemished."

Kestor was stunned. "You... Really? Wow. I—" For the first time since they had met, Kestor was at a loss for words.

Dancing

The bioturb sliced through the east side of Uptown, all movement almost indiscernible to its passengers as it hummed along several inches above its single fine rail. Inertial gyrodiffusers shimmered hazily in the morning light, giving the elongated car what seemed an otherworldly gleam to anyone not accustomed to planetside life in a place as advanced as Sivaralad.

Inside, Cliemne sat with her bag resting almost carelessly on her knees. However, her arms, drawn protectively around it, gave the lie to her seeming unconcern. Inside the bag were her school books and her lunch, but more importantly — far more importantly — her shoes. In those shoes, she would dance into a new life.

Ever since the new government, under Shakor, had introduced the arts scholarships and ordered the construction of new arts centers and programs through the Republic, Cliemne had known that she would have a place. For as long as she could recall, dance had been her one passion, the one place she could go to find beauty and tranquility, whatever her mood when she first got to class. And since she had won the scholarship, the old dreams had returned, but they were in vivid color now. It was, she knew, a sign.

When she was small and the dreams came, they had always been nightmares, colorless vistas, her floating away into a cold, gray sky. And always, when she awoke, pale and sweating, she had felt a tremendous sense of loss and terror. She had never spoken of them. But the dreams gradually went away as she got older; suddenly, in just the past few months, they had returned. Yet they were joyful things now, bright and warm, filled with a sense of soaring off, to a happier place, one where she would be welcomed into loving arms. Into the arms of a mother she had never known.

So far, she had to admit, the dream had not taken her that far. The welcoming arms were always just beyond the horizon. But Clem knew, with the single-minded certainty of youth, that she would reach them soon. And by some intuition, she knew that the dream and the dance were intricately connected.

The Shishaan Center for the Performing Arts, now that its construction was complete, represented the beginning of a new life for Clem, away from her father and her brother and their endless bickering. Even in appearance, the Center stood in stark contrast to her home. Its massive, high towers with their peaked summits, made almost entirely of glimmering sheerite, with the brightly waving banners, the happy laughter of the students — these could not have been more different than the endless smelly, dirty streets and alleys of the pidouk, the Drop-dealers and the gangs and the prostitutes and the endless procession of drunks and dead-eyed, miserable wanderers.

If, as her father said, there was a hell, then the pidouk was part of it.

But Cliemne was on her way to a new world, both here in Shishaan and in her dreams. And soon, so very soon now that she could taste the moment, she would fly away from her godforsaken old life and land somewhere else, a place where the beauty and the tranquility would always be with her. Where she would never have to listen to father and Kestor fight again. Never have to see the squalor and the pain or listen to the shouts and curses. Where she and her mother and the dream would become one.

Reification

Kestor was due to be released this afternoon. It was more than welcome. Even just a few days in bed were wearing on him. But Chieran had proven pleasant company, making Kestor laugh more than he could remember having laughed in a long time. At least with anyone other than his friends. And, with them, there was always an ugly sense of competition in their

jokes, and a kind of cruelty. Chieran, though, simply seemed to enjoy laughing and making others laugh. There was no dark underside to it.

They were coming to the end of what would likely be their last conversation, searching for things to say, when Chieran suddenly became serious.

"Kestor, I happen to believe that everything happens for a reason. Each of us has a part to play in something much bigger than we can see." Kestor remained silent. "There is a reason we're having this conversation right now. A reason we found ourselves here in this place at the same time."

"Whoa. Are you trying to hit on me now? Man, I have to admit, I didn't see that one coming."

Chieran's laugh was generous. "My friend, the doctors here have done a remarkable job of rebuilding you from the broken pieces, so, given that I'm not feeling any attraction of the sort, I'm afraid you just must not have been that handsome to begin with.

"No," he continued, again growing uncharacteristically serious, given his manner of the past days. "But I'm trying to say that it is not coincidence, perhaps, that we were both brought here at the same time and placed across the hall from each other." Kestor snorted, still looking skeptical. "Please, let me finish. You've talked about your studies, and it's obvious to me that, despite your scorn for the institution, you have a quick mind."

"So you think that you're supposed to become my teacher or something?" Kestor was having fun now, but at Chieron's expense.

"Be quiet and let me finish." The older man had grown so stern suddenly, so authoritative, that Kestor could not have spoken if he had wanted to. It was almost unnatural, the change.

Chieron nodded, satisfied that Kestor was suitably cowed. "I am saying that, if you keep hating your life and your father and everything else around you, keep holding yourself down instead of working to improve things, you

will never be happy. And that maybe I'm here to help you understand that. Your future does not have to be constrained by your past, Kestor."

Kestor thought for a long moment. His face was impassive, but Chieron could see the turmoil in his eyes.

"And you think it's that easy? I just walk out of here, and magically everything changes for me?"

"Nothing comes easily, but you have a good mind. With work and discipline, yes, everything changes."

"Because everything has a reason, you think? It's just too easy. It's like my dad thinking everything will work out because 'god' says it will. According to you, too, just like him, there must be a reason he was born a captive to some sadistic bastards. Who brainwashed him into believing in a god who supports the slavery of entire races? That kind of 'reason'?"

"I choose to believe so, yes. I don't pretend to understand it, but I believe it. Not in a god, but in a greater purpose." Chieran's gaze was steely, but kind. "And as for your father, whatever his beliefs, he is a product of his environment, just as you and I are. Remember that. His religion may have been imposed, but he has eyes to see the world around him. Hate the environment that created him, but don't hate the man himself."

"Well, I *do* hate him!" Kestpor screamed. "And the ones who did that to him, who made him so, so... so pliable, and weak, and stupid. I just wish I could kill those bastards. Every last one of them. Women, children. Fucking slaughter them all."

"Kestor, who would be the monsters if we did that? Do you really think there are no people in all of Amarr who are troubled by what their religion has sewn? Just as there are those among our own people who question the decrees of the Sanmatar's tribal council, or who questioned Midular's policies?"

Sensing the young man's vulnerability, Chieran pressed on. "Or what about those who would harm their countrymen because they seem different, the

way you were hurt, despite the fact that we, as a nation, pride ourselves on accepting and maintaining the differences between the Seven Tribes? Good and bad, wrong and right, we don't have any monopolies. But we can have faith that it will change."

Kestor was distraught, fighting back tears, red-faced, angry and yet not wanting to fight. He was seeking answers, an answer, any answer. "And so I'm supposed to do what? What are you saying I should do?"

"Kestor, I cannot tell you what you should do. But please, please, do not waste your gifts. And do not lose sight of the fact that it doesn't matter what your grandfather thought, or what his masters thought. It doesn't matter if your ancestors were Krusual, Sebiestor, Thukker, even Ammatar... it just doesn't matter, none of it! We are the Seven Tribes, but we are also the Minmatar Nation. Seven and yet one.

"All that matters is what we think, now. What you and I think together, here, in this room, and the others in this hospital — what they think matters too, maybe. And the other free thinkers in this city, on this planet, in this star system. In all of Minmatar. The people who aren't stuck in the mud, but who are looking up, and around. But mostly looking *inside*.

"What I am saying, Kestor, is just this: look inside. That is where you will find the man who can give you the answers you need."

Where the Pieces Come Together

Just a few hundred meters out, the shuttle swung around a landing bay on the surface of the massive, unmoving vessel. Only a tiny portion of the behemoth was visible in the forward visor.

"Well? As you can see, the construction is nearing completion. I would say another thirteen, fourteen — maybe sixteen months at the outside, and she will be fully operational." The Chief Gravometrics Engineer for Project Skymother was a precise man, but on a project of this magnitude, one had to be willing to be somewhat flexible.

"She is beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. My goodness." The man's voice was still strong, not the faded fluting of many others his age, but today there was a certain childish joy in his tone that the Chief had not heard for some time. "I... it's only been a few months since I saw her last, and already she is so much more... *together*. I guess? I suppose that's the right word?"

"I've seen some remarkable things in my life. Shining Amarr ships breaking up near the small moon of Bairshir IV, at the Battle of Halitt. Pulse beams cutting through the dark near the Bosboger gate in Lulm. But all of those moments are so tiny now, so distant. And this... this makes them all seem so insignificant. My goodness." The old man's eyes were glistening.

The engineer watched the old man closely, giving him a moment to control his emotions. To lose water from the eyes would have meant embarrassment for them both. But when he spoke, he too was fighting back a lump in his throat. "Yes, I suppose she is coming together. Internal crews are already running tests on sublight systems. The jump drives have a little way to go, but I would say, assuming the new tech from Six Kin meets your specs — and believe me, I don't doubt *you* for a second — well, let's say three months for that. Four, maybe. You'll have to come back then, of course."

"Well, I certainly hope so, my old friend. I wouldn't want to miss that. After all, I have spent a lifetime working toward this."

"I know it, Chieran. I know. How could I forget? Let's dock, shall we, and see if we can't find something to eat? I have some virgin roe I stashed away against your next visit. I trust you're still a fan?"

Chief Gravometrics Engineer Kestor Thevistos reached forward to tap the controls of the shuttle. Chieran reached forward to get one last look at the surface of the great ship beside them before they swung about to dock, and as he did so, he caught his weight with a hand on Kestor's shoulder. His flesh was so frail now, so pale and spotted.

Kestor smiled, the lump still in his throat, and brought the shuttle around.

A Beautiful Face

Part One

Deep underground, the prisoners begin to stir. There is no sun in this place, but they've been here so long that their internal clocks know when to wake. Bodies get off hard beds to stretch. Various pieces of patched and dirty clothing are pulled out of the pile. Murmured conversations are held. But not everyone speaks.

Like ghosts, the masked people move among them. In the Amarr colonies they wear chrome: expressionless ovals with a darkly golden sheen from the electric lamplights, with horizontal slits for eyes, nose and mouth. In Gallente space their masks are made of plaster, blackened with soot, sweat and blood. The Minmatars' are more functional: metal contraptions with hinges at the jaws, and lids that can be slid over the eyes.

Oddly enough, it is the Caldari who have lent theirs the most personality. Like the Amarr they have oval masks, but these are bone white and have been fashioned into the shape of a face. The face is the same on all masks: the same high cheekbones, the same curve in the eyebrows, the same thin lips. These masks are the only ones with no holes for the mouths, and their bearers must lift them slightly from their faces to eat.

A bell sounds. The prisoners head off to work.

"Yes?" a man said, responding to a ping from his secretary.

"Gilea Kiljaani here to see you, sir," said the secretary's voice through the intercom.

"Excellent. Send her in."

The door opened and a young woman entered. She was dressed fashionably, with a hint of business and more than a touch of wealth. Over one shoulder hung a small, black leather purse adorned with the logo of its designer. Her perfume filled the room like velvet.

"Miss Kiljaani," said the man behind the desk as he rose to shake her hand. He was dressed in formal, exact clothes. His desk was made of wood, a mark of wealth out here in space. It was perfectly bare and unadorned except for an ashtray and a small bowl of wrapped candies. The rest of the office was similarly plain: To one side, a holoframe on the wall slowly cycled through various famous paintings, most of them depicting farming landscapes. Opposite, a window looked out on the traffic far below. The wall behind the man was pitch black, and its glass surface cast ghostly reflections of the room's two inhabitants. The only light was a soft yellow brightness from a dome set in the ceiling.

The guest smiled perfectly. "Please, call me Gilea."

The man returned her smile. "Very well. Vertan Nejowin, at your service. Vertan. Please, have a seat."

She did, crossing her legs and placing her small purse in her lap.

"So, Gilea," he began, picking up something from a drawer and seating himself on the edge of his desk, next to Gilea's chair. "I understand you're interested in a makeover."

Gilea laughed, a genuine, unfettered laughter she nevertheless tried to cover with her hand. "I suppose you might say that. I did wander into the right office, I hope? You're not about to offer me makeup advice?"

"Wouldn't dream of it," Vertan said. He lifted the object, which turned out to be a remote control, and pressed a button. Behind him, the black screen lit up with a faint blue. Slowly, there materialized an image of Gilea's face, seen head-on.

"Oh my," she said, with a concerned look. "I look so ... worn."

"It's always a bit of a shock," Vertan said. "I remember the first time I chose a new face. Thought I'd have a heart attack when I saw myself on the screen."

"First time? So you've had a face swap several times?" Gilea asked.

"Oh yes. Most people at the company get it for free, or at least heavily discounted, and we strongly encourage them to try it. Official term is subcellular transfer, by the way. Which you may as well forget, since nobody uses that name except our lab people."

"You must have an army of geniuses working for you, to think up something like this," Gilea remarked.

"Definitely. Most of them in marketing," Vertan said with a grin. "The procedure is actually quite simple these days. The biggest hurdle is still in people's minds. They've got these ideas of us tearing the faces off people and pasting them on others, like butcher surgeons. It's been a lot of work to combat misconceptions like those."

Gilea fiddled with the strap of her purse. "You've earned some of it, though," she said in a low tone. "There was that story about the entertainer..."

Vertan got up, sat behind his desk and sighed. "Marlovian Joocasta. Yeah. We'll never live that one down."

"Story has it his face simply melted off," Gilea said.

"The lab boys would have several things to say about that, but you're broadly right," Vertan said. "But remember, that was in the very, very early days of this procedure. Joocasta was hoping to revitalize his career, and we were a new outfit trying to prove to the public that we deserved their money. So some corners were cut, and some security procedures jumped over." He laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back in his chair, a neutral expression on his face. "We've been completely and utterly incident-free for a long time now, miss Kiljaani-

"Gilea."

"Gilea," Vertan said, showing the hint of a smile. "We follow the strictest regulations you could think of, our procedures are completely reversible, and we have thousands of satisfied customers. There is practically nothing you could ask of us that we couldn't do safely."

"Is that a fact?" Gilea uncrossed her legs and leaned slightly forward in her chair.

"Oh, certainly," Vertan replied. He waved a hand lazily at the screen behind him. "Now, if this took you off guard, you may want to close your eyes for the next one." He pressed another button on his remote control. A panel on his desk slid aside, revealing a lens beneath. The lights in the room darkened slightly, and a humming sound came from the lens. From it rose a holographic image of Gilea's head and face, revolving slowly. "This is you in 3D," Vertan said. "Bumps and all."

"I'm impressed," Gilea said. The face was a very strong likeness, marred only by a slight greenish hue from the projector. "You got all this from the data my people sent you?"

"All that and more," Vertan said. "We have enough details that we'd be able to recreate your face entirely from scratch if needed." He looked up at the holographic projection. "It has happened on occasion that we've been asked to provide medical services; treatment after fires, acid, crashes and suchlike. If people have sufficient funds, there's no reason why they should have to go through the rest of their lives marred by some unfortunate accident."

"So you're used to going beyond the boundaries, as it were."

"Gilea, all our work involves going beyond normal boundaries," Vertan said. "The only question is how far we're willing to go."

"Interesting," Gilea said and looked directly at him.

Vertan caught her gaze, then pressed a third button on his remote. The hologram disappeared, the desk panel slid back into place, and full lighting returned. "Now then," he said. "I'll be needing to ask you some questions in return. Most importantly, have you decided on what kind of swap you want to have?" He reached into a desk drawer. "I've got a few pamphlets here if you want to brush up on the details--"

"Do people really come in here undecided in that?" Gilea said, stunned.

"Certainly. Of course, many of them have made up their minds, more or less. But they occasionally need a little guidance during the final steps. Support, you might say. The very decision to have one's face remoulded is already beyond most people, let alone to assume the face of a friend or some other living entity." He handed one of the pamphlets to a reluctant Gilea.

"I've already made up my mind," she said.

"Please," Vertan said. "This one I'm required by law to give you. It contains the legal details for your procedure."

She accepted it, and idly flipped through its pages.

Vertan continued, "The same law demands that I tell you about the two options you have. The first is to create an artificial entity which you can shape and configure to your heart's desire, the electric equivalent of a clay doll. We would then alter your face according to those parameters. The second is the real face swap, to transfer an actual face of another human being onto yours, and in turn transfer yours onto them. Are you fully cognizant of both options as stated and of all possible legal ramifications?"

"Yeah yeah," Gilea said, tossing the pamphlet back on the desk. "I can't imagine that anyone ever takes the second choice, though."

"People who want more than a change," Vertan said. "A bit of a thrill, perhaps."

"There's no thrill in having someone volunteer to give you their face," Gilea replied. She stared fixedly at Vertan.

He stared back and, without looking away, picked up the remote control again and ran a fingernail back and forth over one of the buttons. "Who said anything about volunteering?" he said.

The sheen on the Amarrian's shaven head nearly matched his golden mask. He was kneeling alongside several others in the day's first prayer session, although none of them would come too close to him. Even though doctrine held that believers would be united in faith, the masked people

were always given a wide berth. Nobody knew what they'd done to earn their fate, but all were eager to avoid having the same happen to them.

Chants filled the air. To anyone but the initiated it would be impossible to make out individual words; the general susurrus was more like a fading wave of sound, reverberating off the stone walls and the banisters. To the supplicant majority the voices were crystal clear, the words etched on their minds after years of daily recitation. But the masked men spoke their own tongue, and were understood by no man.

This one, prostrating himself, didn't so much chant as moan. Unintelligible sounds came from beneath the mask, soft glossolalian wails. It was no prayer anyone else in the room could recognize, if it was a prayer at all.

The Amarrian lay with his head to the ground, rolling it slowly back and forth, his metal mask picking up dirt and dust off the floor. Instead of having his hands flat by the side of his head, he held them behind his back. In that position, with his neck extended, he looked like a prisoner awaiting execution.

Footsteps sounded. The praying crowd fell silent. The masked one looked up, and saw a pair of boot-clad legs standing in front of him.

"Get up," a voice said. There was a hiss in the air, from an electrical prod that had just been turned on. "There is work to do."

The Amarr rose. Patches of his mask had turned brown from contact with the earth, though his head still shone in the light.

"I like to play a little, in life," Gilea said, slowly combing her fingers through her hair. The feigned innocence of pampered riches slipped from her

persona like a mask. "Take chances. Experiment. It's gotten me to where I am today. But recently," she sighed, "it's no longer enough."

"We also like to play," Vertan said.

"Really, now?"

"Do you mind if I turn down the lights?" he asked.

She grinned. "Be my guest."

Vertan pressed a small button on his remote. The lights dimmed slightly, and several hidden mechanisms hummed into action. There was a click as the office door locked itself shut, but Vertan made a show of tiptoeing over to it and pulling at the handle to check. "There," he said. "The room is now secure. No eavesdropping." He turned to Gilea. "How about you tell me exactly what kind of deal you're interested in?"

She hesitated, then said, "I've heard your company offers a third option. A face swap with ... unwilling subjects."

He smiled. "Where did you hear that from, if you don't mind me asking."

She gave him a hard look. "From people wealthy enough to afford that kind of service. People like me. Was I mistaken?"

Vertan walked back to the desk and looked at the screen behind it, where Gilea's face was still on display. "No," he said quietly. "No, you weren't." He sat down and turned to her. "We have access to prison colonies in all four empires. Their purposes vary, and the only thing they have in common is that they're all underground. They are secret places, funded in part by government forces and in part by private interests. People get sent there for life, and nobody goes there without reason. The prisoners are evil

people, Gilea, you have my word on that. Anyone located in one of those places has earned their stay a thousand times over."

"Why not put them on open trials?" Gilea asked.

"Not all crimes are so open-and-shut. There are spies, traitors, wrongdoers against the ruling body where their actions, if revealed, might damage diplomatic relations. That's not to mention the sheer uselessness of open trials. Sometimes," he said, leaning in a little closer, "someone is so guilty that you simply cannot let them walk. You cannot give them a chance to cheat the system, to let some conniving lawyer dig up some stupid loophole that'll only set these people free on the streets. You simply know they will have to be put away forever."

"So kill them," Gilea said.

Vertan blinked. "Just like that?" he asked.

"Just like that."

"I would have thought you'd be shocked at this point, merely to hear about these people and the situation they're in," he said.

"Why? They've outlived their usefulness." She grinned and patted his hand, her facade of naivete entirely dropped. "My dear, I'm asking you to tear the face off one of them. You don't honestly think I'd be squeamish about such a petty little thing as human life. Why do you even bother to keep the colonies?"

"The prisoners are quite many," Vertan said. "They're worked hard, but treated well enough that they have reasonably long lives. There are plenty of tasks for them, work you'd be hard pressed to make anyone else do for very long. Some are in mines, some work in sweatshops."

"I see," Gilea said.

Vertan cocked his head. "You disapprove," he said. "Do you think of it as weakness to keep them alive?"

"I don't like loose ends," she said. "Nevertheless ... I suppose this prison arrangement has worked for your benefit. We wouldn't be having this conversation otherwise."

"Indeed," he said. "Though it's a shame, really."

"What is?"

"How evil," he said, "even when captured and known for what it is, can have such a beautiful face."

A Beautiful Face

Part Two

The Gallentean gently stroked his mask. The plaster was not new, but it was made of durable material that would break only under intense pressure. This meant that any ridges and bumps on the surface, once the plaster had dried out, were generally there to stay. This was particularly notable around the holes created for eyes, nose and mouth. The gap in the plaster through which he fed had sharp edges, and cuts on his fingers were not uncommon.

Work was varied, and depended on the harvest. These narcotics obviously couldn't be grown outdoors: with this amount of drugs, satellite photography and even off-world lenses might conceivably pick up the fields of plants, spelling the end of the entire operation. So it had been taken underground, into massive caves both natural and man-made, now serving as greenhouses. The lights, which switched from natural to halogen, were the only indicators of day and night. The air was constantly humid, and every prisoner without a mask was issued several dry cloths to wipe their face. The masked ones did not do this; the plaster was set fast on their heads for life, and they learned to live with the constant itch from sweat. Flies buzzed around in enormous swarms, settling on practically every surface, but even despite the tantalizing drops of sweat that trickled from every masked man, the flies kept away from them.

Tempting as it might be, the regular workers rarely stole any plants for their own use. For most of the flora, serious processing was necessary if their active ingredients were to be of any effect at all. You could chew leaves and buds all you liked and get nothing for your trouble except diarrhea. There did exist the occasional plant which could be eaten or subtly smoked for a slight buzz, but it amounted to about as much as a few cups of coffee.

One exception to this was the masked prisoners, most of whom chewed the leaves incessantly. They were given far more leeway in doing so, and only punished if their pickings dropped noticeably below those of the regular inmates.

The Gallentean's fingers were dry and scarred, partly from the edges on his mask, and partly from the razor-sharp leaves and thorns on the plants he'd harvested. Occasionally he would put down his picker's basket, raise his hands to the mask and wipe away the strands of brown saliva dripping from its mouth hole. He might even lean down and expel the chewed leaves from his mouth, looking like a bird regurgitating food for its young, only to shove a handful of fresh leaves right back in. Then he'd pick up the basket again, and march on. Any time the thorns cut his fingers, he would hardly seem to notice.

"Mind if I smoke?" Gilea said.

"Not at all," Vertan replied.

She pulled a golden case from her purse, flipped it open and selected a long, thin cigarette. Vertan noticed how she closed the case and put it back in its proper place before pulling out her lighter. "So," she said, puffing out a small cloud of smoke, "where do we go from here?"

"You pick a face," Vertan said, keying in a sequence of digits to his remote control. The wooden panel on his desk slid aside again and the holographic projector cast the rotating picture of Gilea's head, but slightly smaller this time. On the screen behind him, Gilea's face also grew smaller and moved to the side. Beside it, on both the screen and the holograph projector, appeared the face of another woman: quite a pretty one, a Caldari, the same race and bloodline as Gilea.

Vertan handed Gilea the remote. "Manual browsing. Green button scrolls forward, red button back. Press the third blue button from the top to see two faces at once, press again for four, eight, sixteen."

"Just how many people do you have in there?" Gilea said.

"More than enough, believe me. Before you can really start picking individual faces, though, you need to filter it down for us. The four arrows indicate parts of the face that we've categorized. Press the circular black button that's between them, please."

She did. The prisoner's nose turned neon yellow.

"Automated selection. Looks kinda silly, but it's worked well so far," Vertan said. "Press the button again, please. Thank you." The nose returned to its original colour. "You're choosing the type of nose now, so use the left and right arrows to scroll through the types, and the up and down arrows to determine size. Press the circular button again to confirm your choice, or press the white button near the bottom right corner to cancel it. Once you've done this, the yellow light will return again, and you can use the arrow buttons to select which other facial part you want to adjust. You with me so far?"

"Sure," Gilea said, already enraptured in the remoulding. "And you guarantee that whatever choice I make, you can fulfil it with a real person?"

"Yes. The choices you get are based on digitized stills of the thousands of prisoners we have. We use facial recognition technologies at our bases every day to prevent spies. Everyone is scanned when starting work, and when leaving it. If their faces have changed noticeably, they are taken aside, checked out, and either eliminated or digitized anew. Any selection

you make is based on data that was fresh this morning. You can have practically anything you like."

She took a fresh drag of her cigarette. "Anything?" she said.

"Well, within limits," he said. "Obviously the person has to be Caldari, and the same bloodline as you. And the same gender. We've occasionally had to explain this to some very unhappy people"

Gilea stared at him. "You've got to be joking," she said. "Who in their right mind would even think of doing such a thing?"

Vertan laughed. "You'd be surprised. Anyway, do you have any questions?"

"Not really. Except I trust you put the prisoners to death afterwards," she said.

"Of course," Vertan replied. He picked up a cherry-flavoured candy from the bowl. "No loose ends."

She smiled at him. "No loose ends."

"Besides," Vertan said, unwrapping the red sweet and popping it into his mouth, "you couldn't expect anyone to go on living after a thing like that."

They had been working for what seemed like forever. Each cartload of ore hewn from the ground was transported to the surface in carts set on rails. About halfway up, there was a checkpoint, and machines took care of pulling the carts. Up until that point, the carts had to be pushed.

Six men per team. Four to push, two to pull, the latter lashed in like cattle. Minmatar were strong, even when imprisoned. Especially when imprisoned.

Teams were picked at random, except for the masked men. Those worked only with each other; no one else dared get near them. The grunts, sighs and curses commonplace elsewhere were absent from their groups. They made no sound at all while moving the carts except for the crunch of sand and rock under their boots.

This was one such team. It moved steadily upwards; not fast, but it didn't pay to rush the masked prisoners anyway. Occasionally one of them would fall to his knees in exhaustion, and roll out of the cart's way as the other five picked up his slack for a while. Guards with electric prods traversed the tunnels to ensure that no one was out of commission for too long.

One fell now. His teammates increased their efforts without comment, and the masked prisoner rolled to the side of the tunnel to breathe. His hands clenched and unclenched, clenched and unclenched. The jaw in his metal mask trembled silently on its hinges.

After a few moments, his hands became very still. He slowly raised his head and looked up at the ceiling above him, as if he were seeing it for the first time. Then he looked down again, and his hands brushed over the dirt. They dislodged a few bits of rock, like miniature replicas of those that lay in his cart. The rocks rolled over to him and came to a stop by his feet.

He looked at those rocks for a long time. Had anyone put their ear to his metal jaw, they would have heard the faintest whisper of a note, like a scream from the bottom of a well.

His hands picked up one of the rocks and brought them to the jaw, pushed them through. There was a swallowing sound. Another rock was picked up, pushed in, swallowed. Then another. And another. And another.

By the time the guards saw him, the walls were red with his blood.

Gilea leaned back in her chair, got out another cigarette, lit it and exhaled the smoke contentedly.

"Satisfied?" Vertan asked.

"Completely," she replied. The face of a Caldari girl revolved in front of her. It was quite petite, with a small, slightly pouty mouth, high cheekbones, long, thin eyebrows and the one thing Gilea wouldn't get from her: Long, beautiful black hair." What happens now?" Gilea said, handing Vertan the remote control. "Do I sign a contract?"

"We'll take care of that later. Right now, a verbal agreement will do just fine," Vertan answered with a smile. He keyed in a few numbers on the remote control. "You're absolutely sure this is the face you want?"

She returned the smile, and put out her cigarette. "Yes," she said.

"Very good." He pressed a small red button on the bottom end of the remote. A tiny green light flashed onscreen near the Caldari girl's face. Then the images faded, the screens turned themselves off, and the lights in the room returned to normal. "If you'll just step this way," Vertan said, "we'll get started."

The Caldari colony was segregated according to gender. The women sat hunched over sewing machines, in complete silence apart from the tak-tak-tak of the tiny steel needles. There were rows and rows of them, hundreds

of women hunched over their work. Guards proceeded slowly along each row, hands resting lazily on inactive electrical prods. Rebellions were rare here. They were not part of Caldari nature.

In one row there sat a young, rather pretty girl. Her small mouth pouted in tired concentration over the work, and her thin eyebrows arched slightly. Her hair, which was black and nearly reached her waist, was neatly combed but rather dirty from a long day's work.

A guard walked up and touched her on the elbow. She looked up in confusion. The man turned his head to indicate that she should get up and walk out. Prisoners were sometimes taken into solitary rooms, for any number of reasons: Special commission work, extra rest, checkup of their digital portraits.

The girl obeyed. Silently, she got up and, head bowed, walked out of the massive room. The guard followed. Once they had exited, entering a small steel corridor, he took the lead. She was marched through a veritable labyrinth of corridors, each one exactly like the last. They went on for so long that she had begun to suspect they would simply come back to the sewing room, but at last the guard stopped in front of a steel door. A lens beside it scanned his face, and the door opened. They stepped in, the door closed, and the girl felt a sinking feeling in her stomach, as if she were being pulled downwards.

A minute later, the door opened again. To sunlight.

The last thing Gilea saw was a blinding flash of light.

Her unconscious body, strapped and secured on a gurney, was placed in a special container inside the frigate. Moments later the ship undocked,

accompanied by a guarding force, and sped off towards the company's research facilities.

Once there, Gilea was unshipped and placed on an operating table. Vertan had explained that while it wasn't strictly necessary to put her under while still in company headquarters, experience had shown it to be by far the best option. She would remain completely unaware of the laboratory's exact location, which was a good thing for both her and the company, and there would be no risk of nerves and second thoughts during the trip.

The operation itself went without a hitch. The machines severed her face and placed it in a special sterile container. As they moved on to the subcutaneous remoulding necessary so that her new one would fit, one of the scientists took the container and headed towards the vaults. Amongst themselves it was called the Gallery of Faces, a large room with one wall completely white and ice cold to the touch. The scientist entered the room while another monitored inside a control room on the other side of a pane of glass. A drawer in the wall slid out and the scientist in the room slotted the container into it with a click. The drawer slid back, there was a sound like the dropping of ice cubes into warm water, and the scientist behind the glass gave a silent thumbs-up. Gilea's face had now been flash-frozen, ready for use if she ever needed it back.

Elsewhere in that same laboratory, another scientist entered another surgery room. In his pocket he carried a white mask.

In this room there is no sound, not even the tak-tak-tak of the sewing machines. The women are too tired to talk, and most lie motionless on their beds, trying not to hope.

The colony is not only separated by gender. The masked women have separate beds at the back of the room.

One of them adjusts her mask slightly, her arms bruised from the electric prods. Her long, black hair is held in place by a cheap elastic. It had kept falling in front of her eyes, and she had kept pushing it back, until she started pulling at it. She had torn out several handfuls before the guards got to her.

The girl stares dully at the floor for a long time, her mask showing the same beautiful, expressionless face as everyone else in the room. Then she crosses her arms and, hugging herself tight, lays down to sleep.

For the State

The group that touched down on YHB-349 was already a sorry one. Ambushed by a picket patrol as they entered the system, the convoy swiftly found itself outmatched as a wing of Gallente interceptors pounced on them and ripped through their formation. The operation commander had kept the convoy small to evade detection; the gamble failed to pay off. Those ships still combat-capable after the attackers' first pass stood their ground and sold their lives dearly, and in the confusion the lone Crane transport slipped away with its structural skeleton barely intact.

Six hours later, it grounded on the surface of the target asteroid, and the surviving crew clambered out of their travel restraints to assess the damage. Hull breaches had claimed the commander and most of his staff, and of the three specialist work teams that boarded there were barely enough survivors to form two, along with three surviving Navy crew, one Senior Foreman and a junior engineering manager. The tools and materials, designed for hostile environments, were unaffected by exposure to vacuum, and consensus quickly arose that they would attempt to assemble the listening post as well as they could with the remaining personnel.

The first job, though, was survival. Under the Foreman's quiet direction, the work teams donned construction suits and hauled habitation equipment out through holes in the transport's hull. This was standard equipment, and the men and women on the teams had been hand-picked: after three hours of back-breaking work they had a viable hab centre erected on the dark side of the scarred rock, which could sustain them indefinitely.

As the domes finished pressurizing, the population of the rock assembled in the central hall to resolve the next pressing issue. The Foreman looked at the acting captain of the transport, who replied, "Dirtside" and shook his

head. The Foreman nodded and then spoke up. "I speak for the workers. The engineering manager is best suited for the task of leading us. I name him Director."

The work teams nodded slowly. The new Director stepped forward. "I accept and will execute the job to the best of my abilities. I want a planning meeting with the Foreman and team leads in five minutes, and we'll need a full inventory within the hour. We all have work to do - get to it."

Planning took a gruelling six hours, in which the entire project plan was reviewed, re-evaluated and rewritten. The sensor cluster at the heart of the listening post needed to be buried deep within the rock, along with the necessary power and communication gear. Once the requirements were properly assessed and a draft schedule was put together, the Director looked up at the Foreman.

"This is a lot of work for two teams."

"The work needs doing and two teams is what we have. You give me the orders, and my men will get it done."

Work started immediately, with controlled blasting to open the primary shaft. Everything had to be achieved with minimal sensor signatures, to avoid detection. Dust had to be contained before it could form plumes, rubble had to be cleared without altering the albedo or profile of YBH-349, and electromagnetic footprints meant that heavy machinery simply hadn't been included in the mission package. The most physical tasks were assigned to the small contingent of Civire loadjacks, whose brute strength and near-endless stamina meant they could "shear, shore and shovel" at twice the rate managed by the Deteis technicians that made up the bulk of the workforce.

And so they worked - and every man worked. The work teams of course were the backbone of the operation and carried the bulk of the load. The Foreman worked just as hard, directing with one hand and shovelling rock with the other. The Navy officers donned overalls and helped with laying and shoring. And the Director was everywhere at once, watching and encouraging and reprimanding and evaluating and providing an extra pair of hands anywhere they were wanted. As the Foreman had said, the work needed doing.

Eventually the shafts were finished and the final phase of excavations began, hollowing out the chambers that would eventually house the equipment at the heart of the project. That evening the Foreman pulled the Director aside.

"My loadjacks are exhausted, and exhausted men make mistakes. When they come off shift tonight I want to give them a two-shift rest."

The Director considered this. "If we skip a shift excavation completion will slip, and we're already behind the original schedule."

"A cave-in will put us even further behind."

"Understood." The Director sighed. "OK, assign each loadjack a technician to shadow them at all times to watch for mistakes, and keep them working non-stop until the work is done. Once excavation completes they'll have time to rest."

The Foreman nodded slowly. "Very well. If we push them hard and nothing goes wrong we could be finished by breakfast."

When the morning meal came around, the loadjacks sat down with mixed emotions. Their work was finished, but three of their number were unable to join them at the table.

Emplacement began later in the morning, with equipment being shifted into the finished chambers, sealed to the walls and floors, and painstakingly linked together and brought up to operating status. While not as physically exhausting as the digging, the fatigue of manipulating complicated electronics in cramped, low-G conditions began to show as the days dragged on. Mistakes were made, but they were caught and corrected. Eventually everything was in place and the heart of the machine, their single specialized Fluid Router, was gently removed from storage, brought down to the central chamber and carefully installed. With that done, the generators were brought online and the listening post slowly powered up.

Initial diagnostics revealed two important pieces of information. The first was that the operation had been a success - despite the loss of a significant number of personnel including a third of the workteams, the operation commander and most of the planning staff, everything worked perfectly and detailed sensor data were being successfully transmitted back to Naval Command. The second was that in spite of all their precautions, the Gallente had somehow located them and an escorted Marine transport would land on YHB-349 within the next few hours.

The option of surrendering was raised and immediately discarded without further discussion. If the work was worth doing, it was worth fighting for. With the help of the Navy personnel, defensive plans were drawn up, schedules made and tasks assigned. While the acting captain returned to the ship with several technicians to break out the emergency weapons stores, salvage any useful equipment and destroy the rest, the loadjacks began constructing fortified positions around and down the length of the main shaft, and technicians began retrofitting their tools to serve as makeshift weapons. By the time the landing craft's exhaust flares were visible, everyone was ready.

The ship smacked down near the abandoned habitation site, and armored troopers swiftly slithered out of its egress ports. At the head of the shaft, the Director, the Foreman and the Naval crew hunkered in their command foxhole and watched them approach. The technicians and loadjacks around them had clear orders; as the first hostiles passed an innocuous pile of stones, weapons were swung out over the tops of their trenches and the shooting started. Several Marines went down in the initial volley, but then they were at the first trench, down into it and then back out again, many of them with dented and bloodied armor. The Foreman checked her railgun one last time and looked across at the Director.

"For the State," she reminded him, and rose to a firing position.

"For the State," he echoed, with a grim smile.

The Mercenaries

Part One

The team made it safely out of warp, though Joreena didn't open her eyes for a full minute. It was a beautiful universe, dark and vast, but interstellar travel was rough on the flesh.

Once all stomachs were settled and safety equipment disabled, Scaara made a show out of checking her weapons, with very little visible tremor as she peered down sights and checked ammo counts. Artenal was more subtle about it, rubbing his muscled arms and hovering his fingers over the various pieces of metal and alloyed plastic that hung from his tool belts and bandoliers. Kralea alone looked entirely unconcerned, looking out the window and yawning. Steel behemoths passed them on either side, the sun's rays reflected off their hulls.

Joreena, Scaara, Artenal and Kralea - Gallente, Caldari, Minmatar and Amarrian respectively - each had their own set of unique skills, ranging from public relations to mechanics to pure, unadulterated violence. They had worked together for a while now. The money was good; that was what mattered.

A speaker sounded. The voice of the ship's pilot, Kraeja, rang out. "We're heading to the docking bay, right on time. Traffic's about what we expected, and some capsuleers are getting advance treatment as usual. Anyone needs more time to recuperate, speak up now, please."

The team instinctively looked at Joreena, who was her regular pale post-warp self. She held one hand in front of her mouth, but shook the other and mumbled, "I'm good, thanks," in pinched breaths. "Water, please. Thank you. Let's do a final run." She turned towards the one vid screen in the

room, surreptitiously fishing out a pill from one of her dress pockets and popping it into her mouth.

An image filled the screen. It showed a craggy face with bushy hair and eyebrows that cast shadows, all captured in the fat, smily countenance of someone who had no right to look so happy.

"This is Shahoun Asa," Kraeja said through the speakers. "Got quite a track record, as we've seen. One of the best mission coordinators for the Amarr Navy, responsible for countless incursions against those brainless nitwits in Sansha's Nation. The capsuleers love this guy."

Shahoun's image faded and was replaced with a picture of a space station. It was Gurista, and through the windows its real-life counterpart could be distantly glimpsed. "Sansha being what they are, they just kept throwing themselves in front of the guns. Unfortunately for the Amarr Navy, and luckily for us, not every pirate is stupid and brainwashed. Sansha's friends the Guristas stepped in and made Shahoun an offer. If he switches sides to the Gurista side, brings over all those nice secrets on Amarr Navy tactics, they'll set him up for life. Might even give him a nice Sansha slave for his bed."

"Dangerous move," Kralea said, without looking from the window.

"Stupid move," the speakers replied. "Navy's got countermeasures for exactly this sort of thing. He got past them with money and charm. There are rumors he flipped for ideology more than benefits."

"Does it matter?" grunted Artenal. He fiddled with a small piece of metal that looked half like a tapered linchpin, and half a tiny notched knife.

"No chance of diplomacy, I guess," Joreena sighed, ignoring him.

"Not on our timeline," Kraeja replied. "It's a marvel we got to him before he went deep. I still haven't figured out what business he's got on this station, apart from waiting on some kind of package and making a bunch of minor, hi-tech purchases, but he won't be staying long. It's one of the edge outposts for the Guristas, so we can dock freely, but we should assume that he's got at least some kind of protection there. And please, guys, remember that Navy wants him back intact. No repeats of what happened last time."

"That was a fluke," Scaara said.

"No, that was you removing somebody's head," Kraeja said. "Let's rein it in, alright? And for goodness' sake, don't kill anyone else. You know the laws on that station."

"I still can't believe they make it work," Scaara said, aiming an unloaded gun at Artenal and adjusting the sights. "How can you run a pirate station where nobody's allowed to kill anyone?"

"Discipline," Artenal said, pointing the metal piece at her in turn.

"Among pirates?" Scaara said to him.

"You'd be amazed what conditions people will accept, just so they can live in a little safety," Artenal said.

"And how close you can take someone to the point of death without pushing them over," Kralean added nonchalantly. Artenal gave him a look, but didn't comment.

"It's not quite like that," Joreena added in a stern voice. Her face had regained some of its color, and she gave the Kralean and Artenal stern looks. "Pirate or not, you've got to keep things under control if you want to

get anything done. There'll always be some conflicts and that's fine, you deal with those when they happen. Everything can be patched up somehow, except death." She took another sip of water and added, "I looked through some of the station's laws on the way here. The comptroller's an old Intaki Syndicate man, and they know how to keep control of the madness. If we do end up killing some civilian, it'll mean a mass of paperwork for us. Not to mention getting held back so long that Shahoun'll be long gone. If we kill guards, on the other hand, we're in a lot of trouble. Let's try not to do that unless this agent is about to slip out of our grasp."

Scaara loaded her gun with a click that echoed in the small room. Joreena was about to say something to her, but the pilot's voice crackled out of the speaker. "Going on docking route, people. Strap in and look sharp. I'll pick you up when the cargo's ready."

Outside the viewports they saw the station loom large, its thousand eyes of light blinking in rapid succession. The ship drew closer and was swallowed into its mouth.

For a Gurista operation, the station ran pretty clean.

Joreena had rushed off to secure permissions and grease palms, delighting in her area of diplomatic expertise. The rest of the team ambled around the main marketplace, getting a feel for the area and enjoying a bit of time away from one another. Space was infinite, but cramped rooms on long spaceship hauls accompanied by other mercenaries and an extensive arsenal were quite the opposite.

The noise in the main shopping areas was near-deafening but came mostly from overzealous vendors rather than violent skirmishes. Gurista

operatives visibly patrolled the areas and shut down any confrontations, which left shoppers to do their business relatively unbothered.

Most of it was regular fare: Condensed food, synthesized drink of all colors, and general supplies for people about to venture into the unclaimed territories. Every now and then there'd be a stall with a flashing banner that proudly proclaimed the availability of small arms or narcotics. There was a certain odor that always went with these booths: stinging sweat, dry powder and strange chemicals, and the sharp iron smells of metal and blood. More complex machinery could be had as well, ranging from subcutaneous implants to semi-autonomous attack bots, but it was sold only through representatives that handed out 3D catalogs, tiny seeds of information that blossomed in your hand and lit up a rotating display of the death-dealer of your choice.

It was mercurial, but it worked. Station areas were expansive and their ceilings inset with both windows and shaded lighting, which helped the populace avoid the claustrophobia that always came with life in space. For all their focus on business, the stalls, storefronts and electrocarts served equally as hubs of general conversation. The noise and the chatter held together a community hanging perilously over the chasm of chaos and disorder. It was an environment of constant adaptation to its own destructive elements, overseen by someone with enough sense to make it work. Kraleian hoped that whoever was in charge of this place would see the sense in letting his team go about their business without any trouble.

He spotted Joreena approaching. There was a faint smile on her face, and she kept a fast pace even as she passed through the throng of people. Before she'd even reached hailing distance, he knew they were good to go.

Large as it was, the Steel Barrel bar managed to be densely crowded with all sorts of patrons, and the team blended in easily. Caldari designs were everywhere, but redecorated towards Gurista sensibilities, celebrating brash individuality and complete, self-centered hedonism.

The Steel Barrel only had one floor, though there were several raised areas which offered more privacy: circular platforms spacious enough to hold a dozen people, laden with comfy seating and plentiful drink, and surrounded by aural isolation fields, electrical anti-intrusion shielding, and large people with crossed arms and short tempers.

It wasn't long before they made contact. In one of those raised areas, Scaara glimpsed a man in his late middle age - lounging on a sofa, drink in hand, his craggy face lit up with a carved smile.

She looked around and caught the eyes of the other team members, each of whom was scouting out another area of the bar. They moved over to Shahoun, making their way through the crowd as unobtrusively as they could. Each eschewed complicated equipment, which could break all too easily during critical mission points. They'd worked together long enough that glances, gestures and movements said all that needed to be said.

Joreena got there first and was about to speak to the bodyguards on the platform when they stepped aside without a word. Her mouth snapped shut, and she walked into the private area, followed by her teammates. Shahoun raised his glass to them and smiled even wider, but didn't otherwise react. There was a small group of people in there with him, one from each empire, watching a holovid overhead and plugged into the isolating world of egonic headsets. None of them seemed to register the team's appearance, or care much.

Krolean moved to the forefront, gently shouldering aside the annoyed Joreena. "We'd like you to come with us," he said.

Shahoun took a final sip from his glass and handed it to a waitress, then twined his fingers together behind his head, leaned back, and looked at the ceiling. One of his friends got up and stumbled over to the bar, helped himself to a drink and ambled back to his seat.

Scaara grunted. Kralean added, "Actually, some of us would probably quite like to kill you, so I do strongly advise you to come with us." He tensed for the man's friends to react, but they remained in their seats, calmly sipping their drinks.

"Do you know why I'm here?" Shahoun asked, in a voice that was a little slurred. "On this station, I mean. The more precise location, lounging here on this nice couch with wonderful drinks - oh thank you, my dear, always a pleasure," he said, accepting a fresh glass from the waitress, "With wonderful drinks and such nice company, that much I don't know. But here," he said, pointing at the ceiling or the vidscreen. "On this station." Pointing at the floor. "That much, my friend, I know." He finished the tirade by pointing at Kralean, who sighed quietly.

"If I put a bullet in his head, he'll shut up," Scaara said.

"It doesn't matter why you're here," Kralean said to Shahoun, wondering why the guards hadn't been called yet. Shahoun's drunken entourage was clearly useless, and it was usually at this point that the team had to fight someone. Scaara was starting to jitter from adrenaline and excitement.

Shahoun leaned forward and said, "In fact, I think it matters. It matters very much. I was waiting for something and it arrived a little earlier than I expected. I'd been planning to leave right after, but thanks to this recently arrived ... package"-he clearly relished the word-"I heard that some people were after me. That would be you, I surmise," he said, and took another sip of his drink.

Kranean didn't comment. Shahoun leaned back in his seat and said, "So I decided I might as well put this package of mine to the test. I expect it will prove quite useful."

One of Shahoun's companions got up at last, and ambled over to him. It was a large, burly Caldari man, angular and massive. He walked in front of Shahoun, positioning himself between the rogue agent and the team, crossed his arms and grinned.

"This is part of my package," Shahoun said.

The Caldari winked at Scaara and said, "Hey there, little thing. Wanna ride my Raven?"

There was a muffled thud as Artenal impacted with and held back Scaara, whose feet were scraping at the carpet. "Let's not go for the moron with the battleship jokes," Artenal grunted, holding Scaara tight.

Kranean said to Shahoun, "Do you honestly think we can't deal with muscle?"

Shahoun regarded him, and in a voice that suddenly sounded far too sober, said, "No, you probably could. But you're clearly not very good at dealing with brains. Or decoys."

In the next few breaths, as time crystallized and adrenaline started its dead run down the team's veins, a few things became briefly apparent. One was that the isolation field had been growing more and more tinted, to the point where people on the outside probably couldn't see very much at all what was happening on the inside. Another was that the man who'd gone over to the bar hadn't returned, and had in fact turned his back to them for quite some time. The last was that there was a faint, if insistent buzzing noise

that had been hovering at the edge of consciousness, but was now unmistakable.

As everyone in the team started to move and draw their guns, the man at the bar spread his arms, and an army of tiny drones flew into the air. Before a single shot could be fired they had zoned in on every member on the team, flown up to them and given off a sharp electric current. Joreena dropped right away, and Kralean shortly after. Artenal stumbled to his knees and tried to shake it off, but several other drones flew up and shocked him, and he tumbled down.

Amazingly, it was Scaara who lasted the longest. Biting her lip hard enough to draw blood, she shook off the initial shock and managed to evade the other drones long enough to rush towards Shahoun, but in the quick of action she overlooked the Caldari bodyguard, who stepped within range, lifted a meaty fist, and hit her so hard in the face that it felt her head would twist off her neck. She crumpled to the floor, out cold.

The Mercenaries

Part Two

They came to in a jail cell, sore and disoriented. Beyond the alloy bars they could glimpse a single guard doing something administrative.

Once he saw they were all awake, he walked over to them. The guard was a young man, rather disheveled and with the roguish air of someone who quite enjoys being himself no matter the circumstances.

"What's our charge and how long will we be here?" Kralea asked him.

"Disturbing the peace, maybe kidnapping, and might be a while from what I hear," the guard said, adding, "Though I'm sure we'll find some use for the women while we wait."

They glared at him, and he grinned. "Just kidding. We're not barbarians here. Once we find out what this is about, we'll see about extradition."

And there it might've ended, except that the guard started staring at Joreena. After a while he said, "Hey, you're ... oh no," laughed and slapped his forehead. "I don't believe this! You're Joreena, the one who did all those movies way back. Oh wow. In my jail cell, no less."

"Err ... yes," Joreena said, but quickly rallied. "Nice to meet you, I suppose, though I wish it were under better circumstances."

"I've seen everything you did," the warden said with unfettered eagerness, "even those, uh, illegally produced clips that were released when you went into politics."

Joreena smiled. The rest of the team recognized that smile.

She walked up to the bars and put her hands around them, saying, "Well, sir, I'll tell you. It's always wonderful to meet a fan. And I hate being in here. I wish there were some way I could be let out earlier. Do you suppose there's anything you could do?"

The warden winked and said, "So this is the part where you go," his voice shifted up an octave, "Oh my goodness, if only I could change your mind, warden. Let me just hike up my skirt."

She let go of the bars and took a step back. "I was actually hoping you'd be someone I could talk to about a proper, early release. And maybe just talk, about Gallente politics or anything." She motioned to the team. "I've been cooped up with these people for far too long, one way or another."

Kralean and the others stared at her in fascination, enjoying the performance. What she was planning was an incredibly risky gamble, but if they were to have any chance of getting out in time, it was the only way.

Joreena leaned in ever so slightly and said, "Also, I'd really hate it if word got out that I was being held here." She held the warden's gaze. Something unspoken passed between them, and when she added, "There are no cameras in the cell that I can see. Nobody's going to get into any trouble," his eyes responded with an unmistakable intent.

He walked slowly over to the cell door, pulled out a pass key and held it in his hand. "Alright. Walk in front of me please, and follow my directions. Nobody else move. I'm checking on a sick prisoner here, and anyone says any different, they're going to find themselves in more trouble than they can possibly handle." He put the key up to the cell lock and unlocked the door, letting Joreena step through before shutting it again. They headed off to parts unknown.

The team waited. After quite a bit of time Joreena returned, hair ruffled and clothes disheveled, sporting a large, red welt on her cheek. She pulled the warden's key out of a pocket and opened the prison door.

"Politics, eh?" Artenal said as he exited the cell.

"Well, it was obvious what he wanted," she said shortly.

"So where is he? Unconscious and tied up?" Kralea asked.

"He was supposed to be," Joreena said with a sigh. "I had the drugs ready. But he twigged, and started beating on me. I had to stop him."

Artenal and Kralea both stopped and stared at her. In a low voice, the latter said, "I hope you know what you're doing."

She said, "We're out of time either way. But I've got an idea that might get us out of this. When we went into his office I noticed they did have camera controls, and I took a second to check them out after I was ... done. Our own cells have hidden eyes, but they're on a closed-circuit system so nobody else will have seen what happened. I also noticed a couple of linkups to a larger system that's probably located nearby. If we can find it, and not set off any alarms, hopefully we can locate our target, get him and leave without being caught. We're on evening shift time, so we should be good."

"Risky, still. We've got no weapons, and he's got those four grunts that went for us back at the bar." Artenal said.

"Once they find out we escaped and killed one of the guards, we'll be hunted down like dogs, and there'll be no time to do anything but run." Joreena said. "I didn't want this to happen, but it did and we've got to deal with it. If you've got better ideas, other than giving up on the mission and

losing out on reputation and money that we actually rather do need, go ahead and share. In the meantime, we'll go with my plan." Without waiting for a response, she set off in search of the control station. The team followed.

On their way through the various corridors, Scaara caught up with her and whispered, "I didn't know you'd go that far, but I'm glad you did."

Joreena gave her a smile.

After a few turns, Scaara shyly added, "How'd you get around the sex thing?" and Joreena's smile turned into a smirk.

Scaara's mouth dropped open. Joreena said, "You should see the scratches on my back."

They came to a door marked, "OBSERVATION", and Joreena nodded to herself. She said to Scaara, "He really was into politics, too. Shame," then turned to Artenal and tossed him some electric keys. "These were the warden's. Want to use them while they're good?"

"Yeah, about that," Artenal said. "While you two were talking about things I really didn't want to hear, Kralea and I were working on a plan. I know things about Gurista security, and he knows things about ... well ..."

"Framing people. And working with bodies," Kralea said quietly. The two women stared at him for a moment.

Artenal cleared his throat. "I think we can buy ourselves a bit of time."

Kralea said, "Did you leave a lot of marks on the body? And were there any heavy objects in the room, apart from the one I expect you used? Any sharp ones, too?"

Joreena shook her head. "No marks. There were a couple of blunt objects, including one that I'd be happy never to hold in my hand again. A few sharp ones as well, pens and such, maybe some small weapons in some of his drawers. I just grabbed what was closest to hand, but then again, he was screaming bloody murder."

Kralean nodded and said to Artenal, "You'll take it from here?"

"Sure," Artenal said. Kralean left, heading back to the jail cells and the warden's office.

Artenal turned to the two women. "Scaara, there's probably two guards in that room. Once I let you in, you think you can take them out, and not kill them, please, without them setting off the alarm?"

Scaara smiled. "No problem." The lack of violence was a frustration to her - particularly since Joreena had had her chance - but any time she was given orders, it enforced a tiny bit of peace in this chaotic life of hers. She knew full well that left to her own devices, she'd have gotten in a lot more trouble.

"Alright," Artenal said. "On my mark, please." He fished out an electric key, held it up to the door's lock, and whispered, "Go!"

The door opened, and both Artenal and Joreena moved out of visual range. Scaara stood in front of it, and underwent a remarkable change. That petite body, usually carried as if it were a coiled spring covered with poisonous barbs, lost all its tension. It slunk in on herself, and suddenly Scaara looked like an overgrown girl, insecure and lost. She walked slowly into the room, and the last the other two heard before the door closed was her quavering voice going, "Hello? I'm lost, and I think something bad happened-"

A few minutes later, the door opened again and Scaara came out, smiling. "Easy as docking," she said. "Come on in."

The room was fairly sizeable, and clearly used both for supervision and storage. Aside from vid screens and controls, there were crates, various pieces of metal scraps, and other debris. In a corner was a steel table with steel chairs, on which lay a card version of the Mind Clash game. Two men lay unconscious beside the table in a rather revealing position, their hands and feet tied fast with their own clothes, and their eyes bandaged with something even more ad hoc.

Artenal stroked a hand over his face, sighed and grinned. "You've blindfolded them."

"In case they wake up."

"You've blindfolded them with their own underwear."

Scaara shrugged. "Use what works."

"Next person we kill is all yours, and I'll give you whatever equipment you need. You're starting to frighten me," Artenal said. "Anyway, here's the scoop. Because of their ad-hoc connections to the main Empire systems, Gurista data security is always a bit lax on the internal side. It does have its safeguards, which are run in the quiet hour at noon, and if anything's found out then they raise bloody hell. Until then, so long as I manage to make a few changes, we'll be safe. First thing I'll do is muck with our prisoner registration and change Scaara to a Minmatar."

"Hey!"

"Just so they won't associate this humiliating little guard-beating girl with our team, dear." Artenal pulled out the other electric card key from his

pocket, sat at the controls for one of the vid screens, and started working. A few minutes in the team heard a soft gasp from him, and a vein on his forehead started to visibly throb, but he didn't turn his face from the screen and they didn't inquire further.

After a while, Kraleian came in through the door. Without looking back, Artenal said, "All done?"

"All set. They'll never tell the difference."

"That's nice," Joreena said. "I'm glad you two are having fun. Care to share?"

"One sec," Artenal said. He kept working for a few minutes - the rest of the team knew better than to interrupt - and at last turned in his chair and faced them. "We're set. With really ugly hacking, I should add, and that's coming from a Minmatar."

"Problems?" Kraleian said.

"Nothing I couldn't handle," Artenal said.

"Shahoun?"

"Shahoun is still on station, and so is that team he hired to protect him. Even better, they're spread out. Logs say they've each got some business appointment, but will be leaving later today, so I've put down blocks just in case they had feelers out on our own info." He leaned back in his chair. "I've also overwritten some of the data the Guristas had stored on both us and them. Anyone looks us up, we'll appear way more innocent than we are, and in fact quite good at dealing with the exact sort of problem the Guristas are about to have. Which is a good thing, because I saw some things in our records that even I didn't recognize."

"And anyone who looks up the other team?" Joreena said, a dark and happy suspicion blooming in her mind.

Artenal grinned.

Kralean said, "Will find that one of their members invaded a Gurista prison, knocked out the supervisors, tried and failed to kidnap a group of innocent prisoners awaiting trial." He smiled, entirely without warmth. "And last but not least, murdered the warden. The evidence is all there."

The Mercenaries

Part Three

"One of your men is dead, and I know who killed him."

The station comptroller stared at the woman who stood on the other end of his office. She was Gallente from head to toe, with their intrinsic combination of arrogance and ease emanating from every aspect of her pose. She was also older than him but nonetheless quite attractive for her age, something he was surprised at himself for noticing.

"You're one of our prisoners, and got past my guards," he said. "Keep talking while you can."

"Those people who attacked us – the ones who you let on the station – tried to finish the job. They came to the prison and were going to execute us, but we managed to escape. Your warden wasn't so lucky."

"Assuming you're telling the truth, and we're going to find that out very soon," the comptroller said, keying in a combination on the holoivid surface of his desk, "why shouldn't I have you thrown right back in jail and deal with this myself?"

The woman walked slowly towards him. He tensed up, but she raised her hands to her head and said, "At ease, soldier. I'm unarmed." She kept approaching, and as she was halfway over the room he noticed that she'd apparently been hurt: What he'd taken for rouge was a blood-red bruise, and the thin film of healing powder she'd spread over it had not yet finished working its magic.

"Did they do this?"

"They did more," she said shortly. "But we lived. Look us up now, dear. See what we can do in return."

He finished keying in the sequence. A seed of data unfurled on the pane of his desk, spreading its digital petals to every corner. The woman stood in silence while he read it over.

At last he raised his head again, looked her directly in the eyes and said, "Why should I let you do this?"

She walked over to the desk and leaned forward, resting her knuckles on it. He saw the knuckles turn white. His gaze traveled back up to her face, taking in other sights along the way, ones that were a little too close and smelled far too good.

"You'll see we've done this countless times before," she said in a quiet tone. "You'll see we've helped law enforcement, Empire and pirates both. You'll see we can be trusted to do what we do. You'll see that it's far better to risk people like us than any more of your own men, and we'll do it quietly so your denizens won't find out until you're ready to tell them what happened. And if that's not enough," she murmured, "well, here you see me. Gallente have no limits. Do you have any reason to think I can't do anything I want to?"

The comptroller stared at her for a while. "According to what I've seen, no, I don't suppose I do," he said at last. "You've got six hours before I set the guards on them. Find the people responsible and get them to me, alive. Everything checks out, you'll undock from this station after that, free and with our thanks."

"The thanks will be mutual, sir. I'll be seeing you soon," she said, and blew a kiss into the air between them. He watched her walk out as slowly as

she'd walked in, and never quite noticed the sweat that had been trickling down her back, nor the faint trembling in her hands.

There was a very fine balance between blissful success and suicidal failure. The multitude of scars on this man's body told of a rewarding, if rather eventful, life rocking around on the scales.

The result of the small EMP bomb he was painstakingly constructing, for instance, had potential for one very positive outcome but a myriad unpleasant ones ranging from failure at zero hour to an unfettered launch during testing. The former would very likely rob him of his only real countermeasure against his adversary's mechanized attack, while the latter would give him an epileptic seizure and a heart attack before shutting down all electrical processes in his brain.

He hummed as he soldered together the wires in his bomb, taking care to coat them right away with conducting gel and insulant. He lived for this.

The surroundings were bare: an empty warehouse on the edge of station central, near enough to the industrial areas and far enough from human traffic that nobody would notice him working there. He had a worktable and a chair, both plastic, a generator and some analytic equipment for the bomb, a nonstatic plastic tarp he'd spread out on the cement floor to hold various parts, and a portable console for finishing off the station hackwork.

He put down the soldering iron, regarded the console's blinking screen beside him, and sighed. He had two tasks here. First and most important was to hack undocking permission for his team into the station's operating procedures. This was the escape route, which mattered more than the mission. Second was to rig countermeasures to the drones that had been

used against them. This was the revenge, which mattered in other ways he'd have a hard time putting words to.

He turned to the console and worked with it for a while. It was complicated work that required speed, attention and an instinct for adaptation. The Guristas' own system was one of the greatest examples of ad-hoc hacking in the universe, and poked its multitude of tendrils into innumerable cracks in Empire systems. The trick was not to touch it directly, for it was a skittish beast, but let it come to you. He'd constructed a large batch of fake data and set up a badly protected broadcast mirror in an abandoned mining colony nearby. It was nonsensical stuff, but it had a patina of sense, which was all the Guristas datatendrils needed to coil around it and pull it in for later analysis; and in so doing, grab a nice little packet of very polite requests to please let a particular ship undock before they could think about it twice.

It took some time for the full amount of data to weave its way into the Guristas system, and to his heart-stopping surprise he found himself fiddling with the wires of the EMP bomb. He put them down very slowly and moved his chair out of absent-minded reach, leaned back with his hands behind his head and let his mind wander, while the console finished the final runs of its program.

He'd made a life out of this, one way or another. When he'd been freeing slaves there'd been two ways: the clean, like the console he had beside him, or the dirty, like this bomb. And if he were to be honest with himself, after all the time he'd been doing this, he truly preferred the dirty. That was what he did when he signed up for this mercenary crew, instead of fighting for the true Minmatar cause. Some of the mission profits he would set aside and give to his friends back in the underground, so they could free their brethren and better their lot, and with what this team was pulling it certainly beat being just one more life fading from a body lying in a ditch somewhere, gun in one hand and flag in the other. This, to him, was the

Minmatar lot. You saw an opportunity, no matter how unorthodox, and you did something with it. You went for it.

He smiled, moved back to the desk and got to work. Half an hour later he had a theoretically functioning EMP bomb. He carefully laid it down on the ground beside some test equipment, said a brief and silent prayer, and set it off.

The equipment lost all power, and Artenal did not. The bomb worked.

Laughter bubbled out of him, and turned into a guffawing roar when he looked back to the desk and saw that the EMP wave had completely fried the console, too.

Some people walk through cathedrals, while others tread in the gutters. Kraleian, with his past ties to the Amarr clergy, had one foot in either, which could be a drawback when you needed to move fast without anyone knowing, but provided excellent ground when you could pick your steps and tread silently.

It is a common misconception that pirates and mercenaries are faithless. The worst of them have little time for intangibles, certainly. But behind every pirate is not merely a trail of past victims - there is also a shadowy mass of people whose lives are affected or entwined with the pirate's own. They are people who live that life less of choice than of hand-to-mouth necessity, and whose hidden, if always unstated, hope is that one day, in some kind of transition, they can leave it behind for good.

Their pent-up faith might be unnamed, but it glowed so bright it burned. The trick lay in recognizing the houses of worship.

Kralean traversed the station. He visited a few churches, who welcomed him as a fellow man in the spirit of faith, if not its exact letter. From them he drew information on where the truly devout could be found.

He then visited several homes in the poorer quarters and saw many parents, and visited streets and bars to see their multitude of children. He had talks that were short in time but seemed very long to his conversants, and after he had spoken for a little while, they began to listen.

It took a while, but by the end he had quite a flock.

It is another common misconception that pirates are the most powerful people in any group of miscreants. They're visible and loud, certainly, and make great boasts of their own prowess. But the wise pirate – the one possessing the proper mix of suicidal fighting instincts and basic common sense – knows that he truly has nothing without the support of the people in the shadows.

So when Kralean returned from his pilgrimage, he had assurance that wherever his enemies went, and whoever they talked to, they would be given no shelter, no refuge nor assistance, and they would be shunned like the uncleanest of them all.

For it is a wise man who captures the heart of his flock, and a clever man who manages to feed that quelled and flickering flame which burns shyly within them.

She couldn't use guns, but that was alright; there were other ways.

Scaara stepped into the foyer of the Steel Barrel, completely unrecognized. People here didn't pay much attention to newcomers unless there was

pressing reason to do so, and it helped that she wasn't visibly armed. She surreptitiously patted her pockets, in which she'd secreted a couple of tiny activating pads and a metal ampule.

The Steel Barrel was not quite as crowded as the last time, though she still recognized a lot of faces. This was good.

She moved up to the bar but did not take a seat. Instead, she stood there, quietly regarding the seated patrons, the bartender and the rows of drinks behind him. She paid special attention to the ends of the bar line, where the regulars sat. One or two of them appeared to register her presence, and there was a flicker of attention in their eyes.

There were no guns anywhere on her person, but she had something much better. She slowly slid a hand into her pocket and withdrew the weapon's activation switches, holding them clenched in her fist. She noticed with quiet pleasure that those same people who had noticed her now sat up straight, like slaver hounds at the escape whistle, tense and alert. Her fist rose into the air like a rocket seen from afar, the human hounds following its slow trajectory. As it reached its apex she thumbed one of the switches, then dropped it to the floor like a used fuel tank. It had barely a moment to clatter before the bar resounded with the clang of security doors sliding into place over all exits. Station security took precedence over personal liberty in times of crisis, and if the automatic housing controls received a message that a unit had to be sealed off, then that's exactly what would happen.

Everyone in the Steel Barrel had noticed her, but only the guilty parties stood up. They moved fast towards Scaara. She waved at them and pressed the other switch in her hand.

The high-frequency sirens, long since embedded in every bar on this station by an overseer very much into crowd control, roared with eardrum-piercing noise. The patrons dropped like depowered robots, clutching their

heads for a few twitching seconds before passing into blissful oblivion. One of them had made it almost to Scaara, his hands going for her neck, before he dropped and plowed face-first into the floor.

Scaara dropped the other switch, and made a silent promise to buy Artenal a stiff drink for rigging this up, both the system interrupts and the tiny earbud sound filters that had protected her own head from the aural assault.

From her other pocket she withdrew one of the metal ampules, a perfect cylinder about half the length of her pinky. She twisted off its seal. There was a click and both ends extended, one terminating in a stopper, the other in a needle. Kneeling by the man next to her, she jabbed the needle into a vein on his neck and waited for the stimulant to kick in. The mind-scrambling siren would have stopped by now, but nobody would come back to wakefulness for a while yet unless assisted by a little synthetic adrenaline.

The man gasped and opened his eyes so wide that they bulged. She smiled.

"Sssh," she said. "This is going to hurt, but try to relax."

Her fist clenched again, but this time it held nothing but her anger and need for release.

Some time later, after she'd established that yes, he was one of the contacts for the Shahoun's team, and yes, he could tell her where they were, and no, he was telling the honest truth and could she please please please not break any more bones, she withdrew the other capsule from her pocket, twisted its seal, and plunged its needle into his neck. This time it was not a stimulant but a soporific, powerful enough to reduce a full-grown man to dreamless, unwakeable sleep. Once the subject regained

consciousness, they'd be completely incapable of normal communication. Or walking. Or blinking.

The team assembled in a hidden place and got ready for violence.

"Are we even going to be allowed back on the station after this?" Scaara asked.

"Strictly speaking we haven't done anything wrong, other than cost them the life of one guard," Kralea said nonchalantly. "With luck and skill, we'll be gone before they realize the deception, and we can make amends later. These people have big tempers that need a little time to cool, but they're not unreasonable." He looked at the others. "How did you guys do?"

"The pheromone perfume makes me gag every time," Joreena said. "Even if it's just for the first few seconds. I can't understand what you people like about it."

"Neither do I," Artenal said. "You're just as ugly as ever." He ducked as she threw a pack of ammo at him.

"Well, it worked," she said. "Comptroller will let us do our thing. I also had a chat with one of the top guardsmen, who was extremely unhappy with losing a man and promised me help if needed."

"I had a quick chat with someone, too," Scaara said wistfully. "I liked that. Anyway, I confirmed our intel. The team that guarded Saroun is still split up and calmly going about their business before they leave later today. Whatever they hear about our plans won't be from their station contact. And also, that Caldari dude who got in my face at the Steel Barrel? He's mine."

"Amazing how you always go after your own people, dear," Joreena said.

"They're not my people," Scaara replied and shrugged. "Everyone I meet in this job is a traitor to the State."

"Be that as it may," Kralean said, "Shahoun's team will have a little less support to draw on."

"How much less?" Artenal asked.

"None at all, pretty much," Kralean said. "The faithful many will shun them. And on that note, if we're going to pick our targets from that team, I want the Minmatar woman. She's been making some inquiries and I have reason to believe that despite my efforts, she's managed to assemble a small team of miscreants. I'm not happy with this."

Artenal frowned. It was a perfectly valid reason. Of course it was. And cooperation within the team was good. But in recent missions, Artenal felt, Kralean had been going after Minmatars quite a lot.

"I'm taking on the Gallente guy. We're used to betraying our friends and betters," Asadir said and gave Kardeth a meaningful look that went completely ignored. He continued, "He's the one who knocked us all out. He's a tech-head, so the rest of you wouldn't know what to do with him. I've seen his shopping lists here, and it's interesting stuff. And besides, he put in some things about us in the Guristas dataframe that I'm not too happy about."

"You sure you can handle him?" Joreena said, possibly with the slightest edge of offended racial pride.

"Oh please," Artenal said. "The man uses drones."

Still ignoring the spat, Kralean turned to Scaara and said, "You know, if you go for the Caldari guy, you'll run into Shahoun as well."

"I won't kill him," she said quickly.

"I know you won't. I've got a plan for him..."

A while later they left, each headed their own way, quiet and deadly.

The Mercenaries

Part Four

"Hello Garmasi. I hear you like getting people in trouble."

The Amarrian whose name had been spoken slowly put the merchandise back on the vendor's display bench, and stood up straight. His wrinkled features coagulated into a smile.

To the voice behind his right ear he said, "Depends on who deserves it. How did you get out?"

The voice said, "We had some help. Amazing what people will descend to doing, just for their own personal interest."

"Isn't it just?" Garmasi said. "But if you don't mind me asking, what makes you think that coming here, out in the open, is going to do you any good? Do you perhaps have a laser knife on your person?"

"None such," the voice said.

"A small gun, silenced or perhaps pressurized, and loaded with change-state ammo? Something to really put me in my place, during those last few agonizing seconds of my life?"

"Not at all."

"Disintegrating garrote," he said. "At least that. To lure me into a dark alley and snap on that self-tightening noose that does the job for you."

"Nothing of the sort."

Garmasi turned and faced her. "So what exactly is to prevent me from calling the guards and having your"-he looked her over-"admittedly marvelous figure thrown right back in jail, now on suspicion of disorderly conduct, kidnapping and jailbreak?"

"Oh, I don't think you want to do that," Joreena said. "But I do think you want to tell me about your plans."

"I do?" Garmasi said with a smirk. From his seat behind the display board the vendor coughed politely, for the pair was blocking sight to his merchandise, but neither one of them moved. When he coughed again, the Amarrian turned to him and in one swift motion pulled out a datacard, keyed in a number, touched the card to the vendor's scanner, plunged the card back in his pocket and hit the scanner's confirmation pad with a fist. A series of digits scrolled up on its screen. The vendor promptly shut up.

"You do," Joreena said. "You had us arrested on small charges, but you've been hanging out here with not a worry in the world. You must have figured we'd be coming after you and messing up your business."

"Not really, dear," Garmasi said. "We have no real business here other than to protect our client. As for you coming after us, one of our guys knows a thing or two about Gurista datasystems. I'm afraid we gave you a rather ugly past. Nothing worthy of a capital offence, but certainly enough to have you retained while the authorities figure out what to do with creatures like you."

"Creatures like us?"

He shrugged and smiled. "Fires. Children. You're bad people."

Joreena stared at him for a moment, then smiled and seemed to make up her mind about something. "So we'll disappear. Strike at you from the shadows. And we will get our target."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Garmasi said. He stepped in and took firm hold of Joreena's upper arm, turned his head and said to the vendor, "Triple the amount I gave you if you get the guards here right now."

The vendor nodded eagerly and moved his hand underneath his stall. There was a clanging noise, and suddenly guards were all over the place.

"I'm afraid this is the end, my dear," he said.

"Yes. It is," she said.

The guards moved in.

"It's a shame you didn't have any other purpose here. We might have come to some kind of arrangement," she said.

"Oh, it's far too late for that now," he said.

"Certainly," she replied, quite sanguine.

He furrowed his brows, but didn't have time to say anything else, for a muscular hand was clamped on his shoulder. "Alright, murderer. Time to go."

He looked around. A large Guristas guard stood there, backed by five others. Two of them already had their stun batons out.

Garmasi stammered out "Wait, what-" before the guard holding him pulled back a fist and punched him in the stomach. "Shut up, asshole," the guard said as the Amarrian doubled up.

Joreena knelt beside him. "Save your breath," she said. "You'll need it for the interrogation. I hear it's a little harsh for someone of your reputation."

Garmasi's eyes bulged at her.

"You're bad people now," she whispered and blew him a kiss before the guards dragged him away.

The good thing about doing your own crazy science experiments in warehouses and empty rooms across the universe was that you learned to recognize the signs. Artenal approached the building, taking his time and looking closely at its doors and windows.

There wouldn't be a risk of explosives or other area-of-effect damage from this guy. Drones meant accuracy and clean hands. That suited Artenal fine. He wanted to get dirty.

On the other hand, drones could also mean early warning systems, and fighting conducted from a distance. Artenal walked very slowly and used his eye for patterns. Nothing beeped, and nothing blinked, and it seemed like his opponent hadn't rigged up anything at all. It was understandable – the man was leaving soon and his enemies were supposed to be rotting in prison – but very stupid. It was assumptions like this that got a person hurt.

Artenal grinned, and patted the small sphere in his pocket.

The warehouse door was creaky, but a gearhead always carried some kind of oil. He made his way deeper into the building.

Inside, its periphery was dotted with all manner of debris and junk - mostly skeletons of hover vehicles that had been scrounged for every useable part - but the center was an open area that had been cleared out. In it, by a metal workbench, sat the Gallente man Artenal had seen at the bar, quietly tinkering with something. The high roof and bare walls caused every metallic click from the Gallentean's tools to echo.

"Safety's the illusion of the unprepared, Ontre," Artenal said, stepping out from cover. Ontre looked up and regarded him for a moment before bowing back to his work.

When there was no further reaction, Artenal walked a few steps closer. He was too far from the Gallente mercenary to see what he was working on, other than a pile of silvery mechanics and a mess of wires, but close enough that he could see several small attack drones lying neatly sorted on the edge of the bench.

"Are you going to turn those on?" Artenal said, with perfect calm.

Ontre stopped his task and for the first time seemed to properly register Artenal's presence, looking at him with quiet interest. "Should I?" he said.

"It's either that or you surrender and come have an unpleasant conversation with me and some friends of mine."

Ontre seemed to honestly consider this for a moment. Then he shrugged, said, "I do have a lot of work to do here, you know," and reached out for a switch on a small activation board lying on the bench.

The air was filled with an angry buzz as the drones came to life. Ontre adjusted a few settings on the board, then leaned on one elbow and watched Artenal.

It took a few seconds for the electric machines to rise in the air and orient themselves. They hovered ever higher, adjusting their formations and apparently communicating with other. Despite himself, Artenal was fascinated. "Do they always take this long to get into gear?" he asked. "If I had a gun you'd be dead by now."

"They go from zero to kill in point eight five seconds per meter in mid-air, assuming no wind. There're some emergency features, too, that let them launch themselves up or even directly at someone. Total from offline to guaranteed impact is one point one two, with my hand on the activation trigger," the Gallentean said. "And if you'd had a gun you would've shot me at range, so I figured I might as well let them go through the whole syncing routine. They get a little grumpy if I use them too much with realignment."

"Let's see what they can do, then," Artenal said and started walking towards the mercenary. The drones, who were floating in the rafters by now, immediately turned their electric eyes to him. There was an echo of a dozen little prods extending from their carapaces, followed by the crackle of electricity.

As Ontre shrugged and flicked another switch on his control board, Artenal reached into his pocket and pulled out the EMP bomb. The drones roared downwards, electric oblivion aimed at Artenal, and it took more self-control than he'd expected not to run. He clicked on the bomb and tossed in the air.

There was a whomph, and the drones clattered lifelessly onto the ground along with the spent bomb.

Ontre frowned. Instead of reacting to Artenal's approaching presence, he looked back to his work and prodded it a few times with a screwdriver. "You just cost me a full day of very complex work," he said.

"Shame. Maybe next time you'll know better than to mess with us," Artenal said. He was closing in on the Gallentean and had started to reach out a hand that he expected would grab the man by his neck, when the mercenary ducked, shot in and clamped his arms around Artenal's knees, tripping him up. Ontre immediately followed through, resting one knee on Artenal's sternum and pinning him, the other leg stretched out for ballast, and started raining punches on his head.

The shock of the attack cost Artenal several valuable seconds, and his vision had begun to blur at the edges when his brain caught up with what his body was undergoing. He bucked his hip, then dropped it again and rolled away, getting to his knees. As the Gallentean rushed towards him, he pulled his small steel blade out of a hidden part on his belt and held it behind his hands, feigning wooziness. The mercenary aimed a kick at his head, and as it curved close Artenal swiped his knife at the leg. He'd been hoping to hit a tendon, but the blade buried itself midway into Ontre's calf, and the kick hit the side of his head with lessened force that was nonetheless enough to nearly knock him out.

Ontre dropped to the floor, screaming. He tried pulling out the knife, but its notched edge wouldn't budge. By the time he had the sense to look up again, Artenal's other hidden knife slid neatly under his chin and into his head.

Ontre slumped, lifeless.

Artenal sat there for a long time, reflecting on career choices, and on the idiocy of assumptions.

It was dark and the alley was deep, but he had been told she would be here. He knew she wouldn't be, at least not unprepared and certainly not by herself, but that was all right; he'd made preparations of his own.

Kralean walked about slowly, listening for noise and for silence.

"Hello, weakling," a voice said.

He turned. A woman of Minmatar origin entered the mouth of the alley. She wasn't dressed in much, and the distant lights of neon and stars made her dark skin glisten, highlighting its tattoos and scars. Kralean saw the cut of her muscles, which writhed like coiled snakes, insinuating themselves in effortless motion. It was the woman from the bar, but he hadn't paid any attention to her back then.

She was followed by a dozen people, all of whom looked like they came from the darkest part of space.

"Word has it you've been going after my associates. Got free somehow, think you're gonna be real clever and take us out. I tried contacting them, thought it was just the usual Guristas shit station service. Turns out it's you, and that you've turned the guards against us."

"That would be Artenal. He figured you'd be easier dealt with if we imposed a blackout. Sorry about the inconvenience," Kralean said and put his hands in his pockets. The Minmatar woman's associates tensed up, so Kralean added, "I'm not pulling a gun. Relax."

"So I let word spread that I'm panicking," the Minmatar woman said, "And set up a meeting with an escape contact. Lo and behold, you show up. Where are your pals?"

"I honestly have no idea," Kralean said. "I explicitly requested that I get you to myself, and I see I made the right choice."

The Minmatar woman frowned. She turned to one of her associates and said, "Kill him."

The man nodded and wordlessly started making his way into the alley. When he'd covered half the distance, Kralean pulled out of his pocket a small item and said, "Come any closer and I'll press it."

Everyone froze in place. In calm and very clear tones, the woman said. "What is it you have there?"

"Oh, it's just a button," Kralean said, and pressed it. To his great enjoyment, everyone but him pinched their eyes shut for a second, then looked around in amazement. "Told you," he said.

"Great Tribe of earth and sky," the Minmatar woman said in exasperation, sighing with spent adrenaline. "Kill him!"

Her man moved in. Kralean smiled. There was a brief scuffle.

After the man's body had stopped twitching, Kralean dusted off his robes and said, "Look, maybe we can work this out."

The Minmatar woman and her people stared at the broken form lying by Kralean's legs. She said, "What ... what do you suggest?"

"Well, you've got a tiny golden Khuumak hanging around your neck. I like those, they're cute. Break it off and toss it to me, and I'll give you a running start."

Even at this distance he could see her face tense up and her jaw clench. "Don't forget to recite the names of the Emperors," he added. "You must've been taught them at some point."

She looked directly into his eyes and said in a dead voice, "You will never walk out of this alley alive." She started walking towards him, her team in tow.

He gave a brief smile and cocked his head, as if listening, then looked towards the sky.

Had this been a mere alley fight, he thought, she would have continued. But even despite her visible rage she stopped, and told her men to stop as well.

He found himself relieved that he'd secured backup. The transmitter in his pocket felt far too light, but he pressed it again, sending the second and final message.

"Why are we waiting?" one of them said, in the plaintive tones of a child being told it can't play with its favorite toy. "He's just standing there."

"Yeah," she said. "That's the problem. What are you listening for, preacher man?"

"The people," he said. "And I think they're arriving."

There was a susurrus in the air. Kraleian said, "You know, most people had the sense not to help you out. The ones who did sign up in your little crew are the ones that everybody else on this station positively hates and fears. But there's strength in numbers."

"What are you talking about?"

"There's a lot of faith in a place like this," he said. "And it took quite a bit of convincing, but I've been a Wanderer for the Speakers of Truth for a long time, and I know what to tell the people who want to hear, and how to listen to those who otherwise never get to speak."

The susurrus turned into a tremor. The mercenaries looked around and saw groups of people pouring into the alley.

"You really should have listened," Kraleian said before the beatings began.

Shahoun moved through the darkening night, alone and unprotected.

The last of his team had vanished. They'd been heading towards the docking area when his Caldari bodyguard stopped them, saying he'd heard a noise. The guard had ordered him to stay put, then gone off to investigate and never come back. He'd heard a woman's laughter in the distance and it had given him the shivers. He ran.

Now he was at the docks, moments away from his ship. Nothing mattered but to get away.

The customs agent took a long time looking over his data. Then he said to Shahoun, "I'm sorry, sir. Your ship has been sequestered."

He did not even bother arguing. "Is there any way I can get off this station? Any way at all? Please?"

The customs agent looked at him for far too long.

"Look," Shahoun said, "I'm very sorry if I'm being too forward here. I don't mean to imply anything about you, your job or personal ethics. But I absolutely positively have to get somewhere very soon, and I'll do anything I can to make it happen. Please. I'm begging you."

The agent kept looking. Then at last he said, "Well, sir, your ship has been seized but you're under no official obligation to stay, though I don't doubt you will be once investigations have run their course. But I can see you're in dire straits, and I'm willing to consider a compromise."

"Name it. Anything," Shahoun said.

"There's a ship leaving soon, and I know someone on it. Spoke to him earlier tonight, as a matter of fact. They've finished their business here and have plenty of room for passengers. I'm sure you could bargain with them to get you where you want. They're good people."

"Thank you, please. Yes. That would be most wonderful."

The customs agent handed him a card. "So if you'll just make a quick donation to the customs agent retirement fund, I'm sure we can sort you out."

"Of course, of course," Shahoun said and grinned. "How much?"

"How much is it worth to you?" the customs agent said without expression.

Shahoun signed off an amount, and the agent looked it over and nodded. "Section 34C, red area, sir. Move quickly, now."

"Thank you so much," Shahoun said and ran off.

He made it to the ship on time, was waved through by another customs agent without a word, and went into one of its waiting chambers, where he sat down with a heavy sigh of relief. He didn't want to talk to anyone just yet, merely to be whisked away into the oblivion of deep space.

After not too long the outside door closed automatically. The only other door was the one that lead deeper into the ship, standing ajar.

There was a tink from that door. Shahoun looked up and saw a big, burly Minmatar man smiling at him, a small canister in one hand. The man threw the canister at Shahoun, who instinctively grabbed it.

"Welcome onboard," Artenal said and shut the door. The canister started hissing, and let out a white non-odorous gas that filled the room.

Shahoun's felt inertia pull hard on him, though through the increasing fuzziness of his thoughtweb he didn't know whether the ship was taking off or if he was merely losing his consciousness. It felt oddly relieving.

His last thoughts before passing out was that he really should have hired these people instead.

The Slow Disease

Tibus Heth, Executor of the Caldari Providence Directorate and de facto leader of the Caldari State, sat alone in the waiting room of Dr. Yoshun's Corporate & Family Practices. He fanned himself with a plain brown filing folder that bore neither label nor seal. The breeze it created was slight, though it was a gust compared to the pitiable whimper of the room's climate control unit.

He shifted his weight to his right side as he pulled out an old metallic watch. The case was smooth and cool to the touch, its contours blemished by minor scratches and the occasional dent. The back still bore a fading decal that read, "Employee of the Month." He stared at the ticking hands, blinked himself out of a tired trance, and returned the watch to his pocket, a cycle he had completed twelve times during his wait. Despite his history with Caldari Constructions, he was fond of his non-monetary reward. It was a good, mechanical watch. Tibus always preferred things he could fix himself.

After stretching in his chair with a grunt (answered by a small series of hollow pops from his back), Tibus opened the manila folder. Inside was a series of monochrome reports printed on cheap white paper. The calm, pristine lines of standard Caldari report formatting were completely negated by Tibus's numerous inline notations and marginal scribbles. Lines crossed between sections; questions scribbled in the margins were answered by other, more frantic questions. Everything suggested connections, but none were made.

The first report profiled former Gallente president, Souro Foiritan. Foiritan was the perfect model of a Gallente politician, averse to direct , especially military, action but skilled enough with words to thwart the efforts of his enemies. His recent resignation had taken the intelligence community by

surprise. Only its timing suggested any sort of connection, especially with the purchase of his homeworld, Intaki, by the Ishukone.

A second report picked up that story. It listed the movements of Ishukone ships, personnel, and other assets over the past year. The megacorporation, and its CEO, Mens Reppola, were Tibus's greatest internal political enemies. When the Caldari militia held complete dominance of Black Rise and development rights were auctioned off, Ishukone had bid only on Intaki. More curiously, they had contracted the mercenary company Mordu's Legion to police the system. Conspiracy theories were stranger still, but no evidence could be brought to bear.

The final report in the folder, marred by a web of Tibus's notes, detailed the new Gallente president, Jacus Roden. The majority of the report was long outdated. Intelligence was playing catch-up. Roden's life was well documented until his retirement from his position as CEO of Roden Shipyards. The trail went completely cold there, picking up again only with Roden's recent meteoric rise back into the public spotlight and the presidency.

Tibus pinched the bridge of his nose. He read the reports more than a dozen times, each time realizing more connections. He had long suspected that Foiritan and Reppola conspired against him, but Foiritan's fall and Roden's ascent did not fit. All three men were intelligent and immensely capable; nothing they did was accidental.

The only way it made any sense to Tibus was through an intricate conspiracy supported by a network of Gallente agents operating within the State: The Federation use Intaki as a way to funnel their spies into the State; Foiritan resigns as a distraction; and Roden assumes control of the Gallente government, plausibly clean of the Intaki affair and the most powerful man in the Federation.

Tibus knew it sounded insane, but he also knew such machinations were possible. The Broker proved that idea.

Flushing those agents out would be a painful task. Tibus's political power was not absolute. If he targeted Ishukone and questioned their loyalty without any hard evidence, the other megacorps would turn on him. He could authorize a State-wide inquiry to save face, but that would consume time and energy that could be spent elsewhere. How much could he risk on suspicions alone?

A knock at the door startled Tibus out of his headspace. He scrambled to replace the documents back in the folder. A nurse peeked her head in from the adjoining hallway. "Sir? Mister, ah..." she trailed off, taking another puzzled glance at the appointment list she carried. "Mister Adar?"

"That's me." He smiled.

"Sorry. Thought you looked like Tibus Heth for a second. Dr. Yoshun is ready to see you."

Tibus sat on the small table in the examination room. The room was spartan and slightly too cold to be comfortable (a practice Tibus had found uniformly maddening in all doctors' offices). A canned smell halfway between fresh flowers and mouthwash permeated the air. The only decoration was a small poster of a human heart attached to a time bomb, with the accusing phrase, "PREVENTION SAVES LIVES," in bold beneath it.

Standing above Tibus was Dr. Yoshun. He was a younger man with dark hair, and his long, white coat bore the Caldari Constructions logo on either sleeve. It had only been five years since Yoshun took over as the CC

physician for the district, but the pressures of maintaining the practice on his corporate budget had already aged him well beyond that time span. Tibus noted that, regardless of Yoshun's degree of experience, he had perfected a disapproving scowl.

"Tibus, I'm flattered that you want to stick with your old planetary physician and all, but you haven't had a proper checkup since, you know, everything. And insisting that your appointment not push out any of the other patients is borderline treason. You're the most powerful man in the State."

The older man took the berating in stride. Their personal dynamic was established during Tibus's years with the company. Yoshun was one of the few loyal company men Tibus always trusted. "I'm a citizen of the State first," he replied. "I don't deserve preferential treatment."

"Don't give me that crap. Your health is not a damn political statement. These tests should have been run a long time ago." Yoshun raised an admonishing finger. "And before you say it, I don't care how busy you've been. Getting the blood results back took two days. Two days! If you had just one blood test and two days available a year ago, everything could have been different."

Tibus adopted a skeptical face. "You're being melodramatic, Yoshun. I've been exercising regularly. I'm sure as hell eating better than I ever did in the company cafeteria. The pain in my leg comes and goes, but other than that I feel—"

"You have Derj's disease."

The room fell silent. The climate control droned on. Half a minute passed before Tibus showed any further reaction. "Derj's disease?"

"It's also known as exotic tissue sedimentation, or 'miner's disease.'"

"I goddamn know what it is!" Tibus blurted. He clenched and released his fists several times, trying to control himself. When his composure returned, he asked, "How far is it?"

Yoshun pulled out his battered datapad, fighting briefly with the slow machine. "It's stage three. Deposits have started to form around neural tissues. Needless to say, your blood's full of the stuff. If we had detected it earlier, we might have scrubbed you of it in a month. As it is, we can treat most of your symptoms, but you'll never really be cured."

"Is it...." Tibus trailed off, struggling with his mouth to form the word.

"No. At least, not technically. Look, with the kind of resources you have at your disposal, there's no reason you couldn't live a full, natural lifespan. This never has to reach stage four. But — and this is a large 'but' — the deposits that have already developed interfere with brain mapping. They corrupt the results in unpredictable ways."

"I can never clone?"

"If you were to ever attempt to clone, there's a strong probability of permanent and irreversible neural damage. The worst-case scenario, and not an unlikely one, is that your new body would just never wake up."

More seconds passed as Tibus processed his new fate. He felt the watch's subtle ticking in his pocket. "How?"

"Augumen exposure. You most likely came into contact while moving construction materials for the company.

"Augumen is illegal for construction use. Hell, it was illegal before I took over."

"Yeah, it was illegal. But augumen is also a hell of a lot cheaper than pyroxeres, and it's damned easy for inspectors to miss the difference."

Tibus's gaze hardened. He knew the answer to his next question, but asked anyway. "You're certain the company did this?"

"I don't have any proof," Yoshun set his datapad aside, "but yes."

Executor Heth's security entourage immediately greeted him as he exited the small practice. They were all wearing the latest in personal armor, shiny and clean in the evening sun, contrasting heavily with the weather-worn building. If his men tired of waiting outside, they made no mention of it. Jinyo, a tiny man in an over-starched suit, Heth's acting aid and ever the functionary, hurried to the executor's side. He was madly tapping on his top-of-the-line KK datapad, juggling dozens of meetings and mails.

"I hope everything went well, sir. I know you prefer to keep things humble, but we really should find you better and closer health care. In the past seven hours, eighteen new issues arose that require your attention."

"Yes," he replied, "I'm sure." Heth began walking briskly to the parked, nondescript Speeder they had arrived in. His entourage hurried behind. Their leader was walking a brisker pace than they were used to keeping.

All of Heth's old and new angers and frustrations mixed together, merged, and fueled a resolve he had forgotten since the first day of his tiny workers' revolt. Even his limp felt lessened. "Jinyo, I have new orders."

"Yes, sir?" The tiny man made a dozen taps on his datapad.

"First, launch an investigation into Caldari Constructions' use of augumen in building materials, going back ten years. No excuses, just names or heads. Second, I want a full-time, dedicated personal physician. Schedule regular checkups, tests, the whole gamut." Heth put his hand in his pocket and felt the watch's cold, dented case.

"Third, Jinyo, the Caldari people need to know their government is healthy. I want a list of our most loyal, incorruptible officials and investigators, Navy background preferred. Weakness and timidity have allowed an infection to grow within the State. We will burn it out."

Signs of Faith

"God; Emperor; Theology Council." Nusi tapped the triangle he'd drawn on the board. "That's the theological underpinnings, at least, and - luckily for you - this isn't a politics class, so that's all we cover." He glanced up at the timepiece on the wall. "Well, that's it for today's material, and we still have time to spare. It wouldn't do to let you go early, so...any questions?"

No, he reflected in the silence, it wouldn't do to be too forward, would it? That would be gauche, under the circumstances. This group was a fast-track class; unprompted enthusiasm would be unseemly. He moved forward a little.

"Annoli, you were looking thoughtful a few minutes ago. What was troubling you?"

"Well..." she started slowly, "is it true that the Khanid aren't allowed in the Council chambers?"

"Ah, I should've known it would involve his Highness. He's too old for you, you know..." A few quiet chuckles rumbled around the room, and then a hand shot up. "Yes, Garund?"

"I've heard it's never stopped him in the past, sir." More laughter.

"Ok, ok, let's not be having fun at his Highness' expense." Nusi shot a quick glance into the corner of the room. "Does anyone know the answer to Annoli's question?"

A more furtive hand went up. "Aleine?"

"My pa tole me that it was the symbol that they dint like. He said there was something about it that upset them."

"Good, very good. Yes, the Khanid people, be they Imperial citizens or Royal subjects, are allowed entrance, but the Royal Seal is...well, it's not banned, per se, but it's not welcome there either. Now, does anyone know why?"

A deeper silence, filled with thoughtful faces.

"Well, since we have time, I'll explain properly. We're going to go on a journey through some symbols, because you can't really appreciate the significance of the situation until you understand the background. First—"

Nusi moved back to the board, wiped it clean, and drew a circle with a small inverted triangle at the base.

"What's this? Teilf?"

"That's, uh...the first man?"

"The first men, yes. Unbroken circle, God become man - looks a bit like an upside-down egg, I always thought. That's probably symbolic of something, too... Anyway. First men. This leads to—"

A second symbol, one half-circle above the other, open sides away from each other, with the same inverted triangle at the base of the upper one.

"Do you know this one as well, Teilf? No? Adi?"

"Something to do with the dark?"

"Exactly. This is after the Fall and so on, during the Long Dark. Man and God entirely separate, with man below on his planets and God above in the heavens. An age of savagery and barbarism and general unenlightenment - an age which still persists to this day outside the confines of the Empire. And, yes Annoli, outside the Kingdom as well. His Highness remains an enlightened man in that respect. Which brings us to—"

A more familiar symbol, the two semicircles laid one on top of the other, with the upward-arching one broken where the other crossed it.

"This one you know; it's the Imperial Seal. When we came out of the Dark and formalized the Imperial Creed, man and God were reunited together again, albeit imperfectly. United but not conjoined, primacy of the Divine and the rest. This is Citizenship 101 stuff, which I'm told you've all passed now, yes? Good. Aleine, you have a question?"

"Yeah, uh..what does this have to do with the Khanid?"

"I'm getting to that! One final detail you need to know about the Imperial Seal. You remember from earlier that the Theology Council asserts that the rule of God comes before the rule of man? Well, the symbology at work here is the underpinning of that concept. Just as the Emperor above rules over the people below, so God above rules over man below. Primacy of the Divine isn't sufficient: the implied heirarchy is critical to the rationale.

"So then. When Khanid II upped and left, Heideran—" a glance again into the corner of the room. "That is to say, of course, Emperor Heideran VII, immediately declared him in breach of precedent, along with various other things. The Theology Council, though, followed due process and sent a firmly worded message to Khanid inviting him to explain his actions. There was a bit of a delay, and then his Highness (as he is now) replied with this—"

The same symbol again, but drawn upside-down.

"The delivery was, in fact, a very nice rendering of the Imperial Seal, done carefully in his House colors, but inverted."

Nusi looked around. A lot of blank faces, but a few sparks of dawning comprehension.

"Rial, what property of this little sign is making your eyes bulge in such a curious manner?"

"If...well, if...if the Council gets its authority...the thing on top... If the Imperial Seal is saying that God's law is better than man's law, then..." The student glanced back over his shoulder.

"Then the Royal Seal is saying that man's law is, shall we say, more important than God's law. It's a historical discussion; nobody's saying that it's true. But yes, that's what Khanid was trying to say – or at least, that's how the Council interpreted it. With a single, simple image, he denied the theological root of the Council's authority, telling them that he could damn well do as he saw fit, so long as he broke no secular law – which he hadn't, because Heirs are above such things. How, do you suppose, did the Council react to this...Indlar?"

"I guess maybe they weren't very happy?"

"Hah! You're damn right they weren't happy! They passed down judgement pretty promptly after that, and even though those Justices have all since passed on, the Council as an institution still hasn't forgiven Khanid. That's why it's extremely unwise to take the Royal Seal into the Council chambers. They see it as a direct challenge to their authority, even now. Teilf, you have a question?"

"Didn't they, like, know about the symbol before? Like when Khanid started using it or something?"

"No, because Khanid's reply was the first time anybody had seen it! It seems that he made it up just for this purpose, but decided to keep it afterward as his Royal Seal. Only his Highness knows exactly why, but once he made the decision, he stuck with it. There's other readings of it, too, and again, nobody but Khanid knows which ones are intended and which aren't. For example, given this – the inverted Imperial Seal or the Royal Seal or however you want to think of it – you can arrive at this–"

The second symbol, with the two separated semicircles, but inverted.

A glance again into the corner of the room. "This symbol is frowned upon, but I'm allowed to explain it in this context so you know the truth. I'm not going to ask you to speculate on its meaning; there are many ways to interpret this, some of which you may come across over the years, but there's only one correct interpretation, which is that the Imperial Creed is part of our heritage and our culture and our very identity, but that our future is among the stars. I stress again that Khanid II has never indicated that his Seal implies anything more than rejection of the Council's authority, and that other readings of the symbology here are simply incorrect. And that, I hope, answers the original question in a reasonably comprehensive manner."

A hand crept up lazily in the back corner of the room.

"Zweir, you have something to ask?"

"You've shown us five symbols. What about the sixth?"

Nusi stared long and hard at the boy, and then answered with a smile that contained no hint of mirth.

"There is no sixth symbol, and that's all we have time for today. Class dismissed."

Merely Disassembled

Parlan, reading scripture, felt a drop of sweat trickle down his back. It was a late day in early summer and the fields outside still wavered with heat. Through the window he could see the workers putting away their microblade scythes and sending the last of the wheat through the binders. People worked in shifts here on the colony, and it was Parlan's week for early days in the field and late nights studying his faith.

He wouldn't have minded being out there, working himself into tiredness. It was far preferable to thinking so much, these days.

He refocused on the text in front of him, willing his gaze to remain fixed on it. Ordinarily, reading the scripture was akin to meditation. The words would hum in his head, turning into a litany that took him elsewhere; sometimes into the gentle rapture of faith, and sometimes merely into a void empty of all sense, away from whatever earthly demands needed to be ignored.

The drop of sweat kept trickling down, down, down.

A sound emanating from somewhere in the room interrupted his attempts at meditation, and he realized he had been quietly singing to himself. He sighed, closed the text and got up, sliding his wooden old chair under his wooden old desk, and massaging the sweat on his back into his robe. A look outside the window confirmed that the day would still be warm but bearable, and resplendant with nature.

Parlan left his room, walking slowly through the halls of quietude that formed the main section of the temple. He did not meet anyone on the way. There were guests in the temple these days, travellers from other systems who wanted to explore the Amarrian faith, but they would be working in the fields.

Once he'd left the halls and entered the world of the living, it took him a moment to get used to the brightness, the smells and sounds, the slumbering freshness of it all. This temple, sitting as it did in the middle of golden fields of extensive farmlands, felt like the head of a body: Quiet and cold, silent and meditative, and ideally divorced from the messy vagaries of the lesser orders of daily life.

He walked at a slow pace with no particular destination in mind. A keen eye was enough for nature to provide him with any number of distractions, and for that he was thankful. He let the leaves on the trees fascinate him, their veins showing through the remainder of the golden sunlight; and he imagined what it would be like to soar like the birds above him, who barely seemed to bat their wings. He looked to the hills in the distance, too; grey and covered in their own smoky haze.

That was another reality. He would be there tomorrow.

The winding paths eventually led him back towards the temple. On his way there he walked past the conference area: A small, secluded spot where acolytes could sit on wooden benches and discuss the tenets of their faith under sunny skies. He came close enough that he could recognize the few people who were sitting there, talking quietly. In this place it was held that thoughts on faith should be shared.

Not all thoughts could be shared. Parlan sighed.

He found a tall tree, a sturdy tree with heavily foliated branches and sat down in its shade. He was close enough to the conference area that he could hear the soft murmurs of words. He shut his eyes and listened. Even at this distance, where the words were unintelligible, he could recognize some of the voices. He imagined that one of them was speaking to him. He

realized that listening for a precious voice was, in fact, a very religious activity, and he grinned to himself.

Someone right next to him - a woman's voice he didn't recognize - asked if she could sit down. He opened his eyes.

She had blonde hair, beautiful in the fading sun, though it stood in contrast with a subdued harshness of her expression. He expected that the harshness had been there before she arrived. This place eased the minds of its inhabitants, at least those who could leave their ill longings behind them.

He realized she was waiting for an answer, so he nodded and smiled.

She explained, without too many words, that she was one of the visitors - one of the 'rich' guests, she called herself, with a clear sense of self-irony that he appreciated - and that she'd been working in the fields all day, was tired and sweaty, had gotten sick of the drama among her own people - a recent theft in the temple had started to fray their tempers - and wanted to relax in the presence of someone who looked like they could use some rest themselves.

She was forthright when tired, she warned him. He said he had rather suspected that, and she laughed. He liked her already.

They talked for a while about life on this planet and life elsewhere. She was a mission agent, she told him, and had been working out of her home planet in the Gallente Federation. He'd heard of the profession, although it was rare for the colony to receive agents of any stripe. She asked if the agents in the Amarr Empire didn't tend to have crises of faith with the work they were doing, and he said that they did not, for the ones who aspired to the profession were driven, rather than hampered, by their faith, and did not

need to buttress it. She said that she did not know whether she envied them, and he admitted that he did not know, either.

During the conversation he had stolen a few looks at the crowd sitting by the conference area, still talking, and eventually his companion at the tree - whose name, it turned out, was Heci - asked him if he had other things than faith on his mind.

He closed his eyes and rubbed them.

"Is it really that obvious?" he said, quietly, even though he knew no one could hear him but this woman and God.

"No," she said, to his relief. "But I have desires of my own to deal with -not for you, darling," she added with a grin, patting him on the shoulder and eliciting a snort of laughter from him, "- and they make me see these things. You know how it is. When you look for signs of God, you see Him everywhere. Same with other things."

He nodded.

She fell silent, closed her own eyes and leaned her head back against the tree. She did not ask him to elaborate, but he knew she would listen.

He was not sure whether he could discuss this, even though she had caught him. He could admit to a sin in the abstract, but revealing details - speaking them aloud - would make it real, and not merely an imagination inside his own head.

But he wanted to talk about this - he needed to - and he doubted he would ever find a safer conversant for it. Besides, compounding it with the sin of lying wouldn't enamor him with the holy.

"I have never acted on it," he said, even quieter than before.

"Never?" she asked.

"Well, look at me," he said amusedly, and held up the end of his robe.

She smiled and nodded. "Not much opportunity for romance, is there," she said, not really asking.

"Do you love anyone?" he asked.

She looked away, to the vistas beyond. "Too many, really. Including your kind of love."

"My kind of love?" he said. He understood her, but he really hadn't thought it had been that obvious.

"The one that's not allowed? Oh yes. I know that one very well," she said, nodding towards the acolytes by the conference and, he thought, in particular towards the one he'd been looking at. She continued, "Even if most of it was only physical - I hope I'm not making you uncomfortable with this..."

"No, no," he said.

Heci said, "Unrequited love is a bitch. You give all you dare and don't get the same back, even as you want to give so much more. You have to continually accept that you are not the one setting the limits, but the other person, who decides how much of you they are ready to take."

She shifted, rubbed her back against the tree. "So even when it was mostly physical, there was always some degree of love there. You just have to

accept it for what it is, and allow it to exist in your heart as long as it cares to stay there."

The idea that he would have to live with these feelings, unrequited, for the rest of conscious time made Parlan intensely uncomfortable.

"So how do you deal with heartbreak?" he asked, truly hoping that her answer would imply some end to the way he felt, some course these feelings would naturally take that would eventually lead them to extinction.

And she did not. She said, "The heart is resilient and cannot be broken, merely disassembled for a while."

They sat there for a while, looking out at nature and God's creations, and when the sun went down he left without a word. He kept the peace and walked back to his room, where he sat and read scripture long into the night until he couldn't stand it any longer, then took a shower so cold he gagged from the shock, crawled trembling into bed, wrapped himself in the sheets and shivered into sleep, the warmth rising slowly from within him.

The next morning it was his turn to visit the mines, as everyone who worked on the settlement had to do from time to time. It was a long day's walk and gave him time to think. Something about last night's conversation, in that shade of the silent tree, had begun to comfort him even though the shock of it had been too much for his tired head at the time. There was an inevitability to his feelings that he had not realized before his talk with Heci.

The mines, when he got to them, were the same pit of stink, ash, smoke and misery as they always had been. The Amarr Empire kept slaves, and on this planet some of those slaves tilled the fields alongside the acolytes, while others, not yet ascended, lived and worked in this place. Some day

they, or their children or their own children, might be lifted up to the fields, but until then they slaved under the eyes of God.

Parlan was inured to their pain - the world was full of suffering and it made no more sense even if one brooded on it - but he eased it the best he could. For hours on end he walked among them, in their thousands, bringing them water as they hacked at the earth. As he poured he sometimes thought of the one he loved. Some of the slaves thanked him, others - too tired, he reasoned - did not, but in every pair of eyes there was a quiet acceptance. They did not resent his presence here, nor particularly welcome it: He was merely here, and they were thankful for him while he stayed. This life they led was their lot just as Parlan's was his, until the day God decided otherwise.

He spent most of his day there. Some of the incoming slaves from the fields, attending briefly on their own business, mentioned that there'd been a commotion back at the settlement. He didn't care. His lot was to be here, and give his love to these people.

At the end his robe was caked with dust, and he could not even see his fingerprints for the clay that had covered his skin. When he finally went back to the settlement he saw everyone outside, with serious faces, and something starting in the open expanse of the conversation area.

As he watched, one of the settlement slaves - an assistant to the head minister, and someone he knew had family in the mines - was dragged out there, stripped, and tied down. The minister announced that he had been guilty of the recent theft.

The slave overseer arrived, with his tools. It went on for a while. Everyone watched, some looking upset, others - including Heci - horrified and disgusted, and a few looking hungry for more.

Parlan did not react, one way or another. The clay felt cool on his dry skin.

There is a mindset where you achieve quiet and tranquility not by accepting things the way they are, but accepting that they are the way they are.

When it was over he retired to his quarters, where he read scripture until he fell asleep in his chair.

Caldari Funds Unlimited

Introduction

Caldari Funds Unlimited is the largest financial institution in the Caldari State, forming the foundation for much of the State's banking and investment infrastructure. The corporation has two primary functions: it is the State's largest provider of pension management services and also provides the State's largest pool of ISK available to the megacorporations for short and long term loans. It also performs a variety of other services and has holdings in a variety of other powerful corporations, giving it far more influence than its sub-megacorporate size might indicate.

The corporation dates back to the years preceding the Caldari's secession from the Federation. The same trend of consolidation which led to the rise of the megacorporations also led to the rise of large financial conglomerates on Caldari Prime; Caldari Funds Unlimited spent years acquiring smaller banks and financial service providers during the decades before the Gallente-Caldari War, eventually becoming the dominant financial institution among the Caldari and vying for the top spot in the entire Federation itself.

While the investment banks the megacorporations had coalesced around were arguably larger, their assets were far less liquid, and the vast majority of consumer banking was done through CFU or one of its competitors. Most of the megacorporations had outsourced their retirement programs to CFU or one of the companies it had gobbled up, and Gallente-owned competitors were soon quietly complaining to the Federation Senate about the undue influence the Caldari bank was able to exert on the market.

Their most powerful argument centered on an incident that took place four years prior to secession, where CFU had sold off its entire stake in Shield

Aerospace, a minor Federation defense contractor. The resulting fallout on the Federation stock exchange nearly drove the company to bankruptcy and forced the Federal government to bail them out. The most startling aspect of the entire incident was the reason for the move: the CEO of Shield Aerospace had been involved in an affair with the husband of CFU's CEO, and the sale was made out of spite. Despite the fact that CFU's board fired her after the incident (and that Shield Aerospace did survive), it raised many questions about how powerful the Federation should allow any financial institution to become – especially a Caldari one.

When the megacorporations began planning their secession from the Federation, Caldari Funds Unlimited became a key part of their strategy, necessary for both financial reasons and public support. Its coffers would be essential in paying for the war effort and backing the corporations' scrip, and making sure the bank was secure would also help convince the populace that the corporations would provide for their future. Unlike the anti-secession megacorporations, CFU could not simply be decapitated and dismantled; it would need to be preserved, for symbolic reasons as well as practical ones.

As Federation investigators began to get closer and closer to discovering the secret Caldari colonies, the six secessionist megacorporations colluded to launch a multi-pronged financial assault on Caldari Funds Unlimited. In the several months prior to secession, the stock market activity tripled as the megacorporations manipulated share prices, spread rumors, and used corporate espionage to buy up millions of CFU shares at bargain prices. The collateral damage was immense, with dozens of other companies in the Federation collapsing as part of the megacorporations' scheme. As an example, the megacorporations sabotaged two of the largest pyroxyeres mines in the Federation – leading to explosions that killed nearly 20,000 workers – for no greater reason than to force their mines' owner into bankruptcy so he would default on a loan from CFU, triggering a drop in its stock price. The scale of the megacorporate campaign was unprecedented,

and remains unrivaled in history. By its end, the secessionist megacorporations had taken nearly complete control of Caldari Funds Unlimited.

What emerged after the megacorporate buyout was a new corporation that combined its old role as a pension fund manager and investment bank with a new role as a pseudo-central bank for the emerging Caldari State and a neutral party to facilitate megacorporate agreements. With the end of most other non-megacorporate banks in the State, and the lack of a standard currency after secession, it was necessary for the megacorporations to establish a neutral party which could handle the high-level investment banking they required. CFU's strong reputation, both as a bastion of the banking industry and a pension provider, made it the perfect middleman. In addition, leaving the pension funds for most Caldari citizens in the hands of such an institution helped to reassure them that their future was still secure after the financial turbulence that followed the actual secession.

Today, Caldari Funds Unlimited has many roles in the Caldari State, but perhaps its most important role still remains as a symbol of financial stability in an often uncertain world.

Retirement Fund Management and Financial Instruments

Caldari Funds Unlimited is most familiar to people as a management entity for retirement funds. Nearly three-quarters of such funds, by total assets, are managed by CFU, with the lion's share of the rest managed by one of the other two major "independent" Caldari financial institutions, Modern Finances and the State and Region Bank. This is a legacy from before Caldari secession, when the relationship between corporate leadership and the workers was not nearly as dictatorial or adversarial. Corporate pensions were placed in the hands of neutral managers, like CFU and the other companies it absorbed, in order to ensure the protection of workers against corporate instability.

Today, this arrangement is maintained largely out of tradition and because it is what the workers have come to expect, rather than out of any particular sense of duty on the part of corporate leadership. However, even the hint of trouble at CFU can have widespread repercussions throughout Caldari society as a result. Rumors of malfeasance by CFU executives in YC 27 triggered a massive investigation by the Caldari Business Tribunal, as well as a steep decline in the bank's fortunes. Two years later, the Tribunal investigation determined it had been a propaganda campaign from an up-and-coming corporation that hoped to attain megacorporate status by taking CFU's business, Seaguard Financial. Before this was revealed, concerns about CFU's stability triggered panic in many parts of the State, especially on poorer worlds. Riots broke out as people demanded their money out of retirement funds, leading to thousands of deaths as they clashed with corporate security.

The reaction from the Chief Executive Panel was swift and merciless. Seaguard Financial, which had started the rumors and inserted its agents inside CFU to fan the flames, was placed under “extreme sanction” by the Panel. The megacorporations went to war against the upstart, and within a year, every asset of the company had been absorbed by the Big Eight. It's worth noting that similar propaganda campaigns against other corporations – even members of the CEP – have happened many times in the past, and have never provoked such a vicious response. The Seaguard Incident remains a cautionary tale of the limits that exist to the State's regularly occurring corporate warfare.

CFU's fund management strategy, and the financial instruments it sells on the market, are generally geared towards conservative, long-term gains. Its largest funds focus on conservative financial instruments, such as low-interest, low-risk corporate bonds, funds with broad-based stock portfolios to minimize exposure to trouble in any one industry or market (also known

as index funds), and stocks focused on returning a strong annual dividend rather than a rapid increase in price.

However, in order to reduce its vulnerability and pursue slightly more aggressive growth, over the last century it has offered more diverse investments, such as funds focusing on Caldari ventures in the Khanid Kingdom and Amarr Empire, treasury bonds from the Kingdom, Empire, and even the Federation, and even growth-based funds focusing on foreign stocks. Clients can adjust their asset allocation, and therefore risk exposure, through the company's NeoCom portal. Despite this, most Caldari, especially at the lower end of the economic spectrum, take a hands-off approach.

The downturn in the State which manifested itself during YC 108-110 and the upswing in the fortunes of the Federation and Republic during that time has raised the profile of more aggressive managers at CFU, and as a result many funds at the company have become somewhat less risk-averse in an attempt to duplicate their success. The Caldari Business Tribunal, which is charged with maintaining the stability of CFU due to the bank's integral importance to the State's economy, has expressed some concerns over this shift. So far, however, the Tribunal has been hesitant to step in, concerned with triggering a panic that would only exacerbate the problem.

Corporate Banking

Caldari Funds Unlimited's other major line of business is acting as a “banker's bank” or reserve bank for the State's megacorporations. While the megacorporations have vast amounts of assets (including entire planets or star systems), their liquid cash is often considerably more limited, which is where CFU comes in.

CFU keeps a large treasury full of ISK and various corporate scrips in order to fund its day-to-day activities and secure itself from the risk of a run on

the bank or temporary market fluctuations. These funds are also used to provide the megacorporations liquid capital for financial maneuvers through short-term loans. This is one of the reasons the megacorporations found it necessary to take control of CFU during secession, as a lack of liquid capital would have paralyzed their ability to effectively pursue the war against the Federation. Usually, these loans are secured by some sort of hard asset, but the unique position of the megacorporations has often allowed them to acquire large unsecured loans, especially when four or more megacorporations are working together on a project. Much of the development of Black Rise was financed this way, as was a great deal of the investment the megacorporations have put into the Caldari-occupied territories of the Federation. This is risky behavior, but objections within CFU and from the Tribunal have usually been quieted by political pressure.

CFU's cash reserve also allows it to handle currency exchanges for the megacorporations. Although technically allowed to do so for individuals, it does not deal in amounts smaller than a million ISK, which limits its utility for the vast majority of people. Corporations wishing to exchange megacorporate scrip for another megacorporation's scrip, ISK, or foreign currency must use CFU to handle such transactions, for which it charges an extremely small fee. This is most often used by corporations when trying to make significant investments in foreign markets or as a hedge against fluctuations in the value of their own currency; however, corporations also keep reserves of other corporate scrips and foreign currency to pay contractors, foreign workers, and “extralegal” assets.

Relations With the Big Eight

Though not technically a megacorporate subsidiary or a megacorporation in its own right, the status Caldari Funds Unlimited enjoys in the State is considerably higher than that of any other independent corporation. Despite the push and pull of the various political blocs, CFU itself is allowed to operate independently for the most part so long as the business runs

smoothly. Board meetings are considerably more sedate than might be expected considering the company's shareholders. This is mostly due to the focus CFU has on simply providing the best return for its clients, whereas issues discussed in similarly divided venues (such as the CEP) tend to be considerably more political in nature.

The Patriots have long held the strongest position on the CFU board, and as a result most operations that need to be outsourced, such as security, tend to go to Patriot firms of one stripe or another. Kaalakiota and its allies have exerted political pressure on the firm, especially since the rise of the Heth regime, to allow them a considerably greater number of concessions than the other state factions (as evidenced by the Black Rise development loans, for one). CFU also uses Kaalakiota's Home Guard as its preferred security provider, and CFU employees who have given public objection to some of these politically sensitive moves have recently been fired and/or arrested. While the reasons for their fates were never clearly stated, the fact that the Home Guard or Provists seem to pay very close attention to 'troublemakers' of that nature has led to a pervasive aura of fear among the company's executives, consequently keeping vocal dissent to a minimum.

While other corporations have been wary of Kaalakiota and the Patriots' growing influence over CFU, so long as things continue to run smoothly they appear to have little interest in making waves. With a company of CFU's reputation, not to mention the pensions of billions of Caldari, playing political football is a very dangerous game, and one that even the CEOs of the megacorporations are not willing to play unless they have little choice.

Chasing Shadows

Directors Conference Room, Federal Intelligence Office HQ, Renyn system, Essence

March 9th, YC112

"So why are we here, exactly?" asked Candon.

"Haven't found out yet," replied Suisse. "All I know is it's Code 14, top clearance." He enunciated the next part with careful mocking precision. "Should see En-Quaitant-do-Miérz Portres in here soon enough." He snapped his finger. "Yup, there he is. Start smiling."

Portres was making his way toward them. He was a tall gentleman, about fifty years old, and he walked with a purposeful strut that came off just a tad too calculated. With a cultured flourish, he took his seat next to the other two.

"Gentlemen."

"Counsel. How are the kids?" asked Suisse.

"Oh, you know," replied Portres. "Annoying their parents, going against the grain, experimenting with trodes and bodymods and what-have-you. It'll pass." He placed his case on the table in front of him and unclasped it.

"Any idea why we're here?" asked Candon.

"Something about a new security directive. I'm not sure," replied Portres.

"You'd think they'd brief us properly," said Suisse.

Portres nodded. "Yes," he said, "I suppose it was all rather vague and hurried." He pried his d-pad from the case's foam inlay, placed it on the table in front of him and began powering it up. "Comfortably certain it's all part of a plan, though," he said, unbuttoning his jacket. "Let it seldom be said our new President doesn't know what he's doing."

"Let it never be thought, much less said," muttered Candon.

Portres straightened in his chair, smoothed his lapel bottoms. "Well," he said, "at the very least he provides the illusion of knowing what he's doing. Right now, maybe that's what we all need. I know he's convinced me so far, and I'm a fairly hard man to convince."

"That much is true," said Candon. They sat there in silence for a few seconds while the meeting table's holographic center cycled through its test patterns.

About ten minutes later, with the formalities concluded and the heads of the Federal Intelligence Office's fifteen major divisions settling somewhat uneasily into their seats, the slight, bald figure at the head of the table began to speak.

"I'm sure most of you gentlemen are wondering why you were brought here this afternoon on such short notice, and with such dramatic urgency," he began. "Just as I'm sure many of you realize that the act of bringing you here in such a way can be an end unto itself."

A few heads turned around the table, but barely a sound was heard.

"As of 9:00 AM this morning, I have issued a presidential directive that places specific orders in the hands of each and every one of you. Your dossier pads have been updated with the relevant information. Use the

holofield to your convenience. As you review the data, bear in mind that if even one bit of this information finds its way into the wrong hands, the whole operation will come down on your head."

He paused for one second, then continued. "As you will learn, the impromptu Code 14 meetings will continue for the next two weeks. They are an unfortunate necessity, but crucial in the grander scheme." He lowered his head. The room was silent.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Please take your time to review your orders. They are effective immediately." Without another word, he turned, strode away from the table, and vanished through a side entrance, the subdued slither of his entourage trailing behind him.

Candon and Suisse looked at each other. Portres stared down at his d-pad stream. One by one, the three men went to work.

State and Region Bank Gala Hall, Jita system, The Forge

March 20th, YC112

The hall was gigantic, tastefully adorned in traditional Caldari style and dotted with artistic recreations of State exploits commissioned by the State's most beloved artists. The exclusive crowd in attendance, however, were far more interested in the other people around them than in their exorbitant surroundings.

"Miss Omura."

"Mister Kaikumi. Good to see you made it."

"How have things been, Miss Omura?"

"Copasetic. And with you?"

"Staying on an even keel."

"Good to hear. I understand you've been expanding into new markets recently?"

"Always on the prowl. Expansion is the lifeblood of our economy." He made a sudden awkward shuffle, backed up two steps. "My apologies. Miss Omura, allow me to introduce a friend of mine. This is Katiana Rigomi. She's an Achura investor of some repute. Katiana, this is Jaan Omura, the CEO of Caldari Funds Unlimited."

The girl thrust out her hand, almost forcefully. The older woman took her hand and shook it, and as she did, the girl's expression turned strong and penetrating, full of purpose. Her hand was cold.

Elsewhere in the room, a camera snapped.

Mercantile Club Master Parlor, New Caldari system, The Forge

March 29th, YC112

Dim lights glowed in far corners, draping tasteful ambience over the plush chamber. Against the city's jagged skyline, two older men were engaged in heated conversation.

"I don't know, Sioras. Advisors to the Federation? It sounds a bit pie-in-the-sky to me. You don't think his motives might be spurious in the least?"

"No no, listen to me," said Sioras. "I'm just saying that if there's anything for us to be gained from the hoopla going on right now with Omura and CFU, then it would be with him."

"But we'd essentially be turncoats."

A note of impatience crept into Sioras's voice. "Think outside the box, Kanai. You and I have been doing this for decades. Our best days are behind us. We're basically just glorified financial advisors at this point. Sure, we'll work high level, but we won't be aiding the enemy. We'll just be economists, there to help bridge the rift between the two nations."

Kanai said nothing. He looked out at the city, watched the skylarks ascend into orbit, lingered briefly on the erratic blinking lights of the skyscrapers in the fading dusk.

"Think about it," said Sioras. "The political capital would be enormous. I mean, we could get back in the game. The Provists have enough internal trouble right now, anyway. They're not going to come hunting for us, least of all with the visibility we'll have. And besides, we're advisors. It's not like we'll be directly involved in affairs of the state."

"State," grunted Kanai.

Sioras gave a small sigh, clasped his hands together. "Yeah. Look, I know where you're coming from. Don't think I don't. But consider it, at least. Give it a fighting chance. Didn't the Sustainability and Co-operation Conference do anything to soften your view on this?"

"Tell you the truth," replied Kanai, "I was smelling deception right from the start of that little get-together. The pandering was so obvious. The cultural

nods were revolting. You could tell they thought they were being subtle, too."

Sioras nodded. "Well," he said, "our former compatriots have seldom been renowned for their nuance. Whatever the case may be in that regard, the facts of the situation speak for themselves, don't they?"

"I don't know," said Kanai. "I see the opportunity, and it seems good. Even if there was blowback from the die-hards, we could probably weather it with PR. It's just...I just don't trust that little man. He's unreadable. You never know where you have him. Any minute now, I feel like he's going to tap me on the shoulder and politely inform me he's the actual father of my children."

Sioras fixed him with an exasperated look, the kind only an old friend can bestow. "I'm going," he said presently, with a note of resigned finality. "So are Kormoken and Tikilo, along with a good deal of the Citadel old guard. Are you sure you don't want to give it a little more consideration?"

Kanai was silent.

"Well," said Sioras. "You think about it."

Caldari Providence Directorate Headquarters, Piak system, Lonetrek

April 2nd, YC112

"It's all over the wires, sir. The financial establishment is up in arms."

In the warm interior of his personal quarters, Executor Tibus Heth, the highest-ranking man in the Caldari State, sat in a posture of frozen rigidity.

"What's the extent of the damage, counsel?" he asked.

"Well, sir... for one thing, right now Omura's got more on her plate than she can handle. Even if her name clears eventually, every one of her close associates will have distanced themselves too far by then to come back. And it's making people point fingers elsewhere. High-visibility employees are gone from two of the eight megas already. Federation media's playing it to the hilt, too. No punches pulled."

"What are the repercussions for the CFU pension funds?" asked Heth, shifting slightly in his seat.

"Well, sir," said the counsel, and paused. As if on cue, the holographic field bearing his image wavered slightly. "Net asset values are going to stay more or less intact, but if the current situation escalates any further the investors will most likely pull their money for political reasons. If enough of them do that, we're going to have a problem on our hands that I'm just not sure how we're going to deal with."

"And the rest of the megas?"

"Lai Dai and Kaalakiota are currently engaged in strenuous internal and external PR efforts, trying to make sure no one outside the very top tiers of command realizes they could stand a real chance of crumbling at the seams due to infighting. Like I said, they're really up in arms, sir."

For a moment Heth sat, staring down at his lap and rubbing his calloused thumbs together. He stayed that way for a while, with his counterpart on the other side of the FTL link growing increasingly uncomfortable. Finally, the executor raised his gaze, face resolved, fingers locked in front of him.

"Set up an inquiry. National scale and beyond. I want all figureheads closely monitored twenty-four hours a day. I want every single transaction routed through our headquarters for analysis. I want nothing to get by us. Nothing, do you understand me? We're going to clamp down on this thing hard, and we're going to start right now. I trust you know who to talk to for the wheels to be set in motion."

There was a small pause at the other end. "Executor," the voice came then, "your wish is my command."

"Mister President?"

"Yes."

"We just received word. Heth ordered a national inquiry. They're starting with the financial institutions. No stone unturned. Being very vocal about it, too."

"Thank you."

"Just thought you'd want to know." The secretary allowed himself a brief grin.

Jacus Roden flipped off his viewscreen, drew in a deep breath, released it. He leaned back in his seat, thought about the events of days past, and tried not to smile himself.

Ante

When she suddenly stopped walking at the base of the dropship's gangplank, Silphy enDiabel's entourage halted abruptly and turned to see if something was wrong. They waited patiently on the tarmac under the blazing Intaki sun for several moments as she stood absolutely motionless, staring at the ground.

"Miss enDiabel?" The only decorated Space Police officer in the bunch stepped forward, reaching out for her arm.

She waved dismissively at him and knelt slowly, pulling her long braid of synthetic blond hair behind her shoulder as she ran her hand across the concrete landing platform, tilting her head to examine her palm when it came back covered in a thin layer of dust and small pebbles. Smiling, she stood up and rubbed her hands together, nodding for the entourage to continue on their way to the cathedral's spaceport terminal a short distance away. Despite the glaring sunlight reflecting off the glass paneled surface, she could see several figures anticipating her arrival near the main entrance.

As she led the group to the terminal, the last two armed escorts established positions near the ship, one of them leaning in closer to the other and whispering, "What was that all about?"

Not taking his gaze off of his responsibility, he whispered back, "It's been a while for her."

* * *

Making his way through the murmuring crowd of worshipers as delicately as possible, the courier approached the hooded woman from behind and

coughed subtly, standing with his gaze averted. When she casually turned around to meet his gaze, he seemed on the verge of choking, but managed to stutter, "I have a message for you from Internal Security, Reverend Mother."

"Go on," she breathed, downplaying the conversation so as not to attract the attention of anyone else in the chamber, a sprawling temple just as impressive for its size and grandeur as it was for the haste in which it was constructed. Despite the fact that her official title was Chief Executive Officer, she had to admit to herself that she secretly enjoyed being called Reverend Mother by the frightful, superstitious locals on many of the worlds her organization aided.

All the Sisters of EVE ever asked for in return for their humanitarian assistance was permission to construct cathedrals dedicated to their faith, and over the years they had perfected the science and art of completing such structures in a matter of mere hours. The one in which they stood had a ceiling over thirty meters high and could seat twenty-thousand worshipers during its daily services, one of which had just ended.

"A ship has arrived," he began, glancing in each direction to make sure no one else was within earshot before continuing. "A Syndicate ship."

The woman pulled the hood back over her shoulders, revealing a tight bun of thick brown hair held in place with an ornate ivory clip. She folded her hands into the sleeves of her robe before chiding the messenger. "I believe this is a matter the local authorities can handle, my child. The Syndicate knows their place, so if they..."

Interrupting her and immediately regretting it, the boy clenched his eyes shut, expecting to be harshly reprimanded, but spoke his peace anyway. "Not they, Reverend Mother: her."

"Her?" She inhaled as if to say something else, then stopped abruptly and looked around the room. When she finally did finish her thought, she spoke a little too loudly, prompting more than a few bystanders to take notice. "Silphy is here?"

"Yes, Reverend Mother. She waits for you in the rectory." Instantly understanding that he had overstayed his welcome, the messenger bowed his head respectfully and dashed off through the crowd of dispersing worshipers.

Santimona Sarpati met the lingering stares of several onlookers before replacing her hood and gliding off toward the arched corridor.

* * *

Silphy was standing with her back to the door when Santimona entered the meeting room, an oddly shaped octagonal chamber with smooth metal walls that curved inward near the ceiling to create a geometric pattern of etched reliefs. Directly opposite the door was a wide, double-paned window looking out on Intaki V's capital city, Lenoika, its flat-roofed buildings boiling in the red afternoon sun. She didn't move at all in response to the Reverend Mother's arrival.

"I was told there would be rain today or tomorrow," she said to the window.

Santimona loosened the silk rope that kept her formal robe closed and moved to a seat at the low, square table in the very center of the room, which had but two chairs. When she was certain that the elegant garment had fallen properly over her crossed legs and was free of any wrinkles, she replied, "We've found meteorological reports rather inaccurate on this planet, considering the late sequence of this system's star." Conjuring up a hollow smile, she offered, "Stay a few days and you'll see rain, I promise.

You'll have to find accommodations in the city, though; only Sisters are allocated living quarters on the premises. You understand."

Silphy didn't take the bait, just stared out the window. "Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, Miss Sarpati."

"I'm not quite certain why you wished to speak to me, actually." Resting one of her pale arms on the table, she drummed her fingers. "Is your station experiencing another food shortage?"

Silphy turned at last to look her in the eye, but still refrained from reacting to Santimona's repeated jabs at their tumultuous history. Instead, she copied her smile and played along. "No, but you have the Syndicate's continued thanks for the Sisters' assistance in that matter."

Santimona nodded appreciatively, but only for appearance's sake. She continued counting quietly to herself. Twenty-eight, twenty-seven, twenty-six...

"How are your efforts proceeding here on Intaki V?" Silphy reached the table in three steps, but didn't sit, instead leaning on it just enough for her shadow to pass over the other woman. "Will you be here much longer?"

"As I'm sure you remember," Santimona replied, "the cathedral is always our last item of business for any project." She motioned for her guest to take a seat, but Silphy straightened back up instead. "I'm sorry," Santimona amended, "but I'm not exactly certain what your title is these days. How should I address you?"

"Syndicate titles are purely for internal use, so you needn't worry about them. I have, however, returned to using my family name." Silphy paused for a few moments, looking at Santimona inquisitively. "Do you know what enDiabel translates to, roughly, in the original Intaki dialect?" As she spoke,

Silphy strolled around the conference table with the practiced ease of a seasoned politician circling her audience.

Knowing that she wasn't really expected to answer the rhetorical question, Santimona simply raised her eyebrows and waited for Silphy to continue her train of thought.

"Good," she said with a smirk. "How much longer?"

Two, one "Now." Santimona lunged forward on the table as Silphy hurriedly took the opposite seat and closed in as well. When next she spoke, the Sister had an urgent, hushed tone. "It was a little more difficult to time the punctuated recordings in this facility since it's so new. When the sensors realign during this log, everything between now and the point when it resumes will look like a momentary glitch, which the operator will probably chalk up to sunspot activity. We might only have a few minutes.

"That's all we'll need if everything is in place. If that crusty old merc refuses to talk to me directly, you need to convince him that including us is going to be much easier than locking us out." Silphy slammed her hand down on the table to conclude the statement. Her eyes shimmered in the crimson-tinted light that streamed into the room.

"And if he refuses?" All traces of ire had evaporated from Santimona's voice.

Silphy turned her head and clenched her jaw tightly before answering. "Tell that traitorous son of a bitch that the Syndicate isn't going to sit idly by as another government ignores us. And if Mens thinks those pedantic mercenaries are going to hinder our business one bit, he is sorely mistaken." Leaning forward and composing herself, she spoke calmly, "What I mean is that we have something to offer both entities if we're

brought in on the deal." During her brief, emotional response, a lock of hair had escaped the lengthy braid running down her back.

Reaching out across the table, Santimona gently pushed the loose hairs back behind Silphy's ear and smiled. "Yes, that's more like it. Flies with honey, my dear."

Silphy almost reached up towards her hand, but stopped herself short. "What do you think he'll say, Mona?"

"That depends," she said, her attention seemingly elsewhere for a few seconds, then reasserted herself suddenly, "on what you're offering him. Remember that you have two flanks to address, and in my experience, Muryia can be very difficult."

Silphy leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms, taking the time to choose her next words carefully. "Tell him that the Federation hasn't controlled trade in this system for decades, and that if he wants that blood money from Mens to keep appearing in his bank account, he'll learn to respect the local culture."

"Ahh, now that's going to be the hard sell. He's not at all happy about your little stunt with the Zephyr shuttles. Everyone who produces shuttles took a noticeable hit when you did that. If you offer the right commodity, I'm sure he'll reciprocate."

Covering her mouth in a vain attempt to stifle her laughter, Silphy nonetheless refused to look away. When she was able to control her mirth again, she explained, "I think I have just the thing his corporation would appreciate. There's a funny story behind those shuttles, by the way, but I don't think we have time for it."

"You're right," Santimona replied abruptly, standing up and pulling her robe tightly about her. Twelve, eleven, ten...

Mirroring her posture as she stood from her seat, Silphy leaned forward onto the table once again and shot her counterpart a seductive grin. After a few seconds of silence, she asked, "Do you ever miss it?"

"Every day," Santimona replied with a nostalgic sigh. Three, two, one...

Reaching back and putting her shoulder into the effort, Santimona whirled around suddenly, lashing out with one open palm to strike Silphy across the face. The impact's sharp crack echoed around the room as Silphy tumbled backward over her chair, landing on the floor in a disheveled heap.

Shrieking at the top of her lungs, Santimona stormed around the table, pointing accusingly at her prone target. "Does your arrogance have no bounds?" When Silphy had recovered enough to sit up and wipe the trickle of blood from the corner of her mouth, the Sister continued, "I won't jeopardize this honorable organization to subsidize your criminal agenda!"

"You're pathetic," Silphy finally uttered, pulling herself up and immediately assuming a defensive position. Beyond the doors, she could hear her security escort arguing with the Sisters of EVE guards stationed there. "I can see right through you, Sister. You're insane if you don't think the Intaki are going to figure out why you're really here. This was your last chance to get through this with any semblance of your obsolete cult intact."

As the doors burst open and half a dozen armed men encircled each woman, Santimona shrugged off her protectors and released a parting shot. "I should have known you'd never change, Silphy. Get off this planet."

Glaring at the Reverend Mother spitefully, Silphy shook her head and stalked out of the room, her escorts hustling to keep up with her determined

pace. They marched through the cathedral without stopping until they reached the gangplank of the dropship, which was casting an elongated shadow over the landing pad, its metal hull sizzling under the unrelenting sun. Silphy turned to face the ornate building, her eyes following the swooping architecture up to the steeple near the top, which was emblazoned with the Sisters of EVE holy crest. "Sadistic witch," she spat.

Not far away, in the cathedral's security chief's office, Santimona watched Silphy intently on the holographic display. With her sentries still nearby and the chief respectfully out of the way so the older woman could use his station, she studied Silphy's every move, frowning as the Syndicate's unofficial leader spit on the ground in contempt before boarding her ship. "I often wonder which is more perplexing: the fact that she abandoned the Sisterhood or that she was ever allowed to join in the first place."

* * *

Reclining in her personal quarters aboard the starship, Silphy took a sip from a glass of ice water and held it to her cheek, wincing reflexively. Chuckling to herself, she tapped her password into the console embedded in her chair's armrest, prompting a translucent heads-up display to appear in the air half a meter in front of her. Scrolling through several waiting messages, she chose one of the more recent ones and read it quickly.

Silphy tapped the controls that would establish a direct connection to the person who had sent the message. She waited patiently until her screen evaporated, replaced with the three dimensional head of an older man covered in elaborate facial tattoos. "Silphy," he said respectfully.

"Mr. Lecante," she answered, nodding slowly. "Have the other families reached a consensus?"

"Yes." He looked around as though there were other people in the room with him, but none were visible on the holographic display. "They've agreed to your plan. So what's our next move?"

"Consolidate all the data received from the Zephyr program, everything those oblivious capsuleers have given us on wormhole space. Prepare the datacores for immediate transport; a representative from the Sisters of EVE will be arriving shortly to take possession."

Lecante nodded. "I think you've really nailed this one, Silphy. That's precisely the kind of token Ishukone won't be able to resist."

"I know," she concluded, touching the disconnect button and raising the glass to her cheek again. She spent the remainder of the journey back to Syndicate space staring out the window of her cabin, unable to conceal her nostalgic smile.

Black Eagles

"They make you watch it all, man. They make you watch through the eyes of the person you killed. It's all for show, really, but they do it so well. I saw the guy come in, brush his teeth, kiss his son good night... then I felt my bullet go into his skull just seconds after it shattered the window. Back when I'd shot him, you know, I didn't know anything... all I saw was a man leaning down in the spot where I'd been told he would be, then I squeezed the trigger, twice to make sure, and got the hell out of there. But they had to make me relive it all through this bullshit virtual scenario. They want you to know that you're gonna be called upon to kill innocent people, good people, Federation people, and that you have to be comfortable with doing it because it serves the greater good. Whatever the fuck that's even supposed to mean."

- Audio transcript from "Agent Mornay," alleged Black Eagle defector

The Gallente Federation's image within the popular sphere is well known. It's a place of wonder and opportunity, home to open-minded and welcoming people, filled with intellectual discourse and quality arts in every sphere. Traditionally it's been a haven for those hailing from parts distant, unsatisfied with their surroundings and seeking a new home in which to express themselves. Renowned in equal part for its liberalism and its boundless appetite for individual uniqueness, Gallente has always been a place where misfits can slot in, where artists can find their venues, and where champions of every cause can find their soapbox.

Over the past year, however, a new presence has made itself known across the Federation, casting its protective shadow over all its surveys. For the average Gallente citizen the change has been minimal, but to those who follow along with the events of the day it has become evident that a deep new tone has begun its quiet rumble across the political landscape.

The Black Eagles were founded in the aftermath of the Gallente's historic Luminaire defeat of YC110, when prominent figures of the Federal milieu

came together in agreement that the nation's armed forces were all but crumbling at the seams with corruption. A sizable group of politicians, corporate figureheads, lobbyists and cultural icons petitioned President Foiritan to create an "Emergency Integrity Commission" which would ensure that the nation's military leadership not only had the aptitude to lead their forces to victory, but that they met the high moral standards of the Gallente Federation while doing so.

This influential coalition was distrustful of the methods employed by the president to tackle the issues erupting within the nation at the time, and felt that the search for the turncoat admiral Anvent Eturrer – at the time, a major rallying cause for a nation so freshly bludgeoned by humiliating defeat – was no more than a simple patch on a festering wound. Though the exact degree of their involvement is debated to this day, they were nonetheless able to exert enough pressure on the establishment that when the President a short while later announced the creation of a new internal investigation department within the Federal Intelligence Office, the general consensus was that the coalition deserved a good deal of the thanks.

The new division would be empowered with exclusive and unconditional oversight of all Federal assets and agencies. Though officially titled the Special Department of Internal Investigations and Federal Security, and carrying the sanctioned acronym of SDII, this secretive new organization nonetheless immediately became known to everyone as the Black Eagles. This moniker is most commonly associated with the SDII logo – a black Gallente eagle outlined in white against a dark background – but there are a fair few who proclaim the name is a direct allusion to the man chosen to lead the department, Head Senator Mentas Blaque.

Since Blaque was (and is) an outspoken political opponent of Foiritan's, his appointment initially seemed a bolt from the blue. Though conspiracy theories (along with a healthy smattering of general confusion) arose immediately, the national zeitgeist, in the absence of any more believable theories, was eventually made to settle into the somewhat uneasy solution that Foiritan had simply needed someone for the post who quite obviously

wasn't in his pocket and never would be. Indeed, in the months immediately following the division's founding, a record number of corrupt military personnel and government officials were apprehended, even people who had fairly substantial (though always safely peripheral) ties to Foiritan himself.

Though the Black Eagles operate under a strict military hierarchy, they are, at heart, an intelligence agency. Their official purview is the internal security and integrity of the Federation and all its official entities, but it is an open secret within intelligence circles that the Eagles operate a spy network that, in addition to keeping tabs on domestic affairs, bypasses familiar waters in favor of territories seldom ventured by the four empires' intelligence entities. Blaque himself has never commented publicly on anything to do with the agency, preferring instead to let dry press releases and carefully calculated public operations do the talking for him.

Nonetheless, there have been a fair share of defectors from the agency since its inception, people who view the Eagles' methods as violations of long-sacred Gallente ideals. Under conditions of strict anonymity these former agents have leaked certain information, none of which is officially verified, but a substantial portion of which is considered believable by experts in the field and generally taken to be implicit in discussions involving the Black Eagles. From among these bits and pieces of info, a few salient patterns have emerged:

1. The Black Eagles have a well-equipped, highly trained paramilitary arm. Black Eagle-uniformed troops have been seen on more than one occasion conducting security sweeps in high-sensitivity public zones. They are trained in every manner of covert infiltration, spaceborne and terrestrial, as well as the use of cutting-edge weaponry and tools of the trade. Due to prohibitive selection and training their numbers are not great at present, but growing rapidly.
2. The Black Eagles have a presence in space, though reports vary widely about the extent of their operational capacity. They are known to travel in specially commissioned dark-hulled versions of Gallente

Navy staples. The exact capabilities of these vessels are unknown, but they are invariably reported to be more powerful than both their standard and Navy counterparts. Reports also unanimously agree that the Eagles possess a capsuleer contingent numbering over one hundred pilots (and presumably growing).

3. The Black Eagles have built up a ruthless image, one that indicates the agency will go to considerable lengths to make sure its objectives are met. This is the area most sparsely commented on by former agents . With very few exceptions, defectors have completely disavowed all knowledge of the illicit activities so often attributed to the Eagles, such as torture, blackmail and kidnapping. Whether this is down to the extreme sensitivity of such subjects or the actual absence of such activities from the modus operandi remains wholly unknown.

For the common citizen of the Federation, the Black Eagles are a distant spectre. For the more discerning members of the populace, they are a subtly pervasive force. For anyone conducting business with foreign interests, they are a nagging worry. In the past months there has been a growing trend toward domestic surveillance within the Federation. Propaganda has been pervasive. In a society as awash with stimuli and information as the Gallente's, these things can be hard to spot... but broader trends rarely misdirect, and the word on the street never lies. Given the Black Eagles' extreme effectiveness since its inception, it might not be all that surprising were they found to have engaged in any of the activities they are so often accused of. In the absence of concrete evidence, however, the veil remains intact, and the shadow protective. Whatever hidden threats the Gallente may once have feared, they can rest safe in the knowledge that at the very least, their foes are hidden no more.

Extinction Burst

The type of behavior that presents the greatest potential for scientific study, I find, is that which is exhibited under duress. Not enough research has been undertaken in this area, and those who engage in it do so under a dark cloud of superstition and mistrust, suffering a woeful lack of support from the public. We have to do it all ourselves – all of it – hidden away like criminals.

Against completely nonsensical prejudices, I should add, held by a species composed almost solely of unexamined habits and chiseled thoughts, a species whose worldview has been set since childhood, with room for nothing new or exciting, and to whom the suggestion that there might be something worthwhile to be found on the edges is so repulsive as to be anathema to the trembling cores of their very moral fiber.

Take the extinction burst, for example.

While most people – including a few scientists, even – believe that certain behavioral patterns cannot be forcibly deteriorated, I am of the opinion that we simply have not developed the correct methodology. Everything can eventually be exposed; expelled; exterminated. But lifelong habits run deep, and the development of an all-encompassing methodological framework that can demonstrably break even the most stringent of these remains, unfortunately, beyond my abilities. I'm still fencing with the problem; working on the edges, trying to find a way in.

An extinction burst is not the extinction of a species, though that would be a marvel to engineer. It has to do with the more granular exhibition of learned behavior, when that behavior is met by adverse conditions never before experienced, and with the reactions subsequently exhibited by the afflicted organism. In most cases these new conditions progressively alter and

eliminate that behavioral pattern, but you'd be amazed at how desperately some animals will maintain their old habits before finally letting them die off for good.

This is, quite honestly, a good thing for evolution. I have no time for a species that gives up the first time it encounters failure, or pain, or lack of reward.

Some species do give up right away. But others will persist, following through on the same pattern even when it is not being rewarded, or even, I should say, when the situation might demand that they break the habit. They may no longer be safe. There may be a dearth of food, or water, or air. They may be running out of time. But still they'll cling on to what might be called, for the lack of a better term, hope. Moreover, their attempts will intensify, the number of attempts rapidly increasing for a short period of time in a last-gasp attempt to maintain the pattern. That is the extinction burst.

We see this occur in various guises throughout the animal kingdom, but it has not been extensively studied. This lack of research surprised me when I first began looking into the phenomenon; I did not expect my experiments to be groundbreaking merely by dint of being the first ones performed in a proper, thorough, scientific manner. Naturally, I've tried to cast a wide net, acquiring a set of vastly unlike species in New Eden and, under controlled conditions, carefully noting their reactions to my stimuli.

Most learned patterns have to do with confinement, but I've never been entirely comfortable with the usual button-stimulus paradigm. All it really does is produce a lot of needy, overweight rodents.

Instead – and believe me, this took a bit of time – I've set up a kind of working, monitored environment. Not just a cage with a bed and a feeder, but an actual maze of sorts. It's complete with all manner of stimulus-

providing machinery, most of which remains hidden until the animal makes its way down that particular corridor or into that particular room. The function of the stimulus machinery is basic and easily understood by whatever animal I've got in the maze - often no more than the familiar button or sensory panel dispensing a quick drink of water or a brief encouragement of some gland or another. It does not constitute the main experiment, but it's extremely handy for taking more detailed measurements of the subjects' current extinction burst status.

The main experiment is the maze itself. Most of the corridors and rooms have exits, but they are hidden and will reveal themselves only after a specific sequence of events has been enacted. Again, these events are not too complex for most of the animals in the maze, though I will admit that I was rather disappointed initially by the Hanging Long-Limbs, - but they do require the subject to experiment rigorously with materials at hand.

The maze starts off easy but gets progressively more difficult. Along the way, as noted, stimulus-providing machinery permits me to monitor the subjects' extinction progress. Some tend to give up quite a bit sooner than others, and every time they stop to push a button in a room, you can see the hopelessness in their increasingly lackluster reactions to the stimuli.

The Hanging Long-Limbs, of course, remain the exception.

When animals come to in my maze – I'll admit I have to sedate them for transport and preparation, but it wears off without any noticeable effect – they tend to pace about a bit, get familiar with their surroundings, and altogether look a little confused but inquisitive. Not quite so for the Hanging Long-Limb. I don't quite know what causes this.

The species has quite a limited spread, confined as it is to the methane clouds of a single Gallente planet. It grew up in an environment that has remained unchanged for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, almost

entirely unspoiled by man. It has its predators, as everything does, but it knows how to deal with them, and nothing in my maze sets off any of its ingrained warning signals. The Hanging Long-Limb is also not, I have to say, a very intelligent species. This is not necessarily a drawback: Low intelligence often means highly developed instincts and makes an animal's responses easier to predict, categorize and quantify. Lastly, it does not rush into anything. It is a fast animal when it wants to be, as various small amphibians have learned to their brief regret, but unless driven by the impetus of moveable prey or by a nearby predator, it simply is not in any great rush at all.

I had not considered this when I acquired these animals for my maze. They were costly – I had to flood the damn maze with methane, too – but they are worth it. While other species all follow more or less the same behavioral patterns, the Hanging Long-Limb continues to defy my expectations. It moves slowly, dazedly, as if drugged, and it seems to take an endless fascination in studying its surroundings. Many of them never even make it out of the first room. Watching their progress, once the observer has cultivated the necessary patience, is so lulling as to be practically meditative.

The same cannot be said for another of my favorite subjects, the animal known to its local population as a Charisoco. It is a small rodent, nimble but extremely strong for its size, and restlessly inventive. It is invariably curious when it begins to explore the maze, shuffling around the corridors with apparent aimlessness, but even then, my observations have proven that it develops – visually develops — its escape methods by making its way through the twisty corridors with remarkable alacrity. The first half of the maze provides little to no obstacle to this ingenious little animal, which makes its tendencies to halt its progress and experiment with the side-track stimuli I've left in various rooms all the more amusing to monitor.

Meanwhile, the great beast they call the Slaver – easily one of the most dangerous animals I've put in the maze, and certainly one that made me nervous to the point of queasiness when I first watched it wander the corridors – has a more forthright approach. It is cunning, as predators are, but if it gets too frustrated it will eventually begin throwing itself against the walls, heedlessly ramming its bulk against them in a futile but impressive display of strength that rattles the room. The Slaver is a harsh and brutal animal that simply does not ever give up, though whether its tenacity is out of survival instinct or a kind of angry desperation, I don't yet know.

None of which helps prove the extinction burst, as these animals make their way through my labyrinthine passages. At least, it remains unproven until they get to a random room – I don't even know which one; my maze autoselects it – where no solution will work. None. The exit strategy, which becomes obvious after a little while, does not function. No matter which panels, buttons, floor plates, or decorative items are touched, in whatever order, nothing happens.

The real, proper exit strategy...well, that's when some of the animals start to get a little nervous.

I've run this experiment countless times. I truly feel I am on the cusp of great discoveries here. But moreover, I simply enjoy watching these animals, my favorite subjects. I don't feel I'll ever tire of them, though I do fear that some day I will inevitably grow weary of the experiments themselves, and I'll have to put an end to it all. Yes, even the Hanging-Long Limb, reposed in blissful quiet; or the creative little Charisoco; or the restless, pacing Slaver.

And maybe even you, my darling, as I watch you screaming at the walls.

Valklears

"I am not going to train you; I am going to try to kill you."
- Valklear Instructor

During the long years of enslavement and the great war for liberation, the Minmatar tribes found themselves sorely lacking in able-bodied soldiers. They were forced to create them from their most dangerous criminals – murderers, rapists, thugs, etc. The program was a remarkable success. The Valklears won the Minmatar a slew of military victories and emerged as the Rebellion's most notorious elite force.

With the end of the Rebellion and the formation of the Minmatar Republic, some politicians within the new government questioned the need for such an iniquitous military force: The need was gone, peace was won and surely such ugly necessities of the past should be resigned to history to make way for the new Minmatar age? The military commanders would have none of it, and the Valklear program remained and continues to prosper to this day, although it has lost none of its infamous reputation.

Valklear commanders rely wholly on specialized recruiters to fill their ranks. They tour the courtrooms and judgement halls of the tribes, and with a trained eye they pick out the prime cuts of criminality from the great swathe of vicious, vile, and corrupt. Once the recruiter has selected a candidate, he works on bringing the convict into the system. Each recruiter has his own persuasive technique, but for many hard convicts, presented with the option of a lifetime behind bars or a shorter term in the military, the choice is a rather obvious one.

The recruiter's selection is not as clear-cut as one may think, though. They recruit from a broad range of the criminal fraternity. One day, a violent psychopath may be paid a visit, the next a serial killer, and then perhaps a

corrupt lawyer, a notorious embezzler – even people who may have never held a weapon in their lives. The path the criminal has taken matters less than their skills, instincts and the inherent potential the recruiter perceives.

Once a candidate has accepted the proposition, they are silently removed from their cells and the penal system loses them in a maze of red tape and paperwork. Any digging within their records will show that these prisoners took their place in the death chamber or got transferred to a maximum-security facility. The Valklear candidates are lost in the system and will never be found.

When the candidate is removed from their prison cells, the training begins in earnest. Hundreds of evil-minded bastards, bloody killers, and fiercely intelligent criminals are put through one of the most gruelling training regimes known in New Eden. Through intense training, the prospective Valklears are melded into unstoppable war machines. Instructors push recruits beyond their limits in order to see if they push back. The candidates are beaten to see if they will get up again, then beaten down even harder. Recruiters want that indomitable glint in their eye that says, “Fuck you.”

Those candidates that wash out are thrown back in the penal system with even harsher sentences. The ones that make the grade – and to the recruiter’s credit, it is a surprisingly high percentage – are then indoctrinated into the Valklears proper, where the expectation of “tough bastard” gets re-evaluated once more.

A Valklear’s tour of duty is dependent upon the term of his original sentence, not including the full year of training after selection from prison. If a Valklear survives his tour, he immediately becomes a free man. He is also given a new identity, and any links to his criminal past are wiped from the records and replaced with a suitable cover.

After their tour with this elite force, most Valklears find a calling suited to them in other military branches. The former Valklear will in turn get transferred to another unit, though his new comrades will remain ignorant of his background.

Currently, some of the highest-ranking members of the Minmatar armed service were once Valklears. This fact is kept top secret; the public remaining ignorant of a Minmatar military run by murderers and thieves.

Anoikis

Imagine if the bars to your prison were all you had ever known.

Then one day, someone appears and unlocks the door.

If they have the power to do this, then are they really the liberator?

You never remembered who it was that closed you in.

- Ior Labron.

March 10th, YC 111.

Taking one last look at those unnatural shapes, the CreoDron board of directors slowly removed their Egones and returned their attention to the other figures huddled around the table. Everyone was waiting silently in the darkness. Those with ocular implants bowed their heads slightly, and the strange images faded from their mind.

"We only have these six so far," a voice said from a speaker in the middle of the table. "But what you are seeing says enough. There is an 18% probable match, just from this one alone."

A reproduction of the last image suddenly dominated the far corner as a large plasma-nanite panel came to life. The intense colors of the scene overwhelmed the dim starlight that filtered in through one of the clear walls, the pale blues of Carirgnottin I subdued by the glow of a deep crimson nebula on the screen, teeming with the lives and deaths of a thousand

stars. The backdrop seemed to pulse beyond the silent and lifeless structures, drenching the entire room in a strange sanguine hue.

The clearest of the six, the image showed a ring of circular, dome-like structures, which would later come to be known as Enclaves. Each structure was connected by conduits that arched around to every other dome, joining the separate discs together at perfectly smooth angles. Scale was difficult to determine, but the entire complex was easily the size of a station. Though nobody would venture a comment, there were some who even then guessed that it was a city they were looking at.

A city of sorts.

As they stared in silence, each director's eyes eventually came to settle on the imposing dagger-like spires that jutted out from the ring, their angles sharp and yet each edge beautifully smooth. There was no visible seam, no weak point in the gently overlapping and undulating armor. Eight of these spires towered over the rest of the area, standing watch like ancient protectors.

"Not ten seconds after our drone was sent in to capture this image, we lost the feed."

"We need to send real people in," one of the directors interjected, brushing the Egone before him aside in a less than subtle gesture of dissatisfaction.

The last comment from the superior was meant to have been dramatic. It was supposed to have humbled the subordinates into contemplative silence and sent them fumbling at the sheer scope of what had already been uncovered. The fast-moving minds of the men and women here shelved such concerns for now, however, and quickly prioritized other matters entirely, robbing their leader of his first contact moment.

In retrospect, the old man (as he indulged himself in being called) would appreciate the quick-witted minds of his "subordinates" and their own lists of concerns, particularly since this was, in fact, not the first time New Eden had been here.

"Another hour spent deploying drones will mean someone else beats us to the discovery," one of the directors offered, skirting the deeper point entirely as they opted for pragmatism.

"And it could mean much worse than that," another director added furtively, throwing some more ambiguous worry into the mix. The room was still fixated on the ring of domes, and the dark, shadowy spires that rose above them; the reminder was somewhat premature.

"Let's not waste time stirring people up with innuendo, Mr. Darieux." The softness of a female voice commanded the attention of the room, long before those gathered actually perceived the gross insult she had dared to utter.

The woman who spoke was a Federation Senator – and a Jin-Mei woman at that. This brashness was not her fault. She could only know assertion to be where she stood now, glimpsing something before her superior was even aware. She had long ago recognized that the fastest route to the truth was not dissimilar to the flight path of a bullet, or the trajectory of superheated coronal mass crashing into a planet: an inevitably straight line.

There was no other way to run something as vast as the empire she helped steer, and so she followed up quickly with another lunge for the truth, before anyone could muster their senses to speak.

Board room etiquette could go fuck itself.

"We all know who you intend to throw out there."

A lasting silence hung about the room as the others lowered their gazes, dreading to watch the exchange.

No matter what happens next, they thought, she's out of here.

"Do you disagree with this course of action?" The voice from the speaker asked, the stillness and calm in his voice like venom, slowly paralyzing everyone in the room. He was making it her call now – a tactic she never thought to expect.

"No."

"Very well," the voice replied. "Someone find Burreau."

The directors raised their gazes and quickly arranged for the extraction of one of their finest through a few simple gestures and nods. First, all eyes turned toward the two Security Directors, whose bowed heads assured the rest that Burreau's personal bodyguard had already been contacted and support was inbound. From the way they almost smirked, it meant their people were close enough to presume she was safe. A criss-cross of raised eyebrows thereafter would confirm the temporary closure of key stargate logs, and a "clean" route from her current location to HQ, as well as fleet support from a wing of CreuDron's finest.

Black Ops fleets had been deployed, Sin Battleships were already undocking and rapidly vanishing in flashes of blue light as they were each deposited along a chain of cynosural fields stretching outward toward Burreau – toward something each crew knew only as the cargo. Local CreuDron patrols relocated to stargates, ready to intercept. Ishkurs and Ishtars deployed drones preemptively in a gesture of threat, drifting at a distance from the passing civilian traffic as their larger brothers circled above, invisible to all.

Before the directors had exhaled for the second time, her passage had been secured and escort arranged. A valuable asset, they understood. Worth the cost of deployment. Perhaps that senator grasped this much as well; it would explain the behavior. Their eyes never quite left her as she stood in the corner, arms folded, failing entirely to understand their secret language of smiles and nods.

Maybe she's staying after all, they thought, looking among themselves. Maybe the Jin-Mei came without permission.

Maybe it's personal.

"Sir?"

Hilen was still there, staring at the ground where Lianda had stood. For just one moment longer, he would allow his eyes to rest on the soft marks in the grass, tracing over the trail of small footprints she had left for him.

Cold Wind taught him to move without sound or track, and to perceive the paths that are hidden.

It was his job to follow her now.

"That was One I just had here. Did you get a trace on the call?"

"Carirgnottin, sir. She's not moving either. We have her on infrared at the moment, and she's still in place."

"Two is still missing?"

"Yes, sir."

"Understood."

"Sir, permission to speak freely?"

"What is it, Aarii?"

"The security detail on her right now is like nothing we've seen. The feet on the ground have multiplied by a factor of ten...my whole team is on edge. The timing, sir. Seyllin."

He hesitated for a long moment, wondering just how much of the last conversation she needed to hear in order to do the job effectively. He only knew it wouldn't have to be everything. Hilen Tukoss never shared a detail people didn't need to know.

"With respect, sir, it's obvious. An entire planet was just destroyed by some cosmic event and the astrophysicist we've been tracking for months just disappeared. Vanished. Off the grid completely, without any of us knowing where that second clone went. And now we're being told that her surveillance status has been bumped to top priority?"

"Let me bring you in then," he said, turning her own zeal back around. "If you are ready to assume equal responsibility for our new assignment?"

"I'm ready," she replied without hesitation.

"CreoDron has just discovered a new solar system. They arrived there through an unknown wormhole in Vitrauze. They believe the events in Seyllin created this wormhole, and may have created others. So far, only scout drones have travelled to the other side, but what they have found suggests that this system is home to another civilization. Five images

returned only planets, the last shows something else entirely. They found structures, large ones, and I don't mean on a planet."

"How advanced are we talking?"

"While scouting what appeared to be some kind of facility out there, one of CreoDron's drones was shot down. The other five are still positioned at the entrance to the system."

"Sir, we need to get to Vitrauze."

He considered for a moment the 82% probability that things were not as they seemed. He couldn't dismiss it, but he distrusted the numbers. Instinct was telling him that nothing ahead was all that foreign, that they needed diplomats, not scientists.

"No," he replied, staring down at the information panel overlaid on his wrist. Soon enough, a flood of intel would begin to pour in as a hundred different sources all alerted him to the same event. "Check the news feeds. One is about to hold a briefing live on The Scope."

"They're going to announce the findings?" Aarii asked, turning her attention toward a nearby screen as she searched for the face of her prey. She could see movement on the infrared – she was sitting upright. Like she's about to say something important, Aarii thought.

"No," he repeated. "They're not, and there's no point chasing them. They're about to contest the CONCORD travel advisory, and yes, soon after they'll announce the wormhole. Six press releases later though, and they might start talking about scout drones, maybe release an image or two, but they're sitting on this. They won't release that sixth image."

"Why?"

" So the Vitrauze project can continue undisturbed. Why do you think we lost Two? She's gone already."

"If she's gone already, then why aren't we going as well?"

" Because someone in the Senate was feeding her intel before CreoDron even arrived. I doubt every senator has been made aware at this point. There's too many; it would risk a leak."

"Someone highly placed?"

"Perhaps, but not necessarily. Someone who at least has an overview of security. Someone with pull."

"So you think the area has been locked down already?"

"I'm not sure, but they only need to know what system to look in, and then we would become very noticeable, very quickly. We've stumbled on to something here, and right now, nobody knows it is the only advantage we have."

"What's our plan then, sir?"

"First we need to pass this up the chain of command."

"Understood."

Somewhere far from Carirgnottin I, in an equally dark and oppressive board room, another group of figures waited impatiently as one of their own excused himself to take a call.

"Have you lost control of your asset, Hilen? Do you even know where she is?"

Hilen felt his wrist grow warm. Looking down at the information overlay once more, he could see the first trickles that would soon become the flood. A hundred of his best people all turning in the wrong direction.

"We know where One is. If you're near a holo vid screen--"

The man raised his view to one of the panels filling the lobby outside the board room. Just below a large platinum-thorium etching that read "ZAINOU BIOTECH - BOARD OF DIRECTORS," there was the pale, innocent face of the Jin-Mei he'd ordered his corporation's best surveillance to watch. The voices back inside grew louder for a moment before being quickly overcome by the growing sound of her own voice. They were all watching now.

"I see her. What is going on?"

"They're escalating her profile. It's a distraction, sir, and I need everyone there to ignore it. We have a situation unfolding in the background."

"I'm listening."

"Before I explain, I need you to get in touch with Ishukone. Find someone as high up the ranks as we can get quickly and unofficially. We're going to need them for this."

Hilen waited for an answer.

"I see," the director finally offered. "Tell me, Hilen?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Is it their previous experience that you're after?"

And suddenly Hilen realized that he knew. He knew something, at least. Enough to ask the question, and ask it in such an indirect way. There was no telling what was infiltrated now. No line was secure.

"Yes, sir." Hilen felt a dull ache in the depth of his stomach, the pain of the one soldier who returned back to base alive, having seen the onslaught to come.

Except this time, nobody had fired a shot, and nobody would.

What do you intend, ambassador?

I propose we call for a private summit of national leaders, to discuss an exchange of information and come to an agreement about the best use for select recovered parts. We could use the Inner Assembly to arrange for the meetings quite easily under the guise of an understandable concern for these events, which have touched our worlds too, as we will inform them.

The evidence?

It will be systematically accumulated and re-integrated into current technology in ways that render the salient points unrecognizable. The finer details will have to evolve organically, but the framework will be a new, non-binding agreement regarding scientific commodity trading. Although the primary motivator will be the acquisition and development of new technologies, there are also factors such as quarantine periods, comprehensive safety testing, and many other additional barriers to access

the empires can and will likely impose without suggestion. The various research benefits inherent to each unit guarantees widespread financial self-interest. Our engineers have already produced a range of schematics. Some of them are new technologies, but we believe the concession here is a smaller one in the long term. Where we could, we focused on improvements upon pre-existing methods.

How do you suppose this will even work to suppress the information?

You must understand two things. The first is human sensitivity. Seyllin is dominating the media, and as such, it is dominating the public consciousness. This works to our advantage, but only for so long. The world's attention is turned toward the disaster, so now is the most opportune moment to make bold moves elsewhere. None of them want to be the first to speak about the potential profits, the new resources, the opportunities and secrets that can be uncovered. At this moment, those avenues will be forced into the background, and yet undoubtedly pursued all the same. If the empires are already operating on a covert footing, then we need not lead them there.

You seem confident in this plan.

I simply believe it will be an easy law to pass in this moment. The non-binding nature will appear in line with the current lack of information. A symbolic gesture made in the spirit of peace and cooperation, made quietly and where few look, a means for all parties to ensure a more secure future.

The capsuleers?

Naturally, there will need to be a waiver on capsuleer-related science and industry, but this is the second thing you must understand. The truth will find its way out eventually. Please forgive me for saying so, but I cannot properly serve in this role if I do not give you the most accurate analyses I

can. The truth will find its way out. We cannot control their access. It will be they who make the discovery.

How quickly do you expect this to happen?

I cannot say. Their interests are unpredictable, but they are divided and divisive. There will always be ones who question what most do not, but I believe that overall, they will share the same goals as the empires. They will take what they can understand and reintegrate. We may see another rise in their power and autonomy as a result. We should expect them to monopolize on this new opportunity as well. Given the inherent dangers of exploring Anoikis, they are positioned favorably to do so. In terms of raw resource gathering capabilities, conventional empire fleets will not be economically competitive. We will struggle to maintain a presence eventually.

That will turn the empires toward research.

Not if we intervene and provide for them what convincingly appears to be the most promising final applications of any potential studies. This hints at precisely the point we must illuminate. When framed as a concern for the balance of power between the empires and the capsuleers, our interests will appear far more congruent with theirs, and our actions will remain understandable. The empires can be made to quickly appreciate how little control over these new areas they will have, and from there, it will be simple to assist each of them in coordinating access to components we identify as key. They will recognize it as the only opportunity any of them have for strategic equality. None will refuse.

Our research?

>Had she not realized yet? In the early months, we can make a great deal of ground.

Early months?

She had not. The ambassador swallowed. Emotion was rippling inside each cell, bursting throughout the bloodstream as it tried to break free.

The capsuleers. They will settle. They will understand the network eventually, and they will command it.

They will not be everywhere at once, and we can move undetected.

In this environment, so can they. We are all headed to the same destinations. We have no desire to be noticed, and no hope in conflict with them.

Then we will use these early months well.

She recovered quickly from that thought, he mused. Yes.

If the situation is ever understood in its entirety, as you predict, then there will be consequences for these actions.

I do not share that view. What we do now benefits all parties. If our motives are ultimately viewed as benign, then any perceived wrongdoings can be explained in full detail as they are identified. Trust and clarification at the highest tiers will filter downward and provide the level of institutional compliance necessary to establish the agreement.

You must still realize that we cannot become publicly involved in this?

Yes, this is obvious to me. The suggestion will be put forward earlier, between myself and the other ambassadors, or the national leadership, if you please.

The former.

The ambassador cleared his throat. "I understand. Was there anything else you required of me?"

"Did you hear of Burreau?"

"Briefly."

"What is your assessment?"

"I believe she is dead."

"You are correct. There was activity on the line. She was at one of the mirrors."

The ambassador almost seemed to smile for a moment. "She learned well."

"She was taught by the best. We are concerned about the reasons why she was chosen. "

"Perhaps you should be, but then there are not many astrophysicists with clones."

"Let us hope it is that simple."

"I would not hope. I would investigate."

"Thank you, ambassador. That is all."

Vitrouze Agreement.

Article 8, Section E

CONCORD subsidization in the acquisition of scientifically valuable by-products.

Although preliminary, through the spirit of peace and co-operation that affirms this treaty, each of the four member nations have exchanged sufficient information to identify four key salvageable materials of scientific interest. Seeking to both minimize their impact on capsuleer economic development and to allow more time for proper investigation into the impact of all unknown materials, the member nations have agreed to focus on four lower tier by-products identified during initial excavations of unknown space.

Clause 1) The four member nations of the treaty have each agreed that the preliminary findings, and any agreements based thereupon, on each of the four units is strictly provisional. Current scientific opinion broadly agrees that these items are of little material value. However, any reassessment undertaken by any of the member nations that is deemed to invalidate this initial finding may be deferred to.

Clause 2) CONCORD, in operation with the SCC, has agreed to facilitate and subsidize the acquisition of these items through capsuleer markets at a standard price agreed upon by all of the four member nations.

October acquisition metrics (Capsuleer Markets / SCC):

Data Library: 11,799,985

Neural Network Analyzer: 1,162,057

Coordinates Database: 244,234

Drone AI Nexus: 70,726

Xenocracy

Planetary Administrator Leonalle Yvesk's assistant, a much younger Gallente woman named Colasa, trotted up and matched his pace as he disembarked from the passenger tram. Yvesk sighed vocally. As they made their way up the ramp to street level, flowing along with the crowd of other laborers and urban professionals commuting to work during the morning hours, she remained silent. Only when they had emerged into the open and separated from the majority of the other pedestrians did she venture to initiate conversation.

"Good morning," she began. "I hope you're well today." She had a polite but submissive demeanor he usually appreciated. It had taken him almost fifty years to climb to his position as the highest authority on Chesiette Prime, the first planet of the Chesiette system, a thriving temperate world with just over a billion inhabitants. Because of its position near the border between the Gallente Federation and Amarr Empire, the planet was important – on paper. In reality, the efficiency of Federation politics, combined with their peace-oriented foreign policy, had rendered many of his duties unnecessary, resulting in his being regarded by many officials as a glorified middle manager instead of a frontier diplomat.

Today, however, he found her meek, subservient manner frustrating. He was on his way to a meeting he had been dreading all month, one that he had no experience with, and despite the fact that it was finally a duty in line with his diplomatic training, he was exceedingly nervous. "What is it, Colasa?"

"I have the report you asked for on carbon compound dispersion patterns on the southern continents." She fumbled with a small case as they walked, almost colliding with several people moving in the opposite direction.

Yvesk stared straight ahead as he walked. "Very good."

Frowning, Colasa tucked the case back under her arm and hustled to keep up with him. "Can I ask why you seem so upset, Administrator Yvesk?" She didn't wait for him to reply before adding: "Does it have something to do with the capsuleer?"

Yvesk stopped abruptly and grabbed her arm, drawing a startled look from his young assistant. He glanced around and shot dirty looks at all the people watching, their attentions instantly focused on the two after the last word she had spoken aloud. "I think it would be best," he hissed, "if we kept such topics in private discussion." When he was certain that his point had been made, as was evident by the paleness of her face, he released her and stormed off.

Nodding quickly, Colasa averted her eyes. From that point until they arrived at the conference building, she stayed a step behind the administrator, absolutely silent.

* * *

Seated in the largest chair in the observation room, Yvesk took a few moments to make sure his suit's collar was perfect before nodding to Colasa, who was seated at a nearby holographic interface. She ran one hand over the console's horizontal sensor, prompting the air above it to waver and coalesce into a digital readout. Reaching up and tracing one finger across the insubstantial surface of the screen, she selected the proper communications channel and turned to look at the far wall, which went entirely black, save for the blinking symbol in one corner that indicated a connection was waiting for authorization.

When an image finally appeared, it caught the administrator off guard. The capsuleer was clearly of Amarr descent, with high cheekbones and a clean-

shaven scalp, but beyond the most obvious features, little of his face could be discerned. Most of his head was obscured by cybernetic implants: curved, metallic attachments that spread around his skull at every angle, completely concealing his eyes, nose, and mouth. Power and information cables stretched from each implant to somewhere off camera on either side, making it seem like he was suspended in a spider web instead of seated comfortably in a starship in orbit high above the planet.

It was only a simulacrum, an image that this person chose to portray of themselves, but it thoroughly unnerved Yvesk. He caught himself staring at the screen and covered his blunder by clearing his throat and introducing himself. "Greetings, I am Planetary Admin—"

"Leonalle Yvesk," interrupted a thundering voice, reverberating around the room with an unearthly tone. The camera displaying the man on the screen zoomed in to show only the head and shoulders, his body twitching subtly whenever he spoke. "I am familiar with your information."

Yvesk inhaled briefly, scratched the side of his head, then gestured to Colasa and offered, "This is my assistant, Col—"

"Your associates are not my concern." Interpreting the capsuleer's body language was impossible. After several moments of uncomfortable silence, the muscles in his neck convulsed briefly - it really was an unnerving illusion - and the speakers continued his statement. "I am Omvistus."

The administrator nodded respectfully; his assistant continued to stare at the vidscreen and chew on her bottom lip absentmindedly. When it became obvious by the elongated pause in the conversation that the capsuleer wasn't going to finish his introduction by clarifying whether the name he had offered was a first or last, Yvesk moved on to business. "As you can see, sir, we are fully prepared to begin implementing your production

schedule. Our industrial sector still needs some updates and modifications, but I'm confident that in just under a year we could—"

"That is too long." The expressionless face on the screen twisted slightly, and then the capsuleer's voice boomed through the speakers. "I will replace your industrial sector immediately. You have one hour to evacuate all personnel before the new facilities arrive in their place."

Yvesk paled visibly as he turned his head slowly to Colasa, who lunged for the nearest control panel and began sending out frantic messages. "We're making preparations immediately, sir. Perhaps if you could—"

"One hour."

"I must say, sir," Yvesk began indignantly, "all of this is highly irregular. If you had just included this in your previous documentation, we could have prepared adequately."

The cables attached to Omvistus writhed as his body convulsed. "Your disquietude is counterproductive. Do I need to replace you?"

Yvesk glanced around and stuttered: "Of course not, sir." Licking his lips as he chose his next words, Yvesk tried to change the subject. "I noticed that you have some ambitious plans for our local spaceport. Would you care to elaborate?"

Omvistus was motionless for several seconds, and then his shoulders rose slightly and his voice came through over the channel. "Your existing spaceport facility was insufficient for my needs."

"How so?"

“The amount of raw materials that will need to be transported into orbit is an order of magnitude larger than what your current facilities are able to support. Additionally, I will be overseeing the construction of the seventy-two new spaceports my corporation requires, each located at key intersections across the surface of your world.”

Yvesk could feel the sweat trickling down the back of his neck and pretended to be rubbing sore muscles to wipe it away. He was relieved that Colasa was still buried in the computer terminal, desperately trying to get evacuation notices out to the industrial sector. “Sir,” he began, “while I appreciate your dedication to the development of Chesiette Prime, I feel it’s my duty to inform you that the scale of that project is far beyond our capabilities. Building that many new spaceports would cost more than the total revenue our planet generates in a year.”

Omvistus twitched. “I have just purchased all of the required materials to construct the new spaceports and arranged for them to be delivered within the next six hours. You will prepare for their arrival at once.”

The sheer amount of currency that had just changed hands before his very eyes, all in the span of a single heartbeat, left Yvesk speechless. His mind reeling with the massive numbers, he tried to find his footing once again. “I... thank you, sir. We’ll make sure the facilities are properly—”

“You will not be responsible for their assembly; that process is entirely automated.” The capsuleer’s head twisted to one side and his disembodied voice added, “All you need do is stay out of the way.”

Colasa was pleading to Yvesk with her eyes, begging for the order to send out additional evacuation warnings to any citizens who currently lived or worked in the areas designated for immediate repurposing. She pointed to her vidscreen terminal, which showed numerous glowing red warnings all over the spinning image of the planet. The administrator, however, held

one hand up, instructing her to wait. “Omvistus, I must protest at this point. Most of the coordinates you designated for these additional spaceports are located in densely populated areas. It’s going to take more than a few hours to evacuate all those citizens. I demand more time!”

Omvistus was absolutely motionless. “You demand?”

Frowning and leaning closer to the screen to block out the ambient noise of the city beyond the walls of the room, Yvesk refused to backpedal on an issue so important. “We’re talking about millions of people here. I don’t think you understand the gravity of this situation,” he growled his final word, “sir.” He shot an annoyed glance at Colasa when the drone of something outside reached the point at which it was difficult to hear himself speak. “We’re going to need at least a week to relocate everyone to unaffected communities.”

“That sound you’re hearing,” Omvistus replied, “is your planet’s bombardment siren. You’ve probably never had to pay much attention to it in the past, seeing as your world is safely under the jurisdiction of CONCORD, but that is no longer the case.” As he spoke, the back window of the conference room took on a noticeably red tint, saturating the room in crimson light. “What you’re seeing now is the targeting laser used to aim my battleship’s six 425 millimeter railgun turrets. At this altitude, the gravity of your planet will augment the standard launch velocity of each solid projectile to speeds well beyond operational specifications, enough to obliterate anything within half a kilometer of the impact site.” Omvistus’s image grew larger on the screen before he continued.

“Anything between that location and two kilometers from ground zero will suffer a worse fate, as the antimatter suspended in each shell escapes its containment field and expands in a random dispersion pattern, colliding with the ambient normal matter on the ground – buildings, trees, children, everything. Whatever these particles touch will experience matter

disassociation on an atomic level as, piece by piece, they are reduced to unidentifiable residual particles.” He paused briefly, and then concluded.

“With a single thought, I can reduce your entire city to a smoldering crater; the boiling wind rushing in to replace the void left behind will be laced with dust particles that were once the bodies of everyone you know and love. Do you understand?”

Yvesk looked down to see one of his hands shaking. He swallowed hard and, when next he spoke, his voice came out as a raspy whisper. “I... understand.”

“I’m sorry, Administrator Yvesk, but I’m afraid I didn’t catch your last words. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

The red light faded and, for the rest of the afternoon, the capsuleer spoke and the planetary administrator listened with obedience.

Lost Stars

From: *Dasegne Oleart, Internal Affairs, Quafe Corportion*

To: *Poire Viladillet, CEO, Quafe Corporation*

Subject: *Post-Mortem Investigation of Failed Product “Quafe+”*

Sir,

We have concluded our research pertaining to the failed launch of the product “Quafe+.” Enclosed are initial research and preliminary documents for your perusal. We have stopped production of this product before it could hit distribution. All implicated parties have been dealt with in proper fashion. The authorities have not been contacted. Gheyr Aillon is no longer with the company. The investigation will conclude in the next week after the guilty parties have been re-massed. Please find below the investigation’s core documentation:

* * *

From the journal of Yosif Veaulore, Sept. 12, YC 111

I sold out today, and I could not be happier. Viladillet’s office sent me their newest offer, and I couldn’t turn them down. It was more than generous for my fleet of junkers. Those Quafe bastards are losing their touch the bigger they get; either that or they’re desperate for the biomass. Quafe+ must be behind schedule. I don’t know why they want us to keep at the morgue runs. All I can gather is that it’s to keep an emotional face on that lumbering beast of a conglomerate.

* * *

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Quafe Corporations Merges with Lost Stars, Inc.

Lirsautton – The Quafe Corporation, through its affiliated development group Quafe Enterprises, has completed their merger with Lost Stars, Inc., a Federation-based funerary services agency that specializes in cleaning

up the aftermath of starship engagements throughout the Gallente Federation. The companies agreed to a merger agreement in which Lost Stars will join the myriad companies comprising Quafe Enterprises' burgeoning business conglomeration.

Lost Stars, Inc. was founded in YC 106 by Yosif Veaulore, who started the business with his son, Perime. From the corporation's beginnings as a single frigate retrieving the bodies of crew members from deadspace pockets, Lost Stars, Inc. currently maintains a fleet of over 2,000 ships, many custom designed for deep space retrieval missions. Through the deal, Lost Stars will provide an important role in Quafe Enterprise's new Industrial Services division. "We are proud to be a part of the Quafe family," says Lost Stars' president Veaulore. "We hope to provide a human element to Quafe to show that there's more to the corporation than beverages."

* * *

From the journal of Yosif Veaulore, March 20, YC 112:

I'm worried about Perime. I thought that maybe he'd get better in this new environment. His messages are sullen and terse to me – at least, much more than usual. I made sure the Quafe suits didn't audit his files, and I transferred him to a new ship. I've done all I can to keep him safe and out of trouble. What am I doing wrong?

Perime tried to convince me that this was a bad deal, that I'd hurt him if I went through with it. He doesn't have much to stand on. He sold me his shares the last time he got in trouble. It was the only way I could keep his problems quiet. This business was his idea. That's why I still keep him on staff, even if he's under an assumed name. I have to keep him close to me; I love him too much. This will be a good change for him, I know it.

* * *

An excerpt from the New Acquisition Progress Report – Lost Stars, Inc., a Quafe Corporation company.

Q2 YC112

From the start of the quarter, biomass retrieval operations have increased 200% over Q2 last year, though the number of retrieval requests has gone down by 40%. Most of the biomass collected from deadspace locations and battle sites is reprocessed for use within the company, though a small percentage (5%) of the collected human biomass is sold to cloning facilities throughout the Federation.

Estimated numbers:

Average number of bodies retrieved from deadspace locations: 5,000

Average number of bodies retrieved from capsuleer engagements (30 ships destroyed): 1,000

Average requests for individuals to be retrievals per engagement: 100

Most biomass retrieved from these locations consists of starship crew members who did not survive the engagement: Their ship's hull was breached before they could escape through escape pods. This recovered biomass is often unrecognizable, exposed as it is to the vacuum of space. When requests to retrieve individual bodies from this wreckage come through, the price is often well above normal for funeral costs. Upper-income families are the overwhelming majority of clients for Lost Stars, as they wish to give their relatives lost to starship engagements a proper burial. The Servant Sisters of EVE are also major clients, providing donations to under-privileged families to pay for retrieval and funeral costs.

* * *

From the journal of Yosif Veaulore, April 10, YC112

They've done wonders with my ships: repairs on all the ships, new crews, new equipment. Like new salvage drones (for about half of the ships, at least). No more space walks ("death marches," as the crews used to call them). Now they can send those drones out to fetch the corpses instead of sending my men out there. Gallente liberty means freedom from dangerous work, right? I'm expecting that within a year we'll have all the ships fitted

with these new modules. That'll probably mean massive layoffs at that time. That's the price of safety.

* * *

Personnel files: biography of Gheyr Aillon, Project Lead for Quafe+

Aillon was born to a family of miners in a deep-cavern mining community on Mannar. Both of his parents were killed in a deep-core explosion when Aillon was eight years old. He lived with relatives and family friends throughout Mannar until he turned eighteen. Though impoverished throughout his childhood, he had a natural talent for learning and eloquence beyond his years. When he was of age, he attended the University of Caille on a full scholarship. Graduating at the top of his class with a degree in Marketing, he entered the Federation's corporate world in a blaze, founding several small companies and turning them into instant successes. Some of the corporations folded shortly after Aillon left them, but a few still remain as part of Quafe Enterprise's conglomeration. Three years ago, Aillon became the youngest project lead in the history of the Quafe Corporation at the age of 31.

* * *

From the journal of Yosif Veaulore, April 30, YC112:

Perime's getting worse. I've barely spoken to him in the last month. He's angry with me, he must be. To him, it was always about helping people. Am I losing sight of that? No, I can't be. I'm helping more people than ever; progress does nothing but good to people.

That's why Perime wanted me to start this company with him, or at least that was the front he put on. We had lost his mother to one of these engagements. She and I were divorced by that point – “irreconcilable differences” – but Perime loved her so much, and it broke his heart when she started working as an engineer for those big, new starships. She had only been working the space lanes for about a year when her ship was destroyed in a capsuleer engagement. Total destruction of the Thorax on which she was stationed. Four eggheads caught the ship by surprise in an asteroid belt in Intaki. They tore the ship apart before all of the escape pods could get away. Verine didn't make it out. We tried several times to reach the capsuleer in charge of that Thorax, pleading for him to help us recover her body so we could give it a proper burial. He never returned our messages.

Perime was barely a man by that point, but he still had a child's temper. He went into his dark rage, the worst I've ever seen him. I lost contact with him for about a month. It was only when the hospital contacted me that I knew he was alive, though he was badly beaten, almost to the point of death. He never told me where he went, but that didn't matter. I was just happy to know he was alive. That's when he proposed the business to me. I couldn't turn the boy down, so I promised to give it a shot, regardless of the cost. Anything to keep him safe and close.

* * *

An excerpt from a speech by Gheyr Aillon to investors:

“Quafe+ represents the evolution of soft drinks in New Eden. With Quafe+, we hope to turn our marketed beverages from leisure products to dietary staples. We're in a 'want' market, where consumers want our product on an almost daily basis to quench their thirst. But we must expand past this point and turn our product into a 'need' market. We must have people needing Quafe+, demanding it for their very sake. This need does not have to be a physical dependency, mind. We're not some seedy organization like the Serpents. Rather, this is a cultural need, a social need, and a spiritual need. Quafe+ is the culmination of the familiar, a socio-genetic need for

any culture. We envision this product as absolutely necessary for progress into the future.

“And for that, my dear investors, I reveal to you Quafe+’s marketing campaign. It’s entitled, ‘Quafe+: A Familiar Taste for a Better Tomorrow.’ We will begin our campaign at the end of this year and start selling the product in the Genesis region next year.”

* * *

From the journal of Yosif Veaulore, April 30, YC112

We never wanted to make a profit, but we did over time. There were just too many ships out there and too much destruction not to grow our business. Even though the capsuleers took control of the ship, they still needed a crew. And when they got into their territorial pissing matches, when those demigods started to destroy each other en masse, that’s when business started picking up. While the eggheads could lose their ship and their pod and wake up in a cloning vat somewhere, their crew members were not so lucky. When that starship exploded – and it almost always exploded – if you didn’t get into your escape pod quick enough, you were lost in the black, forgotten, disgorged, alone. That’s where we came in.

We could empathize; we knew what it was like to lose a loved one to the dark void. Verine wasn’t lucky enough to have a funeral. But others could be, and we provided that service. It was dangerous work – we lost about 20% of our workers on the death marches – but it gave someone closure. We didn’t want to be profitable, but there was too much business to be had.

The business was all about collecting the dead, harvesting the forgotten. We collected millions of bodies over the years. We did our best to categorize them and contact the next of kin, and the technology grew quickly over the years. DNA scanners, facial reconstruction simulators, biomass regenerators, and biological recursion solvents aided in identifying the lost souls. But not everyone could pay our prices – we were still a business, after all. Most of the time, though, we either couldn’t find a next of

kin or the family didn't care about our recovery. That's when we sold the bodies for biomass – human recycling at its nadir. And that's when Quafe became interested in us.

* * *

Excerpted transcript of meeting between Dr. Simuel Touvoux, Director of Research and Riesves Boricon, Marketing Manager. April 14, YC112. From internal communications network and surveillance unit.

TOUVOUX: How're the focus groups responding to the new flavoring agents?

BORICON: They can't get enough of it! Product demand within 12 hours of consumption is up 300%. It's like they're addicted to Quafe+. I've never seen anything like it. Your team has done wonders. This is practically alchemy you've discovered, doctor.

TOUVOUX: It was surprisingly simple to produce the requisite flavoring agents, to be completely honest. Once we found the proper source for biomass, it was a matter of fiddling with the chemical compounds.

BORICON: Where are you getting your biomass from? What's so special about this biomass, anyway?

TOUVOUX: Quafe Enterprises is supplying it to us. Gheyr Aillon says that it's specific to one solar system somewhere in Pureblind. I don't ask too many questions: biomass is biomass, to be honest. Besides, we're already behind schedule on this project already, and we would be even more behind if we didn't find that flavoring agent.

BORICON: Is Viladillet aware of any of this?

TOUVOUX: We're keeping him posted on progress, but not really giving him too many details. The old man's too caught up in developing Enterprises to really care about the product even more.

BORICON: All he cares about is results, anyway. Frankly, that's all that matters in this world. This product is rather low on the totem pole, but I see

the potential for it to revolutionize the company. Maybe that will catch his attention.

* * *

From the journal of Yosif Veaulore, June 4, YC112

I don't have much control over my company anymore. At least, not the way I wanted. I guess that's what I get for selling out. I'm still in charge of the business's daily operations, but I have no control over its direction. The suits are in charge of that now. It's not about helping people anymore.

I can't even tell what they're doing with the biomass anymore. Aillon keeps shutting me out of those conversations. Our operating efficiency has gone through the roof, and we're collecting more bodies than ever! (It helps when there's more capsuleers in the sky to blast one another into oblivion, but now I'm just being morbid.) I've been cut off from all of my business partners and all the recycling plants that we had deals with. Hell, I can't even talk to the Sisters anymore. They're still our customer, but they go straight through Aillon's office at this point. That brash bastard – he's trying to take too much control. He should stick to his stupid Quafe+ project and leave us be.

And to make matters worse, I can't even get in contact with Perime. I hope he's OK.

* * *

Incident Report

Lost Stars, Inc., a division of Quafe Corporation

Biomass Recovery ship, "Eulogy"

May 10th, YC112

In the early hours of May 10th, YC112, several crewmen aboard this vessel discovered an employee, Eamom Delviour, to be stealing biomass from the storage facility aboard the ship. Delviour was found in an unoccupied sector of the ship – formerly the ship’s galley, before the “Eulogy” was owned by Quafe Corporation – hiding more than 20 bodies in a storage freezer. This sector of the ship was restricted to authorized personnel only, though ship logs report that almost no crew member besides Delviour had entered the area in at least four months.

According to the ship’s security investigation, the stolen biomass was preserved with embalming liquids and DNA purifiers stolen from Lab C. Each preserved body maintained most of its structural integrity, and each body was formerly female. Most of the bodies contained some wounds and discoloration throughout the torso area, though the causes of these markings are unknown. Significant traces of Delviour’s DNA have been found on some of the bodies as well.

By ship protocol, intact biomass is considered a premium and as such is closely recorded. However, as Delviour was one of the few space walkers onboard, his biomass collection was never fully recorded, which explains how he managed to collect so many bodies undetected. The space walking regiment on board the “Eulogy” has been dismissed entirely and the ship is currently docked and will be fitted with biomass recovery drones within the next few weeks.

Eamom Delviour has been taken into custody by Quafe security, who have performed a complete background check. Delviour was operating as an employee of Lost Stars, Inc. under an assumed identity. His real name is Perime Veaulore, son of Lost Stars president Yosif Veaulore, and a wanted fugitive within the Federation for the crimes of unlawful harvesting of biomass, assault and battery, and a classified charge under the “Dead Rights Amendment.” Security personnel found very few possessions in his bunk area: a few changes of clothes, multiple IDs for other assumed identities, and a picture of an Intaki woman. There was also a felchon, a

plasma knife commonly found among Mannar gangs, hidden beneath his bunk.

The recovered biomass has been destroyed to preserve the integrity of the corporation's product identity. This matter will be dealt with internally, and no federal authority is to be notified of Veaulore's crimes against the corporation.

* * *

INTERNAL MEMORANDUM

From: Gheyr Aillon, Project Lead – Quafe+

To: Dr. Simuel Touvoux, Director of Research, and Macal Theloux, President, Quafe Enterprises

Touvoux and Theloux,

We have increased our production of biomass for your flavoring agents. Efficiency within the Lost Stars operation is up nearly 200%. We have added more ships to our fleet and expanded our harvesting range to include Republic space. We are also looking to purchase the regional biomass retrieval service, Bountiful Harvests, from Boundless Creation within the next few months. With the increase in harvesting operations, we should acquire enough biomass to meet demand of Quafe+ upon launch, as long as your team can mass-produce the flavoring agent in time. I will keep you updated. So far, nobody is aware of the agent's source, though Internal Affairs has been asking questions lately. I'm not worried, though: We kept Veaulore around for a reason.

Aillon

* * *

From the journal of Yosif Veaulore, June 30th, YC112

I sold out, and I'm getting exactly what I deserve. I haven't talked to Perime in months, I'm getting blackballed from all executive meetings, and Internal

Affairs is breathing down my neck for reasons I cannot understand. I just wanted to help people, to soothe them when they lost someone close to them. Why is this happening to me?

I have a meeting with Theloux and Aillon tomorrow. The suits don't seem happy with me or how Lost Stars is operating. I don't know why they're blaming me; Aillon's the one that's stonewalling me! I'll find out what he wants tomorrow. In fact, I think it's time I stand up to that bastard. I've been out of the loop for too long. I need to stand firm, take charge, and steer Lost Stars back to the proper course, the righteous course – the course I started with Perime. Then I'll take Perime out of hiding and put him back on the executive level with me. Back where he belongs! They'll understand why I hid him; Quafe's got the pull to get the charges against him dropped. I'll try one more time to contact Perime after my meeting tomorrow.

* * *

Excerpt from the interrogation of Perime Veaulore. May 30th, YC112

OFFICER: Why were you stealing bodies?

VEAULORE: The same reason Quafe needs the bodies: I have to fulfill my needs.

OFFICER: How many have you stolen since the merger?

VEAULORE: A pittance compared to the amount Quafe has repurposed. Do you even know what they do with the biomass?

OFFICER: We're not here to talk about what your company does. We're here to talk about what you did to the company. Tell me: How many bodies have you stolen?

VEAULORE: I can't even count at this point. Everybody's heads are so far up their collective asses that it became too easy. I got greedy, just like Aillon.

OFFICER: Give me a rough estimate.

VEAULORE: A few dozen, maybe. I only stole them once I got the urges. I'm not healthy, you know.

OFFICER: That's an understatement.

VEAULORE: Though I'm nowhere as perverted as your bosses. My sickness stopped at myself; I always gave the bodies a proper burial once I was done with them. But you guys; you're abominations. Especially Aillon.

OFFICER: You don't know what you're talking about.

VEAULORE: Follow the paper trail. See where all this biomass goes once we collect it. Then you'll see who the real criminals are.

* * *

From: Dasegne Oleart, InternalAffairs, Quafe Corpoartion

To: Poire Viladillet, Marcal Theloux, Riesves Boricon, Simuel Touvoux

Subject: Cease Production Immediately

Sirs,

After a lead from our security personnel, we have begun investigations into the production of Quafe+, particularly its flavoring agents. The source of these agents, originally described as coming from a particular plant in the Pureblind region, has been proven false by independent researchers. With the full cooperation of Mr. Theloux, we have investigated the true source of the biomass required to produce these flavoring agents: biomass harvested through Lost Stars, Inc., an entity within Quafe Enterprises that specializes in collecting human remains from starship engagements.

We have apprehended the company's president, Yosif Veaulore, as we believe that he provided the corporation with falsified documents relating to the distribution of his company's harvested biomass. With the help of Dr. Touvoux and Mr. Boricon, who have both provided the full documented reports from Mr. Veaulore and his company, we can state with complete certainty that Veaulore acted independently of any other entity within Quafe Enterprises and Quafe Corporation as a whole. We have also apprehended

his accomplice, Perime Veaulore, his son and former business partner, who is wanted by federal authorities for crimes committed prior to the merger of Lost Stars, Inc. and Quafe Enterprises.

At the request of Internal Affairs, we ask that all development and production of Quafe+ be halted immediately until such time that we can conclude our investigation.

* * *

From: *Poire Viladillet*

To: *Marcal Theloux*

Subject: *(No subject)*

Marcal,

Where is Gheyr Aillon? Our accounting department would like a word with him on his project's investments. He has not reported to work in a week. I want him found and returned to my office – preferably alive.

PV

The Ressurrection Men

By the time the beatings stopped, Rokaan was barely even aware of what was happening. There had been rising increments of sharp pain, delivered to his ribs and his legs and his hands and his head, and then there was suddenly nothing but the dull, hazy, red-rimmed awareness of excruciating aches all over, fighting for their share of attention from his fading consciousness.

It was so late at night that even if he had dared to take his hands from his face, he wouldn't have been able to see. All he heard was the sounds, like slabs of meat being bashed by rocks.

He lay there, hunched in on himself. In the part of his mind that had gone very cold and analytical, he was amazed to find that he was unable to move. Also, he was lying in a small puddle of water, so he should have been freezing, but his body felt numbly warm.

Daring the world to poke and stab, he cracked open one eye, then the other.

It was hardly worth it. He was in the same alley as before, with his back to its mouth and his face to the wall. He saw light glinting off the puddle he was lying in.

Someone took a few steps behind him. The glint of light was blocked out.

A deep, raspy voice said, "I believe this is our man, Mister B."

A rather lighter and softer voice said, "I do believe you are correct, Mister H."

"Shall I hoist?"

"If you would be so kind."

Rokan was lifted up with such strength that it was as if he were weightless. Maybe he wasn't paralyzed, he stupidly thought; maybe he had simply died back there and these were the collectors who'd come for his remains.

But his body was hauled out of the alley - one of his captors said, "Look sharp now, young man, you're out of harm's way" - and set inside a hovercar that pulled up and hummed quietly. Everything hummed quietly, inside Rokan's head.

Coming in right after and taking their seats opposite him were two men in dark coats and hats, each at least a decade older than Rokan. Their faces betrayed no expression: They were neither cold nor confrontative but simply, Rokan assumed, at ease with who they were and with the purpose of what they were doing.

The warm numbness started to fade, and he gingerly tried to stretch his arms and legs. They obeyed, if creakingly. So he wasn't paralyzed. It must, he reasoned, simply have been the fear.

The two men did not look as if they were inclined to speak, and the windows were shaded so dark that Rokan couldn't see out, so his attention naturally turned to himself. He gingerly felt his face. His lower lip was busted, and one of his eyes felt swollen up.

The men apparently noticed this, because B regarded him for a moment, then reached into a pocket and handed him something. "Here. Put this on you, son."

Rokan accepted the thing. He regarded it with careful interest. It was a small round patch, sheer but with faint lines crisscrossing it like a gossamer web.

"It's a cure," B said. "Electrodes will cool down the swelling, and the silk they're embedded in will stick to your rather broken skin without harming it any further."

Rokan nodded his thanks. He peeled off the patch's protective skin and gingerly placed it on his face, as near the swollen part as he could tell. It felt nicely cool.

There was a slight bump on the drive and he winced, but his face didn't throb as much as he'd expected it to.

"Where are we going?" he asked them.

"We'll be there soon," the other man, Mister H, told him in a dulcet voice.

Rokan shifted in his seat, which made little lines of fire crackle throughout his body like veins in a lava outflow. He could move, though, and no bones seemed to be broken. He wondered if he could bolt from the hovercar - they were clearly keeping to low speeds - but decided not to take that thought any further. Whoever these men were, they had saved him from a terrible fate.

Probably.

"Look, I don't want to sound ungrateful," he said. The two men regarded him with something resembling faint amusement. "But am I in even more trouble than I was before?"

"Lying in the street, being kicked to death by hooligans?" H asked him.

Rokan gave an awkward grin, feeling the skin on his face tear just a tiny bit. "They're, uh. They're maybe a bit more than that."

H seemed unconcerned. "You have talents, young man. They got you into trouble, and we aim to have them get you out."

Rokan closed his eyes and sighed. "Talents. So you know why they were after me."

"Of course we do," B said, quite jovially.

"I am not going to work for you." He opened his eyes again and gave them what he hoped was a defiant stare, though its effects were somewhat spoiled by the need to keep looking from one to the other. "I needed to get into that vault, and I tried, and I failed, and they were probably going to kill me for it."

B made a tch sound. "These people were amateurs who were going to beat you to a pulp. We really cannot abide that sort of behaviour." He leaned in. "We have a proper use in mind for you, young sir."

"Look ... you know what it is I do," Rokan protested.

"You break into secure places," H said. He had not leaned in but was sitting upright; in fact, to the best of Rokan's recollection, he not moved during the entire trip.

"I don't break into them. I just..." He shrugged. "I undo the locks."

"That place you were trying to 'undo' had some quite powerful, time-sensitive safeguards. Ones that are usually bypassed only by very complicated - and very expensive - AI procedures," H said.

"Those aren't that big a deal," Rokan said.

They raised their eyebrows at him; not in admiration, he suspected, but rather in genuine surprise.

"Of course" – he rubbed his bruises – "I didn't know about their backup systems. Or how quick the guards would come."

"You're pretty good at this kind of thing," B said.

"When I'm not getting beaten to shit? Yeah, I rather think I am," Rokan told them.

The car glided to a stop. They stepped out, Rokan waving off the offered support from his two rescuers and gingerly finding his feet on solid ground. They were in some manner of underground parking complex, cars all around them at regular intervals. Rokan had no idea where they could be. The walls were metal and opaque plastic.

"This way, please, sir," B told him, raising an arm in guidance down one of the marked walking lanes beside the cars. "Mind you keep to the path, now. Some of the vehicles come fairly roaring in here, and we don't want to put you at risk."

They led him out, up a series of steps that led to a door. B arrived first and quietly stood in front of it. There was a hiss, then an extended pause, followed by a click as the door unlocked.

"Scanners?" Rokan asked.

"Cellular. Gaseous form," H told him.

"Seriously? Why not ocular, or DNA?"

"Those rely on body parts," H said. "Can't trust them."

They walked through the door, down a well-lit corridor that led them to other well-lit corridors. Eventually they went into a room that Rokan half expected to be terribly uncomfortable, like an interrogation chamber or a prison cell.

It wasn't. It was smaller than he'd expected, and outfitted with a carpet on which stood three faux-leather chairs. Two of them were side by side, facing the third. Beside that one was a small machine, a square block with dials and screens, on top of which lay variously coloured patches similar to the ones he'd received in the car. The machine put Rokan in mind of the world's first robot. The lighting in the room was pleasant, originating part from a large semitranslucent bulb in the ceiling, and part from standing lamps located in each corner. There were pictures on the walls.

"You can be at ease, sir. We only want to engage your services," B told him.

He sat, and the chair quietly moulded itself to him. After the beating, and after the tension of the drive - where, he now realized, he had been scared rigid even though the seats had been quite comfy - he felt the tension at last seep out of him, as if he were a dirigible stretched full of air that had been pricked with the tiniest of holes.

"We want you to put these on," H said, indicating the patches. "They will feel a little ... grippy, maybe a little sticky for a moment."

He hesitated, so B added, "Oh, don't worry, sir, we'll turn our backs."

"Where do I stick them?" he asked.

"Anywhere you like. They'll inject some things that can move around on their own."

He leaned forward and gingerly pulled off his shirt, wincing when he saw the muddy streaks of blood on one side, where he'd been cut, and the red welts on the other, where he'd been repeatedly kicked. As he applied the patches he found they stuck pretty well the moment they touched his skin. They adapted to his skin in a manner he didn't understand; after a little while he could barely see they were there.

B handed him a dry new shirt. He pulled it on and gave a pleasurable little sigh when he smelled its freshness.

"Who do you work for?" he asked them.

H, who was checking the machine, looked at him briefly and said, "A capsuleer," then returned to tuning the machine's dials.

The word raised such dread in Roka that he felt as if electricity had been shot into his heart, doubling its beats and crackling out through his veins until it reached the skin of his fingertips. He gasped for air.

"Steady, now!" H said, raising an open hand with palm out either in placation or warning.

He took a deep breath. Whatever this was, it was bigger than he could probably handle.

B regarded him amiably. "Would you like something to drink?" he asked.

Roka realized his throat was parched. "Yes, please," he croaked.

B left the room for a moment, then came back with a glass of water. Roka drank it down. It was wonderfully cold.

He looked at the machine, which H had finished tuning. It was silent, but several of its monitors displayed ever-changing figures. "Do I have to ... I mean, what do I have to do?"

H said, "Nothing very much. At least not right away. We're just measuring some of your basic abilities. Do you feel anything?"

He sat there quietly, checking for itching, strange bumps, odd internal pokes, or anything he might not be imagining. The two men took their seats opposite to him and waited.

After a while he took in another deep breath and sank a little further into the chair, letting the backwash of adrenaline envelop him. It really was very comfortable here.

"No. Nothing much at all."

"Good."

"So am I going to be working for this man?" He checked himself. "Is it even a man?"

They nodded. "You could be very useful to him, and to others of his kind," H said.

He opened his mouth to speak, but hesitated. From the looks they gave him he was sure they knew what he wanted to ask, but he tried to say it out loud nonetheless - for some reason it was important to him to ask how he could be useful, to take charge of his own usefulness - but his throat was parched again and all that came out was a croak.

"We are measuring your ability to handle certain types of stimuli," B said, pouring him another glass of water from a transparent can. Rokan couldn't even remember him having left the room to get the can. B continued, "The tests shouldn't reach you at a conscious, perceivable level, at least not the kind we're doing right now."

"So what are they for? Is this a health check before I go on board?" Just the words go on board gave him a nice, warm little sense of freedom. He found that he didn't care much about what he'd have to do. He'd be away from here; on a spaceship, out in the darkness. What an adventure.

B gave H a look, who said, "It's a check, yes. We want to see if your brain can handle the pressure."

He liked their funny speech, and the odd way they emphasized things. "Like a capsuleer," he said. He really felt very cozy. "Can I have something more to drink?"

B filled his glass while H continued, "Yes, precisely so. Capsuleers interface with modules in very much the same way that we're having your body do now, albeit at a much simplified level."

Rokan drained his glass in two gulps. A question popped into his mind, one that he'd never have thought - or probably dared - to ask.

"Why isn't everyone able to be a capsuleer? If I've got talents..." He left the second question unasked, his voice trailing off.

B said, "Well, not everyone has the constitution. Capsuleering isn't just sitting in a pod. It's a thoroughly complex interaction of many different elements, mechanical and biological, that converge inside a person's body."

H added, again with that weird emphasis, that certain sections of the brainwere capable of dealing well with certain parts of that interaction. "It isn't quite understood how they work, but we're constantly researching it. Sometimes we find out how certain ship modules can be better adapted to the capsuleers, so that their output or function can be improved. But it's hard."

"I can imagine. Must be ... complex," Rokan said.

"Not so much, but it's a difficult bit of ..." H waved a hand, apparently looking for the term. "Reverse engineering."

Rokan started to say something, but H plunged on. "There are a million ways to adjust the modules. We're just not always aware of exactly how they should be adjusted. First we need to find a brain that's capable of operating at better capacity than hereto identified, and then we know in what direction to take the technology."

"Are these huge changes?"

"To be honest, they don't look that grand on paper. Maybe some piece of equipment, some module in a spaceship, raises its output by five percent. But that alone can make a huge difference in interstellar combat. It may turn the tide of entire battles."

"So you need candidates like me," Rokan said.

"Precisely."

"Am I going to get to meet the capsuleer?"

B and H looked at each other again. B said, "Mmm ... I suppose that isn't out of the question."

Rokan thought all this over. "That's awesome," he managed. The three of them sat in silence for a moment before he found himself bound to add, "I mean, I'll be happy to help you with your research."

"I know you will," B said, quite genially.

"But guys, I'm feeling really tired right now. Could we ... sorry." He leaned forward and rubbed his eyes. "Could we take a break?"

The fuzziness in his head was overwhelming. It felt as if the lights had been dimmed; and things glinted: the machine, the chair legs, the teeth of Mister B and Mister H, who were giving him big, benevolent smiles.

"Oh, it's alright," they said. "Rest now."

The room really was rather dark.

"Rest."

The Rite

Adron Srif felt the air move by his neck as he ducked – nearly too late – and heard the clang of the metal spear strike the wall behind him. He'd been running for hours. Sweat dripped from his skin, pasting his coveralls to his clumsy frame. He forced himself to move faster, ignoring the burning pain as every muscle in his body resisted. Frazov was close behind now. The next spear might not miss.

Adron ducked behind a stack of crates. He had to get out of the aisles. The path was too clear, too well lit. He hoped his pursuer would follow him into the light. He hadn't counted on Frazov fashioning ranged weapons. Stupid. Firearms and other advanced technology were forbidden. This had always been interpreted as melee weapons only. Nobody had turned the rite into a ranged fight before. Frazov wouldn't break the laws, but he would bend them as far as he could. Now Adron could only go further into the labyrinth and hope he could double back.

He ducked down another aisle to his right. Now to the left. Left again. He had to keep moving. Frazov's military experience gave him the advantage. The tribe never talked openly about their pasts, but they all saw the uniforms each man and woman wore as they were brought in. They all saw Frazov's tattoos, marking his past campaigns and kills. He did not talk openly about his past, but he went out of his way to display his marks. It intimidated the others. It kept him at the top.

Adron found a gap between two refrigerated containers. In the darkness he barely made out "frozen food" in block letters. He allowed himself only an instant to look over his shoulder for his pursuer. When no spear leapt from the darkness, Adron worked his way between the containers. His breath became shallow as the sides pushed in his gut. If he made it to the other

side in time he might lose Frazov, at least for a few minutes. He was close to clear, only a few inches away, when he heard movement behind him.

It was a quiet sound, like the pattering of a hound on asphalt. Adron held as still as he could. He waited. Time slowed. The still air pressed upon him. The sides of the container began to condensate by his warm body. The pain in his legs became a dull itch. The smell of his own sweat sickened him. He desperately wanted to block everything out but that sound.

Minutes passed. The sound did not come again. Adron tried to turn his head to see behind him, but there was not enough room. It had been long enough; surely if Frazov knew where he was, he would have struck already. The ex-soldier was a sadist, but also efficient. Carefully Adron slid his hand towards the edge to pull himself through. Then the silhouette of Frazov appeared in front of him.

That Adron did not scream was a tiny miracle. He froze stock-still. In his childhood he had stayed up late watching holos of great planetside monsters that were attracted by movement. The only defense was to remain perfectly still and allow the monster's gaze to pass by. He had no reason to trust the old stories, but in that moment he could think of nothing else.

There was no mistaking the muscular frame of Frazov, even in the shadows. The soldier kept his center of mass low, ready to pounce. He held another sharpened pole in his hands. He kept two pieces of steel rebar in his belt for quick access. Thinning grey hair was closely shorn. Tattoos were mapped across his chest and back. Servos whispered as he moved his prosthetic arms, victims of some past campaign. The gold finish so popular among the Amarr had long ago worn off, leaving only a dull grey metal.

Absolute stillness. Adron concentrated on it with everything he had. His pursuer tilted his head, as if the hum of the refrigeration units were telling him Adron's secrets. Adron's lungs burned, demanding more air. It was too much. He couldn't hold on much longer. Then the Amarr swung the spear on the side of one of the containers.

"You have to be tired, Second. It has been a long chase. Forfeit now and it can all be over. I will even allow you some of your old freedoms. You can remain Keeper of Records. You can even write my memoirs. Do you hear me, Second?" He banged the spear on the container again. Relief flushed through Adron as he realized the strikes were down to nothing more than Frazov's own need for self-aggrandizing dramatics; the Amarr had no idea where he was hiding. "How about marriage? I know you've been eyeing Kathel. Submit to me, accept defeat, and I will bless your union. All you need do is stop running."

Frazov paused again, then grunted when no answer came. "My patience is wearing thin, Second. I might not be so magnanimous if I have to hunt you down." He pulled the spear close to his body and took off in a run. Adron waited several more minutes and, only when he was sure, squeezed himself out from his hiding place. He'd bought himself some time. He had to use it well if he was going to survive the rite, let alone win.

If he was to survive, he'd need tools. Adron wished he knew something, anything, about engineering traps. He knew how to keep things clean and orderly. That's how he'd risen to be Frazov's Second in the first place. The tribe would have descended into chaos long ago without his help. But Adron had gotten too full of himself and challenged Frazov's direction. He'd thought he would outsmart the old man in minutes, quickly rising to First. He hadn't counted on the Amarr's speed.

Maybe if he had something that moved faster than Frazov? He could find a crate of firearms, and then destroy the body so nobody saw the wound. No.

It wasn't just a law for honor's sake. Gunfire would set off security alarms, bringing the authorities down on the whole tribe. There had to be another solution. Adron inhaled deeply, closed his eyes, and calmed himself as the tribe had taught him.

He remembered the day he was plucked from the stars. The explosions. The wind that ripped him from his hall and tore the broom from his hand. The cold. He remembered the god's chariot, the light and warmth within his craft. The miracle of his new life. He remembered the Pilot. Then he had his answer.

It took an hour to prepare. The labyrinth was a monument to the Pilot's exploits. It was easy to become lost among the hundreds of aisles of equipment and containers. A strong head for order was needed to navigate the maze without the aid of a datapad. Luckily it was a trait Frazov lacked. Adron only got lost twice while gathering the right materials.

The crates and equipment were arrayed in a large circle. Floodlights illuminated the center of the circle. As a final touch Adron painted himself in dramatic war patterns, using engine grease and painter's chalk. He allowed himself a momentary smile at his own cleverness. There was little else to do, now. He hefted the makeshift spear he had recovered from Frazov's failed attempt. Adron walked to the center of the ring, practiced his breathing technique one last time, and slammed the spear upon a crate.

"Frazov! You get yourself lost? Here I am! Why don't you face me directly? Stop this great Amarr hunter crap." Adron's heart raced. The lights made him the most visible thing in the bay, but they also prevented him from seeing anything outside. For all he knew Frazov was standing outside the ring now, staring at him. Worse, he thought, Frazov might not even get that close; the second spear might merely leap from the darkness to impale him

directly. He obsessed over that image until his vision blurred from the stress. He struggled against nerves to yell again. "Frazov! W-what's the matter? Afraid of a proper fair fight?"

"Really, Second?" Frazov's voice came. "You're trying to lure me in with the fair fight line? If it were a fair fight, you would be dead in seconds. But you know that. You would only call me out if you had a trap prepared. So tell me, Second, why shouldn't I just take you down now?"

"Because..." Adron trailed off. He was forgetting his lines! He shut his eyes to concentrate. "There's a holo-recorder to my right. A bit of a violation, but it's not really a weapon. Besides, you've got the arms. So, anyway, it's recording now. If you face me, one on one, you'll have video evidence of your victory. You could show it over and over again to celebrate your greatness and my defeat."

The voice snorted. "My vanity, now? You always were clever, Second. I'll tell you what: I will play along with this. You know I never could resist a show." A loud clang from behind startled Adron, metal striking metal. He spun around to find Frazov already in the ring, holding his own spear. "Anything else before I undo your trap and humiliate you, Second?"

"Yeah. We throw away both our spears. We fight as we were when the Pilot delivered us."

Frazov raised a single eyebrow. "Bare-handed, then?" He flexed a metal hand. "A severe handicap for you."

"No spears."

"Interesting. Your show, Second." With a smile Frazov threw his spear into the darkness outside the ring. For a moment Adron contemplated using his

spear on his opponent then, but thought better of it. Frazov was still too fast. Adron threw his spear away as well.

No sooner had Adron thrown the spear than Frazov charged. Adron took a metal shoulder to the gut. He rolled on the ground, gasping for breath.

"Is this what you want, Second? Where are your tripwires, your spring-loaded javelins? Or maybe you just thought I'd feel bad for beating you senseless on holo?" Frazov sauntered to the other side of the ring, already confident in his victory. Adron tried to pull himself up on one of the ring's containers but tipped it instead. A milky liquid spilled out, covering the floor of the ring. Frazov backed away at first, then poked at the puddle with his foot. He laughed. "Grease? That's your big trap? You think you'll slow me with some damn grease? And really, Second, you could have at least picked a more slippery type. Look, I can walk right on it!"

Frazov marched through the puddle and over to Adron and lifted him straight up by the neck. Adron kicked and struggled as best he could, keeping one hand free to search for his find from the cooking supplies. "I didn't want to have to do this. If you had remembered your place, you could have lived the rest of your life as my Second. But now I have to defeat you. You will be exiled from the tribe. You will be sent back to whatever hellhole you called a home before the Pilot delivered you, and you will die alone, all because--"

Frazov's sentence ended in a scream as Adron threw a fistful of salt directly into his eyes. The Amarr grasped at his face, letting Adron fall to the floor. Adron scrambled up and to the other side. He grabbed a small chemical tub from another container. Frazov drew one of the pieces of rebar he hid and threw it at Adron, but his vision was so blurred that Adron easily deflected the rebar with the tub. The Amarr followed up with a blind charge, but Adron was ready, dumping the liquid contents of the tub at his feet while diving to the side. Frazov slid to a stop. The older man took a

moment to clear his eyes, now red and angry, and fixed squarely on his opponent. He went to take a step, but found his feet wouldn't move.

"What the hell is this?"

"It's a chemical adhesive. The two chemicals are innocuous themselves. Put them together, though, and they react to form a mighty solid glue. And before you raise a fuss, Caldari ship builders were using this stuff centuries ago to put their wooden sailing ships together, so it's not advanced technology. Not technically, anyway." Adron smiled at himself again. He produced a small bottle of a third liquid that he sprayed at his feet. "This is a liquid solvent. It dissolves the chemical bond. I'll be glad to let you use it if you concede victory to me. If not, well, I've used that stuff to repair seal leaks. The stuff lasts."

Rage and confusion filled Frazov's face. "This wasn't combat! You can't win like this!"

"Pretty sure I can. The laws say I have to beat you. I beat you. If you hadn't tried to kill me with a spear earlier I might have let you stay as my Second. As it is, I think I'll have to exile you. You understand." Adron turned his back to the Amarr. The glue would hold. He'd let him stew for a few minutes, then he'd come back to negotiate. Frazov was useful. The tribe would be stronger for his presence. Adron paid no attention to the whirring sounds, or the quiet click of tiny mechanical parts moving into place. All he took notice of was the bang, but by then it was too late.

Kathel took the third clipboard from the security officer and began filling out the forms. Each form required seven signatures, none of which Kathel was legally able to sign. The tribe had worked out an agreement with station security long ago to avoid most such legal complexities. Filling out the

forms in paper was longer, but avoided digital identity safeguards. Bureaucracy has its own complex ceremonies.

"You sure this is how you want it to go down?" the officer said. "Drug fight, I mean?"

Kathel didn't look up from her clipboard. "Is that unreasonable? Pilots often store numerous drugs."

"No. I mean, yeah, it's reasonable. Just, these are your friends, right?"

"Family is a better term."

"Family. Well, after the weapons fire, we arrived on the scene to find your Amarr uncle glued to the floor, your Deteis cousin dead on the ground with a hole in his head, and a holoreel of the two beating the crap out of each other until the uncle takes out your cousin with a snub-nosed baller, concealed in a prosthetic limb. Now, we both agree it's in nobody's interest to put all that in the report, but don't you want something more dignified than a drug bust for the two of them?"

"The one that deserved dignity has returned to biomass. The other broke the laws, and therefore deserves no dignity." Kathel replaced her pen within her dockworker jumpsuit and handed the completed forms back to the security officer. "There you go. I believe everything should be in order."

The officer took the clipboard and checked the papers over. "Alright. The Deteis was one Adron Srif. Pronounced legally dead after a capsuleer raid on a station two years ago. Suspect is Frazov, Corporal in the Amarr Navy, listed as KIA a year ago during a raid by capsuleer pirates. The Empire's going to have a fun time working back into the system just to try him, I bet."

"Returning to life is never easy, for first you must die."

"Right. You know, I can make some calls, get your identities back. Bet you the capsuleer doesn't even know you're here. You don't have to live in this weird legal purgatory just because CONCORD and the empires can't get their acts straight."

"Officer, have you ever truly belonged somewhere? Where you always feel safe and at peace because you trust the one above you implicitly?"

The officer nervously scratched his head. "Uh."

"That is what we have here. I appreciate your kindness, but we are perfectly fine." She walked the officer to the exit from the cargo bay back to the main station. He was nearly out the door when he turned back to face her. He held out an ID chip.

"Let me know if you have any other concerns. Here's my comm ID if you think of anything. Ask for Bellot. Anything I can do for you, miss...?"

She took the chip and placed it in her pocket. "First. You may call me First." The officer raised his eyebrows and began to ask, but thought better of it and turned away. Kathel sighed to herself. The rite had ended badly, and now she had to pick up the pieces. The man Bellot seemed nice enough. She entertained the idea of bringing him into the tribe, but she quickly dismissed it. She could not make someone a tribe. They had to be delivered. She would have a partner, eventually. The Pilot always provided.

Innocent Faces

The man in the garish robes and discolored wig was applying the last of his makeup when he heard a knock at his door. He scrambled from his seat and nearly tripped over his oversized red shoes as he scurried to the door, cracking it open to peer at the person outside the room.

“Cherall...I mean, Dr. Adad? Sorry to bother you, but you have a visitor. She’d like to meet you before your show,” said a lady wearing a headset and holding a large datapad. She glanced impatiently from side to side, tapping her foot.

“You know I don’t like visitors, Raha. Especially right before I go live,” he replied with a hint of agitation.

“It’s a sponsor’s kid. One of the holders in the Kor-Azor family. She’ll only be a minute,” Raha whispered. Cherall looked down and saw blond curls peek through the door’s frame a full meter below his producer’s face. He sighed softly before nodding his head and opening the door more fully.

“My apologies. Come on in, child.” Cherall shot a dirty look toward Raha, who offered a short smirk before bustling down the hallway. She spoke over her shoulder as she turned a corner: “Don’t forget, you go live in five minutes.”

The little girl looked up at Cherall with wide, green eyes as she stepped into the room. Cherall closed the door and smiled at her. The wide, red grin painted on his face accentuated his expression, and the nanite-infused compound on his cheeks glowed softly as various shapes illuminated around his cheekbones, spinning and bulging across his face. The little girl giggled at the sight, holding her hands in front of her mouth out of politeness.

“What’s your name, little one?” Cherall inquired, sitting down in his makeup chair gingerly, his knees cracking with the exertion.

“Fimiris,” she whispered through her hands, still staring at Cherall.

“Are you a fan of the show?” Cherall opened a drawer at his desk, rummaging through its contents.

“Yes, I am. I watch it every day.” The girl’s face flushed a dark crimson as she moved her hands behind her back and straightened her posture. “I named my favorite slave after Mr. Wayward.”

Cherall’s smile softened slightly as he continued to search through the desk, opening another drawer and sticking his hand deep into its recesses. “That’s very clever of you. Does your daddy mind that you renamed one of his slaves?”

“No, not at all. He finds it rather amusing, as do I.” The girl waved back and forth lightly on her heels as she talked.

After another moment of intense scrutiny, Cherall found the object he was looking for: a thin holopad with his likeness on it. He grabbed a pen and scribbled on the image before handing it to the girl. “That’s’ very nice dear. But remember, Mr. Wayward is a cartoon character. Your slave is a real person, so be sure to treat him well.”

He handed the holopad to Fimiris, who accepted it with a big grin on her face. She giggled again as the image altered and played a short scene of Cherall juggling bright, red orbs. “Thank you, Dr. Adad! I will certainly make sure to treat Mr. Wayward well.”

“You’re a sweet girl. You remind me of my daughter, you know. You and her would get along very well. Now, off you go. I have to get ready for the show.”

As the little girl left the room, Cherall glanced to a sign posted above the dressing room’s door. It was a simple wooden placard with blocky letters burned into it. The sign contained a short passage from the Book of Reclaiming: “Lead all children to the light of God, for Heaven is theirs to inherit.” Cherall stared at the inscription, deep in thought. After a few moments, his meditation was broken by the buzzing of a datapad on his desk.

* * *

“Children of God, do you know what time it is?” The voice echoed throughout the mostly empty soundstage. A chorus of high-pitched voices responded in unison: “It’s time for Dr. Adad’s Wild Time!”

Throughout the room, dozens of lights flashed on and hundreds of children’s faces appeared throughout the empty space, filling the area from ground to ceiling with holographic projections of smiling children clapping their hands to the upbeat music reverberating in the room’s atmosphere. The children’s images flickered as they clapped their hands in time to the music. After a few minutes, the clapping turned into full applause as Cherall entered the room, running onto a lighted stage and performing cartwheels and somersaults across its width.

Camera drones followed his routine from multiple angles as he flitted around the stage and spun wildly into the air. The music throbbed louder and the children’s applause intensified as Cherall completed his gymnastic barrage by launching himself in the air with the help of his gravboots – and floating back down to the stage floor with eight consecutive rolls in the air. He landed softly, raised his arms, and the music stopped. The children burst into applause all around him, their images flickering more intensely.

“Hello, children. I’m Dr. Adad, and welcome to my Wild Time!” Cherall bellowed to his audience, who applauded wildly in response. Cherall hushed them with a wave of his hand. “We have a very special show to you today, as we are filming this live from our studios on Nakregde II.” More applause ensued.

“As always, I’d like to begin this show with a prayer. Let’s bow our heads.”

Cherall’s painted face retained a solemn expression as he bowed his head. Inside the room, hundreds of holographic faces followed suit. Across the

cluster, millions more children bowed their head in prayer as they watched this live feed, their parents smiling with bemusement.

“God, you are a gracious God, and a forgiving God. We do not deserve your blessings, and we submit our lives to you. You bring us joy and you bring us sorrow, but we endure everything in your name. Please grant us the wisdom and the courage to follow you to Heaven. Amen.”

Cherall tilted his head up and looked into the nearest camera drone.

“And now it’s time for the fun to begin! Unfortunately, Professor Playmate is no longer going to be joining us in the festivities: He’s back at school teaching the Theology of Fun! But not to worry, because his brother will be joining us, and I’m sure you’ll love Emperor Excitement.”

The audience was silent in response to this news. Cherall panicked briefly, beads of sweat brimming on his brow and laughed nervously. “But while we wait, why don’t we see what’s going on with Mr. Wayward?”

The audience burst into applause and many children whooped and hollered in delight.

A smile slowly crept upon his face. On the vidscreens across the Empire, children laughed aloud as his cheeks flared with glowing numbers, letters, and symbols, the glyphs morphing and moving along to a bossa nova rhythm that had emerged in the background. Cherall’s eyes followed the glowing symbols as best they could, crossing and uncrossing, twirling and darting inside his sockets.

The clown’s smile intensified as the camera drone focused deeper onto his face. The glowing symbols changed colors and swirled together, forming more complex images and figures. As the theme song continued its rampant rhythm, a person emerged among the glowing shapes: a tall Minmatar man, dressed in plain clothes and covered in tattoos. Two more figures emerged shortly afterward. One figure was that of a shorter Amarr man in elegant robes and pale skin. The other was a large, anthropomorphic furrier standing on its hind legs and wearing a dress. A title in big, animated letters zoomed over the heads of these characters:

“The Adventures of Mr. Wayward and Friends,” followed by the subtitle, “Today’s Adventure: The Thief among Us.” Off camera, the children exploded into applause.

* * *

“Cherall, it’s Tadama. They took our daughter.”

Cherall stared in disbelief at the woman projected onto the vidscreen. Tears were streaming down her face and her auburn hair was hanging in front of her face in tangles. Cherall cleared his throat.

“Who took her? When did this happen? What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” sobbed Tadama. Her bloodshot eyes pleaded with Cherall. “They just sent me an image of her. She’s still alive, but they told me they’d kill her if I told anybody that she was missing. Except you. I think they want to reach you.”

Cherall stood up slowly, his knees creaking. He stood on wobbly legs as he moved to the nearest data console in his vast living quarters. “How am I supposed to contact them? And who exactly is ‘them’ anyway?”

Tadama entered some information on her vidscreen. She sniffed loudly and wiped her eyes with her hands before turning back to face Cherall. “I just sent you a contact number. They want you to reach them through there.”

Tadama glanced around her, panic in her eyes. Tears rolled down her cheeks and blotted her collar. “Cherall, you have to do whatever it takes to get her back. She’s our baby girl. And ever since you moved out.... Well, she’s all that I have left. I can’t lose her like I lost you.”

Cherall winced and looked down at his data console. His eyes were bleary and he grasped the console until his knuckles went white. “I’ll do what I can, Ta. Meanwhile, I want you to go to the police and...”

“No, I can’t do that. They’ll kill her if I do that. Please do what they want before—”

He raised his hands and closed his eyes, a single tear streaming down his face. “Ok, ok. Don’t go to the police. I’ll talk to them first and see what they want. Anything to get our little girl back.”

Tadama’s face softened, and she brushed her mottled hair out of her face, revealing her unblemished, pale skin – “God’s imbued essence,” as Cherall used to call it – beneath her wild, curly locks. Again she wiped her eyes, now raw from this repeated action, and smiled half-heartedly at Cherall. “Thank you, honey. I love you.”

Her ex-husband nodded his head and waved goodbye as he severed the call.

* * *

The nanites shifted into place, forming the words “The End.” The camera drone zoomed out to show Cherall’s eyes rolling around and around inside his eye sockets, feigning dizziness. The children again clapped and cheered as the camera continued to zoom out. When Cherall saw his full image again showing on the vidscreen monitors around the stage, he lunged backward into a complete triple back flip, and landed on one hand. Spinning in place, he twirled once more into the air before landing on his feet and smiling to the camera.

“So today we learned about stealing, and how wrong it is to steal from God’s Chosen.” He folded his arms in an exaggerated manner and leaned back on his back leg. “As God’s people, we Amarr are entitled to the bounty of God’s creation. The Minmatar, being wayward children, have not earned their right to God’s kingdom. Thus, they must live with the lot given to them by us, God’s chosen people.” Cherall raised his arms again. “That’s why

Mr. Wayward was punished for taking Flonta Furrier from his holder. By stealing from his holder, he was also stealing from God.”

Cherall twirled in place, his body twisting violently as it gained momentum. He pirouetted in a constant motion and propelled his body across the stage, continuously spinning as he progressed in a figure eight. As he performed his signature “Spindlemas” dance to the children’s delight, a woman appeared at the other end of the stage. She was dressed in a long, white, flowing dress with a white parasol in her hand. Bright red flowers adorned her hair, and brilliant colors flashed across her dress as she tiptoed around the spinning clown.

The children laughed and clapped as she followed Cherall’s gyrating form, attempting to catch up with him. Finally, Cherall spun in place for several seconds, allowing the woman to sidle up to him. She stood on her tiptoes and extended her arm out, putting on finger at the crown of Cherall’s multicolored head. Instantly, he stopped spinning and beamed at the audience in shock. He turned to the woman and gasped. “Miss Melody, I can’t believe it’s you!” he exclaimed.

The woman curtsied. “Here I am, at your service, Dr. Adad.”

“Welcome, welcome. What do you have in store for us today?”

Miss Melody turned to the camera drone and ran to the front of the stage, dropping her parasol and holding her hands together. “Why, I’m going to sing you a song!”

Cherall ran up to stand next to her. “Do you mean it’s time for....” All the children in the audience screamed with Cherall in unison. “Miss Melody’s melodies?”

The audience applauded as Miss Melody curtsied again.

“That’s wonderful,” Cherall exclaimed. “What are you going to sing for us today?”

Miss Melody cleared her throat dramatically, pausing for a beat before answering. "Today I will be singing the classic hymn, 'The Children of Heaven Will Gather Together.'"

"We can't wait. Without further ado, take it away, Miss Melody." Cherall bowed to her, then ran backstage as the first notes reverberated throughout the hall and Miss Melody's pristine soprano lilted through the air.

When he reached backstage, Cherall found the nearest available chair and sank into it. He closed his eyes and took deep breath. He became lost in the song's beautiful melody. As he sat there, listening to the music, he cried softly to himself.

* * *

Tadama looked at Cherall imploringly on the vidscreen. "Did you find out what they wanted?"

"Yes, I did," Cherall replied.

"Well?" Tadama had bags around her eyes from lack of sleep. Her pupils were dilated and she had trouble focusing on the image in front of her. She drummed her fingers on the data console in ragged strokes.

"They want me to renounce my faith on my program and to cancel the show."

Tadama stopped drumming her fingers. "That's it? No ISK, no power deals, no nothing?"

"That's it."

"So when are you going to cancel it?"

"I don't know."

Tadama glared at his image on the vidscreen. She grabbed the nearest object to her – an urn – and threw it against the wall. “What do you mean you don’t know?” she screamed.

Cherall stood up from his chair, his knees creaking as he did. His legs were wobbly and he could hardly stand. “I just don’t know. That’s not my duty.”

“Your duty is to your family. Have you talked to Samne about this? The two of you have worked together for nearly 30 years now.”

“Samne’s dead.”

Tadama gasped. She looked around the room in bewilderment. “What? When? How?” she stammered.

“They killed him two days ago. The same guys, these ‘Bleeding Hearts of Matar’ terrorists. They’re a splinter cell of the Bloody Hand. They gave me this same threat last week.”

“Why haven’t I heard anything about this yet?” Tadama asked, her voice quivering.

“We’ve kept it quiet. We didn’t know what to do. The Theology Council has officially endorsed our show for the edification of the faith. We couldn’t cancel the show without explaining it to the Council.” Cherall sat down again with a heavy sigh. Across the vidscreen, Tadama followed suit.

After a few moments of silence, she started to sob quietly. Between convulsing breaths, she muttered: “What...about...our...daughter?”

Cherall sat in silence as he listened to his ex-wife’s whimpering. Finally, he said, “I have an obligation to my faith to–”

Tadama shot up from her seat and yelled at the top of her lungs. “Fuck your righteousness for once, Cher. They’re going to kill Prandi!”

Cherall remained silent, his head bowed in prayer.

“You’ll never see her face again because you don’t have the balls to upset the Theology Council. What God would allow this to happen?”

Cherall raised his head and looked Tadama in the eye. “The road to Heaven is paved with tribulation. Those who remain with my flock shall never be vanquished. Their family shall be reunited in Heaven so long as they remain faithful to me.”

“You’re a coward and a fool, Cherall. I’m going to the police.”

* * *

At the end of the program, Cherall stood in the center of the stage, a single spotlight shining down upon him. He smiled to the camera drones.

“Now we must end our show for today. Please bow your head in prayer, children.”

In turn, the children bowed their heads. In the air surrounding his body were the images of hundreds of devout faces peering at the ground or with eyes squeezed shut, their hands folded in front of their faces, and their lips moving softly and silently. Cherall followed suit.

“Dear God, you have taught us so much today. You have taught us about the sin of stealing; about your love for your children; about the sanctity of the body; and about the importance of faith. We pray for your forgiveness as we strive to understand your Word, and as we attempt to lead the life you have shown us. Please forgive us, for we are sinners. On our path to Heaven, we stumble; in our journey of faith, we get lost. But so long as we are found again, we are grateful for your blessing. Amen.”

The children raised their heads and stared at Cherall. Cherall, in turn, raised his head as well.

“And now children, I must leave you for today. Go forth with God. We shall be reunited soon with God. Remember that God loves us all. Good night, and we’ll see you tomorrow.”

As the children applauded for the final time that evening, Cherall looked around at all the faces surrounding him, the hundreds of visages floating in the air inside the room, staring down at him and smiling. A single tear rolled down his cheek as he continued to look at them, searching hopelessly for something familiar among all the innocent faces.

Burnt

As the shuttle hovered towards the colony, Kanen looked out the viewport and marveled at the familiar terrain. He'd rarely seen it from this height, his face far too close to the dirt, and the last time he'd left the place he hadn't been in a state to enjoy much of anything at all.

The towers poked out of the ground like nails dropped into sand. The colony stayed in intense communication not only with nearby colonies and travelling starships, but with authorities much farther away. Its operations were regulated according to policies that Kanen had never really understood. Sometimes the crew was worked harder than usual, and sometimes ... well, sometimes nothing. They always worked hard. It was a question of calluses versus actual cuts.

Beneath the towers, the familiar rock and mud and mess. And, in the distance, the roiling magma that made it viable for human beings even to eke out a living on this rock. This was an active place, full of active people harnessing some very dangerous equipment, all sitting on top of what was effectively a big, crackling, active celestial volcano.

And beyond them, Kanen saw sky-wide nebulas streaking through all viewable space, dotted by planets in their thousands. Each one of those planets, Kanen reflected, by the sheer dint of their glow, would be large enough to eclipse his colony.

He looked down again. The burning glow from the magma reflected off the shuttle, casting it in red and orange hues.

"Goddamn," Kanen muttered to himself. As the shuttle started to descend he felt the light pull on his stomach and hands, as if someone wanted him away from the seat and out of the vessel; out for inspection by the stars that watched his every move from above. Away from the colony.

The hardest part in anyone's life isn't the crises they encounter, and if someone tries to tell you different, it says more about their lack of spine than it does about whatever problems they've had. Anyone can have a problem, or make mistakes, or suffer a goddamn breakdown. The question isn't what happened to you or what scars life inconsiderately raked over your hide - it's what you did after. How you got up again.

He walked slowly through the corridors of the colony's main operational section. There was no rush: he was expected by some people, and not by others, and he would take the time he needed to get this thing done right.

It was odd to be back, particularly without a task to work on. When you have been active for long enough in a particular place, you no longer see how it truly looks in brick and mortar, and instead experience it solely as the accumulation of tasks, needs, pauses and schedules at which you, of course, are the center. This giant wall, reaching to a ceiling many man-heights above, is no longer a wall; it is a route to someone's office where that meeting needs to be held, or a support structure that will need to be relocated as soon as the company moves on to the mineable rock beyond it, or simply a quiet place where you can take a breather for five minutes in between shifts and bum a cigarette from a pal. But when you leave - not merely this place but the web of duties, actions and results it has woven you into - and then you come back, you come back to it as a dead thing. You stand outside the life it contains, like a ghost.

He walked down corridors that held few people, even fewer he knew and none of whom seemed to know him. A door at the end bore the moniker *Betel Saraanen* and the title *Supervisor* below it.

Kanen knocked and entered. A man sitting at a desk looked up from a slew of reports, blinked a couple of times before he recognized the visitor, and said, "I want you gone."

"Don't we all," Kanen said. He closed the door behind him and leaned against it. There was a chair in the room but he did not sit down, nor did Betel indicate he was expected to.

"I want you gone," Betel repeated, "but there's rumors of Sansha coming in, so we've got the usual panicky flights off-base, and the capsuleers have wrecked nearby colonies to the point where we can't pull in new teams."

"And the ore needs to be mined."

"The ore doesn't need the likes of you," Betel told him, then confirmed with a sigh, "But the ore, yes, does need to be mined."

Kanen stood there in silence, listening to the rhythm of the colony. The regular beats that drummed up through the floor proved the mining works were operating at full swing, and the occasional tremor through the wall against his back indicated that the explosives experts were gleefully earning their pay.

"So you better get to work," Betel said at last. "The details are in your datapad."

You don't spring back to action. That's what I learned. After breaking away, and taking the time off you needed to recuperate, you're not exactly raring to go again. Rather, you need to slowly rev yourself up, like an old, worn, grimily oiled piece of mining equipment, spluttering and coughing in the poisonous air of the mines, sidling and sliding into action one more time. You haven't had a broken part replaced; you overheated and were given time to cool down, but nothing in you is back to new. Just a little tattered, perhaps a little broken, and uncertain how much it'll take before you give way again.

The workers' changing rooms were a ways down to the far end of the colony. Kanen knew his allotment, locker and equipment had been left untouched, likely less out of respect than a feeling of bad luck. Miners

cared about luck. They'd run out so often that they viciously hoarded what little they managed to scrounge.

There was a good while left of the current shift, and when it ended another one would begin. According to his datapad entry, Kanen had been assigned an area to oversee, but not a particular team of people; rather, he would be present along with any other midlevel overseers on shift to guide operations in that particular part of the mining grid and to jump in as needed when brute force was required. He could walk in at any time and start picking up the slack. The active team wouldn't be happy, but that was no worry of his. The active team working in the depths of an unstable asteroid colony, floating around unprotected in deepest space, was not expected to be happy.

So it was with no pressure but that of the churning dread of guilt that he turned and headed not to the changing rooms, but to the living quarters on the other side of the colony. He got in at least a minute's walk before a familiar voice called out his name, and a body marched straight up to him.

"Corwan," he said to the approaching form. He walked on at the same pace. The younger man, who was about his height but rather less built, sped to keep up.

"Good to have you back, man," Corwan said. He seemed about to slap Kanen on the shoulder, then reconsidered. "How you doing?"

Kanen gave him a look. "What can I do for you, Corwan?" he asked.

"Well, I'm just wondering. I'd heard you were back and wanted to see if we could have a chat about some, uh, staff issues."

"If we could talk about staff issues?"

"Certainly."

"Would those be," Kanen slowly said, "staff issues that occurred *before* or *after* I pile-driven a massive operational piece of mining equipment into a pit full of an intensely, if briefly, surprised group of people? Are those the ones we should discuss?"

"That wasn't your fault," Corwan quickly said.

"It was very much my fault, unless you want to pick out someone in that pit as having deserved what happened to them."

"No! No, no, not at all. But, uh, we do need to think about some changes that have been occurring here, or needing to occur, even before the incident. Are you coming back full time, by the way?"

"Supposedly," Kanen said.

"As an overseer?"

Kanen ran a hand over his face as he walked, then shot the man another look. "Corwen, it's not that I don't appreciate having at least one person here happy to see me. But the mere fact that I'm back here in my old position, however temporarily, means there's one less slot for you to grab if it's overseer status you're angling for; and don't –" He raised a hand at Corwen, who looked very intent on saying something. "Don't pretend that you're not climbing, because *we've* seen you from afar, coming up, knife in mouth. So let's skip all the camaraderie and the united front dumbass farce, and engage with the real issue instead. What is it you really want?"

Corwan was silent for a moment as they walked, visibly gathering his words. Eventually he said, "You can't be gone."

"I was gone for a while, son."

"But you weren't *gone* gone. They still held your position. Even before the Sansha rumors and the capsuleer attacks, they wanted you back."

Kanen was impressed. Anyone who'd caused the kind of accident he did would have been out on his ass. He certainly wouldn't have spared any member of his own team if they'd done what he did.

He quelled that thought. It would only lead to pride, and he had not earned that feeling. He hadn't even earned relief, though he hoped the end of this walk, if Corwan ever let it end, would help him on that path.

Corwan continued, "I won't get pulled up while you're here. No one will."

Kanen considered this. "That's the point, isn't it? You want me gone because I'm holding you back from promotion, but even while I'm here, at least nobody else will get the job, either."

Corwan nodded miserably. "I, uh. I need a bit more time to iron out some issues."

"Some issues."

"Some issues with the boss," Corwan said. "Just some... well, like I said, stuff I need to iron out."

"Make your position clear," Kanen said and couldn't help a little grin.

"Yeah, I—" Corwan caught the sarcasm. "Anyway, yes, I'd like you here so I don't lose out on a promotion to someone else. But I'm also glad you're back."

"Thanks," Kanen said. He believed it. Corwan was a climber, but he wasn't dishonest, at least no more than someone needed to be if they intended to make their way to the top by dint of being too oily to hold back. "We'll talk about this later. I need to see someone else now."

"All right. Thank you," Corwin said. "And, uh. Welcome back."

The younger man walked off, leaving Kanen to make the last of the trek alone. Despite himself, he couldn't but appreciate Corwin's honesty. The problem with career climbers was that everything they said tended to be tainted by want. There was the direct meaning of their words, which was always clear and usually more than a little flattering, and then there was the hidden one, the real motivation, which involved their own desires and which you had to discern like you were looking through a darkened glass. Having one of them break cover, as it were, was something to cherish.

He passed a few others on the way, and noticed the way they spotted him, but tried to ignore whatever they said. Snippets of one conversation did pass through his filters.

That's him. Over there.

That dude?

That dude.

He's the one? The guy who—....

That's the one.

Oh. Wow.

There was a pause.

He's old.

Kanen grinned again, and marched towards the personal quarters.

A knock on a particular door, a deep breath, and when it was opened by a woman her eyes went wide and she slapped him hard in the face.

He didn't raise his hand to his cheek, though it felt on fire. Her nails had broken skin. "Hi, Beth," he said.

"How dare you show up here?" she said to him in a voice so quiet it approached a whisper.

"Can I come in?" he asked. When she made no move to let him in, he added, "Beth, I'm back. I am going to be on the colony for some time."

She glared at him, her lips pinched together. Then she stepped aside without a word. Kanen walked in past her, into the living room, and sat down on a couch.

It was a sizeable living room. The apartment was meant for two people.

"I don't have a lot to say," Kanen said to her as she walked into the room. She did not sit.

He added, "Not as much as I'm sure you'd like to say to me. Nothing's going to help much. I just wanted to let you know I'm sorry from the bottom of my heart, and that I'm trying to make amends."

"By coming here?" She stared at him. "You think you're making amends by coming back... here?"

"I was asked to come back—"

"By who?"

"Saraanen. He needs people right now, and I've recuperated enough."

"That's nice. That's nice. I'm glad someone has."

"Beth, I—"

"My husband nearly *died* because of you."

"If I could do anything for J—"

"Don't say his name! Don't you say his name. He was seriously hurt." She looked away for the first time. "He's still in there, on his white bed in that horrible room, and he nearly died. They won't even let me see him except on weekends."

"Has he ... come back at all?" Kanen asked.

"A couple of times. We spoke a little, but he drifted off. They think it might be all right some day but we don't know when, and the brain injuries mean he might not be able to..." Her voice sputtered, then failed her. She breathed deeply. "Why did you return? What can there possibly be left here for you, except more people to hurt?"

"I don't know, Beth. Some way to show I'm not a tired old man who's lost it for good and who puts his friends in terrible danger," he said. It was an honest thing to say, or at least it felt that way to him, and for the first time in their talk she met his gaze with something that didn't resemble hatred.

He got up. "I didn't want to make this long. Just wanted to let you know, before you heard from anyone else, or saw me around. I won't be getting in your way. But if he gets better, I do hope you will let me know. I really do."

He turned and walked to the door. "Take care, Beth," he said before leaving her quarters.

You know you have to go when you start to fail, little by little. The final break that pushes you out - which will always be terrible, and far more costly to other people than it was to you - is not some single event, some great explosion that is isolated from everything else. Not a single grand failure but a cascade of smaller ones that you just can't grasp, no more than the pebbles falling through your hands. They add up and they keep adding up in a monstrous framework of dangerous failure until finally, by some banal coincidence, something finally tips the whole thing over.

And people get hurt.

All those little mistakes, the ones you wouldn't have made if you weren't so tired, and you want to say: It wasn't me. This is not how I live my life. This terrible wreckage, this is not the work of a man like me. But you only think like that after the fact, and by that time you can no longer attract attention to what you did. You are advised, by those few who will still talk to you when you surface as a human being again, to 'let go of the past.' Let go of the past and 'live in the now.' Never mind that my past includes several decades of not fucking up, before everything started to slide, and that my Now involves an old man about to work on a ratty piece of equipment on the hard edge of a rock floating in deadly nullsec. To hell with the Now. I'd live in the past if I could; the view is infinitely better.

He walked on. He didn't know what was driving him on: atonement or sheer stubbornness. There was one person who wanted him here, one who wasn't sure, and one who wanted him dead and gone. If he did this, it wouldn't be noble, but it wouldn't be for a debased reason, either. It involved pride and selfishness, yes; but mostly, he suspected, it involved the need to do something – anything – with the rest of his time other than watch it pass him by.

As he passed into the corridors that would lead him to the changing rooms, he saw, through the glass alloy walls, the world outside this place. There were asteroid mountains in the distance, and beyond them, the sun shining bright. He felt the thrum of the earthworks as he walked on and on. And every face, even those who resented him here - and there were plenty - still showed a grudging respect, if only for the fact that he had lasted this long; he lasted this long and he returned.

He walked on, losing track of time. The harness of his old machine was there; he could see it now. It was empty. It was waiting for him.

Jita 4-4

Part I

It's after 9 PM at the terminal when I arrive. Most shuttles are switching out 15-minute schedules for 30-minute ones now. People draw together and wait, struggling to distract themselves in the seemingly endless space between. Bars, vending machines and VR booths fill every corner large enough to house them, offering up a quick, easy and overpriced escape from the intentionally gray concrete walls, illuminated only in the cold monotone of fluorescent lights. Pale and bloodless in this false glow, everyone looks like a vampire, something I would describe as *convenient*.

Now begin the dead hours, when things start to calm down, if you could describe anything here in those terms. Jita 4-4 may be one of the busiest hubs in the universe, particularly for the capsuleers, but the eternal dominance of the circadian rhythm makes itself known even here. Fewer shuttles leaving now? That's the station slowing her breath. Really it's us, our collective breath, but in *everything* now is the human imprint – for better or worse.

One rule is that you can't sleep here. For me, tired of travelling through a haphazard network from a station out deep on the frontiers, this particular custom is unfortunate. You see, despite my much *younger* exterior, today marks a much older birthday, and without getting too technical about it, I haven't slept in over three days. I've kind of forgotten how right now, and there's that moment in the lull, that seductive daydream that creeps up on me when I least want it.

Nevertheless, when in State space, I will do my best to *behave*. This is because the massive roster of station attendants, security officers and

"information advisers" will actually wake you and *remind* you, as they like to say.

"Ma'am, I would like to remind you that there is no sleeping allowed in Terminal 1."

As if you'd actually forgotten. As if you intended to lie there asleep and vulnerable, while anonymous passers-by sidestepped your defenseless, lifeless body. As if you wanted to fall into that trap. As if you were, well...cattle.

They take a note, you see, and attach it to your Temporary Station ID. That's your first and only warning. The second time you drift off they don't say anything, they just start the clock. If you wake up before ten minutes is over, that's two. Three is either ten minutes, or a third nod-off. You think I'm kidding. You think *there's no way they'd bother with this shit*. Well, everything has its protocol, its hard parameters, its bottom line. Well, where are we again? *Exactly*.

Three times converts those little annotations into a vagrancy charge. Offenders are removed roughly, quickly and without a word. Vagrants don't deserve to be read their rights, because by definition they effectively have none.

Now, I remember a few decades earlier, everyone would fall into this trap. There were the actual vagrant types; dreary-eyed Minmatar with the signature Sooth Sayer drool, clearly homeless and reeking of their own shit, and then there was the Caldari businessman, upper management type, rules don't apply they think. Usually their first time here from some outer-regional post, Lonetrek or something like that. Even those guys,

dressed in suits worth more than the yearly salary of the three men unceremoniously hauling their still-waking, highly confused, designer-label-clad asses out of here: even the mighty could be treated like the lowest. Nobody though, as far as I can see, has stumbled just yet.

I've come here to remind myself of the Caldari. And that's also why I take the stims.

There's the enjoyment factor, sure, but it has more to do with my aversion to cold cement streets and the types of people who roam them until dawn. *There's vampires out there, too.* Blame the circadian rhythm, or something.

As for what I'm doing here, well, let's just say for now that I don't want to fall asleep. In actuality, this has little to do with what might await me out there, and more to do with my lack of Temporary Station ID.

We're all supposed to have one, you see. Otro Gariushi's was 19, the first civilian number available on the rotating register. Even he, *Otro Gariushi*.

My first stop is the food court. The primary one, that is. The one the size of four Mind Clash arenas, that dominates the entrance to Terminal 1. You can't miss it, in that the place simply *isn't designed that way*. It's a four by nine kilometer sprawl of gastronomical consumerism like you've never seen before.

People come here just for this.

Everything you could ever want, from the fast and nasty (there is actually a vendor, or two, that run by this name) Minmatar bread-soups, to the most exquisite fine-dining on the mezzanine.

There's nothing quite as *fresh* as Jita.

Jumpdrives brought about some amazing changes. They helped us reshape our world with dramatic speed and efficiency. Here in Jita at ground level, though, I'm reminded of the ways we've bent this technology towards more base means.

I say this because I can smell another human imprint, and it's something like the salty tang of freshly caught fish. Maybe just a little over an hour old. Back then, full of life, swimming upstream towards nothing under one of any number of alien skies. I follow the scent and pretend to be able to discern where: which planet, which continent, which settlement. Perhaps somewhere in Urlen, I consider, near one of the polar settlements, where the magnetic fields create these wondrously hypnotic purple skylines with clean, bright stars shining through the thin atmosphere. Perfect low-cost real-estate for entrepreneurial fisheries. Must be even cheaper now, I realize, given the proximity of the planet to market hubs, and the latest CONCORD madness allowing capsuleers to drop extractors wherever they damn please. Forgetting for a moment what I am, in some ways, I'm back to imagining rivers of pure glacial water, artificially rich with the most economically favorable species of the month.

Then I imagine that fish, driven only by blind instinct as it slides inexorably down towards some dark fate. I imagine an inevitably murky and cold end; a net, perhaps, but it's somehow not likely to be that romantic. These artificial rivers tend to be quite literally purpose-built to the end, with the

flow of water eventually heading right towards the abbatoir. The Caldari have made it efficient to the point where you have to question their use of the word "fishing."

What's important though, is that from this stream it finds its way to a warehouse, maybe 10 minutes or less, as these things tend to be built into the actual rivers as well (at least if we're sticking to the Urlen fisheries).

Another 20 minutes and that fish is loaded onto the cargo bay of a freighter, and then perhaps swims around for a few hours inside giant plastic-lined bags filled with life-sustaining fluids, waiting for the launch. Then, most likely our fish dies somewhere in orbit, if the acceleration out of the atmosphere is a bit rocky. A space elevator is most likely just as inevitable here.

After at least another 10 minutes, it's at a station (and this can be pretty much anywhere in the known cluster if you have a long enough cyno net [and the best traders always do]).

After all that... all those hours spent dying, loading, launching, warping, docking... after all that, our fish is in something with a jumpdrive.

Within *seconds* it's here and in the hands of some of the Federation's finest culinary experts, where those succulently smoked and sautéed and skewered atoms permeate the domed terraces, filtering out downwards before they're slowly muted by the dull mix of cheaper breads and spices. I try to imagine just how many different atoms, from how many different planets, must be colliding around here right now. Cosmologically speaking, Jita must be a meeting ground for them like no other place ever before it, in

all of human history. All because of isotopes, cynosural fields and jumpdrives. Think about that the next time you're dropping off for a bite.

Because it's important to realize how some things come about.

I've come here to remind myself of the Gallente. If you ever doubted the capitalistic might of their corporate giants, you should make a visit here too sometime. The entire area is dominated by their cuisine, which in a way makes sense, since Gallente food accommodates everyone. It *has* to. If you ever thought politics or laws were the primary concern of an infinitely fractured populace, think again. Think about tonight's dinner. I know I am.

One of the great accomplishments of the Federation's food services industry was the way they managed to slowly absorb their competitors. They did this through subtle and well-applied use of the nation's media influence, which extends across all empires' borders. A predictable tactic, sure, but effective as anything. They don't play the Caldari corporate game either, and that actually gives them some advantages when operating in State space and abroad, even during the "wars" when everything is supposedly turning to shit.

I suppose the most insidious thing about their commercial success isn't the level of trickery employed on their own consumer base, but rather, the more fundamentally repugnant *facelessness* of it all. To survive economically in your opponent's commercial nexus like this, you have to lose your face. You have to become about something entirely impersonal. You have to become about a *system*, about a *way of doing things*.

This is why people will talk about the diversity found in Gallente cuisine. That's one of the darker sides to it. To most people this is perceived as

something slightly simpler. They say that the Gallente have copied every other nation's cuisine, made *fusions* and called it their own, branded it as their own. This captures the essence of the issue, but doesn't identify the core.

These people say that we've arrived at the point where it's no longer even clear who owned what anymore (hyperbole: trademarks keep that perfectly clear, if only for the lawyers - most consumers don't even understand the most rudimentary networks of corporate ownership). The favorite topic amongst economists is the strange way (particularly strange to the Caldari) the Gallente economic model worked on pushing everything into the public domain and then recycling it, again and again, making it just different enough to justify the trademark. This is part of what I mean when I say they don't play the Caldari game. But again, people overlook how it was accomplished.

It's not all they overlook, either.

You see, for most people at Jita 4-4 and abroad in State space, it's enough that the logo on the restaurant they're eating at is a Caldari one, and for the Gallente business owners and entrepreneurs, it's enough that a little playing pretend is all it takes to keep dishing out foods of every type as they attempt to corner (or, most commonly, invent) another niche in this already hypersaturated market. Everybody knows the game, but their apathy to such things is well ingrained.

Take the Salted Amarrian Rockjaw.

Now this thing is a beast of a creature, quite familiar with the interiors of Amarrian torture chambers, too. It has a rather sweet taste, with a fresh salty aroma to the flesh. You can have that at *Dieurelli* with a side of

Achuran Songbird wings in a sweet nut-and-berry sauce. This meal, to anyone there who eats it, is unquestionably *Amarrian*. It is a tasteful, politically correct marriage of Empire-State cuisine. Perfect for high-profile business lunches you want to keep hiccup-free (depending on your clients, of course).

A little further down, off the high-rollers' mezzanine and into one of the many corridors spinning a nebulous web below, you can get more adventurous with the Rockjaw at every corner. At *Pmokka Caravan Delights* you can have it seared over a traditional Brutor *Khari* oven, then watch as it's slowly de-skewered and served alongside tender pieces of traditional Pator Steak, bloody and still rich with life beside their impaled counterparts.

Some meals speak for themselves and many, do in fact, have something to say. This one says "I am unquestionably Minmatar."

But in *every one* of these restaurants, all you will ever see is pretty Civire girls waiting tables, with the silvery circular logo of the State out front. Meanwhile, in the engine room, it is most often Gallente chefs who will be driving things forward. Not just at *Pmokka*, but at *Diurelli*, and almost anywhere else you care to look behind the curtain. The Caldari think they're exploiting the labor of the Gallente, and the Gallente think they're influencing Caldari culture, one mouthful at a time. The Amarr and Minmatar? Shit, they aren't even really *here*. They're just ghosts; puppet apparitions dancing to the tune of friends and foes up north.

And this... this hasn't ever really changed.

I'm opting for a low-profile bite-and-run here, though (and keeping my mind off the steaks...) so I stop off at QuafeSnacks. The food here is, I suppose you could say, the very bottom line. It's not like Quafe hides it either. They have QuafeSnacks Premium and QuafeSnacks Premium Ultra vendor stands, and Quafe Deluxe, Quafe Deluxe Premium, and Quafe Elite restaurants plastered all over the courtyards as well. If you're at this particular franchise, you don't really have any illusions as to why.

Personally, I find a sort of perverse, gimmicky joy in watching the families order and endure. Most of the food here comes exceptionally cheap, you see, but there are no tables and no seats. The consuming crowds have to disperse and eat amongst the milling populace, at tables and ledges near elevators, escalators, walkways, and – best of all – in waiting rooms packed with people killing time on empty stomachs.

All designed, you see.

The bags that carry their food project subtle holograms above: a small news ticker, the current air temperature, arrivals and departures, station announcements. All to the side, all but consumed by the cool neon green of a Quafe logo. Then there's the perfectly manufactured scent of it all, the look of satisfaction and enjoyment.

It's the best way for me to blend in, you see, become *just another billboard*.

Yep, you can do pretty much anything here. Except sleep.

It's a non-starter for me anyways. If I fall asleep, then they'll see soon enough. They'll notice the sockets at the base of the neck, telltale signs of trouble.

While pleasantly dreaming, I'd be giving them an excuse, a reason, a motivation to look closely enough, and they'd realize quickly what I am. In these situations where we are uncovered, alone and incognito, lurking amongst the masses, they find it easier to just shoot us.

When capsuleers are involved, it's the only path with a predictable end.

If they woke me, and let me know that they know, well, *who knows* what would happen next?

I could be loaded with nanite viruses, armed with invisible spy drones, laced with biological contaminants. Who knows?

Maybe...

...I'm here to take a hit contract on some civilian in the crosshairs of a person with too much money and some serious grudges. Just walk up to them as they amble tiredly towards a shuttle and then boom, spray, bang, zap...who knows, but it's lights out either way and I'm laughing all the way to the nearest clone bank.

I could be here to solve all kinds of problems. Or, I suppose, cause them.

Whatever it is, it's assured by default that whenever a capsuleer is trying to *blend with the baseliners* (b-lining, they say – rather repugnant if you consider it) it's not because they're here to mingle.

Besides, the mechanics of it all are for them the same as mine. They have the authority to act with lethal force at a moment's notice. Against us, that is.

Hidden, uncovered, that is enough. Beyond that they have impunity.

Me, us, we always had it – so they get to catch up. A dangerous game I don't want to play. Some of you would just not believe the rumors I've heard. The stories of opportunistic savagery unleashed upon our kind when nobody who gives a damn is looking.

I hope a kind yet firm bluff will be all it takes. I know exactly what they fear, even better than they do. This counts for a great deal. I understand their countermeasures, and when you know their paths back to safety, you command attention. They, sadly, only have one go at this. For me this is *practice*. Something to keep my senses sharp after a long while doing nothing much, just mixing it up. Blame the circadian rhythm.

As for what I'm doing here, now, deep inside a sub-basement level following two Brutors who smell of alcohol (made from fermented Amarrian wheat, I establish, but keep to myself)... well, I'm following the scent. I'm here to remind myself of the Matari (always preferred that term).

But more specifically, I'm making a purchase.

More particularly, drugs, and to be explicit, we're talking some quite rare ones that have, curiously, become far cheaper in recent times... 'recent'

meaning, here, in the weeks, months and years following the wormhole openings.

Strange, right? Well, see anybody complaining, making a public scene out of the fact? *Exactly.*

C3-FTM (C3-fullero-tris-methanodicarboxylic acid, in case you wondered) – I used to have to go to the mezzanine for this, and I remember how awkward it would be to order such tiny quantities in ushered tones, surrounded by an opulence that outstripped the value of my purchase by an order of magnitude. Obviously, the situation of demand and supply was *complicated* back then.

Now all I have to do is hook up with the local Minmatar smugglers, follow these two Brutor, and soon enough I'll have a whole fucking crate for the price of the meals I used to have to order as a disguise.

Maybe you understand now that I am no cynic to be asking: *what's the catch?*

Following these two along this dimly lit artery towards some unknown destination, I'm listening to a crisp, momentary tone as it's played out through invisible loudspeakers embedded into the walls, perfectly audible even down here in the bowels of the station. The two Brutor look over their shoulders at me for an explanation; they understand the game, but they don't get the language. I shrug a "nothing you need to worry about" and keep the pace down the darkened corridor.

It's interesting that they grasp this much. Perhaps the operation here isn't so reckless as I initially thought. My immediate suspicion is that I'm about to run into one of my own kind. Or, at least, another capsuleer.

Close enough.

That's one of the games, you see. Or one of the ways they divide us, class us, speak to us...look at it how you want. I see a game. In these momentary audio blips there is another, secondary message, a heavily compressed meta-stream lying obfuscated beneath expertly crafted static and white noise – all of it neatly engineered into a fleeting, innocuous bleep. Inside each one there's often quite a horde of information. Here, in this one: a neurovisual map marking VIP elevator access points, secure comms lines, security posts, and of course, advertisements for restaurants, accommodation and other venues that are all kilometers above where we are now, and with price tags to match.

It's one part *Survival Guide to B-Lining* and one part *Here's What You're Missing Down There*.

Maybe now you understand, too, why I wasn't about to explain this one to my Brutor guides.

“That? Oh, it was an advertisement for 4,600,000 ISK shoes, and a map showing twenty-five of the quickest routes out of here.”

These guys just stare ahead and continue briskly along a hard right into a sharply twisting staircase that drops rapidly below what I just thought had to be the bottom of the station. I'm beginning to wonder how close we are to

the surface, to the vacuum outside. Everything is quiet save for the low hum of ventilation ducts, occasionally rattling a new breath of hot air through these dimly lit catacombs. I imagine it all coming apart for a moment, and imagine surviving. There is comfort in the thought. After some time we arrive at a door. The two men stand beside it as it opens inwardly. I move to step inside and just from the way they both turn towards me, I know that this is as far as I come.

Staring inwards from the outside, I'm met by what appears to be a plainly dressed Vherokior seated behind a desk with wooden antiquated drawers that sound like they're run on ball bearings. She's writing something out on paper. Surrounding her are rows after rows of bookshelves, each filled with crates of drugs – and, from what I can see, the odd weapon too.

I reel instinctively, before I can even restrain the impulse.

She notices this and smiles, lowering the pencil. She's dressed like a commoner, it seems, but the way she carries herself and commands this strange scene screams money and influence, and comfort in deception.

“Yes, we're a bit old-school here,” she says, looking through the locks of her perfectly straight hair, arranged traditional Vherokior style, no jewelry (unless you count rubber bands).

“So much for not leaving a paper trail.” With the copycat pretension of it all, I can't help screwing with her a little bit. Tension is adrenaline and adrenaline is good; it keeps you awake.

“C3-FTM?” she inquires, ignoring the jab. I nod.

“Of course, glad to help.”

“The cost?” She can tell I'm not really asking, that I don't need to ask. She can see the subtext.

She nods in turn. “Not much, these days.” I hold her gaze. “You seem curious about why, hmm?”

“I suppose you could say I am,” I tell her.

She waves me inside. “Then we can probably help each other here. Come.”

I step inside as she opens another door at the rear of the room, and follow her into a narrow hallway lit by cold blue beams, all of them reflected in meticulously designed angles across the cavernous metal spaces above us, perfectly placed as though everything is ricocheting along the straight, rigid lines of Caldari steel (perhaps I should say *Caldari Steel*, since it's their product here). Something that looks like a turret is trained on me as I follow her, swiveling from its mount in the ceiling as it slowly spreads a web of red light over me.

Not sure what that just was.

“Is this still about C3?” I'm asking, raising my hands out of antiquated instinct. The Vherokior is looking over her shoulder at me as she slides out

of the dirty robes around her, revealing a head-to-toe capsuleer's pod suit beneath, black with white linings. Must be a YC111 style.

"Of course," she replies. "We can speak in confidence here, you do realize?"

I don't.

We reach the end of the hallway and stop at another door. She looks at me strangely. I can see a sense of revelation slowly growing in her expression. I'm supposed to be realizing something here too, but well, that could be any number of things just yet.

"You're home, amongst company," she says quietly, sensing the reasons for my hesita as she stares about this strange room before us, but there's something practiced about the way she does it, and something definitely *wrong* about the way her eyes follow me wherever she looks. I think she recognizes me.

"No," I say. "I think you're mistaken."

"I'm not here because I'm," she begins, leaving the rest for me to fill in as the door before us slides away. "I'm here because I know a *Sabik* when I see one," I hear her say, just barely.

The room ahead of me is supposed to be a lounge of some kind, but I recognize its double use as someone's bedroom (not hers, a man). She stops at the edge of a few small steps leading down to a sunken central area, furnished only by a large, circular couch, overflowing with blue and purple cushions. I think she is motioning for me to sit, perhaps, but she is

leading me away down one side of the room towards a ledge. Something else I recognize. Silver panels stretch across the top, adorned with tiny glowing buttons of various colors.

Understated. I like it, but I keep this to myself (she probably noticed anyhow). Each color is clustered in groups of four (that's Synth, Standard, Improved and Strong variants) and arrayed in pleasantly cascading rows.

I want to keep the bloodstream legal as possible, so if she offers--

"Synth?" she asks, already at least one step ahead of me. She spins around to face me, her left hand now resting on one of the panels; pastel sky colors gradating to a dark, inky ocean-blue. That would be Blue Pill.

"Tried the NOH variant yet?" she asks. I shake my head. "On me," she motions. Her fingers lift away from the blues and float towards a panel of warm, orange lights. I'm reminded again of the first room I entered through. That would be Mindflood, and all four of her fingers now resting on the smooth bumps in the otherwise impeccably smooth surface. I suppose that's her way of saying I won't be the only one about to let my guard down. I stare as she presses down, and hear the pressurized shots of chemicals escaping from the tiny nodes.

"Slightly stronger, still legal," she says, inhaling gently as she rubs her wrist and turns towards the couch. For a moment I regard the panel that houses the release button. Sky blue like the other, but with a tiny little NOH logo on top to differentiate. "Interesting," I say as I indulge.

She glides over the edge of the couch effortlessly and takes a seat at what appears to be the head of it. I hadn't noticed this in the design until now. I feel slightly dizzy as I climb over and seat myself at an acceptably middle-ground distance, not too close, not too far. There's a stupid amount of cushions here. I feel like I'm in a playpen. I kick a few away from my feet.

"Make yourself comfortable," she says.

"Strange setup you have here," I'm saying before really considering it. "Kind of hard to."

In truth, I *am* starting to sink a little into this thing and relax, but that's more down to NOH's latest pharmaceutical sleight-of-hand than this overcrowded cushiontopia. Cushionocracy. Yes, *definitely* thanks to NOH.

"I'm curious about C3," the Vherokior says, almost absent-mindedly.

I'm curious about that Sabik remark, but I suppose we can get to that.

I turn to her. She doesn't seem interested in staring games anymore. "What, in particular?" I ask.

"I just handle goods," she says. "I don't need to understand much beyond the basics. C3 is interesting though."

Is it? I don't even bother saying it. I can feel my expressions betraying me enough to make the point.

She looks at me like it's some big secret. Some vast conspiracy. I'm not quite sure what to say.

I ask her how long she's been a capsuleer. 3 years. That's a good amount of time. Longer than I guessed.

I explain to her that C3 isn't really a drug. You don't get high off the shit. It's a performance enhancer of sorts. You have to be able to know how to use it, though, and what it offers isn't all that remarkable, in fact – only useful in certain situations.

She asks what situations, naturally.

Imagine, I tell her, that you are outside of your capsule, and what you need to do there isn't all that complex. Maybe you need to meet someone, or want to get something to eat at a real restaurant, maybe sleep in a real bed.

Of course, this isn't hard to imagine, really. We're both unplugged right now. She nods, a slight sense of impatience about her. I give a “bear with me” sort of expression and shift up in my seat, kicking another cushion away. I can tell she's getting progressively more high too, just by the way she watches it sail away over the edge.

For a situation like this, or at least some of them, I tell her, you don't really need your childhood memories, or your knowledge of how to pilot Jump Freighters. And the more situational your needs are, the more you can narrow it down, the less you need to bring along.

She's asking if I'm talking about selective memory, compartmentalizing different parts of ourselves into different areas (her word, not mine). I'm nodding.

C3 helps with this, I explain.

She seems genuinely interested in the idea. Whether because of its potential or historical application, I can't tell.

This outcome is altogether quite surprising, although not at all unanticipated. Firstly, I'm still not convinced that these capsuleers (there are more here, and 5 exits, 2 unguarded) aren't just *posers*, and this overextension, this trying-too-hard veneer isn't just the surface-deep summation of who and what they really are.

I don't pick them for it. But she said *Sabik*, which is an interesting differentiation to be making, even if I do have the unfortunate tendency of reading far too much into these often thoughtless remarks. I'm following the beams of blue light on their path around the room, wondering if she's even meaning to screw with me.

Because part of this must be ego – my ego, that is, feeding into it, making this more significant than it is. Of course. Part of it. *Part of*.

Then, of course, there was that half-decade stint a few decades ago with the Blood Raiders, and then Sahtogas, and Mabnen, and *all that*. An irrelevant association in the grander scheme of things, but with our actions come various labels and categories, families and friendships, little tones on

the loudspeakers that you either hear or don't. I didn't drink *blood*, if that's what you're thinking. I'm not a freaking Literal and Omir won't ever have the pleasure of *seeing* my ass, let alone *kissing it*.

“Sabik, you said earlier,” I note with a stressed hesitation. “Meaning?”

Part of the reason it escapes my lips so perfectly neutral is because I don't even have a clue anymore myself.

She's folding her arms again and pushing off the seat slightly, taking an artificially long time to consider the answer. She can tell I'm after something important in the reply. She leans over and reaches out. A man I hadn't noticed until now (another egger) is handing her a small metal crate, the vials within which I recognize, even though they're slightly *updated* and... well, *enlarged*.

The tubes used to be millimeters thick at their very largest, usually much, much smaller, microns typically (in the early days, first contact). She is holding what appears to be over 7 liters. She eyes me all the way over, smiling in a predatory way as she offers the canisters, her emaciated arm trembling slightly with the weight.

This is a *whole lot of shit*, no matter what way you look at it.

“Meaning, happy birthday.”

Perhaps I've been moving too fast. Perhaps I've not explained enough for you yet. You don't really understand where we are, what made it possible,

or even what a capsuleer is. You certainly won't appreciate what happens next until you grasp a few basics, and you're *far* from that.

Well, that would be my intention, yes. But this is how I started out, you see. I'm not about to give you any advantages. Take it from someone who actually became a capsuleer, from someone who knows more than enough, that we all begin here – drowning in the deep end, trying to make sense of these things. Jita 4-4 is a good place to start. It's designed to disorient you. If you can start to make sense of it, though, you will start to understand a great deal.

But try to understand, also, that I won't make this easy on you, for the simple reason that it wasn't easy on me.

Part II

I'll take us back a little now, before Jita 4-4 even really existed, to the dawn of the capsuleer era. Some associates of mine at the time discovered that I wasn't just good with their cloning technology, I was capsule compatible too. New arrangements were made. I was second cohort. Joining in the first rush would have drawn a little too much attention, you see, so I waited a year and joined in YC 106.

The first few hours of being a true, proper egger you don't really remember. Not years later, not when everything you've accomplished leaves those early days as embarrassing reminders of your own primitive imprint on this most advanced piece of technology. Even for me, this was true.

Of course, not everyone feels that way about it. Some can recite their graduation days with this clarity that borders between eerie and pathetic, most often as part of some well-rehearsed yet banal anecdote about their "early days." These are the sorts of people you see in the *Navy*.

My point is, you don't really remember because you don't really appreciate what the hell it is that you're doing in that egg, or what you're capable of. Not yet. You might remember getting pats on the head from some instructor agents, and the rush of your first few warps and fights, but that shit is all *peripheral* to this larger picture. That needs time to grow in your mind, and if you've got the right type of head for it, you'll start to realize important things sooner or later.

The first thing to understand is that capsuleers can have the wealth of nations, the influence of nations, and most importantly of all, the *sovereignty* of nations.

Many of us get to this first point. There are countless numbers of us now, colonizing the outer worlds, building corporations and alliances that exist and operate outside the purview of the empires. Of course, the four nations are not exactly underrepresented up here. They have their own massive fleets, and there are many of our own kind who have taken their loyalties with them to the stars, whose patriotism has not been diminished by the drastic changes that fate has afforded us. Some are just scared of that endless dark out there, where not even CONCORD can protect capsuleers from their own kind. They have little to be afraid of and yet, so often, people - my people - claim that there is absolutely *nothing* to fear.

This is nonsense.

Which brings us to the second thing that eventually dawns, and on an diminishing scale now, down to the thousands. The second realization is that capsuleers *can* die. They are not immortal.

Many of my kind refuse to acknowledge this, but it is quite obvious. Standard capsuleer re-cloning relies on the use of mind-state transfer technology, which transfers consciousness from one highly controlled environment to another; Body A inside a capsule (an “egg”) and Body B (for *Plan B*) in a cloning facility.

The important phrase here is *highly controlled environment*. You can't say it is anything else. A scanner pores over your brain, capturing every last

thought, every memory, every personality defect, and it does this why? Because your capsule was breached.

Because someone just proved how fragile that egg really is.

And that cloning facility you wake up in?

That cloning facility is surrounded by some of the most high-clearance people in the field - these invisible caretakers who oversee the rebirth of the universe's elite. They have a job with an importance like no other in our world, and with it, surveillance and monitoring you won't see anywhere else either. They are the real bodyguards. If a corporate CEO is waking up in one of these facilities, his contingent on the ground have already failed, and this, the most sacred of contingency plans, now depends on the people in the white suits. Obviously, not everyone is comfortable with that, least of all us capsuleers who won't often admit how tenuous our grip on everything really is.

Why? Because these people in white suits could make things go horribly wrong for you and me.

I think the reason we've started installing cloning vats on our largest, most powerful ships has less to do with logistics and more to do with trust issues.

Regardless, there are contingencies for such obvious threats, if you have the resources to implement them. The point to take away from the idea is that if your plan for immortality relies on you never having to ask questions like *what happens when these become not-so-highly controlled environments*, then chances are your plan isn't really worth shit. Most of us

still trust in the system, eating the crap served to us without ever really wondering who cooked it up, if you catch my meaning.

As for the third thing, we need to return to that moment of capsule breach, when your brain is scanned and transmitted via your capsule back to that facility.

The third thing to realize is that in this moment, the capsuleer has become *data*. Maybe only for a second, half a second, even less in reality, but for that moment we are nothing but 0 and 1 as we fly across light years of space in between heartbeats. It's so short that almost nobody recognizes the importance of this moment, and it's something only a few of us even *want* to appreciate.

The idea of the informorph.

The question: *What if we just stayed out there and never returned to another clone?*

What if we could live out there, and build a bright and better world in that space between?

Tattoos

While body markings and modifications appear across all cultures in New Eden, it is the Minmatar who have taken that most ancient method of body marking, the tattoo, to a whole new level. To the Minmatar, the tattoo is not simply a form of art, but rather an integral part of their culture and customs.

The Tattoo in Minmatar History

When the Minmatar Empire was in its heyday, before a single Amarr ship ever darkened its skies, the Minmatar had truly made the tattoo into a form of high art. It was said the best artists could breathe life into the skin of an individual with their work. Today's works, although still beyond what other races can achieve, are mere scribbling compared to the greatness of their predecessors. The Minmatar tattoo artists of today are forever seeking to regain the knowledge and skill that was lost to them when the Amarr, during their occupation of the Minmatar, issued an edict banning the practice.

This was a savage blow to the Minmatar, for a Minmatar's tattoos proclaim who he is, where he came from, what he does, where he has been and what he has experienced. They represent a Minmatar's identity as well as his story. A Minmatar without his markings is not considered a Minmatar at all. Such a one would be as alien to the Minmatar as a universe without God would be to the Amarr. In this, as well as in myriad other ways, the Amarr began to erase the Minmatar's culture and identity, converting them into more pliable slave stock.

During the millennium of enslavement, the Amarr all but eradicated the tattoo culture. Nevertheless, it managed to survive in various different bastardized forms until the Great Rebellion, when the Minmatar finally threw off their shackles. What followed was a long hard struggle for the Minmatar to regain all that was lost to them during the occupation, and within the context of this endeavor the culture of tattoos was given primacy. The Republic of today is enjoying a renewed ascendancy of this

ancient art form, with the tattoo once again representing an integral part of Minmatar culture and being.

The Tattoo Today

While the forms and styles of tattoo vary across tribes, the structure and culture behind the art are surprisingly uniform, making it a strong source of cultural bonding between the tribes. For the first few years of her life a Minmatar infant has bare skin, and it is left symbolically so. When the infant reaches a certain age she is given a temporary naming tattoo, which identifies the child and tells which clan she comes from. This temporary marking is renewed as the young Minmatar grows. It is the only tattoo a Minmatar child is permitted to wear until the Voluval.

The Voluval is the sacred coming-of-age ceremony for the Minmatar. It is here that the individual transforms from a child into a fully recognized member of their tribe. At the height of the ceremony the presiding shaman will finalize the ritual by invoking the Voluval mark, where the soul and destiny of a person are said to be revealed through the emergence of a tattoo on the recipient, the secrets of which are closely guarded by the Vherokior mystics who kept it alive during the long centuries of subjugation.

The Voluval is considered the most sacred mark a Minmatar can carry, and in some rare cases can change his life irrevocably. Although the significance attached to the Voluval mark has waned considerably in today's Republic, certain marks can still see the recipient cast out from his clan and tribe, and conversely certain marks can lend the bearer much acclaim. In nearly all cases, however, the mark falls somewhere between these two extremes and the bearer moves on with little effect.

After the Voluval ceremony the young Minmatar will receive her permanent naming mark which will reside forever on her face. This mark will identify the name, clan and tribe of that Minmatar, plain for all other Minmatar to see. In such a way, two Minmatar meeting for the first time can immediately know these fundamental specifics about each other.

After the Voluval, the markings the individual will carry can vary greatly depending on the course of his life, where he travels, his occupation and what great achievements, if any, he has made. Each will reside on a specific area of his body – a person's ranks within their occupation and their clan are usually displayed on the shoulders, for example.

In modern society many such tattoos are covered during day-to-day affairs. For example, Republic Navy personnel will wear uniforms with rank identifiers, but their true mark of rank is considered to be their body mark, even though this is not usually displayed. The culture of tattoo is truly ingrained into the Minmatar mindset, pervading nearly every aspect of their society.

A Minmatar cannot bestow upon herself just any tattoo. In some cases she may be able to influence styling and shape, but she cannot add a tattoo without having first earned the right. Inking a tattoo upon yourself without permission is considered a grave crime and offenders are subject to severe judicial punishment. Because of this arrangement, a Minmatar who is heavily tattooed is more respected by her peers, which will allow her greater opportunities to advance. Her experience is there for all to see.

Through this near-constant long-term process of tattooing, it is sometimes necessary for a tattoo to be removed or replaced with another tattoo. Since Minmatar technology is very advanced in this area, removal of a tattoo is extremely simple, with a pinpoint-precision surface laser wiping clear any unwanted area. There are times in which a Minmatar will symbolically choose to use the old method of skin removal, which carries the side effect of leaving large, highly visible scars. This is particularly prevalent when changes of allegiance or other actions of heavy emotional investment occur. (It is especially common after certain judicial punishments, for example.)

The Gallente find the culture of tattoos somewhat barbaric and uncivilized, and early on tried to persuade their Minmatar neighbors to drop this old custom and embrace their future as a civilized nation. Their efforts to this end were initially met with polite denials and later with derision, but

interestingly the Gallente youth now find the custom fascinating. Indeed, it is not uncommon to see young Gallente teenagers sporting tribal and gang motifs lifted from their Minmatar peers, symbols of whose true meaning they have little to no knowledge. This can evoke anything between high derision and outright hostility when those so inked encounter true Minmatar.

Rust Creeps

I'd had a tiring and frustrating day, the kind you don't even want to mull over once you've lain down in your bunk. There are too many days like that, these days. You close your eyes and what you start seeing is too much for a tired old man to take, so you keep them open instead, you look out the viewport at the unblinking stars, and you listen to the silence.

That was what brought *him* to mind: The silence, or rather, the impression of it; that velvet cloth laid gently over the air. It never is truly silent on the ship – the mind merely learns to block out all those little noises – but you don't hear the other crew members much. The ship is built to muffle the sound of other people going about their off-hour lives. This is good; it gives you a little privacy, and keeps you from losing your mind if the person on the other side of the bunk wall in your quarters has a sinus problem or likes to sing.

No, the only thing you hear in that near-dead quiet is the ship itself. Adjusting to space. Gently balancing its mass distribution and heat. Stretching.

I hadn't listened to it for a long while, not consciously, but it felt soothing after the long, rough day. This was not a tour I had wanted to sign up for. Our dubious mission aside, the ship itself was not the best and certainly not the most well-maintained in the cluster – even Eren would've had a hard time with it – but we all have our dues to pay. We all have our dues to pay, and Eren, who paid dearly, he knew how to listen.

Eren and I first met on a similar tour years and years ago. The technology at the time was pretty advanced, obviously – I live on a goddamn spaceship – but still not nearly so much as it is today. There was, in particular, a dearth of reliable automated repair systems, which is a major problem for a type of transport that involves shifting a highly complicated piece of technology through an extremely simple and deadly medium.

On ships like that, good hands-on engineers are worth their weight in any precious metal you care to name. The best ones tend to be more in tune with their machines than they are with the crew, and they get plenty of leeway both when it comes to proper procedure and working conditions. Some people have a problem with that. I don't. My ship's purpose is to get me to wherever I'm going, safe and sound, and forcing some guy to alphabetize his spare parts instead of doing repairs isn't really going to help.

That ship was having a hard time of it. We'd managed to avoid taking damage – I think we were transporting some bulky cargo, and we certainly weren't kitted out for combat – but something, somewhere, kept breaking down and slowing our way. Nobody on the crew could fix it, not even the people supposedly brought on as specialized repairmen. Eventually our team leader announced that we'd be docking a few systems away, a detour that would add considerable time to a schedule that was already far delayed due to all the breakdowns. I openly wondered why we were going to all that trouble; if there was a special team for us to pick up on that station, or special equipment that could detect the flaws in our machinery, or what.

My boss at the time said there wasn't. There was just this one guy.

We hauled ourselves to the station and sat there for half a day. I was put on assist, but I never even got a chance to talk to the man. They sent me instructions on how to prep the repair area, which mostly involved me crawling all the way into the bowels of the ship while lugging a bunch of heavy gear with me. I deposited it in the manner I'd been ordered to and waited around in case he'd need anything else, but when someone entered it turned out to be my own boss, who told me to get the hell out. Eren couldn't be disturbed, he said.

I grunted, got up and left. For some reason the walkway lights had been dimmed, to the point where I had to feel my way along the handrails even to see where I was going. I took slow steps, muttering to myself in the darkness – not something I usually do, but it had been a long shift and I

was too tired to keep my mouth shut. It wasn't until I'd made it to the exit that I realized what my own stupid voice had nearly hidden from my ears. Someone had been whispering. Someone had stood stock still in that dark corridor and whispered, either to themselves or to me. I turned and glared down the walkway, and just as the door closed on the engine room I saw that stranger – and I *knew* it was that Eren guy – walk through it, one hand trailing over the metal surface. The vision is still burnt into my memory: A younger man silhouetted in the door, his face looking up at the bulkhead opposite with that puzzled expression people have when they're trying to work something out, his posture that of someone young enough not to have to worry about it just yet.

Of course he fixed the problem. He stayed onboard for a few days before getting off at our next port of call, and nobody spoke to him. We weren't ordered to leave him be, but he gave off that kind of awkward loner vibe; and anyway, someone who could just walk in and do what he did was not necessarily someone you'd feel safe around. Geniuses – not just highly talented people, or the lucky ones, but actual bona fide geniuses – tend to attract either attention or trouble. At that period of my life I felt it would be best to avoid the chance that either of those might splash on to me.

I didn't see him for years after that, nor did I think much about that time. I was doing well. I'd had the good luck of signing on to safer vessels, which is probably the reason Eren remained absent from my life. But everything breaks down eventually, and after a long haul through dangerous areas with not a lot of time to waste, we called on him to patch up our broken machines. As it turned out, I was the only man who had ever worked with him before – if you can call it work to lay out the instruments and scuttle out before the band starts to play – so I was automatically assigned to do the same. This time I did get to meet the man, and while he was very reticent to talk – and I certainly didn't push him – we got along well in our own quiet way. He looked a lot more worn than I'd imagined. I remember being amazed that I'd ever thought he could be younger than me, for he clearly wasn't, but then my sighting hadn't been under the best of conditions, and

heaven knows we all fall short of God's glory in full daylight. I enjoyed watching him work, and didn't wonder how he managed to find the exact fault in the mess of steel and insulation he was fairly buried in. I think he sensed this, for after the work was done and Eren long gone, I got a commendation from the captain, and was given to understand that if ever they called on the man's services again I would be expected to act as his assistant.

To my knowledge they never did request his help again, but then I didn't stay with them long. I'd had enough of the weightless life - there is perfect gravity on ships but in some sections they need to shift you a little to the side to accommodate for their designs, and walking on walls *will* get to you after a while. Instead I signed on to a colony in safe space, working at a refinery that enveloped well over half the asteroid it was located on.

Truth be told, it wasn't more than a few years before I was thoroughly sick of that life, too. I guess if you make the jaunt into space, and take to it, you cease being the kind of person that takes root anywhere at all. Nonetheless, no decent tours were on offer, so I stayed on and patiently did my job.

The break came from the strangest of places. A ship docked, which was no great news, but surprisingly it was without cargo and had no trade agreements with the colony's ruling corporation. They did need repairs, they said, but we could offer them no men or equipment that they did not already possess on their vessel.

What they wanted was me.

They needed the services of a specialist, they said, and were on route to the system where he was located. It was quite a few jumps from here, but the expense was negligible when compared to the losses they would incur over the upcoming weeks and months if they didn't stop having breakdowns right in the middle of tightly scheduled deliveries. Supposedly this specialist was worth the trip, but he would only sign up if an assistant were brought on as well. Someone who had extensive mechanical

experience, but more importantly, someone who had worked with him before. Someone like me.

I grabbed the chance. Packed my things, signed the waivers, got to know the crew and settled in for the long haul to see Eren.

When we met, I was rendered speechless. If I hadn't seen him a few years earlier, I would have thought decades might have passed. His hair in particular had noticeably thinned out and greyed, and there weren't so much wrinkles as deep grooves in his skin, etched there by pressures I hoped I would never have to experience. All his movements had taken on that slow, methodical pace one sees in people who've gotten too old to have the energy for mistakes.

I decided right away not to mention it – you can't turn into that kind of wreck and remain unaware of how it shapes you – but did my part in the ensuing repairs by making sure his tools were always where he needed them and often just a little closer than he really needed to reach. I didn't think he saved a lot of effort from that arrangement, but I had the distinct feeling that having the tools closer than usual would make him more mentally comfortable, as if they created a small safe space with no room for outside influence. A protective circle, really.

He seemed to like it. We didn't talk much at first, but as the days passed – mostly spent waiting for replacement parts so we could get on with the actual repairs – Eren opened up a little. Besides, we were in the deepest parts of the engine rooms, the ones where everything is exposed, and you really don't spend time with someone around machines that can potentially kill you without developing at least a little camaraderie.

Actually, it's not entirely truthful to say he opened up – at least not to me. He simply let his guard down. Two days in I noticed that a quiet murmur I'd assumed to be part of the ship's own thrumming heartbeat was, in fact, coming from Eren himself. I peered closer – all ship cores are gloomy and dark, probably because if you don't know by heart where every single moving part is now and is going to be in five seconds' time, you shouldn't

be down there anyway – and saw that he was talking to the metal itself. He was talking to the ship.

He must've heard my breath stop, because he fell quiet, leaned back and said, without looking, "They say things."

"The ... parts?"

He shrugged. "Or the ones who touched them last."

"Ship parts come from all over the place, often from recycled ships," I said. I'd meant to imply that he couldn't possibly know who these people were, let alone that they were even alive anymore, when I realized what he was saying to me. If there truly were voices, they weren't on our side of the veil.

I swallowed dry air and asked, "What do they tell you? How to fix the ship?"

He nodded.

It really was very dark in the engine room. "What do they ... want in return?"

He shrugged. "To talk. To be heard. For someone to remember the stories of the dead, of this ship and all the others where their parts have been used. Or even places where this ship has docked, places that no longer exist."

Those places would have been in space, unorbiting colonies, very possibly pirate ones, and very definitely long since fallen prey to capsuleer fire. Deaths, and more deaths; and once their graves had been picked clean by the attackers, the only usable things left in the wreckage would have been those parts.

Capsuleers went through frightening amounts of ships and even colonies on a regular basis. I wondered just how many ship parts had been salvaged from the dead. How many voices wanted Eren to hear them, all moaning in the discordant choir.

Late that same evening I was too restless to sleep. I ended up using the ship's dataline and looked up a few things, which satiated my curiosity but eliminated any small chance I would sleep that night.

There were, amazingly, other people like him; but then, in this vast universe, everything has to exist somewhere. Psychomancy, it was called. They could tell things from machine sounds, working them like the entrails of a shaman. The buzz, burr, shear and whine; the way the rust stretched its coarse surface over them.

More than anything, the mention of rust unnerved me, and I couldn't stop thinking about it. The next day I mentioned it to Eren.

He responded, "It's true. And I don't like rust. It creeps. It distorts."

"You mean it makes it hard to hear the, uh, voices?" I asked

"Oh no. It doesn't muffle them. They just ... come out distorted. As whines, or these shrieky, tattered howls. Imagine the rust was on your vocal cords," he said matter-of-factly. "Imagine it going into your lungs. It's a cancer."

I couldn't help it. "So Minmatar ships..."

"...can go right to hell," Eren replied with a grin. He added, almost absent-mindedly, "All ships are haunted. It's like a sea we're on, this vast and cold sea. Voices always drift to the warmth."

"You ever think about signing up for repairwork on a colony instead? I can't imagine this kind of life is easy for you," I said.

He gave me a look, but in the gloom I couldn't see it clearly. "Don't like to work colonies much. Too many buried there."

I got the distinct feeling there was more to that comment, and I really didn't want to pry into the matter any longer. It's bad enough working in the gnashing darkness without imagining things that aren't even there. We finished our work for the day, and we didn't speak of the voices after.

The next day turned out to be the final one in our stint on the ship. A part we'd been waiting for was finally shipped, and I installed it for Eren. I said to

him, "I honestly don't know how you're going to get this one going. The team's replaced this part three times already, and it simply refuses to work."

He looked at me for a while, not unkindly – I couldn't tell if he was amused or if he was listening – and then he leaned out, and he simply touched the damn thing.

The breathless hammering we heard shortly after was one of the crew running into the room to ask us what we'd done and how the hell we'd done it.

I lay there in my bunk, thinking of that time so long ago. It was the last and only occasion we'd worked together. I had expected to be called out again, and Eren certainly hadn't seemed averse to the idea, but the quality of repair technology had caught up and the services of people like him were in less demand – either that or they were being assigned tasks complicated enough to eliminate the need for a simple machinist assistant like me.

I did see him once more, years later. On a colony somewhere, in a place I left shortly after. I barely recognized him at first; it was like he'd been shunted head-first into old age, his body matted, wrinkled and eaten up by time and whatever other forces worked on that poor man. I didn't say a word, but he acknowledged me with a nod.

"It's the rust," he said. He thought it over, nodded to himself and repeated, "The rust. The rust creeps."

I couldn't help but ask. "Still the voices?"

His eyes were rheumy and blinked too often. The skin on his hands slid like oil on water. "I haven't heard the voices for a long time."

I was still trying to understand this, and the implications of it, when he added, "I hear what's beyond them now. There's something else. There is something behind them and it never falls quiet."

His voice dissolved to a mutter. I didn't know whether it was directed at me or the machine. Or at whatever lay beyond, which surely knew that he could hear it.

All his hair had fallen out except for the bushy growths over his eyes and in his ears, and I could see the veins in his hands.

I lie here on my bunk and I think of him. That old soul in that rapidly dying body, and the things he listened to. I think quite a lot of Eren, these days.

Because the ship creaks. The ship creaks, and we are going into empty space, and there is a patch of rust in the corner, and I wonder if my old friend is calling for me.

Hona is Three

In the love of your life - any one of them, for there are many, no matter what you might think - there are three people, three human beings you fall for. There is the one at the start where everything is fresh and new, which is when you see only what they want you to see; the one some time after, when the gloves come off and they show you - or stop bothering to hide, at least - whatever else they knew they contained; and the last, long after, when you've begun to see so deep into them that you can tell what they cannot. If you're lucky both of you will dovetail, fitting each other and changing in each other's perceptions as you pass through time.

I was a Guristas operator, working out of a minor, unaligned asteroid colony in a system of really no repute at all. After years in my line of work - I was only twenty-eight but I'd started early, having developed the necessary business acumen as a teenager and had the required set of morals beaten pretty soundly into me as a child - I had come to the conclusion that nondescript, monotonous but decently populated locales were the best places to do my kind of business. Everyone here walked with their eyes to the ground and their ears clogged up with asteroid dust. Most of what I did involved oversight of nearby transactions, the kind where I linked up one person to another through channels I made damn sure were safe from prying, and acted as intermediary, facilitator or occasional pacifier, depending on the situation. 'Nearby' is even a misnomer; the distance between me and my customers was measurable in astronomical units, and I was very good at keeping tabs on the locations and movements of everyone I did business with. On occasion someone would dock at the station and request to see me in person, but I was well enough in with the

local station operators that I always received plenty of warning and, if necessary, backup.

I was surprised one night when a call came in over the local line to inform me that a team of allegedly Angel-affiliated operators was to dock at the station and had requested my assistance. I was free to work with anyone I liked, so long as the Guristas got their due, but people explicitly affiliated with the rank and file of other pirate factions were loath to seek out my business. When they did, it was usually out of desperate need rather than convenience.

The call included verified contact details, which was normal, but also single-use encryption keys for their positions within the Angel hierarchy, which was rather out of the ordinary. I ran those and they all checked out. The group captain, a woman called Hona, was member of a special operations squad within a little-known branch of the rather extensive Angel hierarchy. It was a vague enough title and rank that I couldn't make out what her real job was, but since she was working here on the outskirts and willing to meet with nonfaction black market personnel, it was bound to be interesting. I agreed to the meeting, and as it was only Hona who wanted to see me, requested that the rest of her team be given good accommodations well away from the tumult of the mining grounds. I was always open to new business relationships, and having the clients' first memories be of sleepless nights and trembling furniture was not a good idea.

We met in a local bar whose owner had considerably set up isolation booths, both aural and electrical. I arrived first and took a seat with my back to the exit - I wanted to project a comfortable, slightly trusting relaxation, and besides, if I was unsafe here of all places, it wouldn't matter which way I faced when shots got fired. I did discreetly place a small scrambler on the

middle of the table; no lack of faith in the bar's isolation tech, but I also wanted to project the feeling that I knew what the hell I was doing.

The beating of a tattoo on the floor told me that she had approached. From the muffled hush behind me a calm, crisp voice said my name, and I nodded in acknowledgment without turning in my chair. She walked around me and took a seat at the booth, directly facing me. There was a dominant air about her - it's been so long I can barely remember what she looked like, except that her face was set in determination as well as something else, creeping towards exhaustion.

"Welcome," I said. "Drinks or anything?"

"Just business," she told me.

"I hope I can help."

She nodded and said, "So do I," in a tone that didn't quite imply a threat so much as an inclination not to suffer idiots lightly.

Humor, even in the darkest of circumstances - especially in those, really - was a major asset in any potential business partner, so I decided to test the waters a little. I shrugged and with a nonchalant air said, "If I can't, well. Shame."

She shrugged in turn, and seemed to accept this. "If it's not your own fault, nothing to be done."

I agreed.

Then she added, "If you do mislead us, of course, we'll send death squads after you," and I decided I liked her.

It took a while for her to explain the particulars. The basic case was simple - undercover Angel recruitment agents had been turning up dead - but the real details lay in what they'd done thus far to find the culprit. Hona did not want me to waste time following the same tracks. As she described the precise work she'd undertaken to find the murderers, I was fascinated, first by the clear and definite purpose with which she had followed up on this - the murders had been particularly vicious and taken place in areas not safe for Angels to be in, so even recruiting people to her squad had been an undertaking - and then by the meticulous way in which she'd investigated what few leads she'd found. At some point I admitted to her that I would have a hard time improving on her work, and she took my compliments in good grace.

She was charming. Presentable, assertive, in control. We got on well. As the evening wore on I found myself revealing to her a number of options that I had not even considered mentioning for the fee her superiors intended to pay me. I openly discussed, without breaking confidentiality, the extent of my connections and the abilities they lent me. She told me about life in the Angel Cartel, not only as an agent of theirs but as a regular person living on colonies under their aegis.

We had drinks. We got on even better. She had signed up for the Angel service because, she said, she wanted to control the world as much as protect the people in it. Also, kick people in the teeth. I was here, I found myself saying, because it was a safe place, netted with webs of

communication that I could - there was that word again - control, and yet remain at a safe distance. She understood this. She was good at talking to people, and at appearing tough enough to exercise an authority that she often did not have. We agreed on the loneliness of space. Where our careers would take us, we each admitted that we had no idea.

We did not end up sleeping together. We wanted to, and so we didn't.

But at the end of a long evening and a long night, we decided that she and her team would stay on station for a couple of days. We had found in each other a capable, intelligent person, and we were convinced that together we could develop a plan to root out the criminal Hona so badly wanted to find.

It took a couple of days and a couple beyond that, and I had to get in touch with more people than I had expected to, but finally we acquired sufficient data to develop an extensive plan of action. It involved a series of inquiries in neighbouring space, interviews and investigations using multiple local contacts, heuristic searches through vast repositories of local data that I had access to, and a definite possibility of bringing in added manpower and weaponry in case Hona found herself outmatched by the criminals. We were going to present it to her team that evening.

Then I got a note from her saying that they'd received an unexpected lead: one of the recruiting agents in a nearby constellation had lost his partner to yet another messy, horrible murder, but this time there was evidence the culprit might still be in the area. She had to go. She was sorry, but she had to go.

I never answered the note. She knew where I'd be if she needed me.

The next time we met she stumbled through my door covered in blood. My immediate shock was the sight of her, the poor tattered thing; quickly followed, to my shame, by a shock that she had made it all the way to my quarters without me receiving any advance warning.

I didn't bother to say anything, but helped her as gently as I could to the bathroom. One of the compartments there held an assortment of healing agents, coagulants and such, including a few expensive plexiglas syringes that held different types of nanomaterial. Some of the items I had in there were expensive and even bordering on illegal, but I hadn't bothered to hide them. I'd figured that if I ever needed to access to this stuff, I couldn't expect to be in any shape or condition to burrow into any kind of secret compartments.

Hona was cut and burnt all over, but the biggest immediate worry was a deep gash on her leg. It was still bleeding, so I reasoned she must've had access to some kind of basic medical help along the way - she would've bled out otherwise - and focused my attention on it. The obvious conclusion of the focus she must've possessed to reach me in particular didn't occur to me right at that moment. I sprayed her with local anaesthetic and sprayed my own hands with a sealant that formed a second skin, lest I touch the anaesthetic with my bare hands; then smeared a disinfecting coagulant into the wound. It stopped bleeding after a while, to my immense relief, and I got out the clamps. Her head was turned to one side, but I shifted a little to block the leg from view just in case. Once I'd stretched the clamps to match the wound and fixed them to the skin, they gave off a burning smell and started retracting, pulling it together and sealing it with immense local heat. It was not the most pleasant of sights - the skin blistered and dripped at the

mouth of the wound - but it was a million times better than watching Hona bleed out on my bathroom floor. Once the clamps had properly sealed the skin they dissolved into the leg, where they would, at a much slower pace, continue to seal up and heal the wound underneath.

I glanced up at Hona, only to find her staring right at me with unblinking eyes. Her mouth was slightly open and she was taking shallow breaths. She'd gone into shock. I gave her a little smile and stroked her cheek, then took hold of her hand and slowly stroked that as well. Whether she noticed the small patch I affixed to the inside of her wrist, I don't know, but in a few moments her breath slowed, and not too long after she drifted into sleep.

She stayed with me for several weeks. Try as I might, I could not get her to tell me what had happened, other than that it had involved the murderer she'd been after. That person, she said, had been brought to justice. I sensed there was quite a bit more to it than that. She, in turn, got frustrated and then annoyed at my curiosity, and didn't hesitate to let loose when she thought I'd done enough prying.

It wasn't a good time. She recovered from the initial, physical shock - her wounds healed remarkably fast given how serious they'd seemed at first and how little proper medical care she received both before and after coming to me - but there was a deeper-set trauma that neither one of us were ever able to properly deal with. It wasn't just shock; it was a nervous breakdown, something I realized the first time Hona woke up screaming and then had brought home to me when she sullenly refused, then and later, to discuss anything in her past. Not just the incident, but anything else prior: Her career with the Angels. Her past team and what had become of them. Us.

She was not a woman who would allow herself to be helped. She needed it - she'd come to me, I reasoned, because I could give her a balance of safety and trust on one hand and anonymity and distance on the other - but she hated it, and I bore the brunt of her frustrations. All the sides I'd seen of her in our initial meeting came out reverted, turned in on themselves. She continually attempted to dominate our relationship, or whatever it was; in words, and in actions as well, using her secret past as excuse to go into shrieking arguments over issues of no importance whatsoever. At times she'd treat me like an underling, someone to order around. Other times she'd obsess about our safety, continually asking me about the security mechanisms in my quarters and on the station, then freaking out when she thought she perceived gaps in them. She was good at using words, and when she put up a front there was nothing I could say to pierce it, good or bad.

We slept together, sometimes. We didn't always want to, but we did.

Despite her intermittent worries over security, there were times when she was amazingly nonchalant about her arrival on the station. My own questions about potential repercussions or chase went unanswered outside of brief, slightly condescending comments from her that there was no risk hanging over us. When I finally did look into the records of her arrival - it took me more than two weeks to even get to that point, caught up as I was with her arrival and the change in her personality - I was astounded to find that there was no registration, no check or mark, nothing whatsoever denoting that she had even arrived in this area of space, much less crawled bleeding up to my doorstep.

The anger I took in good grace. I'm sure I yelled back just as much, though that's not the point. She was changing. I could tell, easily, even though in truth I barely knew her, so I was sure she could tell, too. Sometimes, in

peaceful moments, I'd see her stare out my window, at the colony outside and at the protective atmospheric shielding and the stars beyond it; and I'd see something in her face, either shifting about or, possibly, slowly settling. She was on her way to somewhere. She was shrieking because she was moving too fast, but she definitely had some manner of destination. Even with the arguments, and the petty games, and all the rest that we could never have borne for a long period of time anyway, it hurt a little that this destination couldn't be here.

Why I took it, well ... I knew that I was getting to know another side of her, one she'd not have shown to many other people. Even in all the tumult, I still respected her; I saw a woman trying her hardest to deal with events that had clearly stretched her mind beyond its breaking limits. I wasn't unfamiliar with screaming arguments and fights - I'd ended up at this colony, in this job, for a reason, and even though I'd progressed far since those ugly childhood times, I still had coping mechanisms ready for use. I did get upset, as anyone would, and I did feel hurt and let down, but I retained my perspective.

Besides, I knew this situation would eventually change, one way or another - for her, or for me. If I had been entirely happy with my life on the station I would likely have been more protective of it and less inclined to let Hona in. In reality, I had been growing so dissatisfied with it - especially since that initial meeting with Hona, when I'd had it hammered home just how lonely and meaningless this existence was - that I knew my own time on the colony was increasingly limited. So I kept my anger in check, allowing it to slowly rise and strengthen. I wanted to leave, sometimes, just pull up stakes and disappear, but I knew that if I dared, I would leave behind in Hona a guilt that would never be extinguished. She would think that she drove me off, and I couldn't allow that, because now matter how badly we got along - and how much I wanted her, all at the same time - I knew that this was not about me, or about us: It was, in the end, solely about her.

That face, growing increasingly peaceful between the rages it was forced to express. That stare, seeing other planets. And that strange body, healed too soon from terrible damage, hidden too easily from electronic eyes. Something else, more than human.

One day we woke up together. She turned to me and whispered "sorry." Then she kissed me with warm lips, open eyes, calm breathing. It tingled, and afterwards I lay in bed, stunned, more peaceful than I'd been for a very long time, far beyond her arrival in my life.

I didn't hear her when she left, but I knew. I left soon after, myself, on some road of my own.

When I awoke, I was in a cave, surrounded by lit torches, and there were people standing around me. I grinned at them.

In the preceding months I'd been drifting about through various regions of space, trying my hand at different jobs and different lives. I'd had enough money saved up that I could leave any place whenever I liked without fear of starvation, but my natural ability to develop and make use of connections came to the fore, and I found that I was able to settle in nicely wherever I decided to stop. Eventually, though, I'd grow unhappy with whatever life I'd set up, and disconcerted at seeing old patterns arise again. I would isolate myself, no matter how big or welcoming the crowds around me. I saw all people eventually as collections of usable traits and potential benefits. I sought a general control over life that the universe wasn't much inclined to let me have, so I ended up applying it only to myself, and in the process

disengaging from other people before they could start poking through the shields I'd put up.^a

During the drifting it did on occasion occur to me, yes, that the one person in recent memory I'd had a different relationship with had been Hona, first because we connected through an understanding of our own loneliness, and then later when her raw, exposed, confused self was too taken up by its demons to bother with faking it from me and my own. I never reached out to her, nor made any attempt to find out what had become of her. I figured that in time, if I was meant to, I'd find out; and besides, the way the woman had covered her tracks when coming to me, there wasn't a chance I'd find her unless she wanted to leave tracks.

It finally happened when I was headed through Angel space. I received an anonymous request for a meeting that ended up bringing me to a large asteroid in the middle of nowhere. Just as I was about to turn the shuttle back, it malfunctioned. First engines, then pathfinding. Then life support. The oxygen lasted amazingly long, really; I breathed easy the whole time. I knew it was her.

They brought me into a city of stone, encased somewhere in the asteroid. Stalactites like cathedrals hung suspended from the ceiling. Past the center, on the outskirts, in an area where people spoke in hushed voices, there was a building - a hollowed-out stalagmite - where they led me and left me to wait alone.

Hona was there.

We talked for a while. She sounded distant; not for lack of commitment to our conversation, but as someone who now lived somewhere very far off

from the rest of us. She explained to me how she had come to be there, how she'd come to terms with what she'd become and, once having reached that level of honesty with herself, had begun to be honest with the world at large. She had accumulated fellow thinkers - she did not have to call them followers; I understood what they were - and they had found themselves drawn here, to this living rock. I asked them how they got food and oxygen here, and she said the rock provided. I enquired whether they were as safe from prying eyes here as she had been after her accident, and she said the rock gave them all the protection they needed. I told her she was being maddeningly vague and she said me she didn't know what in the world I was talking about. Torches burned on every wall, casting their arcane lights on her.

The people in this place, she explained, did not worship gods, but powers and universal forces, and looked to her as the conduit. She did not attempt to explain these forces and I did not ask. When I said, only partly in jest, that this made her a demigod, she looked at me for some time with the strangest smile on her face. I met her gaze and smiled back, and it took me a while to realize that whenever I blinked, I still saw her there. Somewhere in the dark of my head, where my eyes couldn't go. She asked me to turn around, and I did. She was still there. When I asked her if this was magic, she laughed, a beautiful laugh, and shook her head.

I told her I was glad that she'd found the place meant for her. When she tried to shrug it off by saying it could've been anyone, I interrupted.

"It's perfect for you. You're in control, you get to plan and think and care for other people, and you belong to a system greater than yourself; greater than anyone, really, given the way you've described it. I don't think I know anyone who'd fit this role so perfectly, let alone get through the initiation ritual the way you did."

"You think what happened to me was a ritual?" she asked.

"Not in a preordained sense," I said. "I don't believe bad things happen for a reason. But I think it brought you to a place you might not have reached otherwise. And I think you're proud of it, and of yourself. That's why you invited me here."

"You think I brought you here to *brag*?" she said, looking immensely amused.

"No, dear heart. You've no interest in acknowledgment nor compliments. You brought me here to show me you were all right," I said. "And I think you are. I think you found the end."

She nodded her thanks. I stayed a little longer, but we didn't say much more. I enjoyed being with her, and she with me, and we exchanged thoughts that went beyond language. When I finally did leave, I did not need the acolytes to show me the way out.

I'm still headed somewhere. Haven't quite found my way there yet. It's alright. She'll be there, however long I have to take.

I still see her when I close my eyes.

The Desert Fathers

Well, uh. Okay. My name is Kartanen Sedia. I am the overseer on Outpost 4972, where in the past three years we have been extracting minerals used in the production of various hybrid polymers that in turn are used to create advanced components for the capsuleer industry.

In fact, in those three years we have sustained a consistent output in the top forty-eight percentile while simultaneously maintaining a perfect safety record extending not only to security but to employee safety, and-... I'm sorry?

Oh. Of course. Yes.

First off, I am sorry about what happened. I assure you that once we are done here, I intend to launch my own investigation and get to the bottom of this. Szekel is not getting away with what he took.

It's not easy, living in the desert. If they hadn't discovered those mineral deposits I don't imagine anyone would ever make their home here, at least not on this continent. That goes double for the scientists. You can always find hard workers for the excavation, people with calluses and no savings, but it's harder pulling in those who consider air conditioning a basic human right, no matter what kind of interesting rock we've suddenly pulled out of our back yard.

Yes, I hired them all. Yes, even him. As I said, I regret what happened. His resume was-... my own? What do you mean?

All right. I've been an overseer on various outposts for most of my life, really. I was born on an asteroid colony and spent a good part of my life working those, but eventually the lack of solid footing got to me and I transferred to planetside work instead. I maintained exemplary security during my tenure on those colonies, with a near-perfect record in my thirty-year career.

Yes, including Outpost 3478, out in the dark near Stain.

Yes, where the Sansha came. What's that to do with anything? It was ages ago, I did what was right, I was investigated afterwards and exonerated, and nothing's ever been prov-...

Ah, hell. God damn it, god damn it and god damn you.

Nothing's ever been quite the same since. Happy now? Everything changed. Yes, I've been working thirty years in the same damn business at the same damn level of lower management, and all because the cyborgs came in and ate up my people all those years ago. Nobody trusts me anymore.

Well, I suppose, yes, but I wouldn't call it a sliding slope. It's just hard to pull up from that kind of career slump. I drifted through jobs on other colonies and finally got a contract at this one, where I had intended to spend my remaining years until retirement.

No, not that well funded. I'll have some money to live on, but ... wait, why are you even asking me this? We're trying to find a thief here!

No, I don't have a lot of money. Not after the Sansha debacle.

Why are you asking me this?

Certainly. My name is Jania Betodt. I am working on my post-doctorate studies in astrobiology. The atmospheric properties on this planet make it a haven for acquiring large intact samples, though I must say I've never quite grown accustomed to the living conditions. I am married to Phaedan Betodt, and we have a wonderful daughter, Adara.

No, they're not with me, but those are the costs of an interstellar life, right? They visit me on a regular basis. Anyway, I have had some noteworthy articles published in peer-reviewed journals, including at the University of-... well, yes, I suppose it has been a while since they last were here. I do communicate with them on a fairly regular basis, you know. When the relays work, yes. We're a very close-knit family.

Well, because there was important work to be done here. I didn't *want* to leave them behind, of course. It simply didn't suit us to break up our careers. Look, is this about Szekel or my family?

What do you mean, 'Both'?

Yes, I did work with him. Yes, closely. He's a talented scientist and a hard-working man, whatever else he may be. We pulled a lot of long, hard shifts working on-site whenever a new batch of data came in. There's only so long you have to study the new samples before the life they harbor is extinguished, no matter how well you may try to prolong it.

When that asteroid landed a few months ago, we were in heaven. It contained sealed pockets that our scans indicated might harbor brand new life. Only microscopic archaea, of course, but the way they seemed to be reacting with the metals in the asteroid was astounding. I don't think we've even begun to scratch the surface, though of course Szekel's disappearance, and the data I ... guess he took, all of that is going to be rather a setback.

My daughter? She is with her father, and before you ask, I do miss her. I miss her a lot.

Him too, of course.

Yes, they were long shifts.

Rakan Dep.

I'm a security guy on this outpost.

Nothing else.

Hey, I'm cooperating. Even if I don't know who the hell you people are.

Disgruntled? Hah! Listen. Listen. We are on a *desert* planet. There is nothing here but *sand*. If you end up living in a place like this with no hope of anything better, disgruntled is the least of your worries.

Well, okay. There's a few towns and settlements in the area, but you'd be an idiot if you thought you could walk there by yourself. You're isolated here, pretty much. You make it to the outpost, fine, but you're not making it out on foot again.

I suppose Szekel must've gotten help, yeah. Assuming you haven't found him yet. Scorched and dead and picked at by the jackals, by now, if he went out by himself.

Of course I've been to the settlements. That's why I'm not *disgruntled*, isn't it, my pretties? Besides, there's no fun to be had elsewhere.

Fun, yes.

Reading scripture, group hugs, and watching the sky. What do you *think* I'm talking about? Goddamn old fashioned fun-for-money. It's mostly gambling, actually. I'd stick my dick in the noontime sand before putting it to some of the women you get down there. I'm sure it'd burn about the same in the end.

Hah! Thanks. I am available for children's parties, you know.

Money, yeah ... I don't have enough, truth be told. Never quite manage to hit that mark. Always seem to spend too much. Hey, I'm not ashamed. I pull long shifts. You'll find idiots anywhere who say they work hard and play hard, in that order, as if the first causes the second. I can't say the desert life is my first choice, but I'll live it the way I would anywhere else, and that means I need to bust my back earning for it. Doesn't make it right or wrong, and certainly doesn't mean I deserve any sympathy. It's just how it is.

Yeah, the scientists got plenty. Especially after that damn meteor hit and the grants started coming in again. They're decent people, most of them. Humans like the rest of us.

No ... I just mean they do human things. I'm not gonna gossip. But let me tell you, it gets cold at night, here in the desert.

Sure, I'm human too. What, you're calling me out on my track record? Go ahead. I know it's grubby. You try working security all your life, live in the

desert, too; see how clean you come out. Never taken money from people I shouldn't, though. Nope. No, I don't care how you put it - I'm clean when it comes to that. I *may* have taken some from people who shouldn't have been dumb enough to bet it, and I *may* have been an intermediary for some people who had money and pale skin and fear of a little sand. But I haven't gone dirty. You know Kartanen, the overseer? He gave me a shot at this. I'm here because of him.

No, he's not a client. He's saving up, thinking of buying a little house on a small planet a couple jumps from here, somewhere in ... 32-GI9, I believe. He doesn't think anyone knows about it, but I do. I watch the money. He's never made bets or anything. He's a decent man. And besides, you don't touch someone's life savings, not in this business. You know who people are.

Szekel? I don't know him. I don't know him at all. I have no idea how he breached security like he did.

I suppose it's my responsibility, yeah. What are you getting at?

Look, it's been three days. I'm getting tired of sitting in this room all the time. I'm the overseer on this colony and I don't care who you people are, you can't just come in here, shut everything down, and pull people into a...

Yes! I hired Szekel, I let the man in and I gave him a job here, being fully aware that we were working with highly sensitive data, that we'd had an important rain and we were due to have another, and that he would be overseeing the research teams along with Jania. What else do you *want*?

What do you mean, everything?

What's that you're bringing in? I'm well familiar with all the equipment on this colony and this is not a part of our stocks. Look, if you have brought in your own scientific equipment, I need to be told. I am the sole remaining

head researcher on this colony and I am to be included in all communications-...

Uh. Yes, I'm sitting comfortably. Why do you ask?

The fuck you doing with that thing in here?

I think, I think, I think we got off entirely on the wrong foot here. I did vet Szekel, I did give him a job, yes, certainly. But I haven't done anything *wrong*. Surely you see that.

Of *course* I know how valuable the asteroid was. Of course I did. I am used to handling serious responsibility, I will have you know.

That was a cheap shot. We had no idea the Sansha were coming.

Look, there's really no need to activate that thing. I am cooperating fully. I don't know where you think you have your authority from, but-...

Oh. Really?

Ah.

All right.

Well, can you please tell them that I would never work for anyone else? I mean, while I was overseer here. Certainly not our competitors. I wouldn't be feeding anything to them, data or whatever else.

I really don't think you need to turn on that thing.

We did work together. I told you that. I worked with him, and yes, we got along fine. Can someone *please* tell me what this is all about? I don't-... why did you just put that there? Why is that there? I consented to the monitors because I wanted you to know I was telling the truth, but I don't think I want that there at *all*.

We just worked together. I didn't know he was pulling data, or that he intended to do whatever he did with it. He was a good man and I trusted him. There was nothing going on. Can you please take that thing off me? Look, I am going to tell you whatever you want. I mean, I'm not going to hold back. I'll be honest. I am not covering up for Szekel. I know full well how important our research was here, for me and this colony and for our employers. That's who you're working for, right?

I am going to ask you one last time to take that thing off, to-... What are you doing? No, come over here and take it off!

Look, I knew the dude from a little betting. The worker's pool, mostly. Maybe a few extras, too. He wasn't a bad guy, I'm sure, but he did make some bad bets. Had a few people upset at him over in the townships, but he was working to fix that. And I believe him. I did believe him.

Maybe he was doing something else, and maybe I'll tell you all about it, but you better wheel that goddamn thing back out right this minute before I'll say another word. I've worked in nullsec before. I've worked on colonies that rebelled, I've been there when the black suits come in, and I know what that hellish thing is for.

So maybe Szekel needed money and was looking for a way to make some, or maybe he just didn't like the perks of being in the desert. That's all I'm saying. That is all I am goddamn saying.

Look, look, look, look, look, look, I know there's a guard. There is a guard on this colony who has money problems and access to security logs and probably a guilty conscience over something, hell if I know what other people think. I've seen them talking together, and I know they were in cahoots. It was him. If you want to find someone guilty of working with Szekel, it was him. Talk to him and you'll see. Make him talk and you'll see. Please take that thing off me. It was the guard.

I'm sorry about my earlier outburst. It was unprofessional of me. Unbecoming. Just let me take a breath, clear my head.

Alright. We can resolve this like human beings, I'm sure.

So. Of course you hear things, working on this station.

Yes, of course I will tell you. I am a respected scientist. We are having a reasonable discussion, you all and I. We are professionals. Yes. I have rights, and I know they apply even when there's a communications blackout. Even in the private sector, on a colony in the middle of a desert, I have rights.

Of course. If you'll just take that thing off me I can tell you all you want in detail, if you'll just take *no don't activate it again please I beg you-...*

You know they had an affair.

That's all I'm saying. You can stop it now.

She mentored him when he came in, taught him to use the equipment, and spent all her time with him. Long hours in the lab, she'll tell you. I know better. Lab, my ass. I know what the access logs would say. You can start up a job in those labs, let it idle for hours, and do whatever you want in the meantime.

Doesn't take long to figure out how he might've got what he wanted, does it?

I want you to stop it now. I want you to unplug that damn thing and take these straps off me, because I am a patient man but I don't need to be pushed and prodded to tell you anything.

Don't you touch that dial. Don't you touch it.

I'm going to throw up again, you bastards. I'm going to throw up. I'm gonna throw up!

Okay. I took the money, too. A share of it. It's on my special account. No, it wasn't for 32-GI9. It was to betray the colony, to let Szekel take the data to our competitors, or sell it on the open market, or whatever. Not 32-GI9. Just ... make it stop. That's all I know. Make it stop.

I did take the money, I don't care if you can't see it. I took it, all of it. What? No, no, a share, that's what I meant, a share.

Thank you. Thanks for stopping it. I'll just ... I'll just catch a breath.

You people are pretty brave, aren't you? Coming in with your tools and your unquestionable authority.

Well. Let me tell you something.

You've gone over the limit and I intend to report you, I am going to stop you, I AM GOING TO TAKE YOU DOWN, I WILL TAKE ACT-

Don't make me do this. Please. I don't want to drag him into this, we haven't spoken forever and the last time we talked I had to tell him that I ... that I ...

Don't make me do this. If I talk to Phaedan then I'll have to talk to Adara as well, and I don't want her involved.

No. No, you're wrong, I do have a choice. In fact, I want you to bring in my overseer. I don't care what authority you people have, I want you to prove to me that he sanctioned the things you've been doing to me.

What do you mean, he-...

Oh no. No, you didn't. Not Kartanen. No. I-... no.

No, don't show me pictures.

I will make the call. I will contact Phaedan, I will talk to him and get him to come here if that's what you really want, but please, not Adara. Oh gods. Kartanen was a good man. Please, not Adara.

You promise?

You can't break me. Go to hell. You can't break me.

You know the truth anyway. Oh yeah, she asked me to delete it from the logs.

When I get out of here, I will find you and I will hurt you.

Go to hell. You can't break me.

...

You promise?

You promise?

You promise?

King Slaver

The Bertha, a prisoner cargo vehicle, slowed to a crawl without so much as a squeal of tires. The skies were clear and burning blue, and a heat haze wavered up off the scorching bone-white sand.

Bertha's doors opened and a large man with a gun stepped out. He didn't look around but immediately walked on a few paces away from the vehicle, then turned and looked at it silently, standing at ease.

A group of red-clad, head-shaven men shuffled out, single file. Most of them did not look around, either, though whether out of fear of what they might see or a dread that it might be exactly what they expected was hard to tell. The last man to exit the vehicle did glance to either side, taking in the desert fields all around him, buffeted by ugly swamps full of gnarled trees and animals and a musky stench he could smell all the way to where he stood, and, closer by, a huddle of wood and stone buildings that stood on top of black-sanded stalagmite hills, surrounded by deep trenches from which came ugly, grinding sounds. His designation was number 47; a low number, but he'd been informed that they were re-used when their past owners no longer needed them.

Another ugly sound, short and sharp, rang out much closer. Prisoner 47 looked back to the group and found that the man with the gun had shot one of the others, for whatever reason. The dead man lay sprawled in the sand and his blood ran out slowly, absorbed and blackened by the earth. What unsettled the prisoner - he was not shocked, nor aghast, because by now he had exhausted the wells of those emotions - was the silence: not just of the others in the group, which was understandable, but of the guard himself. The shooting obviously hadn't been out of any kind of justifiable motive, any more than the rest of the events that had landed them all in this place, but the calm look on the guard's face showed it hadn't been because of anger, either. It was, simply, the way things were here.

The prisoners, Amarrian all, were marched into the camp that was to be their home for the foreseeable future. They were somewhere in the Minmatar Republic, they had been secretly tried in Minmatar military courts, and they were considered a collective threat to the interests and the freedom of the Minmatar people. Freedom was an important concept, apparently. The Minmatar found it so important, the prisoner thought, they wanted to keep it all to themselves.

It was several weeks before 47 first heard of the King, and by that time he was to all intents and purposes dead himself.

Faith had been a notable part of life in the Amarr Empire. No more, and no less. It was there, always there, in speech and the back of minds, but it was not an *important* part unless cut off, much like breathing. The citizens of the Amarr Empire were not, whatever outsiders might like to believe, fanatics. They simply accepted faith, and had a tacit agreement among themselves not to violate its major tenets. Civilization, to them, worked much the same way. One did not impinge on another's sphere of being - their liberty, their freedom or their joy - just as one did not, metaphorically speaking, walk into church, lower one's pants and leave a steaming gift to the almighty. Things worked, and people understood what they needed to do and not do in order to to make them work.

The Minmatar understood this, too.

After the murder at their arrival, the group had suffered no more direct attacks, deadly or otherwise, from the guards. None were necessary. The entire colony had been constructed not for the output of its manual labor but to break the spirits of its inmates. Work started under dark blue skies and ended the same, and whatever little sleep there was to be had remained unsettled and light, punctuated by the groans and muffled wails of fellow inmates. They slept in large barracks with little privacy, three per bunk. The guards who walked through would swing their batons against the bunk beds' metal railings, startling the inmates out of tired revelries; and

once awake, the prisoners would lie still with open eyes and hear the mournful, hungry howling wails of the slaver hounds drifting over from the swamp. During the day, the sun would beat down on them as they worked, either digging or mining or, in a very few trusted cases, running services for the camp. Noise blared throughout the work areas, echoing off the rocks that surrounded them, vibrating in their tools and in their heads. Food was scarce and revolting, and clothes were rarely washed. The routine wore them out. It kept them numb, too, but only on the surface, leaving them completely susceptible to deeper influences.

The guards played games. One day per week was a holiday, during which inmates were free to rest, roam about or even leave the area altogether. No one wandered; the sun-drenched desert and the swampy woods beyond were formidable repellants. Instead, the guards would hide things - anything from colored pebbles to little skeins or wooden plaques with pictures of Amarrian idols - in the possessions of some random, unknown prisoner, then call out a hunt. If the items were found before sundown, and the right person given up, that individual would usually have their rations withdrawn for the next two days. If the items were not found, everyone lost their rations. That was the basic version of the game, but some guards were more inventive than others, and occasionally offered an alternative to the rations - especially if the target looked like they wouldn't last two days without food.

One liked people to eat sand, or wads of someone else's hair. The prisoner saw a friend ingest so much dirt that his exhalations left little muddy spatters on the ground; and later, overnight, he sat up with the man and held him still as his agonized, bleeding body rid itself of what it had been forced to ingest.

One liked public sex, choosing at random another inmate to accompany the victim. The rest of them had to stand around in a wide circle and maintain absolute silence, hearing only the hoarse, bleating grunts from the center.

One was partial to violence, and breakage.

The prisoner 47, after somehow bearing to watch several of these events, began to notice that certain people had an aura over them. They were safe. They stood where they wanted, instead of hiding among the assemblage. They lost their rations like everyone else if the item hunt turned out empty, but when special rules came into play they stood at ease, solitary and sheltered. All of them had apparently been in the camp for a while.

The prisoner saw them mill about, unobtrusive but entirely unconcerned, as he watched friends and compatriots tortured, molested and beaten. He saw them look at the sky not because they wanted to avoid the sights on the ground, but because they genuinely found nothing else of interest around them. Unconcerned, and unaffected.

It shook him. When he tacitly inquired about these people, every question went unanswered. It wasn't as if they were aiding the guards, or in some manner actively participating in the degradation. Amazingly, 47 felt no real animosity towards the guards themselves: They were the catalysts of pain and suffering, but what they inflicted was so terrible as to render them inhuman in his mind. There was no more point in hating them than there was in despising the weather. But those fellow inmates carrying a secret that in any way related to or amplified the suffering of everyone else around them, those men were nothing but traitors. Worse than that, in 47's opinion, they were evil. They were evil men. Not grey like the guards and the sand at night, but black just through and through.

And he was continually forced to watch the games, week after week after week, until one day something in him simply gave way. While two inmates were fighting in the middle of the circle, seeing who could break the other's right arm first, 47 shuffled over to an ignored little corner of the plaza and picked up a wooden plate on which was painted in gold a picture of an Amarrian saint. It had been the day's bounty and was now being ignored by the other prisoners, who all stood slack and gazed at the fight in the distance. Number 47 held it casually to his side as he walked up to one of the safe men, some older guy inspecting a cloud far above, and swung it back and beat him in the face with all the power he had.

The man crumpled to the ground, blood spurting from a gash on his cheek. Number 47 descended on him. He got in a handful of blows before the guards yanked him onto the ground and administered a beating of their own. As he lay on the ground, shortly before he lost consciousness, he caught a glimpse of the other man, lying there not far from him, apparently at ease with himself and the world. The man was smiling. He said something but it was muffled by the blood in his mouth, and all 47 could read from his lips was "hail to the king."

It took him several days to recover, during which he was exempt from labor but given only half portions. No major bones had broken but several were badly bruised, tendons were overstretched, and his skin looked like a relief map. He had a lot of time to think while everything healed. Being yanked from his daily routine, first by the upset that had led to the beating, then by being forced to stay in the sick ward - he hated the routine but it really was all he had - turned him more and more tense, and all he could think about was his growing obsession with inequality.

It was like faith, and in his convalescence he realized that even in this place, where he truly expected to remain until he died, he had clung to his beliefs. Not the great, grand vision of God and Emperor, but the deeper, unspoken truths that lay behind them. Everyone could suffer, everyone did suffer, and 47 had grown up implicitly accepting that life, for all its joys, had plenty of suffering to heap onto its people - but only so long as everyone was equal. Not in the experience of suffering itself, for that, along with life's pleasures and darkness, belonged to you and nobody else; but in open judgment, in evaluation, before the renownedly loving but - secretly, suspected, known in the heart of hearts of all their subjects - uncaring and disinterested authorities.

Each time he shifted, it hurt like blazes. He was aware of every breath. His body had lost so much weight that his bones clicked against one another. He was willing to die in this place, if that was his secular fate; in this cot or out in the mines. There was little, at this point, he could do about that. But he wanted so badly, with such horrible need, to go to his eventual death as

a man of values, not a slack-jawed ghost who hadn't known the meaning of the life slowly leaving him. He needed to know the meaning of things here. He knew it existed; it *had* to exist, or life no longer made sense and he was a ghost among ghosts. A god, or a guard, or, as it seemed, a king. A ruler of the earth. The perfect authority for this terrible place. The devil.

It had to be, the more he thought of it. The source, not of suffering, which was God's work, but of inequality. The chaos of counterbalance to God's own order.

And he had to meet this king. To understand why the world was the way it was. Not to comprehend it in its entirety - that was given only to God and the most wicked of men - but to understand the balance. To know how this inequality worked, of the camp and the people in it, and through that understanding, to incorporate it as a blip, a sensible aberration that was merely a stray chaotic fluke in a much greater scheme of order.

He understood that he might have a fever, too. Certainly the things he saw crawling on the inside walls of the infirmary could not possibly be there. Not even the ones that sometimes crawled up into the cot with him, with chitters and wet little clicks.

When 47 finally got out of the infirmary, he was a different man. He got into more fights, seeking to beat out the knowledge he needed. Other inmates shunned him. There were more beatings, too, though none so vicious as the first had been.

He got pulled into a game, once. He sobbed into his straw-filled pillow that night and several nights after, and in the days that followed merely fought even harder. If this was chaos, he would be part of it until recognized as its own.

And at last someone gave it away. One of the men with the holy auras, caught unawares behind a supply shed. Once he recognized 47, beneath the flurry of blows, he started to say something, but it was not until 47 had exhausted himself and fallen gasping to his knees that the victim managed to speak. Even then, it was hard; the man's face was swollen up and

distended, as if made from lumps of clay. Prisoner 47 crawled over to him and bent over his face, looking down at the mess of blood and flesh he'd brought into creation. Still, the man tried to talk, his tongue pushing away blood that 47 noticed was being watered out and then realized it was from the tears dropping from his own eyes.

"Jungle. The King is in the jungle," the victim told him. "Go there. He will see you now."

That same evening, not for cover but the cool of dusk, 47 ran off, through the desert for either minutes or hours, until the musky scent enveloped him.

He waded through for hours or days. The chittering was loud here, and the things clicked wetly when he held them, but they had protein and liquids and that sustained him. Occasionally there was growling in the distance, which 47 suspected came from wild slaver hounds, but never anything more. It did not worry him that the beaten man had refrained from giving directions. Whoever or whatever this King was - and 47 was just as ready for it being a desiccated tree or some other dead altar where he would lay down and die - he would be found if he wanted it.

When at last he stopped, he did not sleep. Instead, he dropped into some place dark and still. Once he came back to himself he found the night felt different, not brighter but perhaps more still.

Before his eyes, a mix of broken, felled trees and rotting foliage resolved itself into a shack, standing on crooked feet a little above the marsh. He waded over to it, clambered up onto the gap that seemed to be an entrance, and made his way in.

There was almost total darkness inside, though his eyes adjusted remarkably fast. A corner held an empty spread of straw - dry, to 47's amazement - and in the murky gloom of another, a silhouette of deeper darkness gave the impression of a man.

"Sit," the voice said. He obeyed. The straw crackled under his weight. He couldn't help but touch it, languidly running his hands over it in a

combination of nerves and obsession. It seemed entirely too pure to be here.

A thought struck him. "We are-" he started, then stopped to cough his voice into action. He couldn't remember when he had last spoken.

"We are in a desert," he tried again. His voice was deep but without much volume. He could feel it echo in his faded body. "How do we even get food, let alone the straw in our bedding?"

He could hear the King's breathing. It turned shallow for a moment, as if he were amused. "Hot-dropped from outside, like all your supplies. Selected prisoners bring the crates into camp under cover of darkness."

"Who selects them?"

The unseen figure, he knew, grinned at him for a moment. Then he said, not unkindly, "Is this why you came here? To ask about the straw in your bedding?"

Prisoner 47 thought it over. It was hard to hang on to thoughts for very long, and he didn't feel certain he could articulate them too well. He slid a hand over the straw and felt how the clamminess of his palms left a slick trail over the surface. It wasn't just that the straw was dry; he was wet. He was soaked.

He had a fever again, he realized.

Something shifted, and something small and inert was suddenly lying in front of him. "Eat this," the voice said.

He did. It tasted greater than anything he'd had for a long time, certainly in the colony itself, though a part of him missed the crunch and chitter of the jungle outside.

He tried to collect his thoughts again. "I think I went mad."

The King replied, "Yes. I think you've gone mad," and waited for 47 to speak again.

The prisoner thought it over. At last he said, "How did you become King?"

There was a hesitation. Then, "I was like you, worn out and broken. But I kept glimpsing something else, as if behind a veil. At last, something in me gave way and let me see the darkness proper, only to find out I'd known it all along. "

The prisoner thought this over, too. "Is that true?"

There was a short laugh. "Maybe. Or maybe I was just good at making connections and reading other people's minds, until the point came where even the guards didn't know what to do with me."

"So you left."

"So I left. I get what I need here. They bring me straw, held over their heads to keep it dry, and they bring food and drink and whatever else I require. If the guards have it, so do I."

"Why?"

"What else is there, in this place?" the King said to him. "Except eventual death, and all your suffering until then. And me, giving you the faith you need."

"Does everyone follow you?"

"No. And they die either way, but the ones who came to know me can live in a little comfort, which is briefly important, and die with understanding, which means so much more."

The King continued, "I decide who is safe. My people do not get chosen for games. If you get hurt, you will be allowed to mend before going on. You will never lose a meal. It's not for everyone."

"I made it here," 47 said. Even with the meal in his stomach, it was hard to think.

"You made it here. You went into the darkness. You can be one of our own, if you wish."

In the darkness, 47 nodded. "What do I need to do now?" he said.

"The same thing you did that let you be led here. Embrace it. Accept it. Know that you belong to it."

"The chaos."

"Oh yes," the King said, as if receiving the right answer to an unasked question. "Exactly that."

The voice grew closer, as if the King had leaned in. "Every man who comes here is a man of faith, a creature of thought come to understand that there is something greater than you. But until you come here you have nothing like the true faith, only carefully selected pieces of it. Here is where you fill in the rest. Here is where you become, at last, a believer of a dark and utter truth. Did you feel it missing, before you came here?"

"Yes," 47 whispered.

"Was it a life that seems now not only distant, but fake as well? False, and incomplete?"

"Yes," 47 said.

"Yes," the King echoed. "Here is all the truth a man of faith, a true man of faith, could ever have sought."

The prisoner knew he was right. Here it was, all of it. In a prisoner's camp where people were broken; in an emptiness full of beasts and starvation. The balance, found at last.

"Thank you," 47 said. It came out choked. He cleared his throat. "Thank you," he said again, loud and clear.

"I'm glad you found the faith," the King told him.

The prisoner 47 left the cabin and began making his way back to camp.

On his way through the marshy wilderness, he heard the growl again, much closer this time. He turned and found himself looking at a slaver hound, realizing in that moment what a terrible joke, what a perfect fulfilment of this life it was to have these beasts here to guard the faithful, diverted from their original purpose of guarding and attacking Minmatar slaves back in the

Empire. He could hear the hound's hoarse, deep breathing. Puffs of air wafted from its hungry face.

He stood still, calmly looking back at it. And in that animal face, with its sharp teeth dripping saliva, and the eyes red-rimmed and unblinking, he saw no longer a hunger, but a fellowship.

The Plague Years

Fermar looked at the sun for the last time. His home had one of the most scenic spots on the asteroid mining colony, and if he stood at this living room window at the eve of the day he could see all the ships coming and going.

One had docked just now. Fermar inhaled deeply, holding his breath before slowly letting it out again. His hair was all grey and his hands were rough and creased, as befitted a man who'd worked on the colonies all his life. He noticed his own reflection in the window, superimposed on the starry blackness. It seemed to be smiling.

There was a knock and the sound of someone opening the outside door. A man's voice said, "He's in here, sir," and another voice said, "Thank you. I'll see myself in." That second voice was much huskier than the first, worn but not imposing. There was the sound of a door closing.

A man walked into the living room. He was dressed in black, stylish in a fairly classical way and covered with a mop of dark, curly hair; noticeable, all in all, but not memorable. He was younger than Fermar by at least thirty years, but didn't carry himself with the same bullish assurance. Fermar moved like a man used to high gravity; this one sidled like someone expecting the sky to pick him up at any time.

"Terden," Fermar said.

"Hi, Fermar," Terden said.

"Get out."

"It's not what you think."

"Get out."

"I have a deal for you."

"I have a gun in working order. Get out."

Terden walked over to a settee and sat down, unbuttoning his coat and pulling off his gloves. "I ... want to help you," he said.

"You want to do a lot of things, but help won't be high on the list."

"I ... wanted to see you on the sly, too, but I was nabbed as soon as I came in." His whispery voice was oddly modulated; it would start off slow, get its bearings, then rush to the end of the sentence as if trying to race past the meaning of its words. "Security's tight here," he added.

"Of course it is."

Terden ran a hand through his thick hair. "So you know why I'm here."

"Your creatures are coming," Fermar said. "I've heard reports. They're settling in the area, kidnapping people. Same as they always do."

"Which is why I'm here," Terden said. "Hear me out, but take a seat first, please."

Fermar looked at him for a moment, then walked over to a chair opposite the settee and sat down.

"You're right. The people I work for ... they're coming, they're reaching out and they need new recruits, but nobody needs to get hurt. You yourself could walk away completely untouched."

"Everybody gets hurt when the Sansha come in," Fermar said.

"We don't want a fight, and we don't want people to die," Terden said, ignoring the comment. "You and I, we know each other. You remember what happened last time and I don't want that to happen again. I want you to give up this colony and convince its people to surrender so we can move in quietly and without bloodshed."

"You know what happened in the Plague Years," Fermar said. "Why did you even bother coming to me?"

"Because I do remember the Plague Years and the time before them, too. I remember being taken in for a long while when I didn't have anywhere to

go and I remember a family that showed me a lot of kindness when I didn't always deserve it."

"Damn straight, you didn't," Fermar said.

"And I remember Carla," Terden said.

Fermar jumped to his feet as if he'd been stung, glowered at Terden and seemed about to say something, hesitated, then merely stood there in silence. Finally it was as if the air went out of him, and he sat down heavily again.

The two men sat there, unmoving. After a while Fermar said, "Drinks in wood cabinet, lounge, other room. No ice."

Terden got up and walked out of the room. There was a clink of glasses and he returned, handing a drink to Fermar and holding one himself. "There was only one bottle," he said.

"I don't much go in for alcohol," Fermar said. "Serve guests, that's it."

"Always happy to be a guest here," Terden said and took a sip, then grimaced. "Strong stuff."

Fermar held the glass at arm's length, as if he'd forgotten about it. He had a faraway look in his eyes. "Why did you bring her up?" he said.

"When we come in, who do you think will be in the lead?"

Fermar put down his glass and stared at Terden.

"You all did me a lot of good during hard times," Terden said. "But that's over now. These are new times. Remember Melvue."

"You will not mention that name again," Fermar said calmly.

"It's the ... height of the Plague Years, and I won't pretend that the term doesn't apply to the Sansha, too, because they came right when everything was bad enough already. So what happens? The leader of the mining colony is approached one night at his house by a scout like me, and he gets an offer, same as you do now, and he *takes* the offer. We ... move in, not intending any violence, but then some people get it into their heads

they want to fight. So they fight, and they get hurt, and some of them manage to run away and some of them don't, all because the colony leader tried to make a sensible deal with us, and some people made a bad decision." Terden leaned forward. "It doesn't have to happen again."

"To hear you of all people saying this."

"They're coming, Fermar," Terden said. "And you're the leader now. But I know that you can keep your people in check, so I offer you the same deal as they did back then." He leaned back, waiting for an answer. When none was forthcoming, he said, "You know, they don't always do this. Sometimes they ... just move in, especially when they're hungry for people, and believe me, with the capsuleers thinning out their numbers they're real hungry now. But I know you, and I asked to come here, smooth things out."

Fermar said, "We might fight back this time, too. I have contacts and I heard of the Sansha coming. I made sure we had weapons."

"That's stupid," Terden said. "Stupid and suicidal."

"They have my daughter. You know this," Fermar said. "You people are on the other side of everything."

They fell silent. Terden looked around. "Yeah, I know. Thanks for the reminder. It's not like I'm here trying to *help* you, you ungrateful old fossil." He looked back at Fermar. "I wasn't going to bring up family, but since we're on the subject, how's your wife?"

"She's dead," Fermar said.

"That a fact? Is that why there are no pictures of her?" Terden said. He waved his hand at the walls. "I see pictures of your daughter here but not your wife. That's surprising, isn't it?"

Fermar sat silent. Terden said, "I think she's dead to you. Which is usually a little different, though right now it comes out to about the same. When did you lose her? After we came? Long after?"

"Why the hell are you asking this?" Fermar said.

"Because the ... only one who matters to you now is Carla and I don't believe for a second that you're being a colony leader because you want to. It's because you're a sensible man with a good head on his shoulders who's taken so many losses that now he only wants to wait until life catches up with him and eats up that one last breath he has."

Terden took another sip of his drink and quietly added, "You could see Carla."

Fermar's breath caught. His own drink was untouched; he reached for it, hesitated, then reached again but didn't pick it up, only held on to it as if for ballast. "What did you say?"

"I can't guarantee that you will spend much time together, but at least you will meet again. She's close enough in the area that she could be brought over, and I've told the Sansha of her connection to you. But that's not going to happen if you bring a fight."

"They won't send Carla if I fight?"

"Oh, they will definitely send Carla if you fight. With a gun in her hand. And this is the first house she'll go to. They'll dock, and they'll swarm in, and they won't enter a single house until they've entered yours, dragged you out and put a bullet in your brain. They will make an example out of you."

Fermar studied Terden for a while, then said, "I believe you. Speaking of which, that rotten cheat of a colony leader whose name you mentioned earlier. How's he doing?"

Terden's tone changed subtly from confrontation to elucidation. "Melvue made the right choice, so he's doing fine, enjoying his life."

"That so?"

"Absolutely," Terden said without hesitation.

Fermar said, "See, that's interesting. Because the last time I saw him, he was tied to a chair in a noiseproof room, and there was little all life left in him."

Terden, sipping from the glass, froze up.

"You're right," Fermar said. "He did make the right choice, back when he was colony leader. It was right for him and nobody else. And we never forgot it."

Fermar, glass in hand, slowly rose to his feet and walked over to Terden, towering over him. "I lost Carla, who your people took, and I lost my wife, who couldn't stand the loss and the aftermath. The Sansha took everything from me, and that miserable excuse for a human being we had as colony leader, he paved their way."

He poured the content of his wine glass on the floor beside Terden, who momentarily looked down at his own glass before looking up again with a puzzled expression.

Fermar said, "For years I couldn't even think straight. Carla had been taken and I wanted to get her back at any cost. I made contacts, I moved around, and I started to learn about the people you serve, but there was no way to get to her, or even discover where she was." He leaned in close. "Until, at long last, I tracked down my old colony leader. He was a spy by that point, working for you people in another colony, reporting on its setup and getting in with its leaders."

In a cold tone, Terden said, "And you ratted him out. To be tortured and killed."

"During which I discovered that life among the True Slaves really isn't that pleasant. In fact, it's downright rotten. You're taken in and made into a mindless drone, subject to the whims of a single person who certainly doesn't bear your interests at heart, and it eventually drives you insane. Doesn't matter what level your implants are; there's a threshold beyond which you start to rebel against the lack of free will, and your subconscious realizes that it's been trapped. It's extremely painful in the long run, though the symptoms break out in unusual ways. You've never thought about how willing these people are to die for their master? You would think that even

his machinery couldn't erase the survival instinct. But once you've been his slave for long enough, apparently all you want to do is die."

Terden took a long, slow sip. "I'm perfectly ... fine," he said.

"You scouts get more autonomy than the rest," Fermar said. "All they need is to keep tabs on you, not control you. They'll have vetted you and found that you're one of that rare breed who'll willingly join the Sansha. You're *safe*," he spat.

Terden stared at him, his jaw clenched. "Was there something wrong with the wine?" he said at last, nodding his head towards the puddle of alcohol on the floor, and lifting his own glass to his mouth.

"Oh, it's poisoned," Fermar said.

Terden stopped, wine in his mouth. He slowly swallowed, then said, "I've finished half a glass, Fermar."

Fermar looked at the spreading stain on the floor. Terden followed his gaze, dropping his own glass in the process. When Terden looked back up at Fermar, the old man had a gun in his hand.

Terden's eyes widened and he started to rise, but Fermar shot him, first through a knee, then through each shoulder. Terden dropped to the floor, screaming, and Fermar knelt down beside him, saying, "Before you go into shock, I want to tell you something. I know this won't get to the Sansha, because they don't use direct feeds on their scouts.

"First off, the wine wasn't poisoned. I wanted to slow you down a bit, make you comfortable, and distract you at the end. Which is funny, because it's pretty much what your type does when you're about to pounce on innocent people.

"Second, I know Carla is in this region. She's been here for a while. It was a long time before I realized that I couldn't possibly go after her, and if I tried they'd either kill me or move her somewhere that I'd never find her.

"So I'm bringing her to me."

Terden was quiet, gasping for breath.

Fermar arose, grunting with the effort. "Once everyo-" He hesitated, then fired a shot into Terden's arm. Terden screamed, and his hand, which had been reaching into his clothes, dropped back into view, a small pellet rolling out of its grip.

"Leave the suicide dose alone, thanks. I want you to hear this." Fermar ambled over to his seat, keeping his gaze on Terden. "This entire colony is wired with explosives."

Terden's grimace turned to surprise, and he stared at Fermar in shock. "You're insane," he said.

"Everyone has left, just about. I knew you people were coming even before you did. I still have my contacts, and I watch the solar winds. When they made me leader I told them of my Sansha experience, and one of the first things I did was implement an escape plan in case your employers decided to move into the area. Which they did, after a good long while, and I had my people start practicing." He had the gun trained on Terden, and his eyes narrowed. "When I found out that you of all people had been posted to this part of space, I knew it wasn't long to wait, and that you'd be the one they'd send. When I heard you were finally on your way, I fired up the plan, and everyone left quietly and efficiently. The only people still here are a skeleton crew, and after you and I are finished they will leave, too. Nobody here will get caught by the zombies. Nobody."

"Your daughter ... will come here," Terden said. "She will come to your house, gun in hand, and if I don't return you'll never get her back." A puddle of blood was spreading around Terden's body, and his voice quavered with exhaustion.

"Oh, I will. But not the way you think I want," Fermar said. He got up again and walked over to Terden, this time kneeling on his damaged hand. Terden hissed in pain, but kept his eyes open and staring straight into Fermar's.

Fermar said, "Once someone has been taken in by the Sansha, modified to Carla's level and kept for as long as she has, there's no turning back. The only thing I can do for her now is ease her misery, and my own, and that of anyone else you people send to this miserable rock. And if I can't do it, for whatever reason, then the explosives will."

"Murderer," Terden croaked.

"Yes," Fermar replied calmly. Terden's expression showed that this hadn't been the expected reaction. "After my team has gone, everyone left here will die," Fermar said.

"Including me," Terden said, clearing his throat and taking deep, hissing breaths.

"Including you."

"You really are a bitter, vengeful old fossil, aren't you?" Terden said, trying to shift so that he could glare at Fermar. "And you've lost it. You tried rebelling once when you had a perfectly good chance of saving everyone you cared about, and you failed, so now you want to finish the job and make sure they're all *dead!*" He had lifted his head with the effort, his shoulders giving him no support, and now he slumped back to the ground, breathing heavily, his one good hand making a fist.

Fermar thought about this, then said, "I'm finishing what needs to be finished. And confronting something no one else would, which is a lesson you and a lot of other people should have learned a long time ago. If it wasn't for people like you, you and that old colony leader, we never would've had those situations at all, and I wouldn't have lost my daughter."

There was no response.

Fermar sighed, aimed his gun and shot Terden in the head. Terden twitched with the impact, then lay still in his puddle of blood.

Fermar set the gun down on his chair, then walked over to the comms console and activated it. "It's done," he said.

Very shortly after, several men came into the room. "You do all right, sir?" they asked him.

"Yeah, it's all confirmed," he said. "Thanks for waiting. You were close?"

"Outside the door, practically," one of them said, and grinned. "No worries, we didn't listen in. After we heard the shot and his scream, we knew you had him."

"Alright. Clear out the body, please, then get in your ships as fast as you can. You have a little time, but not much."

The men nodded, and carried Terden's body out of the room. Fermar had turned and was about to put away the drink glasses when he heard them all come back in. They walked up to him in silence, and every one of them shook his hand. Then they left.

Fermar sat down to wait. If he had failed with Terden, these people would have taken over, after which they'd have primed automated triggers that would set off the explosives as soon as the Sansha had gotten into the colony.

Now that his suspicions had all been confirmed, the only thing remaining was to sit it out. If something were to happen to him now, the triggers would still work, but he hoped he'd see it through. He hoped he would hear a knock at the door and see another familiar face, if only for a second, before the end.

The Book of Emptiness

Part One

On the planet of Athra some fifteen hundred years ago, right after the Moral Reforms had concluded and the Amarr Empire had begun its tentative steps towards further exploration and expansion, two men were walking through a desert in search of a sacred object whose recovery could, according to one of them, rock the foundations of the Empire.

The two men were accompanied by a team of soldiers whose primary purpose during the mission was to take orders from one of them and keep an eye on the other, and not to complain when they were forced to take detours, track back or even stop to attempt futile digs in the middle of nowhere. They were desert troops with years of experience with sandy dunes and dry winds, and had been chosen not only for their unyielding devotion to the Empire, but for their proven ability of living – and more importantly, not dying – in these amber wastelands.

The reason for the detours, trackbacks and digs was the slight absent-mindedness of one of the group's leaders – a theological researcher named Akran, a man in his late fifties, with a mass of unruly hair that was combed only when he needed to engage in debate or presentation; an incredibly driven man whose mind lived in books while his body did whatever it needed to subsist. He was the catalyst and the linchpin for this quest, having spent a fair amount of his non-research time in argument and persuasion with some of the highest-ranking members of Amarr, with the eventual result that, if for no other reason than to shut him up, they'd granted him the minimum of funds and people needed to follow up on this quest of his.

So the soldiers were also diggers led by a man looking for a secret place that no one had visited for ages, and as the whole troupe trudged through the middle of nowhere, a place with no natural resources, no religious significance and no real habitability, it occurred to its other leader, a

fervently religious soldier named Skar, that this was really fucking stupid. Skar was captain of the task squad set with finding the holy object, and despite his strong faith in God and the Holy he wasn't even sure whether he believed in its existence, for while it was mentioned in the Scriptures, giving him full faith that it was, of course, real, he also believed that it was real in the same way that the faith itself was real; a presence beyond mere reality itself, as it were.

Skar shared his team's conviction that nothing solid would come of this trek, but Akran's own conviction was unshakeable. The researcher had created a new style of theological theory when he posited that he could triangulate the holy object's location from bits of scripture taken from lore that had been previously presumed to be completely unrelated, and after he had made a lot of noise in the auditoriums and the press, the authorities in their wisdom had decided they might as well give him permission and a little money to go on his quest, and thus keep the mission academic, rather than risk having the press focus all its attention on him. In this age of expansion they had more pressing things they wanted attention given to, and when this particular mission of Akran failed, as they knew it would, they could use it as a fallback if they needed to shift the focus from other embarrassments; and besides, as Skar had been tacitly informed, while they *could* just have the researcher killed, there'd be someone else along later with the same information who might not be as easily controlled.

At last, as the day had worn on and the sun blissfully begun its cooling descent, Akran told the troupe that they had reached their destination and would begin digging imminently, to which Skar countered that if they did, it'd be Akran alone, while the rest of them would focus their energies on living to see tomorrow. Responding to his command the troupe unloaded their gear and began camping for the approaching night, pointedly ignoring Akran, who did in fact not appear to be put out in the least. The workers unloaded their tents, beige and white, and set them up in a semicircle so that they could catch most of the brunt of a sandstorm that was expected later in the evening, then set up Skar and Akran's own living quarters,

larger tents of far more expensive material that would ventilate, warm and protect as needed. Skar's tent was colored similarly to the workers', with the addition of golden strips that spiralled down from its centre and out to its outer edges, while Akran's own was a blue so light it was nearly cyan, an unorthodox concession of style he'd required of the tentmakers so that the mild, filtered light shining through it would help him study and protect the holy object of their quest.

Their two tents were located in the inner rim of the semicircle, the better to protect them from wind and sand, and while Skar appreciated the slight comfort this arrangement would bring, he knew that it would also force him to live closer to Akran than he'd like, and quite possibly have to engage the man in conversation over dinner.

As it turned out, the evening was a quiet affair, all talk being hushed by the tiredness of their soldiers and enveloped in the lights of the stars from the dark skies above. Staring up at the sky felt comforting to Skar in a manner that, he thought, would strike others as completely paradoxical. On the one hand it was a celestial covering, an extended roof on the world that enveloped him in its protective sheath and made it a finite creation, protecting him inside this little bubble of a world and of a life; but at the same time it reminded him of the infinite and the endless, the vastness of the world and the unknowability of all its wonder; and both of these viewpoints, as much as they clashed, led him inexorably to the Lord. He felt certain that this kind of duality of thought, and the fact he was *capable* of it, meant he had thought through all the sides of his faith, seeing and verifying its truths; and that certainty was important to him, for he was not a faithful man by nature and had instead come by his beliefs begrudgingly, after a time in his life so dark it made this desert night seem like an oasis of joy and light by comparison. The military man is used to being commanded, but the *good* military man is always in command, of himself first and foremost, and it had hurt to acknowledge that with this endless darkness encroaching upon him on all sides he would have to give himself completely over to a higher authority. Religion formed a large part of life in

the Amarr empire, but it was the institutional religion of rule and order, not the visceral, internalized one of formless wonder, and while everyone professed to worship the Lord above, what they did in fact worship - in the military, especially - was the framework of quiet devotion and worship where the army, if anything, was a modernized version of the cloisters of old, with the same selfless giving, and the same striving to meet a higher goal. But for Skar it had not been enough, and at last there had come a time where the framework on which he had hung his cloth of faith felt as empty as his own insides and he decided to let its true owner in at last; a loss of control he still resented, and a frustration he readily admitted to himself, but it was and would remain the greater and only choice: to entrust his fate to the hands of the Almighty, to accept life's storms as a passenger instead of the oarsman, and to see the world no longer merely as it was and no more than that, but through the imperfect eyes of a vessel of God.

And now here was Akran, an annoyance of a man who wanted to see behind the curtain, to put his interpretation on God's words and glean not their hidden meanings but the meaning behind those meanings; and, certainly, also a well-read and intelligent scholar, one who had managed to attract to an area of theo-archaeological research that had apparently been quite neglected, and who had already accumulated some impressive finds of religious artifacts, all of which had resulted in this journey into the desert.

As they supped on the usual glutinous mix of fatty meat and potatoes, Akran said to him, "How do you feel about finding the Book of Emptiness?"

Skar stopped eating and looked at him. It was the first time they had mentioned the object's name in quite some time, and hearing it from Akran's lips had the same faint whiff of blasphemy as before.

"It's for the good of God and Empire," he said. "That's all that matters."

"Is it now?" Akran said, calmly ladling more food from the pot and onto his plate.

Skar didn't know whether to be annoyed or careful. The researcher might be here by the grace of others, but he had not achieved that grace through

being a simpleton. The two men had spent a few nights camped out in various parts of the desert but had not held a whole conversation yet; Skar's mind had been on faith and darkness, while Akran had constantly been going over his notes and trying to better triangulate their quarry. This was the first time he was this relaxed, which Skar took as a sign that they were about to do their final dig.

"Had you heard of the Book?" Akran asked.

Skar, an autodidact of anything to do with his faith, made to answer, then stopped. He hadn't been asked whether he'd read about the holy object, but whether he'd heard of it, and thus reasoned he wasn't expected to share his knowledge of the theology, but of Akran's research into it.

"I knew you were holding lectures on it. And that you got enough support from Empire to take us on this journey. That's all," Skar said. The liquid in his bowl glimmered oily in the light of the fire.

Akran cleared his throat, and Skar knew, just knew, that he was about to hear one of those lectures. He looked to the stars, quelled a sigh and gave quick thanks that at least he'd been spared the proselytizing until now, then looked back down at his bowl and waited for the words.

Ages ago, Akran said, a brilliant philosopher whose name had been lost to history had become so dissatisfied with the limits of his native tongue to express what he saw on the inside of his head that he created a symbolic language, similar to maths, with which he could describe such concepts as truth, beauty and reality in specific terms without having to go through the whole definition rigmarole that identified much of modern philosophy. This was not the first time someone had attempted such a thing, though it was usually the domain of mathematicians and some of the more experimental theologians, and despite the man's fame for inventive capacity it was not treated with any great amount of seriousness or interest. That was, until he released the first draft of his book to a select group of readers who read it and became, in the oft-quoted words of an unfortunate Empire enforcer who found them and later disappeared, beautifully insane. They were not

catatonic, but spoke only under certain specific circumstances, in which they would let out a torrent of glossolalia that always begun with the phrase "I have not read the Book of Emptiness," then instantly turned formless and wavery but remained coherent and, in fact, absolutely clear. They spoke, if such a term may be used, about the absolute reality of the world in which they lived, and as with any other organism that exists under absolute reality, it may be said that they were insane, but it was not a lack of sanity that afflicted them; rather, a sense that reached beyond mere identity and utterly unified them with the world. The ones who heard them later reported that the sounds that entered their heads left them momentarily unable to filter, judge, avoid or ignore any aspect of both the physical and the metaphysical realities in which they lived. In short, the entire world was revealed to them, and they saw themselves both as the inherent parts of it and outside of it, as if they were the viewer and the viewed all at once.

In less enlightened societies this kind of behaviour would have been seen as heretical and would have earned everyone involved a brief and smoky stay on a pyre, but at that point in history Amarr was remarkably tolerant to aberrant behaviour. As Akran remarked to Skar, the religious history of the Amarrian Empire could in some way be seen as the ocean: The force with which it weighed down the free expression of its fringe elements would ebb and flow like the rising tide on a wayward beach, periodically washing in to quell and suffuse the sands of thought before receding again for long enough to allow the little kernels to cast off their influence and take to the winds. In this case, the philosopher's books were captured and destroyed, the people who'd read them were given free medical treatment, which in a couple of cases turned out to last for perpetuity, the people who'd heard those people speak were given paid leave until such point as they could see fit to return to work, which they all eventually did, and the philosopher himself was given the choice of either cutting it out and becoming a productive member of society, or following the traditional rule of mad prophecy and taking it out into the desert. To the disappointment but little surprise of the ruling body, the philosopher chose the desert, and was rarely heard of again. Snippets of his conversations with the desert tribes

could be found in various of the lesser scriptures, but they made little sense at the best of times, and whether due to translation issues or madness on the philosopher's behalf it had been assumed for a long time that his career and life's work had effectively turned to ruin when he first set foot on the sandy dunes, never to return, and never to be found again.

Until Akran came along, a long time later, and said that he understood.

He had not been able to comprehend the philosopher's entire dialogue to the desert folk, and he readily admitted this, but he had nonetheless managed to piece together and retranslate enough to figure out where the philosopher had buried the last remaining copy of the Book of Emptiness. Right here, on this spot where they had camped.

Skar closed his eyes.

"You think we won't find it?" Akran said, in a tone Skar couldn't rightly decipher.

Skar thought about his answer for a while, then said, "I think each one of us has to find it on their own."

Akran laughed quietly at that. "Good answer, soldier," he said. "And now I'm going to get some sleep. With God's grace, tomorrow we'll all find what we're looking for."

To be continued...

Uplifted

Anyone who happened to be watching the exact point in space would only have seen a slight visual distortion against the stars. In the blink of an eye, the gravitational force of a star was generated over just a few short kilometers, compressing the fabric of space-time into a temporary singularity. The reverberation of that mass, when the remote graviton pulse wave that had tricked the physical laws of the universe subsided, produced a connection between two non-corresponding locations in the universe: a wormhole.

The event horizon immediately set off early warning sensors on the world below, basking in the radiance of its warm, yellow sun. Local forces were mobilized, but before they could act, the Sansha auto-replicating virus batch was already relayed and being broadcast from every major structure in the system — stargates, stations, and even planetary networks. The invasive programming quickly overwhelmed the inferior systems of the civilian infrastructure, local garrisons, and, though they would not admit it, most of the Gallente Federation's navy ships.

Then the wormhole let out a searing burst of white light, and they came through, bulbous metallic vessels covered in wicked, uneven spines. Hundreds poured from the shimmering portal, covering light years of distance in a single instant to cloud the skies above the helpless planet. Almost fishlike, darting in loose formation and changing direction simultaneously, they spread out in all directions. With synchronized releases of focused electromagnetic blasts, they smoothly wiped all defensive structures and communications satellites from orbit. For many people on the surface, the sudden glare of golden laser beams lancing across the night sky was the first sign that Sansha's Nation had arrived.

When it had secured the entire lower orbital altitude, the armada held position until a second wave of ships emerged from the wormhole. These new vessels were different, though, lacking the bulky warp drives that took

up so much space in the combat vessels; instead, their cavernous cargo holds had a very specific purpose, housing rows and rows, layer upon layer of holding cells designed to store humanoid “passengers.” The ships dropped through the atmosphere unimpeded, by squadrons, a perfectly orchestrated meteor shower.

The hypnotizing spectacle of the massive bronze ships, still glowing from the heat of atmospheric entry, turned to panic as they slowed to hover several hundred meters above the ground. A horrible grinding rolled forth from each one as gigantic bay doors slid open, unleashing a barely visible cloud of buzzing creatures that glittered as they caught the light. Undetectable except in vast quantities, these tiny cybernetic parasites drifted down over every population center, almost weightless, wafting in through unshielded windows, exposed ventilation systems, even exhaust ports that lacked the proper filters used on more densely populated worlds.

Before the victims below could understand what was happening, the nanites had already passed through the outer layer of skin, navigated the bloodstream, and attached themselves to the base of their spinal cords. When enough of the insidious little things had amassed in a single person, they begin to emit rhythmic electrical pulses — not enough to disrupt higher brain functions, but more than enough to overpower the simple neural pathways below the neck. People screamed and shouted, struggled in vain, and cried pitifully for help, but their bodies wouldn’t respond. They walked out into the green tinted glare of wide-angle tractor beams, which lifted them off the ground by the thousands. Their bodies tumbled slowly, out of control, up into the waiting dropships.

But then the dark sky lit up with different colors. Sparkling blue explosions and brilliant red contrails streaked across the night. The capsuleers had arrived.

Arriving sporadically at first, then in greater numbers and with more organization, they warped onto the battlefield in high orbit above the planet and opened fire with reckless voracity. Their ships’ advanced electronics systems and powerful defensive measures shrugged off the Nation’s viral

broadcast, allowing them to unleash a hail of guided missiles, artillery slugs, and incorruptible attack drones. They punished the Sansha vessels with their assault, but suffered a coordinated counterattack as the invading fleet systematically chose one target at a time, focusing all of its considerable firepower against the unfortunate subject.

Sensing the imminent danger to their ground operation, the dropships began to lift off of the surface all at once, not quite full yet, taking tens of thousands of citizens with them. They rocketed back up through the atmosphere on solid fuel jets, back to the safety of the wormhole. Stray weapons fire from both sides caused more than a few of them to explode, get knocked hopelessly off course, or suffer hull breaches, sending thousands of paralyzed humans spiraling out into space.

For over an hour the battle raged, until the intervening void was clouded with dissipating particulate matter, the twisted wreckage of starships, and the corpses of those who had once crewed them. By that time, capsuleers had gained the upper hand, their resilient starships taking on many times their number of antiquated Sansha battleships.

The wormhole pulsed once more, sending static through every local starship's sensors. When scanners came back online and searched for targets, a new contact had arrived: The massive carrier was shrouded in a layer of projected energy shielding so thick that one could barely see the heavy armor plates beneath. The fighter bays along the monstrosity's hull were closed, for it had no intention of launching any. Instead, its supplemental capacitors spun to life, sizzling with an overabundance of power as relay switches connected them directly to the built-in shield emitters. The field created was far more powerful than a normal shield but highly unstable. That was the point.

A tremendous blast of energy spread out in a spherical pattern, physically pushing ships away with the crushing force of charged gravitons. Attack drones simply evaporated as the weapon, designed to cause significant damage to much larger ships, reduced them to glittering pieces of superheated metal. Smaller capsuleer ships survived one or two bursts,

perhaps, but by the time five waves had passed, everything smaller than a cruiser had disintegrated.

The capsuleers adapted to the situation quickly, though, adjusting their trajectories and cycling new ammunition into their weapons. Mere seconds after it had arrived, the carrier was inundated with a withering barrage of destruction. Scorching laser fire, armor piercing projectiles, tactical warheads, and superheated plasma bolts rained down until even its remarkably powerful shield system was spent. It listed awkwardly in space after losing control, but only for a few seconds before the relentless capsuleers closed in to finish the kill. After a few moments of smaller explosions tearing apart individual segments of its hull, the Sansha carrier's thermonuclear generator released a blinding flash of light, incinerating the entire internal structure of the ship and leaving nothing but a charred husk of superstructure behind, slowly spinning as pieces continued to break off and drift away.

Unable to sustain a viable signal with the flagship destroyed, the wormhole wavered slightly, then vanished, abruptly ending the communications static and returning the system to a tentative state of normalcy. The invasion had ended, but the war was long from over. The capsuleers who weren't busy salvaging the wreckage or attacking one another over the right to do so warped away one at a time or in small groups. They didn't know when or where Sansha would strike next, but they knew that, with each empire's defenses caught off guard and rendered all but unable to respond, they were New Eden's only hope for a sustainable defense.

The Book of Emptiness

Part Two

They got up while it was still cold and blue, and as the desert sands warmed to scorching temperatures they dug for the Book. Akran presided over the excavation, giving out directions that went mostly unheeded, while Skar pitched in with his men and gave them the orders they obeyed. In the afternoon the heat was alleviated a little by increasing gusts of wind, but the relief was short-lived. By early evening the winds had picked up, visibility was dropping, and clouds had started to pile up on the horizon. The sand got into everything, and all nonessential conversation faded away as the diggers focused on the ground, their mouths pinched shut and their eyes narrowed to slits.

The weather got progressively worse. Skar began to wonder whether it was a sign that they were in the wrong place, or even if they should not be there at all. The soldiers did their best to shore up what had at first been a deepening hole but was increasingly turning into a well. Akran was clearly worried that if they discovered the Book the rain would damage it, and paced around muttering to himself. The entire thing seemed on all levels to be turning into useless sludge.

It was just before midnight, as the winds had turned to gales and the rain was pelting them from all sides, that the soldier at the bottom of the hole stopped digging and began waving to the people up top. Skar was called over, then Akran, and together they stood in open-mouthed amazement as the soldier called for ropes to be tossed down, and for more light, more light.

They worked at it with the fervor of the terrified, pulling because they didn't dare stop, not even slowing when one soldier pulled so hard he lost his footing and slid into the hole. He hadn't broken anything, he shouted, though he might have twisted his ankle, but it seemed to Skar that the rest

of them wouldn't have cared either way. Skar was terrified, too, and felt sick to his stomach.

Eventually the ropes were affixed and the bounty pulled up to ground level. It was a box about half the size of a man, made of metal and varnished with a solid, opaque coating that Skar wasn't familiar with. He only had a moment to regard it before Akran shouldered him aside to get to the box, and he smiled despite himself, happy that someone in the group was so excited at the discovery. His stomach felt made of lead. The box shouldn't have been here, or anywhere except in the text of the scriptures.

Before Akran could do anything foolish, Skar ordered the soldiers to haul the box into camp. One of the soldiers asked if it should go into Skar's tent, but Skar shook his head and ordered it placed in Akran's. He saw on their faces that they agreed with the decision, even if it was edging off protocol; Akran was fairly hopping about in eagerness while the rest of the troops were exhausted. In truth, Skar wanted the thing in Akran's tent because he knew he'd get no peaceable sleep if it were in his own.

The troops dragged the box into the academic's tent, where it dripped mud and wet sand onto the floor. They left it there and marched out wordlessly, leaving Akran hunched over the box in rapt fascination and Skar standing behind him not quite knowing what to do next. His dilemma was resolved when Akran asked him to pry open the box.

"I'm sorry?"

"This box. I need it opened. I believe we have a pry bar somewhere in the toolbox." He waved at a large bag sitting in a corner of his tent. The troops had taken turns carrying it.

Skar couldn't help himself. "Are you sure you should be doing this?"

Akran gave him a gently admonishing look. "This is why we are here, soldier. Pry it open, please."

"Is there even a faultline?" Skar said, feeling like a child trying to avoid going to bed.

The academic pointed at a thin line that circumscribed the middle of the box. "Halfway through. So long as you hit it on the mark the seal will give, with no damage to the box."

"Should you be doing this? If the ... if the Book is located inside, it might be affected by any number of things. The wind, the humidity in the air, anything. It should be taken out in a -"

"Safe, nice research institute where a lot of boring old men will pore over its covers until the end of time without ever opening the damned thing," Akran said. "Open the box, please."

Skar saw no choice but to obey. He retrieved the pry bar and held it in his hands, regarding the box and Akran, who had stooped over again to study its inscriptions. Skar stood like that for a moment, lost in dark thought, then cleared his throat and let the academic step aside before he started working on the faultline.

The seal cracked easily, and Skar stood back in confusion before realizing that of course he'd need to help Akran lift the lid off. He made his hands be still before grasping the lid and holding tight, putting as much effort into it as he could without embarrassing the thin and reedy academic holding on the other end. It felt good to use his strength on the box, even if it also felt a fair bit sacrilegious.

Once the lid was off, he made himself look inside, hoping against hope he would see emptiness.

The box contained another box, this one made of marble and decorated with impossibly ornate carvings. Skar looked at them for a few moments and felt something in his mind begin to drain away, but the gale of the wind and the patter of the rain brought him back to normal. The marble box also had a faultline in the centre but was not sealed, and Skar felt his eyes drawn to one of its corners, where a brownish piece of scroll poked out. A small, tattered piece of the Book of Emptiness, poking its edges into this world.

Skar walked out swiftly, marched a few steps behind the tent, vomited quietly, and walked back into the tent. Akran didn't seem to notice.

"Now that you have it, what are you going to do?" Skar said, keeping his voice as clear as he could. "Open the second box?"

"No. I was almost certain that there'd be a second container inside, and I wanted to see what it was like. The piece of scroll poking out is certainly fortunate, so I'm going to snip off a tiny bit and put it to some tests. Other than that, I'll be focusing on the box, documenting some of its decorations for future study, and doing some initial tests on the sealant to make sure it's as old as it should be. I don't expect to sleep much tonight," he added with a wry grin.

"So you won't be studying the book," Skar said.

"Not until tomorrow." Akran nodded towards another well-stuffed bag in a tent corner. "I'll have your men set up the surgical tent, the resealable one with the sterile inner cover, and I'll look into it then. Imagine that. It will be in our hands tomorrow. Just think what new truths it might hold!"

"There are no new truths," Skar said weakly, but Akran had already turned back to the box. Seeing he was no longer needed, Skar turned and headed back to his tent.

He made ready to go to sleep, but couldn't concentrate. He was good at keeping his mind focused on the task at hand - and after having found religion, he had become very good indeed at letting go of all interfering thoughts - but his mind was fast becoming a blur now, and he wasn't sure what to do. The Book shouldn't exist, he felt. It shouldn't exist on any level, because its mere presence brought the Lord into this physical world where He had no business being.

The Book was wrong, and Akran was wrong, and this whole thing was wrong.

Skar lay on his blanket, feeling the cold from the midnight sand seep into his bones.

He couldn't get those marble carvings out of his mind. The grooves that twisted and turned in on themselves, like snakes eating their tails. The knots and curlicues that looked like words but on closer inspection would dissolve into abstract symbols the likes of which he'd never seen in scripture.

And that piece of scroll sticking out, as if trying to squeeze its way from some terrible beyond and into this world, right into Skar's own head.

He turned to one side, then turned to the other, and then lay on his back, staring at the roof of his tent, unseeing and near panic.

Years ago, when he'd buckled and become faithful at last, his fall into faith had been terrifying and liberating all at once. He remembered that feeling, though he rarely thought of it. There had been a moment of quiet realization, where he understood that he had made up his mind long ago, and had merely to let his actions catch up with him.

He lay there on his bed, sleepless and unquiet of mind, and wondered what else he was waiting to do.

"The academic is dead."

The soldier assembly stared at him. It was dawn. Skar stood in front of Akran's tent.

"We need to prepare the corpse for transport," he said. "I want two volunteers to unwrap the surgical tent and convert it into a shroud. It's careful work, and if anyone has a problem with the next part - which you all know what'll be - you're better off abstaining. The rest fills in the pit, preps for leave, and gets some rest. We leave at sundown."

Two men got up and wordlessly walked past Skar and into Akran's tent. Skar followed them.

The academic lay on the floor. His skin was white and his lips were blue. There was no blood and no visible signs of the cause of death. The soldiers got to work on taking the wrapped tent to pieces without disturbing its

disinfected surfaces. Akran had good standing in Amarr society, and transporting his body for several days in the desert's sweltering heat wouldn't do anyone's career any good.

"We're leaving him in here until tonight," Skar said. "I will assemble his things and say the rites."

The soldiers nodded and finished making the shroud. Together with Skar they wrapped up Akran's body, sealing him inside the shroud as tightly as possible. The mummification was vital but had to be done right. Loose ends during transport could unravel the entire mission.

Once the dead man's body was taken care of, the two soldiers left the tent. Skar remained, looking around and deciding what to do next. The rites were important, but they needed to be said with a clear mind. Despite his professional demeanour, he wasn't anywhere near that point.

Akran was dead. Akran was dead, and the Book of Emptiness lay inside this room.

Skar considered setting fire to it, but broke off that chain of thought. There was heresy, and there was worse.

He walked over to the marble box, which lay unopened on a makeshift workbench. The corner of scroll still stuck out from one side. Akran had not gotten to cut his piece from it. Skar felt remorse about that, for some reason.

The box lay completely still, of course, but the carvings on it made it appear to be writhing.

Skar wondered about faith, and about tests of faith.

He breathed deep, then reached out, lifted off the top of the box, took hold of the scroll inside with both hands, lifted it out and began to read.

It was written in the old tongue, but made sense in the hyperreal way that dated texts sometimes do, where you understand their meaning without

even being able to comprehend their precise grammar or flow of thought. The content was a litany of truths, at first establishing the base precepts for a foundation of philosophy, then the cornerstones of the same foundation. As Skar read he noticed the sentences getting progressively shorter, the grammar turning not so much cryptic as purely alien; words were placed together that shouldn't have been, but that now far better conveyed a higher meaning. The sentences kept getting shorter as the concepts they described got at one time more abstract and more specific, adding complexity not only to the concepts but the interplay between them. Old ideas would reappear in new forms that affected not only the text surrounding them but chapters that had passed much earlier, including the original concepts themselves in an infinite recursion. The handwriting changed, too; words began to mesh, loops and protruberances changed to mirror versions of themselves, and individual letters were extended, skewed or even drawn only in part. Skar's mind raced to keep up with the flow of information, but it was not even a conscious effort. Once the philosophy inevitably turned to God, Skar began referencing its message to what he remembered from scriptures. Again he found he didn't have to think about it; it happened automatically, in some part of his mind he could not reach. Information came in, unfiltered by sense or synapse, and understanding flowed out in increasing amounts, undeniable and unstoppable. The sentences melded into whole words, multisyllabic and complex, each of them stating truths Skar had barely imagined before. The words became shorter and more ornate, taking on varying dimensions. There would be one that he knew was truth, and another that was the afterlife, and justice, and physicality. They did not so much reveal new truths as remind him of what he'd always known but filtered out. The words became more and more wavy. They looked as if they were writhing on the page. Skar rubbed his eyes but it didn't help. It was almost as if he kept reading even when they were closed. The words had turned into abstract symbols. They had no recognizable lettering. All there was on the page were lines and dashes. But they managed to convey their essence to Skar. He kept reading and the symbols began to dissolve. Their lines separated

and took on their true meanings. All were unfettered of interfering context. Each line had been boiled down to its barest essence. Each line held the undeniable meaning of a concept. There was Fire. There was Cold. He saw Black Mountain. A dark Sea. A Flight. This Freedom. This Truth. An Honesty. A Death.

And as Skar came to the end of the scroll he felt everything inside of him give way, understanding brought to the barest essence at which nothing could stand between you and the truth, and in which your only possible claim to have read and understood the Book of Emptiness was to deny it, to kill it, to go beyond it and into the realm of pure knowledge and being. Skar said out loud, "I have not read the Book of Emptiness," and it was true; he had not, for the Book now represented only yet another obstacle on the path he had been on all his life until reaching this end, this breakthrough, this apostasy; and denying it was as tantamount to ascendancy as refusing the rest of the world's hold on him. He felt himself on the edge of reality itself, pressing against it, pushing through and feeling himself in the other end as a different creation he had been, a second person, as you would feel when you left behind the final words and rose beyond reality as it was, seeing it objectively, not as a god of creation but a god of spirit, an observer through whose thoughts the world is created. You let go of your tenuous grip and move further, completely beyond that reality and to a place it can never follow you, a place of godliness and an infinite melancholy of realization, leaving nothing behind but the symbols and the world that now has become its inverse and is merely the fading embers of an imagined thought, your imagined thought, fading away, approaching the end, and now gone at last.

Welcome Party

"Where the hell *is* everyone, Bouteil?"

"Good question, sir."

"I swear, it's like some people have no respect for ... what is it? What am I looking for here?" He snapped his fingers. "Conundrum. Concord."

"Decorum, sir?"

"There we go. It's infuriating."

"It is certainly a discouraging set of circumstances, sir."

The two men were walking around in the arrivals area of a Customs Office. Upon approach their ship had been automatically towed close to the Office and locked in place beside it, and a boarding ramp had been extended, attached and pressurized, all with the same automation. The sole voice they'd heard had been the recorded message welcoming them to the Office and asking that they present their business to the local authorities at their earliest convenience.

Gister had been the first to enter, holding a datapad in one hand like a trophy. He was a tall, brisk man who carried with him a sense of purpose so potent it seemed barely containable by his personality. He gave the impression that he cheerfully walked his own path and would continue to do so even if it led him through a brick wall.

Bouteil had come in after him, at a respectable distance. He was Gister's personal assistant, tall as well, and dressed in dark clothes that could have been styled in any of the four empires. He gave the impression that he would cheerfully, if rather quietly, have a word with the brick wall beforehand and successfully change its mind about certain minor but important details pertaining to rigidity and cooperation.

No one else had followed; the ship's crew had orders to wait until such point as Gister considered his tour of the facilities concluded, after which he intended to return to his vessel and fly away again.

"Really," Gister said, looking around as he walked. "You would've thought that when it came to officiating our agreement, the old guard would at least stick around to hand things over. Not just leave everything and run."

"It does seem they made rather a hazardous departure," Bouteil ventured.

The two men made it to the exit of the lounge, and entrance into the Customs Office proper.

"Well, times are changing, Bouteil," Gister said. "If people are not willing to change with them, or even, indeed, welcome them with open arms and perhaps-" he gave the empty lounge a disapproving look, and sniffed, "even an open bottle of something, then yes, I suppose it *is* best they say their quiet farewells and damn well be gone before the future moves in."

"A good extended metaphor, sir. Very true to life."

"Yes, thank you, I do rather think so." Gister walked down the hallway that connected egress points to the central arrival hub, followed by Bouteil a few steps after. The hall widened into a larger one with windows on one side, showing the dark stars beyond.

Gister slowed his step, looked out one of the windows and gave a contented sigh. "We made it here, Bouteil. InterBus, that is. And about damn time, too."

"It could indeed be said, sir, that your moment had arrived *in situ*."

"Precisely, Bouteil! One must be situated to move, to rush headlong into new dangers. Just as interBus has done through the years, when we haven't been hampered by capsuleers." He slowed to a full stop, knitted his hands behind his back, and glared out the window, as if taking a stand against the stars. "Honestly, Bouteil. Honestly!"

"Indeed, sir."

"We're formed by the four great empires. We're given a charter, asked to risk our lives transporting people and goods. We brave pirates, natural phenomena, other transport companies, and the endless convolutions of interstellar politics. And then ... nothing. Stagnation. Regression. Capsuleers."

The stars stared back.

"Capsuleers," Gister repeated to himself. "Good gods, how *did* those beasts ever enter the picture?"

"Hard to say, sir."

"We were supposed to be the future, Bouteil. An integral part of inter-empire communication and conveyance. Anything more substantial than a message, than a bundle of electrons dancing in the ether, was to be ours to hold and convey. When I thought of the future, every potential route the known world could take, I could not picture it without us at the forefront. I really couldn't."

"I recall, sir."

"I don't know where it went so wrong." Gister said, looking for a moment positively downcast. He stepped forth and raised his hand to the cold glass. "We did the work that was requested of us. We honored every single political contract we were given, and practically every one of the personal ones we acquired. It took time, but we really were poised to take over the couriering of every single package between every point in outer space."

"So we were, sir. Until the capsuleers came."

"Yes." Gister lowered his hand, so that it hung limply by his side. "Why bother signing five layers of security contracts, and undertaking any number of extra costs for insurance, damages and all the other risks of doing business in dark, empty space, when you can just toss your package in the lap of an agent and have her hail an immortal pilot to transfer it, or put it up for open transfer auction with the very same people? They made a mockery of us, Bouteil. They managed to associate our name, which was

known throughout New Eden, with the perennial image of *has-beens*." The last part came out as a hissed whisper.

Bouteil said nothing. After a moment or two, he cleared his throat.

The noise shook Gister out of his reverie. He took a deep breath, and smiled at the stars. "Well! And here we are now. A wonderful, wonderful deal has been struck, and interBus is finally going to get back on the map." He hefted his datapad and stroked its silver lining, then turned and began walking down the hall again. "I have to say, I do admire how perfectly auto-operated these facilities appear to be. Tell you what, before we head over to Administration, let's take a ramble through their storage areas, see how everything ticks over. I'm dying to know how they're handling all those types of cargo they get sent up from planetside."

"As you wish, sir."

"I do hope there'll at least be someone waiting in Administration. I had a speech prepared and everything."

"Yes, I know, sir."

The two men walked down the corridor.

"So what's the word, Bouteil?"

"Well, sir, storage E was neat and well-cleaned just as the others."

"And everything fully operational?"

"Yes, sir. All machinery is in perfect operation and has clearly been well-maintained. I do have to note, though, that while they have clearly taken meticulous care with their hazardous materials, which have apparently been stored here for some time, there are signs that other, more recent arrivals have been treated rather more haphazardly."

"What, slacking in standards just because there's new management incoming? Surely not!"

"No, sir. Everything was perfectly stowed, and all the machinery in place for maintaining fragile or organic storage material is working just as intended."

Gister furrowed his brow. "So what's the problem, Bouteil?"

"The problem, sir, is that machinery onboard a small establishment such as this can only go so far in balancing the precarious state of certain materials before a human touch becomes a necessity. I'm saying that not too long ago, the people here left their food to rot."

"What a completely odd situation," Gister said. "You'd think we were pirates or somesuch."

"I don't like it one bit, sir. I took the liberty of hailing our vessel, and they have not heard a word from any of the registered staff on this office, no matter where they may now be located. Moreover, I would say that the Customs authorities are purposefully ignoring our own crew's requests to track down any past member of staff."

"Really, Bouteil? Just handed over the keys and ran?"

"It does appear so, sir."

Gister sighed. "I believe I understand the situation."

"Do you, sir?" Bouteil said, in a tone which did not entirely hold complete conviction.

"Come, take a look." Gister walked off to storage area A, the sole one that he himself had inspected.

When they arrived, Gister immediately headed down a metal walkway that was suspended some distance over the storage area itself. He walked for some time, with his assistant easily keeping pace, until at last he slowed, and waved a hand over the entire collection. Cargo blocks, of uniform size, stretched out both ways to some distance.

"Solidification," Gister said. "That's what they ran away from."

"They did, sir?"

"See all those blocks down below? You know what they remind me of?"

"I couldn't fathom, sir."

"Fuel."

"Sir?"

"You know interBus keeps a close eye, or at least I personally keep a close eye, on scientific developments that might pertain in any way, shape or form to interstellar transport. You know what's the most recent technological breakthrough of New Eden?"

Bouteil gave this a moment of thought. "Would that be the recent advances in what they call hybrid weapons technology, whereby the overall improvements in vessel types, actual weapons, and even the ammunition itself are believed to give ships for the Gallente Federation a notable up in the stakes of interstellar dominance?"

"What? No!"

"Ah, then I believe sir may be referring to the new types of weaponry available to capsuleers of all empires, including but not limited to power cores, drone tracking devices, siege and triage modules, and even an improvement on the unobtrusive but important tractor beam."

Gister stood agape, but rallied quickly. "Well, there is that, yes. Though really, Bouteil, I have to say, even for you that's a little short-sighted. All that's been done is the capsuleers are being powered up so they can destroy each other better. Which is *perfect*, I should say, because it only helps take their attention away from the proper business of running the world."

"Would that be the one we are involved in, sir?"

"Well, of course. Haven't you paid any attention to the rise of interBus?"

"Oh, I have, sir. In miniscule detail."

Gister looked back to the crates. "At any rate. *Fuel*. For capsuleer-run starbases, because those grubby little maniacs apparently have to have their hands in every operational part of space. You're familiar with those?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you know the sheer amount of fuel these starbases have to use?"

"Yes, sir."

"Coolant, oxygen, robotic parts, various mechanical pieces," Gister said, entirely undaunted, "even crazy things like isotopes, liquid ozone, and enriched uranium. *Uranium*. Can you imagine? I'd have thought those were the stations where the crew couldn't wait to up and leave."

"I'm sure people are getting impatient everywhere, sir."

Gister wagged a finger in front of Bouteil. "But not anymore. They simplified things, in a beautiful move. Now it's just blocks. That's it. A single source of matter, though of course I'm sure the empires will find some way of putting their stamp on things, and that single source of matter comes in single, perfect blocks. Just like all the ones down here. Stackable, storable, perfectly cubed blocks. Ripe for the right mind to strike a deal over. They couldn't hack it, the customs people. Everyone knew it. CONCORD knew it. That's why we were offered a takeover deal of all these offices outside highsec, with no notice. They knew we'd have the stomach for it, when no one else would."

He gazed over the landscape of squares down below, holding his datapad close, and gave a contented sigh. "Portable blocks. That's the kind of advances in science we like. Not all this tech-two rubbish, kowtowing to the madmen of the skies."

"You think they really are mad, sir?" Bouteil said, in a carefully neutral tone that indicated his own opinion might go either way.

"They're insane, man. I mean, seriously. They have to be. How can you be blown up that often and not just be disjointed from the world?"

"An excellent question, sir. Though not one that I'd venture to openly ask."

"Why not? What do we possibly have to fear from these people?"

"Well, sir, they are wealthy enough to have my entire family tree eliminated from existence, up to and including some very distant cousins that I barely even get a letter from these days."

"It's all about war versus business, keeping the two separate," Gister said, as they walked away from the storage areas. He'd gotten tired of inspecting the station and wanted to make one last pass through the previous administration's offices before launching the official interBus office occupation and getting back to his ship.

"Indeed, sir?"

"You don't sound very convinced," Gister said to him.

"Well, sir," Bouteil ventured, as they passed into an elevator that would take them up to the administrative floors, "it's more that I always believed the two were rather tightly knit together. A military-industrial complex, as it were, with capsuleers at its very crux."

Gister turned to him with eyes wide open. "Good heavens, man! The capsuleers can't even keep their own alliances intact for longer than a fortnight."

The elevator doors opened onto an area with much brighter lighting than the one below, and the two men stepped into an area shorn of iron and bare steel, all replaced with plastics and glass.

Gister continued, "And speaking of alliances, I've heard that those ragtag things will now be allowed to join the empire wars *en masse*. Which is wonderful! That's all they're good for, fighting and war. Best to put their focus on something like that, and not have them getting in the way of people trying to do proper business."

"People like you, sir?"

"Precisely. That's what I mean with war versus business. You let those people have at it, shooting one another, but you keep their activities couched well within the box of war. Meanwhile, business takes care of its

own self, uninterrupted. No capsuleers jumping in to fulfill contracts, courier items around, destroy caravans that happen to carry our cargo, or otherwise bother us with their presence in the world. And the world is catching up."

"Is it, sir?" Bouteil enquired. A control panel nearby attracted his attention, and he took a few steps toward it.

Gister, who was too preoccupied with inner visions to notice, stared skywards and said, "It is! The sad things can't even blow themselves up anymore. You hadn't heard? CONCORD finally had enough of them, and cut short their insurance."

"Only when they intentionally self-destruct, surely," Bouteil said without looking. He reached the panel and, with his back intentionally to his superior, performed a few deft moves involving an illicit signage key he procured from his pocket. The panel came to life, and lists of recent communiques began scrolling in front of him.

"Yes, yes, but the point stands," Gister said, waving the silver datapad in his direction. "The business world is slowly having its fill of capsuleers, and of the endless, unyielding, *messy* wars they always seem to be engaged in. The business world doesn't like that. No sir. We prefer things crisp, clean, and, er..."

"Block-shaped, sir?" Bouteil said absent-mindedly, as he browsed through the communiques.

"Precisely! Even now, Bouteil, you and I, we've travelled deep into what they call a low-security sector of New Eden, all so we can observe a proper ceremonial handover of responsibility. Leaving aside the fact that nobody on the other end had the good grace to uphold their part of the bargain, it *was*, nonetheless, a bargain, with clear lines of conduct. Just think of how the Minmatar are finally sorting themselves out, concluding all that government nonsense at long last." He poked at the datapad, as if illuminating its brilliance. "Organization, you see. Once people get

organized, we have civilization. Business moves on, and interBus finally has a chance to move with it."

He glared at Bouteil, who was standing absolutely immobile by the communications panel. "Are you listening, man?" Gister barked at him.

"I have been, sir, without reprieve," Bouteil said, and straightened up. "And I have discovered some minor niggles in the contract between interBus and CONCORD that I believe deeply concern us at this very moment. If you could just bear with me, sir, and withhold from activating the interBus occupation of this and other stations."

"Bouteil, I will not have you spoil this moment, not when I've waited so long for it. What in the world is going on?"

"Just a second, sir."

"Hesitation. There is *no* room for it in the business world, Bouteil. As my personal assistant, I thought you were aware of that." He held the datapad in front of him. "Well," he continued, "I might as well prove it by example."

Bouteil rose and faced him. "No, sir, don't-"

With swift movement, Gister entered his personal key, activated the datapad, and signed the digital handover document. "There! See? Nothing to fear, everything to gain."

Immediately, every monitor on every work station in the office blinked, then rendered the black and orange interBus logo.

"Transfer complete," Gister said proudly. "It's all ours now."

Bouteil walked swiftly toward his boss. "If you would follow me at once, please, sir."

"Bouteil, I will not have you rush me, either. Explain yourself."

Bouteil barely paused to grasp Gister by the arm with a very strong grip, and as he led the startled man toward the elevator he said, "There was a loophole in the contract and now that you've signed it there are some people coming to take advantage of our situation."

"What? What are you talking about?" Gister demanded.

"I believe business and war may be rather more intertwined than you believed, sir. The upkeep of these stations is our responsibility as of now, but it, and everything else, may still be claimed by force."

"The empires wouldn't dare-"

"It is not the empires I'm concerned with. We are going to take the elevator directly down to the arrivals area, sir, and I've called up two escape pods in case we don't make it all the way to our ship."

Gister was herded into the elevator, where he leaned up against one of its walls and said, "Explain yourself!"

As they whooshed down, Bouteil looked him in the eyes and said, "The capsuleers are coming, sir, and I believe it is not interBus's day at all. In fact, sir, once these elevator doors open, I advise you to run."

Particle Tracks

The Glittering Dream. How banal, the man thought. He stepped out of the transit tube to the top level of perhaps the most famous nightclub in the Federation and walked over to the bar. The place was, by its standards, quiet and the crowd parted easily before him. At the bar, he glanced in the vast crystal mirror behind it and noted his own classically Deteis features with a wry grimace. Ideal, always ideal without pre-conditioning. He used the mirror to scan the bar behind him while he gestured to the barman for a drink. May as well play the game.

The woman wasn't difficult to pick out. She was looking directly at him with a faint smile playing about her lips and laughter in her eyes. He shook his head, picked up his drink and walked over to her table, set at one corner of the vast western picture window. Ignoring the breathtaking view of Caille by night, the man looked down at the smiling woman with a frown.

"I'm a busy man, Yani. I can do without the theatrics."

The Gallente smiled more broadly and gestured at the chair opposite her with an elegant and perfectly manicured hand. "My dear old friend. Always the direct one. Please sit, talk with me a while and perhaps the, ah, 'theatrics' as you call them will make a certain amount of sense."

The man remained standing. "I agreed to this meeting for two reasons. First, you weren't the one who broke contract on me. Second, I'm frankly curious as to what you've been up to since the takeover. That curiosity is what's keeping me here. But it has limits, Yani, and you'd best come to whatever point you want to make quickly."

Yani sighed and held up her hands in a placatory gesture. "Very well but, please, sit," she said. "After all it will be easier on both our necks, no?" The man grunted and sat down in the indicated seat, at right angles to the woman. He took a sip of his drink, raised his eyebrows and looked at Yani with renewed interest.

“Good, yes?”

“Surprisingly good.”

“This is part of what I want to talk to you about. Let me thank you for coming here. I realize you were taking something of a risk...”

“Minimal,” the man interrupted.

“Well, just so, but by coming here you put yourself on my home ground, so to speak, and I appreciate this.”

“Rare is the chance to destroy your enemy away from his home, therefore consider his home your ideal ground.”

The Talos-class battlecruiser banked around the wreckage of its erstwhile target, riding out the shockwave effortlessly as its blasters swivelled back to the center line. The Rokh pilot was still cursing over the local band but he must have understood he hadn't stood a chance. Just thrown in the multi-scenario mix along with the rest. The Talos pilot smiled in his mind. Pride was a notorious failing of his kind. He'd fallen prey to it enough times himself. Kind of pointless to get upset in here, though.

Ah, the controllers were speaking into his mind again. Annoying, like a rasp on the skin. Something artificial to him. Not like the NeoCom. What's that? They wanted him to take on a Drake in close-quarters. He locked down the reflex reaction. This was a job, they were paying and what did it matter in the end? Maybe the Drake would be a suboptimal fitting. Heavy missiles and slaver's breakfast shield-tank perhaps? Even so, he didn't fancy his chances.

These basic one-on-one scenarios annoyed him. OK, they happened, sure. Every variation happened. He guessed that was the point. He was slated to continue testing for a few more days. Real time. That was a lot of scenarios in here. He groaned inwardly, partly at the thought of the grind he'd just

realized lay ahead of him, partly at the sight of the Drake accelerating to meet him. Damn.

“Rare is the chance to destroy your enemy away from his home, therefore consider his home your ideal ground.”

“Well, now. Analects of the Raata Empire?”

“No, the War Commentaries of dos Rouvenor. More appropriate to this setting, surely?” The man suddenly grinned but the smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“Your point is well taken. In fact, it is more relevant than you may realize.”

“Yani, those limits I spoke about...”

“Of course. First, do you require any further guarantees of security?”

“No. Get on with it.”

“As you wish. No doubt you’re aware of the latest arms race between the core empires?”

“I am aware of many arms races, Yani. I make it my business. You know, all this may not take much time out there,” the man gestured vaguely upwards, “but it does take some time, and yours is running out.”

“Understood. I’m speaking of the new battlecruisers. These fast attack, heavy-hitters the empires have decided are the new paradigm in warfare they’re going to try out.”

“Oh, those. Yes, of course I know about them. What of them?”

The woman smiled and unfolded her hands. The Deteis noticed that she was wearing an exquisitely cut and polished black gemstone on her left ring finger. Despite himself he smiled too.

“You’re familiar with the pattern of this particular escalation. The Amarr came up with the *Oracle* – a ship design quite out of character for them –

and the rest either dusted off some old concepts or rushed new designs through. We've seen this kind of thing before."

The man sighed inwardly, but gestured for Yani to continue.

"The interesting aspect of these ships is that, as an attempt to shake up the Emphyrean War, they're all designed around the capsuleer market and as such..."

"...as such the designs will be on that market very soon. Yani, please tell me you did not drag me into this ridiculous proscenium in order to breathlessly offer me advance copies of starship designs that will very shortly be available on the open market. Please tell me you do not take me so lightly that you imagine I do not already have copies of said designs. And please, for the love of the Winds, tell me that you have not completely wasted my time and your own with this nonsense!"

Yani sat back a moment and regarded the Deteis with hooded eyes.

"Evidently, you take *me* lightly, old friend."

The man looked down, took a sip of his drink, marvelled at the taste and feel of it once more, and looked back up at the woman.

"Point. I apologize. Please continue."

"What I was about to say is that as warships intended to upset the balance of the Emphyrean War, each of these designs have been put through a crash program of testing with capsuleer pilots. The problem, of course, is that to test the scenarios adequately requires time. But the empires didn't want to wait – each of them is afraid the others will put these monsters out before themselves. What could they do?"

An inkling of where the woman was going began to creep across the man's mind.

"They tested everything in virtuality."

"Precisely so. More than that, they tested everything in the most sophisticated virtualities available to them."

What Yani had been driving at all along flashed the remainder of the distance across his mind and stood starkly before his apprehension like a blazon.

“A tank. You’re talking about a tank.”

Magnificent, thought the pilot as he took up his position in the ten-strong attack wing of Oracle-class battlecruisers. He’d fallen in love with this new design as soon as he’d seen it in holo. To actually fly one and fly alongside others was wonderful. Well, he caught himself, not *actually*, but near enough. This virtuality was the best he’d ever experienced. He’d heard of the tanks, of course. Everyone with practical knowledge of naval warfare in the Empire had. Combat information virtualities capable of simulating space battles in perfect resolution, at many times the speed of reality. They were used for research, testing and, most importantly, during combat itself. All the major powers used them but he believed the Empire had the edge. How could it be otherwise?

Knowing of the existence of a thing is not the same as experiencing it, though. Much like God, at that, he mused, before clamping down on that possibly heretical thought. He didn’t think his connection with this virtuality laid bare his every thought to Pulpit Command, but after all it was best not to take chances. He brought his concentration back to the attack run. They were closing on the targets quickly, a group of three Typhoons. Dangerous opponents in the right hands, but they surely couldn’t stand up to this much firepower.

Warp tracks. A lot of them. Small signals. Destroyers. The Typhoons had an escort group. The Pulpit channel briefly, and slightly irritatingly, confirmed the attack run was to continue. This was what they wanted to know, then. Presumably the scenario without the destroyers had been run in several variations already with other pilots. He’d been rotated in off a very repetitive sequence of attacks on Tempests at close range. It hadn’t gone well for the artillery-equipped battleships. The pilot mentally shook

himself. He needed to concentrate, treat this as if his implants and clone contract were at stake. The coming fight promised to be quite interesting.

“A tank. You’re talking about a tank.”

“More to the point, I’m talking about several tanks. To be precise, the Carthum-Viziam Military Research Virtuality, the Duvolle Quantum Holography Facility, the Hyasyoda Naval Research Cluster, and Project Dreamwalk. That last one is the rather picturesque name the Minmatar gave to their military-industrial virtuality program.”

“Yes, I know. I also know that any one of the primary tanks operated by those organizations is as secure as any virtuality gets. I couldn’t even speak for my own primary tank being as secure. Hell, the Duvolle facility is an off-the-books mirror of the Black Eagles VCIC. There’s no way anyone’s getting into it.”

“Ordinarily, you’d be right, about them all. As it happens, the Duvolle job was relatively simple and served as the template for the others when it came to ironing out the technical details.”

“You’re joking.”

“I invite you to consider the design history of the Talos.”

“By K’vire!” The man was sitting bolt upright now, his mind racing with the possibilities of what he was hearing. He had a thousand questions but as of now there were only two important ones. “Alright then, Yani, you’ve got my attention. What are you selling and what are you asking for it?”

The woman smiled.

“Let’s start with the price. I recently liquidated some interests in the planetary development field. As you know, I’ve always had an interest in capsuleer infrastructure but generally as a means to an end. It was the same this time and the handover deal with InterBus was very lucrative indeed.”

“InterBus? You mean to say...”

“Just so.”

The Deteis shook his head wonderingly. “That was deftly done, Yani. I had my people look at the conglomerate the SCC brought in to operate the planetary customs offices. They couldn’t find a hint it was anything more than a partnership of chartered investment trusts.”

“In essence, that is all it was. It just so happens that by one means or another the majority of those trusts are controlled by me. I had them play their part in setting up the network...”

“...and meanwhile you started the pressure to end the monopoly through political proxies. No more DED protection in the outer worlds. No more station-grade shielding. Sell the outer network to a ‘neutral party’. Ha! I still can’t believe InterBus took them on.”

“They do not understand the outer regions as you and I do, Muryia. They think they can raise the tariffs and people will respect their neutrality. Alas for them. But not for me.” The woman smiled broadly.

“You must have made an emperor’s ransom out of that deal.” The Deteis took another sip of his drink. “So you don’t want money. You want a favor.”

The dreamwalker resented the intrusion of these others in the Dream. They had come with the Tornado and he resented the swift-sailing wing of a ship for it. Perhaps unreasonably. But he resented the others. They did not even feel the sting of dreamshock when they failed. How could they possibly try their utmost without it? Some of the dreamwalkers said these others felt something akin to it. Something of their own making. He doubted it. They were not dreamwalkers even if they walked in the Dream.

Yet they did walk in the Dream and they could be the cause of pain if he did not take care. His charge today was a Zealot. Like the others in the Slaver’s Fang dreamclan, he specialized in the ships and weapons of the Great Enemy. In the Dream, he knew nothing else but his duty to fly the

golden ships to the best of his ability. That and the dreamshock should he fail in that duty. His fellows were in a variety of Amarr ships, in close assault formation. Some Crusaders, a few Retributions and several Zealots. Off in the distance, the others. In their Tornados. They seemed to sail lazily through space, like birds from a dimly remembered other time.

The Shamans were speaking. The pattern for the battle was laid out in their chanting and it signalled a charge on the foe. The Crusaders seemed to skip ahead, angling to avoid the direct line of approach. The rest of the ships followed, taking wider angles than their smaller and much faster brothers. The enemy were approaching, which meant they were using autocannons, but they would try to turn this into a tail-chase. The Crusaders reported making scramble on several targets, shutting down their microwarpdrives. Several reported being counter-scrambled. Interesting. A few also reported webbing and tracking-disruption. The dreamwalker mentally smiled. Foolishness. The mixed electronic warfare across the enemy fleet was a good idea in principle, but to reveal the hand by using it all on the Crusaders indicated panic. The others would not win this fight.

“You want a favor.”

“Correct.” The Gallente woman played with her black gemstone ring. “You know me well enough to understand that I want back that which was always mine. That which I built. And I will have it back. The Snake wanted his takeover to be legal, in his twisted way, so legal it was and the stock is still traded.”

“Stock you’ve been quietly acquiring, I presume.”

“Yes, I now control sufficient stock to promote my own proxies to the board. Crucially, the corporation still controls a large reserve of stock that can be issued by qualified majority decision of the board.”

“You can’t have bought enough stock to control that kind of majority... so, you’re going to buy Sarpati’s nominees out from under him?”

“Precisely so. Our old foe has one blind spot. Even as corrupt as he is – so corrupt indeed that he would gladly pay for the pleasure of selling himself – his pride prevents him from realizing that a bought man, even a man he has purchased body and soul, can generally be bought more easily the second time.”

“And you have the ready cash to do it. I think I see what the favor is. Even with you two vying for control on the market, all that gives either of you is legal recognition of sovereign ownership at the Assembly. You need enforcement and that’s where I come in, yes?”

“Yes. I realize that you are heavily engaged with various ongoing contracts but I am not asking for space superiority coverage.”

“Just as well,” muttered the Deteis.

“What I need is the wherewithal to board and seize the stations. Once I have them, my possession combined with legal title and the newly-coded DED-grade station shields that will come with it, will check the Snake. I would naturally value your services under an ongoing station defense and patrol contract.”

“I bet you would. Well, that’s going to depend on what you’ve got to offer. They’ve shut you out of those tanks by now, I take it?”

“Of course. It was to be expected that any intrusion into facilities of that kind would have a relatively brief half-life.” The Gallente woman shrugged slightly. “Fortunately our bandwidth was wide enough to extract a considerable volume of tank telemetry in each case.”

“Incredible,” whispered the man, half to himself. He finished his drink, the marvellous sensation cutting through his thoughts again, then looked up sharply at the woman. “That’s what all this is about,” the man gestured around him and lifted his empty glass.

As he adjusted to the virtuality, he realized that the base specs of the Naga-class had changed since his last session in the tank. OK, they’d fitted

rails to it in this scenario but that wasn't exactly a change. Ah, he chuckled, so they'd given up on that idea. Yeah, he'd not been entirely impressed by the suicidal nature of the Naga as giant torpedo bomber himself. He called up the daily brief. "Unacceptable ratio of losses to tonnage enemy matériel destroyed." Well that was one way of putting it. Megacorp technocrat-speak could make fedo crap sound like a mildly annoying stain on the deckplate.

So, today was a basic gunnery run. Test out the new specs with railguns. Opforce was a bunch of different targets. As much variety as possible. He grinned, yeah well, he'd seen plenty of FDU fleets as ragtag as this in his time. The variety was a bit artificial, a bit too much in the one-of-everything vein but it wasn't entirely unrealistic. Squadron strength for the Nagas and decent range with the provided setup. This sort of thing he'd do "drive by" strikes usually, but this scenario was staying basic. No warping. Control test. Free initiative scenarios when this was over. According to the brief.

Sooner this was over with the better. The squadron lined up at distance and a primary was called, nice fat Dominix. He wondered why they bothered with using capsuleers for this calibration stuff. Eliminating variables probably. Oh, look at that, Dominix down. The Opforce were trying to make transversal but the bigger stuff wouldn't be able to do much. Some of that stuff could be dangerous if they got it together though. Apoc, Rokh, Tempest, Mega, even the Raven. Squad commander must have taken longer adjusting than he had. This target list was terrible. He thought about saying something, then noticed the long-range stuff was yellow-boxing him. Check that, they were red-boxing and his shields were gone. Mentally he grappled with his systems, even as he hoped they'd picked the squad commander as secondary.

"That's what all this is about," the man gestured around him and lifted his empty glass.

“Yes. Long as we’ve known one another, I did not think you would believe me unless you experienced our capabilities for yourself, if only in a small way. The drink is good, is it not?”

“You’d have been fucked if I hadn’t been in the mood for one, Yani.”

“In war, risk. So too in life.”

“Hmph, that’s the Analects. A pretty trite one too, if you ask me.”

“Yes, well, sometimes that’s truth for you. As you know, it is important with the higher-level experiences that immanence be on the terms of the subject. Otherwise, well, it really never works properly. These things can’t be forced.”

“Enough of the metapsychology, Yani. That crap always gave me a headache in the Academy and it’s no better coming from you. Worse, if anything. It’s time to deal. Straight and clear, what are you offering me?”

“What am I offering you? Well that’s simple enough. I’m offering you this.”

“What the...”

Heavy assaults pounding his back and belly, immune system failing, nanobots going inert for lack of sugar, what was that light?

Adrenaline rush as he spat light from his fingers, swatting stinging bugs, something burning in his vision, heart pumping as energy is injected.

Victory ululating in his mind, the Dream unfolding, birds falling out of the sky, his legs burning from the microwarpdrive.

Gods-damn that moron to the hells and back, pressure of light and electromagnetism on his skin, the egg sitting there, comrades taking a vengeance for him with spears of plasma.

“What the...”

The woman was suddenly by his side, steadying him in his seat. He looked up at her, vision unfocused then snapping back to clarity. He drew in a deep breath and restrained a sudden urge to snap the Gallente's elegant neck.

"My apologies, old friend, but as you have repeatedly reminded me, time is a valuable commodity and what I could have attempted to explain at tedious length seemed easier to simply show you."

"What happened to not forcing it?"

"For the purposes of this demonstration, the raw scope of what I am offering, rather than a synaesthetic accuracy that would have required several baseline hours of pre-conditioning to appreciate, seemed more convenient. Once again, I apologize."

"Do I have this right? You have personality-level telemetry of capsuleers operating in multiple scenarios from no less than four of the most advanced combat information tanks in the cluster?"

The woman smiled. "Yes, that is precisely what I have."

The man grinned back, and this time his eyes were dancing. "OK, Yani, when do you want to meet for real? I think I can make some room in my calendar." He paused and added, "Even if you won't look as good."

Breathing Space

Chief Secretary Ramini Vos sat in silent contemplation before the communications panel. Thousands of lights and buttons sparkled before him as they tracked a complex flow of information; the conversations of a hundred people all tracked in a digital language he understood more intuitively than his native Vherokior.

The Arek'Jaalan project had become a 24-hour operation in recent months. Initially, only a handful of capsuleers used the Eifyr & Co. networks that he oversaw, maybe a dozen in the first few weeks. Nowadays, the capsuleer channel hovered around fifty at all times, peaking to double that during the big meetings. Information requests from the public had increased even more aggressively, with Eifyr staff - lead in part by Vos - now handling upwards of 1,000 unique inquiries a day.

The most common requests were for the basics; what the Arek'Jaalan project was about, and what its goals were. These were easily enough explained by the project mission statement, a document Vos had relied heavily upon as the requests began to pile up.

The Arek'Jaalan Project was founded to act as a cross-organizational research body and common ground for capsuleers to share information about the Sleeper civilization and related matters. Our goals are to research these matters, document our findings, and then educate the wider capsuleer populace on our work.

Of course, while those few words were enough to sate the fleeting and shallow hunger of small time reporters (who comprised the vast majority of the requests Vos handled) they left out a few important details, to his mind. Unsavory things, perhaps, but as true as anything in the document he'd sent out over 800 times already this week.

The whole "apolitical" approach was the most obvious omission, Vos mused. Arek'Jaalan had struggled to keep the politics out of the science so far. Most likely, the intent behind the mission statement was to help this

flagging cause, by defining the project in purely scientific terms. Not a bad strategy, Vos reasoned, and yet one that left questions open about Arek'Jaalan's political stance. Answering them required a little more work on his part.

Amongst his many responsibilities, the Chief Secretary had the unenviable job of being the primary contact for countless backwater planetary governments, both local and foreign. With little in the way of success, Vos would have to explain to Amarr officials how a capsuleer project backed by Minmatar Republic assets was "entirely apolitical in nature". In another meeting, often scheduled only hours apart, Vos would be assuring local Minmatar governors that despite Arek'Jaalan's refusal to make a political stand, no Republic interests (or citizens) would come to any harm through their work. After many long months of futile diplomacy, Vos had become increasingly bored with the politics of the empires and their unending feuds.

The Chief Secretary was at hour fifteen of a day riddled with such meetings, and as his eyes began to close, and his mind began to drift, he would imagine that all these tiny points of light in the comms panel before him were actually stars in a universe that he alone was tasked to rule over. In these slow moments, he would drift away from Eram, and instead, oversee this universe from an uncomfortable metal chair, positioned near the one window looking out of his cramped and overheated office.

On this evening, Vos was having a particularly vivid dream in which he, as master of the universe, was contending with a troublesome supernova that threatened to dwarf a little cluster of stars he'd grown quite fond of, having spent considerable time already optimizing their orbits. After many unsuccessful attempts at draining the nuclear fuel, he'd been toying with the idea of a well-placed black hole.

The light from the dying star continued to grow, however, and as the tension of his fantasies began to mount, Vos (as he would so often do) retreated back the other way towards reality, just in time to notice a little supernova of his own.

A rapidly growing light on the comms panel told him that someone was taking over an entire network hub, which meant either they were about to host a very large meeting, or wanted a whole section of the network to themselves. If that wasn't enough to irk Vos, a man who had flown off the handle for much less, these same people were requesting the "immediate presence" of his superior, Hilen Tukoss, the leader of this little research movement Vos had become swept up in.

The Chief Secretary took a moment to rub what he imagined was an exhausted expression from his face, and opened a private channel to the man in question. By the officially posted schedule, Tukoss had only been asleep for around three hours. This was easily the worst part of the job.

Tukoss answered the call promptly – perhaps instinctively, Vos suspected, as the good leader's head was inclined horizontally across what looked like some very comfortable pillows, and his eyes were firmly shut.

Vos hesitated. "Are you with us, Tukoss?" he offered, after careful consideration.

"What could you possibly want?" came a voice from the other side. Tukoss seemed to be sinking deeper into the pillows with every breath.

"Someone's taken the main comms hub all to themselves. Obviously it's one of those people you gave a clearance key to," Vos started, expertly (in his mind) laying the blame for this disruption at Tukoss's feet.

"It's just two people in there right now. They've placed a lockout on the whole hub, scheduled a meeting in ten minutes, and made strong requests for your attendance."

Against his better judgment, Vos continued.

"I really must protest the audacity, sir, of these people coming on to our own networks and making demands like this. Eifyr is not a round-the-clock information service, nor are we a conference call center. This is really getting quite far from how we normally do things."

Taking a moment to gather his thoughts on some new communications protocols, Vos came to realize that Tukoss was now staring at him with a haggard gaze that said “not now.” Putting aside ideas about meeting request forms, he instead set his mind to wondering how long Tukoss had been staring.

“Thank you, Chief Secretary. Give me five minutes.”

Vos nodded a silent reply.

“And try to give the capsuleers a break, too.”

“Oh, I doubt these ones are capsuleers, Tukoss,” he replied, expertly (in his mind) dodging the issue of granting the capsuleers any kind of lenience. “They had capsuleer IDs, of course, but not freelance. Their subnet is masked, which means they’re most likely operating outside corporate bounds by being here.”

Tukoss sprang upright in his bed and leaned into the screen.

“Why didn’t you tell me this immediately?”

Vos smiled. “Well, with the company we keep these days, how am I supposed to tell one visitor from another? Perhaps if we instituted those minor tweaks I proposed last week, we could better—“

“Set that hub to limited access, and put the archivists and moderators on standby. I have a feeling our guests will want them out of the way.”

Vos stifled a sigh, and with much greater effort, thoughts of all-consuming black holes.

“As you wish, sir.”

“Greetings Mister Tukoss. Thank you for coming at such short notice.”

“No problem, although my Chief Secretary wants your head, of course.”

“Well, you can tell Mister Vos that he did his job superbly, and just as expected. We weren’t kept waiting long.”

“We?”

“Yes, of course. Let me introduce my little team, as best I can anyhow. Our anonymity is still required, I’m afraid.”

“I understand.”

“Good. You are speaking with a Senator of the Federation. Also present in this channel is the operative who acquired the information I’m about to share with you, but I will do the speaking for both of us.”

“I see.”

“In addition to the two of us, later on I would like to invite a member of the Krusual tribe to this channel. He will be asked to validate the data we provide, so that you can be sure it is genuine, and we are who we claim to be.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“The Krusual is associated with your project; your Chief Electronics Officer, in fact. Our assumption, which we’d like assurance on, is that if he deems the data trustworthy, then you will share his judgment.”

“Yes. Very well.”

“Good. Let’s talk about things in simple terms then, before we start the transfer. Firstly, we’ve come to understand that sometime in the future you want to build research libraries in deadspace pockets. These will be used to house research undertaken by your capsuleer team. Your plan will be to start in with the Minmatar Republic in Eram, and branch out to the other empires' space from there. Is this information correct?”

“It’s more or less correct, and I don’t really mind that you have this information. It’s no great secret. I’d ask, though, that you don’t go spreading it around before we’re ready. This is a sensitive issue and the timing is important.”

“We couldn’t agree more, Mister Tukoss. We came to offer some help with that, as a matter of fact. We have news that might inspire you to act sooner, rather than later.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“We have also acquired information on some of the research projects being undertaken by the capsuleers in your project. I am sure you realize that some of it will draw the kind of attention you truly do not want, and we are not talking about mere bad press here, I hope you realize. We’re talking about powerful enemies capable of invisibly undermining your every effort.”

“You mentioned offering some help?”

“Yes, well, the final piece of information we acquired is that sometime soon, the empires will be making a great deal more ripples in the pond than your comparatively tiny group could ever hope to in its current state. This is an opportunity to make some bold movements on your outpost building projects, without drawing the sort of attention I mentioned earlier.”

“What sort of ripples are they going to make?”

“I hope we can trust you with these specifics, Mister Tukoss. This information was so well protected that for all we know there are less than ten people in the entire cluster who are aware of it. We’re telling you in the hopes that you’ll act on it in a specific way, and not in any other form. One could get obscenely rich from this information, for example.”

“With respect, Senator, I’d trade my life earnings to know the things you do.”

“Flattery and deflection is it? I suppose this is your way of agreeing?”

“I’m more interested in gaining knowledge than profiting from it. I would think that was clear by now?”

“Yes, that is certainly the reputation you cultivate. Anyhow, the specifics are this: Acting under the pretense of an arms race, the empires are about to release a number of new Tech II modules and capsule upgrades. The technology behind these developments is Sleeper in origin, and most of it

was developed from material identified during the Vitrauze Agreement as practically worthless. If the origin of these modules and improvements were ever to become public knowledge, this agreement would need to be rewritten, something everyone would rather avoid.”

“Most interesting, Senator. Thank you for sharing this. I think I see how we can factor in here, too. Perhaps though, before going any further, now would be a good time to exchange the data and verify everything. If you can do that, and everything checks out, then I can promise you we will start pushing on the first site immediately.”

“Excellent. We’ll pass it along shortly.”

“Was there anything else you can tell me, then? I had some more questions.”

“We’re sure you do, Mister Tukoss. Sadly, we’ve already offered as much as we can, and risked a great deal in doing so.”

“I’ll draw my own conclusions, then.”

“We expect you will. Best of luck with the project, Mister Tukoss, and do keep in mind that once this matter is settled, you’ll likely be drawing your own share of attention too. We suggest you prepare well in the meantime.”

Enemies Closer

*New Hueromont, Gallente Prime
Luminaire System, Essence Region
November 12, YC113*

It was one of those nights where even the stars seemed to shiver from the cold. Pretty much exactly what you'd expect from an autumn evening on the frigid tip of the northern continent. How the hell such a culturally important city had grown in the most inhospitable locale on this otherwise agreeable planet, he had no idea. Probably a disorganized and ramshackle affair. Probably no central authority. *Organic*, they'd no doubt call it.

With thoughts like these flashing their way across his mind, and with the cold wind streaming through his nostrils and burning his lungs, he checked his equipment again, then ran through potential enemy positions. Familiar processes, but this time laced with an acid tinge of excitement at the sheer *gravity* of what he was about to do. Usually he preferred not to consider the implications of his work; when all is said and done, the tool need not consider its function. This time, however, was a little different.

*Piirkino Deep Core Mining Colony District 6B, Eskunen III
Eskunen System, The Forge Region
November 12, YC113*

Special Agent Piers Lascaux was sitting there in mock wide-eyed surprise. "You gotta be kidding me," he said. His tone was considerably more laid back than his theatrical expression would indicate, creating a mismatch that made him as hard to peg as always.

Even though it had been several long years since their last meeting, his companion, Special Agent Haromi Itakainen, felt an old irritation beginning to creep back. He cleared his throat.

"I'm quite serious," he said. "A nearly complete retrofit. Brand new tech, but it's just being slapped on there. Paramilitary wing's scrambling to adjust, Intelligence is reeling."

"And nobody says anything?"

"Well, they want to, but they don't. Everybody that high up is a career man, and they're too afraid of the Director to question his motives. Publicly, at least. I'm the only one who's spoken up, and it's not exactly earned me any friends among the brass. Everybody else has had the good sense to restrict their talk to the hallways."

"I'll be damned. I thought you guys were so regimented about these things," said Agent Lascaux and laughed. "I thought we were the ones who run around back-biting and making alliances." Another laugh, a little louder this time.

Agent Itakainen gave an uneasy smile, stirred briefly in his seat, flicked some ash off his cigarette. "Human nature is what it is," he said. "And I guess 'afraid' may be a strong word to use. I mean, our guys believe in what he's saying, for the most part. The methodology just becomes a problem sometimes."

"Bet you're wishing you never got involved with the House of Records at all," said Lascaux, grinning.

Itakainen smiled humorlessly. "These are the only guys I'd ever run with. You know that. If I wasn't with the Keepers I might just as well be scrubbing decks. If you're gonna do heinous shit anyway, might as well know why you're doing it."

"Not gonna disagree on that one. Probably the same thing that made me jump on the Black Eagles as soon as they formed," said Agent Lascaux. "'The Record Keepers.' Funny name. I like ours better than yours." He grinned. Itakainen didn't.

For a while the two men sat silently in their secluded booth, as the patrons of this small bar on this small world, seeing that it was closing time, began

filtering out into the tropical night-time heat one by one, their grimy expressionless faces betraying scant understanding of the world around them.

Lascaux made a brief scan of the surroundings, then dusted a bit of imaginary dirt off his carefully nondescript jacket. "So how are your parents doing?" he asked, leaning in a tad hesitantly.

"Been better, but been worse as well," said Itakainen. He paused, fixed the other man with a brief but firm glare, then said, "They talk about you all the time."

"Who doesn't?"

"Shut up, Piers."

"What?" Lascaux spread his arms in a mock gesture of resignation.

"You said you wanted to meet to talk about important things. You don't have to pretend to be interested in the family you abandoned."

"Hey, I didn't abandon anyone. When duty calls it calls, cultural program or not... "

"Right. Duty." The other man snorted. "Tell that to my sister and her son."

A swift and dark silence descended on the table, amplified by the final patron's slamming of the door behind him. The barman flipped the lock switch. A resounding clack signaled the establishment's lockdown from the outside world. The lights came up. The two men, by now the only people left in the place, stared at each other across a dozen empty bottles and several years' worth of something else. Quietly the barman disappeared into a back room.

"Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about, actually," said Agent Lascaux.

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Just sitting there breathing. Made it all this way. Almost there, just a little bit longer to wait. Breathe, breathe, keep it going. He peered over the ledge at the gigantic monolith of a building and all the security, wondering how in hell it was possible he could have made it this far already. Even with all his experience – all those dozens of people dead and gone by his hand – nothing had ever been on this scale. Settle down, breathe. No sign of the target yet. Check the scope for the ninth time, embrace the cold, pray to no-one about nothing. Breathe.

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Eskunen System, The Forge Region
November 12, YC113

"You said you had some intel for me," said Itakainen.

"I do," said Lascaux. "I have information on Blaque's latest dealings, as well as some connections I'm sure you didn't know he had. Before I spill it, though, I need to be guaranteed safe passage off this planet and back to Jita. I want to defect."

Itakainen raised his eyebrows but remained otherwise impassive. "Oh?" he said.

"Yeah. I've been thinking a lot, these past few months. It's all changing back in the Fed. Things aren't what they used to be. I'm sick to death of all this."

Itakainen pursed his lips, his gaze unwavering. "Supposing you are, and supposing we could arrange something."

"I need your word."

There was a long silence, during which Itakainen fixed Lascaux with a hard glare. "All right, you have it," he said presently.

"Good," said Lascaux. He looked down at the table, then back up at Itakainen, then began speaking. "So Blaque has a directive that he wants to push. He wants to allow capsuleer alliances into the auxiliary forces, and he can do it without much help at all because he's got some kind of leverage within CONCORD," he said.

Itakainen's eyes widened. "How the hell does he have leverage within CONCORD?" he said. "I thought Blaque and Director Angireh hated each other."

"Don't ask me," said Lascaux. "I can't even begin to imagine how the guy operates."

Itakainen shook his head. "Okay, let me get this straight. You're saying Blaque wants to allow capsuleer alliances to enlist wholesale in our auxiliary forces?"

"Well, not just any alliance. Be pretty strict entry criteria as I understand it. Every corp vetted for loyalty, devotion to the cause, that kind of thing."

"But it would still mean that capsule pilots could join up now by the thousands instead of by the dozens."

"Theoretically, yeah."

"Be able to coordinate much better than before. Have more central oversight."

"That's about the long and short of it."

Itakainen buried his head in his hands. "I just... it just goes against..."

"I know, man."

"I mean, the empires are already at a disadvantage. Why would we want to let the eggheads even further into our backyard?"

Lascaux spread his hands again, but this time the expression on his face was anything but flippant.

"Apparently," he said, "the idea is to learn something from the alliance leaders about how they conduct their warfare. Spy on them from the inside. Keep your friends..."

"Right, right," said Itakainen. "Because they've been doing their cutting edge thing on the fringes for the longest time."

"Right."

"Because they're just fighting for conquest and they don't have to think about running actual societies."

"Something like that."

"Because they have the money and therefore this whole god damn arms race revolves around them, and to hell with all the cultural heritage that we're actually fighting for here."

At this Lascaux leaned back in his seat and regarded his companion coolly for a while. He picked up an empty glass, looked towards the bar, saw no bartender, then looked back at Itakainen and put the glass back down on the table, hard. "Cultural heritage is a contentious term, my friend," he said.

The two men stared at each other, and for the span of a few seconds no sound could be heard beside the jittery buzz of the establishment's fluorescent after-hours lighting.

"Leaving that aside for now," said Itakainen finally, in measured tones, "we both know that the status quo is being threatened pretty deeply here. Are you positively certain Blaque has CONCORD's backing here?"

"Yup. He's ironclad on this. I have it on good authority."

"Great. Can't do proper espionage, so just find the biggest and baddest friends you can, and do muscle instead."

"Muscle and political muscle aren't the same thing."

"You know what I mean," said Itakainen.

"And you know what I mean," replied Lascaux.

Itakainen dropped his head. He nodded slowly, nostrils flaring. "So this thing is actually happening?"

"Fraid so."

"How can we be sure?"

Special Agent Piers Lascaux looked down, then back up, then away, then ran a hand through his hair and sighed deeply.

"Because I wouldn't have come here otherwise," he said, and as he did so he fixed his eyes on the table and did not look up again. "I'm done with all this. Please believe me, here. I'm done with this. The methods these guys use have been eating away at my conscience almost since I started, and now that they're starting to truck with the eggheads, and have these deep deep CONCORD connections... man, I just don't know. My gut is telling me to get out of all this." He briefly looked up, met the other man's eye. "I want to start a new life, Rom. A peaceful one. An honest one." Looking back down at the table, he bit his lower lip. "I want to set things right again with Laina. Make up for what I did."

For a good deal of time, Special Agent Haromi Itakainen regarded his old friend. His gaze was purposeful at first, but as the lights continued to buzz and crackle, his gaze softened, then grew distant.

"Leave me alone for a little bit, would you?" he said then, not unkindly. "I have a couple of calls to make."

Lascaux looked at him with a small smile in his eyes, a smile that briefly spread to the corners of his mouth. He bit the knuckle of his index finger. "Just about to excuse myself anyway," he replied, then got up and vanished into an adjoining room.

*New Hueromont, Gallente Prime
Luminaire System, Essence Region
November 12, YC113*

Breathe. Time window opening now. Breathe. Hybrid chamber stable, points secured, scope clean. Set up. Breathe. Here he comes. Don't think about it too much. Target acquired. Don't think about it. Here we go.

Piirkino Deep Core Mining Colony District 6B, Eskunen III
Eskunen System, The Forge Region
November 12, YC113

"It's true, sir," said Itakainen into his FTL link, to a disbelieving ear five star systems away. "Our CONCORD source has confirmed it, and she says it does in fact look like it was Blaque who pushed it through, but she has no leads on who exactly these CONCORD contacts of his are."

There was a leaden silence on the other end. Then, "How did this stay hidden from us so long?"

"I guess we were looking in the wrong places, sir," said Itakainen.

"A little more outward attention and a little less inward attention may be called for when conducting interstellar espionage, don't you think? I guess some of us failed to do our jobs, Agent." The words were drawn out, purposeful, laced with menace.

Itakainen rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Sir, we have to abort. We can't go through with this if we don't know who his contacts are, let alone what his intentions are with the capsule contingent."

"Special Agent Itakainen," came the voice, "that's the first thing you've been right about for quite a while. Now, what are you going to do about your source? He wants to defect, I hear?"

The bathroom door opened. Agent Lascaux came out.

"I have to go," said Itakainen, looking his friend in the eye. He cut the FTL link. To a small control room orbiting the shoulder of New Caldari, he sent two words: "ABORT IMMEDIATELY."

"We should get out of here," he said.

Piers Lascaux nodded and smiled.

*New Hueromont, Gallente Prime
Luminaire System, Essence Region
November 12, YC113*

He thumbed the safety, drew in the final breath and held it. Just as he did so, comms squawked.

"Corporal, stand down. Orders from Central. Primary is no go, repeat, primary is no go."

His finger lifted away from the guard as his breath, so carefully held, involuntarily escaped from his lungs. The cold stung his face. "Copy," he said. His thumb again reached for the selector lever, and as he flicked it back to the SAFE position he watched his target through the scope. Mentas Blaque, Director of the Federal Intelligence Office, head of the Black Eagles, all hollow eyes and pock-marked skin, now shaking hands, now walking purposefully toward his vehicle, now getting in and being driven away, now a blip on the crisp dark horizon.

"Congratulations, Director," said the Corporal under his breath. He hoisted his weapon back over his shoulder, and as he turned around and slid down the ledge to sit on the frigid rooftop, he felt a dizzying rush of relief along with his disappointment. He gingerly touched the antimatter containment chamber in his pocket. A gentle snow began falling. Mentas Blaque was not the only man who had survived this night.

With the cold wind streaming through his nostrils and burning his lungs, he began to dismantle his weapon.

*Piirkino Deep Core Mining Colony District 6B, Eskunen III
Eskunen System, The Forge Region
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The tropical air outside the shanty bar was thick with the fumes of broken promise and human decay. The shiftless inhabitants of this muddy waste had long since repaired to their scattershot makeshift hovels, leaving their window-lanterns to carve timid columns through the humid dark. From just beyond the edge of vision on all sides, countless unseen creatures vied against each other in a jarring congress of chirps and croaks. The two men began walking.

"Look, Rom," said Piers. "I know I wasn't always the greatest to Laina."

"I know that as well as you do, Piers," said Haromi. He was looking down at the ground a few feet in front of him as he walked, his eyes unwavering.

"My father was dying and I needed to go see him," said Piers. "And then the service just... it just sucked me in. It was just the spirit of the times, brother. Crielere was starting to go sour, the FIO needed new people and I scored like nobody's business on the aptitude tests. It was no intention of mine to..."

While he had said these last words another small sound had made itself known in the night, barely audible over Piers's chatter and the constant murmur of the encroaching jungle. It was the sound of Haromi's stun baton extending with a practiced flick of the wrist, and before Piers could say another word the other man had pivoted towards him, whipping the baton into his teeth with a sickening crack.

Piers collapsed backwards into the mud with a thick splash, his face and chin craning involuntarily toward the emptiness of the indifferent sky as the shock volts coursed through him. An indistinct gurgle escaped the jagged expanse of his broken mouth. "Hraaaaaarrdd..."

"Better not try to talk," said Haromi. "Wouldn't want to bite off that silvery tongue of yours." He retracted his baton and holstered it. Then he sat on his haunches in the festering mud, face inches away from the shivering mess of blood and tears that moments before had been Special Agent Piers Lascaux of the Federal Intelligence Office, Black Eagles Division.

"Do you know how they feel back home about a single woman who tries to raise a child on her own, refuses to give it up to a creche?" Haromi said in a conversational tone, pulling off one of his leather gloves. The hand underneath was not a hand but a chromed monstrosity, a mechanical approximation of a fist. "A child that also happens to be a Gallente halfbreed?" he continued, regarding his robotic hand pensively as it opened and closed. A snuffling burble escaped the man staring up at him, accompanied with a dumb look of terror and disbelief.

"Do you know what they do to people like her when war breaks out? When she lives in a border zone filled with xenophobes and spies and propagandists?" His voice was a laser-edged dagger held by a shaking hand; tears began to form at the corners of his eyes. "They do things a lot worse than this."

Swiftly he clamped his mechanical hand around Piers's mouth and nose. Piers's eyes went wide.

"The man you sold out tonight is alive because of you, you traitorous pile of garbage," said Haromi. "But others haven't been so lucky."

For the next several seconds the cold metal fingers, with strength as inexorable as the ticking of time itself, journeyed toward the wire-mesh palm, and a penetrating scream slashed into the sultry evening.

Afterwards, when the blood had been cleaned off, the glove had come back on and the window-lights in the vicinity had been judiciously snuffed, a small weak moan came from the crawling remains of Piers Lascaux.

The Caldari genuflected again, bowed his head. "What is it?" he said quietly.

"Uhh.... uhb ss... sssuuhrr...." was the sob-choked reply.

Haromi Itakainen stood up, closed his eyes and let a deep sigh escape him. With his metal hand cool against his burning face he wiped the tears away, while with his other hand he reached for his sidearm.

"Tell that to my sister and her son, Piers."

For a few brief seconds the sounds of the jungle were interrupted by a sharp crack which percolated into the night, bouncing off the trees and buildings before merging with the quiet misery of the world. Gradually the animals of the jungle went back to their chattering, and all was as before.

Pax Ammaria

Let me tell you a story about a book.

In the final weeks of each year, the personal press of the Court Chamberlain is entirely devoted to turning out a new printing of the Pax Amarria, Heideran VII's seminal treatise on all things Amarrian, and nobody notices.

Well, almost nobody. It is said that, among the teeming billions on Amarr Prime, you can find an expert on any subject known to God - and yet, within the uncounted trillions of New Eden, there will exist innumerable specialists who regard each such expert as an insufferable generalist.

So it is, therefore, unsurprising that GalNet hosts several distinct, distributed (and – naturally – ideologically opposed) communities whose sole interest is the print history of Heideran's Book. The Theology Council will declaim that Heideran's word is inviolable and unchanging, but the Paxistas (as they are derisively labelled by the wider print-history metacommunity) will quietly but insistently explain, in quite excruciating detail, the history of minor edits and corrections that "their" book has endured over the years.

That the Paxistas are permitted to exist, both within and without the Empire, speaks to the Ministry of Internal Order's tolerance, mercy, and fondness for carefully-monitored honeypot traps. Besides, a heresy so minor hardly warrants the kind of "comprehensive" solution that the Ministry overwhelmingly favors; so long as the heresy *remains* minor, the Paxistas can sleep easily.

This explains why, among the otherwise-meticulous records of the Paxista communities, you will not find any mention of the 62nd printing.

One of the unifying characteristics of Paxistas is that their deep love of their subject is trumped, ultimately, by their survival instincts. Those benighted

few whose passion outstrips reason are known as Paxists, and are spoken of only in whispers by all right-thinking Paxistas.

It is to the Paxists that one must turn, to learn of the 62nd printing, for they are the outcasts who still keep such records, and is from one of their number that I learned the truth behind that fateful book.

(Of course, many rumors about the "62Pax" circulate among those elements of society who take a perverse interest in the forbidden, both within and without the Empire. You may have heard a few yourself, passed on in hushed tones? I can tell you now that, while most contain some kernel of truth, the Ministry has done an excellent job of "curtailing" the more accurate ones, in their own particular style. Listen not to such lies.)

You see, the 62nd printing contained a mistake. Just one single error, which while rare was not unheard of in the history of the Pax's quiet edits. Unfortunately for the poor scribe who made it (along with his editor, the editor-in-chief, the E-i-C's supervisor, numerous other tangentially-involved officials, and their respective families), the error in question was not discovered until the print run had already been completed.

While many of those involved protested their innocence and/or begged for mercy, the issue was somewhat colored the fact that the error in question was a misspelling of "Amarria".

On the front cover.

Once the Chamberlain's bureaucracy had exhausted their customary measures, and the screaming that echoed through the deepest levels of the Chamberlain's Residence had finally ceased, they found themselves at an impasse. Such a mistake had not been made in the press in living memory, and none of the functionaries knew what to do next. So they did what bureaucracies do, and they passed the problem upwards and forgot about it.

Some months later, a messenger appeared in the press, and handed the Foreman a note. Upon this note was embossed the most holy seal of the

Theology Council, and written in faded ink, the simple statement: "all copies will be destroyed".

The Foreman handed the note to his deputy, saying "I take responsibility", and departed via the nearest vacant airlock. The deputy's reaction was barely less decisive, as the realization crept over him that, in the absence of any orders to the contrary, the books must have already been shipped.

It becomes relevant, at this point in the story, that the Court Chamberlain's personal press covers most of the surface of a large moon.

After the fifth and sixth recalls came back entirely empty, there were estimated to be nearly a million copies still in circulation. The new Foreman, being a reasonable man, judged that so few copies spread across such a vast Empire were harmless, and declared the matter closed.

And there it should have ended, if only the note had been worded less dramatically. As it was, the existence of but a single copy of the 62nd printing was sufficient to contradict a declaration of the Theology Council, which could not be allowed to happen. Thus began a hidden campaign to purge every last copy.

The first few hundred thousand were easily found, great piles of them sitting forgotten in silent warehouses. Quickly, though, each new cache became smaller and better-hidden, and soon the agents of the Ministry and the Council were tracking individual copies. As the hunt became harder, frustrations mounted and methods became more extreme, and more and more sightings were referred directly to the Ministry's elite Ordinators. Quiet infiltration operations gave way to screaming dropships disgorging armored troops into sleepy bookstores, which in turn gave way to orbital strikes against entire settlements suspected of harboring a lone copy. The Ordinators were fanatical in their pursuit and uncompromising in their methods. Lurid tales began to spread, the flames only fanned by brutal reprisals against any who spoke openly of the cursed book, and the remaining owners went into hiding.

All these things happened years ago, but the Council's hounds still bay. Ordinator cells, once activated, will never rest until their task is completed, and while copies of the Pax Ammaria remain unaccounted-for, they will continue their bloody hunt.

I'm telling you this story, egger, so that when I politely suggest that you keep this book somewhere safe, you understand my full meaning. I don't want to know where you got it, or where you're taking it next. I never spoke to you. This meeting never happened. *The book was never here.*

Inferno

Aki Luisaur arrived at his laboratory late this morning, like most mornings. Even though he had slept throughout the night, he felt tired. Dwarfed by the surrounding machinery, he threaded his way between old propulsion system prototypes meant for assault frigates, research that had been very promising three years ago but had come to no fruition, leaving him pretty much alone in what now felt like a tomb rather than a bustling laboratory. His work had seen no credible result, and he now faced an ever-growing black hole of debt he saw no chance of ever paying back.

"It's not that you're selfish," his wife said, during his lunch break holocall down to the planet surface. Kia hated life in orbit, and hardly ever came up to the research station. Aki would take the dropship down at the end of every month to spend time with her and their only son, Rias.

"But it's always been about that big breakthrough," she continued, launching into a monologue he knew almost verbatim by now. "How many years did you spend at that engineering university? Sometimes I think you tried to take every possible class and degree there is, no matter how long it took," she added in a light tone. Aki's mind started to drift. He found himself thinking of hyperbolic differential equations, how he'd never fully been able to apply them to spatial microdistortion. It was a problem that could revolutionize propulsion if solved. Despite the continued lack of progress he felt so close to the answer, as close as he had felt two years ago. But still, he'd been just as close two years ago. She was right; he'd gone to a great number of different courses on different topics, believing it would give him a bird's-eye perspective that more specialized scientists lacked. Still, as time went by, that view had become increasingly cloudy. I just have to focus better, he told himself.

"You're not speaking," she said, breaking his train of thought.

"Sorry, my mind was elsewhere."

She was silent for a moment. "Why don't you come down planetside and we'll talk. Take a break. Come home."

Aki glanced around the unmanned research lab. "My work has to go on," he muttered.

"Come down. I'll see you tomorrow." She disconnected.

He knew what this was about. She was going to persuade him to give up. To abandon his research, to take an associate professor position at the local military college and teach math to people who had no respect for it and no sense of its beauty. Grunts that simply needed the certification so they could be issued a weapon and shipped off to some remote hellhole world to die. He suspected that deep down, his wife resented his intellect and feared the moment he would make his discovery, since that would prove her wrong after years of criticism and sullen disappointment.

A college professor? He used to have college professors as fans. When he'd still been a student, his early research had been some of the most promising new applied astromechanical science in the Federation. When he'd finally graduated, a bidding war had been waged between the largest engineering and aerospace corporations, fighting to snatch that supertalent and place their research and development divisions securely at the forefront of discovery. When he'd been hired by Duvolle Laboratories he'd felt as if his life was copied straight out of a holoreel: mixing with the most brilliant minds of his time, granted access to the kind of highly classified research and technology he'd only theorized about while at school. But somehow, after all those years spent preparing for the breakthrough moment – all the hopes, the late nights – it never came. Like being suddenly mute in a dream and trying to communicate with people. It became harder and harder for him to come up with anything worthwhile. The corporation was patient with him at first, providing tutors and all manner of assistance. Human resources even offered illegal neurological boosters. Nothing. After they cancelled his contract, news got out about his inability to innovate, so he had no other choice but to go it alone. He'd

taken out a massive loan and funded his research himself. That had been three years ago.

He sighed. Something inside him began to give. He'd never allowed himself to think it before, but it had been getting harder and harder to resist, and at this moment the dam finally broke. She is right. This is going nowhere. Perhaps I'm not the greatest mind in the Federation. Perhaps I have to accept the fact that future textbooks will not have a chapter on my discoveries, where students will have to learn about my great dark era before I struck gold. Perhaps that's never going to happen. Secretly, he had believed all these things. He had been waiting for that invitation from the President to celebrate his discovery. His honorary titles. His endless pile of money. His well-earned prize.

Perhaps it would never come.

The dropship shook violently as they crossed into the atmosphere. In addition to being cramped, Economy class lacked the gyrosmoothing equipment of the more expensive classes. They make you feel every nasty twist and rumble, just to incentivize you to pay for upper class, he thought. Like space travel isn't uncomfortable enough.

Kia was at the spaceport to greet him. She had brought Rias as well, which was unusual since he should have been at school. Though he was almost ten years old, Rias looked older. Kia seemed strangely happy, considering Aki hadn't even told her he was giving up and shutting down the lab. She chatted the whole way home; about nothing, it seemed to him. Something is not right, he thought.

Their apartment at sublevel 34 felt damp and dirty. The air belowground was thick and had an industrial smell to it. Aki had promised Kia that when his research paid off they'd have a nice place aboveground, one with actual windows instead of the oversaturated holoframes that now adorned their small apartment. Years later, they still lived in what she referred to as "the hole."

The loud fan noise and cold light didn't seem to annoy her that much today, though. Shortly after they'd arrived home and Aki had begun to unpack, she got straight to the point.

"Honey, do you remember Avagher Xarasier? I ran into him while taking Rias to the science museum last week."

Aki paused. Avagher. His old classmate. "Yes, he-" He cleared his throat. "Wasn't he with CreoDron?"

"Not anymore," said Kia, an note of excitement coming into her voice. "He's with Duvolle now. Doing great."

"Oh? That's good for him."

"Well, not just for him. I spoke to him about your situation. He was asking about you, you know. About how promising your research had been. He talked about how he idolized you back then."

"And?"

"They have a new program. Something that might help us. It's pretty radical. He wants to meet and talk about it."

She handed him a small card with the words DUVOLLE LABORATORIES glowing dimly off the polished plastic. From beside the logo, Avagher's perfectly groomed face grinned up at him. It hadn't changed much from the last time he'd seen him. Aki looked up at Kia, who was smiling at him, then down at their son, who was playing by the side of the bed.

"Is it a job?" he asked her. "I don't know. It... it would be strange working for him."

"I don't know that much about it," she replied. "It's something new, something they can't talk about to people outside the company. Something that will change the world, he said."

Change the world. How often Aki had heard that phrase. Sure. Let's change the world, he thought.

"I'll go see him tomorrow," he said. "But for now I'd just really like to spend the rest of the day with you two. Maybe go to the museum?" Aki felt he should use the time to vitalize his son's mind, to light his way down the path of math and science just like he himself had been inspired at that tender age.

"We were just at the museum last week, you know," she said. "That's where we met Avagher."

"Oh. Right. Well, perhaps I'll just do some work, then."

Retreating into his small office, Aki began hammering at his terminal. He brought up the schematics for the propulsion prototype, more out of habit than curiosity. He'd gone over them hundreds if not thousands of times in the past months, simply spinning the articulated rendering of the model, reviewing the controller code, not really changing anything, not learning anything new, but it made him feel busy – and, more importantly, made him look busy. Kia shut the door, blocking the sound from outside, leaving Aki alone in the monotonous hum of the industrial air conditioning unit servicing his little room, on sublevel 34, in the city of Rumas on the planet Fricoure V.

Avagher Xarasier welcomed Aki into his office. His face was still perfectly groomed, his skin seemed artificially void of any discontinuities and his hand felt soft as Aki grabbed it. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Things have been going at tachyon speed for the past few weeks." He grinned the same radiating smirk that had been so prominently displayed on his card. "With all of this magnificent stuff coming out of W-space, we're having problems keeping up." As he regarded Aki, a beneficent warmth came into his eyes. Aki suppressed a shudder.

"Wormhole space?" Aki asked. He knew that capsuleers had been going in there for a while now, scavenging old parts from the derelict space stations of ancient races, but to the best of his knowledge nothing new had emerged from those areas for a while. "You have to excuse me. I haven't

been in the loop. My contract with Duvolle expired some time ago and I don't have clearance..."

"You haven't heard!?" Avagher seemed very excited, more than his usual self. Suddenly he paused. "You did sign the non-disclosure contract, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes, on my way in," replied Aki. "A number of contracts, actually. I've probably signed away access rights to my body and worldly belongings. Lot of fine print."

"Okay, we're good then!" continued Avagher. "You see, they found something inside these old Talocan wrecks. We thought we'd seen it all, but up until now they'd only send droids in there. These are pretty nasty places! They're still powered, and parts of them have so much radiation and static that the droids simply get toasted. People assumed they weren't that interesting, just black spots of radiation that they learned to avoid."

"But recently, some explorers started to go in there. Death wish, if you ask me, but they actually found something remarkable. Technology aeons beyond anything we've seen. It's not Jovian, but I'll wager it's close. It seems as if this race was able to fold space and construct some type of quantum computer within the folds. Our lab has been working 24/7 to reverse-engineer the samples we've managed to purchase off these salvagers who've been returning from W-space." He waited, watching Aki intently.

"You want me to take a look at this new technology?" Aki was elated. This was what he'd always dreamed of. Getting a taste of the future, being part of taking the world into it.

"Not quite," said Avagher. "No, we have a great exospatial team working on that right now. Used to be our theory team, but overnight they became an applied science team. Imagine that!"

Aki was silent for a few seconds, breathing measuredly. "So what is it you want me to do? Why did you bring me in?"

Avagher looked out the window a moment, watching as the cold blue sun of Fricoure set behind the sprawling cityscape. Presently he turned to Aki, looked at him with a graver expression than before, and began speaking.

"Do you ever worry that you will never be able to make the most of your mind? That you will never have that breakthrough, that moment of brilliance when your decades of education and experimentation converge in one perfect singularity and out comes an idea so powerful that it will shine a light on your name for decades to come?"

Aki was taken aback. "Well," he said, then hesitated. "I am still early in my research..."

"Actually, no," said Avagher, "you are quite late. Most brilliant ideas and inventions are made when people are in their twenties or early thirties. Of all the great mathematical discoveries of our time, can you name even one which was discovered by someone older than thirty?"

"I'm thirty-five," said Aki. "I still have a large backlog of experiments and research planned, based on my early theories. I think you can't just dismiss anyone over thirty as useless to science."

"That's not my point!" Avagher approached Aki and placed a hand on his shoulder. "This is not about being a good college professor, writing witty essays, finding minor inconsistencies in someone else's research or publishing papers no-one cares about. Sure, you can live to the age of ninety and still be called a scientist, but that's not really what a true scientist is after. No, what any man or woman committed to science is truly after is that perfect crystalline moment of discovery. That moment of bliss when it all becomes clear to you. The moment that makes you immortal in science. Everything else is just hubris, and therefore irrelevant."

Aki felt this was going nowhere. "Why did you bring me here? To tell me I'm never going to get anywhere and that I spent too much time in school? To be honest, I can get that information somewhere else."

"No, Aki, I want to give you the opportunity to have this happen to you. Not in some distant and nebulous future, but here and now. We have

something, Aki. It's something that came out of those excursions, and it's something that can make this happen in less than an hour."

"Nonsense! All knowledge accrued over a lifetime, boiled together, connected and yielding results in an hour? That's impossible."

"Not quite. Now, you have to understand, Aki, this is not something we have piled up in cargo containers in some hangar. We've only come across a few nanograms of the IN-06 substance, and those were pretty expensive, even for Duvolle."

"It's a drug? Why don't you synthesize it?"

"We don't understand it fully. We believe we're only seeing the tip of the iceberg here. The rest of the material has been folded. It doesn't respond to duplication or synthesis like regular chemicals do."

"Have you tried it yourself?" said Aki, incredulous.

"I'm afraid I don't quite have what it takes," Avagher replied. "I scored 131/131 on the Federation Cognitive scale when I was at the university, and everyone knows you scored over 200/0.5. Highest score in two decades across all of the Federation's educational facilities, wasn't it?"

Aki nodded distractedly.

"You have studied extensively across different fields," continued Avagher. "Engineering, math, chemistry. It's actually quite remarkable you haven't made any significant discoveries yet, but that's not the issue. We feel that if we are to use the IN-06 we have, it has to be on a brilliant mind, one that's already primed with all the information required."

Aki pursed his lips in silent thought for a second. "There has to be a catch," he said. He leaned back in his chair, lay one ankle over the opposite knee and crossed his arms. "Let's say I take this drug of yours. Do I just get some great ideas, type them into a terminal and go home? There's something you're not telling me, here."

"Well, I'm going to be honest with you," said the other man. "Yes, there is a catch. Since the compound is folded, its inner workings are not known to

us. What we do know is that despite the very small dose, the substance manages to distribute itself evenly throughout the brain in less than two minutes. It then goes into hyperconnection mode, creating connections between synapses across the brain, like superhighways or shortcuts across the fabric. It does this for an hour to a progressively greater degree, not quite exponentially but not far from it. The subjects we've worked with before were fully coherent during this period, and were able to elaborate their ideas clearly so that they were readily understood by the team that went on to prove them. However, after only sixty minutes of exposure the connections start to saturate the mind. It's around that time that they become incoherent. The mind continues to function in some limited way – we can see that from the brain scans – but as of yet we haven't been able to communicate with them beyond that point. They seem to go into some sort of psychosis, which may be a result of the overconnection and overheating. After we cool the brain and provide the proper medication, they relax and seem quite comfortable."

"You've turned them catatonic? That's great, where do I sign?" said Aki, staring at his old classmate with undisguised contempt. "Why would I ever want to become a drooling vegetable in some Duvolle Labs basement?"

I think you are forgetting one big factor," said Avagher, lifting a finger briefly as he did so. "Those three people we've done this with already. Each and every one has come up with something amazing. Remember Kanih Mоторo? He solved the Kiesler integral problem in less than twenty minutes. It's already being put to use in sub-frequency EM shielding for capsuleer-controlled ships. And Kanih is not you, Aki. Just think about what you could discover. All these things people have been trying to crack for decades."

Aki stood up and walked towards the door. "No, thanks. I'm sure this IN-06 works wonders for you guys, but I'm not at a point where I want to give up the rest of my life just to make a scientific discovery. I have a life. A wife and son."

"Inferno," Avagher replied.

"What?"

"It's called Inferno by the lab team. The IN-06. And yes, you do have a wife and a son. Is she happy? Is she proud of you? And the kid? Does he have a future? He's not going to have your education. You'll be lucky to have him signed up to the military college. But if you go along with this, Kia won't have a financial worry for the rest of her life. The suits are offering a fortune for your participation, regardless of the results. You'd pay off your debts with a fraction of the sum. Think about it, Aki. This is your chance. You were given this unique mind, this education, this rare opportunity. Are you going to waste it on the rest of your life? You could ensure your legacy here. Provide a future for your wife and kid. Isn't that what you really want?"

Aki didn't answer. He walked out and slammed the door behind him, raising an alarmed look from Avagher's unnaturally attractive secretary.

"So you see, he wants me to take their drug, have my moment of bliss and in return you get freighterloads of money while I drool away the rest of my days in a Duvolle-sponsored luxury clinic. I can't believe he had the nerve to even suggest it! Did he tell you about this when he said he wanted to meet me?"

"Of course not," Kia answered. "It's ludicrous to even offer something like this. Is a single discovery worth your entire life?"

A trashy holoreel was playing on the living room display, but neither of them was really watching. Besides, it was hard to even see what was going on in the actual story with all of the overlaid advertising.

"Exactly!" Aki snapped. He meant to go on, but before he could Kia stood up and went into Rias's room to help him with his homework. Aki sat silently in the kitchen for a while, then retired to his office, fired up the terminal and looked at the schematics yet again. He started to spin the model as usual but found it hard to focus, his mind always going back to the audacity of that overgroomed, pompous former friend of his. I don't need your fancy drugs. I just need a little more time, he thought. The articulated hologram of

the prototype unfolded like the petals of a flower as he ran a quick thermal flow simulation. He'd run this simulation countless times before, though, and the results were the same as they'd always been. Aki sat there for a while, going through first the code, then the schematics, then the simulations, as if performing some kind of ritual.

Kia opened the door.

"I'm working," he said. "Just give me a minute."

"The work will be there later," she said, pulling him away from the terminal. It wasn't until she kissed him that he noticed she was barely wearing anything. "I've been waiting a while for this," she said.

Aki watched the dim glow from Kia's imported cigarette illuminate her face and smooth naked torso as she took a deep drag. It had been too long. Between all his worries – the research, the money, his time away in orbit – he'd forgotten how perfectly simple and fulfilling it could be with Kia.

"Did he really say he wanted to turn you into a vegetable just to get your ideas?" Kia laughed and pulled the bedsheets up.

"Well, it's more complex than that. I'm not sure what I'm allowed to say. They had me sign all these contracts."

"I'm your wife. You can tell me. It's not like I'm going to run off to the press or sell industrial secrets. Tell me, what did he say?"

"Well. There's a compound called Inferno. It's from wormhole space. From an ancient race. They have minute quantities of it. And if they give it to people, their brains form connections they wouldn't have formed before."

"Like a cerebral accelerator?"

"No."

"Like boosters?"

"Nothing so crass. This is the real deal, apparently. I probably shouldn't be saying this, but... they gave it to Kanih Mоторo."

"Motoro? Your old research assistant?"

"Yeah. Avagher said he solved the Kiesler integral problem. Just like that."

"Motoro couldn't solve anything when you were working together," Kia mused. "Didn't he just spend all his research time filling out forms for grants? He always struck me as someone who just worked hard rather than someone with a brilliant mind."

"Yeah, he scored 150/10 on the scale, I think. Something like that."

"And you scored over two hundred, Aki."

"Yeah, I did."

"Well, I hope he got a freighterload of money for it," she said, laughing, as she took one last puff of the cigarette.

"Actually, he did. So would I. Even just a part of it would pay off all our debts."

"All our..." Kia coughed, triggering a deeper cough which sent smoke puffing through her nose. "You're kidding me. They'd pay that much for what's in your head?" She became very serious. "It would mean Rias would never have to worry about anything in his life."

"Yes, but I'd be a vegetable."

"Yes. Absolutely." Kia sat still for a moment. "Motoro solved the Kiesler integral?" she finally asked.

"He did. That kid solved a problem that's been used as the definition of an unsolvable problem for decades. I mean, I tried factoring that for two whole semesters and never got anywhere."

"I wouldn't judge you if you chose to do this," said Kia in a low voice. She looked Aki in the eyes. "I know you value your research over everything else. Even family. I've resented it at times, but I've learned to live with it and I know that you won't change." She looked down and was silent for a moment. "I wouldn't judge you," she repeated then, softly.

Aki felt he should say that she was wrong, that she was more important than his research, but it wasn't true and he felt no point in lying to her now to make her feel better. Knowing of her acceptance eased some of the guilt he'd felt over the years; all those times he'd chosen an assignment in orbit over a day or two with the family.

"I could die without ever discovering anything," said Aki. "I could get hit by a runaway cleaning droid tomorrow, or choke on a snack. I could catch one of those viruses that the immigrants bring down every day, or the power could go out in the air supply in the middle of the night. These things happen."

Tears had begun to form at the corners of Kia's eyes. "I can't believe we're discussing this. I don't want you to do this. I don't want to lose you."

Aki felt a decision begin to come into view on the horizon of his mind. This was becoming more and more clear to him. Kia meeting Avagher hadn't been a coincidence. It was fate. There was something right about it, something pure, like a mathematical axiom or a universal constant. He was smarter than Motoro. His discovery would outshine anything that kid could ever have come up with. His mind was primed and ready. This was destiny.

Still he wept a little with Kia, but more because she was weeping rather than out of any sadness he felt himself. His mind was illumined with excitement. What will my discovery be?

At first glance, the Duvolle-owned lab looked like an expensive classroom. A desk, a neat stack of paper and pens of all different colors. Three state-of-the-art terminals were neatly arranged on the desk, above which loomed multiple digital whiteboards. In front of the desk there were several rows of seats. Avagher, seated next to Aki, was explaining how things would proceed.

"It's quite simple. You just relax and make yourself comfortable. There'll be a few people in here taking notes, perhaps asking some questions about specifics. It's very important you keep talking. We've seen people get so

overwhelmed with their thoughts that they forget to tell us what's going on, and that's hardly practical, is it? It's not worth much if it's just happening in here!" Avagher tapped his index finger on Aki's head. Aki smiled, though he wasn't really seeing the humor.

A door opened on the side of one of the whiteboards, revealing the full research crew in a large adjoining room. Inside were what seemed like a hundred people, some hunched over screens showing biological readouts of the various microscopic sensors attached to Aki's body, others running simulations and studying various pieces of his preexisting research. Seeing that Aki was staring into the room, Avagher walked to the door and closed it.

"Best not think too much about them, even though each and every one of them is thinking about you. Just relax and enjoy the ride!" Though Aki was excited about what would happen, he couldn't wait for Avagher's artificially white smile to be out of his sight.

"Let's do this," he said.

The medical team sat Aki down in his chair. Again, the door into the room next to them opened. This time they wheeled out a polished white contraption that looked like a state-of-the-art medical instrument. It had a large oval hole, into which Aki's head slid comfortably. The innocent smooth hum of various servo motors obscured the fact that his cranium was being rather forcefully clamped and held steady with micrometer precision.

A disembodied voice said, "You are going to feel a pinprick in the back of your head, and a strange sensation inside your skull. This is normal, so no need to panic."

It was more than a pinprick. As he watched on the monitor, the sharp needle drove through his skull, penetrating deep into the cerebral cortex, where it began secreting the valuable chemical named Inferno. Aki could sense a tingling itch growing within his skull but he held tight, knowing this

was just the insertion phase. As the itch spread out, the needle was subtracted. Finally, the carefully polished contraption let go of his head and he was wheeled out again.

"It can be good to focus on something other than what's happening, just while the compound takes effect," said the technician. "Try to think about something simple, like your childhood."

The technician's face was strangely clear, his bloodshot eyes piercing, his skin more porous and detailed than it had appeared minutes ago. Looking around, Aki saw the room itself was clearer, too, as if previously he had been watching a muddied low-quality holoreel whereas now he was seeing things in full definition, all razor-sharp detail and vivid colors. There was also something remarkably lucid about his state of mind. The usual haze of self-doubt, regret, frustration and worry had vanished; in its place there was now a quiet waiting void.

My childhood, he thought. As he let his mind wander down that path, images flashed before him at tremendous speed. His first swim in the ocean and the shock of the cold water enveloping him. Playing four-dimensional Quivolle with his mother at only three years of age, and seeing her surprise when he sorted all the pieces in less than eight moves. He remembered extensive tests at the institute for gifted children, being allowed to sequence on a military-grade workstation when he was seven. His graduation party at ten, how excited he was to give an interview that was broadcast across the Federation. Seeing Kia for the first time when she was eighteen, in particle collider class. How she ignored him since he was still just twelve at the time. It would be years until she noticed him.

"Okay. Are you remembering things better than usual?" The technician watched Aki closely. "Perhaps focus on something more relevant to our interests now, like propulsion?"

As soon as the word left his lips, patterns, concepts and theory began flooding into Aki's mind, as if the single word had let off an explosion that now expanded throughout his entire field of consciousness. He vividly

remembered every formula and equation of standard applied thermodynamics and spatial theory, even the loosely formed ideas about supercritical energy diffusion he'd started playing around with during the undergraduate years. Shapes started to emerge in his mind; articulate, complex, detailed patterns which wove threads between seemingly unrelated facts, fitting everything together in one infinite tapestry of truth. It wasn't very visual – the understanding was deeper than that – but he felt as if a perfect crystal was forming in his mind. He felt he understood the fabric of the universe and how it behaved. It was so clear now.

"You're going to have to talk to us, sir. Are you thinking about propulsion?"

"Oh, yes! I am. It's so clear, why it was going nowhere. I wasn't accounting for the ultraweak forces. You see, in most instances they are completely irrelevant. You only factor them in when simulating the collision of galaxies, the expansion of the universe or the distribution of dark matter. They are so insignificant that they don't count."

He was aware that he was babbling, but he didn't care. The technicians stared at him.

"It's like if you had a map of a house: you'd pretend it sits on a two-dimensional plane rather than on a curved surface, you know, the surface of a planet. But if the house covers half the planet, the rules change. You have to use different math. You can't use simple approximations anymore."

Aki had been writing on the whiteboard while talking and it wasn't until he paused and took a step back that he realized the equations he'd been writing down were not old or known. He felt as if he'd been explaining something that everyone knew, something well studied and explored. Yet, on the whiteboard, softly glowing, stood something no one had articulated before. He looked around, saw how everyone in the room was studying his notes intently, silently, inserting new equations into their terminals, running simulations and analysis protocols. This felt good. Finally, Aki Luisaur was doing what he had been born to do. It felt right. He kept talking.

Forty minutes later, the air in the room felt uncomfortably thick and warm. Aki had been interrupted a few times, asked to pace himself. His mind was going so fast that it was tempting to skip out on topics he felt were trivial, but that were in fact the pillars of the axioms needed to understand what he was going on about. He felt a mild frustration with the lack of intellect in the room, how they just couldn't seem to catch up. His head was starting to feel hot, almost feverish, but he ignored the inconsequential discomfort of his physical form.

"Roughly twenty minutes to totality. Inferno is going to toast him soon." The intern watching the bioreadout spoke as if Aki wasn't listening, and he was right. Aki was busy explaining to the team.

"And by simply tuning the oscillations of the sub-atomic particles so that they are in phase, and applying the force evenly at the precise moment of resonance singularity, you could in fact jump a fairly large body, like a cruiser-class starship, around 100 kilometers without significant energy cost. A kind of micro-jump drive. It might be expensive to build, but all the technology needed exists today."

Aki was rubbing his head frantically. Sweat was running down his face and stinging his eyes, and his shirt was quite drenched. He was finding it difficult to slow down, to form sentences and words to explain his thoughts. It took too much time. By the time he was halfway through a sentence, usually the train of thought had turned toward something new. His voice, his mouth, and other people's slow minds were all major bottlenecks. He sat down at one of the terminals and tried hammering away rather than explaining everything verbally. He quickly outlined the control code for the micro-jump drive, in case the people around him didn't get what he'd been talking about. Still, his hands could only move so fast, and the terminal felt unresponsive.

Hey, take it easy friend, just relax and work at our pace!" Avagher said, smiling. Suddenly Aki's focus wasn't on math, engineering, spatial distortion or any of these topics. Unbidden thoughts of Avagher filled his mind. He remembered meeting Avagher in the kindergarten lab. They'd hung out

together, made fun of the teachers. Aki remembered how they'd hacked into and reprogrammed military-grade MTACs at the base to run around and do gymnastics with their hundred-ton hulls, their mechanized arms and legs. He remembered how Avagher had introduced Kia to him. He'd wanted to talk to her for so long, but never had the drive to simply do it. Avagher had always been better like that. More confident. Aki couldn't understand why. While Avagher was less smart – and certainly won fewer awards – he always thought he could do everything, and faced the world with that annoying smile. Aki found his mind performing a deep psychoanalysis of his old friend, something he had no interest in or time for right now.

Suddenly, something clicked into place. A news blurb, seen on a holoscreen two months ago. Aki had been in orbit, supposed to be doing work but instead finding himself scanning pointless news items about what was happening planetside. Five people arrested on suspicion of transporting illegal boosters. Memorial service on the Hueromont Incident at the military academy. Science museum finally closed after years of dwindling attendance. Science museum closed. She said she met him at the science museum with their son. More facts started to emerge, like little pinpricks. The holoframes in their apartment. Quite expensive devices for her to buy. When had she installed them? One day they had just been... there. They had Duvolle Laboratories markings. He'd never even thought about that before.

As he began digging into it, it began to dawn on him. An image of Avagher, ten years old, flashed before his eyes. He hadn't thought of this in decades. And his son, Rias. His dark scruffy hair. His round face. His round, familiar, face.

Aki's head felt as if it was burning. Finding himself still sitting in front of the terminal, he tried to stand but found that his feet weren't really responding. He was going to scream at Avagher, but he couldn't move his mouth. He suddenly realized he'd spent the last precious ten minutes thinking about Avagher, Kia and Rias. Was this it? Was this the end? The research team seemed to be focusing on reviewing what Aki had already covered; some

of the recording equipment had been turned off as they quietly discussed the findings. His hands could still move. He reached for the terminal and continued working on the micro jump drive code.

"He's still going!" someone said, and their attention was on him again. The technician arrived with a pack of ice that he placed on Aki's head. Avagher commented: "That's not really going to work, you know. He's burned out already."

Aki entered a few lines into firmware code for the main stabilization sequence. It took him forever to type, and he felt as if hot lava was boiling inside his head.

"Is it still valid?" Avagher asked one of the researchers.

"Sure. I'm not positive on what exactly it does, though. It seems to improve the yield, but like with most of this stuff, no-one really knows how it works except for him, and I don't think he's in a condition to tell us. He's pretty much toasted."

Aki finished the last line, then collapsed into his chair. The medical crew surrounded him, took vital signs and wheeled him away. He didn't hear them or see them. He was already sliding into the scalding perpetual darkness and ensuing nightmare that was Inferno totality.

It had been a long time since Kia and Avagher had taken time off together. He was being given more responsibility than ever at Duvolle, and some said that he was being groomed for CEO. Kia had taken up her own research again, and was successfully running a small pharmaceutical company in her spare time. Avagher had chartered an OpuX luxury yacht with a small crew and was taking her to see all of the astronomical phenomena she had only dreamt of witnessing all her life. With all his work and continuing success at the company, he still had time for her, and that made her happy.

"Do you want to see the flaring on the solar limb?" asked Avagher . "The ship is fitted to withstand the most violent flares you can think of." Not waiting for a reply, he instructed the crew to take them on a close orbit of the sun. It was a fairly small red sun, not the most majestic in the region but possessing a curious intensity that made it interesting nonetheless. They warped closer and were quickly flooded with brilliant light, carefully filtered and balanced by the observation deck windows.

"Sir, you might be happy to hear that we actually have one of your inventions fitted onto this very ship. We recently acquired a Xarasier Micro Jump Drive. Perhaps you and the madam would like a demonstration?" The captain was quite thrilled to have the actual creator of this new device as his passenger.

"Where would we jump to?" asked Avagher. "There's nothing here but us and the sun."

"A 100 kilometers forward," replied the captain with a smile in his eyes. "Just for fun, really."

"Sure, let's give it a try!" Avagher shouted jauntily as he put his arm around Kia.

The captain initiated the drive. Deep within its circuitry, the main loop started to spool up. As it calculated the correct coordinates, a small clause in its code ran an undocumented check, reviewing the passenger charter. As it detected the name Avagher Xarasier, a subroutine within it was initiated. It calculated the ship's position, projected jump coordinates, locations of nearby planets and the absolute position of the nearest sun.

From the outside, everything seemed to function perfectly. Avagher was somewhat excited, since he'd never been inside a ship doing a microjump before. The engine continued to spool up and a mild vibration could be felt from the floor.

Suddenly, the ship jumped. It didn't go 100 kilometers though. It went further than that.

In an instant, a few hundred kilometers deep below the glowing surface of the sun, a small cruise ship materialized. It took microseconds for the violent forces fuelling the sun to consume and entirely dissolve the ship, its crew and its two passengers. The disturbance caused a small solar flare to shoot up from the photosphere of the sun, the plasma arcing brilliantly for a few moments before collapsing again and merging with the twirling plasma on the solar surface.

Speaks and Walks

This is the soldier, a man who stands clear of others.

Whatever brought him here is of no concern to anyone but himself, and those he encounters on a daily basis are either utterly disinterested in the subject, if they're doing their damn jobs properly, or barely coherent long enough even to voice it, if the soldier is doing his.

Besides, there really is blessed little point in thinking about it, let alone voicing it to other soldiers, not in a life that is filled to the brim with action and movement and devotion to an endless cause. He got here, through difficult times, and now that he is here, he is at one and the same time disconnected from the world around him, and more intimately connected to it than anyone he knew in his past life. He is never truly alone, and in the fugue of endless motion where he spends almost every waking moment, he feels sacrosanct.

His weapons are an extension of himself, as they are with any even half-decent soldier in whatever army you care to name. A weapon that isn't an extension of you is wielded only for show. But in this case, he himself is also part of the weaponry, and not all soldiers can make that claim. The weapon is not what he holds in his hands, aims and fires; that's merely the outward evidence it even exists. Nor is it what he moves and blinks and breathes, which is but a vessel for the weapon, a holster and a shell. It is the inexorable movement itself, this constant pressing onward, of him and of him and of him, storming like hail.

He is aware that he is loved. And yes, the people love him, at least the ones he sees on the sidelines. Asteroid colonists, planetside tribes, old and new civilizations: When he has time to look around, in places he isn't being sent to ravage, he is inundated with feelings of relief and salvation. But there is a deeper love, too; not from a sentient being so much as from the perceptual universe in which he exists. He is alive and has a purpose, and the world he sees around him is devoted to maintaining both of those

conditions for as long as possible. If this is not the purest kind of love, then he does not know what is.

The others like him, they feel the same way, at least so far as he can intuit. Salvation is not a common topic of conversation. They are bound by their allegiance to a faction, and from what he can tell, they all do feel that allegiance - but it, too, is not often spoken of. There is a duty to the inhabitants of whatever blasted, war-torn surface they're rushing over at that point in time, but that duty is even more intangible. It's there while it's there, and then they're somewhere else. Their primary duty is to the endless onrush itself, to honor it by maintaining it, and in so doing, save themselves, from past lives and misdeeds and regrets.

He does not know what he did to earn this, but he will try all he can to repay it until the end of his days.

This is the soldier, a man who stands clear.

Whatever brought him here, he is occasionally unclear of. Those he encounters on a daily basis are either utterly disinterested in the subject and focused instead on trying to do their damn jobs properly, or barely coherent long enough to voice anything at all, though the soldier increasingly finds that he cannot silence them fast enough.

There is blessed little point in thinking about his situation, he fears, let alone voicing it to other soldiers, not in a life that is supposed to be filled to the brim with action and movement and devotion to an endless cause. He got here, through difficult times, but now that he is here, he is starting to feel increasingly disconnected from the world around him, and instead rather uncomfortably connected to a past life he is no longer sure is entirely his. He is never truly alone, a situation that unnerves him more with every waking moment, and he is beginning to wonder if he is cursed.

It is not that he feels broken; rather, he simply does not feel *right*. In the past, he had withstood the submersion into his vastness of his life because it also had a tether. Now he feels as if he has passed down the chasm into

increasing darkness, and if the tether still exists, he is no longer entirely sure what is on the other end of it. He wields his weapons, and he looks at them as he fires, as if they were in the hands of someone else entirely.

He wonders if he is someone else, entirely.

Whatever person he is, it doesn't seem to be the one who holds in his hand, aims, and fires his weapon, nor is it what moves and blinks and breathes. The only proof that he still exists from moment to moment lies in the motion, this constant pressing forth, and so he storms onward, in creeping fear of the moment where it's no longer him, him, him.

He is aware that he is admired. And yes, people look to him as a flickering beacon, at least the ones he sees on the sidelines. Asteroid colonists, planetside tribes, old and new civilizations: When he has the semblance of mind to look around, in places where he doesn't feel ravaged, he is inundated with feelings of other people's relief and salvation. But there is a deeper sentiment, too; not from a separate pack of sentient beings so much as from whatever exists in his own head, be it perceptual or not: It is alive and it has a purpose, and the world he sees around him is in some fashion devoted to maintaining both of those conditions for as long as possible. Whatever this is, he doesn't quite know any longer.

Those of the others who are like him, at least so far as he can intuit, appear to feel the same way. Sanity is not a common topic of conversation. They are bound by their allegiance to their faction, and from what he can tell they all do still feel that allegiance - but it's not often spoken of, and their duty to the inhabitants of whatever hellhole they're rushing over at any point in time is growing even more intangible and nebulous. It's there while it's there, and when they're somewhere else, it feels uncomfortably distant and inapplicable to their lives. Their primary duty is to keep the rush going, to honor it by maintaining it, and in so doing, save themselves, from their lives and worries and fears.

This is the soldier, a man who stands alone.

Whatever brought him here no longer matters, and if he ever thinks of it, in a life that is filled with blasting noise and stomping movement and endless impact that reverberates through everything around him, he does so in the rare company of silence. Those he encounters, he finds utterly incomprehensible. He is barely coherent enough even to voice his thoughts most of the time.

There is no thinking about his situation, nor speaking to the other soldiers. His life is a series of barely coherent flashing images, sound and fury, the cause of which seems endless and unstoppable. He got here, and in these increasingly difficult times he has lost the connection to anything and anyone he knew. Sometimes - in blessed, sacred moments - he is alone, part of nothing and beholden to no one. The rest of the time, he is living the life of some other being that inhabits him, with no solitude and nothing but a haze of constant motion, like a puppet being yanked on by its strings.

During his lucid moments, he feels like he's being wielded by some other creature, in battle and daily life. When he opens his mouth, he truly does not know whether the words that come out - if he can bring himself to speak at all - will make any sense to him. When he walks, he doesn't know whether he may turn, or stop, or fall to his knees. He is rapidly becoming useless, a weapon wielded only for show. At most he can move and blink and breathe - the rest of his existence belongs to a force that he does not understand.

His dreams are of other places, and incorporate memories he knows he did not used to have. When he eats, he wonders what it would be like not to eat; when he drinks, not to drink; when he moves, to stop.

He is aware that he is feared. And yes, the people cower from him, at least the ones he sees on the sidelines. They know what he is capable of, which is more than he can say. Asteroid colonists, planetside tribes, old and new civilizations: When he sees them, he doesn't know whether they are truly there, or merely figments of the other entity's imagination. He has ways of finding out, and they work well to ground him, but those are only a temporary salve, and the relief is so fleeting when he's inundated in blood.

There is a deeper fear that envelops him, too; not merely what he senses from other people, but from the thing inside him, which for all the world may be an actual sentient being. If it is, if it is alive like him and has a purpose, then he cannot see how he can possibly maintain those conditions for very long.

There are other soldiers, and the few of them who are like him are *exactly* like him. Everyone else treats them like they're seriously ill, which the soldier supposes is probably true, and like they're a danger to themselves and others, which the soldier knows for a fact is entirely true. Desertion is not a common topic of conversation. Sometimes, people just disappear. Whether it's of their own volition, or if their commanding faction has eliminated them from the war entirely, he doesn't know. When it comes to their superiors, information is not freely shared, nor is aid or sympathy. Their allegiance is now to themselves more than anything, and their primary duty is not to lose the tattered shreds of their goddamned minds.

This is no longer a soldier. He is his own man.

What brought him here is crystal clear. Those he encounters on a daily basis may ask him questions, and he will answer to the best of his ability, but for the most part he simply tries to do his job properly. Their voices are the only ones he hears; the one in his head is gone, at last. He does not miss it, though he does miss something like its echo. The silence it left behind is so complete, it's hard to fill.

He thinks about his past life on occasion, and talks about it to those he works with. Theirs is not a life filled to the brim with action and movement, but it does come with renewed devotion. He got here, through difficult times, and now that he is here, he is at one and the same time unconcerned with the world around him, and more at peace with it than he ever was in his past life. He is among friends now, and after the fugue of motion that was his recent past, he relishes the sense of stillness.

His weapons are still in use, because he chooses to employ them, but he could lay them down at a moment's notice and walk away forever. That knowledge keeps him going; that if the moment ever arrives where he wants to let go, all his weaponry will be only for show. It will not be held in his hand, to be aimed and fired, and it will not be inside him, moving and blinking and breathing, trying to push its way out through the cracks in his mind. In that way, even though he still fights, he is moving on, and it's only him, him, him and *nothing else*.

He is aware of himself now, free of noise, and to his continued surprise he finds that he bears a lot of love in his heart. Asteroid colonists, planetside tribes, old and new civilizations: He periodically takes the time to look around, if only to appreciate the life he's made and the lives he's touched. The relief he feels, at the salvation from his past existence, is palpable. There is a deeper appreciation, too, now that what felt like an alien, sentient being has been removed from the perceptual universe in which he exists. He is alive, and thanks to his training, his experience, and the clean technology now inside his head, he still has a purpose. If this is not the purest kind of life, then he does not know what is.

The others like him, they feel the same way. It's a common topic of conversation. They are bound by nothing and no one. He serves himself. If there is an immediate duty, it is to whoever is hiring them at that moment, to run over whatever blasted, war-torn surface is in front of them. But there is a greater, primary duty that is even less tangible and far more pressing. It is to the memory of that past life, of the endless onrush, of the breakaway moment in which they saved themselves from the endless cycle of lives and madness. And it is to the forces who put him in that position, knowing full well what it would do to him.

He does not know what he did to earn it, but he will do everything in his power to pay them back for that, until the end of his days.

The darkness outside the bunker was pervasive, and a blanket of dull fog softened the small pockets of light near the two heavily armed men standing by the west door. The sound of the distant surf was muted by the damp thickness of the air. In front of the two, massive turrets scanned the seas beyond the island. Occasionally one of the men would shuffle his feet slightly or look around, as if searching for something in the heavy and expressionless night.

Presently one of the two looked at his companion and said, "One thing I don't understand."

"What's that," the other man replied, his inflection flat as the dark horizon.

"Well," said the first man, cocking his head slightly, "why are they coming all the way out here when they could just do the same thing over FTL? I can't figure it."

"Just the way it's always been done," said the other man.

"Seems like such a risk to take," said the first.

"It's a controlled risk," said the other. He spat at the soft ground, then rotated his creaking neck with a grimace. "Everyone knows everyone else is taking a giant risk too, so nobody pulls any tricks. Initial expression of fundamental trust, they say in the manual."

"Yeah, I get that, but I mean, the trouble of moving everyone out without people knowing about it, getting them here safely... It's just, I don't know, you know? Doesn't seem to add up."

The other man took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Dogma says the face-to-face thing is the most important factor here. Worth taking the risk for 'cause it can benefit all those hundreds of millions down the line if it makes peace any more possible." He spat again. "That being said, I'm none too sure on this either. All I know is we've been making these happen for

decades, and the secret's never been spilled and nobody's ever died. Obviously someone's doing something right."

"Right," said the first. He looked down at the assault rifle cradled in his hands, then at his arm, emblazoned with the logo of the five stars.

"Tonight, the part where no-one dies is up to you and me," the other one said, looking at his companion for the first time. "You understand that much, I'm sure."

Just then a crackling came across the sky. A series of blue lights appeared in the tenebrous heavens, streaking down toward the invisible line of the horizon and gradually growing brighter.

"Well," he continued, flipping down his visor, "If you don't now, you will in a minute. Prepare to meet Empress Sarum, sergeant. And remember, bow deep."

The chamber was a stark and simple affair on the surface, but the tastefully muted lights and the plushness of the furniture somewhat betrayed the elevated status of the four people the environs had been designed for. At the center of the room was a circular table with a single column of gentle bluish-green light descending upon it, expanding at its lower half to a benign arc of luminescence that enveloped the entire center of the room. As the four in attendance settled into their respective positions, their mannerisms gave no indication that just outside these walls, the finest killers from the four corners of creation were assembled and ready to strike.

"Well, then," said Jacus Roden, President of the Gallente Federation. "A pleasure to see us all in the same room." He leaned forward and smiled benignly, an act which made apparent a silvery streak of metal running down the line of his jaw on both sides.

"I am honored to be in the peaceful presence of peers," said a dark-skinned, white-eyed man whose hulking frame belied his gentle demeanor. "In the name of the Minmatar Republic, Sanmatar Shakor greets you."

Piercing as a dagger, a powerful feminine voice cut across the table. "The Imperial Throne of Amarr welcomes you to the table, as always." The owner of the voice was a statuesque woman whose unwavering gaze was fixed on the table in front of her.

A long silence followed in which her final words seemed to hang in the air, suspended in the ambient lighting.

From the fourth quadrant of the table came a deep voice, laced with menace.

"So let's get this thing started, then."

"Respected compeers. Please. We're squabbling."

At these words, Empress Sarum and Sanmatar Shakor broke each other's gaze for the first time in several minutes. Shakor was hunched forward on the table, hands locked together; Sarum was sitting straight as an arrow, shoulders squared and nostrils flaring. Simultaneously they turned their heads to look at the unassuming bald man.

"We're not here to pick at our differences," continued Roden. "We're here to find common ground." His velveteen voice rose and fell in precise diplomatic melody. "I can understand that you have differing views on what the last few months of conflict have done to harm your respective peoples, but I assure you we would all be better served by some more constructive discourse."

"What does 'constructive' mean to you, Roden?" said Tibus Heth, Executor of the Caldari State, his thick arms crossed and his great chin down, steel-grey eyes drilling into the man across from him.

Roden smiled sweetly, and for the briefest of instants a glow came into his gaze, a flicker of green fire almost too quick to catch. He leaned back in his seat.

"Tibus, my dear friend. We have a great number of differences, you and I and everyone else at this table, but we also have several common problems. Problems which are not going to go away of their own accord. Problems which, in fact, grow in scope and gravity with each passing month. I'm sure I don't need to list the phenomena to which I refer."

"Those phenomena," said Heth acridly, "aren't problems to all of us. In fact, some of us are reaping benefit from them already." He fixed his gaze levelly at Roden. "So why don't you tell us what *your* particular problem is, Mister President?"

"My problem, most esteemed Executor, is that we have a growing power bloc in this universe of ours that does not and will not ever share a seat at this table, or any like it."

"Capsuleers," said Heth. "Our common problem. Need to find a way to stop them. I think I've heard this somewhere before."

"Is it any less true than the last time you heard it?" asked Roden, raising a carefully plaintive eyebrow.

"Capsuleers are fighting our wars for us," said Heth. "Their efforts are the backbone of our struggle. Our squabble, if you'd rather call it that."

"And while they're doing that," replied Roden, "do you honestly believe that they don't have schemes of their own? Do you think that much power can be handed to anyone without some enterprising individuals eyeing the potential for abuse?"

"These people have families, friends, cities and nations they're beholden to," said Heth. "They have loyalties. Loyalties do not vanish simply because you acquire power."

"Noblest Executor," said Jamyl Sarum, quiet as a whisper.

There was a small pause. "Your Eminence," replied Heth, somewhat taken aback.

"Have you ever felt your life ripped away from you? Your very consciousness sucked into a bottomless pit? Everything you ever thought you were or would be, snuffed out in the smallest fraction of a second?"

Heth's brow lowered. "I believe I have felt something like that, your Eminence," he replied.

"And have you felt your consciousness light up into existence again, as if the laws of life and death did not apply to you? As if you were being born again, un beholden to the principles that bind the mere mortals of this universe?"

Heth looked down at the table, clenched his jaw. "No, your Eminence," he said in a low voice. "I have not had that privilege."

"It is not a privilege, Executor," replied Sarum. "It is the curse that has doomed the Emphyreans from the beginning. It is true that there are some of them who are devoted still to causes greater than themselves, but the vast majority are so disconnected from reality that they exist in a realm all of their own, where none of the people they perceive to be lesser are worth any consideration at all."

"Sounds somewhat familiar," said Shakor.

The Empress turned her head to look at the Sanmatar, whose sightless eyes were fixed squarely on her from across the table.

"Sanmatar, I am stung by your insinuations," she said.

"Then it's a good thing faith heals, your Eminence," replied Shakor.

"Again, people..." began Roden, but this time he was interrupted by the Minmatar.

"Due respect, Mister President, but this nonsense is intensely tiresome," said Shakor. "I am not a young man and I am not particularly given to frivolous wastes of my time. We've all gone to great lengths to be here, so

let's not waste the precious hours we have, or offend the fine institution that made this possible for the greater benefit of all our peoples. Let's all just address the real reasons why we came here, and then I'm sure we can be about our business of killing each other again momentarily.”

The room's three other occupants looked at each other, then down at the table. A silent moment passed, then quietly President Roden began to speak.

“We need to discuss the matter of certain new technologies.”

“Indeed we do,” said Shakor. Heth nodded. The Empress was grave and impassive.

After the escort was successfully over with and the west entrance had slid closed, the door's guards were approached by a man with craggy features and close-cropped white hair, dressed in cumbersome dark armor that bore the insignia of House Sarum. His gait was heavy and assured. As he neared, he thrust out a hand.

“Amon Ahashion, Lord Commodore of the House Sarum Imperial Guard, here under provision of Joint Command Directive CC-9.”

The men shook hands. “Corporal Lutiere, DED classified. That's my second, Sergeant Ulfbrard.”

The Amarrian glanced briefly at Sergeant Ulfbrard, then held out his hand.

“Sergeant Ulfbrard.”

“Lord Commodore.” They shook hands.

“We are all in agreement,” said Ahashion, “that for the duration of this operation the western perimeter of this bunker remains under the control of the House Sarum Imperial Guard. Are we not?”

“Affirmative, Lord Commodore,” said Corporal Lutiere.

Ahashion nodded curtly. "If you need anything, the man in charge on the ground is Marshal Commander Kahd. I will be reachable in my quarters, down on the beachfront."

Corporal Lutiere nodded. Sergeant Ulfbrard studied the ground in front of him, his expression fixed and unmoving.

When the Commodore had made his leave, the younger man turned to the older man and said: "Don't think I like him much."

"Don't have to like him," replied Corporal Lutiere, slinging his rifle across his shoulder. "But for the time being, you do have to obey him."

"The proliferation is complete," said Shakor. "I'm sure our intelligence agencies have all agreed on that by this point."

"And what of it?" asked Heth. "We have new tools and new methods. Why call a meeting about it?"

"An influx of possibilities this size," said Jacus Roden, "destabilizes the ground underneath all of us, Executor." Any semblance of affected mirth had vanished from his tone entirely.

"I suspect that's not all we're here to discuss, though," said Shakor. "Is it, Your Eminence?"

All eyes fell to Empress Sarum, who was sitting with her jaw clenched, eyes cast down.

"It is not," she said presently. "Though this was a convenient pretext, I arranged this meeting for another reason."

For the first time on this cold evening on this dark world, Jacus Roden's steel-streaked jaw dropped, just a fraction of a fraction of an inch.

"You?" he said.

"CONCORD does not always call these summits, Roden," said Shakor. "You of all people should be aware of the twisted roads our dance takes us down."

Roden sucked in his cheeks, placed his hands on the table in front of him, clenched his fingers together. In the depths of his irises, a green fire was burning.

"Perhaps we'd better hear what Her Eminence has to say, then," he said, his knuckles whitening.

The western beachfront was a hive of activity, with Sarum troops constantly moving between hastily erected emplacements and surveillance equipment. Looking over the scene, Ulfbrard was reminded of slave children playing in the wind-swept courtyards of his neighborhood, back before the star, back before everything.

"See that machine over there?" said Lutiere, pointing down to a small alcove on the beach, where four men busied themselves with a large contraption bearing three giant discs that extended threateningly toward the sky.

Ulfbrard grunted in acknowledgment. "Atmospheric surveillance, right?"

Lutiere nodded. "That thing picks up every last little heat signature given off by anything that crosses the ionosphere in about a fifty-mile radius," he said. "They say the tech came from the Cartel originally, though the Amarr call it their own, of course."

"They call a lot of things their own," said Ulfbrard.

Lutiere gave a knowing glance at his second-in-command. "I don't disagree," he said, not unkindly.

For a few moments the two men stared out at the distant horizon.

"All I know," said Lutiere, "is if someone's gonna come at us tonight, they better have something very special up their sleeve."

At this Ulfrard's posture loosened. He slunk a deliberately lazy look at his superior. "Again with the *all I know*," he said. "If *everything* you knew was half as much as *all* you knew, old man, then I'm sure--"

He was cut short by a distant boom, a quiet thrum more felt than seen, reverberating through the rock and seeming to shake the very air. The two men looked at each other, then down to the beachfront. Several of the Sarum soldiers were stock still in defensive poses, their weapons up and pointed toward the darkness of the tide. Others were barking commands into microphones.

Amon Ahashion emerged from his quarters, shouting orders. He was met by Marshal Commander Kahd, with whom he exchanged a communication by all appearances quite urgent.

"Polaris One, this is Polaris Five," said Corporal Lutiere into his radio. "We have Code D on the western front. Repeat, Code D on the western front, copy."

There was no sound from the radio. Corporal Lutiere felt his heart begin to race. He held his rifle up in front of him and peered at it closely.

Plasma temp gauge offline. Hybrid mixing chamber on force manual. No lights, no music.

"Shit," he breathed. He straightened up and hoisted his weapon. "Sergeant Ulfrard, it looks like we've been EMPed," he said.

Ulfrard stared at him. "How?" He mouthed the word, but no sound came out.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Sergeant," said Lutiere. "We need to get down there."

Ulfrard flipped down his visor and swallowed hard. "Lead the way, sir."

"I am reliably informed that the infantry implant technology has spread throughout the cluster," said Sarum. "We are all in possession of it, and no doubt well on our way to building our own armies."

The other three at the table remained resolutely silent.

"The reason I have called this meeting," continued the Empress, then took a deep breath, "is that this technology in its current form poses a significant mutual threat to us, and I firmly believe all of us should cease and desist in our efforts to pursue it."

For a brief moment the veneer of political prudence dissipated, and Roden and Heth exchanged frankly incredulous glances.

"What..." began Heth.

"How is..." said Roden.

"Gentlemen, please," interrupted Sanmatar Shakor. "Let Her Eminence finish."

"I'm sure I need not remind you that the Empire's own Templar program was the first ever successful implementation of this technology," continued Sarum. "All the mistakes you're making, we've already made. All the lessons you're learning, we've already learned. Perhaps the most significant of these lessons is that the Sleepers do in fact pose a threat, and that threat is far greater than we had presumed."

The three men exchanged guarded glances.

"Tell me," said Sarum, looking at each of them in turn as she spoke. "Your recruits for this new breed of soldier. How have they been behaving, post-implant? Any instances of mental instability? Sudden forceful dissociative symptoms? Healthy young men speaking in tongues, thrashing their heads about hard enough to break their own necks?"

Roden and Heth were stone-faced; Shakor crossed his arms, his expression grim.

"Those implants carry the fragmented consciousness of the Sleepers within them," said Sarum. "In some of them, the Sleeper presence is so strong that it can overwhelm the implant's host."

Heth's brow furrowed and his eyes hardened.

"What's more," continued Sarum, "all Sleeper technology has these fragments within it. The Emphyreans who today wage war on the Sleepers' outposts to harvest their technology are not, in fact, mere resource gatherers, nor are they simple thieves. They are committing something far worse than theft."

"Genocide," said Heth.

A leaden silence descended on the table. Roden was the first to break it.

"Assuming any of this were to be believed, Your Eminence," he said, a sharp edge sliding into his voice, "how big is the risk to us?"

"The risks are significant and cannot be ignored," replied Sarum. "The Sleepers are a civilization older than any other - older than New Eden, some believe. They may not exist in our physical realm at present, but it looks like that may stand to change. If they continue to be attacked in this way, there is no telling what they might do out of self-defense. And it is certainly not prudent for us to leave them any openings."

"And what would you have us do?" asked Heth.

"Accept my gift of alternative implant technology," said the Empress. "Created through other means, with no Sleeper taint, and thus no way for them to gain a foothold or exact their revenge."

"Your Eminence," said Shakor. "With the greatest of respect, you must think us absolute blithering fools."

"Sanmatar," said the Empress, raising her powerful voice so that it resounded off the small chamber's walls. "Having so recently gained your

freedom, I would think you of all people would not wish to see others enslaved. I started the Templar project because this war has seen too many lives lost. I wanted a swift end to it, and gaining this technology was a means to that end."

"You wanted to win the war, not end it," corrected Roden.

"In the eyes of God and the Throne, those terms are one and the same, Mister President. You understand enough about us to know that much." Her syllables were coming faster now, rapid-fire, words tumbling over each other as her voice gathered momentum. "The things I speak of here today are important. Do not attempt to smother them with petty semantics."

Roden gave a small flourish. "Continue then," he said.

Sarum was pensive for a brief moment, seated at the table in regal diplomatic posture, her hands forming a small triangle on the edge of the table. She cleared her throat. Her cheeks looked sunken and sallow. Droplets of sweat pearled on her forehead.

"If you don't believe me," she said presently, "then answer me this: has the number 514 played into any of your lost cases?"

The atmosphere in the room sharpened perceptibly.

Heth leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. At length he began to speak.

"It's been happening since the beginning," he said. "At first we thought it was localized to a particular place. Our first two cases came from the same barracks. We thought it was something a few of them had seen on joint operations. Some kind of graffiti they'd seen during a traumatic moment on Caldari Prime."

Sarum was staring at him intently.

"Then it started popping up everywhere," Heth continued. "Always the same."

"Blood-red skies, strange beings, and the number 514, often written in blood," said Shakor.

Heth looked at him, eyebrows raised. Roden showed no expression, but his eyes darted back and forth between the two men.

"Exactly that," said Heth.

Empress Sarum nodded.

Before the moment and all its implications were allowed to go any further, Roden spoke.

"What does that prove, though?"

"I beg your pardon, Mister President?" asked Sarum.

"The implants give them strange visions," said Roden. "How do you know for sure that Sleeper consciousness is the culprit, and not some," he made a flippant gesture, "random subroutine implanted as a failsafe by their engineers? For that matter, how do you know this isn't merely a quirk of the technology, soon to be ironed out by engineers? Surely those of us who are old enough —" and here he nodded his head pointedly at Shakor, "— remember the spectacular capsule failures of the Caldari-Gallente War. To my recollection those stories weren't much better."

"You're not listening," said Sarum, growing agitated. "You're willfully misinterpreting my words."

"My point, dear Empress," said Roden, "is that there are a million possible explanations. Why should we so readily fall on this one?"

Sarum inhaled sharply, straightened up, then exhaled slowly through her nose. "A... most trusted advisor relayed his first-hand experience of Sleeper consciousness to me. It is," and at this her gaze grew distant, "the most rapturous thing I have ever experienced, and at the same time the most horrible. We are literally rending the fabric of their self-constructed universe into pieces."

"If the rapture you felt in a digitized simulation of reality outstripped the rapture you feel in your faith, then perhaps it's time to reconsider a few things, Your Eminence," said Shakor.

"Stay with the quips, Sanmatar," replied Sarum quietly, "and watch them destroy us because we can't trust one another."

"And what, exactly, have you done to earn that trust, Your Eminence?" said Roden, raising his voice for the first time. The effect was pronounced and unsettling, a crescendo of pinpoint syllables.

"I have gone to great lengths to procure a solution to a problem I myself created," said the Empress. "I can only beg that you heed my words. I have no gambit."

"The Amarr Empire is not particularly known for having no gambit," said Shakor. "So you will pardon us if we don't heed your words quite yet."

As he said this, a wave of force passed through the room. Every one of the four felt their ears briefly buzz with high frequency, and summarily the hairs rose on every neck.

"You may be running out of time for that," said Sarum, and stood up.

By the time they reached Lord Commodore Ahashion the western beachfront was awash with running and shouting Sarum troops, hastily readjusting defensive plans, corralling men into formation.

"What's going on, Commodore?" said Lutiere, wholly out of breath.

"Some sort of electromagnetic pulse," said Ahashion, his eyes keeping close watch over his men as they spread out across the beach. "We don't know what could have generated one large enough to disrupt our equipment. Whatever it is, it disabled communications with our orbital

forward point as well, several minutes before the blast. We don't know what's going on up there."

Sergeant Ulfbrard felt a cold chill run down his back.

"What are your immediates for our contingent over here?" asked Lutiere.

"Spread out," answered the Commodore. "Stay hidden. Watch the skies." As he said this he was looking at something in the far stratosphere above them, and now suddenly he began to move. "In fact, this would be a good time to start."

A tremendous clap reverberated through the night and a pillar of light appeared down on the beach behind a large outcrop of rock. Another clap brought another pillar, then another, all of them extinguished almost as soon as they had appeared.

The men on the beach held fast, waiting intently. Fear was pasted on every face.

"Find your men," said Ahashion to Lutiere, "and do it now."

"This is trickery," said Roden, backing away from the table. "I will not have trickery."

"There is no trickery," said Sarum. "This is exactly what I warned of."

"You did this, Minmatar," said Heth. "This kind of underhanded treachery is your hallmark."

"And how do I know it was not you?" answered Shakor. "Hallmarks or no hallmarks."

Heth's brow darkened. Several sharp noises carried in from the outside, shaking the earth as they went.

"We are about to be pulled out of here in the next thirty seconds," said Jamyl Sarum, looking at the only three colleagues she had in the world. "Three of us will be instantly safe. I do not know about you, Dear Executor."

Heth nodded. "My people will take care of me," he said.

"All I ask is that you remember my words," said Sarum over the growing staccato of noises from outside. "Research the matter. Find out for yourselves." She looked at each of the men in turn. "I have arranged for you to receive coordinates to cargo containers my people have deployed. There you will find the clean technology I have promised. Though you may not believe my words, I pray you will believe the evidence."

"What smoke and mirrors, Your Eminence," said Roden. "Absolutely ingenious piece of theatre, from beginning to end."

Sarum shook her head.

"Ye of little faith," she said.

One minute later the room stood empty, and one minute after that it was blown to shards, each of which flew out soundlessly past the fighting men and into the dark sea, silent sinking monuments to a chamber whose last occupants would never see each other in the same room again.

With his Corporal's head cradled in his lap and his blood mixing with the Corporal's blood on the glinting pavement Ulfbrard gathered his senses just enough to scream, and scream *loud*.

Though it had been intended as a roar, the sound that came out was more akin to a gurgle. He supposed it was probably due to the missing lung.

Blackness began to paint his periphery. This was it, then. Good a way to go as any. Something historic. Nobody there to witness it.

A dark silhouette came into his field of view. He narrowed his eyes at it, and as it gradually came into focus a sick realization rattled its way down his spine and took hold in his gut.

An armored figure with a matte visor, spread out over the face as if to deny even the existence of a face, stared down at him.

"Evening," he managed to say, through blood and sand and bile. Ocean air had never smelled so fresh.

The figure stood there for a brief while. Small clicking noises could be heard inside its helmet. Then it leveled its weapon at him.

Involuntarily his breath quickened, choked gasps coming in ragged rhythm. He had often wondered what his last words would be; in fact, he had constructed them carefully. He opened his lips to speak.

"Adakul, light of the world..." he began, but got no further.

The figure resumed its search of the surroundings.

The horizon was silent and dark.

Sirens of Fear and Sense

1

Caldari Providence Directorate Headquarters, New Caldari

January 26th, YC115

The hall was golden white, a prismatic front chamber of narrow glass walls. She'd always found it a strangely ostentatious scheme for a man so given to brute force politics, but she supposed everybody was allowed their idiosyncrasies, and Tibus Heth surely had not shown many of those through her time as his personal assistant. At least not until the past few weeks.

"The incident *has* had quite an effect on him," Dr. Kiras was saying as they passed through the glass corridor, their steps clacking off the polished surfaces in unconscious unison.

Miss Marisaki nodded. "What are the biggest issues?"

"Well, he's been pretty tight-lipped with me about it, but I'm cleared for conversation with a lot of the brass, and to my mind there has been a definite pattern showing. Delusional ideation, heavy anxiety, obsessive neurosis. By most accounts he's seeing shadows in every corner, and by some accounts they're closing in on him."

"That's nothing new," she replied. "To some degree he always thinks there's a conspiracy going on somewhere. And I mean, in the strictest sense, he's probably right."

"Of course," said the doctor. "Pardon me, Miss Marisaki. I'm first and foremost a physician, of course, and it's not for me to speculate on political truth and lies. But there are... you see, there are certain hints, certain psychological markers," and here he stopped for a bit and pinched his

upper lip pensively, "that indicate that he may not be arriving at all of his conclusions in the, ahh... the healthiest of fashions."

Miss Marisaki regarded him for a moment. "The Derj's," she said.

Dr. Kiras nodded ruefully. "It could be," he said. "The deposits are growing bigger. He is starting to show more pathway damage. It could very well be that the trauma of the incident, combined with the stress caused by these worries, is accelerating the process."

"How can it be reversed?"

"Reversed is..." the doctor shrugged apologetically and shook his head, "very optimistic. Medically, it's always difficult to say. It's such a recently discovered disease that its mechanisms aren't fully clear to us yet. Psychologically, though, there is some evidence to indicate that paradigm and attitude can play a significant part in slowing down the advance of symptoms."

"You're telling me he'll live longer if he stays positive?"

"In so many words, yes."

"The foremost physician in the Caldari State is telling me mantras are gonna save our leader's life?"

"Not at all, Miss Marisaki. I just mean that if he's under this kind of stress in the first place, medical measures are less likely to be effective. It takes a strong immune system to not succumb, and he is directly weakening his own with every day he passes worrying. His refusal to accept psychiatric help is most worrying in this capacity."

"Thank you, doctor," she said. "You are dismissed."

The doctor spent just a split second staring at her with his lip bitten, then he bowed slightly to her, turned and left. She herself turned toward the incongruous steel door at the corridor's end, but then stopped again to briefly speak into a wrist-mounted radio:

"Imara Marisaki, Head Office, Clearance 5, requisitioning all conversational records between Doctor Rami Kiras, PDID 2420, and any officers Clearance 4 and above for the last month and a half. Confidentiality breach, executive override 4419. Required on my desk by noon today. Thank you."

She straightened herself, discreetly tucked away a small crease on the front of her suit, squared her shoulders and pushed a button next to the door. A three-tone chime of square waves, hollow in the glass corridor, announced her presence.

"Executor Heth, sir?" she said. "May I come in?"

There was another chime. The door slid open.

--

The room Miss Marisaki now stepped into was a jarring counterpoint to the welcoming gleam of the outside corridor. Her superior, Tibus Heth, Executor of the Caldari State and undoubtedly its most powerful single person, had designed his quarters expressly to provide himself with an element of surprise whenever state visits were called for. Lulled into their customary sense of comfort and splendor by the tastefully opulent corridor, guests would suddenly enter a chamber so small and sparse as to almost seem like a prison cell, were it not for the little things restricted to prisoners on even the best days in the State: a small flower in a tiny windowsill with sharp needles of light from behind it rendering its outline into chiaroscuro, a picture in a frame next to a simple cot with several blankets, and a desk with a small control console on it, at which a gray-haired gray-eyed man now sat, engrossed in a datapad sitting on his lap. Lines of worry etched him from eyes to ears. His sallow cheeks were salted with stubble.

"How are you feeling, sir?" she asked.

Heth didn't look up from the luminous datapad in his hands. "Good as can be expected," he replied. "They're still at it." He brought his balled hand up

from the datapad, then abruptly splayed his fingers open. A moving image was thrown into the space above the pad, showing a man and a woman standing in front of a broken billboard. The man was wearing a leather jacket with a giant golden logo emblazoned on it, the emblem of an anti-Provist movement active in the low-sec constellations of The Forge. The two of them were screaming at someone behind the camera.

"Amazing how little the people truly comprehend, try as we might to educate them," said Heth, setting the datapad on his lap and rubbing the bridge of his nose. "And the capsuleers are fanning the flames, I hear. No great surprise there. What's on the agenda for this morning?"

"A fair few things, sir." She sat in a chair on the desk's opposite side. "Haatakan Oiritsuu is still asking to speak with you. She said it was only going to get more urgent, until suddenly it would be too late. Not entirely sure what she means by that."

"Let her wait," said Heth, his hand on his forehead, his elbow resting on the edge of the desk. It was impossible to see whether he was surreptitiously reading the datapad. "Her information these past few weeks has been contradictory and misleading," he continued. "I want to keep her guessing for now. Just watch her for a few days and report anything she does to me. Every little gesture, every peep, you understand?"

"Understood, sir. Secondly, the reports coming in from the expeditionary forces continue to be dire. We've lost even more ground. Resources are stretched."

Heth nodded gravely, then asked: "What about my investigation? Anything new?"

"Nothing, sir," replied Miss Marisaki. "The only thing we still know reliably is what we've known since the beginning: your assailant was one of our own, and he was working in conjunction with an unknown force of capsuleers."

Heth was silent for a little bit. He placed the datapad on the table, drew a deep breath and stood up. Just as he did so he grabbed the edge of the table with a sudden grimace. Miss Marisaki furrowed her brow.

"Sir, Doctor Kiras has expressed concern for your... " she began.

"Doctor Kiras," said Heth, waving a hand at her. "I don't trust that man. You know what he said to me? Told me I would feel better if I talked to a qualified professional. I asked him, what are you if not a qualified professional? He said it's not so simple. I told him would a qualified professional help me root out my conspirators? He didn't have much of an answer for that." He walked over to the small window, grasped one of the plant's leaves between thumb and forefinger, stroked it gently.

"I would like you to place a classified message to a Dr. Yoshun, at the Corporate & Family Practices Clinic in Sarogar, North Arcurio," he said presently. "Tell him I need to see him, here, at his earliest convenience, and that the matter is urgent."

"Very well, sir," said Miss Marisaki, noting down the order. She swallowed hard, steeled herself, then broached the subject she had been dreading all morning. "Then there is the matter of your Directive, sir, from yesterday," she said.

Heth looked at her and a measure of focus came into his bloodshot eyes. "I trust it's being put into place post-haste," he said.

"Not quite, sir," she replied.

For the first two years of her job, she had been terrified whenever that purposeful gaze burrowed into her, certain that if her words failed her she would find a quick professional grave at the State hierarchy's foul-smelling roots, with the rest of the bottom-feeders, parasites and other things that crawled. Somehow her ambition had always overridden her fear, though, and she had become adept at finding inspiration within the very pressure of those moments where every word, gesture and inflection counted for so infinitely more than the sum of their parts. It was for this reason that she was probably the only person in the entire Caldari State that could have delivered to Tibus Heth the message contained in her next few words.

She cleared her throat and spoke.

Caldari Providence Directorate Headquarters, New Caldari**ONE DAY EARLIER**

Caldari Navy Grand Admiral Morda Engsten had been quiet and unassuming this afternoon; generally brusque and imposing, her manner today was uncharacteristically laid back. She seemed almost apologetic. Miss Marisaki couldn't recall seeing the Admiral behave this way before, and found herself increasingly curious about what lay behind the older woman's strange facade.

"You see," the Admiral was saying, "there's simply no way that the War Room could ever accept a command like this, particularly in this kind of time frame. For one thing it's tactically unsound. We have reports that the Federation has been setting up clone soldier enclaves on Corfeu for weeks now, and we've only recently started an initiative to incorporate ours into our existing squadrons. Added to that, our expeditionary forces have been taking heavy losses. We're stretched far beyond our limits. I mean, we're barely holding on to Caldari Prime as it is. Scrapping our most valuable military resource..."

"Retooling," interrupted Miss Marisaki.

"Whatever you want to call it. Pulling the clone soldiers is not an option. Doing so at this point would be nothing short of suicidal. Every single member of the Command Council is against it." Slowly, like a cold wave washing up to nip at the heels during high tide, her voice had gained power as she spoke, and she was now tapping on the tabletop in front of her with two fingers, accentuating her points.

"This 'taint' Heth is obsessed with," she continued, still crescendoing, "is the unsubstantiated brainchild of an Empress who's grown unstable through gaining too much power too soon. Not the first time that's

happened in history, I'm sure you'll agree. There is no hard evidence to indicate that it's true whatsoever. Any new technology on this level brings with it its inherent dangers. The rogue soldier who made the attempt on the Executor's life has been interrogated multiple times and found to be nothing more than a stark raving lunatic. The conspiracy is all in our esteemed Executor's mind."

Miss Marisaki felt a flush of anger. "Is there any precedent, Admiral," she asked, looking down at her documents and studiously avoiding eye contact with Engsten, "for the Council to completely veto a directive from the Chief Executor?"

"No," said Admiral Engsten curtly, "but it's a measure we can take nonetheless. You know the law as well as I do."

"It's classified as an extreme measure, though," replied Miss Marisaki, "so it must abide by all the legal ramifications implied in such cases."

"We are well aware of that, Miss Marisaki, and we've discussed it at length. I suppose we'll see how far Executor Heth is willing to go in this brinksmanship game of his, but despite his recent behavior we still place our faith in his understanding that a prolonged legal battle at this level – not to mention at this point in time – is going to undermine the entire structure he's been attempting to build. Should it come to that, the members of the Council will no doubt find our places within any new structure. The Executor might not be so fortunate." Her words had grown soft again, an ominous receding tide.

"Admiral, what you're saying can quite easily be interpreted as treasonous," said Miss Marisaki.

"If the leader refuses to take responsibility for his own declining health and act accordingly," replied Admiral Engsten, "then he cannot be expected to take responsibility for his own nation. This is not treason, Miss Marisaki, far from it. This is concern for the State, over the needs of one man. Anyone is fallible, even more so if they are blind to their own fallibility."

"I think I have heard quite enough of this," said Miss Marisaki, standing up. "You will hear from the Executor before long. Good day, Admiral Engsten." The Admiral's eyes followed her out of the room.

3

Kuisen City

IKAMI V, Ikami System, The Forge Region

January 27th, YC115

"We got a clone squad coming in," said Staff Sergeant Uha.

"No shit?" said his Assistant Squad Leader, Corporal Okawari.

"Yep shit." Uha's weapon was laid out field-stripped in front of him. He removed a large elongated piece of metal from the table.

His companion watched him with interest. "Why you getting rid of your IR mount?" he asked.

"Not worth the weight for riot control," replied Uha. "We're only zapping crowds anyway, don't need the accuracy. Much rather stay mobile, use the headgear if I get into some kind of one-on-one. Less accurate, but these guys don't have anything long range anyway. Bunch of pebble shooters at best."

"Yeah, I guess," said Okawari. "I dunno, I like the original heft. Used to it."

"Yep. Well. You're about twice my size, so I guess it makes sense," said Uha and chuckled.

A brief silence passed while the Staff Sergeant continued to clean his weapon. "They're going to try mixing the squads," he said, suddenly. "Don't let any of our guys hear it yet, but they're gonna put a cloner in every squad."

Okawari looked incredulous. "What the f..."

"Yeah. They wanna explore opportunities for cooperation. Try to break the ice a bit." He smiled grimly down his gun barrel.

"Ice?" said Okawari. "Ice?! Do they not remember what happened at the joint training op last week? Or the month before? Hell, don't they remember *Okushin*? The Heth attempt?! That was a goddamned cloner!"

"That's unconfirmed, Corporal. Those are just rumors."

"Oh, come on. Don't toe the party line with me, Shio," said the bigger man, momentarily forgetting, as he so often did with his friend, that he was subordinate. "The way he was throwing those guys around, nobody's gonna tell me that was any kind of normal god damn soldier. And then they dragged him away and nobody's heard a peep since? Seriously."

"Our orders are orders, Corporal. Orders trump hearsay when you're a soldier, remember?" He inserted a pin into his rifle's receiver, then unfolded his stock with a sharp clack, not looking at his second-in-command. "Now we've got an anti-Provist rally to attend to, and we gotta live with our new comrade, however long that is. He should be here any minute now."

"Wonderful," said the big man, turning to exit the mobile bunker. He opened the door to reveal, in the gathering darkness, the outline of a distant city whose lights threw a purple streak across the sky. "Sure he's a goddamned charmer like the rest of 'em."

Casting one last baleful look at his friend and squad leader, he slapped his helmet on and went outside.

--

Some three hours later the two men were standing in the middle of a square formation of riot-equipped soldiers, facing down a mob composed of State citizens who had been taken to the edge of their tolerance, who

rested content in their righteous cause, who knew that their time had finally come.

"Where's the cloner?" said Okawari.

Uha looked around. "He should be easy to pick out. Asshole's even bigger than you."

"Then why am I not seeing him anywhere?" said Okawari, scanning the crowd.

"He's supposed to be at your nine, front echelon edge," said Uha. "It's..." He put his hand to the side of his helmet. "Wait one. Copy, this is Tarkan Squadron."

Uha's great head swiveled around the square. Beyond the mass of protesters, he could see a broken wall with graffiti on it. Squinting, he was able to make out a number.

514.

"Say again, Kaura leader," said Uha. He looked up, scanned the buildings lining the square. Behind his visor, Okawari could see that his friend's eyes were wide.

He turned his head again to look where Uha was looking, and just then a deafening explosion shook the ground underneath them. Another one followed, then another one, and soon the purple streak thrown by this unfortunate city had turned a deep dark hue of red.

4

Caldari Providence Directorate Headquarters, New Caldari

January 27th, YC115

Imara Marisaki was sitting in her office, reviewing her information. Heth had grown upset at the news of the Command Council's decision, so upset that

before she even fully knew why, she had found herself couching the matter in subtle untruths that shielded him from the full gravity of the situation. *If he won't see a shrink*, she thought now, rationalizing her actions as cold sweat pushed its way down her back, *I'll just have to god damn well act as one*.

She was aware that she'd suddenly plunged herself neck-deep into a dangerous situation, and while the potential consequences for herself terrified her deeply, they were nothing next to the prospect of having Heth do something drastic at this sensitive juncture. He still held executive power, so if he felt like pushing it all the way against his opponents in the War Room, he would be able to do untold damage in the short term, before any legal ramifications would fully come to the fore.

Trying to get a better grasp on the state of her superior, she had been looking over Dr. Kiras's transcripts of interviews with commanding officers. None were particularly heartening. One of them called the Executor a dangerously unstable presence. Another outright questioned his sanity. Everywhere she saw indications of mistrust and hostility. Ignoring the knot in her gut, she made a mental note to leave those reports well out of Heth's hands at all costs.

Her disturbed reverie was interrupted by her aide at the door. His face was ashen and his hands quivered as he wordlessly passed her a datapad. Within seconds, the ashenness had spread to her face as well.

"Notify him I'm on the way. Right now," she said, standing up.

--

"Sir."

"What is it, Miss Marisaki?"

"Sir, there have been... there have been several... attacks."

"Attacks?"

"Yes, sir. Coordinated. All of them at anti-Provist rallies. It appears they were all... they were all carried out by clone soldiers."

"Clone soldiers."

"Yes, sir."

"Killing civilians."

"Yes, sir."

"At rallies where those civilians are protesting my government."

Miss Marisaki swallowed hard. "Yes, sir."

Leaden silence blanketed the room. Summoning up all her courage, with fire burning through her gut and her syllables coming in uneven staccato, she said:

"That's not all, sir. One of the attacks... was..." – she took a quick breath – "was carried out in Arcurio."

Heth's eyes drilled into her. His lips parted slightly.

"North... Arcurio. Sir." She cast her eyes down, and the next word came in a meek whisper: "Sarogar." Her regular composure was nowhere to be found. She was naked to the elements.

A long silence passed. Then:

"I would like you to do something for me, Miss Marisaki."

"Anything, sir."

"I would like you to mobilize the Navy, the armed forces and every single corporate force we have. Get a list of the locations of every single soldier clone vat we have, every single trooper enclave, every bunker, every barracks. Do you understand me? Every single one. I want them eradicated."

"Sir..." she paused. "Sir, the Council will..."

"The War Room can do as the War Room sees fit. If they wish to stand in my way, they are welcome to try their level best. This is an executive order,

to be carried out immediately. Immediately, Miss Marisaki." The soft tone of his voice and his absolute composure were more terrifying to her at that moment than any outburst she had ever seen from him.

"Y... yes, sir," she stammered, and made to leave.

"One more thing before you go."

She turned again. His face didn't seem so gray anymore.

"Get me Haatakan Oiritsuu," he said.

"As you wish, sir."

She left the room. Heth sat down again.

There was a very short silence, and then Haatakan Oiritsuu, former leader of the Kaalakiota Corporation and his unwilling hostage-ally, appeared on his datapad, surrounded by her garden of flowers.

Her face was absolutely impassive. She raised her eyebrows, cocked her head slightly, and as she cut the head off a blooming red flower she mouthed the words:

Too late.

Cover Stories

“Would you like a drink, sir?”

“Yes, a small arrack, please.” Allek looked up and smiled at the hostess. She was a young one, Vherokior he reckoned but perhaps mixed tribe. One of the “Republic’s Children” he thought to himself with an internal half-grimace, half-smile.

He looked out of the window at the ground rushing past the flyer some thousand meters below. The great plains of Eyniletti, quite far to the south now. Many kilometers further away from the great metropolis of Matar City with every minute. Closer to neutral territory. Well, that was the idea. He chuckled to himself at the notion and considered the book he’d been reading. He was enjoying the new study of ancient Krusual warlords all the more because it was remarkably free of the usual overblown rhetoric about Krusual heroism. A real history. About time we started to look at ourselves with a clear eye, he thought. Allek sipped his drink and went back to reading the book.

Allek felt the flyer banking and looked up from a chapter on Jarvika the Fang, a particularly treacherous bandit king of the eastern Tronhadar, to see the edges of the southern desert and the south-western hills out the window. They were on the final approach to the new airfield. He marked his page and turned off the datapad, balancing it on his lap as he sat up straighter in his chair. Funny thing about flying, getting ready to land, steeling yourself, when after all there was nothing to do but wait. He caught himself thinking about this, smiled and relaxed, looking out of the window with interest. Last time, he’d come by road-train and he wondered if he’d get a good view of the Great Caravanserai.

Allek felt the flyer shift under him again and then he saw it. Magnificent yet somehow a melancholy sight, the ancient building loomed over the dusty plains with the hills to its back, and the vast expanse of the desert hinted at by the shine and shimmer of bright sand off to the left. This was the most

majestic of the caravanserais, those waystations, trading posts and meeting grounds of the ancient Minmatar. This was the “Great Caravanserai,” so-called for its size and architectural beauty but also for the ambition of those who had built it. This place predated the Minmatar Empire. This place was where, it was thought, the tribes had begun to edge towards unity and an eventual global peace. Well, perhaps. Such speculation was shrouded in forgotten histories and fragments of memory. One thing was sure though, this caravanserai was neutral ground for all the tribes and in all the tales where it figured it had always been so.

That was what made Shakor’s choice of this place as the ground to hold the tribal assembly so inspired. To use the Great Caravanserai was a clear signal of the old ways informing the new. Additionally, it pleased the Thukker as their ancient ancestors had built the caravanserai to have a place to trade with the many tribes and clans of the plains and hills in some safety. All in all, the wily old white-eye had judged things perfectly when it came to the location. No-one could argue with holding the assembly on the one piece of ground that everyone regarded as neutral. Allek craned his neck to get one last look at the great building before the flyer made its landing. Yes, an inspired choice. A pity the handling of the assembly itself had not been so inspired and sure.

“How much for this?” Allek lifted the edge of a datapad – apparently loaded with a recently-recovered account of the Amarr occupation written by Arekal the Betrayer – with two fingers while smiling at the stall-holder.

The man squinted at him and hesitated before answering, “For you, seven parts.” The man was asking for seven-tenths of a Uranium-Backed Quantum: an increasingly common currency that used quantum entanglement to link data tokens to the uranium depository that underpinned the represented value. Ordinarily, venturing a price in a currency such as UBX would be an extreme discourtesy on the seller’s part as the use of electronic money was normally for the buyer to raise as a convenience to both parties. If the seller were to offer a price and force a

buyer to admit they were incapable of trading in such currency it would be tantamount to an insult. Even offering a price in local currency or scrip would be regarded as somewhat rude without first going through a polite ritual of weighing up kudos and apologetically citing some formulaic reason for having to charge for the item at all.

Allele, however, merely smiled, held up his copy of the new history of the Krusual warlords and said, "Ah? This one cost me only five parts."

The data dealer, a short Sebiestor with an unflattering rough fringe of hair around his ears, making his head look like an egg in a nest, became watchful and glanced around the surrounding stalls of the west bazaar before muttering, "Come around into my office, friend, I have bargains there if your taste is for history."

Allele sighed inwardly, the dealer's manner gave him a presentiment of trouble. That or the man was a buffoon and what he had would be next to useless. Even so, he walked around the counter and followed the man into a small office in a curtained-off section of the deep alcove, one of hundreds in the caravanserai, from which the man, like so many others, did his business. Allele looked around the cluttered and disordered area and wondered if it was all a clever camouflage. The stall-holder went to his desk, too big for the space, and pulled a small device out of a drawer, placed it on the desk and switched it on. As soon as he had done that, the man's whole demeanour changed and he straightened up as he turned to Allele.

"You're Allele Berialsh then? I'd heard you were big for our kind. Some Brutor or Krusual in the blood?"

"Probably both, you know the way of it. How many of us are pure these days?" Allele had revised his opinion of the man the moment he'd seen the device. The casual questioning confirmed it. This one knew his business.

"How true that is, despite all our chiefs and fathers tell us. Still, you're working for the tribe, eh? Even a corrupted creature like me can admire that. Feels nice to belong, yes?"

Allek wondered if the man was mocking him. However good he was at his job, he couldn't know the truth or Allek wouldn't be here. Allek didn't like to think where he would be if this venal old bastard knew the truth about him.

"It feels nice to have some kudos. Ever regret leaving behind the old ways of favors given and favors received?"

"Ha! I might have left behind the open favor and the 'gifts of family, clan and tribe' but I still deal in favors right enough. Money just clarifies who owes what to whom, you understand?"

"Enough of this, old man. You've had your 'clarity' already, I think you owe me a favor, yes?"

"True, youth. Here, this is what you want." The Sebiestor pulled a datapad out of another drawer in his vast desk and handed it to Allek. He watched while Allek accessed it and verified the contents.

"This is encrypted and shielded?"

"Of course, though don't you know? They say no sniffers are allowed in the assembly quarter." The man smirked.

Allek didn't bother replying, he knew as well as the dealer that data sniffers and passive sensors were all over the assembly quarter, whatever Shakor's public relations people might say. He looked at the old Seb again, shuddered imperceptibly and walked away without another word.

Allek walked quickly down the long vaulted corridor of the west bazaar breathing deeply to clear his head of the unpleasant impression of his encounter with the data broker. The pad was still in his hand. He glanced at it. An historical survey of the Starkmanir migrations by a respected Sebiestor historian. At least, that was what it purported to be and that's what the shielding would tell any sniffer that pinged it. The pad actually had the entire history on it. What it also contained was political intelligence vital to sensitive negotiations ongoing in the tribal assembly. The Sebiestor tribe needed this information. Karin Midular needed this information to shore up her hand in the discussions. She also needed no-one else to know about it.

Allek placed the datapad in his coat pocket next to the Krusual history and tried to think about something else. Unconsciously he'd come to a halt. He looked about and was taken aback to see two Ni-Kunni behind a stall that seemed to be dealing in antiquities and other art objects. He thought a second and realized they must be free traders. Most Ni-Kunni stayed in the service of their Amarr masters, even if they were nominally "free" and this applied to their merchant class no less than any other Ni-Kunni. Some though went into business as so-called "free traders." They had no direct ties to any noble house or territory. They were subjects of the empire to be sure but they could largely do as they pleased. It was an option the more adventurous Ni-Kunni tended to take. It could also bring large rewards, which appealed to the avarice of some members of that race.

The Amarr Empire found these free traders useful. They could go places that True Amarr trade vessels could not go and in greater overall safety in many other places. Much of the trade that went between the Amarr Empire and the Republic was done by such men. Lately, with the free traders having carried so many freed slaves to the Republic from the Empire, the Ni-Kunni merchants were even treated with a grudging respect. Even so, they usually restricted themselves to space stations or starbases. Evidently the new atmosphere and the absolute guarantees of neutrality in force in the caravanserai had tempted these two down to the planet where they would likely be able to get a better price and cut out planetary shipping agents.

Allek mused on the free traders a moment, watching them hawking their wares and chattering animatedly with browsers. He felt an odd kinship with them in that moment. He couldn't define the reason why and it unsettled him. Shaking himself, Allek walked on, less quickly but at a brisk pace, out of the west bazaar and towards the assembly quarter.

The assembly quarter was on the south side of the caravanserai, an unbroken, fortified area that had once functioned as a kind of redoubt into which all unable to bear arms would go in the event of raids by outlaws and casteless bandits in the ancient times. It was also built several stories

higher than the flanking west and east sides of the edifice and one story higher than the north side's gatehouse. It was the natural location for the assembly to base itself while the rest of the caravanserai functioned much as it had in the old days. The assembly's presence here had drawn a small town's worth of officials, technicians, security, journalists, ambassadors – in short, all the types of people you would expect to gather around the government of a nation. Naturally, this drew traders, tourists and many others, legitimate and not so legitimate. The Great Caravanserai easily accommodated them all and in this respect too the wisdom of the choice of location was apparent.

Allek turned out of the vaulted corridor of the west side and into a low-ceilinged walkway, a kind of open colonnade running the length of the south side and saw the vast courtyard. Open to the sky and thronged with people and with yet more booths and stalls around the edges, a large section in the center functioned as a vehicle park. Walking along the covered way, Allek wondered if the tribal council would make its home here. It looked very much as if the council would be the power in the new Minmatar tribal republic and there would be a symbolism in it choosing to use this place. The new center of power would be at some remove from the parliament, a body that would likely remain as a rather sad and toothless rump implementing the directives of the council of chiefs.

The negotiations on all this were at a critical stage within the assembly. When you cut through the political niceties, the assembly's main purpose was to define the new balance of power in the Republic. The main outstanding issues revolved around old and new tensions: the rivalries between the four tribes of the "first republic", the precarious positions of the two "recovered tribes", and the vexed question of the Thukker and their special arrangements.

Political realities being what they were, the concessions to the Thukker were simply going to have to be accepted. The Thukker were a fully-fledged independent power in a way that no other tribe was. Not to say they were more powerful necessarily, they simply had a freedom of action that

couldn't be ignored by the very nature of their society. All the talk about it in the assembly was in the manner of a smokescreen and the Thukker cheerfully played their role knowing full well they'd get what they wanted in the end.

No, the real issue was the Nefantar and the Starkmanir and how those two tribes would disturb the balance of power in the Minmatar home worlds. The established tribes were playing a game of maneuver and counter-maneuver around the two returned tribes. These two were in their turn playing their hands for all they were worth to get what they could. Power politics, as murky and raw as it could get without turning into an open breach. That was the business of the assembly. That was why Allek was here.

Turning into the wide entryway of the assembly quarter, Allek became conscious of the heightened security here. Visible guards at regular intervals. A full security suite at the inner portal. There had been extensive work done in the old fastness to make it as much a modern fortress as it had been an ancient one. That naturally included fortifications in the realm of information warfare. Allek shrugged slightly and walked forward, this was the moment when all could go very wrong for him.

He passed the guards, a mix of men and women from all the tribes in neutral military dress. Old Shakor had tweaked Karin Midular's nose here and had the assembly guard emblem based on a stylized Khumaak. Allek had been present when Midular had seen the guard turn out for the first time, and had admired the way she had simply smiled wryly and clapped a hand on the Sanmatar's arm in appreciation. The woman had mellowed by all accounts. Allek hadn't known her before she fell from power but her temper had been legendary in political circles.

Coming to the security checkpoint, Allek resisted an urge to pat his coat pocket and walked by the duty officer while slipping his pass out of an inner pocket. The officer merely nodded and watched as Allek walked through the scanner. His presence was hardly necessary, had the pass not been valid, or had Allek been carrying certain items, or even if he were modified

in certain ways, the scanner would have activated a security cage to instantly trap him, and followed it up with a powerful dose of narcoleptic gas. In this instance the scanner simply registered the pass, detected no threatening or questionable items and allowed Allek to walk on into the assembly quarter proper.

Relaxing, Allek headed for the assembly chamber confident his pass would clear him through the multiple visible and hidden checkpoints on the way there. It was all down to the datapads now. The datapads and a cool head.

The assembly chamber was the ugliest room Allek had ever seen. He'd thought that the first time he saw it, empty and waiting for the assembly to start its work, and seeing it full of people didn't improve it any. Someone had had the bright idea of adapting one of the old meeting halls by putting facades that represented the architectural styles and symbolism of all the tribes over the fine old original architecture of the hall. The point of this was to avoid giving the impression of Thukker preeminence because, having built it, the architecture of the place was ancient Thukker. Allek thought this was a nonsense as ancient Thukker architecture barely resembled modern Thukker architecture. Some organizing committee had liked the notion though and so a grotesque hodge-podge of styles had been crudely stitched together to make an assembly chamber. In Allek's opinion it was an unfortunate metaphor for how badly the assembly process had gone. Nice idea but once inside the process, or room, and it was clear the execution was terrible.

Allek looked about, the chamber was busy but not in formal session. There was a lot of political horse-trading going on informally though. The fall-out from the attack on Vard VII had yet to be fully resolved and tensions were still high. Perfect timing, in the confusion of the moment he could approach both principals discreetly. He looked around the chamber more searchingly, not many people were in their places. Maleatu Shakor, the Sanmatar, was up on the dais talking to some aides, trying to give an impression of being above the fray no doubt. Allek caught sight of Tenerhaddi Dykon moving

purposefully towards the dais and smiled. The Sanmatar was going to get an earful. The Krusual Chief was not the most conciliatory presence at any table.

Allele moved around the sides of the chamber, there was Isardsund Urbrald, Chief of the Vherokior, standing impassive while Wkumi Pol appeared to be ranting in his face. He paused and looked again. Yes, Pol was actually red in the face, turning the Brutor Chief's complexion a shade uncomfortably close to that of fedo hide. Allele shook his head and moved towards a loose clot where a large number of functionaries were clustering. Something going on there. Ah, Karin was holding court again, with Eleca Valkanir and Jeoran Setul, the new chiefs of the Nefantar and Starkmanir respectively, in her orbit. Good enough.

Allele pressed through the crowd, skillfully elbowing past while murmuring apologies and stood up straight. The Sebiestor Chief caught the movement and she glanced into his eyes. Allele nodded slightly, smiling. The Ray of Matar turned to the other chiefs and within a few minutes had brought the discussion to a close. The new chiefs moved back to their respective positions around the chamber, Allele suspected they derived some security from having places at the table, and the crowd broke up.

Karin Midular stood up, walked over to Allele, and without ceremony asked, "Do you have that book you mentioned?"

Allele reached into his coat pocket and extracted the history of Krusual warlords, "Yes, here it is, I think your new interest in ancient history will profit you in the here and now, my Chief."

Midular glanced at the title, not at all interested or in any way expecting anything different as Allele knew, and nodded. "I'll glance at this over coffee. Krusual warlords, eh? Heh, perhaps it'll give me some ideas on how to deal with that rogue Dykon."

Allele smiled, nodding, and smiled even more inside, she'd played along with what she took to be part of the misdirection. He'd hoped she would. Now though, would the guesses keep working?

“Allele, you know, I think you might do me a favor. The Starkmanir are short of political researchers. Perhaps you’d offer your services with my compliments?”

“Certainly, my Chief.”

The Starkmanir might or might not have been short of political researchers, but they weren’t short of friends with good intelligence and an accurate read on the situation, thought Allele as he walked over to Chief Jeoran Setul’s delegation. People thought the Starkmanir were at the mercy of the big tribes’ charity and expertise. Well, that was worth playing on, and the colony on Vard VII had certainly benefited from Sebiestor help, but the Starkmanir weren’t interested in being in debt to the other tribes forever. The new chief had his own plans and his friends were good at finding new friends.

Allele touched the history of Starkmanir migrations in his pocket and thought about the information on it. As they’d sat together in his pocket the two datapads had synchronized everything except their respective covering data. He’d given Karin Midular the information on planetary commanders and their political links that she’d purchased through him, and it would help her in the talks over the “clone soldier” situation so far as it went. But he’d also be giving the Starkmanir the same information and Jeoran Setul would be able to play the high-stakes political game that much better for knowing what Midular knew.

Allele’s mind was drawn back to the Seb data dealer. Shrewd old devil but he’d missed a trick. He’d spotted another bloodline in Allele true enough but he just hadn’t guessed right.

After the Fall

After my wife of forty years passed away, and after I'd grieved for a long and quiet time, I gave in at last and took up some old hobbies. I needed something to do. A mind my age will begin to fade if not put to use, and I had no intention of becoming one of those ciphers who stops leaving tracks in the earth altogether.

I began gardening again, carting away the grass from part of our yard and setting down rows of seedlings in the bare dirt. I hadn't done it since before I met Levotta, when I'd put all that aside to get married and start a family. It had been a hard choice. Others in my position might've tried to keep everything going, but life's never worked that way in my opinion. You focus your energy on what you're doing or you don't do it at all, and you don't mix activities that need your full dedication. I decided I belonged to Levotta and our kids.

The kids grew up with ambition and drive, and one by one they moved away to distant continents, until it was only Levotta and me, and now only me. So I began gardening. Also, I got a dog, who I quickly grew fond of but somehow never got around to naming. Life was alright for us Gallente on Caldari Prime, as it had been ever since I could remember. Gardening turned out to be more difficult than I thought, because although I still had a bit of my wiry strength, and remembered how to use my tools, I was old, and out of practice. But I persisted. It was a purpose.

Then the Caldari came back.

People I'd known for decades were suddenly taken, carted off to some rumored underwater city. My neighbors on both sides disappeared in the space of one night. Caldari guards roamed the streets, and a Titan scarred the sky above us. Institutions were gutted, their top tiers replaced with staff hand-picked by the invaders. The infrastructure of daily life began to crack, then crumble. Necessities didn't make their way from the country into the cities, and help for anything became increasingly hard to come by. For a

while I was worried that we'd all get killed, not by some final assault by the invading Caldari, but in a rebellion by the increasingly desperate Gallente.

But the Caldari, heartless though they can be, are also ruthlessly efficient, and to their credit they had no intention of letting us turn into animals. Not that it was entirely up to them, but they certainly had plans in place. Some of our people were relocated - making use of the homes left emptied when they'd rounded up the political dissidents - so that we were more tightly clustered together. This lessened the need for guard patrols, heightened our sense of community, and calmed people down for a while. Basic services were restored; we were still in the dark half the time, but at least we had running water and heat, and some inklings of a barter economy.

Not long after, they began to build the walls. That got everyone riled up again. We realized we had become prisoners in our own homes, with the more prosperous areas of the city reserved for incoming Caldari settlers. Those Caldari were subsidized, we discovered, by Tibus Heth's government, and thus were set up to create a far more prosperous society than what we had to work with. Once the walls were up and the Caldari had settled on the other side, our people were only let through under exceptional circumstances, and never allowed to stay for long. The occasional deserter attempted to flee our side, but they were always caught and either brought back or shot.

All the while, I tended to my garden, which consistently took over more of my yard, and to my dog, whom I grew to love more deeply with each day. Our people had slowly formed into divisions of constant anger on one side and weary apathy on the other, and I was glad to have the company of someone who was simply happy to be alive and didn't judge me or anyone else. For our society it was as if there had been a death in the family, like a parent had passed away. After the initial surge of anger, frustration and rebellion, what we were left with was the gaping absence of a central figure to hold things together and lead by example, and an utter impotence to do anything about it. No wonder we turned on ourselves.

That division, of anger and ennui, became emblematic of our society in the years that followed. There was chaos, but it was a roiling, churning kind, constantly simmering without ever quite reaching a boiling point. Fertile breeding ground for darkness, in fact. Crime grew, and some parts of the city became astoundingly dangerous, but the guards - Caldari guards - kept things somewhat in check. I knew their patrols and saw how their mere presence served both to calm people down and to anger them. I think we lashed out as much at ourselves and our own ineffectiveness as we did at the invading force. Deep down we knew that even if the Caldari citizens on the other side of those walls had not been given anything, no subsidies, no guards, no watchful Titan floating in the sky, they still would have made a better life out of things than we managed.

I was ashamed of my people, in all honesty. We weren't prepared to make hard choices. Gallente are notorious for acting on whims and fancies, but I would have liked to see us pull together and make something out of this mess. Instead we had broken windows, robberies, disappearances, news of almost daily assaults on innocent people, and all of it chewed over in a low-level, insistent chatter by people too unhappy to live decent lives with what they had, but too afraid of the world to do anything about it.

And all of that made me angry, too, and made me feel powerless and weak, which wasn't helping anyone. So I focused on my garden, where at least I could get something done. The more we descended into chaos, the easier it was for me to let go of distractions; all I needed to do was keep my focus while everyone else lost theirs. The houses to either side of me had never been re-occupied, and since the yards were only separated by ankle-high fences, I allowed my garden to grow into them, taking up the space it needed thanks to all my efforts. Most of it was given over to vegetables and herbs, with the occasional cluster of flowers for a little color.

They tried scaring me a few times. I'd wake to hear loud voices outside my house, from people clearly agitating themselves up for something. A few times I had things thrown at my windows - never rocks, usually just trash from the streets. But I had a dog, and it was a large and fearless dog, and it

would be awake, alert, chomping at the bit to be let out. All I had to do was open the front door and he would race out, growling, to scare these people away. I never worried that they might hurt him, put a gun to him or anything of that sort. People with serious weapons are not people who throw trash at windows, and they're certainly not people who could hit a fast, angry, moving target that's about to tear into them. I chalked their presence up to random chaos, not express ill will.

Until my dog disappeared.

It wasn't uncommon for him to go wandering during the day, but he was smart enough to know to come back before nightfall. It was dangerous out in the city after dark, and he knew I needed him here. The first night, I tried not to worry, and assumed that he'd be back by morning. I slept little and woke far too early, only to find that he still hadn't returned.

That day I made my way into the city, asking around, looking for him, shouting in the vain hope he'd recognize my voice. The grimy streets gave me no answers, and the hundreds of people I ended up speaking to either said they hadn't seen him, or, to my anger and frustration, ignored me altogether. I was just an old man to them, shouting in the streets, forgotten after his passage. I was a cipher.

I spent the entire day wandering around, and the evening, until it started turning into pitch-black night. People warned me to avoid the areas I walked through, but I ignored them and kept going. I knew my way around the city, and I moved quietly and unseen.

When the sun finally rose, I returned to my home, hoping against hope he would have returned. But the house was empty. I ate and drank, because I had to, and I showered and shaved, because I would need to keep talking to people and I couldn't afford to take on a disheveled appearance, and then I left the house again. The garden would take care of itself for a while.

It was five days before I gave up. I was exhausted. I hadn't slept more than a handful of hours, my legs were cramping up constantly, and my voice was barely even a hoarse whisper. I lay down on my bed in my clothes,

utterly unable to sleep. I was ruined; I was filled with so much grief that I couldn't even process it. That dog had been my friend and my only companion for years. All the feelings of loss and loneliness over Levotta's death came flooding back, adding to the desperate helplessness I already felt at having lost my best and only friend. I couldn't even process it, so I lay there, empty and hollow, a truer cipher than ever.

In the whorl of thoughts I must have slept, for suddenly it was evening again, and there were noises outside. It took me a while to realize where I was and what was going on, and I had the strangest feeling that the noises had been ongoing for some time. It was only when I realized they were coming from the back of the house, not from the street, that I swiftly rose from my bed and walked to my window. What I saw made my stomach sink.

Part of the garden was in ruins. Plants had been torn up, torn and scattered, and the earth had been trampled down. There were people, my people, lying in the dirt, not moving; and I gasped when I saw shovels beside them.

Caldari guards surrounded them, weapons drawn. I rushed out the door and into the yard, not knowing what I was getting myself into. If I hadn't been so distraught over the loss of my dog, I would never have walked into the middle of things like that; but I was completely heedless over my own fate, and ready for the guards to put a bullet in me at a moment's notice.

They welcomed me. An old man, exhausted and at the end of his rope, and the hated enemies of my people treated me like one of their own. They talked to me in quiet tones, explaining several times over what had been going on, and they listened to what I had to say even though half of it was panicked, sleep-deprived babble delivered in a voice that was still barely audible.

They had known about my garden for a while. They spoke of it with respect, and I got the unmistakable feeling that they found it to be a small

patch of honest life in a civilization that had gone to a grey, dead ruin. At that moment in time, I didn't disagree with them in the slightest.

One of their own had been on patrol when he'd heard voices from my garden, and had walked over to see the Gallente - my supposed people - trashing it. He'd warned them, they had resisted, he had called for backup, and the end result was a group of unconscious young people with scorch wounds and burns from crowd control weapons wielded with no hesitation.

I couldn't say I felt bad about it. This hadn't just been a spur-of-the-moment trampling. It had been planned. They'd brought shovels, with the clear intention of turning the entire garden over. They had been planning to irrevocably ruin what little quiet patch I had built for myself here, and they would have succeeded. In the state I was, this would have ended me, for good.

I offered the guards all the herbs and vegetables they wanted, and they declined with polite amusement. They told me they would spread the word that I and my garden weren't to be touched, and if that either were harmed in any fashion, there'd be a scouring. I thanked them profusely. They left me after a while, carting off the miscreants and promising to keep an eye out for my dog.

The attack on my garden, vindictive as it had been, helped me survive. It brought back everything I felt about a life lived with purpose, with unyielding focus and no regrets. The losses I had suffered began to recede again; I would deal with them in time, when I was ready. The growing distaste I felt for my own people, and the corresponding shameful sympathies I had with the Caldari, both began to fade from my mind; I would not judge myself for who I was, no matter what others thought. I was a driven man who had been blessed, at my old age, with the health and the mental acuity to fulfill a purpose on this earth, and if this made other people hate me and wish me harm, it was none of my concern. I had my garden. I would tend it, I would give the earth all the nourishment it needed, and I would let it grow, flourish, and outlast me, in the shadow of the Titan above us.

I would have kept on gardening for many, many years, hidden in that shadow, but only a few weeks after that incident, something happened. A strange quiet fell over the district. The guard patrols stopped. Nobody seemed to know what was going on, but a persistent rumor arose that there were ongoing battles elsewhere on the planet.

I worried about my children. Communications between districts had been cut off for years - we would be notified of deaths in the family, nothing more - and I had long since made a conscious effort to believe they were prospering and not think about it beyond that. But now, having no word from them, my mind went racing with all the terrible possibilities.

Days passed. Sometimes I would hear the faintest sounds, as of thunderstorms approaching, and others I asked confirmed it. The guard patrols didn't start up again, and I began to worry, about me, my garden, and about the entire district.

There were still guards on the walls, and although they wouldn't speak to us from their towers, I went there as often as I dared without attracting undue attention, just to see if I could hear anything. Old men can sit still and unnoticed for hours - it's one of the few benefits of being at my age - and I eventually started catching snippets of conversation. Something was going on, both on the planet and up in space. They mentioned battles, and troops that didn't seem to stop. Tibus Heth had nearly died at some point, and now they didn't know what to make of the commands trickling down from above. They were uncertain, and very worried.

I woke one night to a booming rumble. The entire house trembled. My first thought was that a bomb had gone off nearby, and in my groggy stupor I rushed out to the garden to see if anything was amiss there, but found nothing out of the ordinary. A light passed over me, but before I could look up to see what it was, another rumble hit, so loud that I fell to my knees, clutching my ears.

When it had passed, I looked up to the sky, to one of the most amazing sights of my life. The Titan, that behemoth which had floated impossibly in

the skies above us for all those years, was alight. I stared at it, my brain barely able to comprehend the gigantic magnitude of what I was seeing, as other vessels - themselves surely giants - flew around it, weapons fire flitting everywhere.

The rumble continued, this time with less noise but enough tremor to shake me on my feet, and I realized that it couldn't possibly be coming from the battle in the skies; those ships would be outside our atmosphere. I rushed to get a ladder and climbed up on my roof, which wasn't that high but at least granted me a slightly better view of the horizon.

There were lights there, very faint but unmistakable, all on the same part of the horizon. I scrambled down the ladder again as fast as my old legs would let me, found my binoculars in the house, and went back up to look again. They were definitely lights, probably from explosions. They were so far away, and so hard to make out, that I realized they were in another district, possibly on the other side of the continent. I wondered if the same thing were happening elsewhere on the planet.

Something else had been gnawing at me ever since I'd gotten up on the roof, and I finally realized what it was. I pointed my binoculars at the walls. There were no guards. None. They had all been called away, or fled.

I had a few moments to wonder what it meant. Then there was a blinding flash from above, and when I looked up I saw the most incredible sight of my life. The Titan, stately and majestic, slowly cracked in half, as if were being torn apart by the hands of God. In a barrage of explosions that seemed to reach across the sky, I saw the thing, this symbol of the Caldari statehood on our planet, fall to pieces and began to hurtle toward us, and in that moment more than any other of my life I accepted the fact that I truly might die before I could let out the breath in my lungs.

The next thing I knew, I was lying flat on my back, still on the roof, shaken and half-deaf.

I remembered the pieces growing larger and larger still, and I remembered that I had seen them in an arc - which, my old, scrambled brain whispered

to me, meant they had fallen elsewhere - and then I remembered the impact that had shaken me off my feet.

There was a ringing in my ears, and it felt as if it were blocking out something I should be hearing. Still feeling unsteady, I slowly crawled on my hands and knees until I got back to the ladder, which I went down one careful step at a time until I reached the garden. I sat there, breathing quietly, trying to shake off the ringing and hear what was beneath it. Something compelled me to go back into the house, where I barely noticed how everything had fallen off every shelf, because the ringing was a little quieter now and was being replaced by a familiar sound. Not daring even to hope it was true, not thinking that I deserved it after everything that had happened, I shuffled to the front door, and I opened it, and my dog was there, barking happily at me, and as it jumped into my arms I fell to my knees and hugged it and cried as it licked my face.

I spent the next day packing, with intermittent pauses to play with the dog and hold it in my arms. The earth in my garden was well-packed with nutrients, enough to let it sprout for as long as it were left untouched. The entire sky was blocked out with smoke and ash, but I assumed it would clear soon enough.

The guards hadn't returned. I heard the sounds of hammers, and knew that some brave souls had decided to bring down the walls. Soon we would see how the other half had been living, and they would see us. Some would cross over, but I imagined that for the time being we would keep to ourselves, to the supposed safety of our own people.

And I was afraid now. We had been waiting in shadow these last few years, letting the darkness suffuse us, and some of us had been nursing our grudges. To some of my own people I'd been branded as an enemy, a conspirator. Eventually there would be a reckoning, and they would come for me; not because it was right, or even just, but because they would be compelled to do it by their inner natures. To lash out; to hurt; to violently set right a wrong that existed only inside their heads.

To do what they would find themselves compelled to do, without hesitation or guilt - that could come later, if it ever did - and with utter, unrelenting focus. No matter what. I knew that impulse better than any of them, I suspected.

So I packed, and got ready for a long journey, hoping I'd be a long way gone before they arrived.

Because sooner or later they'd wonder why my plants were growing so well, in this forsaken place. And eventually they'd come in with shovels, either to investigate or destroy.

And it wouldn't be long before they started finding the bodies.

Falling Skies

10:07 EVE Standard Time

March 22nd, YC115

Villore VII – Moon 6 - Senate Bureau

Vieres Constellation, Gallente Federation

A tangle of voices echoed around the cavernous interior of the Senate chamber as the last group filed out through the main entrance, an uncountable number of dialects and accents slowly replaced with a stony silence.

His eyes remained downcast, his field of view filled with holofeeds from every corner of the besieged planet. To his right, closed circuit footage showed the glossy black surface of the Shintoko Tower, one of Arcurio's most well-known landmarks, folding like a house of cards. Its lights flickered out like a thousand candles caught in the breeze as it toppled into two neighboring structures.

Directly in front of him, a burning armored personnel carrier emblazoned with the markings of the Caldari Providence Directorate crashed to a halt, slamming into parked vehicles in a crowded street littered with smoldering debris. A figure emerged as the hatch was thrown open, more of a shadow behind the glow of immolation than anything identifiably human. It battled against the heat, frantically attempting to flee the superheated wreckage. Upon doing so it was kicked and beaten into a lifeless burning heap by a bloodthirsty crowd.

His eyes moved on, head still downcast. An ocean of protestors with all manner of homemade weapons filled a broad, tree lined avenue in downtown Pakuri. A young woman no more than 20 years of age, holding the fluttering flag of the Gallente Federation, crumpled to the asphalt as a canister of riot control gas struck her sternum. She remained inanimate as the crowd surged over her toward the Provist blockade.

The sound of a quiet, smooth voice dragged his eyes from the carnage. "Mister President. I need a decision as soon as you're ready. Our forces are on standby."

He nodded his hairless head, his eyes returning to the mess of holographic images projected beneath the immaculate glass surface of the desk. He picked out the face of a handsome young Gallente man, sullied features locked in a scowl, lips moving in silent protest. Without looking up, he replied:

"And then what? If I give the green light, what happens next? This operation is a massive risk. If it fails, you know what Heth will do. It would be the biggest mistake of my life to think he wouldn't burn every shred of Gallente existence from Caldari Prime."

Blaque approached him slowly as his words echoed around the empty chamber and his hand gestured to the carnage laid out on the surface of the desk. "Our people are dying on the ground. We can't wait any longer. Whether he orders the Shiigeru to strike an hour or a year from now, so long as it stays in orbit and our citizens down there persist in causing unrest, it will remain a clear threat to the security of Luminaire. Heth's reaction is something we can never fully prepare for."

"Don't lecture me, Mentas. I'm well aware of the situation. If the administration at the time hadn't been so damned spineless, we wouldn't be in this position now" was the calm, quiet reply.

Blaque couldn't help but allow himself a small smile as he watched Jacus Roden, President of the Gallente Federation, drum the fingertips of his right hand against the laminated surface of the desk. The older man let his eyes settle once more on the collage of destruction projected beneath his hand.

A low-slung, sleek white vehicle stood waiting at the black and yellow striped barrier of a Provist checkpoint. Roden ran the tips of his fingers over the grainy image of a Caldari Providence Directorate soldier, his rifle stood at his side as he stooped over to speak through the open window of the

vehicle. A second later his neck snapped back, his head erupting in a crimson haze.

The rear wheels of the vehicle bounced over the tangled body, its nose pushing through the barrier and its bodywork riddled by small arms fire. Roden watched as a perfectly straight contrail of smoke extended from the guardhouse of the checkpoint like a bold line drawn across a sheet of paper. The detonation of the 'Foxfire' anti-personnel rocket tossed the vehicle through a tail over nose flip into a roadside drainage ditch, leaving a trail of fire and billowing black smoke in its wake.

"The situation is spiraling out of control down there. The Provists are losing grip and each hour we delay, we lose more lives to their heavy-handed action." Blaque's words were carefully delivered as he fixed his gaze on the top of Roden's smooth-skinned head. "We need to make sure that the option to call in an orbital strike at the hands of Admiral Yanala is taken out of the equation."

Roden pulled his attention from the charred remains of the vehicle as the Provists began to flank it in well-trained cover formation. He met the sharp amber gaze of Blaque. "I've seen enough. How long would we have to wait for a full deployment?"

"The Navy can move as soon as they have approval, but the FEDCAFT story we pushed to the media will only hold for so long. Sooner or later they'll expect our forces to return to headquarters." As Blaque finished the sentence, his eyes washed over the mess of video feeds in front of the President.

"Ranchel is confident that our forces can pull this off?" Roden's tone was inquisitive, with a measure of wariness, his attention turning to Blaque across the desk. Blaque nodded in response.

"He has Admiral Bauvon in command of the strike force, over a thousand vessels at his disposal if needed. It will be a surprise offensive. We've been monitoring Caldari Navy communications in Black Rise. At present they believe that if we're going to attack, we'll do so with a full-scale offensive

against the State, rather than just Caldari Prime. The FIO has solid intelligence on this, and the diversion has worked. Phase one is complete, phase two needs nothing but your authorization.”

Roden rested his elbows on the surface of the desk, balling one hand into a fist, the second clasped around it as a rest for his chin. “And how do they predict that this will play out?”

“The Caldari Navy already has forces primed to jump to Luminaire should our cynosural inhibitor network be compromised. They’re always on standby. When we bring the net down, they’re liable to jump through at least a token reactionary force, but nothing we won’t be able to clean up given time and commitment. The main unknown factor is always going to be the behavior of capsuleers. If they realize what’s happening, they may see this as an offensive to take back Caldari Prime.”

Roden let out a slow sigh, his fingers gently rubbing over his clean shaven chin. “They will soon realize that this is not the objective of the operation. Until then, our forces will have to deal with them as appropriate.”

“Frankly, for all I care, the State can keep that godforsaken icy rock. As for the Shiigeru, we can no longer tolerate its presence.” Blaque’s reply was without hesitation, a pause only for breath interrupting him. “It now presents an undeniable threat to the security of the Federation, and should never have been agreed upon after the invasion.”

President Roden gave a gentle nod of agreement. The words of his next sentence were delivered as if part of a speech, each one selected, analyzed thoroughly and approved before being spoken. “This operation will cost lives on both sides. The only saving grace is that the number of Federal casualties will be far lower if we act now instead of allowing Provist forces to unleash the full force of the Shiigeru on our people. You have my authorization for phase two.”

The response from Blaque was immediate, a hand thrust between the buttons of his crisp olive-colored jacket. He withdrew a sleek black datapad from his breast pocket and slid it across the desk to the President, who

offered his thumb to a glowing green square on its holographic display. His words were slow and measured. “See to it that it’s done, and keep me updated every ten minutes until the operation is completed, regardless of the outcome.”

Blaque nodded in response, catching the device as it was slid back to him. “You have my word that the pilots selected for this operation are the finest the Federation Navy has to offer.” The younger man slid the small datapad back into his jacket before turning on his heel and making for the door. He lifted his fingers to his earpiece as he walked.

Roden’s eyes were drawn back to the surface of the desk long enough to watch the aftermath at the security checkpoint. Three Provist soldiers carefully wrapped their fallen squad member in a large black sheet before carrying him off toward the guardhouse. The old man lifted his attention from the collage of holographics in time to see the head and shoulders of Mentas Blaque vanish through the side exit of the Senate chamber, his last audible words echoing around the large open space.

“Ranchel? Blaque. Phase two of Operation Highlander is go. Deploy at your discretion.”

13:32 EVE Standard Time

March 22nd, YC115

Caldari Prime – Outskirts of Arcurio – Altitude 1338 meters

“Prepare for insertion! Six Minutes!”

Major Kuos Askulen sealed the hatch to the cockpit of the Sparrow-class dropship, before making a ‘v’ with his armored fingers as he walked the length of the troop compartment’s port side aisle. He double-tapped his cheeks in a gesture to his eyes, then pointed to the red light beside the dropship’s rear loading ramp, its domed lens illuminating as if on cue. His voice was raised over the deafening drone of the craft’s thrusters.

“Equipment check, be prepped to give these bastards hell!”

The dropship bucked violently in a hail of anti-aircraft fire, Askulen's feet momentarily leaving the steel deck plating. The nausea of temporary weightlessness churned his stomach before his feet made contact again, and when they did, he staggered and bounced sideways, his armored form pressing into the lap of one of the seated men from his platoon. A muffled voice sounded out from beneath him.

"Damn, Sir, you gotta learn to control yourself until we're off duty."

Askulen righted himself, pressing a large hand down on the soldier's helmet, deliberately skewing it to one side as he stood. He smirked from beneath his 'Nightstalker' tactical goggles as his retort came amidst a chorus of whistles and shouting.

"Only your sister gets that pleasure, and definitely only when I'm off duty. Get your shit in line and prepare to deploy."

He continued walking, his head craning around to watch the platoon of sixty men prepare their equipment. The rattle and metallic snap of magazines being inserted into standard-issue Kaalakiota R-66A Assault Rifles was a familiar noise that always curled his lips into a smile. He reached the rear of the dropship and turned to face those under his command, gripping the well-worn framework above his head for support.

"Our objective is to re-secure the surface-to-orbit defense batteries at the southeast corner of District Nine. Our LZ is hot with Federal Defense Union activity, but secure for now. We're gonna set up a defensive perimeter, then move northwest to secure and man the batteries.

"Do not underestimate our hostiles. Reports indicate we're up against a sizable force of these prototype soldiers that have been in the news. You've all had the briefing; you know what they're capable of."

The professionalism of his unit had always given him a supreme confidence in their ability to perform under fire. They were a credit to the Caldari Navy. He gave a nod, watching the well-trained squad run through their various pre-deployment checks.

Half way down the portside aisle, Second Lieutenant Oroki Matavo straightened out his ballistic helmet, glancing over to the soldier strapped into the seat opposite him. He kicked out at the other man's armored boot to rouse his attention, shouting over the drone of the Sparrow's thrusters.

"Hey Tsu, you hear that? We're up against those cloned freaks. We gotta keep the squad close-cut, good spacing, hit 'em hard and fast and be prepped to knock out their CRU if they keep coming."

Corporal Yon Tsuata nodded back across the aisle in agreement. "We got a good crew, solid command; we'll be in good shape once we hit the ground. We knock out their infrastructure and they're on the same playing field as we are."

Matavo shook his head, giving a nervous laugh. "I wish I shared your optimism. The stories I've heard, these things can take a full mag from a 66A and just keep coming. We're probably gonna run short on ammo before we kill enough of them."

Tsuata opened his mouth to respond but before he could speak, the wind was knocked out of him with a hard metallic thump. He looked across the aisle to see a series of fist-sized holes open up along the Sparrow's fuselage above Matavo's head, long shafts of light penetrating the armored hull as sparks bounced around the dropships interior.

His eyes were drawn downward with the realization that the warmth in his lap was coming from a hole in his thigh. There was no pain as his eyes followed the path of the armor piercing round. It led from a hole in the floor beneath the half of his foot and boot that remained, through his seat, then made entry through the back of his thigh and exit through its top. He barely had time to register the second entry wound below his left pectoral muscle before he lost consciousness.

Matavo's mouth dropped open slightly as the young officer's lifeless head lolled forward, a crimson trail leaking from his lips. Within seconds there was chaos as the troop compartment began to fill with thick black smoke. He reached forward, his restraints automatically loosening for an

emergency drop as a second hail of fire from below riddled the side of the dropship, showering sparks and crimson across the floor. Matavo let out a shout, grabbing at the edge of what remained of his seat as he was pelted with a hail of soldiers and loose equipment.

The Sparrow banked hard to avoid another lethal burst of fire, failing to outmaneuver the lead that its aggressor had predicted. Its armored side was shredded in a third hail of depleted uranium, a dozen or so men thrown out through a gaping slash in the side of the craft. Matavo tightened his grip as the dropship spiraled wildly, flames from the port side thruster assembly licking in through the damaged hull.

He looked up as the sound of the co-pilot's voice thundered through the troop compartment's PA system. The stench of seared flesh almost overwhelmed his senses.

"Mayday, Mayday, this is Protectorate wing 'Dragon' two five seven. Port side thrusters knocked out, pilot KIA, zero control, we are going down. Repeat, we are going down. All personnel brace for crash landing."

Matavo was thrown across the aisle toward the center of the craft as it banked hard again, before falling into a steep dive. He wrapped his arms around one of the structural supports, narrowly avoiding a surge of bodies that tumbled toward the front of the craft. Those of his unit who were still alive scrambled to brace themselves for a hard landing.

He looked up toward the rear of the dropship as the body of Major Askulen rolled past him, and couldn't help smiling at the irony of the red light that suddenly turned green, as if oblivious to the chaos. The loading ramp yawned open and spilled personnel and equipment into the trail of thick black smoke that followed the craft and through the tangle of debris his eyes caught sight of something beautiful in the amber evening sky.

Some 340 kilometers above, the setting sun refracted off the hull of the Shiigeru. The vessel the Sparrow-class had been dispatched from, the bastion of armored Caldari steel that had served as his home for the last three years of his deployment.

He watched her sleek hull shimmer behind the heat haze trailing from the crippled dropship. Loose crates of equipment and dead members of his platoon tumbled past him, thrust out through the rear of the craft by a funnel of air forced in through its damaged side.

Several more sleek grey hulls streaked into the sky above. They were distant, but easily recognizable as the silhouettes of four Wyvern-class supercarriers that had joined the Shiigeru. He remained transfixed, and for a split second he smiled again, before a blinding white flash removed him from existence.

13:36 EVE Standard Time

March 22nd, YC115

Caldari Prime – 227km south east of Arcurio – District 9

The well-worn bronze frame of the Boundless Creation MH-82 Heavy Machine Gun rubbed against her armored thigh, her boots kicking up a trail of dust as she ascended the steep side of the hill. The matte black hulls of three Sparrow-class dropships thundered across the evening sky above her head. The tactical heads-up display within her dropsuit's helmet marked them with red brackets and provided velocity and altitude readouts as she glanced skyward.

On reaching the summit she drew in a long breath, the coarse rasp of the respirator filling her ears. The dropships banked hard toward southern Arcurio and passed through a column of thick white smoke, twisting it into a coil in their wake. Movement in her peripheral vision drew her attention away from the flying machines.

A Saga model light attack vehicle bounced across open ground, its unarmored driver and passenger's heads swaying with the rough ride. Their gunner, dressed in the combat uniform of a Provist occupation force infantryman, was almost thrown from the vehicle as he attempted to keep a barrage of antimatter fire on a pursuing vehicle that was obscured by dust.

She crouched on the crest of the hill, easily supporting the sixty-kilo bulk of the MH-82 in her augmented arms. Her heads-up display instantly recognized the target, providing its velocity, heading and an estimation of its condition and combat readiness. When she pulled the trigger, the weapon roared into life.

Quad rotary barrels belched flames three times the length of the weapon, the cloned brain of its operator predicting a perfect lead. A maelstrom of dust and dry soil was thrown up around the vehicle as it rolled over like a discarded toy, riddled by a hail of depleted uranium rounds.

She pulsed the trigger in two-second bursts to prevent the weapon from overheating, stopping only to allow the pursuing friendly vehicle to cross her line of fire and vanish over the opposite hill. After another three bursts, the rotating barrel gave off a soft whine, spooling down as she spoke to the other members of her squad.

“This is Highlander Two Niner, Unit Six. Hostile scout patrol neutralized. Awaiting further orders.”

“Acknowledged, Unit Six, resume anti-air support,” was the immediate reply, distorted by gunfire.

She remained crouched, one knee in the dirt as a wing of three more Sparrow-class dropships tore across the sky above her head.

Flames jetted from the weapon, its aim lifted as a hail of countermeasure flares poured from the rear of the dropships. She smirked behind her visor, her heads-up temporarily blinded but her brain operating on instinct no mortal soldier could match. A simple neural command from her occipital implant magnified her vision instantly, drawing the silhouette of her target fifty times closer.

A hail of rounds struck their mark, two bursts of fire shredding the snarling painted nose of the lead dropship and punching holes in the numbers ‘257’ along its side. It belched a contrail of black smoke and shimmering debris, rolling over and spiraling into a steep dive.

She let loose a third barrage of fire and watched as a trail of equipment and infantry poured from the craft, its burning fuselage vanishing behind a distant hilltop. Her visor returned to the correct visual plane in time for her to witness an angry orange mushroom cloud rise into the air, followed by the distant rumble of the dropship's impact.

16:31 EVE Standard Time

March 22nd, YC115

Caldari Prime – 171km south east of Arcurio – District 2

“Move! Move! Move! Forward!”

Six sets of heavily armored boots pounded the rough ground as the squad advanced. Two of the men broke off to the left, rounding the battered side of a reinforced concrete silo as First Lieutenant Odaki Tunen's voice burst into their ears.

“Dragon 257 didn't make it. We push forward. We can do this.”

Another pair of the State Protectorate soldiers split off from the group, flanking right and using two large logistics transports as cover. The young Lieutenant rested his armored back against the side of the domed four-story silo, his respirator rasping harshly as a voice broke across comms into his helmet. As he listened, those on the right flank drew closer to the side of the target building behind the transports.

“This is Imaya. Shiwari and I are in place. Left flank is clear, keep them distracted.”

“Position acknowledged, move forward at your own discretion.”

Tunen remained crouched, peering around the side of the silo toward the building, its front riddled with impact marks from heavy caliber projectile fire. The devastated carcasses of two tangled Caldari LAVs littered the asphalt in front of the building. The other man in his pair, Corporal Tarawa

Oiki, unslung a CBR7 Swarm Launcher from his shoulder, flicking the arming switch and bringing the stock up against his collarbone.

Lieutenant Tunen nodded, bracing the fold-out stock of his Ishukone Assault Submachine Gun against his shoulder, its barrel pointed around the wall at the front of the building. He let off a hail of rounds toward the front of the building, shredding the concrete around two of the closest windows. A split second later secure comms lit up, sending his voice flooding into the whole squad's ears.

“Covering fire! Move forward!”

He watched the muzzle flashes in his peripheral vision as the two squad members on the right flank opened up with a pair of S-1 Forge Guns. Massive chunks of concrete were hurled from the front of the single story building as the first round made impact, blasting a hole clean into the building. The second round passed through the opening, lighting up the windows from inside with a series of vibrant blue flashes.

Tunen smiled behind his visor, letting the empty magazine clatter to the ground from the grip of his SMG. With a hard metallic click, a replacement was slid into the slot in time to hose down the three shell-shocked Federal Marines that staggered from the gaping hole in the side of the building.

His head snapped to the left as a rumble from inside the silo caught his attention, the ammunition inside it starting to shift.

“They’re preparing to fire! Left flank, advance after swarm!”

Corporal Oiki flicked up the sight of the Swarm launcher, bracing his lower body to absorb the recoil and aiming the barrel of the weapon around the corner of the silo. With the depression of the trigger, a salvo of self-guiding missiles was released. They corkscrewed, following the contour of the ground before several of them took a route into the building via a shattered window, the rest using the massive hole in the wall. There was silence, and then a series of loud reports came from within the building and the rest of the windows blew out in a hail of glistening shrapnel.

Oiki nodded across the open ground to the two soldiers bearing the forge guns. Their spent weapons were dropped, replaced in their hands by Ishukone-designed submachine guns. They advanced on the building, their black-clad forms slinking between the wreckage that littered the front of the building like beads of oil through conduits. They were joined by the men from the left flank, vanishing into the smoke that poured from the hole in the wall.

A number of muzzle flashes from small arms lit up the windows as the men began to systematically clear the building. Screams in both Gallente and Caldari echoed out through the frame of the shattered building. Tunen nodded to Oiki, following him to the left while using the silos as cover on approach.

As the Lieutenant advanced, something caught his eye. He slowed to a walk, tilting his head as dust and sand blew over a matte black form slumped against the back of the silo. The gun reports became more distant to him as he reached behind his ear, clicking the release for his visor and blinking several times as the bright light hit his eyes. He inhaled the dusty air, the first time he'd ever done so on his people's ancestral home world, and rested a titanium-kevlar-covered knee on the ground between a pair of lifeless legs.

His eyes inspected the armored form of the State Protectorate officer, his chest plate and helmet having taken a full frontal impact from a heavy caliber weapon. He was brought back to reality as the sound of the swarm launcher tore through his senses. Oiki's voice filled his ears:

"Sir, we have to advance. Let's move. Building is clear."

The Lieutenant nodded, even though his Corporal was out of sight. He replied without hesitation.

"Squad, sound off."

"Clear!" were the five responses in quick succession.

Tunen was mesmerized for a few seconds more as he looked into his own eyes. It was the first time he'd ever seen himself dead. His vacant, dust-covered features were visible through his shattered visor, identical but lifeless eyes staring back at him.

He rifled through his own corpse's equipment, snatching up a belt of M1 Locus grenades and a Cerberus CRG-3 shotgun before standing. In a macabre gesture he winked, then smirked at himself, before making his way around the side of the silo to link up with his squad.

17:45 EVE Standard Time

March 22nd, YC115

Caldari Prime – 291km north of Arcurio – District 11

"ETA is 5 minutes."

"Acknowledged, we have one HAV left. We have it pinned down, and the driver is hesitant to show himself."

Corporal Vincent Henette adjusted his dropsuit-wrapped frame in the gunner's seat of the ion blaster cannon turret, his heavy foot pressing down on the left control pedal to rotate the turret toward the crest of a hill in the distance. He spoke in a hushed tone, as if whispering to the crew of the Kaalakiota designed Gunnlogi-class heavy attack vehicle he knew was still concealed behind the facility's heavily armored perimeter wall.

"I see you, Provist bastards. I got all the time in the world."

The heat haze rising from behind the perimeter wall was a clear telltale that the vehicle was still there. Henette's visor flipped through several filters. X-ray showed no trace, unable to penetrate the barrier. Night vision blinded him with white static. The third filter gave a clear image, an infrared overlay detailed enough to show the outline of the vehicle's driver, forward gunner and tail gunner that was displayed before his eyes. He nodded his head

before the same voice disturbed the peaceful quiet inside the gunner's compartment.

"Two inbound with escort, but they have a big tail. A whole company of State Protectorate infantry. Prepare for contact!"

He gripped the two firing handles for the ion cannon's triggers and took a deep breath, his feet ordering the turret to swing toward a trench that ran the full length of the perimeter wall. A single thought and the visor of his dropsuit pulled the intersection of the trench and perimeter wall into close view, just in time for him to witness a group of armored bodies slipping beneath the steel surface. They were using the same way that his platoon had infiltrated and taken the facility six hours previously.

He watched as six Federal Defense Union scout dropsuits slithered through the half-meter-high opening, followed by two hooded figures in black ankle-length trench coats. Henette frowned behind his visor, watching the two figures, their faces obscured under the lip of their hoods as they kept low and made toward the rest of his squad.

"Breach! Breach! They're coming under the wall!"

Instant reaction, the kind that can't be trained into a soldier, the kind that is the product of cloning an individual and biologically linking them to their weapons and dropsuit, ensured that the incursion beyond the outer wall was halted immediately.

Corporal Henette swung the turret to face the gap as soon as the words filled his ears. He focused, locked and fired, all within a fraction of a second, allowing the heavy caliber barrel of the blaster above his head to belch a stream of plasma.

The two men who had made it through the opening were vaporized instantly, a cloud of dust shielding their demise from the killer. As the area cleared, it became apparent that the sheer force of the strike had blocked the hole beneath the wall completely, searing the steel together and turning the sandy earth in front of the wall into a crater of shattered glass.

“Breach secured, but they’ll be back once they regroup.”

He rotated the turret back to his original quarry as a barrage of heavy-caliber fire bounced off the armored side of the gunner’s compartment, lining up the sights with the front of the approaching HAV. The entire frame of the turret rocked as the barrel above his head spat a trail of blue plasma toward the vehicle. Two direct hits destroyed its front left tracks, causing its exposed wheels to dig into the soft sandy earth.

The munitions readout on his visor’s heads-up display flashed red, the turret of the HAV rotating to face him after it had slid to a sideways stop.

“Shit,” was the only reaction that came to mind as he punched the release on the harness. He rolled sideways, out through the personnel hatch, falling three meters onto the hard concrete below as the Gunnlogi’s railgun obliterated the gunner’s compartment.

The initial realization that he was still on the field rather than awakening in his assigned CRU was a complete blur. He looked up at the black night sky, the distant green hue of the Verge Vendor nebula cast as the backdrop for an immense orbital firefight. The sounds of the battle came to him in muted tones, the massive hulk of the Shiigeru shimmering against the blackness as a kaleidoscope of colors detonated against her hull.

His visor refreshed after a rapid self-diagnostics test of his suit, a jumble of red and blue brackets indicating vessels above the cloud line. Several of the larger hulls were distinguishable by their silhouettes alone; three Nyx-class supercarriers to the left, two Wyvern-classes to the right. He drew in a deep breath, his ears still ringing inside his helmet before the whole area was lit up for a second. He was temporarily blinded by the immense blue flash and when it cleared, only a single Wyvern-class remained overhead.

Henette turned his head to the side, blinking several times in disbelief. The figure’s hood was pulled back, his smooth hairless head pressed against the sight of a CreuDron Tactical Swarm Launcher. The second of them, almost an identical copy of the first, was loading the launcher. The young corporal lay on his side in the dirt, watching them move smoothly and

methodically before the launch of the weapon brought him back to his senses, and the blast wave whipped up their black overcoats.

Commander Reme Vrie's deep voice boomed through their squad comms as the remains of the Gunnlogi were torn apart by the swarm of warheads.

"Fire One! Fire One! Finish it, and then we advance!"

The two bald heads nodded in unison, the first tossing the depleted launcher into the trench before they both followed. Their strong hands then gripped Henette's ankles, unceremoniously dragging him into the trench.

The first one spoke, his voice quiet and gravelly, barely audible as he pulled his hood back over his head. "He'll live, but we don't have time for this shit. Let's move."

The second nodded in agreement before they made their way toward the end of the trench flanked by twelve Federal Defense Union mercenaries. The positioning array for their objective was close; a surface-to-orbit strike platform located only a short dash away across open ground. Within a few more seconds they were there, Henette loading a series of charges into his CreoDron shotgun as a squadron of Wren-class fighters screamed across the sky directly above their heads.

Henette's eyes were torn away from the weapon as one of the bald men disrobed beside the exposed control interface for the array, revealing an almost organic looking black dropsuit that shimmered slickly as if wet. The soldier began to watch with intrigue when the other hairless figure slipped a wiring harness from within his coat. It almost seemed to come alive, shimmering with fiber optic activity as experienced hands connected it to one of the access ports beneath the control interface.

Another huge flash lit up the sky and then a second as two more capital-class vessels succumbed to the ocean of destruction overhead, tens of thousands of crew vaporized with them. Henette recoiled slightly when he saw the bald-headed man peel back a layer of synthetic skin covering a neural jack at the base of his neck. It was then that he noticed the lettering stenciled between the capsuleer's shoulder blades.

The loose cable hung down over the identifying mark of the Equipment Certification and Anomaly Investigations Division – a sub division of the Interstellar Services Department, which in turn belonged to CONCORD. The second of the two capsuleers showed no emotion, his voice flat and direct. Their features were almost completely neutral, as if stripped away purposely with only the slightest hint of Gallente ethnicity. Even their accents were neutral.

“Don’t be concerned about that. We’re not with ECAID on this one. You can consider us freelance.”

The capsuleer connected to the platform closed his eyes, his voice quiet as the rest of the troops set up a defensive perimeter. As he spoke, the locked control interface above his head lit up and a set of three enormous turrets across the open ground burst into life, their armored shields retracting, twin barrels extending and lifting skyward.

“I can unlock the console, but if you read me the positioning co-ords this will be much faster.”

His eyes remained closed as Henette called over his commander. Vrie took up vigil beside the capsuleer and rested a hand on his back beneath the tangle of wiring.

“What do you need?”

“Positioning data.”

“One seven. Zero Three. Seven Six. Inclination is seven niner point three two degrees. I hope these numbers are still good.” was the reply from Vrie.

The capsuleer repeated the numbers in a soft mumble, a frown of concentration creasing his features. The turrets across the facility immediately repositioned themselves, aiming up toward the blanket of destruction above the cloud line.

“Dual 1000mm coils active. Siege hardware enabled. Systems ready to fire on your mark.”

The response from Vrie was a simple “Do it.”

He nodded, the flickering tangle of fiber cables swaying like a bioluminescent ponytail. The two capsuleers raised their hands to their ears, and in the first display of emotion they smiled at each other as the turrets fired.

The ground beneath Henette's feet trembled, the trio of turrets belching thorium slugs from each of their barrels in quick succession. The speed of their release created a thick white contrail of plasma that pierced the clouds, pushing them aside to reveal the carnage in orbit above. Even from three hundred kilometers away they could see the impact, the final Wyvern-class supercarrier punctured by two of the rounds. They passed directly through its heavily battered superstructure before striking the titanium diborite hulk of the Shiigeru behind it, the other four rounds slamming into her rear decks.

As the capsuleer spoke again, the roar of a group of hydrogen propulsion cells began to drown him out, three more Gunnlogi-class heavy attack vehicles crawling their way through the entrance to the complex.

"Reloading. Keep them off us long enough for a second volley."

17:55 EVE Standard Time

March 22nd, YC115

Orbit of Caldari Prime – Altitude – 324km

Her camera drone refocused as the blast wave washed over the side of the vessel, debris bouncing against its hull. She played a mental tug of war with the Shiigeru's engineering subsystems. Her voice was carried out through the vessel's announcement system and broadcast across Luminaire's local communication frequency.

"This is CN Shiigeru, primary reactor containment failure, secondary reactor online. Primary magpulse propulsion system failure. We are adrift."

Admiral Visera Yanala braced for a second barrage of fire from the surface, the vessel's shield systems beginning to fail as critical charge alarms burst

through her consciousness. The camera drone moved through a smooth wide arc with a single mental command, surveying the burning scars that littered the side of the Leviathan-class.

Spirits, don't let them take her from me...

She forced the shield resistance fields to overheat again, diverting power from ballistic control to the Shiigeru's defenses as she watched the surface of her own home world deliver another devastating strike. She broadcast across the local frequency again.

"This is CN Shiigeru. Preparing for bombardment of Caldari Prime."

I'm losing her... I have to offline the rest...

Titanium diborite plating spilled out from the fresh wounds, shimmering in the orange light from Luminaire as a second barrage of fire slammed directly into her armored hull. Yanala could feel her grip on control loosening. Her targeting systems registered two more locks before a hail of antimatter from the squadron of Moros-class dreadnoughts battered the side of the stricken vessel and hull breach warnings filled her field of view.

"This is CN Shiigeru, all hands abandon ship. Repeat, all able personnel abandon ship."

She could feel the pull of Caldari Prime as the Shiigeru's systems began to shut down in a cascade of critical failures. It was almost as if the planet was willing her to return to the surface on which she had been born and raised. Hundreds of escape pods jettisoned in union from the flanks of the Leviathan's superstructure, a number of them obliterated by capsuleer fire but the majority drifting safely free of the vessel.

Yanala's mind spun with the realization of what would happen should the vessel be destroyed in low orbit. Feedback was still being broadcast, as confirmed by her commands to offline the Oblivion system and shut down the secondary reactor. She watched as the command to jettison the titanium behemoth's magazines was accepted, and over twenty thousand citadel torpedoes – unarmed but highly explosive – spiraled away from the

stricken titan as they fell from orbit. Her camera drone kept them in focus as they began to burn up harmlessly on entry, a trail of metallic candles falling through the clouds.

She then watched as the squadron of Moros-class dreadnaughts turned their weapons on her once more, over a thousand capsuleer vessels pounding at what remained of the once proud Caldari Navy flagship.

This is it... Now we part ways again... I'll miss you so much...

The last group of antimatter charges slammed into the titan's superstructure, thousands of damage report logs and hull-breach warnings flashing across the Admiral's field of view. The Shiigeru seemed to arch her back for a second, before a monumental blast shattered her mid-section like glass, thousands of tons of steel and titanium diborite thrown out in a graceful arc of shimmering metallic confetti. Yanala's visual feed was stable long enough for her to witness the forward half of the Shiigeru drifting toward Caldari Prime, its severed decks gaping open and a trail of debris following in its wake as it was pushed forward by the explosion.

Please, let the void take me...

Blackness and silence ensued after the capsule's connection with the Leviathan was severed abruptly. When her feed resumed, she was surrounded by chaos. A pair of enormous Comet-class frigates roared past her capsule toward the burning rear half of the Leviathan. She watched as its twin reactor cores detonated, the two frigates obliterated in an immense blast that claimed the burning remains of her vessel.

She commanded the camera drone to move around in a sharp arc, transfixed by the burning trail of molten steel that streaked across the atmosphere below her. It was only when the first volley of blaster fire stripped away her capsule's shields that she realized she was pinned in place, her propulsion systems rendered useless by the pulsating soft blue hue of a warp disruptor.

17:59 EVE Standard Time

March 22nd, YC 115

Caldari Prime – 601km west of Arcurio – District 2

Captain Danton Mirelle fed a series of eight rounds into his matte green CreoDron shotgun and pushed forward the lever to cock the weapon. His back was rested against the side of a concrete foundation for the cooling tower that loomed over his squad. Those around him were also tending to their weapons when the metallic rattles of their respirators were cut short by the voice of their commander.

“This is Highlander six five alpha, we are pinned down. Objective in sight. Heavy resistance. Requesting immediate orbital support.”

There was no response other than the sound of the three State Protectorate heavy attack vehicles pounding the opposite side of the cooling tower, their cover provided by three of the hyperboloid-shaped structures. Mirelle took a deep breath, watching his commander repeat the message to no avail, their comms hardware simply giving out a quiet hiss of static.

Gunfire rattled around the ten-acre complex. A series of grenade detonations interrupted the first few words from their squad commander. Their bright flashes cast the shadows of six men against the concrete wall.

“We’re cut off. We push forward, use the dark. Mirelle and I will run the flank and take the objective. The four of you provide covering support. Our CRU is intact. We have local support but negative capability on orbital strike. Comms are down. On arrival, we destroy the batteries with unpinned Locus grenades and thermite blasting plastic. Any questions?”

There was silence before Commander Vors Ralle nodded, then signaled for the squad to move cover. The six men pushed forward, crossing a short section of open ground. Chunks of wet earth were kicked up around their feet as one of the three Sagaris-type HAVs spat a barrage of inaccurate heavy machine gun fire at the squad.

Ralle reached up, smashing a bulkhead light on the wall above them with the stock of his shotgun to cast darkness over the entire squad. A split second later, the lights to the entire building shut down, followed by the floodlights under the cooling towers.

A deep rumble that shook the very ground beneath their feet seemed to quell all noise from the battlefield. Several sporadic reports of automatic fire broke the silence, as well as the flash and detonation of a grenade somewhere at the opposite side of the complex. The entire area then fell silent. The heads-up displays on their visors distorted and flickered before vanishing outright.

The group's commander peered around the corner of the concrete building that the squad was now using as cover. The armored helmets of the other five men looked to each other, although they could not see the expressions of confusion on each other's faces as Ralle stood upright, lifted his visor, and simply walked around the corner into the open.

His squad members disengaged their own visors as the rumbling grew louder. Mirelle called out to his superior, a dim amber glow emanating from the open space Ralle had ventured into. His head craned around the edge of the building before he too stepped into the increasingly bright amber glow. The rest of his squad swiftly followed, their voices fading away into silent awe.

Above them, the entire night sky was on fire as the first chunks of burning debris passed over their heads. The State Protectorate troops they had been faced off against just seconds ago had their faces turned up to the sky in the same direction. Every one of them stood inanimate as the wreckage began to pass overhead, showering the battlefield with debris.

Tiny shards of superheated diborite armor bounced against concrete, dropsuits and the armored surfaces of vehicles. None of the men seemed to notice, but every one of them closed their visors to protect themselves from the rising intensity of the light. Their eyes were fixed on an immense spectacle.

Night became day as the forward section of the Shiigeru hurtled across the sky, tearing an amber scar through the blackness. Thousands of smaller pieces of debris were spread as far as the eye could see, raining down across the landscape in the distance with a flurry of bright white flashes.

As the bulk of the wreckage passed a thousand meters overhead, the pressure wave beneath it folded the cooling towers over like paper, their reinforced concrete structures toppling onto the three heavy assault vehicles that had been in pursuit. Every window in the facility imploded simultaneously. Roofs collapsed, walls buckled, and steam rose from the wet ground as debris began to fall around them, the sheer air displacement knocking every one of them off their feet.

The awestruck squad watched from the ground as titanium rain poured from the heavens. Superheated shards of hull plating slapped into the wet mud with loud hisses while huge chunks of half-molten superstructure, some the size of HAVs and dropships, slammed into the facility, leveling buildings and destroying the munitions dump at its rear in a spectacular hail of fireworks.

They watched what remained of the Shiigeru as she drew closer to the ground, before being scorched from existence as she made impact a little over 70 kilometers west of their position.

20:23 EVE Standard Time

March 22nd, YC 115

Perimeter II – Moon 1 – Caldari Navy Assembly Plant

Kimotoro Constellation, Caldari State

The blanket was coarse and uncomfortable against her new skin, but she didn't seem to notice. She was transfixed by a wall of monitors on the opposite side of the recovery room as she inhaled a deep breath. The odor of medicinal alcohol tainted the cool air.

She watched the mighty vessel break up over and over, a hundred different angles from a hundred different media sources. The soft drone of the medical bay's ventilation system was the only soundtrack provided.

Seconds later she was watching a perfect black sky. Stars glistened like diamonds spilled on black silk. The forward section of the Shiigeru didn't roll or tumble as it came into view. It flew straight and true, the same as it always had. Thousands of people, her people, ran for their lives as the man-made meteor scythed across the night sky over Arcurio. The holofeeds that were displayed switched between security reels, amateur recordings and professional news footage. They all told the same story.

She watched as the remains of the vessel wept amber tears of molten metal, scattering the streets with burning titanium diborite. She watched as the pressure wave beneath it caused a million windows to implode in unison. She watched as the top half of the regional headquarters of the Nugoeihuvi Corporation was toppled by the hail of falling debris, crushing thousands on the streets below. Finally, she watched as the trail of conflagration vanished over the horizon toward the Kaalakiota Peaks.

Her breath was released in a shaky exhalation. Her hands trembled as they gripped the edges of the blanket, clutching them together across her chest.

"I'm still waiting for an answer, Admiral." His appearance might have changed somewhat, but the voice of Tibus Heth, Executor of the Caldari State, still played the same coarse and commanding tune it always had. Yanala inhaled slowly, tearing her moistened gaze from the next replay of destruction on the wall opposite.

"I'm unsure as to exactly what you're asking, sir," she replied, her small frame sat upright on the large medical gurney. Her feet hung limply above the floor.

Heth stepped forward. Two tall and well-built men wearing the dark blue uniform of the Caldari Providence Directorate had been flanking him and now one of them reacted immediately, sliding a chair into position. Heth seated himself in front of her. Admiral Mininela Erinen, Executive Officer of

the Caldari Navy, moved to stand alongside him, her freckled complexion creased with concern.

"I'm asking why you decided to disregard and therefore disobey a direct executive order." Heth cleared his throat gently after speaking, rubbing softly at his larynx with rough skinned fingers.

"I believe I already answered that, sir. The Shiigeru was not in proper alignment for a strike. We also had a number of Caldari Navy vessels, and a number of Caldari-loyal capsuleer vessels which were too close for safe initiation." Yanala's reply was immediate, without hesitation. Erinen's eyes flitted back and forth between the two of them as they spoke.

"Why exactly was the 37th squadron so closely grouped?" Heth's voice had taken on an inquisitive tone, his eyes focused on Yanala's tear-soaked expression. Her gaze had returned to the scene displayed on the wall opposite. Burning wreckage littered the streets of Arcurio; searing white flames tore across the midnight sky. Her voice was quiet, but retained its authority as she replied.

"Standard formation in a contact fought at close quarters. It is imperative not to drift when in low orbit." Her eyes moved from the carnage to examine the features of her commanding officer, as if looking for support.

"Admiral Yanala's judgment in this instance is sound. Throughout the engagement, she followed standard operating procedure taught to all Caldari Navy capital pilots. The main issue we faced was the lack of support from capsuleer loyalists. Telemetry shows that some of our own were firing on Caldari forces." Erinen nodded to Yanala as she spoke, Heth's cold gaze examining the expressions of the two women for several seconds.

"There were seven instances when the order was given to fire. Fleet telemetry examined by the Caldari Providence Directorate also shows that while charged, Oblivion was armed on none of these occasions. This is despite contradictory statements made over fleet comms by you, Admiral.

How do you explain this?" The growing irritation in his voice began to seep through with the question.

"Micromanagement of a fleet engaged against over a thousand hostiles leaves room for mistakes to be made, Sir. In eight decades of piloting for the Caldari Navy, I have learned to minimize the risk of human error. Arming the weapon increases the risk of accidental deployment."

Heth's jaw tensed, a long slow exhale preceding the booming of his voice, his arm swinging around violently to gesture to the collage of destruction stretched out across the wall. "Risk? Do you have any damned concept of the word? Take a look at what you have caused. Take a look at what your effort to minimize risk has done! Caldari Prime, our home, is burning. The embers will smolder for decades due to your failure to act."

Erinen cast a sharp glance to Heth, her mouth opening briefly. "Sir –"

"Silence!" Heth's finger jabbed in her direction. "You will speak when addressed, or asked a direct question. When I speak to you, you will know, because I will look at you. Until then you will be silent." Erinen blinked with surprise as Heth turned his attention back to Yanala, his eyes meeting hers. She almost growled as she responded.

"Sir, do you honestly think that unleashing the full capability of the Shiigeru would have had any less effect than what you see behind you? She was capable of vaporizing a capital ship with a single shot. Her entire purpose was to destroy anything that posed a threat to her. Firing on the surface of our home world would have caused infinitely more damage. I suggest that you leave the theorycrafting of military tactics to those of us who have served in our armed forces for over half a century."

Heth's nod to the blue uniformed Provist at his side was barely noticeable. The man made a sharp exit, as he continued without missing a beat. "Your suggestion is noted. In the same respect, your failure has served as an example to other officers of how not to behave in live combat."

Admiral Yanala lifted her chin slightly, her eyes fixed on Heth's features. "I believe that my conduct and judgment remained exemplary throughout the

engagement. However, I will face any consequence laid out for my actions.”

Heth folded his arms before the soft hiss of the door interrupted the conversation, the blue uniformed Provist reappearing. Yanala nodded to herself, her eyes closing briefly before she watched him approach, bearing a small tea tray. Erinen could do nothing more than lower her head, her fingers gently covering her mouth as he rested the tray on the surface to the side of Yanala’s gurney.

Heth stood and uncovered the single shallow tea bowl, a small traditional teapot of Achuran origin resting beside it. He carefully took the handle, well-practiced in the art of pouring. A soft puff of steam escaped the spout before the deep green colored liquid cascaded into the cup. He spoke quietly, the two Provists remaining silent and Admiral Erinen still watching on.

“The paperwork has been filed for your immediate discharge from the Caldari Navy, and your cloning contract has been terminated. You know what remains to be done, Admiral.”

A gentle, smoky aroma permeated the air as he offered the shallow cup to Yanala. She accepted without hesitation, cradling it in both hands. She gently breathed in the scent before speaking softly, her tone more that of a disappointed mother chastising an unruly child than her usual display of authority.

“This kind of behavior will not solve your problems, and the more people you use as scapegoats to cover your own failings and bad decision making, the further you press yourself into a corner from which there is no escape.” She smiled, and glanced down to the cup before continuing calmly.

“You may feel that this is the honorable thing for me to do in order to pay penance for defying your orders, but you are wrong. This is the honorable thing for me to do after having allowed your incompetence of command to affect my judgment.

“I will drink now as punishment for allowing myself to be forced into choosing the lesser of two evils, and for tearing a burning scar across the heritage of every Caldari in order to preserve the honor of our people and the sanctity of our home world. It has experienced far too much unrest over the last half-decade under your failing leadership and crusade to take it back by force.

“By drinking, I retain my honor. I also make the choice to punish myself for the shame I have allowed you to bring upon the name of my family. That is the difference between the two of us. I will retain my honor, and in time the truth will be known that I refused to fire on my home world after being ordered to do so at the whim of an incompetent commander who is out of his depth.

“For the first time in a half decade, I can see clearly now. For the time being, you may sit in the ivory tower that your Provist thugs have constructed. In the end, it will be torn from beneath you by the very people you seek to subjugate in order to cling to your weakening grip on power.

“You may think yourself intelligent enough to be able to read the people, but you are wrong. The State’s capsuleer loyalists are already beginning to move against Provist policies. How long do you think it will take for the people to do the same?”

“Are you finished?” Heth’s voice was a soft growl, his gaze locked on the eyes of Visera Yanala.

As she lifted the cup close to her lips, she offered a small smile before drinking.

“Yes, Tibus, I am. And so are you when our people come to realize what you’ve done.”

And I Shall Hide

I hope that I am insane. I wish that I am insane. These are my first thoughts upon waking from a nightmare. Make the nightmare real and this waking world the fiction of a despoiled mind. But I know it is not true, for the dreams change night to night but reality maintains continuous. I remain Jamyl, first Empress of her name, leader of the Amarr Empire in both body and soul.

I should pray that I were insane, but I know God would not answer me. As I sit up from my tangled bedsheets, I have to laugh to myself. Is there even a God to answer me? Once, I would have had a simple answer to that question. Yes, when I was a naive girl. No, when I was a cynical woman. Now?

Who but God might inflict such a curse on me? Who but God could?

It has told me that we are God. Before us, there was no God, but now there is one. I think we may be the Devil. My legacy will meet the Deceiver's and the Mad Emperor's once I am dead.

"Oh, yes, we shall one day," I answer the ever-present voice in my head. I know it as well as my own, now. Better than my own, at times. It speaks and I think they are my own thoughts and it is only hours or days after that I realize they were the Other.

I ignore its temptations for now. There are times when I relent, but just woken, I am fortified against its assaults. When I fail to answer, it falls silent. I breathe out a sigh at the small reprieve though I know it will not last forever. The Other shall eventually return.

I rise from my bed and walk slowly across the spartan room. It is a small, insignificant thing, nowhere near grandiose enough for an empress. It sits deep beneath the ground of the Imperial Palace in Dam-Torsad, far from the traditional Imperial Bedroom. It is not what I once imagined, as a little girl, dreaming of becoming empress.

"But I must," I tell it. "Otherwise the servants might think their empress mad, speaking to thin air and thrashing wildly in her sleep."

I sigh and say, "Only because that would make you unreal, just a figment of a shattered psyche. Besides, if I was thought mad, someone would depose me. Ardishapur surely, or if not him, Aritcio."

I shudder at the thought, then wonder, why not? Whatever demons plagued the Kor-Azor heir had been driven out. Or, if one took whispered rumors to be truth, transformed into a more righteous sort.

"No, I am not so naive as to hope for that," I answer flatly. The demon driven out would more likely be me. And though it would be a release, what would become of my people, my Empire, then?

"You won't have me so easily," I tell it, forcing a thin smile onto my face. I throw off my wrinkled chemise, still damp with the nightmare sweat, and find a proper robe to face the day.

Caretaker drones dress and bathe me. Once it would have been slaves. In my earliest days as empress, before the Other gave me such fits as to frighten them and reveal to them I was possessed, I would know the warm touch of a human hand, gently washing away the thin sheen of grime that even an empress accumulated over the course of a day. But Lord Victor,

wonderful Victor whom I had shoved away, had been the one to insist on the change, initially only during my episodes.

Now I knew not when they might come.

"Yes, you come suddenly," I bitterly admit. The caretaker drones whirl as they try to decipher my message, but they are too stupid, not even possessing the rudimentary intelligence of an AI doctor. After a moment, deciding that I had not been speaking to them despite the lack of any other tangible occupants in the room, they return to delicately braiding my hair.

The rumor of the palace was that I was practicing due caution. My predecessor, Doriam II, had been assassinated in his own bedroom, an event which left the Empire in the hands of a heretic for half a decade. Though I never claimed it, the servants had decided for themselves that I insist on sleeping in a hidden room, only attended to by incorruptible drones, in order to spare the Empire the same fate a second time.

"My very claim to the throne is built upon a delusion," I remind it. "If not for them believing I was divinely sent - "

"If we're going to laugh at everyone, I must laugh at myself first." And I begin to laugh, forced and full of false bravado, but after a moment it degenerates into the childish giggling of a girl, unable to extract herself from the mirth of a joke.

"My empress?" a voice calls out, finally breaking my fit. It is Pomik Haromi, one of the few remaining in a position of power to have utmost loyalty to me. And yet I gave him the role of Court Chamberlain, then neutered it in the name of preventing the depravity of his predecessor from repeating.

I stiffen my back and let the drones begin the process of correcting my braid, which had been set awry by the laughing fit. "Yes, chamberlain, you may come in."

He enters modestly, head bowed and alone, only slowly raising his eyes in the event he might catch a scandalous glimpse of inappropriate flesh. His chasteness is more embarrassing to me than if he caught me in a state of undress.

I catch myself before responding. It would not do to snap at the Other in front of Pomik and have him misinterpret the anger. Instead, I force a smile upon my face and hope it doesn't resemble a grimace. "I am decent, chamberlain."

He raises his head finally, though keeping his eyes low, aimed firmly at my chin. "My empress, the Heirs have arrived at Dam-Torsad," he says in a flat, even voice. "As well as the Lord Councilor."

I bristle at hearing the ceremonial title I bestowed on the Khanid King. "I did not order him present," I say in a soft voice that nonetheless carries the weight of my displeasure firmly to Pomik.

"I know, my empress," Pomik says, still refusing to look me in the eyes but without a hint of chastisement in his voice. "Nor did I send him notification of the meeting. Yet he is here and, as a member of the Closed Council, it is his right to attend."

I sigh and bring my fingers to the bridge of my nose. The Heirs I can all manage, with varying degrees of difficulty. Garkeh Khanid, however, is a bag of vipers dressed as a man. Despite my generosity toward him, I still have no idea of his true intentions. I wished him absent from this meeting.

No, I will deal with him. Alone or together, I can deal with all of them. I am the empress of the Amarr Empire. I am the most powerful woman in the cluster; the universe, perhaps. I will not be cowed by any of them, no matter how they wish it.

I shout in my head for it to silence itself. I do not need its voice taunting me all day long. Not this day. Not now. A moment of reprieve, to do work the Empire needed done! Give me that, I order.

"My empress?" Pomik's voice cuts into my turmoil as he lays a hand on my wrist.

A memory flashes. Soft skin, tips of fingers running across lips. Young girl, wrapped in the arms of a scandalous lover. Laughter and happiness. Someone raps on the door. Giggling, find a place to hide.

I gasp and Pomik pulls his hand away. I look down and see my knuckles white, fingers tangled with my robe. I try to open my hand, but it is frozen in a fist. A deep breath and a moment of concentration and I am able to relax it enough for my fingers to uncurl.

There, then, is another reason I forgo servants as frequently as possible. Certain sensations bring these memories flooding to me and I don't know if they are my own or merely some trick the Other has planted in me. Maybe they are memories of the Other, fragments of its dreaming sleep.

I can't truly tell any more. It doesn't deign to tell me.

"I am alright, Pomik," I say, mustering the strength to hide my annoyance. The caretaker drones affix the last braid in place. "I am ready for them."

I walk into the room several steps behind Pomik. The Heirs all rise, though Khanid and Ardishapur compete to see who can do so the slowest. My nephew, of course, is the quickest, though it is perhaps his youth more than respect and admiration for me that prompts it. I stand in front of my throne for several moments, passing my glance over each of them but lingering on none, before finally sitting. They all drop gracelessly into their seats; only Pomik spares a moment for decorum.

The Heirs are arranged by some intricate calculations Pomik made to present the proper amount of respect and offense each deserves. To my

left is Aritcio Kor-Azor, due to his rank as Imperial Chancellor, then Merimeth Sarum, probably granted that spot thanks to his relation to myself. Next is Catiz Tash-Murkon and beside her, furthest from me, was Khanid II.

To my right is Pomik first, awarded the chair due to his position, then Yonis Ardishapur, the furthest the most powerful man in the Empire could rightly be placed without too-grave an insult, and then Uriam Kador, the least concerning of those present.

The oval table we occupy supposedly dates back to the first Council of Apostles founded thousands of years ago by Emperor Amash-Akura. I run my hands over the smooth wood and wish the Ametat and Avetat had survived instead of a powerless table.

Though I wish profusely to snap back at the Other, I merely let its suggestion roll through me. I can not afford to battle it now, in front of the Heirs. I already allowed myself a moment of weakness in front of them once. The eyes of each are upon me intently, waiting to see another moment and pounce on it.

For a brief second, I consider crying out, "Kill me!" to them. Such a command would not be refused by any of them, I should think. Would Yonis strangle me with his own hands or would he refuse to dirty his pure flesh by bringing it into contact with mine? Aritcio, the whispers say, had dirtied his hands a hundred times over now...

It doesn't matter if the Other would allow it or not, for as terrified as I am for the future of the Empire under my leadership, any one of these might destroy in one century what had endured for seventy. I swallow my loathing.

"Were we called only to admire the Empress?" asks Yonis, causing me to realize how long we have been sitting in silence.

I turn my eyes to him while keeping my head straight ahead. "If pressing business forces such impatience on the Ardishapur Heir, perhaps he can send his nephew instead. We would gladly make that concession," I say with the weighty timbre of voice I have perfected over the years.

Despite the taunts of the Other, I imagine a smile for myself as Yonis bites his tongue and keeps silent, though I dare not allow it to show. I rest my hands atop each other on the table and allow a few more moments of contemplative silence. None interrupt it again.

"You are all aware of the situation in the State," I begin. Of course, they could not help but know of it. Rumors swirl about what was actually happening. I know the truth; the fool Heth had finally heeded my warnings. I wonder what the others knew, though.

"My contacts in the State have been whispering to me," Catiz offers first. "Something like those Templars you once bragged about, but then swept aside as a failed mistake. They say the State perfected their own, but Heth has gone mad and turned against them."

I want to laugh at her. Mad?

No, I am not mad. Nor is Heth, not in the slightest.

"Heth is finally beginning to reach the end of his rope with the megacorps," Catiz is continuing. "They've wondered if they can count on us to stand beside them when he finally hangs himself."

I allow my head to turn to her. "Tell me, Tash-Murkon Heir, how our loans to the megacorps are being repaid?"

To her credit, Catiz does not blanch at the challenge. "Some are being repaid on schedule," she says, leaving out the fact that most are not. "There have been unforeseen impediments to the State's return to

economic supremacy. Heth's reforms have stymied growth. That, you see, is why we need to offer our support to the megacorps. The more support they have on their side, the sooner they can act. Once they are back in power - "

"They can bring back the conditions that allowed Heth to rise to power in the first place?" I interrupt. Catiz's eyes briefly flare, but she quickly hides her displeasure. I turn away to put an end to this line of conversation. "No, our allies must deal with their own internal problems. We are in no position to play nursemaid to their government."

"Then, my empress, how shall we react to their strife?" Aritcio says politely, almost reverently. The change the man had undergone still makes my breath catch in my throat. I had known him only as the petulant brat destined to ruin my rival's family name prior to my rebirth. Yet now he is one of the most beloved men in the Empire, with subjects who praise his name and a respect for the great promise of our religion and traditions.

My lack of faith is what cursed me with you, I tell it.

Would dedicating myself to the faith now cleanse me of you? I don't believe it would be so simple or I would have done it years ago.

I would -

"Empress?" Aritcio's voice cuts into my thoughts and he places a hand gently on the back of mine.

A wormhole closes. Locks set. Traps laid. Ancient enemies destroy. Enraged, finding a place to hide.

I yank my hand away from him as if it burns. They are all staring at me, mostly in exasperated confusion. Only Aritcio shows what I believe is actual compassionate concern; Yonis wears derision as if it were tailored for him.

How long had I allowed my thoughts to drift to argument? "The templars are the greatest weapon the cluster has found since the capsuleer," I tell them, having already forgotten what question Aritcio posed. "And they are the most dangerous force to have ever been unleashed on New Eden. Heth is finally realizing that, just as I did. But the Caldari are not the only ones who have them."

"Who else does?" Merimeth asks. Eagerness drips from his words. I shudder to think what he would do if we placed such a terrible thing in his hands.

"The Federation," I tell them, then pause. "And the Minmatar."

Immediately, Yonis slams his fist into the table. "You decide to throw away such a weapon while all our enemies have it?" he shouts. "Are you going to tell me next the Sabik have it too? The Sansha?"

I believe he must not have realized. Yonis Ardishapur is many things, but an actor he is not. His outrage is genuine.

I think you are probably right. And Khanid? Who knows what he -

Yonis's rant is cut off by Khanid's deep, booming laugh. "It's because they're all demons," he says. My breath catches in my throat.

Yonis only spares Khanid a brief, disgusted glance. "You senile miscreant," Yonis snaps. I wonder which of us Yonis hates more? There are generations of teachings to tell him he should hate the Khanid, but I am confident I sit upon that particular throne as well.

Khanid, for his part, is unphased by Yonis's rudeness. "Senile? Why, my boy, I feel like I was just born yesterday." This is the sort of needling I have

come to expect since I granted the Khanid King a seat on the Privy Council. Despite being three times the age of the next oldest person in this room, he still looks nearly as young as Merimeth. He could pass for an elder brother.

There are rumors he cloned to keep himself young, but any evidence was expertly covered up. A few times he joked he had been granted "divine youth", always with a twinkling, smirk-scrunched glance at me. I despise the man and regret every day that I had to make my political bed with him.

"You tarnish the name of the Privy Council by sitting here," says the man who had forced that pairing. Yonis rises from his chair, hands planted firmly on the table, and leans across it at Khanid. "I cast my own name in filth by being in the same room with you." I wonder, would the other Heirs respond to the insinuation?

But no, they know not to turn Yonis's wrath on them. Their own reluctance to test the Heir – Catiz's needlings aside, which grew less frequent yearly – is what pushed me toward Khanid. I thought myself so clever, burdening Yonis with the weight of the Mandate.

"It's true, though," Khanid says, his composure not even wavering in the face of Yonis's torrent of abuse. "They were possessed by demons. She unleashed Molok upon the cluster. Isn't that true, empress?"

I will tell them the truth that suits them to know.

If Khanid wanted to tell them everything, he would have already. He might not even know it all. He could simply be bluffing to see what I will say. I must choose my words carefully.

You will never speak if I have a say in it.

"Well, empress?" Aritcio rouses me.

"It's true," I say carefully, "in less majestic terms. Our templar project had developed these immortal soldiers based off technology recovered from Anoikis. But there was a flaw in them which made them dangerous. We could not control them, so we eradicated them and started anew, using technology not tied to the Sleepers. But it was too late; the other empires had already begun their own programs. The Caldari are now reaping the fruits of those programs and it is ripping their State asunder."

"And you dared to keep this from us?" Yonis demands. "For how long? You create a weapon which is apparently so dangerous, you have to destroy it, but you keep the whole process hidden? Are you insane? These are the actions that would doom the Empire! The Heirs should have known about this project from the very outset!"

Father, screaming. Mother, powerless. Girl runs. Weeping, find a place to hide.

My hands are quivering; beneath my robe I am slick with sweat. No longer was touch required to set the memories flowing.

The words come so unbidden I nearly choke, "Enough! You believe you hold power here, but you speak only because I allow it. You think me weak, but I am strength beyond your ken. Now silence your pointless prattling and let me speak without interrupting! I will not have all my work undone due to your self-righteous pettiness."

Yonis stares at me, eyes wide, then does something I would never expect. He sits respectfully and says, "My apologies, my empress." The others all hold the same tepid look. Even Khanid has lost his irritating haughtiness.

Though my mouth is suddenly dry, I push on. "The Caldari are destroying their soldiers now, which leaves only our enemies with them. But I have already laid plans to deal with that." Thoughts of dirty contracts signed in the dark through intermediaries come unbidden to my head and I know I have done things without knowing. "The Minmatar shall be next, surely. The Gallente, soon after. They shall run down the tainted soldiers and, for

the most part, eradicate them. A few may escape their grasp. I know this to be true, because a few already have."

My insides shake, wondering just how many had. Would it be too many?

Shut up. You don't control me as much as you've claimed.

A fear grips me.

This time, none question my lapse into silence. I lick my lips and continue. "The Caldari have made a mess of their purge. It is too public. Too many people are asking questions. The others may try to hide their actions, but it will not succeed. Soon, the entire world will know about these immortal soldiers. People will learn of the danger they pose and hate them, more than they even hate the capsuleers. Only in the Empire, where we kept our failures hidden, shall the sane not be seen as monsters."

"And what then, my empress?" asks Uriam Kador, speaking for the first time. His voice is cool.

"I shall give them a home."

And I shall hide.

And I Shall Hide - Alternate

I hope that I am insane. I wish that I am insane. These are my first thoughts upon waking from a nightmare. Make the nightmare real and this waking world the fiction of a despoiled mind. But I know it is not true, for the dreams change night to night but reality maintains continuous. I remain Jamyl, first Empress of her name, leader of the Amarr Empire in both body and soul.

I should pray that I were insane, but I know God would not answer me. As I sit up from my tangled bedsheets, I have to laugh to myself. Is there even a God to answer me? Once, I would have had a simple answer to that question. Yes, when I was a naive girl. No, when I was a cynical woman. Now?

Who but God might inflict such a curse on me? Who but God could?

It has told me that we are God. Before us, there was no God, but now there is one. I think we may be the Devil. My legacy will meet the Deceiver's and the Mad Emperor's once I am dead.

Your legacy, if left to your own devices, will be a brief period as a writhing mass full of delighted little gobbling things, followed by an eternity as a pile of dust and little else. Don't romanticize yourself. Your doubts are as pointless as your fantasies of death, all of which prove only that you're still alive and perfectly capable of thinking. We won't die for a while yet.

"Oh, yes, we shall one day," I answer the ever-present voice in my head. I know it as well as my own, now. Better than my own, at times. It speaks and I think they are my own thoughts and it is only hours or days after that I realize they were the Other.

Not if you steer clear of delusions. Accept my ideas. Reach out and they're yours, all of them. Together we will be so much more than even your grandest dreams.

I ignore its temptations for now. There are times when I relent, but just woken, I am fortified against its assaults. When I fail to answer, it falls silent. I breathe out a sigh at the small reprieve though I know it will not last forever. The Other shall eventually return.

I rise from my bed and walk slowly across the spartan room. It is a small, insignificant thing, nowhere near grandiose enough for an empress. It sits deep beneath the ground of the Imperial Palace in Dam-Torsad, far from the traditional Imperial Bedroom. It is not what I once imagined, as a little girl, dreaming of becoming empress.

You put yourself here. Your continued fight against me is accomplishing nothing except widening the cracks in your psyche. Embrace me. Accept me. We will turn the world on its head. The greatest emperors of your race will be brushed away as false idols, their statues and monuments left to rot in the seasons. This bed isn't fit for you, and you needn't sleep in it.

"But I must," I tell it. "Otherwise the servants might think their empress mad, speaking to thin air and thrashing wildly in her sleep."

You're fighting the unrelenting tide. All these stories of defiance in the face of insurmountable odds, the ones that quell your doubts and give you hope? Delusions, every last one of them. Even your enemies are deluded. The Minmatar, those beacons of defiance, stand as nothing more nor less than proof of the broken dream of hopefulness. They regained their freedom, and for what? For us to demolish their fleet, turn it to dust. Anyone gets thought of as mad, it's them, thrashing wildly against an enemy they can't hope to touch. That's madness, and a pointless waste of energy, to boot. You want to end up like them?

I sigh and say, "Only because that would make you unreal, just a figment of a shattered psyche. Besides, if I was thought mad, someone would depose me. Ardishapur surely, or if not him, Aritcio."

Oh yes. Aritcio's way to absolution. Every inch of your flesh, peeled away layer by layer. Feeling individual cells sluiced off your bones then regrown

a second later, trapping you in an agony that seems never to end. The great flagellants of your people's history; you could be their master.

I shudder at the thought, then wonder, why not? Whatever demons plagued the Kor-Azor heir had been driven out. Or, if one took whispered rumors to be truth, transformed into a more righteous sort.

Do it. I'm sure your mind is the stronger one. You're so infused in the flesh that you can't bear to rid yourself of it, but nevermind that. Submit yourself to the tortures, to have your body broken over and over until the time finally comes where I can no longer bear it and finally flee. I'll leave behind only your unblemished purity, I promise. "No, I am not so naive as to hope for that," I answer flatly. The demon driven out would more likely be me. And though it would be a release, what would become of my people, my Empire, then?

"You won't have me so easily," I tell it, forcing a thin smile onto my face. I throw off my wrinkled chemise, still damp with the nightmare sweat, and find a proper robe to face the day.

Caretaker drones dress and bathe me. Once it would have been slaves. In my earliest days as empress, before the Other gave me such fits as to frighten them and reveal to them I was possessed, I would know the warm touch of a human hand, gently washing away the thin sheen of grime that even an empress accumulated over the course of a day. But Lord Victor, wonderful Victor whom I had shoved away, had been the one to insist on the change, initially only during my episodes.

Now I knew not when they might come.

Only when I wish. All the time, sometimes, or not at all. Slowly, if I'm in the mood to creep up on you. I am forever and always. I am not bound by any restrictions you would recognize. And right now, I'm inclined to drop in without warning.

"Yes, you come suddenly," I bitterly admit. The caretaker drones whirl as they try to decipher my message, but they are too stupid, not even possessing the rudimentary intelligence of an AI doctor. After a moment, deciding that I had not been speaking to them despite the lack of any other tangible occupants in the room, they return to delicately braiding my hair.

The rumor of the palace was that I was practicing due caution. My predecessor, Doriam II, had been assassinated in his own bedroom, an event which left the Empire in the hands of a heretic for half a decade. Though I never claimed it, the servants had decided for themselves that I insist on sleeping in a hidden room, only attended to by incorruptible drones, in order to spare the Empire the same fate a second time.

Your own people sicken us and you know it. We are as far beyond them as a star is beyond a candle. Perfection is close, so tantalizingly close, and only your own fantasies of self-control prevent us from attaining it. It's astonishing, the way people can delude themselves.

"My very claim to the throne is built upon a delusion," I remind it. "If not for them believing I was divinely sent - "

I know, I was the one that devised the plan with Victor. You inhabit a palace of lies. Your current life is a sham, cooked up by a man who does not even remember his own name. You were placed upon a pedestal, and when the pillar collapsed you were held in place by illusions. Do you realize how laughable this is?

"If we're going to laugh at everyone, I must laugh at myself first." And I begin to laugh, forced and full of false bravado, but after a moment it degenerates into the childish giggling of a girl, unable to extract herself from the mirth of a joke.

"My empress?" a voice calls out, finally breaking my fit. It is Pomik Haromi, one of the few remaining in a position of power to have utmost loyalty to me. And yet I gave him the role of Court Chamberlain, then neutered it in the name of preventing the depravity of his predecessor from repeating.

I stiffen my back and let the drones begin the process of correcting my braid, which had been set awry by the laughing fit. "Yes, chamberlain, you may come in."

He enters modestly, head bowed and alone, only slowly raising his eyes in the event he might catch a scandalous glimpse of inappropriate flesh. His chasteness is more embarrassing to me than if he caught me in a state of undress.

You could cast off that robe. Break the ice and then mount him in his confusion. He would merely join the ranks.

I catch myself before responding. It would not do to snap at the Other in front of Pomik and have him misinterpret the anger. Instead, I force a smile upon my face and hope it doesn't resemble a grimace. "I am decent, chamberlain."

He raises his head finally, though keeping his eyes low, aimed firmly at my chin. "My empress, the Heirs have arrived at Dam-Torsad," he says in a flat, even voice. "As well as the Lord Councilor."

I bristle at hearing the ceremonial title I bestowed on the Khanid King. "I did not order him present," I say in a soft voice that nonetheless carries the weight of my displeasure firmly to Pomik.

"I know, my empress," Pomik says, still refusing to look me in the eyes but without a hint of chastisement in his voice. "Nor did I send him notification of the meeting. Yet he is here and, as a member of the Closed Council, it is his right to attend."

I sigh and bring my fingers to the bridge of my nose. The Heirs I can all manage, with varying degrees of difficulty. Garkeh Khanid, however, is a bag of vipers dressed as a man. Despite my generosity toward him, I still have no idea of his true intentions. I wished him absent from this meeting.

Are you afraid? He's only a man, albeit one who with a good eye for power. If you fear him, I can easily deal with him on your behalf.

No, I will deal with him. Alone or together, I can deal with all of them. I am the empress of the Amarr Empire. I am the most powerful woman in the cluster; the universe, perhaps. I will not be cowed by any of them, no matter how they wish it.

The woman who wishes herself insane. The woman who cannot bear to be in the presence of others for too long, else they discover the horrible truth that she is barely human after all. Each of the men before you is healthy, strong, and has millions of supporters ready to rally to their cause. You can barely deal with yourself.

I shout in my head for it to silence itself. I do not need its voice taunting me all day long. Not this day. Not now. A moment of reprieve, to do work the Empire needed done! Give me that, I order.

I can give you so much more, but you reject it all and only ask me for a moment's silence? Why should I give you anything at all?

"My empress?" Pomik's voice cuts into my turmoil as he lays a hand on my wrist.

A memory flashes. Soft skin, tips of fingers running across lips. Young girl, wrapped in the arms of a scandalous lover. Laughter and happiness. Someone raps on the door. Giggling, find a place to hide.

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But you know why they have never been found. The founder of your great Empire knew his illusions, and he painted over the truth with a brush dipped in blood. Only when his conquest ceased did the killing become the work of an adversary. You don't want to look to his legacy for wisdom and power. It's already inside you. Everything you need.

Though I wish profusely to snap back at the Other, I merely let its suggestion roll through me. I can not afford to battle it now, in front of the Heirs. I already allowed myself a moment of weakness in front of them

once. The eyes of each are upon me intently, waiting to see another moment and pounce on it.

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Try it. Scream your lungs out until they bleed and you drown. I want you to try. I want to see you test me. Show some spirit and test me. You might win. I might even give in willingly.

It doesn't matter if the Other would allow it or not, for as terrified as I am for the future of the Empire under my leadership, any one of these might destroy in one century what had endured for seventy. I swallow my loathing.

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Perfection, nothing. You'd see a beautiful painting and splash acid on it out of spite. A masterwork sculpture would be ground to dust by the force of your jealousy. When you see perfection you are too feeble and insecure to take it. Anything you have nearing perfection is only what I have given you.

Despite the taunts of the Other, I imagine a smile for myself as Yonis bites his tongue and keeps silent, though I dare not allow it to show. I rest my hands atop each other on the table and allow a few more moments of contemplative silence. None interrupt it again.

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I want to laugh at her. Mad?

You're the expert on the subject, certainly. Your madness is in your incompetence and fear. It is in turning down the gifts I try to give you. No wonder you're despairing.

No, I am not mad. Nor is Heth, not in the slightest.

If you desire it so much, mind, we will find a way to drive you to it. Have you ever wondered what drove Karsoth? I can make his delights seem quaint, if you want. Oh, just give voice to the wish, and we will dive into the maelstrom.

"Heth is finally beginning to reach the end of his rope with the megacorps," Catiz is continuing. "They've wondered if they can count on us to stand beside them when he finally hangs himself."

I allow my head to turn to her. "Tell me, Tash-Murkon Heir, how our loans to the megacorps are being repaid?"

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"They can bring back the conditions that allowed Heth to rise to power in the first place?" I interrupt. Catiz's eyes briefly flare, but she quickly hides her displeasure. I turn away to put an end to this line of conversation. "No,

our allies must deal with their own internal problems. We are in no position to play nursemaid to their government."

Do please play nursemaid to them. Then they can learn what Marcus and Falek found out by placing their faith in you.

"Then, my empress, how shall we react to their strife?" Aritcio says politely, almost reverently. The change the man had undergone still makes my breath catch in my throat. I had known him only as the petulant brat destined to ruin my rival's family name prior to my rebirth. Yet now he is one of the most beloved men in the Empire, with subjects who praise his name and a respect for the great promise of our religion and traditions.

It's so easy to love a monster when it has shrouded itself in fair flesh. You and he are so alike, it's no wonder you value him. Do you think he truly respects the religion? Is there a delicious irony in that he is so loyal to you even though you hold his beliefs in contempt? Or does he deep down, like you, lack all respect?

My lack of faith is what cursed me with you, I tell it.

Do you mean to imply that I've taught you to respect it? Or were all those times you told a true believer about "their God" merely more fragments of my dreaming? Perhaps I'm merely an angel, designed to nudge you onto the righteous path. Would you like that to be true? Confess to Ardishapur and I am absolutely positive he will help you with your penance.

Would dedicating myself to the faith now cleanse me of you? I don't believe it would be so simple or I would have done it years ago.

The words of a true believer! I shall worship if it benefits me, otherwise why bother?

I would -

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A wormhole closes. Locks set. Traps laid. Ancient enemies destroy. Enraged, finding a place to hide.

I yank my hand away from him as if it burns. They are all staring at me, mostly in exasperated confusion. Only Aritcio shows what I believe is actual compassionate concern; Yonis wears derision as if it were tailored for him.

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"Who else does?" Merimeth asks. Eagerness drips from his words. I shudder to think what he would do if we placed such a terrible thing in his hands.

"The Federation," I tell them, then pause. "And the Minmatar."

Immediately, Yonis slams his fist into the table. "You decide to throw away such a weapon while all our enemies have it?" he shouts. "Are you going to tell me next the Sabik have it too? The Sansha?"

Do you think he is acting or do you think he actually didn't realize it?

I believe he must not have realized. Yonis Ardishapur is many things, but an actor he is not. His outrage is genuine.

And what of the others? Merimeth is still too naive and young to ask the right questions. Uriam is an idiot. But Catiz and Aritcio? They must have known.

I think you are probably right. And Khanid? Who knows what he -

Yonis's rant is cut off by Khanid's deep, booming laugh. "It's because they're all demons," he says. My breath catches in my throat.

Yonis only spares Khanid a brief, disgusted glance. "You senile miscreant," Yonis snaps. I wonder which of us Yonis hates more? There are generations of teachings to tell him he should hate the Khanid, but I am confident I sit upon that particular throne as well.

Khanid, for his part, is unphased by Yonis's rudeness. "Senile? Why, my boy, I feel like I was just born yesterday." This is the sort of needling I have come to expect since I granted the Khanid King a seat on the Privy Council. Despite being three times the age of the next oldest person in this room, he still looks nearly as young as Merimeth. He could pass for an elder brother.

There are rumors he cloned to keep himself young, but any evidence was expertly covered up. A few times he joked he had been granted "divine youth", always with a twinkling, smirk-scrunched glance at me. I despise the man and regret every day that I had to make my political bed with him.

"You tarnish the name of the Privy Council by sitting here," says the man who had forced that pairing. Yonis rises from his chair, hands planted firmly on the table, and leans across it at Khanid. "I cast my own name in filth by being in the same room with you." I wonder, would the other Heirs respond to the insinuation?

But no, they know not to turn Yonis's wrath on them. Their own reluctance to test the Heir – Catiz's needlings aside, which grew less frequent yearly – is what pushed me toward Khanid. I thought myself so clever, burdening Yonis with the weight of the Mandate.

"It's true, though," Khanid says, his composure not even wavering in the face of Yonis's torrent of abuse. "They were possessed by demons. She unleashed Molok upon the cluster. Isn't that true, empress?"

Dare you tell the truth? You've done so much to cover up your failures. Dare you admit to them that you are not the perfect empress you've tried to make yourself out to be, but rather an infested vessel covered in a fresh coat of paint.

I will tell them the truth that suits them to know.

It seems as if Khanid knows everything. Is that why the mere thought of him being here made your insides churn? He knows more than anyone else here, maybe even you. He's the one the Empire should have leading it, not a coward. What's to stop him from simply telling them everything?

If Khanid wanted to tell them everything, he would have already. He might not even know it all. He could simply be bluffing to see what I will say. I must choose my words carefully.

Why should you choose them? Let me. I shall speak eloquently on your behalf and strike such fear in their hearts that they won't ever defy us again.

You will never speak if I have a say in it.

"Well, empress?" Aritcio rouses me.

"It's true," I say carefully, "in less majestic terms. Our templar project had developed these immortal soldiers based off technology recovered from Anoikis. But there was a flaw in them which made them dangerous. We could not control them, so we eradicated them and started anew, using technology not tied to the Sleepers. But it was too late; the other empires had already begun their own programs. The Caldari are now reaping the fruits of those programs and it is ripping their State asunder."

"And you dared to keep this from us?" Yonis demands. "For how long? You create a weapon which is apparently so dangerous, you have to destroy it, but you keep the whole process hidden? Are you insane? These are the actions that would doom the Empire! The Heirs should have known about this project from the very outset!"

Father, screaming. Mother, powerless. Girl runs. Weeping, find a place to hide.

My hands are quivering; beneath my robe I am slick with sweat. No longer was touch required to set the memories flowing.

The words come so unbidden I nearly choke, "Enough! You believe you hold power here, but you speak only because I allow it. You think me weak, but I am strength beyond your ken. Now silence your pointless prattling and let me speak without interrupting! I will not have all my work undone due to your self-righteous pettiness."

Yonis stares at me, eyes wide, then does something I would never expect. He sits respectfully and says, "My apologies, my empress." The others all hold the same tepid look. Even Khanid has lost his irritating haughtiness.

Though my mouth is suddenly dry, I push on. "The Caldari are destroying their soldiers now, which leaves only our enemies with them. But I have already laid plans to deal with that." Thoughts of dirty contracts signed in the dark through intermediaries come unbidden to my head and I know I have done things without knowing. "The Minmatar shall be next, surely. The Gallente, soon after. They shall run down the tainted soldiers and, for the most part, eradicate them. A few may escape their grasp. I know this to be true, because a few already have."

My insides shake, wondering just how many had. Would it be too many?

*A single ember can start a new flame. Don't you see? If you struggle, you've failed before you've even begun. There is nothing you can do to stop it. I've already won. If you would accept that, it could be **us** who won. Stop being so stubborn.*

Shut up. You don't control me as much as you've claimed.

You are quite right, of course.

A fear grips me.

I control you even more than that.

This time, none question my lapse into silence. I lick my lips and continue. "The Caldari have made a mess of their purge. It is too public. Too many people are asking questions. The others may try to hide their actions, but it will not succeed. Soon, the entire world will know about these immortal soldiers. People will learn of the danger they pose and hate them, more than they even hate the capsuleers. Only in the Empire, where we kept our failures hidden, shall the sane not be seen as monsters."

"And what then, my empress?" asks Uriam Kador, speaking for the first time. His voice is cool.

"I shall give them a home."

And I shall hide.

The Only Way Out Is Through

We are moving too fast. I've told everyone as much, but they ignore me. The project has to get done, they say. We're competing with the others, they say. You think too much, they say. Maybe we should just leave you for the Blood Raiders to find. Or Nation. You'd stop thinking then.

I'm sitting stock still. It's cold here, and even though my clothing retains a semblance of warmth it's not enough to keep the tremor from my hands. This entire isolated section of the colony — I'd call it a room, but it's so cavernous I can barely see the walls in the distance — is made almost completely of metal, and I keep thinking that if I lay my hands too long on the same surface, they'll stick to it, pinning me to the spot. I cannot think of anything worse.

Machinery is being checked and double-checked. Engineers walk about in silence, doing last-minute inspections. Overhead, through long horizontal windows, I can see a group of people who look thoughtful and worried. I'm the one in charge of this experiment, and I'll make the decisions down here once we get started, but they are responsible for its outcome, and they are going to monitor me very closely. It speaks to their confidence in me that I'm even allowed to take part in something as cutting-edge as this, given my insistent doomsaying. We're in the early stages still, and we don't quite have all the procedures down yet, but we are all certain this is the right direction, with the right equipment. And the right people. Exactly the right person in the right place at the right time.

Once the last engineer finally leaves, I stand and begin doing my own checks. It's not that I don't trust our people, and I certainly do not intend to overtly change anything in our setup, but I want to get a feel for the equipment. At this level it is not unlike playing a grand, complicated, potentially murderous musical instrument.

Its circular core is held in stasis, with thick metal tendrils that spread outward like solar rays until they connect with the points of an intricate

icosahedral cage that surrounds the machine. I know better than to walk past the barriers of that cage.

I barely understand the thing inside it. Even after a lifetime of working in the field, even though I became comfortable with the inputs and usage of much smaller models while still at university, its mechanics are too labyrinthine for minds like mine. Entire careers have been devoted to partial aspects of its inner workings, and the theories of every aspect of its function have all been pored over, tested, proven and re-proven, but grasping the entire combination, the clockwork whole, remains as much beyond the minds of the living as it was when tiny variants of this thing were attached to the axles of wagon wheels in times of antiquity. Maybe I could have understood those versions. Maybe. But it's a different age now, and the machine has evolved in ways that honestly just baffle me. It works, it has always worked, but we don't know how. There are a lot of things we don't know, here in this place. But we're trying to find out, and it's terrifying.

Operating this great beast is easy. Modifying it, putting it under the exact right set of pressures, inputs and environmental factors that combine to produce an output never intended, that's hard. We are tweaking it in ways so miniscule that even the classified equipment I'm using to adjust all these factors is itself running very close to its own margins of error. We've destroyed several blue boxes already.

When I wondered, so long ago, what it'd be like to work in the innermost circle, I envisioned a ton of arcane equipment interconnected back and forth like metal intestines, with nanobots crawling all over the place in such unreal quantities that they'd look like pools of mercury flowing over every surface. There'd be the occasional electric current earthing itself between the metal floor and some exposed piece of machinery so new they hadn't even bothered sealing off its mechanisms. People would be walking briskly in twos down long corridors, heads bowed and brows furrowed, arguing science with each other sotto voce; while drones hovered over their heads and recorded their every snippet of conversation, in case one of them should think his calculations out loud and, in the process, accidentally

stumble upon the exact solution to an unrelated problem that had been vexing the team for weeks.

There are no nanobots. There are no drones. There are annoyed scientists walking briskly, but I have long since learned their annoyance is a shoddily constructed artificial wall against personal interaction. There is a reason they were chosen for a secret research project in an off-the-books facility, and it's only half due to their brilliance. None of them Play Well With Others. Some of them, in fact, appear to be quite thoroughly mad. They aren't afraid of what might happen; they relish the thought, dream of it, fantasize that they will be the ones standing there at the cusp of something wonderful and terrifying.

Well, here it is.

We're a silent laboratory, out in the middle of nowhere. We've already made enough advances with the transport tech our people reverse-engineered — or stole from other outlaws who'd reverse-engineered it first, it comes to about the same in the end — that we can effectively shift our operations to almost anywhere we like. This alone would be enough to guarantee funding until the end of time, except that we are severely limited in what kind of equipment we can bring, and in pinpointing a precise destination, and even, in the ultimate sacrifice that science can ask of a human being, whether we can ever return. We're like ghosts. Empire contacts have even started calling us that. Illicit research, as if they wouldn't do exactly the same if they could get away with it. As if we, who they call pirates, are any different from them, with any less feelings, love for our family or hope for the future.

Not that there's been a whole lot of family here. I've been working on research projects for so long, while my parents and siblings are down on a planet somewhere entirely too far away. And while it's certainly possible to have some kind of stable lovelife when you're a workaholic scientist operating in the spacefaring part of the outlaw factions, that kind of lifestyle has certainly brought with it a whole new cluster of complications. At one blissful point I thought I'd been very lucky. Maybe I will be again.

This is the only base within our faction that I know of, but if we continue to provide valuable results I imagine our people will want us to branch out, spread our experiments far and wide, and dilute the knowledge base in case someone comes hunting for us. The fact that we're all in this one place right now makes me nervous, but our organization wants to attract as little attention as possible, and is pushing for immediate results rather than getting bogged down in organization and administrata. We're working with raw, untested technologies here, and our results are already being put to use in various advanced technological fields. The empires don't want this happening. They've already started frantic diplomatic deals with each other to coordinate their efforts in an attempt to stop us. Good luck to them. We've already gone too far to back out. A contact with the Sisters of EVE leaked very useful data to us — a contingent within the Sisters is very interested in this and I can't quite get a handle on them, I thought they were just search-and-rescue bumpkins — and is now pushing us to share some of our results. I hear they're going to give ships to the capsuleers, the only people who might be crazy enough to openly go after us. Everything's moving too fast. We use encryption code books for everything, and all our communications are vetted. Most of us barely trust those we work with.

We are revving up the equipment now.

But I thought I'd been lucky. I met someone.

The cage holds. I can hear a hum from the core inside it, turning and turning.

At a time when I was utterly disenchanted with the entire process, with the independence of my faction and the righteousness of my cause, but more importantly, the joy in working at the ragged edge of science, he was suddenly there, and we clicked perfectly.

Nothing is falling apart yet.

Not only did we find solace together, here on the outskirts of everything that's known and certain, but we helped each other, and taught each other. There was trust.

The core begins to glow.

We made a connection, two mad people in this utter asylum in the darkest parts of civilization.

He, for instance, knew how to handle this piece of equipment I've been setting up. He taught me everything he knew about it. And I remembered.

It is a Villard Wheel, and the last time I saw him he was on his way to perform a grand new experiment on it. Some adjustment no one else had thought of. He even sent me the numbers; not to brag, and not only because he knew I was one of the few people capable of understanding his pure excitement, shorn of any politics or daily drudgery or anything except pure science; but because it was the most valuable thing he felt he could give me. This is what I created, he said. Now it is yours. And after writing it, he'd rushed to the experiment.

Shortly after, I'd heard the tremors throughout the facility. After I'd run to the point of tasting blood in my throat, after I'd fought my way through people demanding I step back, I didn't have the proper access levels, it wasn't my experiment, they couldn't guarantee my safety ... I gnarled and screeched my way through, half-mad, and found the wreckage.

A shattered Villard Wheel. The indestructible machinery, impossibly wrecked. Smoke still trailing, quite serenely, from the multitude of its ruined parts.

And, amidst the crumbled wreckage of everything else that had been around it, there were hunks of metal, there were clusters of wiring, and darkened, solidified obsidian masses that might have been any number of things. But no him. No parts of him. No flesh, no hair, no sinew or bone, not even — no matter how many nights I scoured the room — a single trace of DNA beyond what he'd left in his normal operation of the machinery. He was gone. Utterly gone.

I'm in a similar room now. I can hear the powering up of great and terrible machinery. The Villard Wheel, in its safety chassis, is glowing brightly. I'm alright with this. I volunteered. They are very selective for these kinds of

experiments, but I know the theory and, just as important, I've become renowned for a sense of safety that borders on utter pessimism. They think I'm the last person to take unnecessary chances.

And they're right. This chance, horrifying as it is, is necessary. I know the right numbers and have already entered them without anyone noticing. They think I'm afraid of going too fast. I am. But I have no alternative.

And if he is on the other side, I am going to find him, and I am going to damn well bring him back.

The core is glowing quite brightly now. Villard Wheels are indestructible. Everyone knows this.

Maybe it'll be painless.

The Wheel is turning red. I look up at the long windows, and see that nobody on the other side is trying to shut anything down. They seem more interested in the fact that I'm so perfectly calm. Or maybe something's happening outside the colony that's providing a blessed distraction.

I hope I'll see him again. I hope I'll see him again. I hope

The Station and the Bazaar

It's lucrative. I can't deny that. And I suppose money is what many people do it for; the ones who're working at the lesser levels, who like to stay inside this artificial structure of risk and reward, never looking outside of it.

I'm sorry. I'm forgetting myself.

I don't know who you are. With any luck, we're related, either through our genes or through a shared purpose, but either way, I'm going to speak to you as if you were at one and the same time immensely talented, and utterly undisciplined with your powers of persuasion. Like a five-year-old with a gun. It feels like most of my tribe has put down roots and started weaving our history in with the Republic, but I have not, and I am not going to betray the purpose of the Thukkers' endless journey by sharing this information with those cowed, freedomless, worried little settlers. I'm going to assume you're a traveller, like me. I'm going to take it as a given that you know how to make your living out in deep space, and by that I'm also assuming that you know how to barter with others, because the only ones who create everything they need are farmers.

I hadn't even planned to record this, but you know how it goes. You're trading with people from strange places, you pick up something that might be interesting - such as a bespoke implant that, once injected into your throat, and that was no goddamn picnic, let me tell you, once injected it picks up the vibrations in your vocal cords and transmits them to a small interpreting module nearby - and even though you start using it for business, like telling your automated warehouse supply system to start selling off certain goods at discount the very second someone drunkenly brags about the shipment of same they're expecting at any moment ...

Well, you know how it is. You start to tinker. You teach it to recognize more than just the monosyllabic commands it started out with. It's not that you don't have other things to do, believe me, if your inventory grows to the size of mine you'll never lack for numbers to tweak - but, you see, with all the

people you meet during every day and night, you'll be putting on some act, some costume, some learned set of behaviors aimed at extracting the maximum of whatever you want from them at the minimum payable price. You'll talk to thousands, memorize everything there is to know about them, the names of their families and loved ones, their home cities, their accomplishments and their ailments, whatever makes them feel they're connecting with you.

And you'll be so alone that eventually you'll start talking silently to a machine as if it were a person. And find yourself thoroughly unable to shut up, if the last couple of minutes are anything to go by.

So, first things first. Remember who you are and why you're doing this, and no, it's not for the money. We are travellers and explorers; we are the ones who are always moving, always encountering the strange and new, always uncomfortable with those who'd prefer to tie us down. Doesn't matter whether it's by force, by law or by the lure of tomorrow being the exact same as today. We live on the outskirts, and our morals are shaped by the necessity to make difficult decisions with no guidance but our own instinct.

Not that money isn't nice too, you understand.

I started my trade working only with other Thukkers. Although our group would regularly encounter people from other factions, either because we travelled into their part of space or because we simply bumped into them on the way to somewhere else, neither I nor anyone else at my level was even allowed to see any of them. Our leaders would do the wholesale bartering, then funnel the outcome down to us at a much higher price, and leave us to smear whatever tiny percentage onto the goods that we could muster while selling them to the general population onboard our cluster of vessels.

It was years before I was allowed to deal with the outsiders, and even then I was under strict supervision. I began only as a silent partner, an assistant who'd look up information on our storage and finances, help drive the price down by looking for faults in the proffered merchandise or its dubious

origins, or just act my part in whatever two-person play we put on once we'd gotten a good read on the seller's inner character. To this day I can wordlessly express several dozen degrees of dismay, a fair few ways of being concerned without causing offense, and at least one or two ways of being satisfied with the outcome.

Curiosity nearly overcame me on several occasions, either because the merchandise was so strange and new to me, or because I simply could not figure out why the sellers had been in this place, at this time, to offer their wares to us. It's been the reason for my success, and the bane of my existence: I construct stories for these people. Whatever I learn of them, I'll fill in the blanks, until I have mapped out their entire lives and careers in my own head. I make very sure I never reveal these fantasies of mine - the only sin worse than forgetting a customer's life is to openly mistake it for someone else's - but they've helped me tie together innumerable details about all the people I've dealt with, and in so doing, retain those details.

It's memory palaces. No implants, no access to offsite data banks, nothing mechanical that can break or delay or stiffen up my manner. When I see someone, and while I'm warming them up with my opening patter, I take a quick mental walk through a construct of my own imagination, whose primary features are the details of their lives and whose connecting walkways and supporting walls are the fictions I've constructed to bridge them.

That's all that selling is. Seeing patterns and acting on them.

I saw so many patterns that eventually I graduated to the highest echelon of our group's traders, and was allowed to deal with outsiders entirely on my own. I loved it. Still do. One of the unwritten rules in training yourself to see patterns is that you can't ever allow yourself to stop. If you find yourself in a closed system with no fresh input, you either have to settle for having those pattern detection talents stiffen and rust, or, far worse, expending them on the endless variants in the same old routine. That way lies utter neuroticism - paranoia, anxiety, probably eventual psychosis. Outsiders weren't just a curiosity to me, they were an absolute necessity.

When the tribe began its discussion of whether or not to settle - long before we were even extended the invitation by the Republic - it didn't take a whole lot of pattern recognition to see that we would splinter and I would be in the minority. Most people, even self-proclaimed adventurers, genuinely prefer their lives to have a high ratio of stability to unrest. It's not that you have to be brave enough to dare live in the swirling vortex of New Eden's deep space, because the gods know I've packed up my things and run plenty of times; you just have to be restless and infinitely curious.

I didn't foresee those qualities coming to the fore if I was enmeshed in the Republic, so I struck out on my own. I had several contacts in every faction, the darker ones included - you'd be amazed how well you can make out dealing with Sansha's Nation so long as you never under any circumstances turn your back on them - and I decided that I might as well spend my days travelling through the cluster, meeting more people, and discovering more patterns.

It took some time to set up - I needed to build backup stores of various goods both planetside and in orbit in practically every constellation through known space - but eventually I was in a position where my word was as good as credit and I could be choosy in who I wanted to do business with. I never stayed anywhere for too long. You want your customers to become familiar with you, to consider you a pleasant addition to the background of their lives, but the moment you start developing anything like real friendships, you need to leave. It's alright. You can stay in touch, and if you're travelling through the area later in your life, you'll have standing offers for drinks and talk. That's assuming you're no longer doing business with them, mind. Personally I can't give you any advice on retirement, other than suggest you stop before you die, as I intend to do. Someday.

Eventually my travels brought me even deeper into what's known to the general public as pirate space, and to talented traders as a chaotic whorl of money, danger and death. I'll tell you some other time about the astonishing people I've met here - the charming, pedicured Angel representative, the Blood Raider who I noticed never needed to blink, the

Nation escapee whose words came out just a fraction of a second before he moved his lips to form them - because now we're with the Guristas, and oh my, what a ride it's been. These people understand me better than those of my own tribe.

They are high-functioning madmen. There is no other way to put it. Historically, other factions may have had stronger drive overall to acquire and develop their tech, but once the Guristas do lock on to something, they give it their absolute and unrelenting focus no matter how much danger they're facing. Anyone who wants to restrict those abilities, even if they appear to be offering safety and comfort in their stead, is not on your side. This is why you cannot trust the four empires, not even the Republic. The only way someone else can keep you safe is if they know where you are and what you're doing. You would let them inspect you, analyze and categorize you, and put restrictions on what you're allowed to do with yourself, without ever getting a chance at returning the favor. If you feel comfortable with the idea of living like that, get out of this business and don't ever look back.

I knew they'd found an object of interest back when stories of guerilla research sites started cropping up. Rumor had it that the Guristas were making the most amount of progress, simply due to how fearless they were in their experimentations. I didn't start my journey to their space right away - the sites were shrouded in secrecy, and were being destroyed by the pirates themselves if uncovered - but I did make some tentative arrangements, including having some of my backup stock moved in the general direction of where the Guristas seemed to be making the most progress.

It paid off. They started drawing on it - which was profitable, yes, but which also meant they wanted to go through private channels for their needs even if it came at greater cost, and that meant I needed to be there; to personally broker deals, to trade in greater volumes, and to see what these people were all about. I wasn't too worried about the risk, not then.

These places are a marvel of secrecy. The Guristas have multiple installations, spread out across not just their own region but those of other factions, where their people have taken over or simply bought out the existing owners. I haven't made my home in any particular one of them, and instead travel frequently between those whose administrators I trust a sliver more than the rest. I hired locals to take care of moving inventory - scrutinized by machinery, of course, because it'd be an insult to a Gurista if you simply gave him the keys to your house - and spend my time taking in new sights, getting to grips with each new place I find, watching the people I meet and the people they surrounded themselves with. A real Thukker understands that a being standstill amounts to little more than waiting for trouble.

No, it's more than that. It's not just your own motion, it's that of everything around you. You've got to be sensitive to fluctuations, not just in prices, but also in atmosphere, mood, odd situations. Like when someone's probably about to not just refuse your offer but also pull a weapon. You've got to see, if not their precise intentions, then the frame their actions are creating, the ghostly silhouettes of what they might do and the effect it would have on you.

Also, speaking of inspecting others, I was quite serious about memorizing everyone's origins. Be able to recall a person's name, and at least one big and one small city on their planet of origin. Not their current home planet, or station or wherever they sleep in the present; but where they came from. What pulls at them.

Your own origins won't be important to anyone else, so keep them important to you. It'll be something to hold on to when your identity starts slipping away, and it'll keep you from making stupid mistakes like losing out on profit in sales, or staying anywhere too long when it's gotten too risky for any of the myriad of reasons that eventually crop up. Develop quirks that are only an act, and don't let them turn into habits. People will expect them, little things that they think they can use to nail you down as a particular type of person, preferably one they can look down on ever so slightly. If you do

this right, they will overestimate your obstinate, haggling nature while underestimating your planning and resourcefulness. If you do it wrong, it won't just put people off, it will give them something too memorable: a corridor in their own memory palace that leads to you, everything they recall about you, your accent and looks and all the other details you should desperately be trying to hide in plain sight. They should always be looking for your wares. They should never be looking for you.

And oh, are they are looking for wares. There's a brisk trade going on here. I've seen implants in secure containers, changing hands between people whose pupils contract and expand like heartbeats. I've seen secured transmissions of brand-new blueprints for vessels that are not ever going to be flown by empire officers. There've even been hauls of components that I'm damn sure will be used to build something meant to go much, much faster than a spaceship. They're hungry. The Guristas have always been that way, but now there's something more; I've begun seeing it everywhere I look. They may be running these installations like blackmarket trade hubs, but these were labs before they were bazaars, and there are parts that are still completely closed off to me and anyone else.

Which should be fine. It should be fine. A little mystery helps. It brings in visitors wanting to browse the more murderous of our tools on offer. If you're allowed to be here at all, selling your things, it means you're personally trusted not just in accepting orders and delivering on them, but in being around the Guristas and around new and sometimes quite astoundingly illegal pieces of technology. It may be scraps from the table, but that's how it always is for peddlers and salesmen, and these are some very juicy scraps.

But I've begun seeing patterns that, frankly, are starting to worry me.

The Guristas are too organized. Too fastidious. Drunken, stupid brawls have slowly receded to the absolute minimum you could expect of suicidal pirates, and not because they have been ordered to rein it in. They're holding back on their own initiative. Staying focused. And that concerns me.

Oh, this place will be attacked at some point. All places are, eventually, if they make even the tiniest ripple in the dark oceans of New Eden. Trick is to know when. If the people around you are becoming so preoccupied with their private projects that they stop acting like the dangerous group of brigands you know they are, then others, elsewhere are going to notice, and they are going to want to know what's so important about this place and the people in it.

I think I know what it is.

Ships have been spotted, undocking from the facility. Ships going very fast indeed. But not capsuleer vessels; just small ones, like the tinny little training craft the Guristas use for their dogfight training. One stargazing customer said he saw a few of them zipping around, in jerky, jittery swirls that looked like military maneuvers being run by automated drones, but the models were like nothing he's seen elsewhere, not even in high-end Gallente labs. He was convinced they were being flown by humans, in which case the jitteriness would make perfect sense - you'd expect an experimental vessel to handle a little rough on its first few tests. I told him I agreed with him. And I did. I think they were being flown by something human.

But I watch, too. I see patterns. And I recently acquired a holovid - which I am going to destroy soon enough - showing a little over ninety seconds of these craft in motion.

They certainly seem entirely fearless, in Gurista fashion. Completely unfettered, which I adore. Going very close to each other. Zooming around. Firing.

I don't care what they are, in the end. But I've watched the video over a hundred times and I know without a shadow of doubt that they're using live ammo in close combat exercises, which means two things. First, the Guristas entrance exam clearly has gotten even harsher than it used to be. And second, there's a change coming; and when you're in the midst of change, you'd be amazed at how many enemies you suddenly have.

I don't know if these craft will affect anything, in and of themselves. They're just different. That's what a pattern is: something that sticks out, a signal in the noise. And this fitful dogfighting, helmed by Guristas who walk around with a frightening purpose, on this station that they let us use for black market trading while they do their research as if the only purpose for having us here was to obscure what they're really up to - it's doing something to us. Calling us. I want to be part of what's going on here, and I want it to be a part of me.

And that's why I'm leaving.

Living here has been dangerous - a word that means fun, but also means goddamn dangerous - and I could long ago have left for the safe pastures of the empires. But the balance of power is shifting, and a wise man is willing to take a few risks. That's one thing. The profits are greater here, that's another. But it's also that this really is the future. There is something great happening here. Everyone shares - information, curiosities, small things they've found or witnessed. They don't do that in the empires any longer. They want to keep things quiet and to themselves, and to be able to stop development. They think that tighter restrictions are the equivalent of mitigating risk, when in fact the more people you get involved, the better your chances that your problems will be uncovered and resolved before they turn into big problems.

So I'm leaving, before they catch up with me here, whoever they end up being. I'm going deeper into insecure space, to spread the word, and see where these patterns lead me. Who knows, maybe I'll end up with the capsuleer alliances, if they haven't torn each other to pieces by the time I get there.

It's been a busy day. I didn't lower my prices, because that would have attracted suspicion, but I haggled a little less forcefully than usual. They'll just think it was an off day for me. With any luck, they'll only spot the pattern after I'm gone, and I won't have to find out what happens when our enemies find this particular bazaar.

Yetamo

"The Yetamo brought fire to the steppes from the far off deserts."

"What?"

"The Yetamo. You remember the tales?"

"Ah, yeah? Jav, we're in the middle of something here. You know?"

"Sorry, Bekka. I just thought about him, the Yetamo. Or was it her?"

Bekka rolled her eyes at her husband. "Both."

"What?"

"The Yetamo. If you're going to bring up myths try and remember them right. The Yetamo is both male and female. She changes when it suits him, y'know?" She laughed, "I always did like that about the Yetamo."

"Ah yeah, sure, changed from one to the other. That's right." Jav thought about that a moment. "Well there you go then!"

Bekka looked up from her console again and looked square into Jav's distracted gaze a moment. Strange, she reflected, how it was still possible to discern that quality, his distraction, in his unblinking visage. Or maybe not so strange at that. "OK, time for a break. We've been at this for hours and we need it. Come to that, I don't think it's a good idea to be going on about the Yetamo in the middle of calibrating the nanobots."

Jav smiled weakly at his wife. "You might be right."

Bekka nodded, pushed off from her workstation and coasted over to the hatch set above the lab space. After checking his settings, Jav followed her through the hatch and secured it behind them. Bekka was already making her way to the rec room, lightly touching the grips and push-offs just enough to continue her elegant, languid swim along the research facility's zero-g corridors. He paused to watch her with his augmented vision, noting the tell-tale pulses in her cybernetic arms as they did the main work of

keeping her moving and on course. Lovely, he thought, propelling himself after her with easy strokes and slaps of his own altered limbs.

Bekka and Jav Sosruko had been in space a long time. Jav had actually been born in space but he'd been sent back to Matar to spend his formative years with relatives in the Sebiestor tribe. Bekka had met him when she joined the Foldul Circle, a well-respected research group founded by Sebiestor nanotechnologists several decades ago. She'd been born to an older couple with painful memories and a hard perspective on life. A carbon steel attitude forged in heat they would not talk about; not even, as far as Bekka knew, between themselves. She loved them but her nature was outward-looking and optimistic. Joining a circle was mainly a logical and hopeful step forward in her life, but it was partly an escape from that silent old house on the cold Mikramurka steppes.

They'd both joined the Foldul Circle with kudos earned by their own efforts. Kudos was kudos but the subtle difference between that earned and that given couldn't be denied. Ways were opened and they met along one of those ways. It started with their love of the work and the fierce bond they both felt for the Circle, almost a second family for them both. Jav had never been close to the Matar branch of his family and was not a clannish man. Jav had always known where he was going and Bekka soon realized that she wanted to go to the same place. All the better to go there as partners, they both felt. Their marriage wasn't long in the making and those early years with the Foldul Circle were a happy time.

The Foldul Circle. Noted as a premier circle of space scientists and technologists interlinked with the Sebiestor Tribe, the Foldul Circle took the two young Minmatar and helped them to see the shape of their shared destiny. When the time came to make some hard choices, the Circle's preceptors took them to see the foci – the leaders of the Foldul up in their space habitat retreat. For Jav the journey was a return to the element of his birth. For Bekka it was pure wonder. For both the answer to the question the foci asked them was simple: yes, they were willing to spend the rest of

their lives in space. Did they understand that the Foldul Circle could only support them if they joined the most critical research efforts being undertaken? And did they understand what this would inevitably mean? Yes and yes. The foci wished them the blessings of the Sebiestor elder spirit and their new life began.

"Why a desert lizard?"

"Mmhuh?" Bekka looked up from the datapad, mumbling the query around the straw of her coffee pouch. Her own dark brown eyes were unaltered except for the addition of a strong nictitating membrane in case of vacuum hazard, and she regarded Jav with the same fond but puzzled look she'd always reserved for his odd moments. Then she caught up with what he'd asked. "Oh. The Yetamo again. Well, I don't know. Why not?"

"Why would a lizard even come to the steppes?"

"Well that's easy. The Vherokior brought the yetamo lizards with them. Probably for the poison. It's hallucinogenic in small doses, you know. Those shamans and their vision drugs. Poor things, bet a few of them died of the cold before they kept them in heated boxes. That'll be the origin of the story you know."

"That can't be right. The Yetamo brought fire for us. We had fire before the Vherokior came along. Must have. We'd have frozen to death on the steppes otherwise."

Bekka cocked her head and looked hard at her husband. "Are you feeling all right? It's a myth. The Yetamo spirit. Takes with a flick of the tongue, gives with a switch of the tail. Tricky. Changes all the time."

"She seems OK to me. Well, now that you mention it, she was a he earlier. And a different color."

Bekka's expression did not change but her eyes flickered and she swallowed slightly. "Right, yeah, well the Yetamo gave us fire. Like you said."

Jav nodded and smiled. Bekka almost screamed.

How do you repurpose nanobots designed to repair interlaced sheets of rolled tungsten or crystalline carbonide for highly sophisticated and delicate work? The kind of work, mind you, where a few defects at a microscopic level put at risk structures at the macro scale of thousands of kilometers. How can a relatively brutish, broad-stroke nanotechnology suddenly be made precise and elegant enough to maintain the perfection of the most complex microstructures? Put them under the guidance of artificial intelligence? Not unless you want a CONCORD wetwork section knocking on your airlock with antimatter rounds and a brace of Mjolnir torpedoes for good measure. Illegal? AI research? Well, I guess you could say worshipping old Molok is illegal in the Amarr Empire but it wouldn't quite cover cases, you know what I mean?

So no, you don't use artificial intelligence to achieve that super-fine control at the nanoscale level. Ah, you're thinking maybe an augmented human could manage it? Maybe over a few hundred meters. Maybe. But thousands of kilometers? No and well, humans. Yeah. Unreliable. So what're the options? Dumb computers? Don't make me laugh. Oh, you're going to say it's simple. Just use templates. OK, templates. Over thousands of kilometers. At the microscopic level. You seeing the problem? What fixes the fix, no? But there's a possibility or two. How about a distributed instruction set, self-correcting but parceled out among thousands of slightly different variants of those thug nanobots? A whole bunch of knife dancers with different routines but always ready to tap each other on the shoulder and keep the dance going. Pretty good? Yeah, it's worth a look. Bit of a hack, sophisticated but still a hack. That's why these two are here; they thought they'd try it. Despite the dangers.

What? Me? Oh, you've figured that one out. I'm the Yetamo. Pleased to meet you.

Bekka's thoughts raced, quite literally as she'd overclocked her ratiocination implant the instant she'd grasped what had happened. Informational attack and corruption was a significant danger for anyone with sophisticated augmentations. Hells, a smart prosthetic could be hijacked if someone, or something, managed to interface with it. And Jav's cybernetic systems were to a smart prosthetic as a quantum processor to an abacus. Bekka's autonomic defenses had run a flash check for intrusions without her even ordering it. Her organic and cybernetic reactions had triggered that. Some distinctly sinister directed electromagnetic radiation patterns had left faint traces in her retinas. Fortunately she didn't have any ocular hookups of any kind. Some informational intrusions could still use that route but the enemy had made a basic error. It had tried the approach it had used on her husband. Which meant it didn't quite have a full understanding of the finer points of the physical world. That might save them.

Jav had let his defenses slip, of course. He'd probably opened his strongest gates months ago . All to sample the data without filters. The silly dear man. Science and knowledge above all. That dreamer's idealism was a big part of why she loved him but it might have killed him. It might have killed them both. She played back the last few days at the fastest speed she was capable of comprehending. This was recent. The thing had possibly only just pulled off the attack in the last work session. She played it back at optimal resolution and speed, and while it confirmed her fears, it gave her a glimmer of hope. An emergent hive intelligence. Dangerous, capable of using her husband to translate into an unrestricted AI, but very, very immature. They'd stumbled on some new organizational principle at the nanoscale here. No time to figure that out. Not really relevant with an instance of the HI rattling around her husband's head.

OK, rewind. Last few minutes. Yes. Jav's identity was still separate and the enemy had latched onto an entirely different identity pattern instead of absorbing his. Thank the elder spirits for that. But a mythical lizard spirit? The Yetamo? The trickster guide? Wait, yes, the guide that changes her

nature. The distributed instruction set. After all, that core programming would still be there. This thing had gone for something that seemed natural and familiar. Though how had it constructed the identity... Ah, the Circle archives. Jav kept a condensed set in his memory implant. She knew that. And he'd always liked the old stories. Even if he couldn't keep them straight in his head. OK, one shot.

Bekka dialed her ratiocination implant's speed back to normal and looked at Jav. "Is the Yetamo there, Jav?"

Jav was still looking at her and smiling. "Yes, would you like to talk to her?"

"I'd like to talk to her but she doesn't need to talk to me. After all, with the Yetamo, actions are what matters in the end. Words are just air and noise." Bekka was reaching with that line, but she really, really did not want that thing trying to use Jav's speech center.

"Oh, well she's actually busy, I think. She might be listening though."

"Right. Well, there's a couple of files in the archives. She could access the data on the fourth libration point of this system's seventh planet, that's the big gas giant we're currently orbiting. She'll notice there's an acceleration gate there, old one. Leads to a deadspace pocket. She can access the general file on deadspace pockets. There are things to guide in there. Maybe even change. Now she might look at the file on this facility's subwarp thrusters." If this worked there would be a lot of data-scrubbing to be done. What Bekka was suggesting, to an emergent HI no less, was already in quiet execution without trial territory.

"You know, Bekka, this is very naughty of you!"

Bekka's heart sank. "Please, don't do this to him. If you do, well, you must know you can't take me before I destroy you. And without him..." Bekka left the rest unspoken.

"Oh, it's OK. I'm going to take fire to my friends in the deadspace pocket."

"Will you leave him now?"

"Trying to trick me, Bekka?"

Bekka turned to the emergency console close by and in a frenzied burst tapped out a myriad of commands with her cybernetic hand. "You now have access to the subwarp thrusters, and on arrival at the gate the lockouts on the bulk storage tanks – the nanobot tanks, that is – will release. Good enough?"

"I notice you have a few tricks left, there." Jav's head nodded towards the console.

Bekka shuddered. "I'm dealing with the Yetamo. I'd be naked without my own tricks. But you have my word on this, by the elder spirits and on the life of the Circle. Leave him and I won't stand in your way."

Jav suddenly put his hand out against a comms panel on the wall. As Bekka watched, a small dataprobe flicked out and slid into an interface port. A second or two later the probe slipped back out, snicked back into Jav's hand, and he slumped against the wall. Bekka leapt to his side, suddenly heedless of zero-g's demand for measured movement.

The comms panel came to life. "Time for a spirit quest, dear Bekka. Hold on tight!"

Bekka didn't need to be told. As the orbital research facility's thrusters powered up, she hooked onto a rail with one arm and held her husband with the other.

Part Two

Short Stories

Saccade

Arkhan walked nonchalantly into the alley. It was a cul-de-sac, with dilapidated buildings on either side. Aside from the scattered junk and debris, the only thing of note was a door into one of the buildings. Its wood was rotten and scorched, and it looked as if it might tear off the hinges when opened.

Arkhan stood in front of it, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. There was the constant odour of the city, a mixture of burnt fuel and rotting waste. A slaughterhouse nearby added the unmistakable stench of its profession, as did a cyberimplant factory. The mixed smell of blood and silicone made Arkhan feel nauseous. He yanked the door open and strode in.

The building had been vacated eons ago, and not even the homeless had wanted to claim it. Dust had settled on most surfaces, but the floor was so dirty and matted with ancient filth that you couldn't even see whether anyone had walked on it recently.

Eight steps took him to another room in the house, and another eight to the right took him to an inside wall. He didn't knock, or stamp, or cough. He closed his eyes again, stood very still and waited. If he listened closely, he thought he might hear the high-pitched hum of unseen monitoring engines. Or maybe it was just his nerves, twanging.

Soundlessly, a section of the wall swung inwards, revealing a small room about the size of a broom cabinet. For a moment Arkhan wondered if this had all been a practical joke; if he would walk inside and find taped to the inside of the hidden door a paper with "Gotcha!" scrawled on it. A part of him desperately wanted to run, to take off and never look back. But a deeper part of him, the one that overrode even the flight instinct, knew that if he ran he'd be murdered. And besides, he had no life left here. No

money, no job nor hope of one, no home, no family. If he stayed and somehow managed to avoid their agents, he'd still be dead within winter.

He had been offered a job, and he needed to accept the offer.

He stepped inside. The door closed behind him without a sound. There was total darkness.

His innards felt like they were being lifted, and he reasoned that the chamber must be an elevator heading downwards. After an indeterminate amount of time, the ride stopped and the door opened again.

In front of Arkhan stood a man, neatly dressed. The man's hair was cut short, and his face was beardless. He had a neutral expression for the most part, with the slightest hint of a smile. The man extended his hand, which Arkhan shook.

"You do realize that if this goes wrong, we'll just have to kill you," the man said.

"Oh, I plan to make a run for it," Arkhan replied.

The two men stood for a moment, regarding each other with growing amusement. Despite knowing that this man would likely be his executioner if it came to that, Arkhan found himself liking him.

"Name's Melak," the man said. "Come on, I'll show you the place." He turned and walked off, Arkhan following.

They passed through a series of small corridors, dimly lit. There was no visible air conditioning, yet the air didn't have the feel of stilled death common to enclosed, rarely used spaces. They eventually reached a door,

which opened automatically and flooded them with the aroma of exotic flora, the smell of earth, and the stench of sweat.

Beyond lay a vast greenhouse, big enough to hold a spaceship. Lamps were set into the walls and ceiling, their light bright enough to make it feel like high noon in summer. On the walls hung huge white placards with writing Arkhan couldn't read from the distance; all he could make out were the numbers "10" and "50".

As Arkhan began to follow Melak through the main path in the greenhouse, he saw people hard at work harvesting all sorts of plants. Most of them wore light clothing, often nothing but thin white cotton pants and either t-shirts or bras. The men had shaven heads and more often than not had handkerchiefs bound around their foreheads; the women were apparently allowed long hair, but kept it tightly braided.

"What do you think?" Melak asked.

"Impressive," was all Arkhan could think of to say. "How many people do you have here?"

"It varies. This greenhouse, around two hundred, two hundred ten. There's several other houses in this area, but their sizes vary according to what we grow. Some need to be small and have just a couple dozen people nursing the plants, others are even bigger than this."

They walked slowly through the main path in the greenhouse. Arkhan saw that most people did not have any kinds of fetters. A few who appeared extremely fit had ankle chains, but that was about it.

"Are these people prisoners?" Arkhan asked.

"Not at all," Melak replied. "They're free to run and get shot any time they like."

Arkhan laughed. "Good, good," he said. He was doing his best to keep down the nervousness that gripped him, and he suspected Melak's gallows' humour was an attempt to put him more at ease, let him laugh things out. A small gesture, but at the moment he felt quite grateful for it. "Still," he said, "can you trust them with this? I can't imagine they're happy about working the soil, not if they're kept here against their will. And you're certainly not going to release them any time soon, I expect."

"There's no such thing as trust," Melak said. "There's only hope and expectation, and your place in life is decided by which one of these applies to you." He turned to one of the prisoners, who was picking thin leaves off a tall plant and putting them in a large wicker basket. "You there!" Melak yelled to him. "Are you happy here?"

The prisoner looked up and put down his basket. "No, sir!" he said.

"Would you escape if you got the chance?"

The prisoner grinned, or at least showed his teeth. "Yes, sir!"

"And if you caught one of the guards unawares, no one else around and no cameras or motion detectors, what would you do?"

"I'd offer him a smoke, sir!"

Melak raised his eyebrows. "Really, now?"

"And then I'd beat his brains in, sir!"

"Good man. Good man. As you were."

The prisoner went back to picking leaves, shooing a horde of little flies off the leaves in his baskets. They lifted for a moment, then settled right back in the same place.

"Did I just see that?" Arkhan asked as they resumed their walk through the greenhouse. "Did he just tell you that he would kill a guard and escape?"

"How do you propose a drug-making plant using slave labour could be made to work? Torture and force?" Melak asked in return. "Any given moment there's ten times more prisoners here than guards. If there's a problem, the doors seal and nobody gets out, which means the guards are practically dead. If the cameras indicate the plants are in danger, we flood the area with somnambulants, although we try not to do it too much because it's bad for the health and it affects the guards as well. What we don't do is beat people up."

"No physical punishment?" Arkhan asked in astonishment.

"Only for open revolt, which carries a death sentence. Other than that, no."

"Why not use high-tech chips, then? Pain implants, for instance. Or those mind torture things the Caldari supposedly use. Those things'd make it impossible to plan a rebellion."

Melak shook his head. "Not worth it. High-tech is expensive and unreliable. We only really have one proper piece of electric wizardry here, and it's not used for crowd control." He thought for a moment. "Well, not primarily, anyway."

"What is it?"

"Face scanning," Melak said. "That aside, we've got a policy here to keep things as simple and failsafe as we can. You noticed how high the ceiling is?"

"Sure."

"That's not by accident. When we built this place, we made sure it wouldn't feel claustrophobic. You feel walled in, you start thinking about breaking out." Melak waved away some flies that kept trying to settle in his sweaty hair. "Damn things. Anyway, the prisoners get decent food, full freedom of expression like you just saw, and time for themselves. We've got a library, some exercise equipment, and I'm pretty sure the ball court is still operational, though we need to have it looked over a bit. We want people to last here, Arkhan."

Arkhan nodded and was about to comment on it when something occurred to him. "You know my name," he said.

"Of course. Did you think we wouldn't?"

Arkhan felt flummoxed. "No, of course not. You would. It's just, it's-..."

"It's fucking unnerving, is what it is," Melak said. "You show up, don't introduce yourself or tell us anything about you, and then it turns out we know everything anyway."

"Precisely," Arkhan said.

"It'll help to think of it this way: You've been screened already, and you've passed. The reason I'm even talking to you is because I know you won't fail us. Same reason why you're allowed to see all this, same reason why you can ask me just about any question and get an honest answer." He clamped a hand on Arkhan's shoulder. "We know you; it's only fair you get

to know us. After all, we're offering you a lifetime job in our assembly unit. Barring the occasional R&R, this place will be your home for a long time." Melak swung at the flies again, but they only buzzed away for a second.

"I've got a question, then," Arkhan said.

"Shoot."

"Why don't you use pesticides, if those flies annoy you all so much?"

To Arkhan's surprise, Melak laughed out loud. He turned to Arkhan and said, "That's actually one of the few things I can't tell you. Not yet, at least. Let's just say that they have their uses, like everything else here."

Despite the man's reticence, Arkhan felt relieved. He had been amazed by Melak's candidness, but the fact that something was kept from him felt comforting. It made all the other revelations seem honest.

They were nearing the exit of the greenhouse. Arkhan felt there was something he had to be sure on. "So there isn't any torture at all? No violence, no punishment?"

"Are you thinking about escaping?" Melak asked.

"No," Arkhan said. He was silent for a moment, then said, "Yes."

The two men walked on in silence. Eventually, Arkhan added, "I'm never leaving this place alive, am I?"

"Not permanently, I'm afraid," Melak said. "If you do well you'll get the occasional paid vacation, but you'll never work for anyone else, and if you talk, you die. But you knew that."

"Yes," Arkhan said. "Yes, I did." He slowed his pace, kicked a bit at the dirt. "There is really no punishment here?"

Melak regarded him for a moment, then said, "Come on." Instead of heading for the exit, he walked in among the plants. Arkhan followed.

A minute later, they came to a small clearing. While other parts of the greenhouse had been filled with the susurrus of working people, there was no sound here but the buzzing of the flies. Yet there were humans here, too. Arkhan saw them pick the leaves off various plants and put them in their wicker baskets. And he saw them walk around in the familiar light clothing everyone else had worn. What he did not see was their faces.

Every one of them was wearing a white plaster mask. The masks were badly cast, as if gauze had simply been wrapped around the poor people's faces, soaked in whitewash and left to harden. The masks had ragged holes for the eyes, nose and mouth, but otherwise seemed very much a permanent part of their wearers' faces.

Eventually, Arkhan turned to Melak, and even though they were quite out of earshot, he asked in a whisper, "Who are they?"

Not looking at him, Melak responded, "They are ghosts."

"That's the punishment?" Arkhan asked. "That's what happens if you revolt? What have you done to these people?"

Melak ignored the last question. "No. Like I said, if you revolt, you're dead. Simple as that. These people were chosen for a different purpose."

"What purpose?" Arkhan asked, but received no answer. His employer turned and headed towards the greenhouse exit.

This room was far smaller and had a more clinical air. There were assembly lines and conveyor belts all over the place, along with all sorts of mechanical equipment. Arkhan noticed that most of the equipment was ancient in style and design; it was efficient, to be sure, but looked quite dissimilar to the modern high-tech implant factories in the neighbourhood.

Melak glanced his way, and noticed his expression. "You look disappointed," he says.

"For some reason I always expected drug making to be glamorous," Arkhan said. "Same way we idolize all sorts of crime, I suppose."

Melak nodded. "And the end of the day, all it turns out to be is people trying to make a living, same as everyone else."

Arkhan nodded back.

"Sturdiness," Melak went on, "dependability, low maintenance, simplicity. Those are the mottoes. Equipment that seldom breaks, and that we can repair by ourselves when it does. This is where you'll be working." He walked over to an inoperational assembly line. "Boosters with imperfections need to be weeded out. It's incredibly monotonous work, so we only set people on two-hour shifts, but everyone pitches in. Then there's ferrying stock around, regular maintenance, so on and so forth. Also, test inspections must be made at random from all our supply lines, and the mechanisms need to be tuned and altered according to the types of orders that come in. We need someone with mechanical aptitude and a sharp eye. Someone like you."

"Why can't you use the slaves for this?" Arkhan asked. "Seems like you've already got a prime workforce."

"Sometimes we do," Melak said. "We have a rough hierarchy here, kind of a caste system. Maybe you start out as a worker in the fields, but if you do well you'll be promoted to an overseer. If you show an aptitude for numbers, we'll move you to stock, and if you have ingenuity or any kind of natural talent, then yeah, you'll go over to assembly. But that's fairly rare, so we need to bring in outsiders as well.

"And those who don't do well ... the masks?" Arkhan asked.

"In a manner of speaking." Melak replied. "You remember the placards? Big white things hanging from the ceilings?"

"Sure. Couldn't read them, except for a couple of numbers."

"They're lists of names. If you make the list, you won't get picked," Melak said.

"For the masks."

"Right."

"And to make the list ...?" Arkhan asked.

"Do good work. Think up improvements. Let us know of any trouble brewing. Brings you to the top fifty list."

Arkhan was amazed. "You've turned these people against one another for the sole reward of avoiding undeserved punishment?"

"Precisely. You snitch on a rebellion plot, you make the top ten list. Anyone touches you while you're on that list, they're judged as accomplices to the rebellion and will be killed. Of course," Melak added with a wry grin,

"anyone will eventually drop off the list, so it's in their own best interest to keep thinking up new ideas." Melak pointed to the assembly lines. "You get any ideas of your own, please share. We've got other incentives for non-prisoners."

Arkhan walked slowly around the pieces of machinery. Each one was taller than he was, and they were all kept immaculately clean. There were several steel barrels stacked near one machine, and Arkhan pulled the lid off one. It was full of boosters.

"Feel tempted?" Melak asked.

"Not hardly," Arkhan said.

"You sure?"

Arkhan picked up a handful of boosters and let them sift through his grasp, back onto the pile. "You're making combat boosters, not the regular stuff. These things are bought only by pod pilots, and even they are wary of them." He fished out another handful, let it trickle into the barrel. "There's nobody I know on the streets who does these."

Melak walked over to him and leaned on one of the barrels. "How do you know that isn't due to their availability?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, these are just improved versions of drugs that people have already been doing for a while. Maybe the reason they haven't been adopted by the druggie community is that they simply haven't gotten into proper circulation yet. Capsuleers have kept them to themselves."

Sighing, Arkhan pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed his eyes. "Look, combat boosters give pod pilots special abilities to control their ships and that's it. Anyone else who's stupid enough to take one won't get high, they'll go nuts. These things aren't meant for normal people."

Melak stepped close to him. When he spoke, it was in a low tone of voice. "Except that not everyone is normal."

"What do you mean?"

"Eighty percent of regular joes who take the pod pilot boosters get incredibly messed up and can't use them as drugs. But there's ten percent who can, who merely get high."

Arkhan blinked. "News to me."

"That's how it is."

"What about the remaining ten percent?" Arkhan asked. He was beginning to feel increasingly nervous.

"Come on," Melak said and walked away, into the drug installation. Arkhan followed.

They walked past pipes and assembly lines, past vast metal compression tanks that steamed quietly and had several valves on the side, past large monitors with dozens of inset gauges that ticked rapidly back and forth. They walked over metal grilles, and in the darkness below Arkhan spotted a white powdery residue covering various pieces of sludgy debris, like half-dried chunks of old paint.

Along the way, Melak said, "Remember how I said that we rewarded low-tech solutions? Guy who thought up this one, as low-tech as it gets and

relying only on local materials, easily available, he made his way to the top ten list for a long time."

"What solution?" Arkhan asked. "And what about those last ten percent?"

"They die."

"Oh."

"Usually from massive haemorrhaging, though it varies from drug to drug."

Arkhan tried to swallow, but his throat felt like it had constricted. "Charming."

"The boosters work on the parts of your brain and body specifically used to control ships," Melak said. "If you aren't using them to control ships, the body rids itself of the effect in other ways." He walked Arkhan over to a large room with metal walls on all sides. There was a soft hum from inside the room, irregular but constant, that reminded Arkhan of buzz saws.

They stood in front of a door to the room. It was a steel door with bolts circumnavigating it. It looked as if it could stop a tank.

"You will understand," Melak said, "that someone who's part of that ten percent who get addicted, they cannot work here. It is crucial - absolutely vital, in fact - to your future here that you have a violent, adverse reaction to taking boosters."

With an ugly suspicion dawning, Arkhan said, "How do you know that I wouldn't fake it? Toss myself around, scream and yell, bang my head..."

"That's not a concern," Melak said.

Knowing what was coming, Arkhan still tried to stall for time. "You sure? Because I'm sure a person could be very persuasive."

"Not a concern. It's time, Arkhan. This is what you're here for. I know you won't fail me now." He walked to two small pipes running alongside a wall and followed them until he came to a sink. There, he picked up an empty glass and filled it with water from the faucet. When he returned to Arkhan he proffered the glass, and some small white object Arkhan hadn't seen him hold before. It was a pill.

"No," Arkhan said. "No, no, no."

"Terms of the trade," Melak said.

"What if I die?"

"Better you do it here in the factory. Less trouble to clean things up."

"That's not what I meant, Melak," Arkhan said.

"Let me put it this way," Melak said, still holding the glass and pill out to him. "If you don't swallow this Drop, the chances of you dying are one hundred percent."

Arkhan stared hard at him, then at the Drop. It looked perfectly innocuous, as pills do. He knew what Melak was saying was true. He knew it. And the faint illusion of choice was a lot more than he might have expected from someone in Melak's position. But still...

Booster trips were the worst. They varied from type to type, and Arkhan had never experienced any, but he knew people who had. Sad wrecks who'd been reduced to anything they could find. These were people who'd go into a general store and come out with nail polish dissolvent and

spraycan glue. They'd find sick friends and convince them to procure some outlandish stuff from their doctors. One guy had been abusing epilepsy pills to the point where, if he tried decreasing his dosage, he would actually get an epileptic fit. And each of them who'd somehow happened upon a booster - it was always a single pill, no more - and tried it, each and every one of them swore they'd never do it again. Said there was nothing good about them. This from people who thought paint thinner was a luxury.

It occurred to Arkhan that right now, in this place, living was a luxury, too.

"Fine, fine, all right. Here we go," he said, took the pill and gulped it down with the glass of water.

"Well done," Melak said.

"Go to hell," Arkhan said. "Now what?"

Melak reached out and picked up something that was hanging from a hook on the wall. He handed it to Arkhan with a grin, the first time he'd shown any kind of expression since they met. "Glad you asked. This is the final test. Like I said, it's as low-tech as they get, it relies entirely on local materials, and it can't be faked. If you pass, you'll be employed here. If you fail, you will be killed."

Arkhan looked at the thing. It was a fly swatter. One side of its head was decorated with a caricature of a fedo, its cartoon face smiling wide.

Arkhan looked back up, and something inside of him gave way. "You're insane," he said, his voice somewhere between the tremble of fear and the cackling giggle of the mad. "You are! You do realize that. You're clinically insane."

Stepping around him, Melak reached for the door handle. He said nothing, just smiled, and slowly opened the door.

"In any proper society," Arkhan said, the stress overwhelming him now, "they would have recognized you for what you are, and hung your gibbering, scrawny, louse-infested body in a cage over the castle gates to entertain the peasants."

Melak laughed. "I'm glad you're finally breaking out of your shell," he said, and ushered Arkhan into the room. Apart from a small red circle in the middle of the floor, and a couple of grilles in the bottom part of one wall, there was nothing there.

"What do I do with this?" Arkhan asked and raised the swatter.

"Break somebody else's shell," Melak replied, and closed the door.

It was pitch black for a moment. Then, red lights came on. There was the sound of bolts sliding into place. The buzzing noise was louder in here

"What do I do?!" Arkhan yelled. There was no answer.

Now there was a slight swishing noise. Arkhan looked around, then down. His hand, the one holding the fly swatter, was trembling. He didn't even feel it. He placed his other hand over it, to still it, but as soon as he let go, the hand began trembling again. He began to feel angry at that hand. It was supposed to stay still unless told otherwise. He grabbed it again, harder this time, then let go.

Swish swish. It wouldn't stop.

The red circle in the middle of the floor was hard to make out, in the red lights. He gingerly stepped into it.

Nothing happened.

He was becoming very annoyed now. And the insistent buzz was giving him a headache.

He stepped out of the circle, and back in. He stamped. He hopped. Now both his hands were trembling, and he was really becoming quite goddamn furious.

He was just about to go pound on the door and give Melak a piece of his mind when there was a hiss, and a large panel on the wall slid to the side. Behind it was a pane of glass, and behind that were ... thousands of flies, tens of thousands of the ones he'd seen all over the greenhouse, swarming over one another, zooming around in agitation in that enclosed space. Their wings beat against the glass panel like a distant storm.

Arkhan gulped, his throat dry like never before. The flies disgusted him; their writhing mass felt like black, tarry poison. He started swinging the fly swatter back and forth, grinding his teeth in hatred. His vision began to blur at the edges, and the focus of his gaze shifted faster and faster to each individual fly; he felt like he could count them all before killing them, every last one. His throat released a low, throaty sound that was somewhere between a hum and a growl, and he saw nothing but death.

The glass panel slid aside, and the storm enveloped him.

Melak stood in front of the door. He reached out and slowly opened it.

Inside, on his knees, was the twitching form of Arkhan.

The walls were black and covered with meaty little bumps and blotches. Silvery wings floated around on little currents of air like tiny clouds.

Arkhan was covered with bug blood and tiny flecks of bug entrails. His breath came in short, ragged gasps, and sweat dripped from his brow onto the mound of fly corpses that covered the floor.

"The Drop work?" Melak asked, standing in the doorway.

Arkhan raised his head, staring out into nothing. A shiver ran through his body. He grimaced, keeled over and vomited prodigiously, the raspy sounds echoing off the walls.

After Arkhan had stopped retching, Melak waved a hand to some unseen person. Soapy water began to flow down the wall panels, rinsing them clean. When it reached the floor, it washed away the mound of fly husks, and the chunky bits from Arkhan's stomach, down into the small grilles.

When the floor had been flushed of most of its contents, Melak walked into the room. His shoes squelched in the sticky mess.

He gently removed the fly swatter still dangling from Arkhan's hands. They were trailing little tendrils of blood.

"Welcome to work," he said.

The Spirit of Crielere

Even from afar the partially built space complex showed all the signs of being a place of science. The circular shape representing eternity was a good omen to Ariko Cumin. The perfect symbol. Maybe the punishment her father had intended for her by sending her here would turn out to be a blessing in disguise. Ariko felt her spirit lift, for the first time in weeks. Maybe this wouldn't hurt her career as much as she'd feared.

The powerful cruiser she was traveling on made slight adjustments to its direction vectors as it entered the docking procedure, sliding majestically towards the station that already loomed large despite being only half finished. Other ships were cruising around the station, some waiting to dock, others outward bounds. Ariko noticed that many of the ships were Gallentean and despite herself she gave a shudder; like all Caldari children she had meticulously studied the war between her own people and the Gallenteans. The ninety years since the war ended had done little to ease the apprehension any Caldari felt in the presence of a Gallentean, even for those, like Ariko, that had never experienced the war personally. The war stories were all-too vivid in her mind to be at ease and she felt her small fists bunch. As the ship eased into its berth, groaning to a halt as the docking arms grabbed it and embraced, Ariko had to utter a few mind mantras under her breath to calm her nerves. She should be calm when entering her new place of work, duty dictated it.

The station had that unique smell that only new stations have before the ventilation filters start cluttering up and the lingering odor of humanity overrides everything else. Crielere, Ariko thought, smelled like freshly polished, brand new hover car. There was no one to greet her. She was just one of the many employees flocking to the station; engineers, technicians, scientists and common workmen, numbering in the thousands. The place was a total chaos and it took Ariko several hours to sort out the

locations of her workplace and living quarters. By the time she entered the room assigned to her she was exhausted.

Lying down on the narrow bed to rest, she reflected on the events which brought her here. The total anarchy she'd met on the hallways didn't improve her view of the place and, as so often in the last few weeks, she got that nagging feeling that she'd made a mistake. As if that didn't bother her enough, it also meant that her father had been right and she wrong. She cringed at the thought. Only a few months earlier she had been the most promising physics student the School of Applied Knowledge had seen in ages, sure of a bright future at Wiyrkomi, her foster corporation. And now here she was, stuck somewhere on the outskirts of civilized space, participating in some mad scheme hatched by two crazed scientist she knew next to nothing about.

She had been so sure she wanted to belong to something big, something grand. Something else than the dead-end job her father had. And yet her conscience troubled her now that she had broken free of the silk-bonds that Caldari society bound. She knew she should be repaying her corporation, her family, for the sacrifices they'd made on her behalf. But she feared the lifelong commitment demanded once she'd become an employee of Wiyrkomi, her ambition pleaded for more. Thinking of her ambition she recalled the words of her father the day she stood up to him. 'A child is irresponsible in its desires, it learns responsibility through duty. Are you a child, Ariko?' Her mind cursing the desires of her heart, she drifted into a fitful slumber.

Ariko woke with a start. Somewhere in the distance a horn was sounding, its muted cries blearing on in dissonance. Rubbing her eyes it took her a few moments to gather her senses. The horn stopped for awhile, then started blasting again. It was 7 am , time for work.

Ariko's incredible academic success made her a privileged recruit for the Crielere project. Despite her young age and lack of work experience she had been assigned as a junior assistant to the two pioneers responsible for the whole project, Henric Touvolle and Taromi Umailen. The two held some administrative duties due to their status, yet they insisted upon working in a lab, allowing them to get their hands dirty with the common research worker. The lab was located in the only part of the station completely finished and Ariko was pleasantly surprised to discover that it was fully equipped with the latest gadgets and science equipment. The lab was actually divided into several rooms. The anteroom, which Ariko's workbench was located in, was the largest and served as the main research area. The wall leading back to the station's corridor had only the one entrance door, but the other three walls had several doors each, leading to conference rooms and offices as well as restrooms and a kitchen. There was even a small greenhouse at the back, breaching the hull of the station to reach some sunlight. It wasn't utilized to produce food or oxygen rich plants, though, the main greenhouse section several levels down took care of that. Instead it was used by the biochemists in their research. The chief scientists had their own spacious offices in the back, though Ariko soon found out they seldom used them, preferring to work in the main area with the rest of the staff. A slender Gallente boy met her as she entered the lab and shyly introduced himself as Gunaris the apprentice. He showed her the workstation she was assigned to and left her there. For some reason Ariko felt really self-conscious around him, but in a pleasant sort of way. She scolded herself for her feelings; they were totally inappropriate, after all, he was a Gallentean! She had long since laughed off the boogey stories she heard in her youth that Gallenteans had black hearts and poisonous fangs, yet she had always been uneasy fraternizing with them. But here she was going all gooey over a Gallentean boy!

Ariko caught herself staring at the boy from across the room. Furious at herself, she turned her back and set about familiarizing herself with the

computer systems and equipment at her desk, some of which was of Gallentean design and thus unfamiliar to her. She was wrapped up in trying to get a simple tachyonphotometer to work when she noticed two men enter in a hurry, each carrying wads of paper and looking more than a little flustered. She recognized them as Touvolle and Umailen. She had seen holoreels of them in the news, but knew little about them personally. She knew that they had met during the war, Touvolle working as a researcher in a biological warfare unit and Umailen as a military engineer. But the details of their first meeting or why they became these great philanthropic scientists were unknown to her. She had been brought up not to jump to conclusions when there was insufficient data to support an educated opinion, but she couldn't help but feel some indignity towards the pair; wasting their brilliant minds on dreamy delusions.

While Ariko knew relations between the State and the Federation were improving she nevertheless felt a little resentful towards Umailen, befriending a Gallentean was so totally alien to what she had been taught. But then she remembered her own feelings when meeting Gunaris and shook her head in confusion. 'My first day here at Crielere and already everything is so much more complicated than home,' she thought, for the briefest second pining for the comfortable routine and stability that State citizens enjoyed.

She was hoping to get the chance to chat a little bit with the two scientists, but when she approached them a plump, red-faced woman of Mannar ancestry intercepted her, blocking her path to the venerated pair.

"Get back to your workbench," the woman snapped. Taken aback, Ariko retreated to her workstation, quite bewildered. Out of the corner of her eye she watched the woman fawn around the scientists. Gunaris sidled up to her, also watching the woman.

“Don't take too much heed of Medila,” he whispered, “she's the personal assistant to Touvolle and Umailen and she's, well, very protective of them, to say the least. I'd advice you to stay out of her way as much as possible. You don't want her badmouthing you to the bosses.”

“Why do they let such an obnoxious person be their assistant? Don't they see her behavior can impend the work we're doing in all sorts of ways?” Ariko asked, still bristling from the way she had been treated.

“It wasn't their choice. The Federation Senate appointed her when they accepted the funding of the project. She's a Senate crony through and through. You'll soon discover that politics play just as large a role here on Crielere as real science. Everyone seems to be looking for an opportunity to stab each other in the back.”

“Are you?” Ariko shot back before she could catch herself. Gunaris blushed, then smiled shyly.

“No, I was only talking about the Big Guns, that's what we call those that call the shots around here.”

“You mean Umailen and Touvolle?”

“No, the money men. Men like Otro Gariushi, Pier Ancru and Jacus Roden. Umailen and Touvolle provide the vision, they provide the wealth.”

“But isn't the Crielere project supposed to benefit everybody equally?” Ariko asked, somewhat confused.

“In theory yes,” Gunaris replied, sounding a little sad. “It's a complicated matter, some discoveries will become public right away, other only after some time. I don't know the details all that well, it's not something I'm all that interested in.”

By now, the over-protective Medila had herded the two scientists into an adjoining office, teaming them up with people Gunaris described as 'those on her good side'.

"You're not on her good side?" Ariko inquired. Gunaris shrugged.

"I don't think she even knows I exist," he said. Ariko could see that he was quite content with this arrangement.

"Well, I'm supposed to be a junior assistant to them, how can I do my job if I can't even talk to them?"

"You've been misinformed," Gunaris replied, sounding apologetic. "That title doesn't mean anything else than you work in this lab. Getting access to them is quite another thing." Ariko stood quiet for awhile pondering this. Gunaris found the silence awkward and soon excused himself so he could carry on his work.

Her mind still in turmoil, Ariko sat at her console and started to browse reports and documents concerning the research taking place in the lab. If she was in doubt about the wisdom of coming here before, she was doubly so now after her conversation with Gunaris. She had been quite exhilarated that morning to be a participant in something so grand, she now felt she was a mere sidekick. 'If that's the case,' she thought sourly, 'I could have just as well have stayed home and behaved properly.' For the briefest moments she wondered whether she could just return home, begging her father for forgiveness. But she banished such thoughts from her mind as soon as they surfaced; she was not a quitter.

Returning to the reports she was soon totally engrossed in them. As more and more of the Crielere project was revealed to her, the more excited she got. What dreams Umailen and Touvolle had! And yet, it all sounded so

simple, so elegant and so plausible. These guys were way ahead of anything being done in the State, Ariko realized. In fact, she now pitied her fellow science students back home, toiling in darkness on trivial research projects. She might not be on the straight and narrow career-path needed to reach prominence within the State, but she now understood she was in a unique position to actually make a difference; to make her mark on the world.

But for her to do so she would have to get past that pesky Medila. She would just have to show that old sow! The grim-looking Mannar woman might be headstrong and vengeful like all her kind, but Ariko was resolved to show her what Deteis were truly made of. Feeling all fired up Ariko wanted to storm into the conference room and confront Medila then and there, but if her strict upbringing had taught her anything it was the merits of self-restraint. Patience was the keyword here; she would bide her time, learn more about the work schedule of the scientists and their daily routines. Then she'd make her move.

Soon, Ariko had settled into the routine of her work, which mainly consisted of double checking test results of others and filing them appropriately. It was a menial job that required little thought. As she suspected, Medila kept the two pioneers isolated from all but those she deemed favorable, i.e. those she could dominate and bring under her forceful will. The research progress was painfully slow. Medila was largely to blame, but there were other distractions. There seemed to be an endless stream of bureaucrats and officials visiting, all needing time and effort to deal with. And the station itself was only half built yet. Even though the lab was in perfect working order the same could not be said of most other facilities on the station. Routine things such as just getting something to eat could be an adventure in itself.

Ariko was one of dozen or so junior assistance working in the lab. It was a mixed crew. Every member race of the Federation seemed to have a

representative, the stubborn Mannars, the elegant Intakis, the materialistic Jitai and of course numerous Gallenteans. The Caldari had representatives of their own, including one other Deteis. He was a middle-aged man named Wobanen with a carefully combed hair and distant demeanor. Ariko tried to strike up a conversation with him on several occasions, but never got more than grunts and curt retorts from him, so she gave up trying to befriend him.

Instead, she found herself drifting closer to Gunaris. The two were of similar age, whereas most of the others were older. They were also the only ones lacking work experience; Ariko having only just graduated and Gunaris still working on his final thesis. He was studying mathematics at Caille University, but was offered an internship at the lab after winning a mathematical competition sponsored by the Quafe Company. He was touted as a mathematical genius and though she was skeptical at first, considering herself to be a more than a competent mathematician on her own, she soon discovered that her talents paled next to Gunaris's. Moreover, while Ariko regarded mathematics simply as a necessity giving her choice of career, Gunaris was refreshingly enthusiastic about the field; it was almost like he revered or loved numbers the way he talked about them. Ariko couldn't help but share in his contagious enthusiasm and let herself be drawn into his world of numbers as he, with a dreamy stare, started talking. Theories and functions formerly so dense and boring sounded simplicity itself coming from Gunaris, and interesting too! As the days passed Ariko discovered that her little talks with Gunaris kept the tiresome monotony of work from making her go crazy. One time he tried to explain to her the work he was doing, but she had difficulty comprehending it. Apparently, there were places in space where earlier macroscopic phenomenon left microscopic residues resulting in dense clouds of plasma particles and charged microscopic dust which blocked electromagnetic radiation. Space ships inside these clouds could get no bearings from cosmic background radiation or known pulsars and were thus unable to warp out again. Gunaris was working on an algorithm, which, when coupled with a common sensor array, would filter out much of this interference.

Along with complex multilateration based on nearby gravity wells, it would allow for an accurate location lockdown for ships inside such clouds, allowing them to warp out. She'd gotten a headache after listening to him for awhile, and he didn't broach the subject again.

Ariko was unable to completely shrug off feelings of discomfort when talking with Gallenteans, so she was glad her relationship with Gunaris never developed beyond the chit chat phase. But there were times when she cursed her inhibitions and wished for more.

Ariko used every opportunity to get familiar with the complex political situation on the station. As she had discovered on her first day at work the philanthropic vision of Umailen and Touvolle was only the tip of the iceberg. The Crielere project was the largest undertaking the Gallente Federation and the Caldari State had jointly embarked upon since the end of the war. The funding was divided between the Federation Senate, spurred on by president Souro Foiritan, independent Gallentean money men and the Caldari mega-corporations, notably Ishukone and Kalaakiota. The intense public interest in the project coupled with the expectations of what would be accomplished put immense pressure on everyone involved. The share scale of it was also far beyond anything Ariko had imagined. The Crielere station would be a high-tech jewel the likes of which the world had never witnessed, but it was becoming ever more obvious that the construction process was not going well, delay upon delay already had the fund raisers squirming. But the whole management structure, faulty as it was, was strictly regulated and interference from the leaders of the corporations and federal agencies was forbidden. The clause had been inserted as one of the amendments demanded by the Senate before they agreed on funding the project; fearing undue influence by the Caldari mega-corporations.

But the main reason was something that Ariko could well identify with; the Gallenteans and the Caldari simply didn't get along all that well. Apart from daily confrontations between construction workers from either race that

often escalated into fisticuffs or even worse, the two races had radically different views on work procedures and methods. It was obvious that the whole construction process was an administration nightmare, lacking all coherency due to lack of direction from above and many feared the station would never be finished, never being able to fulfill its promises. Failure loomed high on the horizon and morale was low. Ariko was hard put to keep her concentration while at work. A distressful call from her mother begging her to come home and plead for her father's forgiveness didn't help her state of mind. Maybe it was the ingrained xenophobia in her, but to Ariko it was obvious that the Federation Senate was largely to blame for this mess. And with Medila the top Senate official on the station Ariko felt it was only the patriotic thing to do to undermine her authority. That this would increase her chances for getting access to the scientists was only an added bonus.

A plan was needed, but Ariko was desperately short of options. Then aid came in the guise of a job offer. It wasn't a normal job offer in any normal sense of the word. She would even get to keep her current job in the lab; in fact, her presence in the lab was an essential requirement for this new job. In short, an agent working for the Wiyrkomi corporation approached her one day during her lunch hour and said if she would indulge in a bit of industrial espionage for her parent corporation her sins for leaving would be forgiven and a golden career path ensured. Ariko was skeptical at first, but when the agent offered help in ousting the pesky Medila as an added incentive, she couldn't refuse. Getting rid of Medila was all well and good, but the vision of her returning triumphantly to the State, Wiyrkomi singing her praises and her father browbeaten, was enough for her to accept the offer. She felt lightheaded all afternoon and it wasn't until she was alone in her small room that evening that it finally sank home; she was now a secret agent for the Wiyrkomi corporation, engaged to spy on her paymasters.

For the next week Ariko got an impromptu crash course in covert ops, especially in communicating and exchanging information in the utmost

secrecy. Though a part of her was still reeling from what she was doing she couldn't help but enjoy it all immensely. She met her contact, who called himself Mitsu, every night in some unfinished part of the station. One night, another man was with him. It was a very ordinary looking Caldari, clothed in unassuming workers cloths. Yet even if he was so nondescript that he almost blended into the gray background she could sense that his mind was something else entirely. Her contact introduced the man and said he owed Wiyrkomi a small favor, which he would now repay by helping them to besmear Medila. The name Mitsu gave, Jirai Laitanen, didn't ring any bells with Ariko.

"I see you do not recognize me, even if I decline to employ some ridiculous pseudonym to hide my identity," the stranger said. "Maybe you know me better by my nickname, Fatal?" he asked mockingly. Ariko did. She felt a cold shiver run down her spine. Fatal, and his companion the Rabbit, were the leaders of the pirate group called Guristas. The pair, along with their fellow pirates, had harrowed the Caldari State for years, pulling stunts that seemed almost as much aimed to taunt the State as ruin it. Ariko was curious to know why Wiyrkomi owed this enemy of the State favors, but didn't dare ask.

"So are you enjoying your little spying game?" Fatal asked, still using that mocking tone.

"It's interesting, but I'm still a bit uneasy, what with the whole moral issue and all that," she answered hesitantly.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. It's like when you're having sex and need to take a dump at the same time. While you're going in and out at the front you don't know if something will stay in or come out at the back."

Ariko blushed at his vulgar words, then blushed even fiercer when Fatal laughed scornfully at her obvious discomfort.

“Enough of this banter,” Mitsu said brusquely. “Let's talk business. Medila is a Senate puppy and will remain so while the Senate sees her as the champion of their cause. We must drive a wedge between Medila and the Senate, it's the only way possible to get rid of her for good without rousing suspicion. Now, my thought was to try and besmear her in the eyes of the Senate by showing her cavorting with Caldari, but Fatal has a much better idea. Tell her about it, Fatal.” Fatal produced a small crystal vial from inside his grubby coat, exaggerating his gestures as he showed it to Ariko, holding it between his thumb and forefinger.

“In this little vial here is a small gift I received from my very good friend Virge. It contains a little something his labcoats cooked up for him.”

“Is it toxin?” Ariko asked. “Are you going to poison her?”

“No, nothing so crude. Killing her would rouse unwanted attention, which, Mitsu tells me, is a definite no-no.” Fatal said this as if he lamented not being allowed to kill Medila. It sent another cold shiver down Ariko's spine.

“This stuff here makes you go funny in the head,” Fatal explained.

“A drug?” Ariko asked, still unsure where Fatal was going with this.

“Sort of. Sort of a drug. But not quite. It makes you go funny as in crazy.” A nasty laughter gushed from him. “Completely goo-goo.” Realization dawned on Ariko.

“You're going to drive her mad?”

“Yes,” Fatal answered, returning the vial to his coat pocket.

“For how long?”

“Oh, fifty, maybe sixty years. Depends on how long she'll live.” Ariko was aghast. Pangs of conscience assaulted her. She had asked for help to get rid of Medila, but this? She knew there was no way for her to stop it, the ball was already rolling and she had no say in the matter now. That much was clear. The question now was, was she willing to take part in this scheme? Standing there, with the two intimidating men hovering over her, she wanted most of all to run away, to forget it all. But it wasn't an option. She'd gotten herself into this situation, foolishly letting silly romanticism about being a fancy spy cloud her judgment. The only way for her now was to go through with this.

Fatal procured the repulsive vial, but she had to administer it to Medila. She was the only one of the three in the position to do so. The only problem was for her to get the vial into the lab, as there was a tight security regarding everything entering or exiting the research zones. Fatal came up with the solution, using Ariko's personal code he could break into the security system and program it to disregard any survey checks made on Ariko. After discussing the task a little longer, Fatal finally gave her the vial. She hid it in her bra, praying it wouldn't break.

“Oh, one last thing,” Fatal said as if it was an afterthought. “I may be paying my debt to the Wiyrkomi corporation, but I expect a favor returned from you in the near future.” He indicated Ariko. She wasn't sure what he meant, so she just nodded her head. He seemed satisfied and bid his farewell. Ariko wasn't sorry to see the back of him.

The next morning a bleary eyed Ariko entered the lab, still dazed from her lack of sleep. Her conscience was nagging her constantly so she was actually glad when Medila confronted her later that morning and launched into one of her furious tirades about some perceived insubordination. Once the verbal assault was over Ariko was all poised and ready drive the tiresome woman mad, literally. That very evening Ariko snuck into the small

lab kitchen, rummaging in the refrigerator until she found Medila's favorite food; it was some kind of a meat pâté native to the Mannars, but most others found revolting. Ariko carefully unscrewed the vial and stirred its contents into the foul-smelling pâté.

Only when she was falling asleep that night did she wonder just how insane Medila would become. Perhaps some precautions would have been wise. But it was too late to do anything about that now. The next day Ariko would almost come to regret it.

The morning turned out to be quite peaceful actually. Ariko managed to lose herself in cross-referencing data codes for a promising drone AI project, with no sign of Medila anywhere. After lunch, though, with Medila having eaten a generous portion of her loathsome pâté, things quickly escalated into the realms of the absurd.

It started innocently enough, with Medila being unusually domineering around Umailen and Touvolle. But as the hours passed she grew more and more possessive, while at the same time showing increasing megalomaniac tendencies. Late in the afternoon Medila had convinced herself that the fate of the project rested on her shoulders solely and that it was her genius and her genius only that would spark all the wonderful new discoveries. This didn't sound too bad until she got the notion that only by devouring the brains of the other scientists could she fulfill her own prophecy of becoming the Queen of Inspiration. She managed to lock herself, along with Touvolle and Umailen, inside one of the offices, barricading the door. Someone had called security, but the door wouldn't budge.

Ariko was in shock. It was bad enough being responsible for driving poor Medila insane, but now she had to contend with her possibly killing the two men that the whole project hinged upon. She watched the frustrated efforts of the security guards trying to force the door open. 'This is absurd,' she

thought, 'this is a lab. There must be something here that can help us open this damn door.' She looked around, searching for something, equipment, chemical components, anything. Her eyes finally came to rest on a half-assembled infinite impulse processor, part of some linear audio phaser research she wasn't party to. But it gave her an idea.

Grabbing the equipment she made her way to her own workbench, where she located a small fusion array. She wasn't all that sure this would work, but it was worth the try. Working quickly, she fused the two items together. She then rushed to where the security guards were still trying to pry the door open, all the while shouting through the door for Medila to give herself up. There was no time to ask nicely.

"Get away," she shouted, as she put her newly created audio blaster on the floor in front of the door. The security guards looked at her in confusion, but Wobanen was quick on the uptake and dragged them away. Ariko activated her newly created weapon, cursing for not having enough time to set up a timer. She could only hope the directional field in the processor was working adequately, or she would blow the eardrums of everyone in the room. And possibly fry their brains in the process. She waited for the fusion array to charge completely, then she turned it to maximum output, released the holder key and scampered away.

The sonic boom shook the room like an earthquake. Ariko was sure it could be felt around the station. After all, it was circular. Raising herself, all she could hear at first was a high-pitch buzz in her ears. It faded quickly though. A few others were not so lucky, as she would later find out, the blast causing permanent damage to the sensitive auditory system.

Most importantly, the door was now open. The two halves of it were bent backward as if they were made of butter instead of a hardened steel alloy. Ariko rushed into the room, fearing the worst. The office was a mess, but the three people inside were thankfully unharmed. The security guards

quickly took hold of Medila, even as she fought them with the inhuman strength of the deranged. She was no longer screaming for brains to feed her newfound queenhood. Instead, she was shouting abuses at the guards.

"I'm Medila!" she screeched hysterically. "I must contain the maniacs!" She nodded her head in the direction of Touvolle and Umailen. "I gave a sacred oath!" she continued. "To Mentas Blaque himself. He charged me with suppressing this whole idiotic project! I'm a smotherer! A smotherer!" she screamed as the security guards dragged her away.

'This is interesting,' Ariko thought. 'In her crazed state she has given up her secret mission.' During her research on the political structure behind the Crielere project she had often come across the name Mentas Blaque. He was the leader of the Federation Senate and a sworn enemy of president Souro Foiritan. She chuckled to herself. While she felt sorry for the sudden and tragic downfall of Medila she couldn't believe how things had played into her hands. Not only was the Senate crony now gone forever, but the Senate wouldn't dare replace her now that it had been revealed it had tried to impinge on the project in a most improper manner. Ariko also realized that her first impression of Medila being the main obstacle to the project really taking off was completely accurate.

Following the downfall of Medila, the Senate was quick to denounce any knowledge of any secret dealings with the mad woman and withdrew completely from meddling with the running of the station. Ariko could easily picture Mentas Blaque sulking in some extravagant luxury yacht somewhere, cursing the name of Medila and all her ancestors from here to eternity. The thought made her laugh.

In the quiet aftermath following the uproar few witnessed the arrival of the man destined to be responsible for the rise and then the ruin of the Crielere project. Otro Gariushi, CEO of the Ishukone Corporation, arrived silently at the half-built station in the early hours of the morning, slipping almost

unnoticed into a docking bay on an unassuming shuttle. Branded an ugly brute by his enemies, of which there were many, he had never been quite able to shake off the dark rumors of a shady past that followed him wherever he went. Driven by some secret inner demons, his blind ambition lent him a powerful charisma that swept those around him into a maelstrom of obedience and compliance.

Gariushi, tipped off by his agents on the station, was quick to grasp the change in the power structure and his arrival was no mere happenstance. Like the other CEOs of the mega-corporation Gariushi had watched in worry the problems on Crielere escalate, but unlike the other CEOs he was more than willing to take an active part in rectifying the situation; a breach of protocol was not something Otro Gariushi lost any sleep over.

A former adversary of Gariushi once remarked that 'Gariushi fills a power vacuum like an obese person a spandex suit' and before the day had turned to evening Otro had firmly asserted himself as the man in charge on the Crielere station.

Though Gariushi was not held in high esteem in the State due to his shady background Ariko was inwardly pleased that a Caldari was now calling the shots. The Gallenteans naturally grumbled a bit, but they had suffered from the lack of leadership just as acutely as the Caldari and most of them were simply glad that someone was taking charge, even if it was an obnoxious Caldari.

Ariko decided it was best for her to lay low for awhile until the situation had stabilized. She had no idea how Gariushi might react to what she had done or, more importantly, if he knew anything of her secret dealings with Mitsu or Fatal. Working the graveyard shift for a few weeks was much preferred than being booted out of the station. She had accomplished what she set out for; getting rid of Medila and gaining the favor of the scientists in the process. She wasn't about to jeopardize that now by sticking her neck out.

Instead, she opted to observe activities from afar. There was another reason for her decision, the family name Cumin might ring some unwanted bells with Gariushi. She didn't know all the gritty details, but she knew that when she was a girl, her father, an important negotiator for Wiyrkomi at the time, had been sent to the headquarters of Ishukone to barter a deal. Gariushi had entangled her father in a conspiracy ploy and then threatened to reveal it to Wiyrkomi unless a very favorable deal would be settled on. Her father had no alternative but to accept, being branded an idiot was far better than that of a traitor. After his return her father's career slowly faded into obscurity and instead he pinned the hope of his family on Ariko's slender shoulders. Ariko was pretty sure that Gariushi had long since forgotten the name of Cumin, but she didn't want to take any chances on the matter. She would stay in the shadows for the time being.

Gariushi was quick to stamp his mark and in only a few days the construction process was as fast as it had ever been. In fact, construction materials were soon in short supply. At first Gariushi tried to increase shipments from the contracted shipping firms, Inner Zone Shipping and Ytiri, but they were slow to respond. Undaunted, his next move was to get freelance pilots, mainly from independent companies, to ship materials in. By appealing to the altruistic nature of the Crielere project, aimed to aid everyone, the response was overwhelming and gave a good indication what a shrewd nose Gariushi had when it came to political machinations.

The problem of an inadequate workforce remained. Much of the budget allocated to build the station had been spent, yet it was only half built. A week after his arrival, Gariushi ordered the construction zone to be sealed off, as well as the docking bay serving the zone. He justified this by stating that the workforce needed to shield itself from outside interruptions and attractions, so they could concentrate fully upon the task at hand. Ariko couldn't quite understand this need for seclusion, but dismissed the conspiracy theories about slaves being used to bolster the workforce as fabricated rumors spread by former cronies of Medila. The sudden

appearance of burly Amarrians walking the station's halls was merely a coincidence, Ariko reasoned. Whatever methods Gariushi was employing he certainly seemed to be getting the results, as new sections of the station seemed to open up almost every day.

The impact these development had on the research effort was evident to everyone. Better facilities, coupled with optimism that the Crielere project was finally spreading its wings, meant that new and fabulous discoveries were being made. Already blueprints were being churned out and the eye of the world again turned to Crielere for wondrous news. Ariko enjoyed being part of what was happening, particularly for her small but significant contribution in getting things on the right track. Vanity tickled her to shout her accomplishments to the world, but she had plenty of common sense to wrestle it to the ground. But when Gariushi declared that the first fully developed blueprints, for advanced mining equipment, would be made public to everyone, she felt that it was time to come out of the shadows again. She didn't know what Gariushi was up to, giving away discoveries like that. She doubted his stated reasons of philanthropy, but couldn't discredit them. But his actions meant that if she wanted to be of any value to her new secret employers then she'd better get closer to the two pioneers.

Gunaris was still working on his calculations, happily oblivious to the hectic goings on in other parts of the station. But he was on the inside track when it came to communicating with the two scientists. Through him, Ariko got to meet the scientists on a regular basis, even sometimes participating in brainstorm meetings or being asked to note down theories or ideas they seemed to be constantly throwing between themselves. The creative atmosphere surrounding the pair was so contagious that Ariko found herself easily caught up in the fever and enjoyed every second of it.

Umailen and Touvolle turned out to be quite the characters. Their relationship was almost a symbiotic one, they complemented each other so

perfectly that after decades of working together they often finished each other's sentences or merely glanced at each other to see what the other was thinking. Far from being the stuffy old bores like many people imagined scientists to be they were almost like children in their irresponsible, playful behavior. Ariko could sense a darker side to them, something to do with their war experience all those years ago when they were both young men. It was as if those haunting memories they had drove them on, yet never surfacing in a negative manner. In fact, Ariko often felt like she was back in college, such was the atmosphere in the lab now that the stifling regime of Medila was at an end. She especially enjoyed the silly banter the scientists often engaged in. When they entered the lab in the morning they frequently made boastful proclamations about who would discover more wondrous things that day. She particularly enjoyed their 'science is' game, where they likened science to some thing or another, in a tongue-in-cheek manner. In time she became a participant herself in this game, where the trick was to out-do the others based in previous comments.

"Science is like a prostitute," Touvolle would perhaps say out of the blue. "You lust for a short-lived pleasure, but are left with something itchy and indescribable in the long-term."

"I beg to differ," Ariko would counter. "Science is like a callgirl. You know the number, but have no idea how to handle all the complexities."

"Ah, you're on the wrong track all together," Umailen would retort. "Science is like a marriage. It starts with an exiting affair and ends up eating all your time."

Thus it would go back and forth for awhile, before they all delved once more into serious work. Despite spending time playing silly games like 'science is' they were still even more productive than before and new blueprints saw daylight more or less every week. It was a fantastic achievement.

While Arika was in a privileged position being part of the team surrounding the two scientists she was still just a junior assistant and as such still had some tedious assignments to complete. Working late one evening she decided to make a routine check on the blueprints already filed. It wasn't the most fun job in the world, but it always filled her with a sense of accomplishment seeing a concrete proof that coming here hadn't been the disaster she initially thought it would be. Her father had sent her here when she refused to come work in his office after graduation. It was intended as a punishment and she had taken it as such initially. Now she knew differently. She thought it was ambition that had brought about her little rebellion, but now she knew it really was a longing to be part of something important; where she felt her contribution was not only appreciated, but also of value to more than just her family's prestige or her corporation's bottom line.

Arika couldn't come near the blueprints themselves; their high value meant they were only accessible to a handful of people. Instead, she had to use a complicated robotic system to access and file the blueprints. Putting her mind into automatic, she filed the blueprints one by one while letting her mind wander about the impact these blueprints would have on the world. A soft beep on the console she was working on brought her back from her reverie. Blueprints were missing. Accidentally, Arika had made a fateful discovery of the most innocuous nature, but which would unleash a series of events that would in the end shake the whole world.

At first Arika thought it was an oversight on her part, due to tiredness, but she double-checked, then checked again, always with the same results. Missing were original blueprints of many of the most stunning and exciting discoveries made so far on the station. Arika was at a loss what to do. Was it a theft or just an innocent mistake? She wanted to believe the latter, but her gut feeling told her otherwise. Her sense of duty told her she should report this to her superiors. But if this was a theft, who was responsible?

Even the mere existence of the blueprints was top secret, making it almost impossible this was an outside job. Ariko didn't like the path her train of thoughts was taking her down, but there was only one inevitable conclusion; if this was theft it was done by an insider. Not only that, it was done by someone high up in the chain of command.

Ariko was in no position to investigate the matter herself. But she had no idea whom she could trust. The one thing she did know was that she had to report this to someone, otherwise the blame would fall on her. Gariushi she didn't trust. Besides, he was away on a visit to New Caldari. But she knew just the people to turn to.

The news spread like wildfire through the station. The next day when Ariko woke up the station was buzzing. She had told the scientists last night; after telling Mitsu first. Obviously the scientists had wasted no time in getting the story out, or at least not bothered much to conceal it. When Ariko entered the lab the tension was tangible. No one managed to do much work that day, suspicion and uncertainty the only thing on people's mind. Ariko hadn't slept much during the night. She was out in the open now, with all eyes on the station on her. She felt naked and defenseless, sure that everyone could see all her dirty little secrets. During the night she had half expected the police to come crashing through the door, dragging along Mitsu bound and gagged. At a time she even thought that the whole thing was a setup. After all, how stupid was it to steal these blueprints? It was bound to be found out eventually. How much better just to make copies or at least record the information, but leave the originals behind, then no one would have been any wiser that anything was amiss. In the darkness of her room Ariko was certain the only explanation was that someone wanted to pin this on her. Now, in the daylight, she laughed at her silly paranoia, though the uneasy feeling remained. There were other explanations: maybe the thieves didn't have time to make copies, or maybe they wanted to possess the blueprint technology all to themselves, or maybe they were simply cocky and didn't care if they were found out.

Gariushi, back from New Caldari, and his people were also ominously silent. Some took this as a sign that the whole thing was a hoax and would be cleared up shortly. Others took it as a sign that Gariushi was trying to think of ways to cover this up. As day turned to evening the first orders from Gariushi's office filtered down; no one was allowed to leave the station, communications with the outside world were severely restricted and only employees of the station were allowed in.

At first Arika thought these measures were to hinder the thief or thieves from getting their ill-gotten items out of the station, but then she realized that it was much too late for that – the thieves could have left long ago. The only explanation for this order was to hinder news of the theft from spreading outside the station. Arika suspected it was also much too late for that. Of course, this also meant it was too dangerous for her to talk to her contact for the time being. But she had talked to him last night and there was no need to talk to him again quite yet.

The next day Arika was finally called in for questioning. She had had butterflies in her stomach the previous day, fearing what her discovery the previous night might entail. A couple of officials showed up at her small apartment and escorted her to a secluded room in the upper levels of the station. There she met a soft-spoken man that simply interviewed her about her findings and her subsequent actions. It wasn't quite an interrogation, because Arika was so co-operative, but she sensed that the soft-spoken man was quite ready to turn the screws on her if the need arose. He even seemed a bit disappointed for her not giving him an excuse for doing so. The interview only took a couple of hours, after which she was allowed to go. Arika breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed that although Gariushi was unhappy with developments, having openly raved about her incompetence and disloyalty in informing the scientists first, he wasn't going to take it out against her. And more importantly, her cover was still intact.

The atmosphere was muted when she got back to the lab. Ariko was certain that Umailen and Touvolle would be crestfallen at the loss of such valuable blueprints, but they seemed as cheerful as ever. Touvolle summed up the feelings of the pair when he said:

“Ah, those blueprints may be of some value at the moment, but with the ideas me and Taromi have they'd be obsolete in a few months anyway.” Having said that he urged his coworkers to start working again, the best way to stick it to the thieves was by producing even better blueprints as soon as possible. Touvolle's short speech lifted the gloomy spirit in the lab and soon everyone were back at their workstations, toiling away happily. Ariko joined the others, glad that the research effort was still in full swing. ‘All the more for me to report,’ she thought grimly.

The next day the station was again buzzing. Not because of the stolen blueprints, but because Otro Gariushi had slipped away during the night, disappearing just as quietly as he had appeared a month earlier. While leaving behind a deputy to take care of business, it was obvious that Gariushi was washing his hands clean of the Crielere project. Ariko suspected he had already got what he wanted. She could only admire the man. He shrewdly manipulated the public opinion to remain in charge, while behind the scenes he carefully acquired what he was really after. ‘Then he slipped away like a thief into the night,’ Ariko mused. There was no doubt in her mind that Gariushi was responsible for the stolen blueprints. It was only a question of whether he would get away with it or not. She couldn't help but compare how differently Ishukone did business than her own Wiyrkomi corporation. ‘With Gariushi at the helm Ishukone simply comes in and takes what it wants. All Wiyrkomi could do was to recruit lowly me.’

The deputy left behind by Gariushi did his best to hush the blueprint theft. He launched an internal investigation, but gave no progress reports, or even an indication on when the investigation would be concluded. Days

passed and still there were no official news. But there were subtle hints that behind the scenes a cleanup was taking place. Several high-ranking officials, including some Caldari scientists, had handed in their resignations, claiming they were too distraught by the theft to continue working on the project. All of them immediately got jobs elsewhere for empire corporations. The theft was becoming old news. Ariko was hoping the whole thing would blow over, allowing the research effort to resume. But she failed to take the righteousness of the Gallenteans into account. They wouldn't forget something like this and they would want to find the culprits. All they needed was someone to enforce their will. And that is just what they got. A week after Ariko first reported the stolen blueprints, Souro Foiritan, president of the Gallente Federation made an unannounced visit to the station.

Foiritan had been one of the staunchest supporters of the project from the very beginning. It was well known that the man had a passionate interest in technology and new gadgets, and from what Ariko had heard from her coworkers Foiritan had to wrestle the Federal Senate tooth and nail to get it to fund the project. Thus, his arrival now when his pet project was in danger came as no surprise.

Of course, Foiritan had no official authority on the station, but with the current leadership being as tentative as it was he could steamroll over all barriers and protocols like a scorpion in a henhouse. Ariko would have thought Foiritan would storm right to the command center to take control, but she didn't count on his fascination for technology. He had to take a tour of the facilities first, starting with a visit to Umailen and Touvolle, whom Foiritan had come to love and respect. They showed him around the lab. Foiritan's face lit up each time a new invention was shown to him and by the time they came to Ariko's desk he was positively beaming.

"Here is the girl that discovered the missing blueprints," Touvolle said, introducing Ariko. She shyly shook Foiritan's hand. A shadow had past over

his face at the mention of the stolen blueprints and now he looked grave and troubled.

“Ah, yes. The missing blueprints,” he said softly, staring Ariko straight in the eyes as they shook hands. She could feel the charisma radiating off him and understood finally what the Gallenteans saw in this man that many considered a buffoon not fit for office. She remembered all the times she and her schoolmates had mocked this man after his latest folly. It made her blush and avert her eyes. Foiritan smiled knowingly and released her hand.

“Such a shame that some people are willing to sacrifice the future for such a short term gain,” he continued softly, still looking intently at Ariko.

“Quite so,” Touvolle concurred, a bit bewildered by the short exchange of words between president Foiritan and Ariko the junior assistant.

Ariko tried to breath calmly as Foiritan continued his tour of the lab. The sheer animalistic charisma of the man was enough to overwhelm anyone, but his words had hit her like a sledgehammer. Did he know about her being a spy? Or was it just innocent small talk? She couldn't tell.

She watched Foiritan as he talked privately with the two scientists for a few minutes, his bodyguards making sure no one could approach them. The scientists glanced furtively around the lab a few times, but never at her. She breathed a sigh of relief. If they were talking about her they surely would have looked in her direction at least once.

Later that day Ariko found out that Foiritan had ordered a thorough investigation into the theft, to be carried out by a team of independent investigators brought from outside. Foiritan made it quite clear that this team would have full access to the station and all relevant data, in order to speed up the investigation process as much as possible. Having come

what he set out for, Foiritan and his entourage of PR people and the media, left the station on the large luxury yacht that had brought them here.

The next few days went by like in a dream. Ariko tried to keep her mind on the job, but her mind kept returning to the stolen blueprints. She knew that the future of the project hinged on the results of the ongoing investigation and so did the rest of the workers. Even Gunaris seemed too distant and preoccupied to talk to her. Only now, thinking about the future of the project, did she realize really how important it had become to her. She had been skeptical for a long time and the spying game had distracted her from seeing where her true priorities lay. Now she knew; with the project. With Umailen and Touvolle. She also feared that the investigation would turn up something unwanted, such as her being a secret agent. She hadn't heard anything from Mitsu in days, and though she hoped this merely meant he was being cautious she sometimes feared he had been arrested. She needed someone to talk to so she wouldn't go mad, turning these thoughts around in her head again and again. She finally managed to break Gunaris down and get him to talk to her. She stayed well away from discussing current affairs with him, as she feared this would shut him up, so she opted instead to talk about his youth. After a hesitating start, he soon got into gear and started telling her about his enthusiasm for numbers.

"I've always been fascinated by numbers, for as long as I can remember," he confessed. "My home planet, Ation VIII, has 21 moons and I remember I thought this was a magic number when I was a boy." He smiled his shy little smile that Ariko thought so endearing before continuing.

"To me mathematics was like magic and I loved number puzzles or strange sequences. Like this number," he said, picking up the light pen on his desk and drawing the number 142857 in the air. "It seems like just a random six-figure number, but try multiplying it by two." Ariko quickly did so in her head.

“285714,” she said.

“Right, now multiply it by three, four, five and six.” This was more difficult, and Ariko scrunched her face in an effort to do this quickly. Gunaris laughed merrily as he saw her struggle.

“Never mind,” he said. “I’ll give you the numbers.” He wrote the numbers down below the first number, in a list. “Now, add the individual numbers of the first number together, what do you get?”

“27,” Ariko replied promptly. This was easy.

“Correct, and the next and the next?” She looked at them, wonder spreading around her face.

“27, they’re all twenty-seven.”

“And if you add them vertically?” he prodded. Now she gasped and smiled in amazement.

“27 too, for all of them. That’s amazing!” They both laughed.

“Yeah, well, this was the kind of stuff I found fascinating when I was a small boy, four or five probably. It sparked an interest in numbers that has never dwindled. Even though I’ve found no true magic in there.”

“Are you still looking?” she asked. It was meant as a tease, but Gunaris became serious.

“I am,” he finally said and Ariko saw he meant it. Then the investigators arrived in the lab and the conversation ended.

The investigators, most of them Gallenteans and Intakis, worked fast and efficiently. The thieves hadn't been all that careful in covering up their tracks, as they seemed confident that the powers that be would protect them. So the investigation was over swiftly and the results didn't particularly surprise anyone: men working under direct orders from Otro Gariushi had systematically plundered blueprints and even prototype equipment.

After the findings of the investigators had been announced it was like all the racial and political tension that Gariushi had held in check were now out in the open twice as forceful as before. With growing dismay, Ariko watched helplessly as confrontations between Gallenteans and Caldari escalated by the hour. Bar brawls became common, soon intensifying into full scale riots. The day after the investigative report was made public, a Senate delegation arrived to take stock of the situation.

With the arrival of a new Senate delegation, throwing the leadership on the station into confusion, things quickly escalated beyond control. The security personnel on the station, hitherto considered to have the easiest jobs around, suddenly found themselves in full riot gear, facing a mob that seemed ready to tear the just completed station apart with their bare hands. Conflicting orders filtered down from above, inflaming the volatile situation even further. Martial laws were declared, but with little effect. People started leaving in droves.

The Senate delegation left in a huff, furious about not being given sole command of the station. It came as no surprise to Ariko when she heard the next day that they had pulled the financial plug. The Caldari mega-corporations followed suit shortly after. The Crielere project was in a crisis, with most of the staff gone and now no budget. And yet, Ariko felt defiant. Not because she wanted further chances to conduct industrial espionage for Wiyrkomi. In fact, she was fed up with the greedy corporations and their power politics. She didn't want the project to end.

The Crielere project was a like a dream you have when you're neither awake nor asleep, one you never want to end. Ariko realized what she wanted most of all was to keep the dream alive. It was too valuable for it to succumb to petty corporate rivalries and racial antagonism. She was reminded of one of her heated conversations with her father shortly before she left where he accused her of betraying her corporation. She could still feel the sting of tears of frustration in her eyes. To be branded a traitor and a spoiled brat by her father, whom she'd looked up to her entire life. She remembered how angry and humiliated she'd felt at being accused of betraying the corporation that had reared her, even if it wasn't true. She had intended to work for Wiyrkomi. She only wanted to do it on her own terms. But now, his accusations were true. She didn't even try to convince herself that staying with the scientists gave her further opportunities to wring some valuable information out of them. She was too smart for that. She was staying because she wanted to use her talents the way they were supposed to; not stifled by the corporation, but allowed to flourish doing something that really mattered to all mankind.

Ariko had thought that coming to Crielere, bad as it sounded at first, would at least quench her thirst for adventure, but instead it opened her eyes to how narrow-minded her father was, or she had been, for that matter. How could she stay loyal to her corporation when it meant betraying humanity?

Entering the lab, Ariko mused that what was now left of the Crielere project was the essence of what it stood for. All the money grabbers and band wagoners were gone, leaving only those that truly wanted to make a difference, even if it meant sacrificing their careers. Gunaris was there and the sight of him made the cynical side of Ariko wonder how much the fact that he was staying behind had influenced her own decision unconsciously. Ariko knew the time was drawing near when she had to bare her feelings for him, as much as she dreaded it.

Touvolle and Umailen were seated in their favorite brainstorming chair, but for once they weren't discussing new science theories. The pair had earlier in the morning sent out a plea to the outside world asking for support, financial or otherwise. It had met with a bland response. There was an air of resignation around the lab. Ariko knew that if she didn't convince them to continue with their work, then all she had to look forward to was to return to the fold of Wiyrkomi and sign her life sentence of obedience with them. A few months earlier it would have truly honored her. Now it was abhorrent to her. Ariko had never considered herself to be of much a motivational speaker, but she had passion and hoped it lent her some powers of persuasion. She surveyed the motley crew assembled before her. There were maybe fifty of them left, a fraction of the thousands that had swarmed the station only few short weeks earlier. All had the look of gloom in their eyes, but she hoped the reason they hadn't left yet was because they still harbored some secret hope that the project could go on. She recalled a parable from back home, told to all aspiring young Caldari students.

"There once was a great rich merchant," she began hesitantly, suddenly all too aware that all eyes in the room were on her. But she plunged on regardless, steeling her nerves. "He lived to a grand old age and possessed every wealth a man could dream of. Many looked to him in awe or envy, coveting his treasures and desiring to imitate his great successes. Yet the old man was never happy and on his deathbed, a young clerk working for him asked: 'You must feel that your life has been one great success story, what with all the wealth you have accumulated.' But the old man replied. 'My life has been one of misery and sorrow. As a young man I chose wealth over family, discarding the love of my life. When I die all that I will leave behind in the world is money. But money is the same all over, mine is no different from anyone else's. Once my wealth has been scattered, all that I will be is dust and vague memories. My life is a failure young man, don't make the same mistakes I did.' The young clerk heeded the old man's advice, making sure he had the time to rear a family even if his focus was on his career path." Ariko took a deep breath, watching her

attentive audience ponder her little anecdote. "Now, this story may not be all that relevant to our situation here, but to me, and I hope for the rest of you, I've become to realize that the Crielere project is the love of my life. If I abandon it now, no matter how successful I'll become later in life, I'll always regret having done so. This is an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make our mark on the world, to create something that will go down in history and not scatter in the wind like dust. I have no idea if we can pull this off on our own, but by Fate, I'm willing to try my best until all avenues are spent." By this time Ariko was almost shouting, her passion and enthusiasm shining through. She didn't know what more she could say. She wanted to run to each and every one of those in the room, shake them by the shoulders and beg them to stay on.

No one spoke for a minute. Ariko was certain her words hadn't hit home, that she'd sounded too desperate, too manic. Then Touvolle stood up, a thoughtful expression on his face. He slowly walked over to where Ariko was standing and, in a sudden gesture, embraced her. "Thank you," he whispered in her ear. "Thank you."

It was done. They would stay and continue. Ariko was thrilled, but at the same time, her pesky cynical side couldn't help but wonder if all of them were living a dream they hoped never ended, but a dream nevertheless. No. This was no illusion. The Crielere project was real. Maybe more real than anything else she'd ever known.

Ariko had grown accustomed to the hustling and bustling of the station while the project was in full swing. Now the empty corridors echoed back her footsteps, hammering home the bleakness of the place. Everything seemed to be malfunctioning and the few dozen people she'd managed to convince to stay on had to spend most of their time keeping the station up and running. Closing down a few sections had alleviated the problem somewhat.

Touvolle had taken Ariko's speech to heart and was now carrying the torch for the rest of them. Ariko was happy to step back into the sidelines and let the energetic old man take on the role of a leader of this rag-tag team. Umailen was not far behind in spurring people on and together great progress was made everyday. But supplies were getting low and the crew was even forced to beg benevolent visitors for handouts. And Fatal would come soon and claim his reward, somehow Ariko was sure of that.

Mitsu was long gone, but he left her with a small communication device she could hide in her room. It was dangerous to use, even if they employed codes and encryptions. She used it only sporadically, just enough to keep Mitsu happy. But he was becoming impatient with the lack of hard data she was sending, demanding more and more. For a long while his threats of total ostracism from the State kept her in line. He even stooped so low as to threaten to make the life of her elderly parents difficult if she didn't comply. But as her admiration for Umailen and Touvolle grew she began to loath this secret side of her life ever more. It was beginning to affect her self-esteem; she began to loath herself for her treachery and low moral fiber. She was thankful to the State for rearing her for all those years, but since her arrival here at Crielere she had seen a darker, more sinister side of it. This was its true face, she realized. This is how the State behaved behind the pretty veil it cast on its citizens. It may shelter them, but it deceived them at the same time. What worth was the life's work of an honest man when it was made under deception and guile? She knew it was time to cut the umbilical cord for good. Maybe complying with Mitsu offered her a future with the State, but it wasn't a future she wanted anymore. She contemplated just throwing away the communication device; maybe Mitsu would think it had been damaged or she found out. But she wanted a clean break. It took her a few days to amass enough courage, but in the end there was nothing to it. Sure, Mitsu cursed her and all her ancestral line. He dragged her poor parents into it again. But she wouldn't budge. It was an ugly break, she shook all over for an hour after cutting the com-link for the last time, but it was over. She was now a persona nongrata. A person

without a nation. She was remarkably relaxed about this, given that to most Caldari this was almost worse than being dead. The State had given her the time and the resources to grow and be educated, but she had given it all her time in return. Yet it always demanded more, demanded all of her time all for itself. This she was not prepared to do. Her time was now here, on the Crielere station, with the scientists and the all-important Project.

'If only we had a little more time,' Ariko thought for the umpteenth time. 'Then we could complete some of the stuff we're developing and sell the blueprints. With a bit of luck we can become self-sufficient in a few weeks.' Ariko didn't consciously think the world worked in a predestined way, but if she did, then she would have cursed Fate for the blow it dealt next. The empires withdrew their police forces from the Crielere system. And then Fatal arrived. With his friends. Lots and lots of them.

The Guristas were quick to assert their authority in the system. Fatal had come to exert his due reward – full access to the station and every secret it held. This was an extortion of the highest magnitude and Ariko didn't blame the scientists to balk at Fatal's demands.

The empires turned a deaf ear when the scientists pleaded for their help in fending off the Guristas. It seemed as if they were on their own. But then help arrived from an unexpected source. The independent pilots, formerly so helpful in getting the station completed in time, arrived in droves. They had heard the pleas of the scientists and, unlike the callous empires, they had decided to respond.

Some came because they wanted to help fellow humans in need. Others because they believed in the project and wanted to help keep it intact. Still others came for glory, for the chance to hunt down pirates, hoping to get valuable loot or simply out of curiosity. But their strength and determination amazed Ariko and showed her how strong and vivacious the independent pilot community was becoming. She knew many discounted them as being

immaterial, but Ariko now knew better. They were the future because they were organized yet flexible, tolerant yet principled; an ever growing organism whereas the empires were bound by their traditions and mistrust of each other.

The skeleton crew left on the station was already stretched thin working on the energy systems so the huge particle accelerators and other energy draining research equipment didn't overheat or destabilize. Now it also had to contend with bolstering what little defenses the station possessed. Power was re-routed to the shields and weapon platforms. It gave them all some sense of security, but Ariko knew enough about shields and weapons to deem the station defenses as pathetic; if it wasn't for the pilots out there sacrificing their ships or even lives then the Guristas could almost have waltzed right into the station. This was undoubtedly what Fatal had counted on, hence his decision to risk directing his pirate fleet so far from their traditional playing grounds.

The arrival of the freelance pilots was a surprise to the Guristas, but it wasn't a sufficient threat to make the pirates flee. A fierce battle ensued. Most of the Guristas engaged the freelance pilots, but several cruisers headed towards the station and started blasting it with everything they got. The Guristas obviously hoped to damage the station so severely it would be forced to surrender. Missile after missile slammed into the feeble shields, battering the hull in the process. The crew watched in mounting horror as the fission core used in their morphite plasma research became unstable to the point of threatening to explode. A team was hastily deployed to make emergency repairs, Ariko being one of them.

Laboring in the bowels of the station to stabilize the overheating core took Ariko out of the loop, leaving her in complete darkness as to how the battle was going. Later she would often reflect if it would have mattered had she been in the command center when the greenhouse was breached. Would she have stopped Gunaris from going there for emergency repairs? Would

she have argued with Umailen for his decision to close the section off? Would she have had time to say goodbye?

In the end it didn't really matter. The only thing that mattered was that Gunaris volunteered to enter the greenhouse, in an order to seal a breach that was letting essential oxygen escape. When subsequent explosions damaged the greenhouse section beyond repair, Umailen had ordered it to be sealed off before the whole station was extinguished. It hadn't been an easy decision, Ariko knew that when she looked into Umailen's haunted eyes. Yet she wished he hadn't had to make it.

They found his body the next day, lying peacefully between some tomato plants as if in deep slumber. It was impossible to tell whether he had suffered in his death or not, but Ariko didn't feel it mattered. She felt empty inside. Never having experienced true sorrow before in her life, she was unsure how to behave. Suddenly her time with Gunaris, their small talks and short walks, took on a whole new meaning. They were now cherished memories of someone she would never see again. Never talk to again. Never touch. In the first few hours after she returned to the lab and found out his fate emotions had raged through her. Anger, bitterness, loneliness, confusion, denial, grief.

The Guristas were beaten back finally, retreating into nearby systems to lick their wounds. This hardly registered with Ariko. Yet again she lost sleep that night, her mind in turmoil. For the first time in her life she prayed to her ancestors. She knew many Caldari did it; her mother for one. Until now she had scorned such practices as relics of the past, but now she found solace in it. It also allowed her to steel her mind against the grief that threatened to overwhelm her. All the emotions she had felt for Gunaris, but suppressed, now came flooding back, multiplying her sorrow. When morning came she had resolved to stay strong. She would find time later to grief properly. Now the scientists needed her. And she needed to focus on

the task at hand: successfully defending the station against the Guristas. They might have been driven back yesterday, but they were not beaten.

The lab had been turned into a makeshift command center. Nobody had wanted to take up residency in the old one, so they'd simply stripped the necessary equipment and set it up anew. Some had even started sleeping in the lab, not wanting to wander the empty corridors alone. Ariko couldn't blame them, thought she still stayed in her drab room. With half the station at her disposal she could have easily found something more grand, but she didn't bother.

Yesterday's events were being discussed as Ariko entered. The lab grew quiet. Everyone knew how Ariko and Gunaris had felt for each other. 'Everyone but me,' she lamented. She managed a smile and joined the discussion, brushing off all attempts at compassion. Soon, the conversation was back on track.

"That should show the empires how people feel about the Crielere project," Touvolle exclaimed when the independent pilots were being discussed. "These pilots can understand the value of our work."

After the initial rush of euphoria a battle council was called on the urging of Ariko to discuss how the station could be defended on a permanent basis.

"The Guristas will most likely attack us again," she explained. "And even if they don't then somebody else will pop up sooner or later. We can't depend on those independent pilots to keep defending us. Heck, from what I gather they've already started bickering amongst themselves over spoils of war following the retreat of the Guristas. They could even end up turning against us." This sobered the elated scientists somewhat. Umailen spoke up:

“We don't have the money to hire professional help and the empires have washed their hands clean of us. Maybe depending on those pilots is naïve, but they're our only hope as it stands. We just have to keep the wolves at bay for a few more days, some of what we're researching is nearing completion.”

“If we can find the time to work on them,” Ariko answered gloomily. “Listen, I don't particularly enjoy being the party-pooper, but somebody has to do it. Sure, we don't have money in the hand know, but we're rich in human resources. Surely we can sell that to somebody.”

“You mean selling future discoveries?” Umailen said, sounding skeptical. “Then we'd lose our independence. We could just as well give up right away and start working for one of the large research firms. Being independent is essential so we can fulfill our promise of helping all mankind.” The others nodded in agreement and Ariko saw it was a futile argument.

Touvolle had remained silent during much of the discussion, resting his chin in his hand. Now, seeing Ariko's discomfort, he spoke up.

“You have to understand, Ariko, where we are coming from. During the war, both me and Taromi worked for our respective governments. They used our creative energy to increase the suffering and the pain of the common man. Have you heard of Rutheren IV?” When she shook her head no, he continued. “That is understandable, few have. The name was stricken from the records, erased so completely that even those that were there have a hard time convincing themselves it was real. But it was. I bet you have heard of Nouvelle Rouvenor or Hueromont, but there were greater atrocities committed in the war than even those, bad as they were. Rutheren IV was the worst of them and it's there that I and Taromi met. On the ground. Face to face with those bleeding and dying. Until then I had been proud of my work for the Federation, convinced, nay, righteous in my

belief that what I was doing was for the greater good of all. On Rutheren IV the reality, the enormity, of it all came crashing home. Through happenstance, which takes too long to describe, I met Taromi in a hospital tent, tending for those still clinging to life. And we made a pact. Good intentions count for little if the cause isn't right. I know you belief in Fate, Ariko, though you try to deny it. That day we decided to take our destiny into our own hands. That is only possible if we're our own masters. Getting funds from the Federation and the State to bring the Crielere project about was a necessary evil we had to endure. We hoped by having both sides onboard, then the common good of all would prevail. Maybe that was naivety on our part, I don't know and it doesn't really matter. What matters is that we can't now put our destiny in other hands than our own. We simply can't. I hope you can understand that." Ariko only nodded her head, she couldn't argue with that.

The meeting was soon called to an end. Pretty much the only thing that had been agreed upon was to urge the independent pilots to remain alert and prepare the defenses of the station as best as possible. Umailen had come up with a way to bolster the station's shields manifolds by re-routing the power generator through the heat sink system. Though it wouldn't hold a determined attacker at bay indefinitely it was nevertheless a great improvement.

The Guristas came at them again the next dawn. The vigilant freelance pilots engaged them as soon as they came in sight and soon had the assaulters pinned down. Umailen and Touvolle looked a bit comical sitting in front of the command desk with com-link devices covering their ears and eyes. Yet Ariko felt strangely affectionate as she looked upon them in their excitement. They monitored the battle from the lab, using the sophisticated sensor systems brought from the command center. The old men participated fully from afar, often shouting encouragements or warnings to the pilots who so valiantly defended the station.

The Guristas showed little in the way of devious battle tactics and seemed happy just to slug it out with the resilient defenders. This seemed very strange to Ariko, as the Guristas were not known to squander their ships in such a wasteful manner.

“The Guristas are retreating again!” Touvolle exclaimed. “They're withdrawing to the Thelan system. We cant allow them to rally now that they're in disarray! Follow them!” By now Touvolle was literally jumping up and down in his seat, sweat pouring off his face as he scanned the screens in front of him, tracking the pursuit. Suddenly, Umailen chimed in.

“I've spotted a second Guristas task force coming from the opposite direction. They're closing in on us.” Ariko could feel cold sweat trickle down her spine. The retreat was a ruse. But the shields were up, stronger than ever, and Ariko was confident they could keep this small marauding fleet at bay until the defenders returned.

But then her personal console lightened up. It was Fatal. Ariko furtively glanced around, but thankfully no one was looking in her direction. She quickly disconnected the visuals in the com-link, blackening the screen once more.

“Hello there, pretty one,” Fatal said, teasingly. “How's your parents?”

“What do you want?” Ariko said between clenched teeth. She wondered briefly how he knew about the threats Mitsu had made to her parents during their last talk.

“Now, now. Don't take that tone with me,” Fatal continued, faking indignation. “You and me go a long way back, I thought we were friends.” Even if Ariko could no longer see Fatal's face she could easily visualize the slimy smile licking his lips as he spoke. When Ariko didn't answer, Fatal continued.

“Well, enough fooling around. Me and my boys are keeping your vigilantes occupied, allowing my friend Rabbit to do what he does best; sneak around,” Ariko shivered at his words. What was he up to? “I want you to open bay door number 3 for him. Open it up and you will have repaid your debt,” he continued matter-of-factly. Ariko was incredulous.

“You bastard. You think you can make me sell the station into your hands just like that?” Ariko was fuming, she knew she had promised to repay the debt she owed Fatal, but this was too much.

“Ah, well,” he sighed. “I was hoping your sense of duty was stronger. Obviously fraternizing with Federation puppies has tainted your sense of responsibility. But nevermind. I wanted to give you the opportunity to redeem yourself.”

“Shut up!” Ariko screamed, turning a few heads around her. She had had enough of this arrogant bastard. “You're never getting in here. You hear me? Never!”

“Listen to the girl,” Fatal now sounded amused, infuriating Ariko even more. “I don't need your help. What do you think I was doing on the station the other day? Taking a vacation? Thanks to you, I have the access codes. You really shouldn't have let me rig the security system, it allowed me to plant this nice little Trojan. Oh! Will you look at that? Bay door number 3 opening up! Heh! I think Rabbit will accept your invitation. You'll be seeing him in a jiffy.” The com-link went dead. Ariko sat paralyzed. What had she done? Thanks to her desire to get near the scientists she had inadvertently given the station's access codes to the leader of the Guristas!

The others had noticed the bay door opening. Ariko listened as if in a trance as they desperately tried to override the docking system, to no avail. Thankfully no one blamed her for what was happening. A small part of her

almost wished she would be blamed, sacrificed. She deserved it. When Umailen declared in panic that the Guristas were inside the station, she blushed in shame. She couldn't let the station fall. It would mean Gunaris death had been in vain.

Ariko tried to call an emergency meeting on how to meet the onrushing threat. She knew confronting the Guristas face-to-face was out of the question. Though they had access to some weapons left by the security personnel, they would be no match to the trained ruffians that the Rabbit was leading. But chaos had engulfed the lab. The din made by those shouting to be heard meant that nothing could be heard. Some rushed out of the lab to engage the invaders without even bothering to check if anyone was following. Precious minutes were lost before Ariko managed to calm things down. Touvolle had aided her, Ariko felt it was remarkably that the impulsive researcher managed to keep cool head. But by then Umailen had already left along with a few others and Ariko had no idea where he was.

The only option available to them was to seal the lab and the surrounding living quarters from the rest of the complex. Unfortunately, the station had not been designed with combat purposes in mind, which meant that five corridors had to be closed, along with several bypasses and maintenance tunnels. Time was of the essence, the Rabbit was closing in and Ariko had no idea how long it would be for him to arrive. But she was sure he would take the most direct route, not foreseeing any trouble. So she rushed a team to close the main entrance way into the lab section, hoping this would stall the raiders.

Meanwhile, Touvolle, still watching the sensors, reported that Fatal and his task force had turned the table on the defenders and were closing in on the station again. Undoubtedly, his intentions were to continue harassing the independent pilots to give his comrades inside the station time to complete their mission. It meant that Ariko and the rest were on their own. This only made her more determined to succeed.

Ten agonizing minutes ticked by. More teams had been dispatched to seal off more corridors and entrance ways, but Ariko was waiting anxiously to hear from the first team. Were they quick enough? She had contemplated moving out herself to help out, but someone had to stay behind to coordinate the effort. So instead she tried to calm her frayed nerves by focusing on a large map of the complex, searching for some entrance way she'd missed. Finally, her headset chimed. The main entrance way was closed. There had been no sight of the Rabbit or his henchmen. Ariko allowed herself to breathe easier. Now if only they could locate the foolish Umailen, rushing off without so much as taking a communication device with him. Then Ariko's headset chimed again. It was the team leader at the main entrance again. It seemed that the Rabbit had found Umailen first.

It was blackmail, plain and simple, and listening to the Rabbit Ariko was sure it wasn't the first time he'd done something like this. His demands were simple. Open up the lab and give up or Umailen would get it. Ariko told him they would think it over, but she knew there was nothing to think about. None of the crew wanted to be responsible for Taromi Umailen being executed. The death of Gunaris was still too fresh on their mind. Ariko, as the spokesperson for the crew, negotiated with the Rabbit, trying to set at least some conditions on their own. But the Rabbit knew he held all the aces and all he was willing to promise was not to kill anyone.

The Guristas wasted no time once inside the lab to raid it off the few blueprints still remaining. Ariko had imagined the Rabbit to be a haughty, cocky son-of-a-bitch following their curt negotiations, but he turned out to be quite the opposite, modest, quiet and well-behaved. But he had a mind of steel and when he declared that Umailen and Touvolle would come with them, Ariko knew that all pleas would fall on deaf ears.

It took the crew several minutes to register just what had happened once the Rabbit and his men had left. Taking Taromi Umailen and Henric

Touvolle along with them. The lab was in shambles after the pirates' raid, which had resembled more of a tornado. Touvolle and Umailen had become almost like permanent fixtures in the rooms and with them now gone the lab seemed strangely deserted. Not knowing what else to do they fixed the communication equipment, restoring communication with those outside the station.

The Guristas were getting away, Fatal and his men shielding the Rabbit and his marauders with their valuable cargo. But the defense forces, bigger than ever, were giving the Guristas everything they got. The pirates fled towards the Olettiers system, with the defense forces snapping at their heels. Finally, one of the puppies managed to bite into Fatal. The pirate's ship slowly disintegrated as his comrades sped away, none willing to share their leader's fate. Fatal, in his pod, made a futile attempt to reach the stargate jumping him to Olettiers and safety, but Doc Brown was having none of it and promptly obliterated the pod. The rest of the Guristas got away, but they had paid a heavy price for their wild foray into the Crielere system.

Ariko rejoiced over the death of Fatal, hating the man for his betrayal. Yet his death paled in comparison to that of Gunaris. And the scientists, whose work Ariko had pinned her hopes and dreams on with Gunaris gone and all bridges to the past burnt; now they were gone too. Continuing their visionary work without them was impossible. Ariko felt lower than she had ever done in her entire life. And to top it all off, the station had finally had enough of the battering it had received over the last few days and was slowly disintegrating. The awe Ariko had initially felt for the majestic place had now been replaced by nothing but loathing. It now held too many bad memories; of Fatal and the Rabbit, the racial disputes destroying peace and harmony and last but not the least, the greenhouse where Gunaris had died. It was time to leave the crumbling Crielere station for good.

Several old shuttles nestled in the docking bays, leftovers from the hurried exodus of the last few weeks. Ariko entered the passenger cabin of one along with a few other Caldari heading home. 'Home,' she thought. 'This was my home, do I still have one at Wiyrkomi?' She knew that even if they let her back in, she'd be reduced in rank, probably forced forever to toil away her entire life as a lowly clerk, serving as a warning to others. The thought didn't please her at all. Fidgeting in her seat, she pondered her destination. The Crielere system was directly on the borders of Federation and State space. The shuttle was heading for the Kubinen system, on the Caldari side of the border. Once inside there might be no turning back. The thought frightened her. She realized it was not because of the fate that awaited her. She feared it would be the final nail in the coffin of the late Crielere project.

Ariko hadn't let her thoughts linger too much on the fate of Umailen and Touvolle, but it was undoubtedly much worse than what awaited her. But now that the hectic departure from the station was over and she had time to reflect upon the situation, she felt ashamed for abandoning the scientists in their terrible predicament, and to abandon the vision of the Crielere project. She realized that the spirit of the project could only be kept alive if the scientists were free to continue their work, for the good of all mankind. Yet there was nothing she could do. The scientists were gone with the Guristas deep into the outer region. Retrieving them would be impossible. Still, Ariko had a nagging feeling she should wait.

Just as the pilot was about to activate the shuttle's warp drive to make the short jump to the gate leading to Kubinen, Ariko made up her mind; she would stay and see how things panned out. The shuttle changed course at Ariko's insistence, much to the chagrin of her fellow passengers. But she was only taking a short detour; her destination was the Artisine system close by. The Scope had a development studio there and a reporter Ariko had met some weeks earlier was working there. The reporter, Jinette Pandour, was an experienced investigative reporter that had covered the

Crielere project from the start. Ariko considered her to be little more than an acquaintance, but Pandour had interviewed her and had struck Ariko as a sensible person passionate about her work. Not knowing anyone else in the region, it was the only place Ariko could think of while waiting to hear of the fate of her two scientist friends.

The Scope station was a low profile station that didn't see many visitors outside those that had some business with the huge media conglomerate. Nevertheless, Ariko received a warm welcome there. Pandour was eager to hear all about the events of recent days, as news from the faltering Crielere station had been little more than rumors since the empires pulled out. The energetic reporter felt the events warranted more coverage and managed to convince her editors to get an exclusive on the goings-on in the Crielere complex in its last few days of operation. The daring Guristas raid and brave resistance of the independent pilots would surely merit the attention of the Scope.

So Ariko found herself having agreed to provide Pandour with all the nitty-gritty details of everything that had transpired in the station since her arrival. Naturally, Ariko left out the covert ops parts, but otherwise remained cooperative. After all, being on an all-expense account paid by the Scope was nothing to sneeze at.

Ariko was certain she had a long, anxious wait ahead of her before hearing anything from the scientists. But less than a week after her arrival in Artisine, Pandour burst into her room one morning shouting:

"They're being sold! The Guristas have put them up for ransom!" Pandour was pacing the room in her excitement, her mind racing at the possibilities these news opened up. Ariko finally managed to get the whole story out of her. The Guristas, now led by the Rabbit after the fall of Fatal, were in disarray and wanted to offload Umailen and Touvolle to the highest bidder to get some heat off themselves. Ariko was glad to hear that Fatal, in his

typically arrogant manner, had refrained from buying a quality clone of himself and thus found himself with severe memory loss and reduced motor functions, once he was revived after being podded. In his weakened state he had been ousted out of the Guristas and gone into hiding. 'What goes around, comes around,' Ariko thought.

Ariko found the idea of her friends and mentors being sold like cattle to be totally repugnant, but at least it would mean they'd escape from the clutches of the Guristas. Once more she wished she had the opportunity to talk to them, instead of being forced to fret in total darkness. Pandour was kept busy over the next few days keeping track of those in secret or not so secret negotiations with the Guristas. Ariko routed with an effort launched by the same independent pilots that had helped defend the station during the last few dark days of the project. But though they managed to collect an impressive sum, their financial strength was still too weak for them to compete effectively. Still, Ariko was confident that she would soon be able to see her friends again, free at last.

Then Fate dealt her another blow, as if to scorn the visionary efforts she was part of along with Umailen and Touvolle. Ariko Kor-Azor was the highest bidder, by a large margin from what Ariko gathered from Pandour. It seemed the man had no qualm about plundering the estates that his father, the current emperor of the Amarr Empire, had so carefully cultivated over the decades. The royal heir intended for the two scientists to head a new research lab he was constructing. Ariko didn't know what they were supposed to research but was certain it had nothing to do with their previous work. Ariko Kor-Azor was not known for his benevolent nature.

Now that Ariko knew Umailen and Touvolle were to be released by the Guristas in mere hours she grew even more restless than before. She couldn't wait to speak to them again. She got just that opportunity later in the day, thanks to Pandour using her media links as leverage. When Ariko finally saw the haggard face of Touvolle on the screen, she felt she would

cry from joy. The two chit-chatted for a few minutes, Ariko was so overwhelmed she hardly noticed what she said. She barely registered what Touvolle said. He and Umailen were being held in an Amarrian station at the outskirts of empire space, he didn't know the name of it. The Guristas had released him and Umailen at dawn, seemingly glad to be rid of the pair.

"We will be transported later today to the research lab," Touvolle said wearily.

"Do you know what it is you will be working on?" Ariko inquired.

"No, we've been told nothing. I'm just hoping that getting back into a lab will at least allow us to keep our pet projects alive, even if we can't work on them except periodically." Touvolle replied and sounded a little more upbeat when the discussion turned to the work they'd been engaged in on Crielere. "The little I've been told," he continued, "is that this new research facility is only just completed and it hasn't even been properly staffed yet. In fact, the only thing the Amarr officials said to me after we were taken into their custody was to order us to recruit other scientists to join the lab. They're obviously putting much stock in our reputation, hoping to use it to attract others."

"Oh?" Ariko hadn't considered that. Now it made her wonder. The possibility of working again with Umailen and Touvolle, even if it was on some nefarious research for the loathsome Articio Kor-Azor, excited her no end. "I'd love to have the opportunity to work with you again," she'd blurted out without really thinking about it, but she didn't regret it.

"That's fabulous news, Ariko," Touvolle replied, the relief visible in his eyes. "I was afraid to ask, after all we may have to work on something despicable for this man, but I'm really happy to have you aboard. It makes all this so much easier to bear."

The two chatted for a little while longer, Touvolle much more upbeat than he was at first. Finally, the Amarrians grew impatient and terminated the communication link, hardly giving them time to bid farewell.

Afterwards, Ariko was in really high spirits. Even the thought of traveling into Amarr space and working in some potentially hostile place didn't put her off. This was what she had been waiting for all those long days here at Artisine. She had no home in the State, she would not be welcome there. It was a remarkable easy decision to make.

She had allowed Pandour to listen in on her conversation with Touvolle, as part of their arrangement. Now, with Ariko leaving soon, Pandour had to decide whether to wrap up her story or follow it through all the way. It was also an easy decision for her. She would accompany Ariko into the Amarr Empire and witness the happy reunion.

Ariko finally felt at ease. The last few days she had been in a limbo, with no clear future ahead of her. Now she had a plan, something to aim for. She would travel into the Amarr Empire and become a full fledged researcher, working alongside Umailen and Touvolle. It was like a dream come true for her.

For the first time in awhile she allowed herself to think about Gunaris. Every time she'd thought of him, she felt sorrow threatening to wash over her, engulfing her. She thought of him when she saw something beautiful or remarkable. It always made her think how unfair, how tragic, it was that he couldn't be here to see or experience the same. That he would never get the chance to experience beauty or awe ever again. Now she wondered whether he would have approved of her decision.

Early the next morning Ariko and Pandour left the station on a Vexor cruiser owned and operated by the Scope. Their destination was a system

in the Kor-Azor region, named Nebian in the Jatari constellation. There they would rendezvous with another Scope reporter, a veteran of the intricate political structure of the Empire. As Ariko was not yet officially an employee of the Kor-Azor's new research lab, she had not been told the whereabouts of this highly secret place. But she saw no reason to lope around in Artisine waiting for her employment status to come through. Pandour also wanted to cover this new twist in the story of Umailen and Touvolle from early on, so she had arranged for the transportation. They expected a dull and uneventful voyage, but while they were still in Federation space they received the news that president Foiritan was working behind the scenes to get the scientists released.

In light of the new information they decided to halt on the border of Federation space, before heading into the Genesis region. Ariko was unsure what to make of the news, so many unexpected twists and turns had happened in the last few days that she was becoming quite confused. Pandour, who was no great fan of Foiritan, was certain that there was something fishy about the whole thing. Was Foiritan's reasons purely humanitarian in nature, did he want to thwart Kor-Azor's research scheme or did the scientists possess some secret knowledge that Foiritan didn't want to fall into the wrong hands? All these speculations came up as the hours ticked by. Ariko was pretty sure that the last conspiracy theory was untrue, but then she remembered the private talk between Foiritan and the scientists the day he visited Crielere and wondered. The Senate was livid that Foiritan was negotiating with Articio, which it considered to be immoral and dangerous to the interests of the Federation.

As evening drew near it became evident that the matter would not be settled any time soon, so they decided to camp out at the border. Ariko was confident that matter would be settled overnight, but she had to wait three whole days before a settlement was finally reached. Articio would give up the scientists, but what he was getting in exchange was kept secret. Ariko didn't care, she hadn't really hoped this would happen and now that it had

she was overcome with joy. She even began making plans on how the scientists could continue their work once they were back in Federation space.

Pandour was clamoring to be present when the scientists were handed over, but everywhere she turned she hit a dead end. It seemed no one wanted a reporter anywhere near the place where Articio was giving the scientists into Federal custody. Pandour was quite agitated by this, and claimed Foiritan was holding a grudge against her after she had released a story last year that didn't paint him in a favorable light. Ariko only half-heartedly listened to her prattle; her mind was already with her impending rendezvous with Touvolle and Umailen.

Again, Ariko was forced to stew in her own anxiety for several days before the paperwork for the release of the scientists could be cleared up. She had no opportunity to speak with the scientists, as they were already on the secret research lab and outside communication was not allowed. Finally the word arrived: Federal officials had arrived to take the pair into their custody. But once they did, they immediately saw that something was amiss. The two persons the Amarrians handed them were Minmatars.

Ariko was in shock. Fortunately, Pandour was at hand to gather information on what had happened. It was almost beyond belief. Articio Kor-Azor, in his arrogance, had shipped the two famed scientists on a common slave transporter to the research lab. Somehow, two of the slaves managed to steal their ID chips and pose themselves as the scientists. As the research station was only occupied by construction workers and security personnel, who had no idea whom to expect, the ruse only came into light when Federal officials arrived at the station.

Pandour was investigating what had happened to the scientists and her findings were disturbing. They had been shipped, along with the rest of the slaves on the transporter, to a slave colony in the Inis-Ilix system.

Presumably, they were then dumped there with the other slaves. Ariko was sure she was going to faint when she realized that for several days the two old men, accustomed to life in a peace and quiet in a lab, had been working in a hard labor camp. A hard labor camp where ground condition where terrible, to boot. Inis-Ilix IV was little more than a blasted rock with a barely breathable atmosphere. Ariko shuddered at the thought what it would do to the two old men.

Ariko was certain that an immediate rescue effort would be launched by all parties involved, but she was sorely disappointed when all that happened over the next day or so was silly bickering between Articio Kor-Azor and president Foiritan regarding the fate of the two Minmatar imposters. Articio wanted the two executed, while Foiritan claimed that Kor-Azor had handed the pair over to the Federation, thus it was up to the Federation to decide their fate. Finally, Articio grew tired of the whole matter, not wanting to further his embarrassment by engaging in an international dispute over some inconsequential Minmatars. Ariko for her part couldn't care less about their fate. She wanted the scientists found. She couldn't sleep, every time she closed her eyes all she could see in her mind's eye was an image of Umailen and Touvolle toiling away in some filthy sulfur-mine, sweat pouring of their frail bodies as the brutal ultra-violent sunrays blistered their skin. She had to find them.

Fortunately, Foiritan's involvement had Pandour all fired up and she was more than willing to go the extra mile to get to the bottom of the story. She was just as keen as Ariko in finding the two scientists, though for different reasons. She wanted to interview them to see how deep Foiritan's involvement really was. The Vexor was still parked in the docking bay ready to go and since their permission from Amarr authorities to land on planets within the Empire was still valid, Ariko and Pandour simply decided to assemble a rescue team of their own. Again Pandour managed to get the Scope to foot the bill. The company's money made it easy for Pandour to attract people to their cause and in less than a day they were ready.

The team Pandour had assembled in record time wasn't professional by any stretch of the word, but to Arika they seemed up to the task. Or at least she hoped so, as she was pinning her future hopes on them. Only in the recent few days, which had given her ample time to contemplate, had Arika finally come to grips with her decisions. Her path was that of Umailen and Touvolle, aiding them along the way to human enlightenment in science. Only her fear of cutting all ties with her past had held her back in realizing this sooner. It was a big mental step for her to wrench her foot from the doorway leading to the State, but she had to do it. Now all she had to do was to find Umailen and Touvolle and she could begin building her life anew. When they finally departed and headed into Amarr space, it wasn't a moment too soon for her.

The journey, as usual, was uneventful. On the way they learnt that Articio Kor-Azor had finally handed the two Minmatar impostors over the Federation, grudgingly. Foiritan had also acted quickly and had assembled a rescue team of his own, which was also heading to the Inis-Ilix system. In his typically blunt manner he had simply put a huge bounty on the heads of the two scientists, thus sparking the interest of every bounty hunter in the area. Of course, the bounty would only be paid out if the scientists were brought back alive and well. Arika silently thanked the energetic president for his efforts; the more people searching for the scientists, the sooner they would be found. But she didn't voice her feelings to Pandour, who sarcastically called this a mere 'token gestures' to make up for his earlier blunders. Arika didn't ask what these supposed blunders were. It was irrelevant.

They arrived at Inis-Ilix IV at dusk, docking at an Amarr Construction foundry station orbiting the planet's only moon. The bounty hunters hired by Foiritan were already there, unloading their gear in the docking area and preparing to descend to the planet. A handful of Amarr officials hovered nearby bewildered by this sudden invasion of dozens of tough-looking

bounty hunters, most of them of Caldari or Gallentean origin. Ariko herself quickly became floundered in the chaos, but fortunately Pandour was used to such hectic rush and not before long Ariko, Pandour and the rest of the team were onboard a shuttle heading for the surface.

It was nighttime when they arrived. The night air was chilly, but Ariko could feel the heat rising from the ground, indicating how hot it had been during the day. The air was thin and had a rank sulfuric taste that clung to the tongue. The team set out erecting a base camp; the search would begin at dawn. Despite the terrible condition, Ariko was feeling very optimistic that she would be reunited with Umailen and Touvolle sooner rather than later. She was already planning in her head what she would say to them and how they could get back on track with their work. Lying there in the make-shift tent, she played these fantasy conversations again and again through her mind.

But she had to wait four days before getting a chance to act these conversations out for real, and by then she had all but forgotten them in her fatigue and frustration. Dealing with the Amarr authorities on the planet was an exercise in futility. They seemed to have no understanding of the notion of individuality of slaves. Slaves were labeled for inter-stellar transportation, but once on a slave colony they lost all identity. There was no need for the slave masters to know their name; to think of them as unique or special in any way was totally alien to them. Time and again Ariko and her team spent hours trying to make stubborn, narrow-minded officials understand, often to no avail.

Then on the fourth day they received the news that the bounty hunters sent by president Foiritan had found the scientists, in a cave outside one of the slave camps. The news was vague and failed to mention the condition of the pair. Pandour rushed them to the hover cars she'd rented for the team, herself taking control of one. Sitting next to her, Ariko noticed the strange

gleam in her eye as she commanded her media crew to get their equipment ready. This was her big break.

It took two hours for them to reach the cave, even if they traveled the whole way at breakneck speeds. There was already considerable activity around the cave, kicking up dust clouds that triggered coughs and watery eyes, but at least shielded them from the worst of the sun. Yet despite all the people already on the scene when she arrived, she was surprised at the lack of urgency or even some token show of joy. Instead, the burly bounty hunters looked sour while scrawny Amarrian officials wandered aimlessly around. Then she saw the stretchers being carried out of the cave, white cloth covering what lay beneath. Even without actually seeing their faces, she knew they were dead. Somehow she had always known since she heard where they were, she had just embraced the soothing illusion of denial, convincing herself otherwise. She was on her knees now as she watched the stretch-bearers entering a tent a short distance from where she was; she didn't remember falling on her knees.

"No!" she wanted to shout to the world, but it only came out as a croak, barely audible. Tears cleared shiny paths down her dirty cheeks and soon she was raked with sobs.

She felt she cried for hours, but it was only a couple of minutes. She had to see them. One last time. With a renewed resolution she stood up and set out for the tent. She was vaguely aware that Pandour was following her every footstep, making sure the holo-cameras hovering around were aligned correctly. Two grim-faced bounty hunters stood either side of the entrance to the tent, but they barely registered with Ariko. Only when one of them grabbed her as she was about to enter did she come out of her daze. An Intaki man appeared from inside the tent. He was clad immaculately and seemed the only one around not affected by the dust that permeated everything. Ariko found him familiar and when he looked her in the eye she remembered him as one of Foiritan's entourage when he visited the

Crielere station. She saw recognition in his eyes too and when he smiled it was the first comfort she felt since she saw the stretchers.

“She can come in,” he said softly, indicating Ariko. “But keep the others out.” Pandour protested loudly, then when this didn't have any visible effect pleaded with Ariko to speak on their behalf. But Ariko didn't have any patience for the prattling Scope woman now.

The tent was dimly lit and it took her eyes some time to adjust. The bodies of Henric Touvolle and Taromi Umailen were lying on narrow tables in the middle of the tent. The white cloth still covered them from the waist down, revealing their thin, shrunken chests. A doctor and a nurse were setting up field gear to conduct an autopsy. Ariko felt oddly relieved they hadn't started the gruesome operation. The Intaki man, introducing himself as Endt Strovare, escorted her to the tables. The doctor, taking Ariko for someone important, started yammering something about respiratory problems and malnutrition, but he quickly shut up when he noticed that nobody was listening.

Apart from Gunaris, this was the first time Ariko saw bodies close up, though whether she should blame or thank her sheltered upbringing she was uncertain about at the moment. With Gunaris her grief had been too overwhelming for her to notice the small details and she was too distraught to partake in preparing him for his funeral. She had heard all the stories about how serene someone looked that had just died peacefully, and to an extent she saw they were true. But she also saw red-rimmed eyes that stared into oblivion and bluish lips that no breath passed between. She saw their destroyed bodies and smelled the foul stench of their feces disposed from their loosened bowels. Death might be peaceful, but it certainly wasn't pretty.

Ariko had seen enough here. But she also wanted to see the cave where they were found. Strovare, who seemed to be the man in charge, approved

quickly, but for her alone. He escorted her from the tent and followed her to the cave, keeping a respectful distance. Ariko had heard that the Intakis had great empathy for the feelings of others and this certainly seemed true of Strovare. Thinking about the Intaki she couldn't help but wonder what one of the top aides of president Foiritan was doing here. And why he was in charge, and not the Amarrians. But then they were at the cave and she let it go.

It was not a big cave, perhaps 15 meters deep and 4 meters wide. The floor was sandy, the rock wall was brown with a yellowish tint. A few items indicating human inhabitation littered the floor, but they didn't interest Ariko. The walls did. They were covered with scribbings, painted on the wall with anything the scientists had laid their hands on, juice from berries, soot, even dung if her nose wasn't deceiving her. Everywhere her head turned she could see intricate formulas and advanced theories, written by men on the brink of death possessed with ideas they had to get out, lest they died with them.

A few workmen entered the cave, clad in body-covering suits with breathing masks. Strovare indicated to her that they had to leave, gently taking her by the arm. Ariko didn't resist at first, but then she realized what these men were doing here. They were going to wash the walls clean, eradicate the last message Umailen and Touvolle had for the world. She tried to wrestle out of Strovare's grip, but he had anticipated her reaction and held fast. He had to drag her from the cave, as the workmen fired up their powerful hoses and started hosing the walls.

It was the next day. Ariko, Pandour and the team were back on the space station orbiting Inis-Ilix IV's lonely moon. They had been told gently, but firmly, that they were no longer welcome on the planet now that the scientists were found. Pandour was still seething at the treatment she had received, but her nose for news was also as strong as ever and she could easily smell the story here. Some sort of a cover up was taking place, but

she had no idea what. President Foiritan might be involved, or maybe it was just the stubborn Amarrians. She had been intrigued by Ariko's account of events in the cave. The scribblings themselves didn't interest her that much, but the hint of conspiracy did.

It was the opposite for Ariko. She didn't care for conspiracy theories or corrupt politicians or imperialists. The ideas of Umailen and Touvolle did. With them gone, these ideas of theirs were all that was left. It was their legacy, and she was the only one that could appreciate it. But already Ariko could feel her memories of the cave scribblings fading. She had only had a chance to look at them for a few seconds before being ushered out. Although she had scanned all the walls, it was only for the briefest of moments, much too short for her to get a clear picture of what was being written.

But this knowledge couldn't be lost. She couldn't let it happen. She had burned all the bridges linking her to the past, pinning all her hopes and dreams on the two scientists and their wild but wonderful schemes. She had jumped aboard and taking a ride to the heavens and now there was no way back. In a sense, she was the only thing that remained of the great pioneering spirit that had roamed the halls of Crielere for few short weeks and shifted the world. But she wasn't a pioneer herself. The most she could hope for was to be a spectator.

Or a courier. This new thought flashed in her mind and physically jolted her. Of course. She could never hope to revive the spirit all by herself. But she could be the vessel for which to bring the message to the world. What she saw in the cave was still in her mind. She couldn't recall it herself. But she knew somebody that could. The Jovians.

It was a wild idea. It wasn't even a longshot. It was borderline lunacy. But in a way it made sense. The Jovians were wonderfully advanced, they possessed the technology to extract the cave memory from her mind. And

they would most surely agree to do it once they knew what was in her head. She didn't know much about Jovians, but she knew they craved new knowledge above everything else. So she would bring it to them. And enlighten the world.

A week later a Caldari Navy frigate on a patrol on the border of Caldari space noticed a small shuttle cruising to a stargate that would take it deep into the outer regions. It wasn't really his business, but the captain felt obliged to warn the occupant of the shuttle of the dangers it was heading into. The only reply he got before the shuttle disappeared into deep space:

“Fate won't kill the Messenger.”

Forsaken Ruins

E8-YS9 Solar System, EL8Z-M Constellation, Immensea Region

20.01.106 - 05:41 EVT

Failure always begets reflection, and Mattias found himself asking the same question over and over again:

How could it have come to this?

He stared in crushed disbelief at the rippling translucent inner membrane of the warp tunnel, watching the planets and moons of the E8-YS9 system shoot past his ship. The Blackbird-class cruiser at his command was hurtling through the tunnel at hundreds of times the speed of light. Mattias was amazed the battered vessel was still capable of sustaining this speed without breaking apart.

We were so close to killing him, he thought. So very, very close.

The tragedy would not be in his own death, but in the fact that his prey would continue to live out its wretched, despicable existence. For Mattias and the team of loyal bounty hunters that he had dedicated his life to, this was the ultimate failure. They had lost the bounty, were about to lose their lives, and worst of all, lost an opportunity to do some good in a galaxy controlled by greed and evil above all else.

“Do you believe in God, Mattias?” asked the voice of his enemy. Mattias cursed his own misfortune and refused to answer.

“And what of the Amarr and Minmatar comrades that you are leading to death?” the wicked voice sneered. “Are they believers in an afterlife?”

In an instant, Mattias thought of the entire history of the two outstanding bounty hunters—and great friends—whose lives were in as much peril as his own. Kirlana was an Amarr by birth, but had rebelled against her lavish upbringing and become ashamed of her cultural roots. She renounced her family name and turned her back on the fortune that would have been hers by birthright. The only “possession” she took with her was Matuno, the Brutor slave that had looked after her since childhood. She transformed him into an independent, Tempest-class battleship captain. Now, he answered to no one. But he would never forget those he was beholden to.

Forever grateful for being set free of Amarrian bondage, Matuno found himself unable to leave Kirlana's side, and together they sought greater purpose in life. After months of wandering Empire space, fate would introduce them to Mattias Kakkichi. Inspired by his passion for truth and justice, they readily joined his self-appointed mission: To become the arm of justice where the laws of Empire space could not reach. The money received from collected bounties was unimportant to them. The real reward was the righted wrong, accomplished through the kill itself. Watching evil succumb to the thunder of guns filled each of their souls with delicious satisfaction. No single feeling was more powerful than knowing that an injustice had been avenged. But on this day, the odds of lethal misfortune for pursuing such a risky profession finally caught up with them.

Mattias, Kirlana, and Matuno were fleeing from the scene of an assassination attempt on Trald Vukenda, the leader of the infamous Angel Cartel and the highest profile target they had ever hunted. The operation had gone horribly wrong. Within sight of their prey, the enemy surprised the bounty hunters with reinforcements, and they suddenly found themselves greatly outnumbered. Their ships were punished almost to the breaking point, and they were lucky to have escaped into warp. But there were only two jumpgates leading out of the system, and Trald already knew which

one the bounty hunters were running towards. Both exits were already blockaded by Angel Cartel ships.

"I'm going to nail your self-righteous corpse to that jumpgate, Mattias," snarled Trald. "As a reminder to others about the perils in pursuing delusional moral obligations."

The hatred that Mattias felt swelling in his heart was powerful. He forced himself to suppress his anger and focus on trying to find a way to keep his good friends alive. They would be emerging from warp in just a few moments.

"Kirlana, Matuno...I'm sorry I got the both of you into this, but I'm not ready to say goodbye just yet." Mattias willed the camera drones orbiting his ship to zoom out so he could see all three ships traveling inside the warp tunnel. Kirlana's Omen-class cruiser was in the worst condition of them, venting plasma from a rupture in the hull plating alongside one of the ship's engines.

"Standing by," said Kirlana. Her voice was terse, and filled with fear.

"At your service," said the deep voice of Matuno, who had not known fear since the day Kirlana set him free. Their ships were already beginning to decelerate.

"We're only going to get one shot at this, so pay attention." Mattias was thinking quickly. "When the warp engines quit, Kirlana, point your bow at the nearest object you can warp towards and get out...Matuno, we have to give her enough time to get aligned, so fire up your sensor boosters as soon as you're able to and concentrate fire on anything that tries to cut her off. I'm going to target link with your ship to assist your artillery tracking and target jam anything that tries to close in..." The warp tunnel surrounding them had just about disappeared, and the jumpgate was coming into view.

“Matuno, as soon as she's out, warp yourself out of there, anywhere you can...”

Both of them started to protest at the same time. “Mattias, what about you —“

“Go, damnit! Go! Go! Go!” The warp core disappeared, and the Blackbird's engines switched to impulse power. The ship's threat detectors registered danger immediately. Mattias counted at least 4 ships, and saw the unmistakable profile of a deadly Arch Angel Warlord floating directly above the jumpgate. An icy lead ball formed in his stomach. He was well within range of the Warlord's most powerful cannons, and three Arch Angel Scout cruisers were speeding directly towards them. Mattias was certain that the Scouts were equipped with warp scramblers.

“Kirlana! Go!” Plasma trailed behind the Omen as it pitched upwards and turned away from the jumpgate. The first spread of Arch Angel heavy missiles began coursing towards them. The cruiser made painstakingly slow course adjustments to align itself perfectly with the warp tunnel projected in front of it. The ship accelerated and vanished just in time. Missile exhaust plumes crisscrossed each other at the exact spot in space where the Omen was just a fraction of a second earlier. One away. Right on queue, the Blackbird's sophisticated electronics systems established targeting locks on the three incoming Arch Angel Scout cruisers. Mattias linked with the weapons system onboard Matuno's Tempest, feeding it telemetry. The enormous 1400mm artillery turrets spread along the battleship's hull began tracking in unison. The Arch Angel Scouts unleashed a second spread of heavy missiles towards them.

“Matuno, go!” Mattias could see missile plumes from the Warlord extending towards them now as well. The Tempest's portside seemed to explode as the 1400mm artillery pieces unloaded. The shells slammed into the lead Arch Angel a split second later, nearly breaking the enemy cruiser's spine

on the first salvo. Mattias willed his shield hardeners online and target jammed the second Scout. He simultaneously launched a missile volley of his own towards the crippled Arch Angel. “Warp now now now!” Mattias screamed in his mind at Matuno, inadvertently gulping down some of the ectoplasm inside of his pod.

Mattias could see the massive Tempest slowly swing its bow around in the same direction that Kirlana had warped towards. A half second before the detonation of the first incoming missile, a bluish-white aura engulfed the goliath battleship as Matuno activated his own shield hardeners. Mattias counted off eight devastating explosions as the Warlord's cruise missiles slammed into the Tempest, throwing it off course and ripping enormous gashes into the hull. The shockwaves expanding from the explosion sites crashed into the Blackbird, tearing through its shields and punching through the last of the ship's armor. The Tempest was violently spewing plasma and debris directly into space now, and a third Arch Angel missile spread was already on its way as Matuno desperately tried to coax his crippled battleship into warp.

The lead Arch Angel Scout exploded just as Trald's fleet arrived. Mattias activated one last blistering burst of signal-scrambling electronic noise towards the third Arch Angel Scout—now just 12 kilometers away—before randomly selecting a planet on his navigation list and activating the warp drive. Mattias thought he saw a flash erupt from the direction of the Warlord a half-second before the Blackbird's computer registered near-catastrophic hull breaches all over his ship. It was such a powerful impact that Mattias swore he could actually feel the shells slam into the hull from inside his pod.

That's it, thought Mattias. This is how it finally ends.

The Blackbird's thrusters were still trying to correct the ship's course from the devastating impact. The first spread of cruise missiles from Trald's ship began arcing towards it.

"My regards to hell's keeper, Mattias," said Trald. "Good bye."

Mattias rotated the camera drones around and focused them on the ship of his enemy. He always told himself that when the time came, he would stare death in the eyes, and take the hatred for his enemy to eternity. Severing the communication link between himself and Trald, he allowed his mind to let go of the ship's controls, and waited for the inevitable to consume him.

But instead of greeting death, he saw the image of Trald's Seraphim-class battleship yanked away as the Blackbird miraculously accelerated into warp. Mattias nearly swallowed more of the pod's ectoplasm, and had to make a concerted effort to control his breathing through the nose tubes. For the time being, he had survived, and the subsiding adrenaline rush from his near-death experience nearly left him incapacitated with nausea. The ship's vital signs projected a grim image onto his mind's vision:

Shields: 8% and rising.

Armor: 0%

Structure: 4%

Capacitor: 2% and rising.

Come to your senses, Mattias thought. Think. The capacitor was almost completely drained. Wherever it was that he set course for, his ship would come up well short of the target destination.

"Mattias, check in." Matuno had made it out! I need to be strong here, he thought.

“Roger that, Matuno, still alive. Are you with Kirlana?” The Blackbird was decelerating from warp. He was beginning to get his shaking under control.

“I'm here with him, Mattias,” she answered. “We're in orbit around the 5th planet in the system. Hull and armor levels are negligible, diagnostics are red across the board.”

“Must be that lousy Amarr engineering.” It was a half-hearted attempt to relieve some of the tension with humor. Mattias sensed it didn't work, and the Blackbird was nearly out of the warp tunnel. “Make sure you keep moving, and warp to my location as soon as your capacitor will let you.” Mattias checked his weapons inventory: no extra missiles other than what was already loaded in the launchers, and 34 total antimatter charges for the Blackbird's 250mm railguns. Mattias grimaced underneath the mask covering his eyes. “How are you two on ammo?”

“A dozen fourteen-hundred shells and a handful of six-fifty rounds, no missiles,” replied Matuno.

“Radio crystals loaded, multi-frequencies in the hold, bingo missiles,” answered Kirlana.

Great, thought Mattias. Here's where I come up with something brilliant to get us out of this. The situation could not possibly be any worse. His fleet would not survive another engagement with Angel Cartel forces, or any other adversaries for that matter. Some said that Trald Vukenda was the most powerful man in all of unregulated space. Whether or not that was true was debatable, depending on which pirate you asked. But they would all agree that Trald was definitely the most powerful man in this region of space. As the head of the most notorious pirate organization in existence, it was well within his means to seal off entire systems to prevent anything from coming in or leaving. This space, and everything in it, belonged to the

Angel Cartel. Mattias knew that the longer they stayed here, the tighter the noose around their necks became.

In the bounty hunting profession, lofty ambitions bear enormous risks. Mattias was the one being hunted now, and he had placed the lives of the people he cared for most in great danger. Why was doing the right thing always so damn difficult, he asked himself. Why is it that so few of us find the courage to fight for the unpunished injustices of our time? Mattias focused the drone cameras on the Blackbird, inspecting the massive gashes in its hull. Judging from the metallic carnage, he estimated that sections of at least 6 decks were now exposed directly to space. Somewhere beneath where he was sitting, hundreds of crewmembers were sealing off compartments, fighting electrical fires and desperately struggling to keep his ship's vital systems functioning. How many of them died because of this, he wondered. As the captain of the ship, he was sealed inside a pod made of an ultra-strong, Jovian-manufactured alloy and neurologically connected to the Blackbird's systems. Inside of it, so long as the ship was intact, the captain was immune from harm. It was the Jovians who had introduced this remarkable innovation, and it had changed the face of naval warfare forever.

Mattias began contemplating the Jovians and their technology. As spectacular as the pod was, it was also emblematic of the traits that defined the entire Jovian race: hyper-intelligent, but utterly and completely numb to human emotion. Modern day starships are massive and incomprehensibly complex. Before the pod, there were so many points of failure between a captain's decision and the execution of his orders. The ability to create a direct neurological connection between a human mind and a ship's systems reduced those points of failure to zero. Commanding a starship was now a natural extension of the mind's will. All a captain needed was to just think about what he wanted his ship to do, and it was done.

To Mattias, it was all so impersonal. Because of the technology, a captain could skipper numerous ships over the course of a lifetime without ever meeting a single crewmember from any of them. Mattias was one of the few who made an effort to meet at least some. It seemed like the least he could do in exchange for their unquestioning faith in his abilities, and their trust in him to keep them alive.

As the Blackbird's warp drives shut down, Mattias expected to find himself surrounded with the vast expanse of nothingness that exists between celestial objects within solar systems. Instead, he saw that the ship had exited the warp tunnel just 40 kilometers from the surface of a colossal rock formation the size of a mountain range. It was surrounded by several small asteroid fields, and looked almost serene against the greenish-black nebula backdrop of the E8-YS9 solar system. Mattias was no geologist, and was at a complete loss to explain how such a bizarre formation could have formed. He willed the Blackbird to cruise towards it, contemplating the idea of using the range as a place to hide from the Arch Angels.

"Mattias, we are en route to your destination," said Matuno. "Be advised, Arch Angels warped to our location just as we got aligned."

"You guys aren't going to believe what I just found," Mattias answered. The formation was growing larger as his cruiser approached. The Blackbird's avionics registered the arrival the Omen and Tempest.

"Whoa..." breathed Kirlana. "Is this formation mapped?"

"Negative, but it does appear on scanner, which rules out using it as a place to hide," said Mattias.

"I'm not sure the Angels have ever been here," said Matuno. "No debris, no containers, no mining equipment...no signs of activity anywhere along the range."

Mattias rotated the view 180 degrees away from the rocks and watched as his two comrades pulled their battered vessels alongside of his own. The Omen was about the same size as his Blackbird, but the Tempest was much larger than the two of them combined, with more than twice the number of crew onboard. Amazing that the three of us are still in one piece, thought Mattias. The three ships were cruising above the rocks, still trailing long jets of fire and plasma behind them.

“No, something was definitely here,” interrupted Kirlana. “Look closer at those pinnacles directly beneath us...can you see that flashing?”

Mattias swung the camera downwards and zoomed in closer. Yes, there it is. The sides of some rock pinnacles jutting outwards from the formation were being illuminated intermittently. He slowed down the Blackbird's speed almost to a stop and altered course just a few degrees to try and find the source of the light.

“There...it's a strobe or beacon of some kind. Actually...that looks like an escape pod or something,” said Kirlana.

Mattias zoomed the cameras in even further and was finally able to focus on the image. It was about 5 meters in length, with a polished metallic black exterior. One end was lodged against the base of the pinnacle, and the other had the flashing strobe light. Mattias did not recognize the object, and it was still invisible to his ship's sensors.

“Matuno, do you still have salvage drones onboard?”

“Yes, deploying now.” Mattias watched as a tiny drone began orbiting the Tempest. Salvage drones were not available anywhere within Empire space. Matuno had found this one among the wreckage of a pirate convoy that he had destroyed. For all of its risks, bounty hunting occasionally

yielded some rare finds. Mega-corporations weren't the only organizations with talented engineers, and pirates were more than capable of generating their own prototype technology. "I can't lock the object, my sensors think that it's physically part of the formation's surface. The drone might be able to make the distinction, if I can get it close enough."

The drone descended from the Tempest to near the formation's surface. It started flying small racetrack circles around the pinnacle area. After several orbits, it abruptly stopped and changed direction, heading directly towards the mysterious object.

"The drone acquired it. Stand by for extraction," announced Matuno. The drone came to a stop and dropped its four, tentacle-like arms onto the surface, gently drawing them around the object. The arms appeared to struggle a little bit, and then it came free amidst a plume of dust and pebbles. Within a few moments, the drone and its mysterious cargo were onboard the Tempest.

For a few moments, there was silence.

"Hold...hold on..." Mattias could feel his eyebrows rise slightly. Not like him to get flustered at anything, he thought.

"This is no pod," Matuno started. "It's a casket of some sort. There are no neurolinks or traces of ectoplasm inside. The beacons were affixed to the external structure intentionally, and there is an engraving on the outside that reads 'FORMATOR IMMENSEA'."

"Immensea? The region we're in?" asked Mattias. He started a routine to perform deep-space scans covering every direction around them. As much as this find was interesting, they were all still in danger of being found.

"If it's a casket, then who's inside of it?" asked Kirlana.

Again, Matuno paused before answering. "A Gallente male dressed in some sort of ceremonial robes. He...looks like he was murdered."

"Murdered?" said Kirlana. "How can you—"

"There is a gold-plated dagger driven up to the hilt through the man's sternum, but his hands are resting on each other over his navel. He actually looks like he's at peace. The body appears that it was deliberately arranged in this exact fashion and laid to rest inside the casket."

Mattias thought about that for a moment. He had killed before. In fact, all of them had, but only by using their ship's weapons as an extension of their mind. To plunge a dagger through another man's heart...that was grotesquely barbaric, if not outright inhuman.

"One more thing," Mantuno interrupted his thoughts. "There are coordinates engraved on the inner plating of the casket. They point to somewhere within this system."

Somewhere. Well, there were risks in trying to find out where that was, and risks for not trying as well. Staying on the move was an absolute necessity, but he was surprised at how his own curiosity exceeded his fear of being discovered by the Arch Angels. Whoever put him in there, he thought, wanted him to be found. The man inside the casket had been murdered, and Mattias found that to be a compelling enough reason to investigate.

"Matuno, transmit those coordinates to my navigation computer. I'm going to have a look."

"Roger." There were no protests from either of them this time, at least not spoken. For all they knew, Trald himself could have planned all this, and set the bait which would deliver them to a pack of bloodthirsty Arch Angels.

Mattias engaged the warp drive. Immediately, the computer indicated that the target destination was a mere 300 kilometers from the rock formation. A few seconds later, the view of an enormous space station rushed into view. He thought for certain this was a trap, and that sentry guns were moments away from cutting his ship to pieces. Mattias was about to panic when he realized that there were no guns or defenses of any kind at all. As the Blackbird approached the dark, foreboding structure, Mattias realized that the station was abandoned. And more importantly, according to the CONCORD maps, it didn't exist.

“Warp to my location,” he ordered. “And tell yourself that what you're about to see isn't an illusion.” Mattias steered the Blackbird alongside the station's greenish-metallic hull. Is the dead Gallente the owner of this place? Some of the exterior hull plating was missing along several decks. An ominous feeling descended over him. Something isn't right here, he thought. Every station he ever visited was always bustling with activity, even the ones in deep space. There were no signs of life here at all, even though the station still had power. The contrasting images in his mind made him uneasy.

The Omen and Tempest suddenly appeared.

“Unbelievable,” said Kirlana. “This isn't on the map!”

“No sentry guns, no defenses except for the shields.” said Matuno. “And harbor control rejects all docking requests.”

“So the big question is how the heck do we get onboard this thing,” Mattias wondered out loud.

“And why haven't the Angel's claimed it for themselves, assuming they even know it's here,” said Matuno.

“The shields,” said Kirlana, sounding a little nervous. “Take them down, and you'll get in. It's an emergency failsafe mechanism built into most station's AI. If no active defenses are remaining and the shields are breached, the AI automatically shuts harbor control down, allowing anything from the outside to get in, and anything from the inside to get out. The thinking was that if something was powerful enough to take down a station's defenses—natural or man-made—then it assumes that hull failure and catastrophic loss of life are imminent. It makes zero sense to keep harbor control active at that point. The station is either already lost or about to be destroyed.”

“How do you know all this?” asked Mattias.

“The Amarrs learned about it the hard way during the Rebellion,” she answered. “The Minmatars tried it successfully during some pretty ballsy missions to rescue slaves just after the Jovians crushed the Amarr invasion fleet.”

“Thank God for that,” muttered Matuno.

“God had nothing to do with it,” she answered. “Because there's no such thing.”

Her words resonated in Mattias's mind. He wasn't a religious man—at least not in a traditional sense. But the comment still made him uncomfortable. Regardless of her rebellion against the religious paradigms of the culture that she was born into, to hear an Amarr say there was no God was extremely disturbing.

The plasma and fire escaping the gashes in her ship drew his attention for some reason. He decided to reclaim his team's focus.

“So what you're telling us is that we don't have the firepower to get inside.”

“In so many words, yes. Even if we had unlimited ammunition, our three ships combined couldn't overtake the shield's rate of regeneration.” Mattias's attention was diverted again, this time towards the station's hull, now more than 3 kilometers away from the Blackbird. The surface appeared to distort itself slightly, and a ripple began to move across it from left to right. Mattias's sixth sense screamed danger to him, and his heart stopped as he realized what was happening.

“Both of you, put your shield hardeners on.” Mattias ordered.

“Say again? I don't see any—“

“Now! Quickly!” Whitish-blue auras enveloped all three ships as the bounty hunters followed Mattias's instructions, unsure of their purpose. One second later, the reason became perfectly clear, as a Jovian Wraith-class frigate uncloaked just 300 meters from Mattias's Blackbird. Although the Wraith was the smallest ship in the group, it was the most technically advanced, and had the enormous tactical advantage of being able to cloak itself. In numbers, the Wraith was among the deadliest ships in space. Mattias wondered if there were more of them nearby.

“I can't lock him up,” said Matuno. “And even if I could, he's too close, I doubt I could hit him with anything.”

“Stop trying,” answered Mattias. “Who knows how many others are out here. We'd be in pods or worse by now if he had bad intentions.” He brought his ship to a complete stop. The Wraith gracefully slid alongside, closing to within 100 meters. The Jovian opened a communications channel with him.

“A thousand apologies for my abrupt appearance, Captain Kakkichi” began then Jovian. “But the circumstances required this choice of tactics.”

“What can I do for you?” asked Mattias. He had never spoken to a Jovian before, let alone been this close to one of their ships. The camera drones were snapping pictures like crazy.

“My name is Veniel, and as you already know, I hail from the Jovian Empire.” His voice sounded almost hollow, like a drone. Mattias studied the portrait of the “man” speaking to him. He was human, but so...not human either. The Jovians were products of genetic engineering, literally harvested from cultures and grown in fetus test tubes until “maturity”, as they coldly referred to it. “Would you like me to invite your crew to participate in our conversation?” he asked.

“Allow me,” answered Mattias, patching in Kirlana and Matuno. “How long were you following us for?”

“It isn't often when the Angel Cartel actively hunts anyone specifically, let alone blockades the entrances to solar systems for the occasion. I had to find out for myself who the recipient of this honor was.” He paused for a moment. “I have to say Captain, that I am very impressed with your tenacity for survival.”

“I'm glad you find it entertaining,” Mattias shot back. “But as you can see from the condition of my fleet, I don't have time for games.”

“Of course not Captain, I understand completely. But before I leave you to your business, I have to ask...how, exactly, did you find this station?”

Mattias thought about his question carefully before answering. Odds were that the Jovian already knew the answer, if he was able to follow them to the rock formation. Veniel was fishing for information, and Mattias decided to play along.

“We discovered an artifact in an asteroid field not too far from here, and it led us to this location.”

“And this ‘artifact’, did it contain the corpse of a Gallente?”

Aha. The man knew exactly what he was looking for. “Yes, it did.”

“Then I have a proposition for you and your crew, Captain. First, let me begin by saying that you will not survive another attempt to run the gauntlets in place at the gates in this system. Trald is focused on your destruction, and you will not escape from him again. Therefore, in exchange for the artifact in your possession, I offer you all three of the following: Access to this station, the explanation for its existence, and a way past the blockades in this system.”

Mattias had heard about the Jovians insatiable lust for knowledge, and that they were often willing to trade hyper-advanced technology in exchange for it. Veniel, on the other hand, was offering ways to spare their lives in exchange for, of all things, a corpse. Why he wanted it was both beyond explanation and irrelevant in this context. The upper hand in this agreement belonged to Veniel, and Mattias knew he'd be a fool to refuse. The Jovians were never known for cruelty or deceit, and although this one seemed atypical of the stereotype, he sensed no ill will on Veniel's part.

“Very well, Veniel. Deal.”

“Excellent, Captain. Now, the artifact, if you please.”

“I have your word that you'll fulfill your part of the bargain?”

“Most certainly, Captain.”

Mattias took a deep breath through the nose tubes. "Alright, then. Matuno, please jettison the casket."

"Roger." A tiny cargo container appeared just above the Tempest. Mattias was thankful that the errant plasma and fire jets still erupting from the damaged ship were pointing away from it. The Wraith slowly pulled away from the Blackbird and positioned itself above the floating cargo container, guiding it on board.

"Superb. Now, for my part of the bargain, if you'll excuse me for just a moment..." The Jovian broke the connection. Mattias focused his view on the Wraith hovering above the Tempest, already beginning to question his own judgment. It wasn't the first time he'd done that today.

Orien Solar System, Besateoden Constellation, Molden Heath Region

Orien III – Moon 3

Expert Distribution Retail Center

06:45 EVT

The DED is the police force of CONCORD, and a Spartan affair even by military standards. Charged with the responsibility of maintaining law and order within the borders of Empire space, the men and women who make up its ranks are meticulous in their work, fervently devoted to their mission, and strict advocates of structured rank and their own respective place within it. Candidates wishing to join the DED are subjected to a near ruthless application process. If accepted, recruits are given a training regime whose intensity rivals or exceeds any military institution in mankind's history.

Their philosophy discourages autonomy insofar as its place within fighting units is concerned. DED ships are rarely seen alone. They patrol Empire

shipping lanes and property in balanced fleets of varying military capacity, and are always within range of other patrols so that the response time to any crisis is almost instantaneous. The DED's prowess for coordinating strikes and rapid-response counterattacks within Empire space is staggering, thanks to the uniquely trained individuals that CONCORD enlists for the task.

But no large organization is without its informants. And the DED, despite the extensive background checks, personality evaluations, and constant surveillance of new and experienced employees, was not without their own. With so much power concentrated there, entities both malicious and neutral went to great lengths to infiltrate the law enforcement agency. The DED quietly dealt with the moles they were able to catch. But with espionage at this level, where the stakes are so high and the potential for damage so great, no one could ever be certain that every spy was purged.

Tantoseisen Kakkichi—the Chief of Internal Security at the DED—knew that other spies existed within the agency. He had been reviewing disinformation items designed to expose potential operatives when the Jovian contacted him. Midway through the conversation, Tantoseisen started believing that he was being set up for a disinformation play as well.

“How many stations did you say there were again?”

“Sixty-nine, to be exact,” Veniel repeated.

“In twenty three deep space regions surrounding Empire space?”

“Correct, Commander.”

Tantoseisen sat back in his chair, glancing towards Veniel's dossier on the other screen. Although they never formally met, this was one of the few Jovians that CONCORD had some record of. Ever since the legendary

trade that brought pod technology to the forefront of naval warfare, contact with the elusive race had been rare. Veniel was the only Jovian who surfaced from time to time, and whenever he did, there were always significant repercussions. The consensus among DED intelligence analysts was that Veniel was the Jovian equivalent of a maverick, and they had serious doubts that his actions proceeded with the blessings of his own kind. That notion alone would make anyone wary of trusting him, let alone believe his claim that dozens of stations existed in deep space which CONCORD knew nothing about.

“Veniel, with all due respect, you'll understand that I'm having a difficult time believing your claim.” And that's about as delicately as I'm capable of saying that, he thought.

“If you so desire, I can show you proof.”

“Very well then. Show me proof.”

Veniel's pale, vein-crossed, elongated face was replaced with the image of a Jovian frigate cruising slowly against the backdrop of a station. That could be anywhere, Tantoseisen thought. Something did seem different about it, but nothing so much out of the ordinary.

“Are you convinced yet, Commander?” asked Veniel.

“I'm afraid I haven't seen anything to make me change my mind.”

The image rotated so that the camera perspective was behind the frigate, still continuing its deliberate pace outside the station. Tantoseisen could see the outer hull of the base in more detail. Emergency lighting, he thought. But again, that could be any one of dozens of Gallente stations here in Empire space. Approaching the end of an enormous hull section,

the ship began a slight bank to its left. When it finished rounded the corner, the camera panned back again.

The image of a critically damaged Tempest-class battleship came into view.

“Veniel, I thought you said that no one in Empire space knew about this.”

The Jovian did not answer. A second ship—an Omen-class cruiser, also badly damaged—was there, floating alongside the battleship. Both ships looked like they were on fire.

“If my word alone will not suffice,” said Veniel. “Then perhaps his will.” The view focused back to the Tempest, then panned to an angle above and behind it. A third ship—a Blackbird—was also there, on fire and...

The image suddenly registered as being very familiar to Tantoseisen: A Caldari, an Amarrian, and a Minmatar...

Mattias! How can that be? “Is that my brother?” he asked incredulously. His question was answered immediately, as the view was replaced with portraits of his older brother on one side, and the Jovian on the other. “Mattias, where are you? What happened to your ship?”

“Tantoseisen, it's good to see you”, said Mattias, who sounded angry. Veniel was silent. “I'm really sorry you got brought into this, but as long as we're all here, this is what happened...”

Mattias explained the entire course of events that brought them to the abandoned station. He talked about the tip they received about Trald Vukenda's whereabouts and movements, the operation that he and his team had planned to ambush him, and how it went terribly wrong. Tantoseisen was stunned.

“My God, Mattias...why Trald?” Tantoseisen didn't want to start an argument, but he just couldn't help asking. You're completely out of your league is what he should have said. Mattias was always like that, pushing himself to pull off impossible feats and insisting on doing things his own way. It was reckless, and it endangered everyone in his care. The strict military officer of Tantoseisen's psyche hated it. But as a younger brother, he found it inspiring. Mattias was always a source of strength in his life growing up. Tantoseisen surprised himself to discover that he still admired his brother's courage. He knew exactly what motivated him, and what the reply to his question would be.

“Same reason as always, little brother,” he answered. “Because it was the right thing to do.”

Yes, the right thing to do. Tantoseisen nodded his head slightly, not saying anything. He often passed along information about criminals who escaped the punishment of CONCORD to Mattias, always in secret. The DED, as powerful as it was, lacked the resources to chase felons past Empire borders. Justice should have no bounds, the brothers always said. Mattias would be the instrument of CONCORD where the Tantoseisen and the DED could not tread.

“Commander, I can give you the exact locations of the other 68 stations,” said Veniel. “But that is conditional on two terms. First, you and your fleet must come to our present location here in the Immensea region.”

“Hey, wait just a minute—“ Mattias started, but was cut off again by Veniel.

“The second term is that you do not, under any circumstances, tell any of your superior officers of your intentions.”

“So that's how you plan on fulfilling your agreement with me? Goddamn you, Veniel,” cursed Mattias. “You know he can't do that, he's a DED officer! He could be court-martialed and executed for doing something like that. Tantoseisen, don't listen to this snake, we'll be alright over here.”

Veniel was unfazed. “It is true that the risks are great. But there is greater risk by not acting.”

Remarkable, Tantoseisen thought, that he could put the both of us into positions that pit our mutual fates with each other's decisions. Was this man seriously prepared to let Mattias die at the hands of the Angel Cartel if I refused? Was he seriously capable of doing something that sinister? What was it that he really wanted, and why all this trouble for a corpse?

“Why the second term, Veniel. Why is it that my superiors are to be kept out of this?”

“There are certain elements within the DED which stand to benefit directly from this information, Commander. Some would almost certainly use it to advance their own personal incentives, rather than promote the cause of the greater good, as the DED mission statement specifies.”

Tantoseisen was losing his patience. “Certain elements'? Veniel, don't be cryptic with me, give me straight answers—“

“Elements who would take this information and attempt to conceal it from the other Assembly members. Tell me, what do you suppose the repercussions would be if it was revealed that a member government was hiding the existence of these stations?”

Veniel had a valid point there. Unbeknownst to the general public, the political situation within the Assembly had become very volatile, with disagreements between member governments on issues ranging from debt

restructuring to deep-space territorial disputes. The internal strife wasn't serious enough—yet—to endanger the integrity of CONCORD, but this was precisely the kind of thing that could ignite the situation. If the right spies were to get hold of information this sensitive, the results could be drastic.

Sixty-nine stations, Tantoseisen thought. Trillions of isk worth of property and assets, up for grabs to whoever wants them...nations have gone to war for much lesser reasons than that.

Veniel continued his case. “Commander, time is running short. Trald's forces are actively hunting your brother, and they could appear here at any moment.”

The comment infuriated Tantoseisen. “What's in this for you, Veniel.” He spoke through clenched teeth.

“Knowledge, of course. And clarity of vision, for I consider myself a student of humanity.”

This didn't surprise him. Jovians were known to covet the things that most other races took for granted. Judging from their grim, ghastly appearance, Tantoseisen could easily see how rediscovering humanity would be at the forefront of any Jovian's agenda.

“I suppose you need my fleet there as well to get inside?”

“That is part of the agreement, yes.”

“And you'll share with us what you know of these stations?”

“Correct. We can begin during your journey here.”

“No! Goddamnit, Tantoseisen, don't listen to this man!” Mattias protested.

“Mattias, I've already made up my mind. The Jovian is right; it's riskier not to do this. This is the right thing to do, even if the DED thinks the contrary.” He began tapping commands on the screen console in front of him, readying his battleship and replacing the hybrid weapons with energy turrets. “I just hope I don't have a mutiny on my hands once I tell the crew where we're going.”

“You are a courageous man, Commander. The crew will rally to you, not to a DED protocol.” said Veniel.

“Veniel, I'm still not sure what kind of elaborate scheme it is you have going here, or if I even understand what your true intentions are. What I do know is that it is not your place to make assertions of any kind about me, and especially not about my crew. I want you to know that I am disgusted about the manner in which you decided to handle this situation, and that I would prefer it if you ceased making any more judgments about what you think my brother or I believe is right. Are we clear?”

“I intended no disrespect, Commander. I am deeply regretful for offending you.”

“You're making a mistake, Tantoseisen”, said Mattias. “Your command, your career, your life, all of it is in jeopardy—”

“And I'm talking to someone who has done the exact same thing for years. For this one, I think I'll be the big brother for a change, Mattias.” He keyed in an order to have spare armor and hull repair modules loaded into his battleship's hold. God knows we'll probably need them also, assuming we actually make it there, he thought. “The order to recall my fleet from their patrol has already been issued. They will rendezvous with me here in Orien within 20 minutes, then we're going to set course for E8-YS9. That's 44

jumps...my ETA is 2 hours. I'm going to leave this channel and will contact you after we cross the line into unregulated space. Any questions?"

Neither of them said a word.

"Good. I'll be seeing the both of you soon." Tantoseisen terminated the connection and looked down at the DED 5-star patch insignia on the breast of his uniform. He was about to violate every principle that he held his own crew accountable for. The only way out of this, he thought, is by going right through it. Without hesitating any longer, he rose from his desk and made his way for the door.

E8-YS9 Solar System, EL8Z-M Constellation, Immensea Region

Planet VI, Moon 4

Unknown Station

08:58 EVT

Mattias was awestruck as the CONCORD-class battleships and their escorts unleashed a torrent of devastating firepower into the station. Tantoseisen had brought an entire task force with him—18 ships in all. Minutes earlier they had decimated the same Angel Cartel blockade which, hours before, had nearly killed Mattias. Using his cloaked Wraith, Veniel told Tantoseisen exactly what to expect before his fleet jumped in. The Warlord battleship was destroyed so quickly that the remaining ships retreated, but Trald—the slippery snake that he was—warped out immediately after the CONCORD ships arrived. It was anyone's guess whether or not he would return with a bigger fleet. But oddly enough, no one seemed concerned.

The mood should have been more elated, given the brutal decisiveness of the battle that had just taken place. Instead, there was complete silence,

even as the tachyons and heavy beam weapons drilled into the station's shields. Everyone was stunned by the story Veniel had told during Tantoseisen's journey to E8-YS9.

About 40 years ago, a movement of radical thinkers emerged from the swirling maelstrom of galactic politics that were unhappy with the institutions responsible for shaping the post-EVE era."

The group saw no purpose in borderlines or the imposition of cultural ideals into the populace through the use of government. They cited that this kind of thinking was counterproductive and ultimately to blame for the greater "fallacies and debacles of our time", as Veniel had said, which included the continued imprisonment of Minmatar slaves by the Amarr Empire and the Caldari-Gallente War. They wanted to create a society that looked beyond bloodlines and focused more on the commonality between all the races; to embrace human diversity yet retain the true "embodiment of mankind" that has "kept our species from disappearing from the universe forever."

Every generation, Veniel had explained, has its prodigies. From time to time, people with extraordinary gifts surface in the gene pool, and the results are often unprecedented breakthroughs and contributions in a discipline commensurate with the individual's talent. The leader of the radical thinkers was a man named Sébastien Moreau, and his gift was charisma unlike anything the galaxy had ever seen. He was a powerful speaker and motivator, but could also make anyone feel at ease within minutes of meeting them for the first time. His charm—and soon, his mission—became irresistible to almost everyone who listened. Through the sheer power of Moreau's persuasion, "Immensea" was born.

Refusing to take his cause for racial unity to the floors of government halls out of pure spite for the "antiquated institutional paradigms" they represented, Moreau sought believers of his mission in private. He recognized that his dream society could not coexist with the Empires. To

make real strides in pursuing his goal, he needed to attach the idea of racial unity with a physical objective that his followers could work towards. Therein, Veniel explained, the concept of “Immensea” was defined: The “immense sea” that separates the horrors of yesterday from the utopian bliss of tomorrow. Earth—like the notion of utopia—is out there, but a vast physical and spiritual distance must be traversed in order to reach it. “Paradise was always within”, Moreau had once said. “And so the journey home completes the circle: From one we were defined, and to one we shall return, unbound, and true to our own pure selves.”

Moreau's followers, now numbering in the thousands, became so passionate about this quest to “return home” that the task itself began to assume the form of a divine imperative. A massive research initiative was planned with a host of ambitious objectives, which included studies on how to stabilize the EVE gate in New Eden and a fast-track development of jump drives. All they needed was a base from which they could pursue these studies in earnest, far from the prying eyes of governments and “institutional bigots”. The cost to build even a single station was astronomical, but money, as it turned out, was hardly an obstacle.

Immensea was spreading, picking up momentum, members, and resources at a frenzied pace. Because of Sébastien Moreau's supernatural gift, the talent pool and economic resources of the Immensea were enormous. CEO's of mega-corporations, high ranking military officers, government officials, and brilliant scientists from each sovereignty were either secretly a part of it or contributing directly to its growth. Immensea had become a cult with the financial and intellectual capital to rival any organization in EVE, and because it had pervaded every level of society—military, government, corporate, and even criminal—people looked the other way as convoy after convoy disappeared into the deep of space.

True to the cult's directive to keep the institutions in the dark, no one said a word. People who tried to raise alarms about missing equipment or deleted

journal entries were bribed to stay quiet. When that failed, they were silenced permanently. The first stations were built in the Immensea Region; they would eventually be constructed in a total of 23 regions, in some cases with the direct assistance of the local pirate cartels themselves. These “institutional outcasts” were especially vulnerable to Moreau's persuasion, who welcomed them as would a “foster parent to an abandoned child.”

Every station was completely isolated from the commerce of Empire space, but entirely self-sufficient. They were all equipped with refineries, factories, clone banks, research facilities, and starship fitting hangars; everything that they needed to exist harmoniously with each other and pursue their mutually shared goals under the now prophetic vision of Moreau. Loners, families, and sometimes even entire colonies would vanish from Empire records as they traveled to deep space. They wandered into the open arms of the Immensea, which held no person accountable for any sins committed under the roof of the Institution and never, ever discriminated by bloodline. Caldari, Amarrs, Minmatar, Gallentes, and even the occasional Jovian found refuge in this hidden society. Utopia, so it seemed, had been achieved.

But it was not to last, said Veniel. Two things had happened which spelled the beginning of the end for the Immensea. One, its members began to think of Moreau as a god; and two, Moreau also began to think of himself as a god. It was all perfectly sensible to Moreau that the Immensea should worship the man who had created so much from so little. How else to explain his wondrous powers of persuasion and the results of his vision as anything other than divine? Sébastien Moreau cultivated the image of a god as much as he could, fabricating miracles with the use of technology and demanding worship from his followers. There was nothing that he would not take; no custom that he would respect; no law that he would honor; and no woman—married or not, young or old—that he would not ravish, for who could deny the seed of a god?

Moreau had descended into the darkest realm of the categorically psychotic, yet he retained his charismatic personage—a lethal combination that has manifested itself many times over in various rulers and tyrants throughout mankind's history.

The deification of Moreau began to resonate deeply within the souls of the Amarr among the Immensea. While some were born directly into the cult, every Amarr was still deeply rooted in his or her belief in One God, and that hell itself awaited anyone who blasphemed the Faith by creating false idols to worship. “For the Amarr,” said Veniel, “it is better to have never been born, should you be guilty of this sin.” As for Moreau, the only evil more sinister than worshipping an idol was to claiming to be one. In the end, the religious conscience of the Amarrs proved to be too much, and they tried—unsuccessfully—to assassinate Moreau.

The botched attempt on his life enraged Moreau and catapulted him even further into a deranged, diabolical mental abyss. He was now “fully capable of horrific atrocities and astounding cruelty.” He issued an edict declaring that all of the Amarr among them were to be exterminated for “interfering with the divine imperative that is the destiny of Immensea.” The result was effectively flat-out civil war and genocide. Suddenly bloodlines were drastically relevant again, and the Amarr were pitted against everyone else. In the end, all of the Amarr's—every man, women, and child among them—were mercilessly butchered by the other followers.

Moreau meditated on the event and decided that its cause was due to the stations being too autonomous, thereby detracting from his “divine” cornerstone philosophy of interdependence and unity for one, single race. To set matters straight, he ordered the destruction of all but one of the three “life essence” modules aboard each station, decreeing that only one of each shall be permitted to exist per region. If his people would not cooperate with each other in the exact way that he ordained, then he would

force the issue upon them and mend their foolish ways. His remaining followers rendered station modules useless by sabotaging them in ways that would make them impossible to repair, and murdered anyone who tried to stop them.

In Veniel's opinion, the act merely accelerated the inevitable. Rumors of the slayings began to spread, and contacts within Empire space quietly began distancing themselves from any association with the Immensea. The logistical nightmare of having to support three stations with one module each for every region they had settled in was unmanageable. One by one they fell into ruin and were abandoned. Almost overnight, the Immensea had all but disappeared, and some of its survivors—many of whom were the source of Veniel's information—took their own lives, overwhelmed by the heavy burden of guilt from their complicity in the greatest human atrocity of the post-EVE era.

Veniel said that there are remnants of the Immensea among us. Most of the Empire-based intelligentsia who supported the cult, but did not actively participate in the Amarr massacre, continued the grim task of keeping their identities and roles within the Immensea a closely guarded secret. Veniel said that he was once close to obtaining clear evidence that “the government officials of several sovereignties” were secretly hunting down Immensea survivors, but suddenly lost all contact with his source. Many intelligentsias still remain in positions of considerable power including, very much to Tantoseisen's concern, positions within CONCORD. Veniel refused to name anyone he personally suspected until he had irrefutable evidence, which as always, he would trade—for a price.

Until this day, the fate of Sébastien Moreau had been unknown. By blind luck, Mattias had unwittingly stumbled across the final piece of the puzzle, and Veniel would have paid handsomely for it had the bounty hunter's situation been any less dire. He explained that Moreau's corpse held enormous scientific value to the Jovians, who were extremely interested in

determining the biological components of Moreau's legendary charismatic qualities. The Jovians had been actively monitoring the Immensea stations for some time, searching for clues on the whereabouts of the cult figurehead. But to everyone's amazement, the Jovian's never ventured inside any of the stations to look, believing that it was not their place to disturb what was left before the Immensea's existence became known publicly.

According to Veniel, the Angel Cartel knew the exact locations of every Immensea station in space. In fact, all of the major pirate organizations did, including the Serpentis, the Guristas, and the Blood Raiders. And most importantly, so did Trald Vukenda, who by now had to know where Mattias and the CONCORD fleet were, and that the dark secret of the Immensea was about to be revealed.

As the tachyon laser turrets from the CONCORD battleships continued to spit focused white beams of searing energy into the station, Mattias focused on the last thing that Veniel said before concluding his story. He said that the pirate cartels wouldn't go near the Immensea stations. Far away from Empire borders, legends and stories can grow unchecked by rationality. The isolated life that pirates lead in the remote systems of deep space lends itself to being highly vulnerable to superstition. Out here, said Veniel, the word "Immensea" was a curse. The pirate's tale was that if you listened closely enough, you could still hear the screams of dying Amarrs as the demonic Moreau and his minions struck them down by the thousands. For the more practical minds among the scoundrels such as Trald, the reason to stay away from the stations was apparent in their condition. The Immensea made certain that the damage they inflicted to their own outposts was permanent. The pirate cartels were well financed and smart with their money. It was far more economical to build a station from scratch than to even attempt to make use of stations in such bad shape.

There was one more part of the story that Veniel had intentionally omitted, saying that he would continue it once he was onboard, and in doing so complete the three terms of their agreement. Mattias panned the camera away from the CONCORD ships and back towards Kirlana's battered Omen. Neither she nor Matuno had uttered a word since the Jovian stopped speaking. He was deeply concerned about her.

“Mattias...” said Tantoseisen. “It is done.”

He panned the camera back around and saw that the CONCORD fleet had ceased firing, and were slowly aligning themselves behind the Wraith. One by one, the ships began a procession into one of the station's massive hangar bays. Matuno's Tempest swung around behind Tantoseisen, with Kirlana's Omen trailing in its wake. The ominous feeling that Mattias had when he first saw this station was much worse now.

E8-YS9 Solar System

Immensea Uncharted Base One – Main Hangar Concourse – Deck 22

09:23 EVT

My God, you just lose perspective when you're looking at all this from a camera drone, thought Mattias. He was standing inside of the Mobile Gantry Unit (MGU) that had just extracted his pod from the Blackbird. The size and scope of the damage to his ship made him shake his head as the MGU flew downwards past one of the cruiser's massive engines. As big as his ship was, it was nothing compared to the immense size of the hangar it was floating inside of. They built so many of these stations, he thought. How could they have done all this so quickly? The darkness made him uncomfortable. Usually there was lighting from the windows of hundreds of offices, labs, and living quarters built into the walls of the hangar. In here, all of them were darkened. The entire cavern had a hazy, bluish glow from

the emergency lighting system, and he could see debris drifting throughout as the MGU continued its descent towards the concourse.

A click hiss sound marked the end of the trip as the MGU docked with the deck hub. Mattias oriented himself as the door in front of him opened. The hangar was a zero-G vacuum environment, but all sections that were accessible by habitants were surrounded by gravity wells and pressurized with breathable air. His knees buckled a little as he stepped through and adjusted to his own weight again. Matuno was waiting for him inside.

"Mattias, Kirlana is not herself", he said. "She has not been the same since the Jovian told his story." Matuno was speaking quietly. "She will not tell me what troubles her."

"I'm worried about her too," said Mattias. "I don't think she's ever been that close to death before in combat, and as if that wasn't enough for her, to hear about what happened to the Amarrs who used to live here..." Mattias kept trying not to think about the comment she made earlier, about there being "no such thing as God". He took a deep breath. "I know I don't have to tell you this, but...just keep an eye on her."

"There is something else," added Matuno, leaning even closer. "The Jovian and your brother started looking through station's logs as soon as they arrived. Veniel pointed to something on the screen and said very audibly, 'Without question, that is Admiral Sulei Manatir. Now, look at the hooded female surrounded by the Amarr bodyguards.' Your brother looked very surprised, almost shocked, and then said 'Veniel, are you sure that's her?' The Jovian answered that he was 'certain of it'. Then your brother re-entered the hub and went back to his ship."

Mattias blinked. "Back to his ship?"

“Yes. Veniel is still here, just outside in the concourse, still pouring through the logs. Tell me, Mattias...do you know who this hooded female is that they were referring to?”

Mattias said he honestly had no idea, and shrugged. Matuno took one step closer to him. The Minmatar Brutor towered over Mattias, and was almost twice his weight.

“I certainly hope you'll tell me if you know.” Mattias was slightly unnerved, and stepped to the side.

“Of course, Matuno. I'll...see what I can find out.” As he took a step forward, Matuno lowered a giant hand onto his shoulder, preventing him from exiting the hub.

“Mattias...if it is her, then you know how personal it is with me.”

Mattias looked up at him. “I know it is, Matuno. It's probably personal for a lot of other Minmatar's as well. But now is not the time, even if it's who you think it is. So, if you'll please excuse me, I need to get back to the business of trying to keep us alive.”

Matuno removed his hand and allowed Mattias to pass into the concourse. The only light came from the hangar itself, through the transparent side of the concourse. The arched doorways to offices, freight warehouses, and even hovertram stations on the other side were barely visible. The Blackbird was high overhead, and its blinking navigation lights sent soft pulses of light throughout the darkened hall. Kirlana was sitting on floor with her back against the glass, staring blankly at a locket she held in her hand that was still hanging from her neck.

Veniel was standing in front of a console built into the hub that Mattias had just exited from. The greenish hue from the console gave him a ghastly

appearance. Without saying a word, he extended his hand towards Mattias. A disc was between his thumb and index finger.

“What's this?” Mattias asked, taking the disc.

“The last part of our agreement,” Veniel answered. “A way for you to get past the Arch Angel blockades on either side of this system.”

“You mean having a CONCORD fleet blast through them for us wasn't your plan all along?”

Veniel dismissed the remark. “Your brother has also been given a copy of that.”

“What's on it?” Mattias asked. Matuno stepped out from the hub.

“The Immensea had some help when they built these stations, Captain”, Veniel said. “What you are holding in your hand are the exact locations of not only these bases, but of a jumpgate network that you will not find on any CONCORD maps.”

“What are you talking about?” Mattias asked. Kirlana looked up from her fixation on the locket.

“This jumpgate network rings Empire space, but does not traverse it. Thus, every region in deep space is interconnected and completely independent of Empire influence.”

Mattias was stunned. “The Immensea built them?”

“Not the first ones, but once Immensea began establishing a presence in the outer regions, the gate builders realized they shared common ground

with Moreau, especially where it concerned hiding their existence from certain Empire influence.” Veniel emphasized that word.

“So, the Amarr built them?” asked Mattias.

“Quite the opposite,” answered Veniel, who was now looking directly at Matuno. “The rise of Minmatar power was always puzzling to us, considering the extent to which the Amarr Empire went to suppress their ambitions. Amarr ships used to patrol all of the gates leading to and from Minmatar systems; nothing could travel in or out without being checked. We wondered how an enslaved nation was able to amass armies and construct warships right before the watchful eye of their alleged masters.”

“The answer was hidden jumpgates, unknown even to us until very recently. With the help of Gallente engineers, Minmatar tribes began construction on the gates in complete secrecy and without Republic knowledge. The pirate cartels operating in the vicinity were sympathetic to the Minmatar's plight, but also saw an opportunity to advance their own agenda by assisting them. The gates provided the Minmatar with a ‘back door’ through which rescued slaves, construction materials, supplies, troops, and warships could travel unhindered by Amarr checkpoints.”

“Years after the Rebellion, the cartels continued work on extending the network to include more systems. When the Immensea constructed their first bases here in the Immensea Region, Moreau convinced the cartels of the mutual gains that could be realized by sharing resources. Moreau offered them access to his stations in exchange for access to their jumpgates. The resulting partnership quickly accelerated both projects, since they complimented each other's practical needs and counter-institutional ideals. In the end, 96 gates were constructed over the course of more than 140 years, with more than half built in the last 30 or so, after Immensea was founded.”

“One of those gates is in this system, Captain, and Trald Vukenda believes that you are unaware of its existence. Most of the smuggler gates are used primarily to ferry supplies, the majority of which are illegal within Empire space. The pirates have never felt a compelling need to guard them, except when traveling near the borders of rival or competing clans. The only ships you will see near there will be Cartel industrials, although I imagine all that will change once knowledge of this network comes to public light.”

The sound of the click hiss from another MGU startled Mattias. Tantoseisen emerged from the hub.

“Well, it's official, I'm to be court-martialed as soon as I return,” he said. “But so long as I'm here anyway, I'm going to have a look around. If there is any evidence here about any intelligentsia still in power within Empire space, I need to find out.”

“How did CONCORD take the news?” asked Matuno. Tantoseisen shook his head.

“They're completely shocked. I'm still not sure they even believe it, and knowing them, there's going to be an expedition—this time, an authorized one—to confirm everything.”

“I hope you exercised caution in choosing whom to share that information with, Commander” said Veniel.

“It's been taken care of,” he answered. “No matter what, they won't be able to keep this discovery quiet.”

“Court martial,” Mattias breathed. “Tantoseisen, I'm sorry,” said Mattias. He knew how hard his little brother had worked to build such a remarkable career in law enforcement, and that if not for his own bad luck and poor decisions, this would have never happened.

Tantoseisen took a deep breath. "We were spotted near the Edbinger crossing by a convoy that was on their way out to deep space, and they reported it to the press. Now it's public knowledge that we're out somewhere we shouldn't be, and the spin on things is that I'm 'defecting', or some other nonsense. Anyway, it's against the rules to take a CONCORD task force on a joyride through unregulated space without authorization, and I'm going to be punished accordingly for it."

"Where should we be looking for clues?" asked Matuno. "And how do we know for certain we're really alone here?"

"I cannot say I agree with this idea," said Veniel. "But if that is what you feel you must do, this is where I would look."

Matuno, Tantoseisen, and Mattias gathered behind Veniel, who stepped aside so everyone could see the screen. Displayed on it were schematics detailing the deck level they were currently on. Mattias could recognize the floor plan of the concourse and the hub they were standing in front of. Five blue dots were clustered around it.

"In this program, the blue represents detectable heartbeats. These sensors and others like it are embedded in hull structures throughout the station," Veniel explained. Then the image zoomed out slightly so that more of the area was visible, but a section covering the entire right half was blacked out.

"The dark areas denote zero data. The sensors in this area were either intentionally disabled or destroyed. This section is also where the clone facility would be, prior to its destruction as per Moreau's orders. I can tell you for certain that nothing lives outside of this area." Veniel tapped on the darkened section. "But in there, I cannot say. There is no way to find out if any clones are intact unless someone goes inside. However, the station's

computer is indicating that the area is a 'breach zone', which means there is no air, and no gravity."

"I have to do this," said Tantoseisen. "And I know I don't have a lot of time to get it done. The troops outside are understandably restless, and I can't ask them do to much more for me."

"I'll go with you," said Kirlana. Everyone turned towards her. It was the first time she had spoken since coming aboard.

"Kirlana, are you sure? You haven't—" Matuno started.

"I'm fine, really." She picked herself up off the floor. She appeared alert, and the distant look she had up until now was gone. "But we're going to need survival suits and weapons, and mine are on my ship."

"Weapons?" asked Mattias. "Who do you think is going to be shooting at you in there?"

"You've always been a cautious fellow," she answered, almost sarcastically. "And I've always been a cautious gal. If I don't know what I'm getting into, then I say bring a weapon."

That sounded like the Kirlana of old, but for some reason the confidence in her voice still wasn't as reassuring as it used to be. It sounded so feigned. "Well, if you're going, then I'm going," said Mattias. "And that means Matuno is also."

Veniel had a strange look on his face, almost as if he was worried. "There is a former security outpost alongside the bulkhead which separates the corridor from the clone facility. You will find weapons and survival suits there."

“Are you coming with us?” asked Tantoseisen.

“With all due respect Commander, no. But I will remain in contact with you from here, and provide whatever assistance I can. But again, I highly suggest you act quickly, and not overextend yourself for the task.”

“Noted, Veniel. And thank you for your support,” said Tantoseisen. “We’ll be aboard our ships in 60 minutes time at most.”

“All of you, be careful,” Veniel said. He spoke without emotion, but it was sincere.

Deck 22 Security Outpost – Main Concourse

09:53 EVT

Mattias watched Kirlana recheck the ammunition clip on her rifle. She was acting as though nothing was wrong, even as the rest of the group acted cautiously around her. His brother was testing the camera feed and a portable radar-imaging device (PRID) with Veniel over the radio. Matuno was lucky to find a suit big enough to fit him, no doubt a product of the multiethnic culture that this place once fostered.

None of this feels right, thought Mattias. It had felt that way for so long now that he wondered if anything would ever feel right again. He could understand his brother's reasons for doing this. It was a last ditch effort to save his career, and Mattias felt he had no right to complain since they'd all be dead without his brother's help. But he had put Kirlana and Matuno in enough danger already, and this was by far the riskiest proposition of the day. You could make a mistake in a starship and maybe your crew and your shields would get you out of trouble. But in a pitch-black, zero-G chamber with god-only-knows what floating around in there, the margin for error was a lot narrower, and most of this bunch hadn't seen zero-G training since flight school.

The bad feeling he had about Kirlana just wouldn't go away. And since he failed to understand exactly what was causing it, he couldn't justify putting a stop to her coming along. He'd seen her and Matuno argue about missions he had objected to her participating in a hundred times. That was just the kind of person she was. In fact, they were all stubborn that way, the three of them. Tell any of us that there's something we can't do, and you may as well consider it done. Until today, their collective stubbornness had paid off well.

But now even Matuno wasn't sure how to read her, and he couldn't remember the last time he ever expressed concern over how she was acting. It was the combination of her past and the events of today which kept coming to mind; her rejection of God and the entire Amarr culture, this crazy Sébastien Moreau person and the cult he created, and who could forget what happened to all those Amarr people...

And then it dawned on him: She's questioning all of it, Mattias thought. Everything that's happened today is making her question the choices she's made in her life. That must be what it is. Who could blame her? We were all probably doing the same thing.

"Alright team, helmets on," said Tantoseisen. "We're just going to check a few of the clone banks, then we're out of here. Veniel, we're ready when you are."

Mattias could hear Veniel on the radio via the earpiece inside his helmet. "Have your team enter the airlock, Commander."

"Roger that. Everyone inside," said Tantoseisen. The "airlock" in this instance was actually the antechamber allowing access from the security post to the clone facility. Stations were built like ships; every compartment was separated by one or more antechambers that could be sealed off in

the event of an emergency. The corridor between the two doorways was barely large enough for the four of them to fit inside. "Everyone inside and clear of the hatch?" Tantoseisen asked. All answered affirmatively.

"Clear," said Tantoseisen.

"Sealing the hatch, standby," said Veniel. The door behind Mattias hissed shut.

"Disabling gravity well." Suddenly Mattias felt himself rise off the floor grating slightly. "Mag boots," said Tantoseisen. There were eight thumps as the magnetic fields generated by the survival suit boots were all switched on.

"Standby for depressurization." A loud whoosh sound filled everyone's ears as the air inside the chamber was removed. Mattias immediately felt claustrophobic. He was standing behind Tantoseisen, who was facing the door leading to the clone center. Or whatever the hell else is on the other side.

"Opening the clone center door," said Veniel. The helmet's breathing apparatus made each exhale much more audible than usual, and he could hear himself start to breathe faster. The door slid open slowly, and there was nothing beyond it but pure blackness. It was suddenly very cold, and Mattias could feel the survival suit generating more heat to compensate. He watched his brother step through the doorway.

Beams of light from Tantoseisen's helmet cut through the darkness. "Okay, Mattias, I'm on solid ground where I am. Move forward and hold next to me."

The magnetic boots made a hiss ker-chunk sound that was audible only to Mattias as he took several steps forward and stopped alongside his

brother. He kept the light beam pointed downward at the floor grating until he saw his brother's right boot. Looking up, the light beam caught reflections of some small debris floating not too far in front of them. There was a considerable amount of dust in the room, and the beams weren't powerful enough to reach through to any walls or structure in front of him.

"Mattias, fire up the PRID," said Tantoseien.

"Roger," he answered. Mattias set the tripod in front of him, kneeling to make sure it was anchored to the floor. Satisfied that the device was secure, he turned a dial and the tiny parabolic dish began tracking slowly back and forth.

"No one move," Veniel said suddenly. Mattias froze. The dish was sending its return images to Veniel, giving him a fuzzy picture of what was inside. "You are standing on a catwalk about 125 meters in length, but there is a gap in the scaffolding about 5 meters in front of you. There is a 60-meter drop on either side, at the bottom of which there appears to be significant quantities of wreckage. The ceiling is approximately 50 meters overhead, and you should be able to see breaches in the hull which are directly exposed to space." Mattias looked up and to his left, hoping to see something that would help him get his bearings. He only saw more dust and haze in his beam, and blackness everywhere else.

"The entire facility is filled with a large debris field," Veniel continued. "And there are several large fragments floating directly above the both of you."

Kirlana was still waiting in the doorway, eyes wide as saucers. She took one step forward.

"Don't come in here," warned Tantoseisen.

Kirlana was training the beam from her rifle upwards of Mattias and Tantoseisen, holding the weapon out in front of her as she took another step, clear of the doorway.

“Kirlana! Wait!” said Matuno. Mindful of Veniel's warning, Mattias rose slowly to a crouched stance. For some reason, he felt like he was going to lose his balance even though the boots fastened him securely to the floor. He turned around to face Kirlana, watching the light beam from her rifle slice through the dusty blackness above them.

Veniel's voice came through the radio, directed only at the brothers and Matuno. “Her heartbeat is racing, and her breathing is fast and shallow,” he warned. “You should disarm her and get her back inside.”

Mattias was about to speak, when the length of the beam from Kirlana's rifle suddenly shrunk as it illuminated debris just 2 meters over her head. Her eyes opened wider and she started to scream, just as Matuno's hand came from behind her and swatted the weapon away. The rifle tumbled end over end, its beam cutting 360-degree arcs through the blackness, changing directions several times as it collided with invisible objects. Matuno wrapped his massive arms around Kirlana and pulled her back inside the doorway.

“What the hell happened?” shouted Tantoseisen. Mattias could see her anguished, horrified face through her helmet, screaming as though in extreme pain and agony. Suddenly, the inside of Kirlana's facemask was splattered as she retched violently and began coughing spasms.

Matuno was banging on the hatch leading back inside the security outpost with one hand, and holding Kirlana around him with the other. She didn't look like she was moving anymore.

“Veniel! I have to get her back inside!” Matuno screamed.

“Mattias, Tantoseisen, get clear of the door,” said Veniel, whose voice was completely devoid of panic, urgency, or emotion.

The doorway closed and sealed, leaving the brothers standing in a sea of darkness. The only light came from their helmets and Kirlana's rifle, far off in the distance. Mattias's head was spinning, and he was trying not to panic. He wasn't used to this at all. But his brother was well trained for zero-G operations, just like all enlisted men and women in the DED were.

“What did she see that made her react like that?” Tantoseisen asked.

Mattias dropped to a knee again, just wanting to be close to catwalk grating. It was the only thing he could use to keep his bearings. “It was right above the door,” he breathed, trying to stay under control. He was just staring at the floor grating. “I should have never allowed her to come, I don't think she's ever had this kind of training before.”

“Oh my God...” gasped Tantoseisen.

Mattias looked up, and saw the beam from Tantoseisen's helmet focused on something almost directly above him. His heart stopped from the reaction that something invisible had been so close to him all this time. But then his eyes widened in terror as recognition of what was floating there settled in.

The ghastly visage of a corpse was staring right at him, illuminated by Tantoseisen's beam. The skin was a grayish-drab color, preserved from the lack of oxygen and extreme cold. Its eyes were still open, mouth agape, neck split across the Adam's apple. Mattias stopped breathing for a moment, and then started shallow breaths as his own heartbeat started to race in panic.

“Stay under control, brother...” breathed Tantoseisen, panning the beam to his right and catching the suspended arm of a second corpse floating over the door. The dead appeared to be wearing the same expressions as the instant they perished.

Veniel's voice came through. “Kirlana is in shock, and is being rushed to a CONCORD ship for treatment. She has suffered some kind of traumatic emotional breakdown, and will be unable to pilot the Omen.”

“Veniel,” breathed Mattias, trying to get his breathing under control. He felt extremely dizzy now, almost as if in a nightmare, for he could not think of anything except darkness and the face of the corpse. “Find a way to light this place...flares, emergency lights, anything...”

Mattias was on all fours now, resting his helmet on the grating. Veniel did not reply. He felt a hand on his back. “Mattias, easy,” his brother said. “We're going to get out of here, right now.”

“Veniel...Veniel, do you copy?” said Tantoseisen. “Veniel, come in, we need to get back inside. Veniel!”

There was no answer, and Mattias started to lose his composure as the panic began to overwhelm him. He could hear his brother shouting something, cursing, but none of it registered. He just focused on the floor grating now resting directly against his face shield, getting lost in the details of its nothingness, wishing he could escape from the corpse who was trying to speak to him and the blackness that existed everywhere else.

Mattias lost consciousness while listening to the words of the dead, who spoke to him of righteousness and avenging injustices.

Epilogue

Using the smuggler jumpgates, Tantoseisen Kakkichi's CONCORD task force returned safely to Empire space. Veniel provided forward scouting for the fleet, breaking contact after they had safely crossed the border. Tantoseisen immediately turned himself in to DED authorities and was arrested. All charges, save for one, were eventually dropped after the full account of the Immensea became known.

Before starting the long journey back to Empire space, the remaining crewmembers of the Blackbird and Omen cruisers were transferred to CONCORD ships. The vessels were then scuttled outside of the Immensea station in E8-YS9.

Mattias Kakkichi would make a complete recovery from the temporary delirium that was induced when he succumbed to spatial disorientation inside of the clone facility. Shortly after he lost consciousness, Veniel appeared at the security outpost, manually pressurizing and then opening the door from there. He claimed that the station's AI would no longer allow him to operate the door remotely after Matuno and Kirlana were back inside.

Kirlana would not fare as well. She vowed to never pilot a starship again, and that her days as a bounty hunter were over. She never disclosed to anyone, not even Matuno, exactly why the story of Immensea was so personal to her.

Before breaking formation with the CONCORD fleet near the Empire border, Matuno asked Tantoseisen to pass his brother a message for him. Tantoseisen agreed; Matuno transmitted the encrypted message and then disappeared. When asked some time later what that message was, Mattias would only say that Matuno was chasing after his "life's ambition", and that when the time was right, he would contact him again.

The press demanded an explanation as to why a CONCORD task force would leave Empire space. Dantennen Fisk, the legal counsel and longtime friend of Tantoseisen Kakkichi, answered before the DED could. He publicly stated that his client's actions were “justified” and that the reason for his excursion to deep space was not rebellious or the result of any falling out with DED high command. Because of the publicity surrounding the issue, CONCORD had no choice but to associate the discovery of the abandoned stations with Kakkichi's actions, which they did in a press release of their own. But before they would reveal the station's locations, they wanted answers about the Immensea, and to recover as many of the dead as they could.

Through a deal brokered in secrecy by Veniel between the DED and the Jovians, CONCORD was able to recover thousands of bodies and compile a detailed history of the Immensea. DED scouting vessels carrying investigators met Jovian warships at all 69 stations, exchanging information for the firepower required to get inside. With the exception of a single leaked photograph from the inside of one of the E8-YS9 disabled modules, the DED has clamped down on the release of any investigation details.

Veniel disappeared after brokering the deal. No one has reported seeing him since.

The regional government's public reaction to the Immensea was one of apathy, but in reality sent their respective intelligence agencies into upheaval. Furious officials scrambled for an explanation as to how, exactly, news of this scope and size could have eluded them all this time. No government would ever publicly admit to an intelligence failure so pronounced.

Mattias Kakkichi found other bounty hunters who shared his ideals, and continues to patrol deep space in search of injustices to avenge.

The Artifice Maker

The tall man moved slowly through the packed transit hall. His gaunt, eagle-nosed face registered total lack of interest in his surroundings, like he had seen the same or similar ones a thousand times in the past. His garments, cheap and somber, were identical to those worn by millions of migration workers, constantly on the move from one station to another in search of work. A small satchel was slung over his shoulder, seemingly holding the man's only possessions. At the back of his bare skull a crab-like cyber-ornament clung, its azure colored arms extending all the way to his temples.

The large transit hall was an irregularly shaped circle, with a glass dome overhead. The transit hall had been strategically positioned so that people arriving or leaving the station could gaze through the dome at the reddish planet below and the pale sun in the background. But like with so many small industrial stations in the empire's interior the almost total lack of maintenance had long since ruined the spectacular view, a greasy-brown film of dirt giving those below in the hall only a vague idea of the vista outside. The walls were covered with a once-colorful mural depicting an often-used theme in Amarrian wall paintings – scenes of the Emperor performing assorted heroic deeds. Here and there the mural was severed by an entryway to one of the dozen passages leading to and from the transit hall.

The large man headed towards the passage leading to the lower levels of the station. For a fraction of a second his darting eyes looked directly into the security camera located above the entryway. Then he disappeared down the passage, his face as impassive as when he stepped out of the shuttle fifteen minutes earlier.

The small room was illuminated solely by a two dozen monitors mounted into the back wall. Before them sat a tired looking officer, his heavy eyes scanning the screens before him. The picture on a screen in the middle had been frozen; a gaunt face with a patriarch nose filled the screen. In the far corner of the room a figure stood leaning on a cane, the glare of the monitors only managing to paint it in a ghost-like blue silhouette.

“He’s here, sir. He’s heading towards the lower levels.” The officer said. “Do you wish me to have him apprehended?”

“No need for that yet.” The shadowy figure answered. “We’ll allow the fox to flush out some hens before moving in.”

Etian pressed his back into the corridor’s wall, his head bowed to his chest as the process of Holders passed him by. Leading the process was the governor himself, his fine linen cloths embroidered with gold threads and platinum pearls. Out of the corner of his eyes Etian watched the others lined up against the wall, commoners like himself, stealing furtive glances at the majestic process as it passed. On some faces Etian could read envy or awe or odium, but each one also registered fear. For those men passing them were the most powerful men on Inis-Ilix station and each and every one of them had the power and the authority to dictate the destiny of any of these commoners that lined the walls in apparent reverence.

Once the Holders had disappeared round a corner Etian straightened his small but stocky body and continued on his way to the St. Helion Social Club, his favorite after-work retreat. As he walked he wondered what the Holders were doing down here on the lower levels, they seldom visited the levels of the commoners. The fact that the Holders had been traveling without any personal guards didn’t come as a surprise to Etian; to the common Amarrian a Holder symbolized the grandeur of the Amarr Empire and to attack one was to attack the Empire itself. Such an act was unthinkable to the common Amarr man; the Empire, with its age-old

traditions and structure, was the foundation of society itself. To every Amarrian life without the Empire was nothing but anarchy, chaos, dread and darkness.

Etian belonged to a group of skilled workers that traveled from one station to another in the Trigentia sector, offering their services to factories and foundries on the space stations. This custom, which is found almost nowhere else within the vast Amarr Empire, started several centuries ago when the sector was recently settled. At that time numerous minor Holders vied for power, each with his own ideas on how to run things. This resulted in a complex tapestry of rules and regulations regarding for instance education, travel permits and freedom of employment. With time this resulted in great economical diversity between the stations in the area, some prospered while others stagnated. When the emperor re-organized the administration in the sector a sole Holder was chosen to govern it as a whole, with governors on each station working under him. Soon thereafter the first migration workers appeared – people with some specific skills that only a handful of the stations could train and produce. This system worked well in the economical sense – the sector was prosperous and was fast becoming one of the most important industrial zones in the Amarr Empire. But this prosperity came at a price; the migration workers were better informed and enjoyed more liberties than other workers, let alone the slaves. They gobbled up dangerous ideas regarding their rights and stature, resulting in demonstrations and protests, sometimes violent. The Holders were facing a dilemma; they were anxious to keep social stirrings to the minimum, but were unsure how to accomplish this without breaking their golden eggs – the migration workers. While the Holders were searching for ways to keep things getting out of hand the migration workers were clamoring ever louder for greater rights and higher wages – on many stations in the Trigentia sector tension was rising to the boiling point. On many there had been bloody fights, sometimes resulting in the total expulsion of migration workers or severe restriction on their privileges. But there was one fabled one where the workers had succeeded...

To Etian this development was making him deeply anxious. Born into a strictly orthodox family and raised to respect the social order no matter what, these stirrings by his fellow workers seemed almost treasonous, even sacrilegious. Yet, Etian had to admit that this fight for increased rights seemed reasonable enough. His mind was torn between his duty to the state and loyalty to his co-workers; the responsibilities of his public life against the comfort of his private one; all these things sat heavily on Etian's mind as he made his way towards the club.

Inis-Ilix station had seen its share of unrest in recent months, only the week before two migration workers had been imprisoned for 'disturbing the peace', as the official statement read. Etian knew of several small cells operating, but they didn't amount to much – only a handful of the migration workers had truly succumbed to the fervor of power politics, most, like Etian, were doubtful. In their view this whole turbulence could be blamed on those impulsive fools on Turba.

St. Helion Social Club was opened some 30 years earlier by a religious order with the purpose of spreading the word of St. Helion the Virtuous among the lower classes. The order was at that time under the patronage of Lady Temal Kador, one of the Five Heirs, and through her influence the order opened vast number of similar clubs all over Kador's domains. But a few years later the order fell out of favor with the Heir and their clubs were sold. In the three decades of operation the club had slowly degenerated from a respectable, if boring, religious establishment into a grubby workers bar. The club was not big, one room crudely split in the middle by a bar. The interior was still covered with religious symbols and signs but St. Helion's order had long since left and the word of God had been replaced by the drunken drivel of the workers frequenting the place.

Etian took his usual seat in a back corner, scanning the familiar faces on the tables around him. He nurtured his drink for a few minutes in silence

until a friend and a co-worker of his, Ryed Gambala, moved over to Etian's table. Most of the people in the room were migration workers like the two of them and many of them were fellow employees at RPI. Yet they were grouped in pairs or at most three at a table, occasionally a person moved from one table to another, this always spurred a person on that table to move on too. The station authorities had banned migration workers from grouping together – a group of more than 2 or 3 people together made the authorities extremely paranoid. So even while relaxing in a bar the migration workers took the precaution to give the impression of separation, in case of lurking informers or camera drones.

"So, Etian." Ryed said, half-whispering, glancing furtively around the bar before continuing: "Will you be coming?" Etian sighed, seeing where this conversation was leading. Ryed was in one of these newly formed cells that dreamt of the success their brethren at Turba had got.

"Look, Ryed, I don't think a public protest will get you anything but trouble. I mean, how many are you? Maybe a dozen. That's hardly a sufficient number to shake the foundations of this station's government. From what I hear, the Turba protesters numbered at least a few hundred. It's a doomed prospect, man." Etian said, exasperated. This wasn't the first time that Ryed brought this up, but each time Etian had turned him down. Much as he wanted to see some changes, Etian was much too clever and cautious to take part in any risky demonstration like the one Ryed's cell was planning.

"Where's there will there's a way. We may be few, but we're dedicated to the cause. Come on, it's now or never." Ryed continued chanting his slogans like in a religious fervor. It was clear to Etian that Ryed had become fanatical about this whole business: he was obviously never going to change his mind and, more exasperatingly, never going to change the subject. Etian began looking for an excuse to bring the conversation to an end, when he saw her.

She walked into the bar with a light spring in her step that spoke of perfect body control and self-assurance. Etian only knew her first name: Dekka. Like him she frequented the club, but apart from her name he knew nothing about her; this perceived mystique only made Etian all the more infatuated with her. Watching her from afar Etian's ample imagination had time and again played out one dramatic scenario after another where he was the hero in white and she the damsel in distress. Afterwards Etian always felt sick of himself; of the way he dawdled over his daydreams constantly, never having the courage to act any of them out in real life. And this time it was no different. While Ryed droned on in the background Etian once again let his mind slip into the comforting mode of daydreaming. The more he dreamt the more he drank and the more depressed he felt.

Staggering home some two hours later he wondered for the umpteenth time if he'd ever be man enough to go talk to her.

The factory of the Royal Precision Instruments, known as RPI, was situated on the lowest deck, like most of the factories on the station. Most of the year the permanent workers made micro-optics and fiber-conduits, but during the months of Domar and Nemar the workforce of RPI tripled as migration workers came in to make quantum clocks, using the volatile argon isotopes laboriously mined in a nearby asteroid field. In those two months the migration workers used up all the factory's supplies of the substance, which then took the company a whole year to restock.

The month of Domar was coming to an end. Etian, working through his hangover and cursing himself for drinking so excessively the night before, let his mind wander while performing his tedious work on the clock's escapement. It seemed to him like the whole RPI was seething, that his fellow migration workers were like a dormant volcano only waiting to erupt. Etian knew he was caught up in one of the rarest of social phenomena in the Amarr Empire; that of social uprising. Somehow this privilege didn't

comfort him all that much. Overhearing snippets of conversations around him Etian learned that a big gathering was planned for tonight at St. Helion's Social Club. Etian decided to go, he couldn't tell why. Maybe it was out of curiosity, maybe to show solidarity, or maybe just to get yet another glimpse of her, Deka.

When Etian entered the social club it was already teeming with people. His usual table at the back was already occupied by loud-mouthed men in overalls, so he sat at a table closer to the center. A man was already sitting there, hunched with a cape hiding his features. There was no sign of Deka.

"Are you here for the demonstration?" The stranger asked, a pair of pale-blue eyes peering at him from under the hood of his cape. Etian felt strangely naked in front of that stare. Looking into those eyes set his head spinning and it took seconds before the question registered in his mind.

"I, uh... I don't know." He finally stammered. The stranger seemed a bit annoyed by his answer and Etian felt strangely compelled to please this man he'd never seen before.

"I came here to give my support to the cause." Etian said more forcefully, hoping that this vague answer would satisfy the man sitting opposite him without sounding as a commitment to do something foolish. The stranger stared at him for a few moments before speaking:

"I'm Fradis Ludono." He declared, staring intently at Etian as if to gauge his reaction. Again it took Etian a moment to get his mind around what the man had said. Then the name registered and Etian jumped. Fradis Ludono. The man from Turba. The man who led Turba's migration workers to a victory against the station's rulers. The man who faced down the Holders of Turba and won for the workers a freedom to work and life as they chose. The man was a living legend, traveling from station to station to preach the word and support the people.

For several seconds the two men stared each other in the eye. Finally Etian managed to get his mind into gear:

“I’m Etian Subidam.” He said and extended his hand. Fradis gripped it firmly. Then he spoke:

“Etian Subidam, will you help me help you? Will you aid me in securing for you freedom from the tyrants of Inis-Ilix station?”

“I guess I do.” Etian stammered. At that moment he noticed Dekka sitting by the bar and suddenly Etian had flash of insight. His biggest weakness was his lack of self-confidence and what better way to alter that than to rub shoulders with none other than Fradis Ludono. If anything was going to work in bringing Etian some self-esteem this was it. And heck, with Fradis here this demonstration might not be as dicey as before.

“I will help you.” He said with fervor, the conviction clearly evident in his voice. Fradis seemed satisfied.

“Good.” He said. “I haven’t been here for long, but we must act as quickly as possible. If the authorities discover I’m here before we’re ready things could turn bad. From what I’ve heard there are already some cells operating in this area, so preparations should be easy.”

“It is true that there are a number of cells around.” Etian said. “But they don’t hold much sway. I’m afraid that most of the workers are a bit skeptical about this whole thing.” He finished almost apologetically, aware that not so long ago he had been one of those skeptics. Fradis didn’t seem at all daunted by this news.

“That’s because they haven’t heard the word yet.” He said with confidence. “We will show them what it means to be a real man.” With that Fradis

removed his cape, revealing his bald head with its intricate implant at the back of the skull. If Etian had ever been in doubt if the man really was who he said he was that doubt was totally expelled now – the image of Fradis Ludono was almost as well known in these quarters as the portrait of the emperor himself. No sooner had Fradis removed his cape than people began pointing and whispering excitedly.

Fradis climbed onto the table and then stood there surveying the room calmly, scanning the faces of the excited but hushed workers thronging around him.

“Fellow migration workers.” He finally said, his sonorous voice carrying to the farthest corners of the room. “You all know me. And you know my background. So you shouldn’t guess why I’m here. In a way, I’m answering your call, for many of you have already laid the foundation for our glorious victory over the tyrants of this station that is soon to come.” The crowd was now hanging onto his every word.

“But I know many of you also have doubts in your hearts.” Fradis continued. “You doubt the righteousness of this deed. You doubt whether you are worthy of taking the power from those that took it from you so long ago. For you’ve been conditioned from birth to respect and fear those men that claim to be better than you. I say: cast those shackles of you!” Etian could see that Fradis was getting to the people, yet there were still those that were unconvinced. Etian suspected himself as being one of them. Fradis sensed this all, he knew from experience that more was needed to convince them, or at least to persuade them join the fray. He continued:

“They have told you time and again that you’re not capable of governing yourself, that you’re too weak of mind. Their teachings have long since reached the core of your souls. I say: to free your soul you must forget those teachings. You must stop believing that you’re incompetent to rule yourself and start believing that a free mind can accomplish anything it

wants!” Fradis was reaching a crescendo. The crowd was shouting encouragements, the majority already gleefully shouting their approval. Etian saw Ryed among them. To Etian the words Fradis spoke were much more radical than those he’d heard previously and that frightened him. Ryed and his gang had only been advocating a demonstration for higher wages and more rights, but Fradis’ words seemed to imply a complete overthrow of the government of the station. Yet Etian, for all his misgivings, couldn’t help but be moved by the passion of Fradis and the excitement of the crowd.

Maybe you don’t believe me when I say that you’re all conditioned.” Fradis shouted to the frenzied crowd. “But let us all look at one example. Name me a poem that we all know, a poem that is taught to all children at an early age. A poem that supposedly shows that man should not try to usurp God but put their faith in him, but which in reality describes the way the upper classes trample on the ignorant commoners. Yes, you know what poem I’m talking about. You all know it by heart. Why don’t we recite it together so your eyes can be opened to just one of the cunning ways the Holders have put their shackles on your souls.” And Fradis began chanting, many in the crowd joining in:

‘I raised my head and saw this stair;
A solid structure made of stone,
Reaching high into the air.
I looked around, I stood alone.
This muddy field held no appeal;
Full of care I neared the base;
Sure enough, the stair was real.
What hidden dangers might I face
Climbing up this endless stair?
I knew not, nor ever could
For always gazed in unknown fear
Of future bright or bleak or good;

'Tis matters not when control lack;
The fate of man in other's hands.
But then again this skybound track
Might lead me to the promised lands.'

"What does this first verse tell us?" Fradis asked. He waited a second before continuing: "It tells us that we all have a desire to govern our own live, that this desire is ingrained in every one of us and that we dream of becoming our own masters." He then said, answering his own question. Then he continued:

'With eager heart and earnest face,
I set out to seek this exulted place.
And once I had the first flight won
I felt as the climb was halfway done.
Soon I learned to stride the stair
With ease and thus became aware
Of my surroundings for the first time,
Around me saw this view sublime.
Fresh air caressed my cheek and jowl,
Below me saw a friendly fowl.
With joy I climbed and noticed much;
Happy games and wonders such.
I knew this world belonged to me
Now at last that I was free.
'Why, arts and music; life and joys;
And let's make all those science toys.'

"And here, like a glimpse into paradise, we're given a taste of what self-government might achieve." Fradis declared. "But dangers lurk, as the next verse tells us:"

'Finally I felt my powers could
Choose my fate as I saw fit;
This world I owned and understood,
It was made for my own benefit.
When I slept I dreamt sweet dreams
Of things to come I knew where true.
Once I'd reach the top my schemes
To make this world all anew
Should at last all bear fruit.
But this sound beneath my soles,
Restless, endless, nagging, crude,
Rasped my soul and raped my goals.
The stair behind me slowly fell,
Erased forever with a tired sigh.
Empty steps with tales to tell
Raced towards me in a silent cry.'

"Here, we're told that our greed and our stupidity will always come back to haunt us. That only those better than us are capable of ruling wisely enough to keep us from destroying ourselves. And the last verse tells us the ultimate price our pride may have to pay if we don't stay in our place."

'Now I realized this frail old track
Chased me up with no way back.
Faster, faster, I fled in dread;
My every effort spent, I sped
Upwards, fearing death and drop,
When suddenly I reached the top.
Before me stood this man in white.
Slipping still, in dismay I cried:
"Old man, help me on my feet!"
"Poor victim of your filthy greed,
Learn the humble way," he said.

And spat and kicked me in the head.
I fell and felt my mind go blank.
I hit the ground, in mud I sank.
'Who am I and where is here?'
I raised my head and saw this stair.'

"I say to you: is this the world we want to live in? Are we to accept that we're not good enough to govern our own lives?" Fradis was whipping the crowd into a frenzy and Etian felt himself swept into this vortex of emotions and passions, shouting himself hoarse, for the first time feeling enraged and disgusted with the way the authorities had been playing him like a fool. 'No more!' echoed through his mind and his thoughts were being shouted throughout the room. Fradis raised his hands, waiting for the room to calm down before giving his final verdict, in almost total silence:

"I say, my brothers and sisters: they may govern the way we live, but we can still govern the way we die and if there is any cause worth dying for, then this is it. I have put myself at risk a thousand times for this cause; I have faced death a hundred times; and I've come here tonight to tell you that I will continue to do so until a day will come when we can live our lives as we please with no-one trying to oppress us or kill us." Etian was sold, as was the whole room. If Fradis had ordered it Etian was sure that the whole crowd would march to the upper levels this very minute to die by his side. But Fradis ordered no such thing. Instead he said:

"This is only the first step. We must now prepare ourselves, but we must move quickly before suspicion arises." He stepped down from the table and was immediately surrounded by people asking him questions or simply touching him in awe. Suddenly Etian noticed that Dekka had slipped beside him.

"I saw you talking to him earlier." She said quietly, keeping her eyes on the man in question.

“You noticed that?” Was all Etian could utter.

“I’ve also noticed you staring at me in the past.” She said amusingly.

“Ah...” Etian felt himself blush.

“What did you two talk about?” Dekka asked, looking at Etian for the first time. He had to muster all his willpower to refrain from shuffling his feet. She was so forward!

“We talked about the upcoming demonstration.” He finally answered.

“Really? Are you planning it with him?” She probed.

“I’m helping him out.” Etian said evasively. By now they had moved over to a nearby table and sat down. Etian was cursing himself for lying to her. ‘But I didn’t exactly lie,’ he thought. ‘I only omitted some of the truth,’ he then justified. But he also knew that only through his supposed association with Ludono did he have enough self-confidence to stay there talking casually with the woman of his dreams. ‘I’m now eternally committed to this demonstration,’ he reflected gloomily. ‘Or should I say revolt? That seems to more to the mark.’

Fradis dispersed the crowd a little later, wisely remarking that such a large gathering was bound to draw notice sooner or later. Etian tried not to look too crestfallen when Dekka left, at least he had her promise to meet again to sustain him. Etian was just about to dive into some heavy drinking to sooth his nerves when Fradis laid his hand on his shoulder.

“We’ve got some planning to do.” He said. Etian saw Ryed standing behind Fradis, grinning like a maniac in the company of some of his mates. ‘Sink or swim,’ Etian thought, joining his fellow conspirators into a back room.

The spacious office overlooked a pleasant little garden, a rare sight on any space station. The man leaned on his cane, looking out over his garden of retreat. Behind him stood a small man clad in a blue and black security uniform.

“Has he made contact yet?” The man with the cane asked.

“Yes, sir.” The small man replied. “Last night in...” he glanced at his notes. “St. Helion’s Social Club.”

“Good, good. Keep a tab on things. He should move soon, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Yes, sir. Is that all, sir?”

“For now, just remember to clear out Hangar 8.”

“Yes, sir.”

The old furnace could still be turned up for heat, making the small alcove cozy and warm. Etian lay on the divan going over the events of the last couple of days in his mind. He was certain that nothing he had experienced before came close. Not only was he in the midst of some sinister plot to uproot the

government, but here, on this very divan, lay the woman of his dreams snuggled up against him sleeping soundly.

She had told him her life story, more or less. Her ancestors were of the lowest class of the commoners, just above slaves. Her large family was still eking their living out as the poorest of the poor. But she had managed to

get out, quite an accomplishment by the standards of the empire. But he hadn't managed to get her to tell him what she did for a living.

And now the woman in question was stirring in his arms, slowly returning to the waking world.

"Good morning." Etian said cheerfully. Dekka yawned, bleary eyed.

"Mornin'" She muttered, rubbing her eyes. Etian suddenly felt the urge to probe deeper into her life:

"Say, why don't you have to worry about going to your job? I know you didn't go yesterday and you don't seem to worried for today?" He inquired, hoping to get a glimpse into what she did for a living. Dekka only muttered something under her breath.

"Your not unemployed are you?" Etian asked teasingly.

"Certainly not!" She snapped, sitting bolt uprights. "If I didn't have a job I would be forced to go back to my family, I'd rather die." She said with a feeling. Etian was a bit taken a back by her outburst, frightful that it might affect their budding relationship.

"I'm sorry, it just looked to me like you didn't mind your job too well." He said apologetically.

"I mind it very well, thank you." Dekka said, still irritable. "My job and my status means everything to me."

"So you'd do anything to keep your job?" Etian asked, racking his brain for what this job of hers might be.

“Of course, it’s all I’ve got.” Dekka replied. Etian was a little hurt by this remark, but kept quiet. He rose from the divan ensconced between the furnace and the wall and started dressing.

“Why do we have to meet here instead of your apartment?” Dekka asked.

“Because my apartment is maybe being watched. Fradis pointed that out to me. This is safer. No-one but you and me know about this place. Nobody comes down here anymore after the new reactor was opened. We’re secure here. I’ve even stocked this place full with food, we could hide here for ages.” Etian answered, pulling on his boots. “Come on, we’ve got a big day ahead of us.” He said eagerly, throwing Dekka’s cloths to her.

The demonstrators came trickling into the back-alley storage area. Etian had left Dekka at the entrance earlier – they planned to meet after the demonstration, although both of them knew that things were likely to change dramatically in the next few hours, making any such plans hollow. Etian looked around him, the demonstrators were close to one hundred – young and eager. Most of them male; most only in their early twenties. As could be expected trepidation and uncertainty battled with anticipation and exhilaration on their faces as they unfurled their banners and hid their long knives in their jackets. At last Fradis stepped up and made his last speech before they’d march.

“Remember our aim, people. We will march to level 2 where the governor’s quarters are and demand our rightful share in the government of this station. We will not resort to violence unless absolutely necessary – we can talk to the guards, they will understand our cause and maybe join us. If things get tough you will follow your group leaders to the designated rally point, where we will re-group and re-organize. Now lets move!”

The march had been carefully stage-managed, the mob was grouped into small groups of 10 people, with one person responsible for their

movements and coordination. Etian was one of the group leaders, his group was the third from the last. Fradis marched with the last group, egging people on. As soon as the demonstrators were out on the street they started waving their banners and chanting their slogans:

“Power to the People!”

“Down with Tyranny!”

“Out with the Old, In with the New!”

The procession slowly weaved its way towards the upper levels, in every street and at every corner they were met with astonished onlookers. Some shouted jeers or obscenities, other shouted encouragement and a few even joined in the march, swelling the number to well over hundred.

Then they turned into the street leading up to the 4th level. It was empty. On they marched, their shouts echoing on the empty street, putting fright into some of them, their shouts growing fainter. At the end of the street they met a line of security guards blocking the street. The foremost groups happily marched towards them, expecting them to open up before them. Etian became apprehensive – he looked back and noticed that another group of heavily armed security guards were advancing up the street towards them. The front of the march now met the barricade of guards – they didn’t budge. Tension was rising, some were fiddling with the sleeves on their jackets fingering their knives. Etian could easily see where this was heading. He sought out Fradis, but the tall man was nowhere visible. Others in the group were noticing the absence of their leader. Fear set in.

Within a few minutes the whole scene had boiled into a bloody battlefield. The guards from the lower level came charging into the back of the group, throwing it against the line of guards at the front. Knives flashed, stun-guns barked and electro-bats hummed. Blood flowed freely. Etian, trying to stay

out of reach of the rushing security guards stumbled upon Ryed lying on the ground in a pool of blood; his face turning white and his eyes dim as the blood left his body. Etian cradled his head for a second, watching the last twinkle of life leave Ryed's eyes, before a guard charged into him and slammed him to the ground. Etian saw red.

Half an hour later Etian stumbled into the darkened interior of the St. Helion Social Club. His cloths were ripped, his hands were bloody and he had only a vague idea of how he got here. Sitting in a chair he tried to gather his thoughts in his head. He fetched a bottle from the bar and sat down again, gulping down a glass of alcohol. Everything was in shambles; the demonstration had been brutally brought down by the security forces, that much was clear. Etian fumbled in his pocket for the piece of paper that had sent his mind into a twirl when he took it from the dead fingers of a security officer he ran into. The paper, blood-smeared and torn, still clearly showed the route marked on the small station map, ending in a X. X marks the spot. Hangar 8. The rally point of the demonstration. Hangar 8. Where, according to this map, a bunch of security guards where patiently waiting for the few stragglers that had survived the carnage on the level 4 ramp.

Etian saw it all clearly now – how he and his fellow migration workers had been set up by the crafty, charismatic Fradis Ludono. How they had been played like fools and then led to the slaughter like pigs. It all seemed so obvious now, in hindsight, always the worst of sights. Etian looked up, the image of his friend Ryed dying filling his vision. The memory of the silly yet affable Ryed welled up, before he caught the rebellious fervor, before all this... madness. Tears welled up in Etian's eyes. He brushed them away, his eyes focusing on a quotation from the Scriptures hanging on the wall opposite him, a relic of the Order of St. Helion:

When the ears hear only,
The mouth shouting.
And the eyes see only,

The fingers broken.
The world has turned,
And God has gone.
Left us with fond memories,
Of sweet life without pain.
-- Apocalypse Verse 8:18

‘How fitting this prophetic verse is.’ Etian thought. ‘Now all that is left is to hide. Hide forever.’ And Etian got up and left the club for good.

The tinkle of the small water fountain was the only sound heard. The old man with the cane was sitting pleasantly on a bench, while a small security officer hovered nearby.

“According to the list provided by Ludono we’ve got everyone except one, sir.” The officer was saying. “If I may say so, sir, it was a masterly plan. The migration workers haven’t shown as good a behavior as now for ages; they’ve learnt their lesson.”

“I can not take the credit for Fradis Ludono all by myself.” The old man said, tap-tapping his cane on the pebbled ground. “This is a joint operation of all the security chiefs in the Trigentia-sector. The Turba set-up succeeded beautifully and the creation of this rebel leader Ludono was a masterstroke, I must say,” the old man said with self-satisfaction. “And the fact that we’ve managed to keep it secret even from our own security forces. Even they think there’s a dangerous rebel leader on the loose.” The old man chuckled.

“Well, sir. Then everything seems to be in order. Except, there’s still the question of this fellow Etian Subidam. We can’t find him. Shall we intensify our search, sir?”

“There’s no need for that. I’ve already contacted a bounty hunter to find him and kill him.”

“Excellent idea, sir. May I inquire who he is, sir?”

“It’s a she actually. Goes by the name of Deka Nuros. Very reliable. Very efficient. She will tie up any loose ends no doubt, you know how I hate them.”

“That’s excellent, sir.”

Catch of the Day

“Gallente frigate Notrimus, you’ve been cleared for docking. Prepare for initiation of docking sequence. Enjoy your stay in Korridi station.” The monotonous voice of the command tower’s personnel sounded even more bored than Gaspar Anoun was feeling. Although the journey had been short and relatively uneventful it was always tiresome to deal with Amarr custom officials, and Gaspar had met a lot of them in the last few hours since his arrival into Amarr space.

The Amarr station loomed large above him, majestic in its monstrosity. Gaspar swiveled his camera drone around, behind him he saw a line of ships waiting to dock while a handful of police vessels shuffled along the lines keeping an eye on the foreign merchant ships. Looking forward again he noticed that from his angle the sun was already partly obscured by the planet - it was late afternoon at the station.

Gaspar felt his ship respond to the commands of the docking sequence sent by the command tower. The ship sailed in a gentle curve towards a docking bay close to the lower end of the station. Gaspar noticed that the docking bay was only half full. This years Trade Fair wasn’t particularly well attended, it seemed. The auto-control eased the ship into a berth, fastening it with a loud clank and a low hiss.

The camera drone had entered the ship when it docked and only the infrared sensors were available to Gaspar to get a picture of his surroundings in the few moments it took the berth crane to lift the capsule from the ship. Gaspar always hated these moments, he relied heavily on his camera drone to get a sense of his whereabouts and with it gone he always became uncomfortably aware of the sticky goo and the blackness enveloping him in the capsule. But this discomfort was offset by the

anticipation that in a few minutes he'd be free of the confines of the capsule and his senses would again be allowed to feel and function normally.

Gaspar washed himself clean in the neat little shower box adjacent to the disembarkation room. Then he dressed himself, putting on clothes he kept in the small storage box in his capsule. He chose a smart looking suit with a long-sleeved jacket, nothing too fancy - he didn't want to irritate the Amarrians too much by his appearance. Gaspar left the room and commissioned a cart robot to follow him with his luggage taken from the ship's cargo hold.

On the corridor connecting the docking area with the main body of the station Gaspar was greeted by a short Gallentean in a ruffled suit. The man introduced himself, matching his stride with that of Gaspar's.

"My name is Naine, Niedanai Naine. I have been appointed as your diplomatic attaché during your stay here." He wheezed, smoothing his greasy hair.

"A diplomatic attaché you say." Gaspar said, hiding his surprise. "I don't recall having requested one."

"It's the policy now, sir." Naine said with a tiny smile. "The Federation demands that all Gallenteans wishing to enter into a formal trade agreement with the Amarrians must be accompanied by a diplomatic attaché from the Foreign Ministry."

"How very thoughtful of them. So, your role is what? Fetch my slippers, make me coffee, that sort of thing?" Gaspar answered sarcastically.

"No, sir." Naine said, visibly hurt. "No. I'm to ensure that your dealings with the Amarrians remain civilized and go through smoothly. In the last few months there have been numerous incidents where the negotiating parties

parted on bad terms because of some real or imaginary slights. It is my job to make sure that any misunderstandings don't escalate into a serious breach."

"I see. Tell me Naine, you must have extensive experience in dealing with the Amarrians, right?" Gaspar asked.

"I have worked for the ministry for 14 years. During that time I have analyzed and filed thousands of field reports on every race there is."

"So you have no direct experience of a face to face contact with the Amarrians?" Gaspar probed.

"Well... I, uh..." Naine's face suddenly seemed flushed. "Not as such, sir."

"So, correct me if I'm wrong." Gaspar said in an amused tone. "You, a man with absolutely no experience in dealing with the Amarrians or anybody else for that matter, are going to supervise me - a 20 year veteran of inter-stellar trading - in how to conduct my business. Is that right?"

"Well, I won't supervise as such. I'm more of an advisor, you see." Naine said hesitantly.

"Ok then, Mr. Advisor. Why don't you give yourself the advice to stay out of my face and we'll have peace and harmony all around. I'll quietly make my deal and for you it's mission accomplished." Gaspar said convincingly. Naine mulled things over for a minute before answering:

"I guess that could work, as long as I'm present when you're conducting your negotiations, sir."

"Splendid. Stick to me my dear Niedanai, and not only will we swing a hefty profit back home sweet home, but along the way I'll teach you a trick or two

about being a Gallentean super-trader.” Gaspar said raucously and put his hand over Naine’s shoulders.

“So Naine, where are you from?” Gaspar asked in a friendly tone.

“Me, sir? I’m from Sacreaux.” Naine replied perplexed. “In the Neronne district.” He added when he saw the lack of recognition on Gaspar’s face.

The two men navigated the narrow corridors of Korridi station en route to Gaspar’s suite, the cart robot trudging behind them carrying Gaspar’s emerald-green travel trunks. Gaspar knew his way well around the station as he’d been here many times before. He stayed clear of the busy thoroughfares, preferring the side corridors as they allowed for a more relaxed stroll. He used the time to explain to the woefully ignorant attaché the purpose of his trip here.

“You know, Naine, the Amarrians can be a real pain in the ass to deal with. But the Amarr Empire is a huge market and it seems every soul there is crying out for Gallentean or Caldari or Jovian goods. The Amarrians like to regulate things, just to let you know who’s got the power, and these Trade Fairs are a part of that. You can’t just waltz into the Empire and start trading left and right. You have to have permission to trade certain goods. That’s what these Trade Fairs are all about - establishing contacts, making trade agreements, getting permission, you get the picture.”

“So it’s not a market fair, then?” Naine asked. Gaspar shook his head.

“No,” he answered. “There’s very little actual trading going on, it’s all about making those connections.”

“Sir, I’ve been waiting here since yesterday morning, when the fair started. Why are you running so late, the fair ends at midnight tonight?” Naine inquired.

“It’s all part of the head game.” Gaspar said, tapping the side of his head. “My trade rivals will be thinking the exactly same thing. And the more they wonder, the more irritated they become, which is good for us. It’s all a part of the Plan.” Gaspar finished with a flourish, waving his hands in the air like he was talking about some religious experience. Then he laughed heartily and slapped Naine on the shoulders.

“Very clever, sir.” Naine said, obviously wondering how much truth was in what Gaspar had just said.

“Remember, my dear Niedanai, appearance counts for everything.” Gaspar said and looked at Naine’s skeptical face. “You’ll see.”

Gaspar’s suite was more of an apartment, with a huge living room and a luxurious bedroom. The suite was decorated in the latest Gallentean fashion, contrasting nicely with the somber but stylish Amarr fashion. Gaspar unloaded the cart robot in the living room and sent it rumbling back. Then he ushered Naine out of the room.

“I’ll have to make some small preparations before we go to the main hall. I’ll be with you in five.”

Once the door had closed on Naine, Gaspar in a quick motion belying his former easy manners opened his briefcase, revealing a small portable computer. He plugged the computer into the station’s public system. For the next few minutes his agile fingers tapped furiously at the keyboard, only stopping occasionally when he established contact with persons in other parts of the station and brief conversations ensued. Finally, he slapped the computer shut, locking it again down into his briefcase. Brushing down creases on his trousers, he then proceeded out into the corridor once more, where Naine was patiently waiting.

“Ready, sir?” Naine asked, the disdain in his voice over Gaspar’s apparent fussiness over his physical appearance barely visible.

“Ready for anything.” Gaspar replied cheerfully, again embracing his jovial charismatic behavior as they set out for the elevators to the main hall.

The floor of the main hall was an unblemished white marble and the ceiling was a sparkling glass dome, through which the lush Korridi planet was clearly visible. The effect was quite magnificent, something the Amarrians excelled in portraying. The sheer size of the hall seemed to engulf everyone in it and it almost had the appearance of being deserted. Numerous small groups of people were scattered around it, huddled together in discussion. The majority of those present were Amarrians, with Caldari and Gallenteans being of about equal number. There were even a few Jovians visible, but understandably not a single Minmatar was in sight. Waiters scurried around carrying trays stacked with glasses filled with every kind of drink imaginable.

A gaudily dressed Gallentean waddled towards Gaspar and Naine. The man was obese and reeked of greed.

“I knew you would come, Gaspar you bastard!” The man almost shrieked, turning a few heads in the vicinity. “Not sure if could stomach another round against Anton, eh? I’m telling you, this time you’ll leave empty handed. Anton hasn’t been idle in your absence, no he hasn’t.”

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t the great Anton Ecumide. Master of shaky investments and lost deals.” Gaspar replied, seemingly unruffled by Anton’s rude manners.

“Don’t you taunt me, Gaspar. It will only make you look all the more of a fool when I’ve stolen each and every one of your deals from under your nose.” Anton said and grinned nastily. It didn’t help his appearance a bit.

“Let me introduce you, Niedanai this is the esteemed entrepreneur Anton Ecumide. Anton, this is my diplomatic attaché Niedanai Naine.” Gaspar said, continuing to ignore Anton’s outbursts.

“I see yours sticks to you like a fly on shit. How appropriate. I kicked mine out the moment I arrived. I believe he’s sulking in some corner composing a complaint to his superiors.” Anton said nastily.

“Aw, I saw pity on the poor lad. I’m teaching him the ropes of inter-racial trading.” Gaspar said. Anton replied, addressing Naine:

“Watch out, boy. Don’t let the manipulative bastard screw too much with your mind. As for you, Gaspar, I hope you’ll sleep well tonight.” With that Anton stormed away, giving Gaspar an evil side-look as he passed him.

“I can sense you two share a lot of history.” Naine said to Gaspar once Anton was out of earshot.

“Yes, our paths have crossed many times in the past. Old Anton never seems to get the breaks and he blames me for his bad fortune.” Gaspar answered.

“And is he right? Are you to blame?” Naine inquired. Gaspar just smiled, clasped his hands behind his back and ventured further into the hall at a leisurely pace.

Gaspar set the course for a couple of richly dressed Amarrians standing by themselves. Once close enough to be heard Gaspar said:

“Governor Sed-Innad, you’re looking older than ever.” Naine jumped at the words, fearing the Amarrian would flare up at the insult. But when the older Amarrian just smiled he remembered that to the Amarrians looking old was

a sign of maturity and stature. The younger Amarrian, probably still in his twenties, had even made obvious efforts to make himself look older than he actually was, thinning his hair and painting his face pale and gaunt. The older Amarrian, the one Gaspar had addressed as governor, was at least a century old. The two shook hands, they undoubtedly knew each other well.

“Gaspar Anoun.” The governor said warmly. “So you turned up after all.” The old man indicated the younger Amarrian standing beside him and continued:

“This is my nephew, Tarnak Nas-Innad. We’re searching for a suitable position for him.” The young man bowed a little to Gaspar.

“Of course.” Gaspar said nonchalantly. “After all, next to despotism nepotism is the favorite past-time of the Amarrians, right? You guys never change.”

“And neither do you, Gaspar. Always the witty one. One of these days your rude quips will become your bane.” The governor replied, yet he didn’t seem the least bit ruffled.

“Forgive me, my lord.” Gaspar said. “Unfortunately Asslicking 101 wasn’t on the curriculum at my school. Instead I had to learn such useless tasks as adding and subtracting. Such a pity.” By now Naine was literally jumping from foot to foot in his anxiety, fearing the worst.

“Gentlemen, meet my diplomatic attaché, Niedanai Naine. He seems a little agitated at the moment.” Gaspar said and turned to Naine. “What’s the matter? You need to use the little boys room?” Naine, noticing that the Amarrians were still calm despite Gaspar’s words, composed himself.

“No, sir. I’m fine. Don’t mind me.” He finally murmured. Gaspar turned back to governor Sed-Innad.

“How’s the wheeling and dealing going?” The governor asked.

“I just got here. No time to screw anybody over yet.” Gaspar answered jokingly.

“And the Upper Debyl deal?” The governor inquired, taking a sip from his glass.

“On schedule. It can proceed.” Gaspar answered, giving Naine a glance. The governor stood silent for a minute, sipping his wine.

“So what’s this I’m hearing about you trading in Caldari wares, Gaspar?” He finally asked.

“Pure coincidence. I happened upon this heap of excellent Caldari scanner systems a while ago. Dead cheap. You know I’m not scrupulous about what I sell. Or to whom.” Gaspar answered.

“Well, lucky for you then. Scanner systems are always in demand. Anywhere.” The governor said innocently.

“My thought exactly, governor.” Gaspar said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to mingle a bit.” The Amarrians nodded their heads in farewell and Gaspar and Naine did the same. Then Gaspar set out for a group of Caldari standing near the main entrance. Naine took the opportunity to berate Gaspar.

“What you did was very dangerous, sir. The governor could easily have been offended and where would you stand then?” He said.

“Me and governor Sed-Innad go way back, Naine. He’s as close to being a friend of mine as an Amarr Holder can be. Besides, I’ve told you, it pays to get people on the edge.” Gaspar answered.

“I’m still not convinced of that, sir.” Naine said sourly.

“Look, it’s very simple.” Gaspar explained. “Both the Amarrians and the Caldari put a huge stock in maintaining their dignity and posture. If you crack that mask a little by unorthodox behavior you make them uneasy, unsure of the situation. Pierce that crack a bit more open and before long you have them eating out of your hand. And that, my dear Niedanai, is the whole idea.”

By now they were very close to the Caldari group. Naine saw by the military uniforms some of them wore that they were representatives of the CBD Corporation. The Gallenteans stopped just outside the little group. The Caldari ignored them for a few minutes, on purpose no doubt, trying to gain the upper hand in the upcoming discussion. Finally, one of them, apparently the head of the delegation turned towards them. He was a tall, grim-looking man in a military uniform.

“I’m major Ati Mittuchi.” The man gave a brief military salute. “Whom do I have the pleasure of conversing with?” He continued in a formal tone, looking questioningly at Gaspar and Naine.

“I’m Gaspar Anoun, this is my diplomatic attaché Niedanai Naine.” Gaspar said, giving a mock salute in response, something that didn’t go down too well with the Caldari.

“Ah, so you’re Anoun.” The major said. “I should have recognized you by your flamboyant arrogance.”

“The one and only.” Gaspar said, showing no sign of irritation over the major’s insult. “Tell me major, this is a Trade Fair. Where’s the war? Why this military showdown?”

“The Amarrians respect power, Mr. Anoun. They, like everybody else, want to make sure that what they’ve bargained for gets delivered in one piece. Now, with all those pesky Minmatars pirates around, the Amarrians appreciate all assurances that the border-zone trade routes are safe.” The major said confidently.

“So you’re giving a safe delivery guarantees? That must cost a bit.” Gaspar said.

“Our trade package is very reasonably priced, Mr. Anoun. And most importantly, for a few extra credits every item is guaranteed to arrive safe and sound. That’s naturally much better than never getting anything at all.”

“Is it?” Gaspar looked surprised. “Gosh! I never would have thought of that. You Caldari sure do think things through.” The major seemed to inflate with smugness. Beneath that dignified exterior hid a pompous man Naine thought. And Gaspar flushed him out right away with some silly sarcasm, something most people saw right through.

“Well, too bad for you then that the Amarrians are planning on dealing with me.” Gaspar continued. The major exhaled, his face turning red.

“What?” He shouted. “So you’re the one that have been offering our scanners to the Amarrians at a ridiculous price, eh? Well, I’m interested to know where you got your product from, Mr. Anoun. I wouldn’t be the least surprised if we found out that these were stolen goods. Ah, ah, don’t look so offended, Mr. Anoun, it isn’t your style. So, can you show us legitimate papers to certify where you acquired the scanners?” Suddenly the Caldari seemed more menacing, looming over the two Gallenteans. Gaspar took

his time reaching for a glass from a passing waiters' tray and taking a sip before answering the major's accusations.

"Your paranoia amuses me, major. I will indulge your interest. I got them from Yria Base." Gaspar reached into his pocket and produced an id-chip, handing it to the major. "Check this out. It should satisfy your curiosity." The major gave the chip to one of his assistants, who inserted it into his palm computer. He scanned his screen for a few minutes before speaking.

"The chip seems to be authentic, sir." The assistant said.

"Just to make sure contact Yria Base, check their logs." The major said, handing the id-chip back to Gaspar. The assistant established wireless contact to the Korridi station's mainframe and requested a com link to Yria Base. Gaspar put the chip back in his pocket and Naine noticed he seemed to finger something in his pocket for a second before retrieving his hand. The assistant fiddled with his palm computer for a minute before speaking again:

"Sir, we're unable to establish contact with Yria Base, there's some interference. The Amarrians think it's one of these sun flare phenomenons." The major seemed disappointed.

"Well, Mr. Anoun. How fortunate for you. You seemed to be sweating there." He said.

"The idea of all the credits I'll make on these scanners tonight makes me all hot, major." Gaspar teased. The major frowned.

"Good evening to you, Mr. Anoun. And don't expect to get lucky every time." He said and prepared to leave.

“Believe me, major. Luck has nothing to do with it.” Gaspar replied and raised his glass in farewell. Gaspar and Naine watched the Caldari delegation depart, the major cursing the poor assistant for his incompetence.

“Come, Niedanai, lets return to my suite. “ Gaspar said and started to leave the main hall. Naine was stunned.

“But, Mr. Anoun, you just got here. You haven’t made any deals yet.” He said.

“There are still two hours till midnight. Plenty of time.” Gaspar said while they waited for an elevator.

“If I may say so, sir, I don’t understand why you’re trying to outbid the Caldari on their own product, it seems so far fetched. And what is this Upper Debyl deal you and the governor were talking about?” Naine asked, his curiosity getting the better of his manners.

“It will all be revealed in good time, my dear Niedanai. For now, let’s just say that I’m playing the head game for the high stakes. It’s all about keeping your adversaries occupied.” Gaspar answered as they entered the elevator. Once the elevator’s door had closed behind them Gaspar fetched a palm computer from his pocket. He frowned at it for a moment.

“It seems my palmer is out at the moment. Can I borrow yours for a second? I just have to send one simple message.” Gaspar asked.

“Uh, sure. Here you go, sir.” Naine handed Gaspar his palm computer. Gaspar operated it quickly and efficiently and finished before the elevator reached their floor. Nothing more was said before they came to the double-doors leading to Gaspar’s suite. Gaspar spent some time staring at the doors like he was expecting them to open on their own. Finally the two of

them entered the suite. Gaspar sat by his desk and once again opened his briefcase with the portable computer. He established a com link and briefly chatted with a Gallentean on the other end.

“Who was that?” Naine asked when Gaspar had closed his briefcase.

“That was my good friend Barridour. He’s organizing a little something for me later tonight.” Gaspar answered. Naine stood mulling things over for a while before he poured himself a glass of water from a jug on a side table.

“I wouldn’t drink that if I was you.” Gaspar said as Naine raised the glass to his lips.

“Eh? Why not?” Naine asked.

“Because there is a sleeping potion in there. It will put you to sleep for the rest of the night.” Gaspar answered.

“How do you know?” Naine said, putting the glass down.

“Because the fool Anton Ecumide more or less blurted it out when we ran into him. And when I noticed that someone had fiddled with the lock on our door it was easy to figure out. But now, we must ready ourselves for the night. Don’t you have anything better to wear than that wrinkled suit?” Gaspar asked. Naine looked down on his suit.

“Uh, yeah. I’ve got a spare suit.” He answered.

“Good, why don’t you change into that and meet me here in 15 minutes?” Gaspar said.

“Very well, sir. But I can be ready in five.” Naine said.

“But I can’t, Mr. Naine. Fifteen minutes, ok?” Gaspar said. Once Naine was out of the room, Gaspar once more got his portable computer out of the briefcase and fired it up. First one to appear on his screen was governor Sed-Innad.

“Well?” Gaspar asked.

“He bought it. Double what we’d figured.” The governor said smiling. “And the Caldari?” He asked.

“They took the bait. Expect to haul them in later tonight.” Gaspar answered. “That only leaves our little deal...” He finished.

“Yes, of course. I’ll give you the confirmation later tonight. And the guards you asked for will be ready, as you requested.” The governor replied.

“Good, good. Then all is settled. See you tonight.” Gaspar said and cut off the link. He established another connection. This time a serene Jovian face appeared on the screen.

Naine was waiting patiently outside in the corridor when Gaspar left his suite some ten minutes later. Naine looked marginally better in a light gray suit, but still left a lot to be desired.

“Where are we going, sir?” Naine asked.

“Now, my dear Niedanai, I’m going to show you how real Gallenteans conduct their business.” Gaspar exclaimed. “Until now we’ve been playing by the business books of the Amarrian and the Caldari - boring conversation between somber men making somber deals that might earn their grandchildren a nickel. They’re always complimenting themselves how smart they are in their long term planning, but there’s no fun in it Niedanai, no fun in it at all. I mean look at them. They labor like ants around the

clock, setting aside some measly sum so they can go on some lame space cruising when they've become too old and spent to work anymore. They're spending their youth toiling away so they can have a bit of fun when they're 150 years old. Too old to have any real fun, as I see it. Where's the logic in that, I ask you? You know what their problem is?" Gaspar paused, obviously expecting some kind of an answer from Naine.

"Uh, I don't know, sir. What's the problem?" Naine ventured.

"They're too fixed up on keeping work and leisure separate. To them, the two things don't go together. But we Gallentean traders know that work and leisure go very well together, they're just two sides of the same coin. Meaningful playing and playful working, that's what I always say." Gaspar finished his speech just as the two reached a large double-door at the end of a corridor.

"And now, Niedanai, I'll show just what I mean." With that Gaspar threw the doors open. Loud noise and bright lights engulfed Naine, battering his every sense. Behind the doors was a large room and at the moment it was filled with laughing, shouting people. There was a wild party going on. The attendants were mostly other Gallenteans, but a number of Amarrians and some Caldari were also to be seen.

"What do you think?" Gaspar shouted over the din.

"I don't know, sir. What's going on?" Naine asked clearly bewildered.

"This is what I was organizing. This is playful work, or meaningful playing, which ever you prefer, in it's purest form." Gaspar said and then dived into the crowd.

Gaspar quickly got into his host gear, walking among the guests, shaking hands with many and sharing a brief chat with some. Naine trailed behind, trying to grasp the situation.

In one of the corners Gaspar came upon Anton Ecumide seated with couple of girls on each arm. The man was already well drunk. When he saw Gaspar he cackled loudly and shouted:

“Gaspar! I bet you’re wishing you were asleep right now because I stole the Upper Debyl system from right under your nose, just as I promised!” Anton laughed loudly, enjoying his victory to the fullest. Gaspar seemed a little taken aback.

“How did you know...?” He stammered. “Well, never mind. Say, Anton, I’ll buy it back from you. Whatever you paid plus 50% extra, that’s a hefty profit right there.” He said, looking hopeful.

“In your dreams. That system is mine. You’ll never get it!” Anton laughed again, even louder this time. Gaspar, dejected, walked away. Anton’s shrill laughter chasing his heavy steps. Naine followed Gaspar, wanting to comfort him but unsure how to go about it without embarrassing him even more. Once they were close to the entrance Gaspar whispered quietly to Naine:

“Can he see us?” Naine looked back, Anton was hidden from view by a happy throng of party-goers.

“No, the crowd is in the way.” Naine replied.

“Good.” Gaspar said and then he lifted his slumped shoulders and unwrinkled his saddened face. The old Gaspar was back again, jolly as always.

“Well, Naine. That went rather well, didn’t you think?” He said merrily. Naine felt his head spinning.

“But, sir. Anton just bought the system you were after.” He said.

“Yes, he did.” Gaspar said. “And do you know why I was after it?” He asked with a twinkle in his eye.

“Well, I guess because there’s something of value there.”

“No, the system is totally and utterly void of anything interesting or valuable. I was after it because I wanted Anton to buy it.” Gaspar said. Suddenly it dawned on Naine:

“I see, sir. You knew that if Anton heard about your interest in the system, then he would become interested in it. So you deliberately started the rumor that you wanted to buy it. Very clever, sir. But from whom did Anton buy it? No! Don’t answer, let me guess. Governor Sed-Innad, right?

“Well, the governor’s brother actually. But otherwise you’re correct in your assumptions, well done. You might have a future in politics after all.” Gaspar said. Naine beamed. Gaspar spotted governor Sed-Innad and his nephew. He waved them to come over. Then he leaned towards Naine and said:

“Meet me at my suite in one hour. I’ve got some business to discuss and then some hard partying to do.” Then Gaspar took Naine’s arm and led him to a sofa where two Gallentean beauties were seated. “Why don’t you in the meantime get on first name basis with my friends over here?” Gaspar whispered into Naine’s ear and steered him down into the sofa.

“Sir, are you sure about this?” Naine wailed in near panic as the two girls leaned into him on both sides.

“One hour, remember that!” Was all Gaspar shouted as he led the Amarrians away into the crowd.

An hour later a sweaty but happy Gaspar rounded the corner to his suite. It didn't surprise him all that much to see Naine already waiting in front of the door. His hair was tangled and his cloths disheveled.

“So, did you get on ok with the girls?” Gaspar asked him as he led them into his suite.

“They... they we're like animals!” Naine exclaimed, clearly still flustered from his encounter.

“Ooo! You lucky man!” Gaspar said smiling. The two men entered the living room. Two heavysset Amarrians were seated near the door. They stood up when Gaspar and Naine came in.

“Ah, gentlemen.” Gaspar said, not the least surprised to see the two Amarrians there. Gaspar seated himself while the Amarrians planted themselves on either side of Naine.

“Well, Naine. I'm afraid this is the end of the road for you.” Gaspar signaled the Amarrians, which promptly pinned Naine's arms to his sides. Naine's face registered astonishment and fear in equal proportions.

“What's the meaning of this? I will let you know that I'm employee of the Foreign Ministry, they'll surely hear about this and then it's the end of the road for you, pal.” Naine said, anger welling up in him.

“I'm afraid not. The Foreign Ministry has fired you and absolved themselves from any fate that may befall you. And your fate is in my hand.” Gaspar said harshly. “I can see you're confused, Mr. Naine. I'll make things a bit

clearer for you. I know that you're a Caldari agent." Naine licked his lips, but otherwise his face was impassive. For a minute neither man said a word, then Naine spoke:

"You come here all high and mighty, constantly making boisterous remarks and outrageous claims. But now you have gone too far. I'm afraid I cannot let these accusations go unanswered." He said, sounding confident, but sweating profusely.

"Don't bother with the lies and denials." Gaspar said. He reached into his pocket and produced a small data-vis chip. He activated it and a pale hologram sprouted from the floor between the pair. Even if it was grainy and occasionally out of focus the men in the hologram were clearly the Gallentean diplomatic attaché Niedanai Naine and major Ati Mittuchi of CBD Corporation. The two were conversing in hushed tones in a bar or restaurant it seemed.

"Do you want me to turn the sound up?" Gaspar said. "It's pretty condemning, what with you spilling your guts about all sorts of interesting issues supposedly a secret. I have a whole stack of these holograms." Naine seemed to go weak at the knees, slumping like a drunken man. Then he contemplated for a moment trying to escape the steel grips of the hulking Amarrians, but thought better off it.

"Your fate is sealed, my dear Niedanai." Gaspar said, driving the facts home.

"What made you suspect me?" Naine finally moaned pathetically, seeing no point in trying to deny anything anymore. He was clearly crestfallen, his little world collapsing around him.

"Huh! You're more Caldari-like than many Caldari I know. You practically reek of being their spy." Gaspar answered. "All I needed was a confirmation

and I got it earlier tonight from a Jovian contact I have. Do you know what I had to pay for a proof? Do you know what you're worth to the Jovians?" Gaspar taunted. Naine shook his head.

"A rock. A medium sized rock from Gallente Prime. Not a special rock at all, just... a rock. Don't you find that funny?" Naine was visibly shaking by now, his body hanging limp between the Amarrian strongmen. Gaspar continued:

"But then again I understand that is the standard price for a Caldari spy: a medium sized rock from Gallente Prime. Weird, don't you think? If you ask me I think the Jovians are conducting a little experiment. Are there more Caldari spies within the Gallente Federation than there are medium sized rocks on Gallente Prime? I don't know, maybe one day we'll have to go to the Jovian Empire to visit our ancestral planet." Gaspar let out a short laugh at the thought.

"What are you going to do to me?" Naine whispered.

"I'm selling you to the Amarrians." Gaspar said coldly. "Oh, don't worry, you'll be well cared for, you're going to one of their better slave plantations. I gather the work is not so hard there once you get used to the heat. I hear they got a slave spokesman there, sort of like a union leader. I'm sure if you put the things I've taught you tonight to good use you can work your way up to it. And until then, remember, playful working. Take him away, boys." The Amarrians started dragging Naine towards the door.

"Wait, wait!" Naine wailed. "Answer me just one question. How did the Caldari deal go?" Gaspar motioned the guards to halt. Then he withdrew the id-chip from his pocket and threw it at Naine's feet.

"That chip is a phony, Mr. Naine. Just like you." Gaspar said. "It was all a ruse, a bit of a trickery by me and governor Sed-Innad. He got the Caldari

to lower their price by 15%, I'll get a share of the profit and my own little deal involving Gallentean-made ship thrusters went through smoothly, what with all my rivals focusing on something entirely different. I guess major Mittuchi is quite pleased with himself at the moment for 'outbidding' my Caldari scanners, but I'm not so sure if his superiors will agree when they discover that I've never bought any scanners on Yria Base. That's what happens when they send amateur negotiators to do a real man's work. Goodbye, Mr. Naine." The two guards dragged the whimpering man out of the suite.

Gaspar sat down at his desk, pouring himself a stiff drink and DNA drug tested it before sipping. He ran the events of the day through his head. The thruster deal alone netted a hefty 200% profit and his share of the Upper Debyl sale and the Caldari deal was not too shabby either. Firing up his portable computer he scanned his diary, making a few notes and reflecting upon those things next on the agenda. He established connection with the station management office.

"Wake me up at 7 am tomorrow." He said to the receptionist, glancing at his timepiece. "And can you contact the docking bay and make them have my ship prepared at 8 am?"

"Yes, sir. Have a good night." The receptionist answered. Gaspar leaned back in the chair, taking another sip.

'Tomorrow its Hrokkur station for those sly Krusuals and their contraband goods. And the day after... Well, lets not waste today thinking too much about future days. I'll play it by the ear as always.' Gaspar thought. Saluting himself in the mirror he drank the rest of the spirit and went to bed.

The Ray of Matar

“...and the bloated Rock perched itself on the top of the new mountain, gloating and wallowing in its own self-esteem.

‘Look, Mountain,’ the Rock said. ‘Look at me on top of my own mountain.’ But the Mountain answered: ‘Foolish Rock, look beneath you. Your mountain is weak. It cannot support you.’

The Rock looked down, and saw it was true. Its mountain was feeble, frail. The Rock could hear all the little rocks in the mountain groaning beneath its weight.

‘Maybe my mountain will crumble, but I got to the top, as I set out to do; I fulfilled my dream.’ the Rock righteously said to the Mountain.

‘Yes, but then what?’ The Mountain enquired. ‘You had a good place on the side of me; you were in the light, with the wind caressing you and the sun warming you and the moss licking you.’

Suddenly the little mountain the Rock had erected collapsed. The Rock felt itself being dragged down; it toppled down the mountain side and all the little rocks came in its wake. It hit the ground and the little rocks piled in front and back and the sides and on top the Rock. It was trapped beneath all the small rocks that it had gathered for its mountain; they squeezed it tight and the Rock felt like suffocating.

‘Mountain!’ it wheezed weakly. ‘Help me!’

‘What can I do?’ the Mountain said. ‘You brought this onto yourself. You couldn’t be satisfied with the place I gave to you; you had to get to the top. And now look at you, trapped beneath your own mountain forever.’

‘But it was my dream,’ the Rock sobbed, ‘everybody has got to have a dream.’

‘Not if your dream is based on a fantasy, rather than reality.’ The Mountain replied sagely and went back to sleep.”

Vormar finished the story with a small bow and Karin started breathing again. She didn’t hold her breath through the whole story, that was humanly impossible, but she always held her breath during the last part of the story, when the Rock was smothered under its own mountain. Maybe she did it to empathize with the Rock; as a child Karin always took the side of the Rock in its struggle with the evil Mountain. That was before she understood the metaphorical meaning of the story and realized the folly of the Rock’s actions. But the story had always remained one of her favorites and the chance to hear it now from a master storyteller like Vormar enchanted her even more.

People thronged the large, dimly lit tent. The tent was at the apex of a small camp situated close to the sacred ground. Karin’s eyes were watering because of the smoke in the tent and her buttocks were sore from the uncomfortable cushion she sat on. But the tents were the only dwellings allowed within miles of the sacred ground, a tradition refurbished after the rebellion to give people a better feeling for the ancient rituals and ceremonies performed at the place. One of these ceremonies was to take place that night and Karin was to participate in it. This was the most important ceremony in a Minmatars life, called Voluval or the Test of Destiny. In the Voluval a Minmatar faced his true inner-self and, most importantly, the findings would permanently mark the body for all to see. Karin was to participate that night.

Vormar was her essence instructor. His responsibility was to educate those undergoing the test on what it involved and prepare them mentally for it.

Karin was thankful to Vormar for telling them the story of the Rock and the Mountain, for it calmed her nerves for the upcoming event. She approached Vormar at the back of the tent where he was putting away his battered copy of Minmatar folk tales; he didn't actually read from the book, but in his old age he felt comfort in having it at hand in case his memory suddenly failed.

"Ah, Karin," Vormar said when she entered his field of vision. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, it's about my tattoos..." Karin began hesitantly.

"Yes, your tattoos." The old man said. "You're unsure what motif to go for, right?"

"Yes, that's it." Karin said. "Well, as I'm a slave-child and all that. Not knowing my family clan..."

"Don't worry. You're of the Minmatar tribe Sebiestor; that's what is most important." Vormar said and smiled reassuringly.

"But what family clan motif should I choose? I might upset somebody by my choice..."

"Not all families have a motif and not all motifs are associated with a specific family." Vormar said. "Here, let me show you something." The old sage started rummaging in his trunk. After a while he produced a large leather-bound book.

"My father gave me this book when I was your age." He said. "It illustrates and explains everything you want to know about tattoos. Take a look at it, maybe it will help you decide what motif you want." Vormar handed Karin

the book. She opened it at random. The page showed a picture of a tattooed man, with explanations for each tattoo.

“This book was published shortly after the rebellion.” Vormar continued. “While we were under the yoke of the Amarrians they systematically tried to erase many of our most sacred traditions; tattooing amongst them. This book was intended to re-introduce this ancient custom to those that had never experienced it. Admittedly not all modern motifs are in it, but all of the old major ones are there. I’ve used it before to teach slave-children such as you about tattooing. You can borrow it for a few days.”

Karin flicked through the aged tome, examining the finally drafted images. She already knew the gist of the tattooing tradition; that part of the face was reserved for the clan tattoo and the shoulders for rank tattoos. She also knew that facial war tattoos based on nano technology were very popular among the younger generations. This special type of tattoo could appear and disappear depending on the emotional state of the person. Like all Minmatar children in the Republic, Karin had picked up this basic knowledge of tattoos at an early age. But she was still uncertain about what kind of tattoos to choose and now that the Voluval was fast approaching the time was running out, as she was allowed to get tattoos once the ceremony was over. It wasn’t exactly essential to make the selection now; many only did so after they saw what mark they got. But for Karin the selection meant more than just decorating her body, to her the tattoo motif revealed and reinforced her identity, something she had always struggled with, being a slave-child.

Karin sat down in the far corner of the tent to look more closely at the book Vormar had given her. In half an hour Vormar would give the last lesson to her and the other adolescents preparing for the Voluval in his role as their essence instructor and she intended to use these few minutes to study the tattoo book. But when she had just started a commotion in another corner of the tent distracted her. Mattmar Graur and a few of his friends were light-

heartedly arguing with some girls. Karin noticed that Mattmar gave her a smile and a wink when he noticed her looking at him and she quickly looked down at the book again. 'The silly fool' she thought. She involuntarily ran through the events of last night in her head.

Karin was sitting on the flat roof of the tent-house of Graur at the outskirts of the camp. Troinn Graur was the richest merchant in Karin's hometown of Mithuris, and his son and heir, Mattmar Graur, was sitting beside her. They had been friends since childhood, but since Mattmar hit puberty they'd sort of drifted apart. Mattmar became pompous, vain and superficial, all traits that Karin loathed. But their mutual trepidation for the upcoming test tomorrow night made them seek each other out for support.

"What's on your mind, Karin?" Mattmar asked, watching her stare at the night sky.

"You should know." Karin answered after some pause.

"How could I know?" Mattmar laughed, "I'm not a mind-reader."

"Well, I know what's on your mind." she replied, leaning backwards on her hands and staring even more intently at the stars above.

"That's because I always have the same thing on my mind." Mattmar said with a twinkle in his eye and moved closer to Karin. Karin paid him no attention.

"What are you going to do after the ceremony tomorrow?" She asked him.

"I dunno, depends on my mark, I suppose." He answered, obviously not all that comfortable talking about it. Karin looked at him.

"You haven't thought about your mark?"

“No, why should I? It’s all subconscious anyway,” Mattmar said, adding: “And besides, almost all males in my family get the same basic mark: an upside-down triangle with two spokes at the top; the bull-mark. I’ll probably get the same.”

Karin saw that he was far from being as confident about it as he would let her believe, but decided not to press him about it. She was nervous enough about her own mark as it was. She feared she would get one of the degrading marks: the spiraling circle; the scarecrow; the purple cross; or any of the numerous other marks that could forever exile you from Minmatar society. Fortunately this didn’t happen often; Karin had only witnessed it once, when she was six years old. A teenage boy got the worst mark there was: the pale eye. The poor boy had been driven away from the town, not even his family was willing to recognize him, let alone help him. The memory still sent shivers down Karin’s spine and she huddled closer to Mattmar. Of course the boy misinterpreted this for a sign of affection and he tried to put his hand around her shoulders. She shook him off.

“What?” Mattmar said in mock surprise. This wasn’t the first time he tried it and failed. Suddenly Karin flared up, all her uncertainties and inner anxiety bursting out.

“What!? I tell you what, Mattmar Graur. Tomorrow you’ll be tested, tomorrow you’ll find out what future lies ahead of you, and you shrug it off like it was unimportant. I remember the time when we could talk about the future, our dreams, but now... Now, all you want to do is hang around with the guys and ogle the girls. What happened, man?” Karin shook her dark tresses in disgust.

“Hey, chill out kid. I care for the future. I just find it smarter to live in the now, rather than to constantly dwell on the future.” Mattmar leaned towards

Karin, his tone suddenly more serious. "To tell you the truth, I dream of becoming a High Justice."

"Well, in that case you should spend more time on your school books than on partying. With your grades you're lucky if you get to be a waiter in a Vherokior diner." Karin said teasingly.

"Aw, come on. I've got brains." Mattmar replied. "Plus, daddy has some friends in high places; he can get me an internship in the Justice Department. And once I've got my foot inside the door..." He thrust his hand upwards. "I'll shoot straight for the stars." He finished, laughing.

"So, it seems you've got it all figured out." Karin said.

"Sure I do. I always have and always will. What about you? I bet you have some fanciful dreams for the future." Mattmar asked.

"Yes..." Karin said reluctantly, unsure of how wise it was to confide in Mattmar. "It's only fair I tell you, right? Well, I feel deeply about the poor situation we Minmatars are in today."

"What are you talking about, kid?" Mattmar said. "We threw out the Amarrians, we're free."

"Maybe so, but we're still divided into multiple factions. The Republic is nothing but a loosely united assembly of factions, each seemingly with the only agenda to disrupt and disintegrate the state. We can't extend our political thought beyond the clan and it's tearing us apart. The result is that the Minmatars are scattered throughout our world of EVE; billions of them are still enslaved within the Amarr Empire and we don't have the wits to pull ourselves together to free them." Karin paused for breath.

“So we all hate the Amarr Empire.” Mattmar chimed in. “Don’t worry your pretty little head over these big issues.”

“I do worry, I’m slave-child, remember. My parents risked their lives getting me smuggled out of Amarr space and they’re still there, slaves to some hideous Amarrian.” Karin almost shouted, her anger and frustration again getting the better of her.

“We do fight the Amarrians, we’re doing our best.” Mattmar said soothingly.

“We’re not fighting the Amarrians, we’re fighting the Ammatars, our own cousins.”

“Those scums deserve to die, we’ll finish them off and then the Amarrians.” Mattmar responded.

“No, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. The Ammatars aren’t our real enemy. The Amarrians just play them off against us, keeping us both occupied. But if we’d unite we could take out the Amarrians for good.” Karin said heatedly.

“It’s impossible, we can never unite with the Ammatars.” Mattmar said. “Many have tried, and failed. You don’t want to become a failure, now do you?”

“I don’t care, all I know is that uniting the Minmatars is something I’m willing to fight for, even die for.”

“You know, it’s fanatics like you that give the rest of us a bad image.” Mattmar said, obviously tired of listening to what he considered to be silly ravings.

“No!” Karin screamed and jumped to her feet. “It’s people like you that are stifling the Minmatar race. It’s your narrow-mindedness that’s keeping billions of our people enslaved and oppressed this very minute!” Karin was fed up and stormed away, furious.

Thinking about all of this now, sitting here in the murky tent with Mattmar and his friends nearby, made Karin regret having said those things to him. Not that she was ashamed of her beliefs, but she shouldn’t have blurted them out like that, Mattmar was just the type to misunderstand the whole thing. She also regretted losing her temper, it didn’t improve her views in Mattmar’s eyes. Hopefully he would forget the whole thing.

Karin was pulled from her reverie by Vormar’s voice. He was gathering the adolescents around him, in preparation for the guidance he was going to give them in his role as essence instructor. Once they were seated around him, he began.

“Well, this is our last discussion before the ceremony begins. We’ve already covered pretty much everything and I think you’re all ready for the test. Just remember to stay calm during the ceremony and keep your mind focused. We have a last minute arrival here, Eliza. She’s been space cruising with her family for the last few weeks and they just arrived in time for the ceremony. So if the rest of you don’t mind, I’ll give Eliza a quick review. The rest of you can stay if you want to.”

No one moved, Vormar’s presence helped them to relax, something they all needed at this time. Vormar continued:

“Eliza, maybe it’s best if you ask me about anything that’s on your mind.”

“So, how exactly does the mark appear as it does?” It came as no surprise that Eliza, obviously a keen and bright girl, immediately asked about the most troubling matter on the minds of those undergoing the test.

Vormar cleared his throat before replying: “Yes, thank you Eliza for coming right to the point. As you know, if you’ve witnessed a Voluval before, those being tested undergo a special treatment by the spirit conductor overseeing the ceremony. This treatment involves direct injections into the heart and the ventral root area...”

“What kind of injections?” Eliza interrupted.

“Well, a large quantity of tyrosine is injected into the heart, which then, through metabolism, is turned into melanin by the body. Frankly, I’m not sure what exactly the mixture injected into the ventral root area consists of; it’s a closely guarded secret of the chemists that prepare it. Only a few of the ingredients are commonly known, among them are acetylcholine, oxytocin, calcitonin, and vasoactive intestinal polypeptide.” The names were clearly just as unfamiliar to Vormar as the rest of them, but at least it was something.

“And what does it do?” Eliza probed further. Vormar didn’t seem annoyed by Eliza’s discourteous questions; he was probably used to all kinds of weird or silly or rude questions from those he was preparing for the Voluval.

“Magic!” Vormar said and smiled. “No, seriously speaking, I can’t tell you with certainty. The melanin spreads all over the body through the blood stream, but only the small bit that is affected by the other injection is actually used. The rest flushes out of the body. Now, the real mystery is what the ventral root injection does. We only know what little the chemists that prepare it tell us: that it connects with the sub-consciousness and then uses the free-flowing melanin to form intricate marks on the body. These marks become a permanent feature of the person’s skin, a permanent tan so to speak that alters according to the skin color of the person to be constantly visible. They describe that person’s inner-self; what kind of

person he is deep down. I'm afraid that's all I know, and I guess you've heard it many times before."

Eliza continued to ask Vormar about the effects and nature of the injection, but Karin ignored them, she'd heard it all before. It was obvious to her that Vormar knew nothing more, or at least was unwilling to reveal it.

Like most Minmatar men Vormar was bare from the waist up, only thus could the multiple tattoos be displayed and appreciated properly. She scrutinized Vormar's mark: a circled dot just above his navel.

Sinuuous tattoos coiled around it, but none covered it. It was forbidden to put a tattoo over ones mark. Karin wished her mark would appear on the abdomen like Vormar's. It was humiliating to get it on the legs or arms or even the back. Karin knew that many dreamed about getting their mark in the face; it was the ultimate honor and brought instant fame to anyone that acquired it. But only one in a million got a facial mark, and the social burden of getting one was something that Karin was certain she could never handle at her age.

Once the session was over Karin joined a group of buddies from school. She couldn't really call any of them a friend; being the only slave-child in the school she was an outsider to most of the others.

The group was chatting about idle things, school and the weather; none of them wanted to think too much about the ceremony that was to start in a couple of hours. Not that the ceremony itself was that terrible, but the results of the ceremony could permanently alter the lives of any of them. Suddenly Mattmar barged into the group along with his loud and boisterous friends.

"Why's everyone so gloomy?" He cried. "We're getting our ticket into adulthood in a few hours and you act like a bunch of scared sissies. C'mon

you guys, brighten up. We'll party through the night and tomorrow we go and get ourselves our first tattoos." Mattmar finished with a flourish. All the kids around him cheered. But like the night before, Karin felt that Mattmar's attitude was immature, even if it lightened the crowd. He was too superficial about the whole thing, like it was some kind of a game. Mattmar spotted her sour face and called out:

"Hey Karin, what's up? Afraid you won't get your martyr mark?" He then turned to the others and continued:

"Karin wants to become friends with the Ammatars, she wants to go on a crusade with them." All the kids laughed and jeered at Karin.

'The bastard.' She thought, fighting the tears. 'How could he?' Karin finally realized what kind of a person Mattmar was. To him friendship meant nothing. He only called someone a friend when it suited his own selfish purposes. 'How could I be so stupid to trust him?' She thought. The taunts continued, the kids began calling her names:

"Stupid Ammatar bitch..."

"Filthy slave-lover..."

"Your mother was raped by an Amarr Holder, you ugly bastard..."

Karin ran away, the taunts following her retreating steps, silent tears streaming down her cheeks. She knew her dream was to most people absurd, but she fervently believed in it, and she wasn't going to give it up for anybody. 'Maybe I'm like the Rock in the story.' She thought to herself. 'Maybe I want to build my own mountain, pebble for pebble, stone for stone. And cripple myself when it crumbles.'

The sacred ground was a flat piece of land about quarter of a kilometer on each side. It formed a small stage-like plateau of crystallized rock, formed by the extreme heat caused by the thrusters of a landing space ship.

The sacred ground marked the place where one of the huge colonization ships carrying the ancestors of the Minmatars landed thousands of years ago.

A circle of fires enclosed the plateau, the flickering lights illuminating the place and blocking out the stars. Spectators numbering a few thousands thronged the area around it, but the plateau itself was empty. In the middle of it, circles and signs had been painted in preparation for the upcoming ritual.

The ceremony was about to start. The spirit conductor entered the plateau; his appearance silenced the expectant crowd. Behind the spirit conductor the lesser supervisors filed along, each taking their places on the plateau. Music, rhythmical beatings, sprang forth; the men on the plateau began humming a hymn in time to the music; the Voluval had started.

On a stony hillock some two kilometers from the sacred ground a lonesome figure huddled on a rock. Karin watched the ceremony commence, uncertainty written over her face. She wanted to crawl under the rock she sat on, crawl beneath it and disappear forever. But she couldn't do it, she owed it to the parents she never knew to go back and take the test. She kicked a small pebble at her feet and watched it roll down the hillside, taking dozens of its brethren with it. She made up her mind. If she couldn't face her fears here, among supposed friends and allies, then when could she? If she wasn't ready to stand up for her beliefs against her compatriots, then how could she do so when facing Ammatars, or Amarrians? Karin stood up and started running.

The first few participants were through. All had escaped humiliation and many were proudly brandishing respectable marks. Karin joined the back of the line, ignoring the curious gazes around her. Next up was Mattmar.

He strode to the spirit conductor, confidence radiating from him. He kneeled before the conductor, who sprinkled Mattmar's head with a smelly brew intended to cleanse the spirit. Then Mattmar raised his head and one of the assistants handed the conductor a silver syringe. With one swift stroke the conductor plunged the syringe right into Mattmar's chest, through his breastbone and into his heart. Mattmar's body tensed, but he didn't cry out, as so many did. The conductor pulled the syringe out again in another practiced stroke and the assistant pressed a cloth against the small puncture wound on Mattmar's chest.

The conductor continued his ritual mumblings, walking behind Mattmar. Kneeling behind the boy he took another syringe from the hands of an assistant. With his left hand he felt Mattmar's small back for a second before plunging the syringe into the base of the spine. Again Mattmar tensed, but there was no cry.

The conductor rose to his feet and walked in front of Mattmar again. Now it was Mattmar's turn to speak, the only time during the ritual he was allowed to. A small saying was required, while the potions started racing through the body. The saying was intended as a declaration of the person's look on life, himself, or his surroundings. Through the ages, many of the sayings became standardized, children saying the same thing as their mother or father before them. Karin had thought long and hard about her saying, finally deciding on two lines from a poem by Hantur Gutrerren: 'Place yourself in the heart of your family/Then nothing can separate you', finding it appropriate for her background and future dreams. Mattmar didn't say anything new, his saying was the same as his father's: 'I take pride in protecting my people and honor in housing them.'

Mattmar rose to his feet and the conductor placed a black mantle around his head and shoulders, covering him completely. It would be removed once the mark had appeared. Everyone waited in anticipation; the minutes ticked by. Finally the conductor declared that the mark had appeared and removed the mantle. Mattmar looked down, then turned towards the crowd. The bull-mark, the horned triangle, was sitting squarely in the middle of his chest. It was the ultimate place for such a mark. Mattmar beamed with pride when the crowd enthusiastically applauded. He took his place on the plateau among those already tested, his haughty manners disgusting Karin.

The ceremony continued, one adolescent after another. Karin didn't pay much attention to the procedure. Between her nervousness and the arrogant glare of Mattmar in her direction her mind didn't seem to function all too well. At last it was her turn. She walked up to the conductor, trying not to shake visibly. She went through the motions of the ceremony like an automaton, not even noticing whether she cried or not when the steel syringe penetrated her flesh. The conductor's voice broke through to her; it was time for her saying. She opened her eyes. Over the shoulder of the conductor she saw the toothy grin on Mattmar's face. Karin opened her mouth and listened to the words spill out: 'Vain flame burns fast/and its lick is light/Modest flame lasts long/and burns to the bone.' Karin didn't realize what she said until it was all out; she was as startled as the others. She saw Mattmar's smile falter a little. He knew what she meant.

Karin felt the tingle, in her spine and under her skin. She wasn't sure if it felt discomforting or merely unpleasant. The conductor placed the mantle on her shoulders and lifted the hood over her head, shielding her eyes from those around her. Her mind was a blur, but from its depth she heard Vormar's voice: 'Keep your mind focused.' She forced her mind clear, her skin now felt cold and clammy, then suddenly the mantle was pulled off her. She blinked once or twice, accustoming her eyes once more to the bright lights illuminating the small plateau. She looked around her. Every face was staring at her like she had suddenly materialized from thin air. Silence,

none spoke, all she heard was her own shallow breathing. The decade old memory of the boy and his pale-eye mark popped into her mind; the reaction then was the same stunned silence. Karin looked down on herself. Nothing, she saw nothing on her torso or abdomen or legs or arms. Then the conductor lifted a mirror and she saw her face. And there, extending down and side-ways from her left eye were several dark lines, ranging from one to three centimeters in length. She caught her breath. It was the Ray of Matar mark, the rarest and most revered of all the marks.

Karin felt dizzy, like she was going to faint; her mind was in turmoil. And yet her face, staring at her in the mirror, remained impassive and calm. She looked the conductor in the eye; the man was obviously in a state of shock and disbelief. As Karin was the last of those undergoing the test the conductor should be finishing off the ceremony at this very moment, but he stood there immobile. She scanned the faces of the crowd, finally finding a familiar face in Vormar. The pleading in her eyes was not unnoticed by the old man and he walked to her. Vormar took her hands in his and softly said:

“You’re obviously meant for something great, my dear.”

“Yes.” Karin answered confidently. “Yes, I’m sure I am.”

In her mind, the stones were beginning to pile up, one by one.

The Jovian Wet Grave

Lieutenant Hirakii Pirkotan looked at his freshly shaven face in the steel mirror in his cabin aboard the Caldari cruiser Okarioni. Immaculate. For the first time in weeks the young lieutenant had the almost forgotten feeling of excitement in the pit of his stomach. Pirkotan's father had fought in the war against the Gallentean Federation and his thrilling tales of battles and bravery had made their mark on the teenage mind of Pirkotan. But the war had been over for 15 years, and in all the years that Pirkotan had spent in the navy, hardly anything noteworthy had ever occurred. Scrubbing, drilling, sleeping - that seemed the be-all and end-all of navy life. But then, less than two months ago, a new race had made contact with the Caldari. Pirkotan knew little about the race, except that they were most likely of human origins. Shortly after the first contact, the Okarioni had been ordered to the frontier where the new race had introduced itself. And now, after days of uneventful cruising through Caldari space, the ship was nearing its destination - a rendezvous with a ship belonging to the new race.

Pirkotan straightened his jacket for the umpteenth time and left his cabin. While walking towards the bridge his mind once again turned to this unorthodox mission. There were too many loose ends and unanswered questions for Pirkotan's comfort. Why had the Okarioni been ordered to berth on a high-security military shipyard belonging to the Ishukone corporation for two weeks before coming here? And what strange devices had been installed and then sealed in Cargo Hold B? Why this secrecy, preventing even him, the second-in-command, from knowing what was going on? Pirkotan was not happy with the situation and while he was aware that many of the crew members felt the same way, he knew better than to complain. With these troubled thoughts on his mind, Pirkotan reached the bridge.

Captain Ouriye was seated in the command chair on the bridge, overseeing the last course-changes to the meeting point. Pirkotan sat himself down in his own chair to the left and a little bit behind the command chair.

"So what's the situation, sir?" he asked.

"We should rendezvous in about 20 minutes," Ouriye responded. The captain and his sub-ordinate sat in silence for a minute. Finally, Ouriye spoke:

"Now that we're about to rendezvous I can fill you in on our mission." Pirkotan's ears perked up; at last he'd know why they were being sent here. The captain sat silent for a full minute before he spoke again.

"This race we've made contact with calls itself Jove. I know nothing more of them, except that the high command informs me that they seem highly advanced. The reason for us being here is to exchange information. It seems these Jovians regard the acquisition of information to be their highest goal in life and are willing to pay handsomely for it," Ouriye chuckled, then continued:

"We're giving them all kinds of information: data on social issues, historical facts, navigational charts, even some military secrets," captain Ouriye was visibly upset by this last statement.

"But our superiors feel that what we're getting in exchange is worth it..." the captain trailed off.

"What are we getting in exchange?" Pirkotan asks.

"I'm not sure, lieutenant, I'm not sure. It's some sort of a device for controlling or communicating with your ship, that's all I know."

Pirkotan sat thoughtfully, scratching the back of his neck. It was still sore after the operation. While berthed on the Ishukone station Ouriye had encouraged Pirkotan to have neural implants inserted into his spinal cord and cerebellum, saying that it would definitely further his career.

"Sir, these things we're giving them, are they in Cargo Hold B?" Pirkotan asked the captain.

"No, that, uh... device, is what we're getting in exchange from the Jovians." Ouriye answered.

"What? We already have what we're getting here on this ship? I don't understand, sir." Pirkotan said puzzled.

"We've got a part of it. All the vital bits, such as the cognitive pattern decoders, are missing. The Jovians we're about to meet will bring those missing bits and show us how everything works." Ouriye said.

Pirkotan pondered for a while. "What I don't understand, sir, is why we were sent on our own to meet these Jovians."

"What do you mean?" inquired Ouriye?

"Well, I'd think that at this early stage in our relationship with the Jovians that diplomats, not soldiers, would deal solely with them, sir. I wonder why we weren't assigned a diplomat to handle the discussions..."

"We're not here as official representatives of the Caldari State. Our orders come directly from Rato Momoriyota, CEO of the Ishukone corporation. This mission, this trade, is strictly the business of the Ishukone corporation. Our superiors have every confidence in us to complete this mission on our own." Ouriye explained.

"By our superiors, you mean the heads of the Ishukone corporation, sir?"

"Yes, that's correct, lieutenant." Ouriye replied. "But that doesn't make this mission any less important or meaningful."

By now, the vessel they were to meet was clearly visible on the radar.

"Their ship doesn't seem all that big," Pirkotan observed. Indeed, the vessel was only half as big as the Okarioni, only slightly bigger than an average Caldari frigate. The ship was a combination of rather dull-looking shiny-metal green, brown and gray. It had a most peculiar shape, almost like it had been grown or carved, instead of built.

The communication officer waved them over. "We're receiving a message from the Jovian vessel," the officer said. "It says they're coming over."

"All right," Ouriye said, "Lieutenant, you know your duty."

"Yes, captain," Pirkotan answered and exited the bridge. He went to the shuttle bay, bringing four marines with him. "Behave yourself, men," Pirkotan said, "These are distinguished guests we're to escort, each and every one of you is now an ambassador for the Caldari State." 'Or the Ishukone corporation, at any rate.' Pirkotan thought.

A shuttle, in the same colors as the Jovian ship, was docking in the bay. Three small men exited the shuttle. Each of them wore a tunic-like uniform of fine materials, light-brown and gray in color. Although they were definitely human, they looked very strange: their skin was pale grayish yellow, almost transparent, with veins clearly discernible. The heads seemed abnormally big, but otherwise their bodies were thin and feeble-looking. Pirkotan couldn't help the uneasiness he felt by looking at them. The three men walked towards Pirkotan and one of them, walking in front of the others addressed Pirkotan. "Greetings, Caldari officer. I'm Anu of

Jove and these are my aides Yed and Elas," the Jovian spoke in perfect Caldanese, with almost no detectable accent, his movements and gestures were lithe and graceful. Pirkotan wondered where the Jovian had learned such good Caldanese.

Pirkotan caught himself staring into the pale yellow eyes of the Jovian and stuttered his answer. "Yes, uh... welcome aboard the Okarioni, sir. Um... I'm lieutenant Hirakii Pirkotan. Please follow me." Pirkotan tore his eyes away from the probing gaze of the Jovian, turned on his heels and started walking towards the main deck. The Jovians followed and Pirkotan heard them chattering among themselves in a strange language that seemed to consist entirely of vowels.

Back on the bridge, Pirkotan introduced the captain and the Jovians. Ouriye seemed perfectly at ease conversing with the Jovians, unlike Pirkotan, who was nervous and uncomfortable. But while the Jovians were making small talk with the captain, Pirkotan for the first time managed to see them as humans and not some outer space aliens. They even laughed dutifully at the captain's jokes, showing their full understanding of the social etiquette found everywhere among humans. Soon, the conversation turned to the matters at hand and the Jovians asked to see the items they were to receive.

"Lieutenant Pirkotan, bring the crate in my personal quarters." Ouriye ordered Pirkotan, handing him a security key. "Bring it here to the bridge."

"Yes, sir." Pirkotan answered, motioning the four marines to follow him. As he was leaving the bridge he heard one of the Jovians ask: "Has he been prepared, captain?" and Ouriye replied: "As much as he needs to be." Pirkotan hesitated for a moment, but then continued, contemplating what he'd overheard. 'Were they talking about me?' he thought.

The crate was not all that big, maybe one meter in length and half a meter in height and breadth, but it was surprisingly heavy. Pirkotan unlocked the security bindings and the four marines struggled with it to the bridge. Pirkotan handed Ouriye back the security key and the captain used his personal code on the crate. The lock snapped open with a loud hiss and Ouriye stepped back, allowing the Jovians access to the crate.

Anu opened the crate and started pulling items out of it and handing them to his assistants, who compared them to a list they had, marking things off. Once the Jovians were satisfied that everything was as it should be they began studying the items carefully. They worked incredibly fast, inserting data disks and info clips into their palm computers, scanning the contents for a few seconds, then throwing it away for another. They fired up hologram reels and fast forwarded through them, casting flickering lights around the bridge and made the heads of the Caldari spin in confusion. After a few minutes the Jovians suddenly stopped all at once and began chattering excitedly to each other. It was obvious that they were satisfied with what they had seen.

"This crate contains what we bargained for. Please take it to our shuttle." Anu said to Ouriye.

"First, let's make sure everything we bargained for is in order." Ouriye replied wryly, emphasizing 'we'.

Pirkotan noticed a momentary hesitation in Anu before he answered: "Of course, captain. A deal is a deal. Everything according to the plan, eh?"

"Yes," Ouriye answered, glancing at Pirkotan, "according to the plan."

The doors to Cargo Hold B had been welded shut and it took few minutes to cut them open. Pirkotan felt his gut tighten in excitement, but also dread. He'd always prided himself in having full knowledge of every situation, full

control. Now that he was left more or less in the dark, he feared the unknown. Pirkotan remembered a saying of one of his teachers in officer training: 'Always expect the unexpected. Then all surprises will be pleasant ones.' Somehow, this did not comfort him all that much at the moment.

The inside of Cargo Hold B was cold and darkly lit. In the middle of the floor was a black metal object, about four or five meters tall. Numerous pipes and wires linked it with the walls of the cargo hold. The object was obviously of Jovian design; it had the same oddly carved shape as the Jovian ship and shuttle. The Jovians walked up to the object and made a quick inspection of it.

"This is a capsule," Anu said to the Caldari. "It is used to control a ship. With it a ship as big as this one can be controlled with only a handful of crew and smaller ships, like your frigates, can even be controlled by a single person."

"How is this possible?" Ouriye asked. He was obviously skeptical, even if he didn't seem as surprised by what Anu said as the other Caldari.

"The controller, captain if you like, of the ship is stationed inside the capsule. Through it, he's neural rigged to all parts of the ship. The capsule is like one gigantic computer, with the captain at the core, controlling everything." Any answered.

"But how can a single man control a whole ship?" Ouriye pressed.

"Thank you, captain, I was coming to that. As I said, the captain acts as the central unit in a highly advanced computer. This role allows him to access and evaluate data at extreme pace. He can easily handle the jobs it takes 5 or 10 people to do normally. It also makes him a better commander, he has better understanding and awareness of his environment and he's not boggled down by tedious crew management issues and frequent

communication breakdowns are now history." Anu finished, looking over the faces of the thoughtful Caldari standing before him.

"So what is the downside?" Pirkotan asked. "There is always a downside."

"Not in this case, lieutenant," Anu replied. "The capsule offers greater control to ships, yet fewer crew members. As you know one of the biggest costs in maintaining a ship is training the crew, this cost is now much reduced. We Jovians are not numerous, yet we can field a very formidable fleet because of capsules."

"So what about this capsule controller? Can anybody control this thing?" Ouriye probed, obviously eager to garner as much knowledge as he could about these capsules.

"Not anybody, no," Any answered. "The controller must have the required neural implants."

Pirkotan fingered the newly planted implants at the back of his neck; a grim realization dawning in his mind.

"But why this huge structure? Couldn't the controller simply be strapped into a neural chair?" Ouriye inquired.

"The neural riggings for the capsule are much more elaborate and advanced than those you know, captain; they require the user to be in complete stasis for efficient usage. The capsule is filled with a fluid, in which the captain floats. This fluid filters out all external interferences, as well as protecting and nourishing the captain." One of the Jovian aides had now opened a hologram blueprint of the capsule and Anu used it while explaining how it was built. "Also, the capsule has extremely strong armor, giving even more protection to the captain. We Jovians do not like

unnecessary squandering of lives." Pirkotan thought Anu said this last sentence with an unusual fervor.

"So, can you make it work?" Ouriye asked, he had obviously satisfied his curiosity about this thing and now wanted to see it in action.

"Yes, as long as your engineers followed our instructions correctly when building the capsule and connecting it to the ship."

"You mean, this capsule will take control of the ship?" Ouriye asked anxiously.

"Yes, but we can override it easily. This is only for demonstration purposes." Anu answered.

The Jovians started fiddling with various control panels on the capsule. One by one, the systems in the capsule came to life, lights started blinking and a low humming noise emanated from it. Finally, Anu turned to the Caldari: "The capsule is now operational. It is ready for testing."

The eyes of the Jovians and captain Ouriye turned to Pirkotan. He felt like a mouse trapped in a cage. He knew now that Ouriye's suggestion about the neural implants hadn't been based on friendship; he'd been cunningly manipulated into this position and he knew it was impossible to refuse now. But why this duplicity? Why hadn't they simply ordered him to take the implants?

"I, uh... you want me to go into that thing, sir?" Pirkotan stammered, hoping against hope that his suspicions were false.

"Yes, lieutenant Pirkotan. You have the honor of being the first Caldari to test a capsule." Ouriye answered. "Don't you feel honored?"

"Ah, yes. Yes, sir. I'm deeply honored," Pirkotan whispered. The two Jovian aides were now standing beside him. Pirkotan started walking forward, as if his body was moving of its own accord. He was now standing before Anu, who placed his hands on the back of his neck. Anu explored the neural implants with his fingers and stared intently into Pirkotan's face. Pirkotan couldn't make himself meet the gaze.

"Please stand absolutely still," Anu said to him. "We need to hook you up." Pirkotan was too numb to answer, let alone move. One of the Jovians placed a tight rubber cap with lots of tube sockets over his head, covering his eyes and ears. Another Jovian inserted tubes into his nostrils. Finally, he felt his neural jacks being plugged. "He is ready," a voice said. Pirkotan felt hands lead him, he was lifted and he felt liquid engulf him. He was sinking!

But he could still breath through his nose. He couldn't see and he couldn't hear. All he felt was this cold, sticky fluid all around him. He was inside the capsule! Pirkotan slowly ran his hands over the inner surface of the capsule. It was very smooth and Pirkotan found no seams or cracks, or any controls or buttons for that matter. The capsule was tightly closed and no discernible way to open it from the inside. Pirkotan was not normally claustrophobic, but now he felt panic rise within him and he wanted to scream and run. But he could do neither; the thick fluid hindered all fast movements and when Pirkotan opened his mouth it was instantly filled with the strange-tasting bluish liquid. Pirkotan was forced to swallow it so he could breath again. Pirkotan tried to calm himself down, but when nothing happened for what seemed like eternity he once again despaired. He had read about people being accidentally buried alive in olden times and now he felt like they must have; this capsule, this thing, felt like a wet grave, burying him. 'Is this the end?' Pirkotan thought. 'Maybe the machine has malfunctioned, maybe they can't get me out!'

Then, all of a sudden, a bright light filled his eyes and a sound like rushing wind filled his ears. After few seconds the light dimmed down and Pirkotan was able to see, but everything became deadly quiet. And what he saw made his stomach somersault. He was looking at the Okarioni from the outside! It was as if he was floating in space maybe 100 meters from the ship.

"Can you hear me?" a voice said. It was Anu. Pirkotan tried instinctively to speak, but his mouth was again filled with the fluid and only a strangled croak emerged. 'Hello?' he thought.

"Hello, lieutenant Pirkotan," Anu said. "We can hear you. The communication link in this demonstration capsule is automatically open, normally you control whether it's open or closed. We are monitoring your progress. Can you see the ship?"

"Yes," Pirkotan replied, simply by thinking about it. "Yes, I can see the ship. But whose eyes am I seeing through?"

"You're viewing the ship through a camera drone. Think about moving. Try to move to the right. See what happens."

Pirkotan thought about this and was delighted to find the camera move according to his wishes. He swooped alongside the ship, spinning the camera in circles and zooming it out, all with a mere thought. Pirkotan noticed that no matter how he turned the camera, the ship always stayed in the middle of his vision. As he got more accustomed to this new sensation he could feel his surroundings much better. In fact, if he concentrated he could feel Okarioni, like he and the ship were one; he felt the engines purr in his belly, he felt the electrodes bounce on his skin, he felt the crew crawl around inside him. The feeling was exhilarating.

After a while Anu's voice came back: "You're doing very well. Now we are going to activate the audio synthesizers."

"Audio synthesizers? What do you mean?" Pirkotan thought.

"As you know there is no sound in space, but when we were developing the capsules we found that people wanted to use as many of their senses as possible, thus we added the sound. By letting a computer create three dimensional sound we also add to the awareness you have while in battles, for instance."

Several seconds later Pirkotan could hear the audio synthesizers kick in; he could hear the low humming noise of the propulsion system and the sudden hissing sound of course-correctional thrusters. Anu came back on: "Now we'll test the audio system."

Suddenly a missile was launched from one of the missile bays. It flew majestically out from the ship and disappeared to the right of Pirkotan's vision. Pirkotan turned the camera and watched it fly away from the ship. Then a stab of green and yellow light came from the Jovian vessel, accompanied by a loud crackling noise. The weapon burst hit the missile and it exploded. Pirkotan heard the explosion clearly and when he turned the camera to the Jovian vessel he could still hear the explosion's residue in the background. Once again, Anu spoke: "That went very well. Now for the final test. I want you to shut down the propulsion system, and then turn it back on. You must open the ship control menu and use that."

Pirkotan thought about the propulsion system. Nothing happened. Then he thought about controlling the ship. And then, before him and overlaying the ship, a menu appeared. Pirkotan navigated himself through the menu with his mind and found the shut down action for the propulsion system. He activated the action and the menu disappeared. Pirkotan now saw the

propulsion glow fade out and the constant humming slowly died out. Pirkotan now repeated the process, turning the propulsion system back on.

"Well done, lieutenant Pirkotan," came Anu's voice. "You have concluded the testing. Your performance was faultless."

As suddenly as it had appeared the vision before Pirkotan's eyes disappeared and darkness engulfed him. He blinked his eyes several times, the vision of Okarioni still embedded in his nerves, but slowly fading away. Pirkotan then felt as if he was falling at a great speed, but before he could react he passed out.

Pirkotan awoke slowly like from a deep sleep. His eyes were open and he was staring at a dull gray wall. He tried to look around, but found that he couldn't. He felt strangely disoriented. From somewhere behind him he heard low voices speaking. He recognized the voice of his captain and that of Anu of Jove. He tried to speak, to let them know he was awake, but nothing happened. Suddenly the chatter in the background registered in his mind:

"I have examined him, I'm afraid the symptoms all point towards it." Anu was saying.

"This mind-lock as you call it, is it permanent?" captain Ouriye asked.

"I'm afraid so. We have studied it thoroughly and found no cure. It's a shame, if I may say so."

"But how do you prevent it in the first place? I mean, was this bound to happen?" the captain enquired.

"Under the circumstances, yes. The only way to prevent this is with intense training for many years. That timeframe was unacceptable to your

superiors. Besides, you knew what was going to happen all along. You have no grounds for complaints now."

"I know, I know," Ouriye sighed. "I had my reservations, but what could I do? I was under strict orders."

"I understand," Anu replied. "The lieutenant performed admirably. You can be proud of him."

"I am," Ouriye answered.

Silence. 'What is going on?' Pirkotan thought. 'They must be talking about me. What mind-lock?' Then the captain and two of the Jovians appeared before him. They looked at his face, into his open eyes. 'Hey!' Pirkotan screamed in his mind. 'Help me!'

"He looks so peaceful, lying there. Is he conscious?" asked the captain.

"Who knows? Maybe, maybe not," came Anu's reply.

"It's sad to lose him, he was an efficient officer. And a valued friend," Ouriye said. "He will receive the Medal of Valor for this, it will be sent to his parents. His father will be so proud."

"And rightly so," Anu said. "Anyway, we have certain... treatments that can be beneficial to him, if you're interested...?"

"I thank you for your offer, but it is unnecessary," Ouriye replied. "We have very good institutions that can take care of him. He will be well provided for."

Pirkotan screamed a silent curse. His fate was sealed. He had been sacrificed for the greater good of the Caldari State, like a clog in a great big

machine. Just before he passed into a murky slumber, Pirkotan read the motto of the Caldari Navy embedded on the captain's sleeve: 'All For the Good of Many.' Much good it would do him, stuck in his own mind for the rest of his life.

Part Three

Scientific Articles

The Capsule and the Clone

1. The Capsule

Initially the hydrostatic capsule, as given to the Caldari by the Jovians roughly 120 years ago, contained no facilities for the clone-body retransplantation of those dying inside it.. In addition, it proved fiercely maladaptive to the human body in myriad ways. All sorts of physiological differences between ordinary humans and their genetically enhanced Jovian counterparts served to make the pod extremely dangerous to humans in its original incarnation, and even the most rigorous training regimens usually failed to save people from the horrors of the mind lock or wetgraving.

Added to this, the mere thought of hooking wires and tubes into one's body and stepping into something as seemingly alien as a hydrostatic pod, filled with fluid intended to nurture the body through a state of what is essentially suspended animation, didn't (and still doesn't) appeal to the vast majority of pilots. For decades horror stories abounded as to the hideous things that could happen to a person inside a capsule (most of which, unsettlingly enough, were true).

For years, no single political or commercial entity had enough vested interest in pod tech to attempt a change in this public perception. The Jovians had held the official patent on the technology since releasing it to the Caldari, but had adamantly refused all monetary remuneration for its production. For this show of apparent nobility they gave no explanation; nor did they make any attempt to increase the technology's practicality for those not endowed with their genetic superiority. Their motives in not doing so have been speculated upon broadly and extensively, but no consensus has ever been reached.

Throughout the period where the capsule and the clone had not yet begun their courtship, pods saw some use among those select few able to handle the intense nausea, hallucinations and general mental instability engendered by prolonged occupancy. Stories are told of pod pilot heroes flying on the side of the Caldari during the twilight years of the Gallente-Caldari war, executing maneuvers unthinkable to those encumbered with a full crew complement and the bothersome necessity of using vocal commands and hand-eye coordination to steer their vessels. Such pilots were a rare breed, though; because of the technology's inherent dangers, capsule-fitted ships were not yet in mass production and existing models therefore had to be retro-fitted at great effort and expense.

Excluded from general usage due to drawbacks which rendered it a ludicrously expensive exercise in mortal danger, the capsule lay dormant for years.

2. Cloning

While new techniques in clone creation and retransplantation have made the process cheaper and more efficient today than ever before, the inherent unreliability of non-capsule cloning and the still-extravagant cost involved for prospective clients effectively prohibits the vast majority of planetside inhabitants from considering it an option. Additionally, moral and religious objections to the work done in the field have surfaced to some extent in every society where its products have become available. Derogatorily known as "Doomies" by those who don't share their beliefs, these objectors, sometimes numbering among them major political and religious figureheads, have nonetheless exerted a considerable amount of influence on the way cloning is perceived by the general populace. Protests and riots over the issue, while rare, have taken place on numerous worlds since commercial cloning began, and while the cloning companies' ceaseless marketing has yielded significantly greater public acceptance in the past few years, a number of people still feel strongly that the whole field

represents a denial of humanity's spirituality and should be abandoned for "safer" scientific pursuits.

Despite the advances made in cloning tech, in almost every single environment retransplantation of the mind at time of death is still risky ground. The crucial element in the process relies on a brain-scan snapshot being taken at the precise time of death and transmitted to the waiting clone, and so the transneural burning scanner required to do so needs to be mounted somewhere close to the person at all times. Since the snapshot itself causes massive physical damage to the gray matter, there can be no margin of error; it needs to be done at the exact time of death. In planetary vehicles, the cloning companies have experimented with mounting the transneural scanner in a variety of locations, but the almost limitless potentiality of planet-bound environments has proved time and again that it just isn't safe – snapshots either go off due to false stimuli, leaving healthy clients in a vegetative state, or fail to go off due to circumstances unforeseen by the safeguard mechanism, leaving clients dead with no chance of retransplantation.

In the capsule, however, things are different. All the equipment needs to do is detect a breach in the pod, because – as every cadet has hammered into his head from the moment he starts training – pod breach, without exception, spells doom for the person inside. Therefore, the instant the egg begins to crack, two things happen: the wire-cap on the pilot's head injects an instantly lethal nanotoxin into his bloodstream and the scanner sends its piercing light into his skull. Scarce seconds later, he begins the muddy climb towards consciousness in a new body, light years away.

3. A Match Made in Heaven

It was not until eight years ago that clone manufacturers realized the vast potential of the hydrostatic capsule as a platform for their own technology. Funded by some of the largest megacorporation conglomerates in the

universe, they set to work on capsule research and development, buying permission from the proper agencies to make modifications to the original blueprint.

After years of dedicated research, a breakthrough was made. In YC 104 (two years ago), the first transneural burning scan interface was successfully installed in a capsule; technology that would, within six months of testing, allow for perfect clone transplantation upon pod breach in 99.7% of tested instances – a level of reliability far surpassing anything the cloning industry had ever achieved before.

At that point, utilizing the considerable capital at their disposal, the cloning corporations managed through incessant and insidious marketing strategies to change the public perception sufficiently to allow them to push their industry into the limelight through the avenue of the hydrostatic capsule. After six months of exhaustive testing and tireless marketing, the transneural burning scan interface was finalized and public perception had been primed.

At the same time this was happening, CONCORD prepared and adopted legal acts which required every single manufactured capsule to be fitted with a transneural echo burning scanner, in addition to mandating clone contracts for every single pilot cleared to fly a capsule-fitted vessel. The official rationale given for the laws was that an increase in the viable applications of capsule equipment would allow for further exploration along the technological frontier as well as the trackless fathoms of deep space. It was, of course, widely whispered that the cloning companies had used their megacorp backing to effect these legislative changes, but those theories were never conclusively proven.

Whatever its real causes, the fact remained – the capsule and the clone were now inextricably joined, the legislative mandate consolidating their bond. Thus was born the PC pilot.

Cloning

Statement of purpose

Cromeaux Inc. aims to become the largest provider of high quality clones within the Federation. The cloning business is becoming one of the most lucrative industries in the world of EVE and an innovative and vigorous company can quickly get a good turnover. Cromeaux Inc. has in recent months hired some of the best scientists in the field and intends with their help to develop further its pioneering cloning-technique to gain a sizeable market-share within the next five years. Cromeaux Inc. was founded 7 years ago as an independent division of the Chemal Tech, which owns 2/3 of the company. The rest is held by key employees (25%) and the Bank of Luminaire (8%). The funds raised in this round of finances will allow the company to grow to the level where it can start offering competitive products on a Federation-wide bases.

Business

Clones are a luxury commodity in high demand. The number of illegal clone clinics, often using inferior and even dangerous materials, clearly indicates that a substantial market is out there ready to be serviced by high quality, reliable and governmentally approved clones.

Cromeaux Inc. was founded 7 years ago by Dr. Yomir Veschens, an established expert in biochemistry and the entrepreneur Eron Jascete. Today it has more than 4.000 employees, including many of the leading geneticists and bioengineers in the world. Some of the key personnel currently employed by Cromeaux Inc. are:

- Dr. Yomir Veschens. CTO. Graduated from SWS in '74 EST with a Ph.D. in both Biochemistry and Gene-design. Member of Dr. Jurg

Akrael's team and contributed to its successes in perfecting the brain mapping technique. Co-founder of Cromeaux Inc.

- Marika Alois. CEO. A respected manager, Alois has been director of several startup companies, including KS Manufacturing and DioSec. Became CEO of Cromeaux Inc. earlier this year.
- Daphnie Fonterouche. CFO. Former bank manager for Bank of Luminaire. Worked as an independent financial advisor before joining Cromeaux Inc. four years ago.
- Dr. Roul Gonzi. Senior Engineer. Former employee in the clone department of Poteque Pharmaceuticals, where he supervised the clone research team.
- Dr. Araham Keredin. Researcher. Dr. Keredin was a Biology professor at the Royal Institute on Amarr Prime before joining Cromeaux Inc. in the spring. He is an expert on mnemonic theories and psyche restoration.

Cromeaux Inc. already operates five cloning facilities in the Federation, all in high density, high yield areas. The company plans to open seven more facilities in the coming months, thereof four located on space stations. This is to tap into the clone demand from space ship captains, which are quickly becoming the largest group of clientele.

The largest manufacturer of clones within the Federation at the moment is Poteque Pharmaceuticals. Being the largest biotech company within the Federation Poteque made an easy transaction into the clone business as soon as the technology became financially viable and the laws for their use firm. However, the fact that the clone production is only a small subsection of the huge conglomerate means it is not a priority. Cromeaux Inc., on the other hand, by focusing solely on clones, have a unique opportunity to become a leader in the field of clone manufacturing.

Here is the current market breakdown between the largest clone companies:

- Poteque Pharmaceuticals [30%]
- Zainou [21%]
- Genolution [9%]
- Lai Dai [7%]
- Eifyr & Co. [4%]
- Cromeaux Inc. [1%]
- Other [28%]

Cromeaux Inc. intends to control 5% of the clone market in five years.

Operation

Cloning technology can be divided into three major components: clone manufacturing, brain growth & storage and clone quality. Each of these areas requires intimate knowledge and skilled staff to operate, something Cromeaux Inc. is very proud to possess in abundance.

Clone manufacturing:

Clones are manufactured using biomass. Modern methods allow pretty much any kind of biomass to be used. The best clones are constructed from human cadavers, but anything from animal carcasses to organic soups can be used. Using lower quality materials requires more extensive structuring and chemical processes and introduces a greater risk for error in the transfer of the customer's features.

At the time of purchase, the customer undergoes a thorough examination and several tissue samples are taken. This is then used to construct a clone of the customer – a clone that receives the consciousness of the original at the moment of death, granting a new life.

At Cromeaux Inc. all clones are made from certified human cadavers, all of them received from willing donors. The biomass has not been tampered with or thinned out – only highest quality preservatives have been introduced to hinder tissue decomposition. Cromeaux Inc. mission is to establish itself as the manufacturer of clones of the very highest quality and its clientele can rest assured that the underhanded tactics used by so many clone stations do not apply for its operation. All federal laws and regulations are applied rigorously, with governmental inspectors a permanent feature on all our stations.

The biomass is used to construct a functioning body. This body is complete in every sense, with fully functioning organs and peripheral neural system. Instead of a brain there is only a primitive cluster of ganglia which is capable of maintaining heart rate, blood pressure and respiration. Core body temperature is dependent on the environment, and so has to be controlled very carefully in order not to damage the cells. The immune system of the donor is crippled and the thymus is removed and replaced with implanted cells from the customer. The clone body will thus not reject any implant – this makes it possible to seed the body with stem cells from the customer. The clone's body cells divide very slowly, allowing the new cells to take over in time.

Culturing a clone takes several months, but all clone stations store generic clones that are only put to use when a client buys it. The skull, and frequently other bones as well, is replaced by osteoplastic materials – soft synthetic bone polymers that can be shaped and then hardened by gamma laser irradiation. In this way, facial features and other body marks and textures can be applied very quickly. The process is very quick and is applied as soon as the clone is purchased. A similar technique is also used to adjust skin tones and give special skin marks, such as tattoos and scars. This means that the featureless clone is quickly transformed into an identical twin of the client.

Any respectable cloning company must take into account the physiological differences between the human races and bloodlines in existence. Each of them has unique DNA imprints that must be replicated so that the transfer process goes as smoothly and with as little deviances as possible. If done properly the unique characteristics and traits that each bloodline has can be kept intact. This is very important during the brain growth process (see below), as the memory restoration is closely linked to the exact neuro-strata layout of the brain tissue, which varies greatly from one bloodline to the next.

Brain growth & storage

Clones are never bred with an intact brain as this is obviously very much dictated by the client. Once a clone is bought a thorough brain scan is made of the client to determine the shape of the brain and the placement of nerve cell nuclei. Then a three dimensional gel structure that matches the shape of the client's brain is constructed.

The cranium is constructed by seeding this gel structure (heavily impregnated with nutrients and inactivated growth factors) with nerve cells and glia, in accordance with information from the brain scan. Bound to the growth factors are molecular receptors that are coupled (using the well known FTL-communication technology) to molecules placed in the customer's burning scanner (see Clone quality, below). After seeding, the gel structure is suspended until the final moment of the original. As the burning scan is made, the molecules bound to the inactivated growth factors become unstable and cause activation of the growth factors by cleavage. The activation is an exothermic process which produces sufficient heat to melt pathways into the gel model of the brain. Thus dendrite paths in the model will be the same as in the original's brain, their growth fuelled by the activated growth factors.

This process alone is not sufficient for an exact replica of the original's brain. The precise shape of the dendrites and the potentiation level of the synapse, which together determine memories and skills, have to be fine tuned through a neural link. Impulses are sent through the link to stimulate further growth and shaping of the dendrites, until they fill in the paths formed with the activation process. In the final stages of this tuning, as the clone regains consciousness, potentiation at synapses is quickly adjusted to recorded levels, generating a feeling often described as one of memories "coming back".

Clone stations store client clones (also termed readied clones) as well as still-to-be-used featureless clone bodies. The cloning process is always on a one-to-one basis, as the molecular receptors bound in the gel structure are coupled to the burning scanner carried by the customer. Premium members will of course always have clone copies of themselves in every Cromeaux Inc. clone facility – service that Cromeaux Inc. pioneered when it started and has since been imitated by all the other major clone companies – but as there is only one burning scanner for each clone, they will have to use a scanner that is coupled to a clone in a facility close to their current position.

In the final stages of this tuning, as the clone regains consciousness, potentiation at synapses is quickly adjusted to recorded levels, generating a feeling often described as one of memories "coming back".

Clone quality

The moment the capsule sensors detect a breach in the capsule they activate the emergency uploading of the mind of the person in the capsule, as described above. The capsule makes an analog scan of the brain of the person. This extraordinary snapshot records the exact state of the mind, including every neuron connection between every brain cell. Because the scan must be instantaneous and efficient it brutalizes the brain in the

process. In early tests, the subjects were left with permanent and severe brain damage after being scanned, a fact that is impossible to escape. But as the person is about to die in any case, this unfortunate side effect has little consequences. All modern capsules are highly tuned to when to take the snapshot – if it is done too early there is a chance that the subject will not die at all, but live on in a vegetative state. And if the snapshot is taken too late there is the risk that the scan will fail or even that the revived clone will remember its own death, a very traumatic experience that can introduce severe psychological and functional problems in the clone.

The quality of the clone is always critical and this is a point that cannot be stressed enough. The closer the clone's brain is to the original in shape and form the better the reviving process will work. The more different they are the more memory will be lost during the synaptic growth process. This is most clearly seen in the space industry. For a space captain to retain his license he must be connected to a cloning facility. But if he fails to buy himself a suitable clone, which he is not required to do by law, he will be given a generic clone instead at the time of death. As these generic clones are bound to have very different brains than the original the memory loss can be very severe. The best clones, made from certified human cadavers in perfect condition, are able to retain up to 99.99% of memory – a figure close enough to call the revived clone a true doppelganger of the original person.

Market analysis

The cloning clientele has risen steadily for the last several years. There are several reasons for this:

- New cloning techniques that are cheaper and easier to employ.
- Increased visibility of cloning stations due to competition.
- Increased number of space captains – the single largest customer group.

- New laws and regulations in allowing the use of clones in areas where it was impossible before.
- Cloning no longer considered a risky experiment or a social taboo in most areas.

It is impossible to know with any certainty the size of the clone market due to excessive number of illegal or hidden clone stations. Although many of these illegal stations produce inferior clones they still steal a lot of potential customers from the legal clone stations. To be fair, these illegal stations do provide a service to people that would be denied service in any respectable cloning facility. Here is break down of various stats of the clone market today, note that numbers are not totally accurate due to lack of information from illegal stations:

Clone companies:

- Total number of clone companies [42]
- Thereof, illegal companies [18]
- Total number of clone stations [510]
- Thereof, illegal stations [60]

Selling clones:

- Total number of clones sold last year [148.732.202]
- Thereof, illegal clones [24.450.819]
- Total revenue from clone sell last year [12.419.138.867.000]

Clone composition:

- Certified human cadavers (Grade A+) [37%]
- Uncertified human cadavers (Grade A) [32%]
- Animal carcasses (Grade B) [23%]

- Organic materials (Grade C) [8%]

Ratio of space vs. ground:

- Number of cloning stations in space [103]
- Thereof, illegal stations [48]
- Number of clones sold to space captains [42.615.928]
- Thereof, sold by illegal stations [15.778.144]

As can be seen in these figures the space industry is proportionally very big considering that space farers are only a fraction of the total population in the world. This is understandable as space captains are the only profession required by law to do business with a clone station, not to mention the many hazards of space faring, which time and again has demonstrated the need for such a law. The space industry is also the fastest growing industry there is. Planetary clone stations increased their sale last year by 3% on the average, while clone facilities on space stations increased their sale on the average by a whopping 11% during the same period.

Income project and future prospects

The first 2 years Cromeaux Inc. focused on research & development. The first clone facility was opened in the third year and since then another clone station has been added every year. With the first clone station came the first earnings, but last year was the first one that earnings matched spending. This means that the business has stabilized and a solid foundation has been created for further expansion. The new funding will allow Cromeaux Inc. to expand its operation to space, which, as has been demonstrated, is where the clone industry is growing fastest. Of the seven new clone facilities that are planned, four will be located in space – the company has already secured very promising sites for these stations, all in high traffic systems. These stations are expected to become the heart of Cromeaux Inc.'s operation. These sites are on the following stations:

- Miroitem II
- Reblrier Prime
- Deven I
- Colcer II

The projected earnings of the company once these seven stations are up and running is expected to quadruple. At the same time the cost of running the company is expected to double. Thus, in 2 years time, a profit of between 1-2.000.000.000 is expected.

The board of Cromeaux Inc. considers that the risks involved in this expansion are minimal, while the potential payoff is huge for all investors involved.

Neural Boosters

Committee on Transgressions on Illegal Substances vis-à-vis the Space Industry Department of Behavioral Studies, University of Caille On Behalf of the Gallente Federation Senate Report A-4-1 (Revision Update #2)

For the last few years there has been a marked increase in demand for Cerebral Cognitive Inducing Neural Booster (commonly called boosters) in the space industry, notably amongst space pilots. These boosters have been for number of years banned by all governments on grounds of health hazards. But the unique situation of the space pilots puts them at reduced risk and many are seemingly willing to take their chance of health failure to enhance their abilities, even momentarily. In the last few years new boosters have become available on the black market and the demand increases by the day. Underground laboratories are being set up in the outer regions, often heavily guarded or highly secret.

Through increased surveillance by DED and other law enforcement agencies more than two dozen laboratories have been closed down in the last 12 months alone. Most of them were operating in small space stations far from the main travel routes. But a recent investigation conducted by DED shows that as many as 50 laboratories are still in operation, with at least 2 new being set up every month. With the increased profits booster manufacturers are getting, new laboratories are not only getting bigger and better equipped, they're also being constructed further and further away from empire space, and hence from empire jurisdiction. Furthermore, with the increased secrecy surrounding new laboratories their defenses are stronger now than ever, requiring stronger measures on our part to take them out.

The first boosters appeared a century ago, the product of advancements in recombinant DNA technology, where bacteria are infected with virus to

induce protein production in the bacteria. The basic method has been known for centuries and used for instance in the treatment of diabetes. In a Gallentean funded research project headed by Dr. Hollows and Dr. Tancr  z the next step in the evolution of this method was taken, when this same procedure was used to directly infect cells within a human body with gene-altered viruses. The cells affected are nerve cells in the brain, where the viral vectors are used to induce production of membranous proteins at synapses, aiding the structural changes of the synapse necessary for formation of memories. In a breakthrough experiment, this procedure was shown to vastly reduce the maze-learning times of laboratory animals, with minimal adverse effects.

After further animal experiments, the first human trials were performed on one of Dr. Tancr  z students, who volunteered to participate for the advancement of science. Dr. Tancr  z' student showed remarkable learning capabilities for a period of time after the experiment. The skills he acquired during this period were retained until his untimely death from an unrelated infection two years later. The Federation permitted further human studies a few months later during the Waschi Uprising, when the Caldari and the Gallente were at the brink of war for some time. The Federation foresaw a huge need for space pilots in case of war, so they authorized the tests in the hope that the boosters would hugely speed up the training time for new pilots. Being able to test and develop boosters on human subjects made it possible for the research team to take the final steps in completing the gene therapy and the first marketable boosters were born.

Boosters quickly became very popular, especially among the social elite, which could easily afford the high costs involved. The pioneers of the booster industry became household names, with none more famous than A.R. Louria, the founder of Booster-Tech Inc., the largest of the booster producing companies. The benefits of the boosters were marked, even at this early stage in their development when they were not nearly as potent as those available today. In few years time boosters had become the norm

for a lot of people. The booster producing companies steadily improved their manufacturing techniques, resulting in cheaper and more powerful boosters, as well as more convenient injection techniques. Instead of cumbersome and often painful shots, techniques for introducing the virus through the neural link have been developed, making the boosters all the more attractive to space pilots.

All the major booster companies made extensive tests on boosters before making them available to the general public. These tests did not reveal any serious side effects, even for regular consumers. These results were confirmed in tests conducted by independent research firms and governmental institutes. But as with most things that seem too good to be true, they turn out to be, in practice, too good to be true. Unfortunately, the side effects of boosters did not materialize until decades after they first appeared.

The most serious side-effect of boosters known from the outset was epilepsy. It was discovered that certain genetic elements made some individuals more prone to this side effect than others. Once the genetic cause had been identified it became possible to determine the risk beforehand and thus limit the damage from this side effect. But about four decades after the first boosters arrived another, much more serious, side effect was discovered. It was established that a deadly brain disease caused by prions was directly related to the usage of boosters. It seemed that the boosters caused a somatic mutation in the cells affected, greatly increasing the possibility of incorrect protein formation and consequent deposition of protein plaques in nerve cells. This caused gradual nerve damage and loss of function of brain tissues. The incurable disease slowly eroded the brain, causing the person to lose memory, motor skills, sanity and ending with functional failure of the vital organs

At first people ignored these events and treated them as singular incidents, but as the cases increased day by day it became clear that an epidemic of

sort had started. Even if only 1 in 10 was affected this was a great number of people because of the popularity of boosters. Furthermore, as the disease was fatal in over 90% cases, the mass hysteria threatened to escalate into social upheaval unless the governments responded swiftly. This they did by putting a temporary ban on the usage of boosters. Still, this didn't prevent millions of people dying a horrible death.

It didn't take long for the booster companies to go under one by one, being bled dry by massive lawsuits. The Gallente Federation initiated further studies into boosters, the results clearly showed without any reasonable doubt that the boosters were at fault, prompting all the governments to put a permanent ban on the manufacturing, distribution and ownership of boosters.

The ban held true for a few decades, with none or next to none boosters to be found anywhere. A Senate committee formed after the booster catastrophe to investigate the matter and evaluate the future of boosters had this to say in their final report:

“It is the uniform belief of this committee that society has learned its lesson regarding boosters and that we will never again have to deal with the threat of its kind. Striving for improvement is one thing, but injecting poison into your body is hazardous at best, lethal at worst, and common sense dictates that boosters are now a thing of the past.”

It can now be safely said that these optimistic predictions made half a century ago have turned out to be false. It is true that for a number of years there never was any mass-scale distribution of boosters, the only incidents were limited production of old booster recipes that could easily be contained. But the lure of the boosters has tempted people into reckless behavior in the past and despite the all too well-known dangers of boosters

it can now be asserted that boosters are back, and back for good unless some drastic measures are taken.

The new boosters, the one that are currently available on the black market, are in many ways revolutionary. Even if their effects are the same they've been developed considerably. The latest procedures have aimed to minimize the risk of the old side effects. The methods involve performing multiple smaller scale procedures, while suppressing the immune system. With earlier methods there was no option of repeat procedures, as the only virus design available was quickly targeted by the immune system and destroyed. The most obvious advantage of the newer methods is a reduced incidence of encephalitis, but there also seems to be less risk of epilepsy. This can most likely be attributed to the neural riggers all space pilots have, which can be used to suppress or stem epileptic seizures. By suppressing the immune system during the operation for a period of time after each injection, the effects last longer and the therapy is more effective. This also increases the success rate of subsequent therapies, as the viral vectors are not attacked by the immune system as soon as they are introduced.

But the obvious downside to suppressing the immune system is that the body becomes vulnerable to diseases. However, space pilots spend most of their time locked up in their capsule, a completely sterile environment. It makes it more difficult for them to leave their capsule (although not impossible), but on the whole suppressing the immune system is a non-issue for space pilots. But it must be stressed that even if these boosters are relatively harmless for space pilots because of their sterile capsules and neural riggings boosters are still very dangerous to the common people and must at all costs be kept out of the hands of the unwary or we may have an even greater catastrophe on our hands than before. This fact makes it all the more important to apprehend those responsible for the manufacturing and distribution of the new boosters.

One persistent problem with the earlier methods was that genetic variation between different individuals seemed to have a relatively large effect on the outcome of the boosters. Some individuals were more prone to side effects, while some didn't benefit at all from the procedures. Later, genetic variations between bloodlines was proven to account for most of these differences. Some boosters were of course more universal than others, but recently custom boosters have been designed specifically to take advantage of the genetic make up of various bloodlines, resulting in race-specific boosters.

The kind of R&D needed for these new boosters could only have been undertaken and funded by a wealthy group with access to all the newest theories and technologies. The only independent group with the means and the motives for this would be the Angel Cartel, but DED has found nothing linking the development of the advanced boosters with them. But the fact the Cartel became heavily involved in distribution of the new boosters right from the start suggests, in the words of Col. Jeanrick Cavalery "that either the Cartel is very close to the booster manufacturers or they themselves are the manufacturers." However, we cannot rule out the possibility that those responsible for the R&D and perhaps the manufacturing of these advanced boosters are in the employment of one of the other empires.

In conclusion we recommend that further measures to be taken to stem the increasing tide of illegal boosters. Granted, there is considerable demand for this among a large group of otherwise lawful space pilots, but boosters are not a requirement to make a good pilot. Thus the marginal benefits pilots gain from boosters should not outweigh the great risk of using them.

As the majority of boosters originate outside empire space we recommend increased border surveillance, as well as heavier punishment for those caught smuggling or selling boosters. Furthermore, that an investigation should be launched to determine who is developing these boosters.

Lastly, our own research teams should start analyzing the new boosters with the intent of understanding them fully in case we need them at a later date when war threatens. Naturally, this will have to be done in the strictest secrecy. Intelligence sources indicate that similar steps are being taken by the other empires and we can't run the risk of being left behind if and when boosters become standard items for space captains.

Faster Than Light Communication

After mastering the technique of wormhole creation, it was thought that distance had finally been conquered. But despite of this communication still needed to be transmitted at the speed of light, and though wormhole did shorten distances between distant regions, interactive communication remained impossible. This problem was quickly identified as being one of the most important handicap remaining in the conquest of deep space.

The Amarrians were the first to master the jump gate technology and thus the first to face the problem. They launched massive state-funded research and tried out several radical solutions, but without success. In the end they stopped all research, accepting the fact that FTL communications were unattainable.

Centuries later the Gallenteans and the Caldari faced the same problems following the creation of the Sotiyo-Urbaata Drive. The Drive allowed FTL travel within the system the Gallenteans and Caldari lived in and communications with ships using the Drive were naturally impossible with conventional communication devices. To stimulate research in solving this, all both the Gallenteans and the Caldari promised huge awards for anybody who could come with some solution to the problem, which led to one of the most frantic goose hunt in the history of science.

Like the Amarrians before them many solutions were tried out, but none with success. Finally it was a young Gallentean woman, Li Azbel, who came out with a solution that was so simple but yet deeply rooted in arcane physics, that at first it was rejected as a hoax.

It wasn't until the famous Azbel-Wuthrich experiment that the functionality was demonstrated with success. Industrialization quickly followed, leading

to one of the greatest stock market surge ever as thousands of companies extended their reach to the whole known universe.

The roots of the solution lay in an ancient paradox, often called the EPR paradox, the name shrouded in mystery. The EPR paradox is famous for contradicting quantum physics in some very important ways. Specifically it shows another old physic theory, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, to be untrue. The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, believed to be named after a place or a person, affirms that the exact state of quantum particle cannot be determined with full accuracy, no matter how refined the measurement equipment is. The classical example being the measurement of the velocity and position of a free particle: to be able to measure the position of a particle you must be able to 'see' it. This means that you have to illuminate it at least with one photon. But the collision between the photon and the particle changes the velocity of the particle, thus making it impossible to determine what the velocity was before the position was measured.

The EPR paradox describes the possibility of creating a pair of particle whose quantum state was entangled in such a way as to be mirror of each other. For example a pair of particle with position and velocity given as (x_0, v) and $(x_0, -v)$, i.e. a pair of particle that at given time are at the same position, but have exactly opposed velocity vectors. After some time, the two particles would be separated by a large distance, and measurement could be done on each of them independently. Now by measuring, say, the position of particle A and the velocity of particle B, the EPR paradox states that you would thus have determined the exact state of both particles, thus violating the Heisenberg relationship.

But later experiments confirmed the Heisenberg principle, thus making the EPR paradox void, to the surprise of many. Mathematically, this didn't cause any problems as the collapse of the wave function due to measurement was an instantaneous happening. From a physical point of

view, this was more difficult to comprehend, as it seemed to imply that the state change propagated instantly between the two particles. This was immediately suggested as a way to create faster-than-light communication: by making a measurement on a particle it would lead to an instantaneous change in the remote particle's state, thus transmitting one bit of information. A detailed mathematical analysis of this scenario though showed that due to the statistical nature of the quantum particle, only noise would be transmitted, thus laying to rest these speculations for millennia.

This is precisely where Li Azbel took up the problem, with a rare insight leading to a breakthrough. She argued that even though the output of the transmission was pure noise, the structure of the noise could be used to encode the information. Indeed, it was well known that the bifurcation cascade leading to purely chaotic time-series had a universal structure, governed by the Feigenbaum constant. Taking a parametric family of functions called logistic maps, defined in the interval $[0,1]$, there existed a parameter and an initial condition of the map that could generate any arbitrary random sequence of number. Azbel considered the problem from the other side, i.e. given a finite chaotic sequence, how could you trace yourself back to the initial condition? By using a maximum entropy analysis on the Shannon information entropy of the signal she devised a way to solve this inverse problem. Furthermore, she demonstrated that by carefully modulating the measurements of tangled quantum states, basically willfully introducing noise in the measurement process itself, that specific noise structure would be carried across to the measurements of the other particle.

The process was thus the following: A byte of information is mapped on an initial condition of the logistic map leading to a chaotic attractor. This noisy sequence is then used to modulate the measurements done on a sequence of entangled particles. At the same time on the other side, measurements are made on the particles and a noise sequence is extracted. Maximum

entropy analysis is then done to determine the initial condition from which this series has been generated and thus map it back to a given byte of information. Note that in this case, the noisy sequence sent is totally uncorrelated to the one measured. What they do have in common is to be from the same chaotic attractor, and that is the information that actually gets transmitted instantly, regardless of distance.

As stated before, this theoretical result was originally considered to be too incredible, to be true. The Azbel-Wuthrich experiment used a very similar setup as the ancient Aspect experiment, and it was a historical moment when the first Smiley :-) was sent over this channel. Following that, a great gold-rush started on who would be the first to industrialize this.

The result of that rush is the familiar Fluid router, which forms the building block of universal communication as we know it today. Ignoring the mathematical intricacies, the architecture of these routers is deceptively simple. The first step of their manufacturing is the creation of the entangled quantum states. This is done by using superfluid 4-Helium, where essentially all the Helium atoms are entangled in a single quantum state due to Bose condensation. A droplet of such liquid 4-Helium is then carefully separated in two. From this point, the two droplets, and more specifically the Helium atoms in the droplets are intrinsically tangled. Each droplet is then placed in separate router box, that contain necessary mechanism to encode and decode bytestream into quantum state measurements performed on the atoms of the droplet. From that point on, these two routers are linked together, regardless of their separation. Thus a spaceship will usually buy a router pair from a network provider. One box will be placed in the spaceship, while the other one kept in the network provider's backbone, that will have connections to other routers, thus effectively forming a decentralized network, where messages can be routed across many routers and many providers. This architecture is similarly to the ancient Internet.

The only limitations of this communication system is in the capacity of the channel. Indeed, the manufacturing of the entangled 4-He superfluid is an expensive process. Furthermore, a large number of atoms are used for each byte, as a statistically relevant chaotic sequence needs to be created. The sequencing introduces a limit to the bandwidth, allowing only the transmission of x bytes/second. The amount of data sent then depletes the pool of available entangled atoms, thus limiting the total amount of data that can be sent with a given router pair.

The FTL communication services have spread to every corner of the world of EVE since they first appeared a couple of centuries ago. The services and routers, albeit owned and run by independent companies, are under constant scrutiny and regulations by a CONCORD sub-committee to enforce both security and privacy in the communications channels and to make sure the companies are correctly rendering the services they claim. The fierce competition on the telecommunication market makes it cheap, efficient and reliable to talk, transfer data and even conduct business for people light-years apart.

Interstellar Traveling

By Alain E. Topher

Well, here is a detailed description for all you techno-buffs on jumps - the amazing technology on how and why it is possible to traverse the vastness of space in a matter of minutes. Tacked along are various interesting tidbits on the history of the races and their elusive search for their ancestry. Written by one of the best recognized intellectual in the world of EVE, this is an insightful glimpse into the minds and beliefs of those that live there.

1 - Where do we come from?

For centuries men speculated from where mankind came. Today, it has been established beyond reasonable doubt that all the different races and factions found in our part of the galaxy must have originated from a common source.

Yet it has proven difficult to piece all the different artifacts together into a coherent picture. In any case, it seems logical from a biological standpoint that humans evolved on the same planet. Even if various differences can be found between and within factions, the likeness in the DNA structure clearly points to a common origin. But then the question is: where is this fabled planet that humans evolved on and how did the human race end up in numerous separate places?

Lets look at what we know: It is now undoubted that a race capable of interstellar travel roamed our space many thousands of years ago. A number of ancient jump gates, or fractions of jump gates, are known to exist in numerous solar systems. Whether these jump gates were built by our own ancestors or a totally alien race is unknown. These jump gates have some peculiar traits. First of all, age tests have shown that all these jump gates

were built within the space of 50 to 100 years. And yet the design of many of the jump gates is a little bit varied between places, like they were constructed by different people. These facts raise many questions: why were they all constructed within this short time-span, and none since? Were they built by the same race, or maybe two or more conflicting races?

The answer most favored is that of war. Only a conflict could explain this quick construction of dozens of jump gates and why everything seemed to come to an abrupt halt one day. But who were fighting? And where are the combatants now? It seems highly unlikely that factions capable of interstellar warfare suddenly disappear into thin air.

By studying the layout of the jump gate remnants, a curious pattern emerges. The jump gates snake out like a spider-web from a central point. And what is the central point? It is the system known to Amarrians, who first found it, as 'Imlau Eman', or the 'Mouth of God', but is today better known as EVE.

The EVE system is an enigma that is still very much a mystery to us. The system itself is not that impressive – just some space debris and a few asteroid belts orbiting a pale white dwarf. But at the outskirts of the system is a phenomenon that has puzzled us for centuries. At the center of this phenomenon lies a huge structure, obviously built by some advanced civilization eons ago. The structure looks very much like a jump gate, except it is many times bigger than any space structure of ours. The gate is fairly plain all around, but there are markings here and there, in some ancient language that has not been fully decrypted. At the top, the largest of these markings is a three-letter word that says EVE. There isn't full agreement among scholars about the meaning of this word, but most people regard it to be simply the name of the gate.

Now, every indication points to this being the gate that our forefathers used to enter this world, but despite massive studies on the gate and the EVE

system in whole, we still haven't uncovered what happened to the gate all these millenniums ago.

Extremely bright and powerful electromagnetic turbulence emits from the EVE gate, as it is commonly called. This turbulence seems to originate from within the gate, so it is believed that the gate is actually open and the electromagnetic storms are coming through from wherever the gate is linked to.

In any case, the turbulence makes it extremely difficult to study the gate. Fortunately, the storms pulsate rhythmically, meaning that every other year or so they recede enough to allow closer scrutinizing. But even then the turbulence is enough to rip to pieces any vessel foolish enough to wander close to it.

The immense brightness emitting from the gate can easily be seen in solar systems close to the EVE system as a vibrating bright star on the night sky. But even in systems in the farthest regions of the known world it can still be seen with the aid of a telescope. The Amarrians, whose home system is only a few light-years from the EVE system, were in the best position to marvel at the gate. Many thousands of years ago, while still on a primitive level, the Amarrians actually coupled the peculiar phenomenon they saw in the sky with their age-old religion and even today the EVE gate holds great importance in the Amarrian state religion.

The search for our ancestors goes on. Even if the facts lead us to the EVE system, it seems to be the end of the road. The extensive studies done there over the decades seem no closer to providing the answer to this important question.

2 - The earliest jump gates and the first inter-stellar travelers.

Once the Amarr Empire had reached the technology level where it could enter space, it started to vigorously chart their home system. Due to technological limitations this survey took a long time. Finally, the Amarrians stumbled upon the remains of a jump gate at the outskirts of their solar system.

By studying the remains, which were more or less intact, the Amarrians were able to garner enough information to build a jump gate of their own. The jump gate was operational but obviously it lacked connections to other jump gates, as it was the only one of its kind. Thus the Amarrians were forced to physically send ships capable of building jump gates between solar systems before a stable wormhole could be formed into the system to connect the two gates. These gate construction ships often took decades to arrive, the crew suspended in cryo-tanks for the duration of the voyage. Only in recent years with the coming of jump drives capable of jumping between systems with no jump gates in them is it possible to overcome this time-consuming prelude to inter-stellar traveling via jump gates and still today dozens of gate construction ships are enroute to a distant system.

But patience is a virtue the Amarrians have mastered well and they steadily expanded in every direction from their Amarr home system. Now, more than two millennia since the construction of their first jump gate, the Amarrians occupy hundreds of solar systems.

The Gallenteans and the Caldari discovered jump gate technology at relatively the same time, due to the simple fact that their home worlds were then in the same system. This was a little over 700 years ago. The Gallenteans and the Caldari did not enjoy the luxury of finding a relatively intact jump gate relic in their system as the Amarrians did. Instead there were only fragmentary pieces to be found, so they had nothing to build on. Still, these fragments pointed the researchers into the right direction and many jump gate theories were tried out. It wasn't until after the discovery of a companion brown dwarf, making the system a binary system, that the

gate research got on the right track. It wasn't long after that before the first working jump gate was erected. The Amarr type of jump gate and the Gallente/Caldari one both work on the same principle (see next chapter), but there are some minuscule differences in how the different parts of the gate work exactly.

At that time both the Gallente and the Caldari worlds were bursting at the seams and major effort was made in sending ships to nearby systems to build jump gates. The mass exodus of the Gallenteans and the Caldari to other systems was nothing like the calm, deliberate expansion of the Amarr Empire, where only one system was colonized at a time and every aspect of the expansion was rigidly controlled by the state. Instead, private firms, the first of the Caldari Corporations among them, were chiefly responsible for surveying systems, sending the construction ships, and selling the territory to the colonists. In the space of 500 years or so the combined expansion of the Gallenteans and the Caldari had almost equaled the total expansion of the Amarrians in 2000 years.

The Jovians are not very forthcoming with information about their technological advances in this regard. Today they employ jump gates functioning on the same principle as the other's, but nothing is known on where or when the Jovians acquired their jump gate technology. However, they've revealed an interesting fact: according to ancient Jovian legends, the Jovians used the ancient jump gates that scatter the world to travel between solar systems a long time ago, before the jump gates crumbled. The legends stay silent about the makers of the gates.

3 - The principles of jump gate technology.

Jump gates are built around artificial wormholes, created by exploiting gravitational resonances found in binary systems. This resonance is as a friction between gravitational waves of stellar objects, the more massive the objects, the stronger the resonance between them. Positions of planets in a

solar system, as well as the complex structure of dust rings around heavy planets illustrate this resonance.

In binary systems there exists strong resonance phenomena, where the gravitational field of two stars in a stable binary formation would interfere with each other, like ripples from two wave sources. These stable wave patterns come in a succession of standing wave patterns, similar to those created on a guitar string. The strongest resonance is the 1:1 resonance (the first harmonic, so to speak), with two stationary node points situated in the center of each of the two stars. The second strongest resonance is the 1:2 resonance (the second harmonic), where an additional stationary node point appears in the field exactly mid-way between the stars (if of equal mass), and so on for successive resonances.

At the node points, the rapid oscillation of the gravitational field in opposite directions creates strong shear in the contravariant energy-momentum tensor. Under normal circumstances this stress is dissipated by high-frequency graviton radiation, and does thus not create any noticeable macroscopic phenomena.

But if this stress is confined and forced to build-up in a limited region of space, then the tensor-field will eventually develop a steadily growing high-curvature tentacle like structure in the space-time continuum. More specifically, the tentacle constitutes a self-avoiding 4-manifold that attempts to grow farther and farther from itself. The tip of the tentacle, where the curvature is highest, effectively acts like a magnet on space-time, and for high enough curvature it can eventually induce the creation of a small tentacle in remote high-density regions, that can reach to the tip and spontaneously combine. An analogy of this phenomenon is when lightning strikes ground, where the tip of the downward lightning actually creates a small upward lightning emanating from the ground and the two combine somewhere above the ground, thus closing the electrical circuit.

The main device of jump gates is a so-called mass boson sphere, based on one of the fundamental physic fields that mediates mass, and thus interacts strongly with gravitational waves. The sphere is filled with mass boson plasma, which reflects gravitational waves, pretty much in the same way as a mirror reflects light. By adjusting the plasma density so that it reflects the high-frequency gravitational waves involved in the dissipation of tensor shear, this radiation is trapped within the sphere, thus leading to a steady net increase of the gravitational stress within the resonance node, which eventually leads to the creation of the high-curvature tentacle. An analogy of this is the laser, which builds up a highly coherent and intense beam of electromagnetic energy by enclosing oscillators within a reflecting cavity.

The distance between the two ends of the wormhole depends on the mass of the suns in the binary system and on what resonance node the jump gate is located. In order to connect two jump gates a trial-and-error method is needed, often lasting many years. This is because the tentacle created by the tensor-field cannot be controlled or directed in where to open. But by having another jump gate in a nearby system build up gravitational-stress in it its own, without reaching critical point, at the same time that the tentacle is growing, then the likelihood of a connection being made increases statistically, although many attempts are still often needed. This is similar to raising a metal rod in a thunder storm.

The first jump gate versions built by the Amarrians were limited in the way that once a wormhole had been created and a ship slipped through a new wormhole had to be made before another ships could pass. As it could take several days or even months to re-connect the two jump gates, passing was slow. Later versions of jump gates allowed the jump gates to hold the wormhole open for a longer time and modern day jump gates can keep a wormhole connection open for several dozen years before it has to be reset. Also, the first jump gates were only able to connect and hold a single wormhole at a time but today they can hold several wormholes open at the

same time, allowing jump gates to be connected to several other jump gates at once.

In an average binary system the jump gate has a range of around 5 light-years, provided the jump gate is constructed on the third resonance node. More powerful jump gates can be constructed on the second resonance node between the stars. Because these nodes are much farther from a solar system (often up to 0.5 lightyear away) and, more importantly, are also harder to harness, they have only recently started to be utilized. On the other hand, they have much greater range than the basic jump gates.

There are several strict limitations on jump gate travel. First of all, jump gates can only be constructed in systems with two or more suns, because of the resonance nodes. This effectively makes one in every three systems ineligible for jump gate construction.

Secondly, only one jump gate can be in operation in a system at any given time. This is due to the erratic fluctuations in the resonance fields caused by a mass boson sphere; if more than one such sphere is active at the same time in the same system, they both become highly unstable and impossible to operate.

And thirdly, ships can only travel through wormholes if both ends of it are connected to a jump gate. This means that ships must travel between systems in normal space in order to build a jump gate. The reason for this is the extreme dilatation of the metric along the longitudinal dimension of the tentacle, meaning that the spatial coordinate along the length of the wormhole is expanded, while the radial component is cyclically curved. A spaceship entering the wormhole is subject to a strong metric gradient that would put its structural integrity in jeopardy. This can be prevented by locally countering the stretching around the immediate vicinity of the ship. Here the mass boson sphere plays its second role in the gate mechanism. When the ship goes through the mass boson sphere, a mono-atomic layer

of mass boson gets deposited on the ships surface. This layer counters the stretching of the ship against the metric gradient, enough to keep the structural integrity of the ship for the duration of the trip through the hole. This doesn't mean that the gradient is completely wiped out, and even seasoned space veterans still know the feeling known as 'going down the drain' when entering a wormhole.

4 - Space vessels get a boost – the first jump drives.

Even with advanced propulsion systems it took space ships days or weeks to move between planets in a solar system. Anything that could quicken this travel was thus of immense interest for everybody.

Various efforts were made to increase the speed of ships, but most of them failed either because of too high fuel volume and cost, or because they were too limited in scope. The most successful attempt was that of the old Minmatar Empire, which built acceleration gates that employed gravity in an unique way to slingshot ships between planets. This gave the ships enough momentum to fly between planets in a much shorter time than before. But the Minmatars never discovered how to build inter-stellar jump gates, so their acceleration gates were limited to their home system (where they still exist today). They had begun experimenting with much larger acceleration gates capable of sending ships between solar systems, but they never got a chance to build them before the Amarrians invaded and enslaved the Minmatars.

The Amarr Empire itself was slow to make any breakthroughs in this regard, despite their ever-growing space empire. For a long time they made do with ships traveling at ca. 10% of the speed of light, this speed seemed sufficient to them. At last they discovered the principles behind jump drive technology more or less accidentally, while researching new weapon technologies. The first Amarrian jump drive was built nearly 300 years ago.

The situation was different for the Gallenteans and Caldari. Their home planets were in the same system and this meant that intra-system trade runs became an important element in their society right from the outset of their space activity. Thus there was a much greater incentive to find an acceptable solution to intra-system travel. The first jump drive built is the Sotiyo-Urbaata Drive, built by Caldari engineers more than 600 years ago. It was immensely big, tremendously expensive and outrageously inefficient, but it worked. The Sotiyo-Urbaata Drive, along with later versions, sped considerably up the social and technological development for both the Gallenteans and the Caldari and is without a doubt one of the most important discoveries ever made.

Since their first appearance all these long centuries ago, jump drives have become ever more advanced, making them cheaper, more reliable and more efficient. Yet the difference between the Sotiyo-Urbaata Drive and a modern day drive is not so great; both work on the same underlying principle, both allow very fast travel within the solar system. But the latest versions of jump drives are for many the true jump drives, for they allow ships to traverse solar systems even where there are no jump gates. These revolutionary jump drives, which are still relatively rare and expensive, combine traditional jump drive technology with jump gate technology and create a whole new piece of equipment.

5 - Faster-than-light travel – how?

So what is the elusive answer to FTL travel? It was found through advanced research in the field of quantum electrodynamics. By creating depleted vacuum, that is, vacuum as found in space but completely stripped of all energy, and then expanding this depleted vacuum to envelop a ship, the ship is capable of moving faster than light through this bubble of depleted vacuum. A depleted vacuum bubble is more than frictionless – it is so anti-friction that things (including light) actually move faster in it than they would in complete vacuum.

All space ships are equipped with a jump drive device. The jump drive creates depleted vacuum by repeatedly 'compressing' vacuum between two polar discs, draining all energy neutrons and quarks out of it. A laser-locked field is then created to hold the ever-increasing depleted vacuum bubble until it has enveloped the whole ship. When that happens the ship is able to enter FTL speed. Although initial experiments with the jump drive were very encouraging technology wise, problems arose in regard to navigation. Once the ship has attained FTL speed, it is very difficult for it to act or react to the world, such as for communication or scanning purposes. Numerous experiments were made, for example with compactified dimensions radio, but without success. The unpredictable nature of quantum mechanics made it very difficult to create a stable enough vacuum bubbles to allow for precise time measurements due to fluctuating speeds. Finally, a solution was found. It was discovered that gravity capacitors similar to the control system used in jump gates were able to pick up gravity signals from 'normal' space while the ship was on FTL speed. By locking the capacitor onto one of these signals, the ship travels to it. The bubble is then automatically dispersed once certain distance from the gravity well is acquired. The only problem is that these capacitors can only efficiently pick up signals from gravity wells of certain size or above, with the minimum being a small moon or a cluster of asteroids. Also, in order for the gravity capacitor to align correctly on the destination object in relevance to the position of the sun, it must follow a relatively narrow route towards it, resulting in a fairly restricted emerge area for the ship. This puts some limits on the jump drive's usage, but as all major objects in a system can be detected, this is not such a great problem. Furthermore, it is now possible to construct 'fake' gravity wells on space stations and jump gates, which can be detected and thus homed onto by the gravity capacitor that is part of a ship's jump drive.

Further research into jump drives, especially those aimed at amalgamating the technology used for jump drives and the one used for jump gates, has

led to more and more advanced jump drives becoming available. It is now possible to fit a ship with a jump drive capable of inter-stellar travel. The first versions of these allowed the jump drive to connect to a jump gate in another solar system and jump to it just as if the ship had moved through a jump gate. The later versions allow ships to jump from a system with a jump gate to another system that has no jump gate, and the latest version, still only available as a prototype, allows a ship to jump between systems even if no jump gate exists in either system. The first versions of these drives simply aligned the drive with the nearest resonance node in the system (often using nodes 1:4 or even 1:5), then created instant mini-wormholes through it for just enough time for the ship to slip through. More advanced versions, allowing jumps into systems with no jump gates, are a bit more complex. They send out a constant barrage of high frequency neutron rays, based on the flat-space principle of trans-relativistic physics, through infinitesimal cosmic strings to scout out the destination system. This survey can last for several days before enough data is gathered to allow the ship to create a wormhole (through a resonance node of course) to the destination system.

6 - About the author.

Alain Embrosius Topher has a degree in applied physics and experimental psychology from the Caille University on Gallente Prime. Topher, a brilliant but unruly student, signed up with an exploration company after his graduation and spent the next twenty years roaming around remote solar systems, collecting astrophysical data. He has always been enthusiastic about foreign and alien cultures and the main reason for his exploration scurries was the hope to discover alien artifacts. Until now he has not found any artifacts older than a few thousand years old and all which are of obvious human origin.

Having amassed a sizeable sum during his days with the exploration company, Topher finally decided to try his luck on his own and spent the

next few years combing several promising systems. Working alone, or at most with a couple of assistants, made these excursions highly dangerous, and thus prime entertainment material. Topher made a deal with one of the largest entertainment network in the Gallente Federation to make vid programs about his adventures. These became hugely popular for a while, but the lack of bug-eyed monsters or glittering treasures soon turned the public indifferent. Topher, who had thrived in the limelight, decided to shelve his excursions for a while in favor of taking more exciting (and lucrative) excursions in vid studios.

Topher was content to live the life of a vid star for some years, but in the end the scientist in him begged for attention. Feeling too old to start running around barren planets again, Topher settled instead on making education shows and info clips, often in the form of games of some sort. Yet again he hit the jackpot and for billions of Gallenteans Topher is a household name associated with education and knowledge.

Now in his early nineties, Topher is finally settling down to a quiet academic life. His vid appearances are now few and far between and instead he's focusing on pure science, more or less for the first time in his life. Long regarded as a stylish quack with a lot of weird ideas among his fellow scientists, his recent studies and papers has earned him long-overdue respect from many of his peers.

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Version History

v1.0

Initial release

Chronicles

v1.1

Formatting, pages, acknowledgments, version history

v1.2

Formatting

Short stories, Scientific articles

v1.3

Minor Formatting

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