

# The EVE Chronicles

2006-7

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Except where otherwise noted

# Table of Contents

The Greatest Joke.....	3
Postnatal.....	9
Saccade.....	12
The Shrinking Skin.....	24
Fedo Song.....	30
The History of Flight.....	36
Methods of Torture - The Amarr.....	41
Methods of Torture - The Minmatar.....	46
Methods of Torture - The Gallente.....	52
Methods of Torture - The Caldari.....	59
The Speakers of Truth.....	64
Godflesh.....	66
Soft Passage.....	72
Invisible Waves.....	78
The Speaker of Truths.....	86
Sand Giants.....	95
Post Mortem.....	102
Most Ancient.....	108
In the Electric Museum.....	113
A Mind of Infinite Complexity.....	123
Terms.....	129
Winter Came While You Were Away.....	137
Summer Breeze.....	144
Aura.....	152

## The Greatest Joke

- *Sit down, please.*

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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.

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*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 travellers, 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.

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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.

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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.

## Saccade

[*Note: Saccade was not published as a chronicle, but as a short story on <http://www.eveonline.com/background/stories.asp>*]

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.

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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 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.

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"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.

## Fedo Song

[*Note: For those who prefer their stories unscrambled, the scene order is 20-14-1-9-7-3-12-5-11-17-6-16-13-8-4-10-2-19-15-18. Fedos, meanwhile, are described in detail at <http://www.eveonline.com/background/potw/default.asp?cid=jan04>*]

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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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"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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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. Damn it. 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."

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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 hovetable 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.

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"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. "Hoverable'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 had been 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 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 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'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 would change my mind about becoming a Torturer?"

The lizard regarded him with stone-faced 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 price. It compared the cost of maintaining 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. No matter who might be listening."

"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 Amarr 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 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 Song 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 burred 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:

It is a symptom of madness that thoughts become uncontrollably disjointed. This can be encouraged.

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.

\*\*\*

It is a symptom of madness that thoughts become uncontrollably disjointed. This can be encouraged.

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.

\*\*\*

It is a symptom of madness that thoughts become uncontrollably disjointed. This can be encouraged.

## 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.

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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 arbitrate 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.

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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.

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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."

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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.

## 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.

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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.

"Damn it," 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, Dorian 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.

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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 ChromIts.

The ChromIts 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 ChromIts, 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 ChromIts, 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 ChromIts, 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 ChromIts, 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 of 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 Wiyrkomi 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."

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 Serpents 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 Serpents 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 I, 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?"

"Damn it, 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.*

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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.

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*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.*

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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.

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*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.*

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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.

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*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.*

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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.

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*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.*