

# The EVE Chronicles

2007-8

By CCP Abraxas

Except where otherwise noted

# Table of Contents

Black Mountain: On This Earth.....	4
Black Mountain: Inertial.....	10
Black Mountain: The Room.....	15
Black Mountain: The First Half.....	20
Black Mountain: Of a Sentence.....	27
Black Mountain: A Man of Peace.....	33
Black Mountain: Some Dying Angel.....	41
Black Mountain: Hyperconsciousness.....	49
Black Mountain: Pushing Towards Bliss.....	53
Black Mountain: The Canvas.....	59
Black Mountain: A Pleasant Surprise.....	65
Black Mountain: The Sanctuary.....	70
Black Mountain: Polymelia.....	73
Black Mountain.....	84
Black Mountain: Dismantling.....	91
Black Mountain: Sounding the Horns of the Hunt.....	97
Daughters of the Revolution.....	103
Hometown Heroes.....	109
The Lottery.....	115
Murder and Creation.....	120
A Boy and his Slaver.....	124
A Life in Three Acts.....	127
With Acknowledgments to Mad Dogs.....	131
Of God and her Beast.....	137
Silent Furies.....	143
The Paths They Chose.....	149
The Dark End of Space.....	157
The Better Part of Valor.....	164
All These Wayward Children.....	170
Masks of Authority.....	175
Her Painted Selves.....	179

Cities of Refuge .....	185
And to Live in Peace.....	190
A World Where No Such Road Will Run.....	197
All Tomorrow's Bodies .....	200
Wild Earth.....	212
The Part Where I Play the Devil .....	220
Beasts of the Field.....	227
Under the Sea, the City .....	237
Kameiras .....	244
Chained to the Sky .....	247
Two Deaths .....	255

## **Black Mountain: On This Earth**

*[Note: Black Mountain was a serialized novella, published on the chronicle web page in standalone installments. For background on its two protagonists, the reader is advised to read "The Greatest Joke" and "Post Mortem", available online and in the 2006-7 compilation.]*

As the inspector was leaving her apartment, he said, "Now, you'll be sure to report anything suspicious. If there really is someone on this facility causing problems, we need to catch him before the pirates do."

"I will, I promise," Atira said. She saw the man out, closed the door after him, and rested her forehead against its cool steel with a sigh.

A lot of off-ship pirates had been disappearing in this area, and while this development was little bother for the corporate forces who paid for the colonial crime monitoring, it was starting to draw the ire of the pirate factions, who had threatened to post more patrols and even to send in their own squads of ground enforcers. The Angels in particular had made some very pointed threats, and Atira had already had to deal with some of their people.

It was known that pirate factions routinely sent out recruiters for their cause - after a few years working on a mining colony, the average worker would easily be regaled by stories of life on pirate ships or even in their own earth-bound working forces - but they were usually found out and shown the door without much incident. They could be killed in-space, where they posed a valid threat, but not on the colonies. Different rules applied in the skies and on this earth. The inspector, funded by some of the main companies, was here to sort this out before things got even uglier.

Atira started getting ready for the evening shift. Equipment was kept quite basic on the mining colony, as complex electronic repair parts could be hard to get. Atira had air-pressured taser guns with settings that defaulted to stun but could be set to deadly levels, along with a retractable metal truncheon, a reinforced vest and other sundry equipment. She liked the tasers, which were attached to her hands and only useable by her, but they had to be aimed carefully and at a fairly stationary target. The truncheon, on the other hand, could be aimed and thrown with no hesitation. It contained ball bearings set on a tiny piston that, when the piece hit its target, would ram its momentum home even harder. A nasty feature, but the colonies were nasty places.

She pulled the truncheon from her belt, drew it out and hefted it, and tossed it a few times at a small, electronic scoreboard that hung in her living room. She got no bull's-eyes, but hit well enough that she'd have knocked a real-life target out. Satisfied with that warm-up, and certain that the evening wouldn't hold any more troubles, Atira headed out on patrol.

They strolled through the various bars, Atira and her partner. Each bar was kept as low-tech as everything else on the colony, although there were occasional pretensions to affluence. Some places leased bootleg Egones, special transmitters and receivers that played sound waves which only reached the customer's ears and that were specifically chosen to fit his tastes, or they had the similar eye-cast TV that required special ocular filters and was used mainly for sports events.

These generally cropped up in the lower-level establishments, aimed as they were at people who preferred to drink alone. Most sane people tended to be put off by the sights of patrons nodding their heads to total silence or shouting sports tactics and grievances at empty air.

Other establishments relied on more corporeal attractions. It was paradoxical, but the more hands-on a place was, the more peaceful it tended to be. Due to the overwhelming amount of testosterone and aggression that suffused the mining colonies, strippers would only work in the high-level places where they could be provided with constant protection both at and off work. Prostitutes, of course, could be found everywhere, but a year or two of living here would wear them out faster than the mining drills, and leave them with similar looks.

Equipment in bars, likewise, was kept in good shape, and included everything from holoball to miniature mind clash fields, but repair costs were so high - particularly for anything electronic - that only the more higher-class establishments even bothered with it.

It was a hard business to be in, but highly profitable if you had the talent. People drank a lot here, and fought a lot, and the bars were in a constant race to attract the first type and repel the second.

Tonight, Atira trawled the lousier bars, the ones full of people with little to lose. It was hard to know who was new and who wasn't, since teams of workers came and went on a regular basis, but you did learn to recognize types. In one of the seediest she saw some people who definitely did not look like miners, and made a mental note to check up on them. She also noticed a man, well-dressed and apparently alone, who was quite calmly sipping on his drink and not doing anything much at all apart from apparently enjoying the ambience. She filed him away for further study as well and, realizing that her partner didn't seem to have noticed the undercover pirate recruiters, decided that she might have a chance of dealing with them later using her own methods.

The evening wore on, and they were headed towards the last bar of the evening when the inspector caught up with them. There was little traffic here, and the only sounds wafting out from the bar's doors were general chatter and the clinks of pleximugs on metal tables. No music could be heard, of course, nor any sports.

"Ah, I hoped I'd find you here," he said to the pair, then turned to Atira's partner and said, "Could I speak to you for a second, please? Alone."

Atira was annoyed at the slight, but then realized that the inspector actually seemed hesitant even to look at her, as if his gaze might betray something. She felt a pang of nervousness, but said, "Hey guys, I'll just head into the bar. Come in when you're done, okay?" and went in.

Again she noticed that calm, relaxed man, sitting at his own private table and sipping his drink. She was going to walk over and ask him a few questions, but at that moment the inspector walked into the bar and said to her, in a voice far too loud and tremulous, "I need to speak with you. Right now, please."

She stared in his face, and she realized that she'd been found out. They'd discovered a corpse, or her dogtags, or a witness, or something, some kind of ruination.

She was wondering exactly what to do when the calm, well-dressed man walked past her and up to the inspector, pulled out a gun, pointed it at the inspector's head and blew his brains out all over the floor.

\*\*\*

It was the day after, and Atira was returning home from her shift. She was puzzled, tired and getting rather paranoid.

Nobody at work had remembered anything strange happening last night at the bars; no murders, nothing. They also did not remember any inspectors. When she'd quizzed her partner about it, he'd furrowed his brow and said, "Why? You expecting someone like that?"

The previous night, after the gunshot, the bar had fallen dead silent, its patrons too stunned to act. The gunman had turned to her and said, "Walk out," and she had obeyed, amazed by his initiative. The inspector's body wasn't the first whose death she'd had a hand in, though it was usually more direct, and she had stepped over his inert, mottled form without a second look. Around her, the patrons had held their breaths, the only movement at all coming from the seriously drunken Egone guys, who'd were lying down on their tables with their heads gently bobbing from side to side in tune to the silent music.

She'd spent the day on tenterhooks, expecting at any moment that someone would come in, point at her and scream her guilt. She had gone on as many open, circuitous colony rounds as she could, retracing her steps, trying to find some clue as to what had happened and what was coming, but had come up empty. Even the floor that had held the inspector's cooling body seemed free of blood and brains, though it was too grime-encrusted to tell for sure.

So when Atira finally made it home, she was not yet in the land of adrenaline backwash where relaxation reigns, but her exhaustion meant that she had long since stopped getting jittery at the least little thing. And the instant she walked in and closed the door behind her, her subconscious needed little effort to cut through the subdued noise of her thoughts.

Someone was already inside. It was the silence, and the way that the air felt deader than usual, and it meant the person was there for her.

She kept to her routine, taking off her shoes and jacket and unbuckling her belt, and pulled the metal truncheon from it. As she walked down the corridor and towards the corner to her living room, she crouched, tensed her legs and quietly extended the truncheon, then in one swift motion jumped past the corner, twisting in the air, and flung the truncheon at the human target she glimpsed there. As she landed she kept moving, rolling into a crouch and preparing her tasers for a high-voltage shot, but was stopped short when she realized who her target was.

In a corner of her living room, sitting in her easy chair, was the well-dressed man from last night. He held the truncheon, caught in mid-air inches from his face, but otherwise he didn't appear to have moved. He was smiling.

"Who are you? How did you get in here?" Atira demanded.

"Name's Alad, but you forgot the last question," he replied. "What did I take?"

She stared at him in incomprehension. Then realization dawned and she rushed into the bedroom, tore open the bedroom cupboard and grabbed for a box that was no longer there.

Alad stepped into the bedroom doorway. "It's gone. An impressive collection, I must say."

She contemplated whether to kill him on the spot. Risk as it might her chances of figuring out last night's murder, she couldn't afford to be blackmailed or indentured by any man.

But then she looked properly into his eyes, and the tiny fire she saw there stayed her hand. She'd only ever seen that kind of mad, unquenchable gaze from one other person. In the mirror.

He held up a glass of water. "Drink it."

She took the glass and downed it before he had a chance to say anything else.

Alad regarded her with clearly added interest. "You know," he said, "I was rather looking forward to baiting you a bit. Maybe saying something like, 'Oh, come on. What's the worst that could happen?' You've completely ruined that."

She grinned at him. Despite the oddity of the situation, she found herself rather liking the man. Besides, he'd caught her truncheon in mid-air, and blown a man's brains out in front of the world. Open defiance was probably the only realistic way she could take charge of the situation without compromising her own safety.

"What if there was poison in that glass?" he asked.

"Everyone dies someday," she replied sweetly. "Even you. Now, can I please get an explanation for all this?"

He pulled out a small box about the size of a fist and opened it. She looked at its contents and winced.

"What do you see?" he said.

"It's like a visual migraine. Flips through images that remind me of things I ... don't want to think of."

"So it doesn't make you want to see more?"

"I'd be happy if I never saw the damn thing again."

As he stared at her in apparent amazement, she added, "Right now, thanks."

He came to, and snapped the box shut.

"I appreciate your help the other night," she said. "And I can spot the work of a professional. So I'm going along with this for now. But I'm getting very curious."

"Coming soon, dear, coming soon. One more thing. Why didn't you fire these?" He pointed at her hands, on which the tasers were affixed.

"Taser shots are monitored. I didn't want a criminal investigation in this house, for obvious reasons, so I preferred to knock you out."

"Also," Alad added wryly, "You've got a very high faith in your aim. And possibly little fear of dying, maybe coupled with a hidden want to be found out."

She shrugged.

He said, "Well, I'm happy with what I've seen here. You're in."

"In what?"

"I can't tell you everything right now. Basically, we're building a team of people to go on a potentially dangerous mission."

"And you think I'm fit for this?"

"You have several natural gifts, of which this one," he tapped the box, "was the most impressive.

"Oh?"

"You're the first one not knocked on their ass by that," he said. "Anyway, if you do what we ask, and help us find what we're looking for, we'll erase your criminal record. Moreover, we'll eliminate all possible ties between you and the acts you've committed. If you want to restart your life somewhere else, we'll even throw in a facial remodeling to get you going, along with a substantial monetary reward. You'll be rich as a capsuleer."

She walked into the living room, sat down in her easy chair, and stared at him. After a while she said, "That's quite an offer. And I'll be working with other people of similar talents?"

"Broadly speaking, yes. You'll all be working under codenames, incidentally. Yours is Draea."

"How will you keep control?"



"Leave that to us."

"Right, because you're such good planners."

He hesitated at that. "What do you mean?"

She rested her head on her hand and looked at him askew. "Like lightning from a blue sky, some inspector arrives. His corp is worried that all those naughty, naughty pirates who've been disappearing in the area have been doing it on my watch. Lo and behold, his questions lead him directly to me, just in time for you to come in and save the day. You rotten cheats," she said, with about as much amusement as rapprochement.

He opened his mouth to speak, but she raised her hands, tasers aimed, and said, "If you are going to say anything other than how clever I am, be warned that I can fire two shots from each hand, and unless you're intending to catch them all with your teeth, you're going to have a real bad time."

"Does this mean you refuse our offer?" he asked.

"Hell, no," she said, lowering her hands. "I'd much rather work with people I can't trust. It makes everything so much simpler, and I can focus purely on myself for a change. When do we start?"

"As soon as you're packed. I'll wait outside." Alad headed towards the exit, and on his way out added, in a tone barely loud enough for her to hear, "We may have to move you up a division."

## **Black Mountain: Inertial**

Nale wiped the sweat off his brow. He'd only just returned to the bench after the day's physical set, and his hands were still shaking. If he weren't a dying man, he'd have been worried about his health.

He looked around. The gym was active, if basic. The mats weren't self-cleaning, but they did have a fairly good antibacterial skin - as Nale had been grateful for during all those times he'd had to do sprawl or duck-and-roll exercises - and they were being put to good use by two dozen men engaged in various versions of fight sports. In the cardio section, the magnetic treadmills had auto-adjusting capabilities that kept the speed and incline in line with one's required heart rate, and the pads could even be tuned to variable repulsion in order to better simulate grass. They worked and worked well, and routinely put Nale to within a fraction of a heart attack, but they were getting a little worn. Nale suspected that one of these days a treadmill would break and someone would find themselves launched through the roof. The gym had low ceilings, too.

A logo of the Sanctuary, one of the corporations belonging to the Sisters of EVE, was stamped on all machines in this section, along with all the benches. Nale idly reached out and rubbed the logo embossed on his bench. The narrow ridges of the Sanctuary star felt wonderfully cold to the touch. He'd been here for several months, training and doing missions, and at times the only things that felt real in this world were the ridges and bumps in the logo, and the fire in his body when he worked out.

The compound itself was shaped like the Sisters' logo, with three isolated sections forming a rough circle. One of them was the living quarters and training grounds for the task forces to which Nale belonged; another was the administrative and general work center, where normal Sisters business was conducted; and the third was the ops center, where nobody went.

Everywhere in the gym, someone was being brought to sweat and tears. In one corner Berkhes, a close friend, was being put through the inertial test, where a machine fired rubber-coated balls at him at high speeds. Nale watched him and rubbed his own bruises, bright purple and growing. He hated that machine.

One of the monitors sat down with him and asked how he was doing. The monitors were half personal trainers and half nurses, and showed up usually when people collapsed or started to vomit.

"I'm all right," Nale said.

"Shakes?"

"Yeah."

The lights in the gym were tiring Nale's eyes. It was after dark, and the ceiling in the gym was beset with windows. During the day the crew'd be blinded by the sun, and at night the stars would look down on them with icy glares. Every so often a trail would pass over the skies, and

Nale, trying to keep his mind off the exhaustion, would wonder if it was a falling star or a capsuleer. They turned the lights up after dusk, and the monitors made sure the trainees kept up a constant pace. Everyone knew the agony of stopping or changing your motion was so much worse than plunging on.

"Well, you did push it pretty hard there," the monitor said, and Nale had to squint to see his face. "I saw you do the inertial. You'll make that machine burn out before you quit."

"That's the point," Nale said. "This is the only thing I still haven't gotten a handle on, and I'll keep doing it until I get it right."

"That's what I like to hear," the monitor said. "Ops want to see you."

"Beg pardon?"

"Do you know where ops is?"

"Everyone knows where ops is."

"Then get your ass in gear, son."

As Nale hauled himself to his legs and set off, the monitor added, "Oh, one thing. You eaten yet?"

"Nope."

"Good."

\*\*\*

He wanted to die.

Instead of being greeted by serious people in Sisters uniforms, he'd been met by more monitors, asked to change into an electrorhythm costume that would monitor his body to an insane level of detail, and sent deep into the place for even more tests.

This part of compound was also well-lit, but its architecture felt far less welcoming and was closer to Caldarian angles than the Gallentean curves he was used to. There were narrow corridors with locked doors, and once Nale had finally been led to the testing area, things didn't much improve. The equipment was sleek, black and massive, and most of it looked like a cross between mining equipment and torture devices. Only even half of the devices, to Nale's mind, could possibly fit a human body in one piece. They had no logos, and operated in utter silence. There were no windows here.

One of those machines was called Infinity-8, and looked like a drive shaft: A large spherical construction on one end, one that turned out to contain a gyroscope, followed by a long,

windowless corridor. The gyro spun him through 360 degrees at high speeds, after which he was made to walk through the corridor and found it beset with monitors on every surface. The monitors transmitted video specifically designed to disorient his perception, and blasted out alpha sound waves aimed at affecting his cognitive abilities. He made it through without screaming, crying or vomiting, though it was close, and on the other end had to put on a helmet that attached itself to his face through microscopic probes and forced him to play Mind Clash against AI opponents, first a single one, then groups of smaller ones. He did better against the smaller ones, which relied more on oversight than concentration, but by the end his head had started to throb quite strongly. Also, the microprobes made his scalp itch like mad.

Once he was finished with all the tests, and vowing that if he lived through the day he was going to start drinking again, they made him go through a series of inspections. In theory the checkups could have been done by machines, but the Sisters preferred the human touch, so he had to stand naked and rather embarrassed while the monitors went over his vitals. One of them mentioned to him, "You're a natural."

Nale, who was trembling from exhaustion and could barely stand, said, "I don't feel like a natural."

"Well, you're the first one we didn't have to carry in here on a stretcher. You're amazingly relaxed."

"Comes with death," he said.

The monitor gave him a funny look, then said. "Tests are over. After you've cleaned up, ops people want to talk to you." The monitor looked at the screen showing Nale's vitals and said, "Now his adrenaline rises. You're a strange, strange man, Nale."

\*\*\*

He walked into a large and remarkably low-tech room. It had one round table whose surface was a glass finish, a black matte with a green shade, and at which were seated four people, three in official Sisters wear and one in casual. One chair was empty.

Nale recognized one of the three Sisters operatives as Riserakko Isenairos, the Sanctuary's chief advisor, but the other two were unknown to him. He looked at the casually dressed man and was surprised to see Berkhes, who grinned at him.

Nale addressed the Sisters. "I was expected?"

"You were," one of them replied. "Have a seat. I'm Jonak."

He sat. The chair felt remarkably soft.

"Comfy?" Jonak said.

"I could fall asleep here," Nale said.

Jonak said, "I imagine you could. They've been working you pretty hard out there."

"I suppose. I'd still like another go at the inertial, just as soon as my feet turn back from rubber to solids."

Jonak gave a brief smile, and slid a reader across to Nale. The device was about the size of Nale's forearm, and was already turned on. The words, "Book of Emptiness" were lit up on the front.

"You know we've been setting up scout teams," Jonak said.

"I know you've been setting up a lot of teams," Nale said. "I've done a fair number of non-scout missions. I've heard the name of Sansha's Nation whispered, but nothing concrete."

"So you have. About those missions ..." Jonak replied, and looked to his two compatriots.

Before they had a chance to comment, Berkhes cut in. "Most of them were simulated."

Nale stared at him. "What?"

"They've been pumping us full of nanomachinery and sending us after transmitters planted by our own people. Half the time, the stuff we were handling wasn't even there. I just got promoted, myself, and I wanted to punch these people in the face when I found out."

Nale sat back in his chair, stunned.

Jonak said, "We need people who possess not only an empathy for this kind of thing, but also an immunity to certain chemical, neurological and psychological pressures. People whose very natures would already make them perfect candidates for the Sisters, but who are willing to go even further than that."

"So they've been pumping us full of nanobots, usually by making us drink them, and making us see visions," Berkhes interjected again. "Supposedly it's a test of how we'd react to the Book itself. The bots flush out when we piss, apparently."

Nale sat there, still stunned, then shrugged and went, "All right. What do you need?"

The three Sisters representatives looked at one another, then back at him. "Do you have any questions?"

Nale tapped the reader. "I presume they'll be answered in here."

"Any comments?"

"Nope."

Riserakko, the Sanctuary advisor, scratched the thin strip of beard on his chin and said, "We've spent a long time playing with your head and pushing you beyond your usual limits in almost every conceivable way. Doesn't that bother you?"

"I'm a little concerned that you found it necessary to lie to me, but I appreciate that the tests probably wouldn't have worked otherwise. Aside from that, no." Nale leaned forward. "Look, I'm dying. I hope you know this. I'll be in perfect health one moment, then the next I'll be just one more cooling body. I've already had my world turned inside out and I'm still learning to see it anew. I honestly can't be bothered to waste energy on being angry at you people. Anyway, I've found new strength through the exercise, the tests and the missions, and nobody can take that away from me."

"This is true," said the last, unnamed Sisters representative. His face was rough-hewn, and he spoke in carefully measured tones. "There is certainly nothing we can take from you. In fact, I have been going over the results of your tests, and they are quite astounding. We have been hammering you from every angle, and not only have you withstood it like no one else, your abilities have actually started to exceed our measurements. We want to move you up from the scouting teams and into the operational league itself. Once the real thing starts, you'll be in the heat of the fray."

"Thanks. Uh, did you notice the bit about me dying?"

The man leaned forward. "Quite frankly, with the things we have been putting you through, if you were going to die any time soon you would be dead already."

Nale stopped short at that. All this time he'd had unwavering faith in the Sisters' ability to decide what was right for him and his faction brothers, even when they'd been sent out on dubious missions with no explanation given. It occurred to him now that one of the reasons he'd been chosen for this task force was precisely because he hadn't required any explanation, or asked any questions. "The information," he said, just to say something, "that's all in this reader, right?"

"It is," Jonak said. "You can't take it outside this section of the compound, obviously, so we've set up new quarters for you here. Go and familiarize yourself with the material, get something to eat, and we'll see you back here in three hours."

"Thanks. Any chance you could give me a quick capsule summary of this whole thing?"

"A rogue piece of Jove brainwashing technology is on the verge of falling into the hands of Sansha's Nation and we're the only ones who can stop it."

"Ah, right. Glad I asked."

"Welcome to the team," Berkhes said.

## Black Mountain: The Room

"Much as I appreciate your enthusiasm, you need to stop this nonsense. If you walk up to someone, if you distract them for a second and then manage to take them down, you kill them on the spot. That's what you do. Okay? If you absolutely have to leave a personal mark, you find something lying around and shove it into their eyesocket. What you do *not* do is let them get up and make a run for it before throwing a knife into their backs. Let's be professional about this. And stop crying."

Draea, standing in a crouch and breathing heavily, looked up at him and said, "I'm not crying."

"That ain't sweat."

"Little runt kneed me in the groin. It sets off the tear ducts."

"Told you she had balls!" a teammate shouted to them.

Alad leaned his head back and rubbed his eyes. "Alright!" he shouted. "Session over, thanks, go away, people! Dinner's at seven." On command, the holograms in the area faded out, shields blinked into oblivion, and various pieces of cover, hurdle and barricade collapsed into themselves and slid silently down into slots on the floor.

Alad extended a hand to Draea, who accepted it and stood up. One of their victims was lying on a bunch of black paper-maché rocks nearby, snoring.

"I'm getting a little tired of this, Alad," she said.

"Are you, dear?"

"No, actually, scratch that. I'm getting so utterly sick of it that I could vomit blood. If I have to go through one more stupid exercise with one more stupid fake victim where I push a rubber pin against their gut and tell them they're dead, I swear on all that is holy, I'm going to shove this pretend knife through my own eye until it rattles inside my skull, let the last beats of my dying heart carry it through my body, and *pull it out my ass.*"

She sighed. "Also, the martial arts sessions are stupid. Nobody does small-joint manipulation anymore."

"I'm glad you're opinionated." He caught her glimpse. "No, seriously, I am. It means you care. And I'm glad that you care, because you're being promoted."

She stared at him. "What, just like that?"

"You've been on countless recon missions, completely unsimulated, protecting our interests in all sorts of situations. You've shown a remarkable ability to stay alive and to ensure that others ... well, don't. And your IPM index-

"My what?"

"Int-Per-Mem, dear, don't interrupt. It shows quite amazing numbers through the entire scale, mental and physical. *I'd* be scared if I knew you were on my heels."

The victim got up, yawned and started walking away. "There's another group coming in," Alad said to him. "Where are you going, Placx?"

"For a smoke," Placx said without slowing.

Alad watched him go, then turned back to Draea. "Follow me."

They walked through the compound, passing the exercise rooms, the altered states chambers and the torture vaults. Each was designed to test the subject's physical, mental and spiritual tolerance, to find their breaking points and how they would react when pushed to that level, and even, for the torture vaults, what they'd do to others. A team member prone to murder everyone around him was as much a liability as one who'd go catatonic.

They moved down to a lower floor, passed through corridors Draea rarely traversed, and at last came to an unremarkable door that she had never even noticed before. She stood in front of it, but it didn't open.

"Special access only, dear," Alad said.

Draea raised an eyebrow. There were no visible scanners or locking mechanisms in front of the door. Nevertheless, when Alad stood in front of it, the door hummed softly and opened. The space inside was almost pitch black, with only one cone of light shining down brightly on a metal chair a few steps into the room.

"Don't worry," Alad said. "You've already passed."

Draea shrugged, walked in and sat on the chair. Behind her, the door closed, and what little outside light had been flowing in was cut off.

She sensed someone nearby, but she did not feel threatened.

A voice, issuing from a speaker high above, said, "You are alone in this room."

"You lie," she said. It was not a rebuke; it was a statement of fact.

The voice, sounding pleased, continued, "You have now been promoted to task force operative."



The voice fell silent for a moment, in quiet expectancy. Draea said, "... thanks?"

"Do you understand what it is that the operatives do?"

"Killing people is a given," Draea said. "The rest doesn't really matter, does it?"

"That depends," the voice said. "Before we continue, you should know that you will never be allowed to speak of this to anyone not on your own task force. You do, however, need to know a few things if you're to do a decent job for us. Does the name Book of Emptiness tell you anything?"

"Not really. Sounds Amarrian, but that's about it."

"It was. Supposedly a lost holy book, one that would bring immediate ascension to the reader. It is now the chosen codename for a machine that we're after. Set at low power it has the capacity to heal some mild psychological issues. On high, it has the power to brainwash people."

"Ah, so you want me to get it for you."

"No. We want you to destroy it."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Are you serious?"

"It is a non-negotiable part of our arrangement. We have spies out right now, various scouting forces. Once we get a positive lead, we'll send out one of the task forces."

"So why me?" Draea asked.

The voice replied, "You have excelled at what you do. You've gotten this far and managed not to die, and our nanomachinery tests prove that you have a natural aversion to the Book's effects. Aside from this curious obsession of yours to hit people at range with ridiculous weapons, you are one of our absolute top performers. Not only that, but in your previous life you showed a remarkable acumen for flying under the radar. We need agents who can work on the edge without falling off or bragging to everyone who's watching."

"Do I at least get to know who you people are?"

The voice laughed. "If you want, though it won't make much of a difference either way. We're a special section of the Society of Conscious Thought. We're operating on behalf of the Hyperconsciousness agenda." The voice paused again, and when Draea registered no

expression, it continued, "There is a final test. We know you're capable of committing atrocious acts both in cold blood and in the heat of battle."

"Damn straight," Draea said.

"But it's one thing to do it against an enemy you dislike, and quite another to do it against someone who hasn't done anything to you."

Another light turned on, shining a bright cone down a little way from Draea. It illuminated a small metal table on which lay a knife with a very long and narrow blade - a knife useable for both slitting throats and stabbing hearts - and a woman in a chair, tied and strapped in, wearing only underwear and a bra. The straps were so tight and numerous that her body and head were absolutely immobile, and both her throat and her wrists were exposed, the latter strapped to the chair's handles. She was gagged, and there were streaks of tears and snot running down her face.

"I like how you let her wear a bra," Draea said. "Otherwise this'd just be so undignified."

"Personally, I wanted to strap Placx in there, but they overruled me," a different voice said from overhead.

Draea looked up and grinned. "Alad?" she said.

"I swear, that man's played victim for the last time. We just cannot have people slouching around here.

"Should I do it, Alad?"

"Do anything you like, dear. But do it to the hilt."

"If we're all ready here-" the other voice said.

"Oh yes, by all means. Let's treat this with the reverence it deserves," Alad said with exaggerated seriousness, then went quiet. After a few seconds he added, "No pressure."

Draea slowly walked to the woman and the table, where she picked up the knife and weighed it in her hand.

"What's her name?" she asked.

"Irrelevant," the nameless voice replied.

"That's for me to decide," Draea said. "And besides, since you're so concerned with cold blood, I hardly think it'd make things any easier for me if I knew her name."

The voice said, "Still-", but Alad cut in with "Inibjer."

"Thanks," Draea said. She looked Inibjer in the eye and said, "If it helps, I've done this before."

She tossed the knife in the air a couple of times, then leaned down to Inibjer and whispered, "I'm not going to kill you. Don't worry. I'm going to walk away slowly, and they'll have to find someone else to do the job. I might even be able to get help, put a stop to this."

Tears started running down Inibjer's eyes, and Draea said, "Be strong." Despite the restraints, Inibjer tried to nod, but all that came out was a tremor.

Draea slowly walked away, then, in one swift motion, she turned, raised the knife and threw it with massive force. It whizzed through the air and sliced just past Inibjer's head, grazing her right temple and bouncing off the wall beyond.

There was a sigh from above.

Frowning, Draea walked past Inibjer and picked up the knife, then stalked back to her, said, "Sorry, dear. I lied," and leaned over the prone victim. Inibjer trembled and shivered for a moment, then gurgled and went slack, maroon rivulets trailing down her arms and chest.

Draea smiled, stroked Inibjer's hair and cheek, then absent-mindedly wiped her hand on her shirt. Behind her, the outside door slid open with a metallic hum. She turned and walked towards it, but hesitated at the exit. "Alad?" she said.

"Yes?"

"What would've happened if I'd refused to kill her?"

"Oh, we'd have filled the chamber with poisonous gas."

"Are you serious?"

"What, you think I'd want to go in there and do it personally? You've got a *knife*, you psychopath."

She left the chamber, laughing loudly.

## **Black Mountain: The First Half**

Nale was sitting on his bed in the ship quarters, fully dressed, looking at the thing in his hand.

It was a metal device the size of his fist, curved and with a little opaque sphere set in the middle. The sphere had a red sheen and showed a faint triangular halo. As he rolled it in one direction, it turned yellow, then orange, blue, indigo and purple. He rolled it back to red and found that while it couldn't roll far in the other direction, forcing the sphere a little would turn the red to green; though when he let go, it shifted back to red.

It was a catalyst for the Book. The machine could not be set off unless nearby activated this device. Otherwise, the Book would remain completely inert, and supposedly appeared quite innocuous. It was also the first piece of actual proof Nale had been given that confirmed the veracity of their mission, and while he had been happy in the past to heedlessly go along with his directives, he was very grateful that ops had seen fit to give him one of these items. Not because he might have to use it - that eventuality seemed ugly and enticing, all at once - but because it gave him an anchor, a counterpoint to the weirdness that surrounded this whole mess. The more he had found out about the hunt, the less real it all seemed. This catalyst would keep him going.

Nale held it up to the light, watching the refractions. The catalyst's surface had an oily sheen, so that the light danced through the spectrum of colors, but the sphere set in its middle drank in all light like a black ocean and gave nothing out in return. Nale thought of how amazing it was, that these small things might effect such big changes in the people around them, and he mused that it was really quite the same with his team and the rescue missions they'd done. Oftentimes he had wished that his own team, and the Sisters at large, could make more of a difference, but then - he rolled the sphere back and forth - they'd just have to make do with what they had.

Since its discovery, this little piece of equipment had become the very basis of their mission. It came from a set of several catalysts that had just recently surfaced and, according to the Sisters' analysis, gave final proof that the Book not only existed but had also surfaced outside Jove space. Nale and everyone else on the team had been given clear instructions that if they were to retrieve the Book they were allowed to set it off in an emergency, but not unless absolutely necessary, and preferably not amongst large groups of people. The Book supposedly had an area of effect, and they must only ever turn it up to blue levels, which would be enough to disable most people. Higher levels would permanently mark anyone unlucky enough to be in the vicinity.

They themselves were safe from the Book's effects, something apparently to do with a combination of genetic makeup, personal strength, and simple immunity to having their brains scrambled for peace. The Book, Nale had been told, would reach into people's minds and forcibly eliminate warlike, angry and hateful tendencies, and would probably lobotomize the poor bastards in the process if set on too high a level. But for those who'd managed to get through the Sisters' regimen, these feelings were so faint to begin with, so little a part of their personality, that their removal wouldn't cause any permanent damage. The machine might have *some* effect, the Sisters administrators had grudgingly admitted, but it shouldn't be anything to worry about.

Roll the sphere, roll the sphere, red to green.

There was a knock on the door, and Shiqra, a teammate of Nale's, walked in without waiting for a response. Shiqra was a thin man, full of jittery energy than that made him look like his skin had him trapped. He wore tight clothing and didn't smile so much as implicitly grin, and had the brusque manner of someone who'd done more than his share of high-risk rescue missions. He'd been one of the first to get recruited.

Before Nale could utter a word, Shiqra said, "We've got a lead. Solid one, this time. Need to head off right now before Empire gets a word of it."

'Empire' was their codeword for everyone who wasn't a Sister, and applied particularly to some of the more sinister forces of the four Empires, each of which, while still in the dark, was slowly becoming aware that the Sisters were after something.

"Where is it?" Nale asked.

"With the Angels," Shiqra said and left the room.

\*\*\*

One journey later, they were at an Angel station, and the noise was deafening. They were hardly even out of the docking bays and into the marketing area proper before they were assailed by sensory overload. Roadside vendors shouted at them from every direction; booster peddlers walked around dragging locked plexiglas carts, their chemical wares clattering inside; and sweaty, stinking Drop maniacs, with their characteristic soaked rags bound over their temples, sat on the curbs and screamed at things that weren't really there. Condensation from body heat covered the walls, and the Angel banners that hung on every wall were limp and dark with wet grime. The clamor was giving Nale a headache.

Strictly speaking it wasn't necessary for the Angels to allow these huge marketing bazaars on their stations - they were a tightly run criminal organization whose business deals tended to be of a subtler nature - but they'd long since discovered the benefits of networking and of providing social hubs. Some of their best recruits were reportedly merchants who had come to an Angel station in search of profits, found they liked the atmosphere, and decided to get involved.

It made sense that these people be the first to dredge up the Book. Aside from their entrepreneurial spirit they were the prime harvesters of Jove technology, were spread around most of known space, and were notoriously effective when it came to stealing other people's things. They were wanderers, too, and had never been content merely sit at the Serpentis' heels; always exploring, always pushing further.

Nale spotted a few Angel representatives, who nodded genially to them. Angel officials routinely kept up a highly visible presence on station, but stayed calm and unafraid to chat with the civilians. It was clear that this was a place where people knew each other, and where business

was expected to tick on without undue hassle. Nale's worries about standing out in the crowd had proved unfounded, too: There was such a mix of people here that even with their Sisters badges on their arms, Nale and his team didn't attract the slightest bit of unwanted attention. He was relieved, and hoped it would stay that way.

The badges were the standard Sisters wear, worn by members in war-zones to show neutrality and protect from harm. They probably weren't really that necessary as far as protection was concerned; people didn't usually get bothered at these stations for no reason, and those nice Angel officials wouldn't hesitate to crack skulls if any trouble arose. But what the badges brought as well was special dispensation. Sisters were often allowed with very little explanation to pass into places closed to others, and nobody liked to question or delay them too much. After all, the skin they were saving might one day be your own.

Nale and his team were searching for a particular vendor, and trying to do it without asking any questions, but so far they'd had no luck. Two of Nale's other teammates, Berkhes and a big, hulking man called Monas, were lagging behind, looking around and, in Nale's mind, taking a little too long to get to where they were going. They were five on the task force; Zetyn, their tech guy, was back on the ship, while Shiqra was lagging even further behind.

Shiqra suddenly started walking faster, passing Berkhes and Monas and reaching Nale. "I've got it," he said to Nale.

"You know where the guy is?"

"Yeah, just figured it out. Come on, let's get moving."

They walked down several streets away from the main square, towards the fancier areas of the station. Shiqra, Nale and Monas led the group, but Berkhes lagged a little behind, looking thoughtful. Nale didn't comment; Berkhes was an old friend who'd shared innumerable missions, and was as dependable as any man he'd ever known. If he needed to work something out, he'd be given the space.

At last they came to a house that shone with affluence even by the standards of others around it. Its entrance was guarded by Angel officials who betrayed none of the warmth of their brethren down by the market, and the team was barred entrance.

And there it might have ended, in more ways than one, if someone hadn't come out of the house, muttering curses. It was a female Angel captain, and Nale immediately approached her.

"Excuse me?" he said.

"Yes?"

"I'm Nale, Sisters of EVE," he said, offering a hand which she shook.

"I'm Hona, Guardian Angels, special forces. What do you need?"

"We desperately need an audience with this merchant. Is there any way you could help us?"

"Help is usually done through deals. What could you offer me and my team?"

"Well, uh, if you get a papercut I could probably bandage it," Nale said.

Hona stared at him for a while, then asked, "Is Arak expecting you?"

"No," Nale admitted.

"Is he going to be happy about whatever offer you have for him?"

"I honestly have no idea."

She stared at him a little longer, then said, "Well, you're Sisters and I've got sympathy for the cause. And plus, it'll probably piss Arak off, which is all for the good as far as I'm concerned. So I'll let you in under my authority."

"Is it going to get you into trouble?" Nale asked.

"Doesn't matter. My task force has been decommissioned. I was looking for some work for us, or at least a little help in finding a person I know who's gone missing, but apparently neither are worth Arak's time. I'll have to find the guy myself, clearly, then start flying aimlessly through space. Maybe you'll have better luck than me."

She spoke to one of the security guards, then waved the Sisters in and walked off.

They entered the house. Arak the merchant resided on the second story, in a massive Caldari-esque chamber. Pieces of onyx ochre and splinters of cooled gelidus ice were carefully placed, offering half an aesthetic view and half an undertone of religious symbolism. Multihued globes of cytoserocin, a gas cloud that constantly revolved and coalesced, lay in porcelain bowls designed for sacrifices to the gods. Nale looked at a celadon sphere, and its purplish shade gave him a shiver.

One wall was completely overtaken by a sand waterfall whose quiet hiss felt soothing to the ear. In the air, laser birds flew around, 3D images projected by hidden vidcasters. It was a remarkably nice office, and the whole effect was only slightly spoiled by the giant Quafe cooler behind Arak's desk. It was full of Red Quafe, a special version with selected rogue ingredients, and the reason became apparent as soon as the team entered. Arak, overweight and clad in figure-hiding robes, sprung up from his desk, paced to them and shook their hands. His brow glistened. He waved his hands at the birds. "Their flight is symbolic, too, the patterns. They're casting good luck on this room, good business luck."

Nale followed his lead and sat in a chair by the desk. "We understand you had a recent shipment come in with some strange things, including an inert block of shaped metal. We'd like to buy it."

"What, sight unseen?" Arak said.

"Yes."

"Sure."

Nale's team looked at one another. This was a little too easy.

"Uh, have you used it?" Nale asked.

"Nope, I haven't. It just got in, doesn't seem to do much, design isn't familiar, but it just looks like some old, broken-down machine and I can't imagine what anyone would want with it apart from antiques interest." The words came out in a gabble. Nale noticed two open RQ bottles on the desk.

"Do you know what it is?"

"Oh sure, I've got some idea, but I'll leave it to the experts to decide."

Nale cast a glance at Berkhes, who surreptitiously rolled his eyes. Neither of them believed Arak had any idea at all.

"Do you have it here?" Nale asked.

"No, it's at my warehouse." Arak leaned forward on his desk, nudging the RQ bottles. "You know, I don't usually inquire on these things, but I'm curious as to why the Sisters would be after something like this."

Nale sat back in his chair. "We hear it might have some healing properties, but we need to research it first."

"You people have remarkably good spies, then, since I hadn't even started to put out word that I had the machine."

"We're quite happy getting here first, thanks," Berkhes said, and flashed him a small smile. "Could we see it, please?"

"Oh, it isn't here. I don't store any of my merchandise on-site, so I'll need to send a couple of people with you to a warehouse elsewhere"

"I'm sure we can find our own way," Shiqra said in an impatient tone. "Regarding payment-"

Arak held up a beringed hand. "No worries, I trust the Sisters. We can discuss it when you get back. Here's the address."



He keyed in a combination on his console. The laser birds settled on his desk, where they melted into words and numbers on the desk surface. "I'd like to give you the location inside the warehouse, but can't, sorry. Policy. My men will go with you and pull out the right box."

They paid their respects and exited the building, setting off towards the warehouse in tow with Arak's enforcers. As they walked down the street, Berkhes whispered to Nale, "I'm not at all sure I trust Shiqra. He's been acting a little nervy lately. When we were at the market I think I saw him get a message on a transmitter, something that certainly wasn't meant for the rest of us. And he keeps fiddling with something in his pocket that ... well," Berkhes added with a little grin, "I really hope isn't what I think it is."

He was about to say more, but Shiqra walked up to them, smiled and said, "I'll catch up. I need to send a quick message to main base about where we're going and what our plans are." Shiqra dropped back, and Nale looked to Berkhes, who raised one eyebrow but said nothing.

Once they got to the warehouse the merchant's crew let them in. They entered the building, which was so massive that Nale couldn't see to its end in the gloomy light. It was full to the rafters with stuff, stacked on ten-floor scaffoldings and surrounded by metal walkers with giant, piston-pumped arms.

"The guy really is a collector," Berkhes said.

They were led deep into the warehouse. At last the merchant's men stopped, and keyed in numbers on a console. An automated machine slid along the rails of the scaffolding, clamped on to a small box, pulled it out and lowered it to the ground.

Nale and his companions looked at one another, all of them sharing the thought that this contained looked much too small to hold the Book.

Nale and Berkhes walked up to the box. "I've got a bad feeling about this," Berkhes said, and Nale nodded. One of the guards walked up, knelt in front of the box and unlocked it, then stepped back a respectable distance.

Nale took a look around the room, taking in his teammates' faces. Berkhes looked fairly calm, having apparently arrived at the same conclusion that Nale had. Zetyn was feigning an unimpressed look, but his excitement easily shone through. Shiqra just looked dyspeptic.

Nale turned back to the container. He opened it, looked in and felt like his entire body had deflated, a mixture of loosened nerves and disappointment.

In the box, which was far too big for its contents, was a catalyst. It was larger the one Nale had been given, the size of his entire forearm instead of his fist, but otherwise it was exactly the same.

Nale sighed and turned to Berkhes, intending to ask him what to do now, but stopped short when he saw the man's face.

Berkhes stood stock still, staring out at empty air as if he'd seen infinity. Then his eyes bulged, he stuttered something, and blood began to spurt in great gouts from his neck.

Nale and his companions immediately went for the nearest shelter, all of them veterans of a myriad firefights, all of them filing away their burgeoning grief for later. The merchant's men, slower and inexperienced, stood their ground, and moments later Nale heard a telltale swoosh that he'd only half-registered while staring into the box. Both men grimaced and clamped their hands to their necks. They half-managed to reach for their guns before collapsing on the floor, spouting blood.

In the deepening shadows, Nale spied a team of people moving towards them. Some guy in combat gear marched right up to the box without sparing the Sisters a look. He lifted it and looked inside, and seemed about to say something when there was a bang, and the front of the man's chest bloomed red. He fell to the ground, dropping the box and sending the catalyst tumbling out of it.

Everyone around saw that it was not the Book itself. There was a hushed silence, followed by a barely audible "... *shit!*" somewhere in the dark, and the sounds of gunfire and running. The Sisters remained inert and completely quiet, Nale included, until he felt the cold steel of a pistol laid against the back of his neck.

A voice said, "What you're looking for has already left." The pistol was withdrawn, and there was the sound of running feet.

Nale stood very still, listening to the receding gunfire. He remembered that voice. It belonged to an Angel captain called Hona.

## **Black Mountain: Of a Sentence**

Draea felt rather uncomfortable. Her team was making its way to the warehouse area on an Angel station, and at any moment she expected to see a familiar face, someone who'd known someone she'd killed. Not that she probably needed to worry much, considering the company she was in, but it paid to be careful.

She looked around at her teammates. There was Krezek the tech-sadist, Falau the brawler, Yorlas the bounty hunter and Polok the chem-tech warfare dude. Krezek was an ex-sniper with a gift for electronics and infiltration who liked torturing his subjects without ever being in their presence. Falau was a survivor of a million little wars, ranging from barroom brawls to rush-squads on conquerable stations, and had, by his own account, had an eager hand in starting many of them. Yorlas was a considerably more careful opponent whose activities, as with Krezek's, had included sniping, along with various manners of assassination both individual and en masse. His only real goal in life was to terminate as many people as possible before his own end of times, and while he had a stated interest in experimenting with methods, he drew his pleasure from the successful taking of a life and the individual marking of his kills, and not, as Falau did, in the bloody preamble to death. Polok, a rather more personable individual whom Draea liked quite a bit, was heavily into chemistry and the myriad alterations of the human body it could bring forth. He had a preference for being called the Plague Doctor, and had stuck to it right until he told Draea about it, at which point she laughed so hard at him that she nearly collapsed on the floor. He never mentioned it again.

Supposedly the Book wouldn't work on them. They were too far gone, the violence and darkness too ingrained in the very fabric in their personality, for the Book to do anything more than give them a bad headache. If the device ever got into the wrong hands, Draea thought, they would be the first ones put against the wall.

They'd all studied the plans, although some of the data, such as where Arak kept his merchandise, had only been revealed to them just as they were getting off the ship. Some information came through Yorlas, who apparently had friends in the area. All Draea's team needed to do now was get to the warehouse, and get inside it. Krezek had vowed to take care of the last part.

As they were walking towards the station's storage areas, Polok, whose stalker instincts matched Yorlas's, turned to Draea and said, "One of the Angels is following us."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Polok described him in detail.

Draea thought hard, and eventually an old splinter of a memory dislodged itself. A duo of Angels had appeared on her colony a while back, recruiting miners. She'd monitored their progress, then gone dark and caught one of them alone and unawares. He'd been a stocky man, and she'd later sprained a back muscle shoving his corpse into the incinerator. The other Angel, unaware of her

part in the murder, had raised a fuss and even called in some people of his own to investigate, but the corps had backed the cops and she'd stayed clean. Misplaced faith was a wonderful thing.

She called her team mates closer, and told them of all this. They grinned at each other, and Yorlas said, "Can't have him screw this up. Let's fade out. Look for the bullet."

The group split in two. Draea and Polok continued walking, but slowed their pace to an amble, and changed their route to darker streets. Krezek, Falau and Yorlas faded into the shadows.

Draea worried that the guy would have contacted other Angels, but Polok assured her they were safe. The man might have sent some message, but if he really had reported them to the active forces in the area, they'd long since have been scooped up and thrown into quarters. They kept looking around while talking, and eventually spotted a likely-looking side street between two warehouses. Everyone in the group had murderer instincts that they'd learned to trust implicitly, and those included finding the best spot to do something nasty, so it was no surprise when they came closer and saw a bullet lying at the entrance.

They walked into the alley, Draea subtly kicking the bullet away, and the Angel followed shortly after. He was closing in on them, Draea realized, and it would only be a few breaths before he engaged. The street was dark and deep.

"Don't turn around," Polok said to her, and she didn't, but she heard the sounds: There were the faintest of steps from the Angel trying to sneak closer, then a swoosh in the air, a gasp, the briefest of scuffles, and a muffled thump, followed by a gurgle and something that sounded like a wet piece of paper being torn up.

They stopped, and now she turned around, eager to inspect someone else's handiwork. She walked up to the corpse and gave it a professional's look. She wasn't so much interested in the stab wounds on his chest, or the gaping hole in his groin - everyone had their peccadilloes - but she was intrigued by the rim of shredded skin on one side of his throat, which matched neither a garrote pattern nor the serrated edge of a blade. She looked at Yorlas, who was busy cleaning off his knife.

He looked back at her, shrugged, unslung a gun that hung in a strap from his shoulders and handed it to her, saying only, "Missed. Aim needs adjusting."

She inspected the gun. It was a pressurized shotgun with six slanted choke tubes arranged radially. Each tube was lined with a magnetizing agent that helped keep its shots in line when they exited the barrels, making for longer range. The clips were twofold, one capsule of supercompressed gas and another capsule holding the ammunition. The magnetizing agent would only work on tiny metal pellets, but in Draea's view, that kind of ammo shouldn't have torn up the side of the Angel's throat like it had. Not unless the pellets had special, non-standard features.

"This ammo you have," she said to Yorlas, "Change-state, by any chance?"

He nodded.

"Activation on high-speed contact?"

Yorlas nodded again. "With skin," he said, and handed her a clip from his belt.

She inspected it, then gripped both ends tight and pushed in. She felt the internal safety dislodge, and one end of the clip became loose. She reached for one of the dead man's hands and pulled it close, removed the clip top and poured a handful of ammo into his cooling palm. They were little spherical pellets, and as soon as they touched his skin, several tiny, angled blades shot out from their surface, the blades curved in on the centre like the slanted path of a meteor falling to earth.

"And when they go into someone's skin?" she asked Yorlas.

"They spin," he said. "Work through his veins. Make a mess."

"So you could hit anyone anywhere on their body with this, and..."

"And the orbs will go in, make their way through the bloodstream and pulp everything they touch," Polok said, walking up to them. "Just one gets into you and you're in trouble. Close to an artery and you're dead, but even if it's just in your toes, they'll still cause pain so agonizing it'll drop you on the spot."

He picked up one of the silver pellets lying on top of the victim's palm, and looked at its blades. "These are regular issue. They got heat-seeking ones as well. Bronze-colored, I think. Nasty little things."

There was a beep that startled Draea far more than it should have. Yorlas pulled out a communicator, and Polok said, "Not again. That's, what, the third time you pull out that thing?"

Yorlas, ignoring him, said, "My contact on station. Says the Sisters are going to the warehouse. We should hurry." He got the gun back from Draea and said, "I fire the first shot."

Falau said, "The hell you do. Next one's mine."

Yorlas clapped the gun and said, "I need to test the aim. Problem?"

Falau got in his way and said, "Might be."

Polok stared at the two of them, then said, "By the gods ... all right. All right. Hey!"

They looked at him.

"Yorlas gets the next shot, because we'll need to stalk these people, but once we're safe and good, Falau can have all the fun he wants. Happy?"

The two men looked at one another, then back at him and nodded.

"All right," Polok said, and turned to Yorlas. "At least turn off that communicator of yours. I'm tired of having you spill our plans to everyone on the station."

They set off, Polok muttering to Draea, "You know that execution test to get on the team, the one we did right at the end? Yorlas thought of that. Idiot."

"You've got nothing to compensate for. Why on earth are you bitching about him?"

"He just rubs me the wrong way."

"Polok, you've killed at least four hundred people."

"Your point?"

\*\*\*

Once at the warehouse, Krezek took to the fore and did his magic, though not without mumbling comments to empty air. "Guns, yeah, fine. Gimme a circuit board any day of the week. About time I got something to do here."

Draea, standing nearest to him and feeling impatient, said, "Want me to tell Yorlas of that attitude?"

"Not on your life."

"Then hurry it up. And add an automated opener for the doors, too, in case we need to make a getaway."

"Sure. Want them to explode?"

"No, thanks, just make them open."

"Roger."

He rose, keyed in a combination on the lock, and the doors slid open. The team walked in.

Yorlas's informer had not given them the precise location of the Book, so they decided to wait for the Sisters to show up, and to shadow them. The team took its positions, deep enough in the shadows that they wouldn't be spotted, but with access to walking paths so they could follow the progression of anyone walking through the warehouse. Draea made sure she was in visual range of everyone else, and settled in to wait. There were other entrances to this place, but she expected the Sisters to come in through the main one.

It wasn't long before the warehouse doors opened again and the Sisters came in, flanked by two guards. Draea's team stayed on them until they got to the box's location, and watched as they

called it down from the scaffolds. Draea noticed that while two Sisters walked up to the box, and two more looked on curiously, one the Sisters stayed very definitely at the back, looking around a bit. She grinned in the darkness. However Yorlas had managed this, he'd earned his place on the team.

She pulled out her gun and saw the other team members do the same. A few paces away, Yorlas took aim. She watched as he relaxed his shoulders, took a breath and held it, and leaned a little into the shot. He closed one eye, and fired.

One of the Sisters guys started spouting blood from his throat. The other Sisters faded from view, and before she could react, Falau had sauntered up to the box, picked it up, and started to inspect its contents. Draea was about to get up and go to him when there was a bang, and Falau crumpled to the ground. He dropped the box as his body fell, and she saw the catalyst roll out of it. People not her own started moving in the shadows.

Draea exclaimed, "Shit!" and ducked just as something was fired at her head. There was a mad scramble as her team tried to rush toward the doors, provide cover fire for each other, and not get shot, all at once. Once they got in view of the exit, Draea saw Krezek manically working on his mobile interface to activate the doors, and she realized that as soon as they went through their silhouettes would be easy targets. Polok caught up with her, and as they ran she hissed at him, "Lay down interference!"

He reached for the bandolier on his shoulder and pulled off a couple of multiburst grenades, set one to thermal and another to electromagnetic, and tossed them. The thermal one bounced towards the attackers who were following them, flared up and sprayed a thin drizzle all around that immediately caught fire. The chemical wouldn't burn the surfaces it coated up, and only flared up for a few moments, so Draea hoped the warehouse's fire extinguishing system wouldn't immediately start dropping anti-inflammatory powder. She risked a look back and thought she saw the hunters stopped in their tracks for a few precious seconds.

The EM grenade, set to visible-light focus, blasted off behind them. It skewed light and caused such massive refraction that aiming at a target became next to impossible, like trying to find the one true reflection in a shattered mirror. It was possible to set these things to near-lethal levels, but apparently Polok had taken the wise stance that blinding everyone in the room wouldn't be good procedure. Shots were fired, but none of Draea's people got hit, and at last they escaped through the doors, blinking frantically in the fake sunlight to rid their optic nerves of the grenade's refracted remnants, and quickly made their way down the street.

\*\*\*

They were back on the ship. The team was setting up their gear and preparing for launch. Draea, in her quarters, was rapidly planning their next move. After they'd undocked from the station, blessedly unnoticed, and set off in a random direction, she filed several questions to her Society contacts. Some were about mission minutiae, and had Draea thanking the gods for her mining colony experience and the knowledge of ship statements and docking logs it entailed. Others were about certain individuals on the mission, based on a dark intuition that had begun growing

in Draea's mind. She put a high priority on them, knowing that the team would soon have to plan its next move.

Her answers arrived shortly after. They commended her for her insight, and gave her an unofficial promotion to team leader. They also included some very interesting information on her mission and personnel concerns, along with suggestions on how to deal with both.

Draea drew up a flight route and sent it to the main console onboard her ship. Afterwards, she left her quarters and walked through the ship, eventually making her way to a little-used maintenance area. In there she went to a repair parts cabin and, from way at the back, removed a small, circular item with a red, opaque button at the center. She returned with it to her quarters, sent off a quick message to base, and received an immediate reply. The item in her hand lit up and blinked twice. She pressed firmly on its small button. The item lit briefly once more, then went dark again. It was now coded to her fingerprint.

Draea sat there for a little while, then pocketed the disc, sent out a call for people to meet her on the bridge, and headed off. On her way there, almost on instinct, she stopped by one of the hi-tech weapons cabinets and retrieved another disc, this one with a number of sockets and wirings on its surface.

Once they were all settled on the bridge, Draea spoke up. "First off, the Society has made me the de facto leader of this group, if there ever was any doubt. Problems?"

The assembled group shook their heads.

"Good. We're taking off."

"Back to base?" Polok asked.

"Far from it. We've found the Book, for real this time," Draea replied. "And we're off to get it."



## **Black Mountain: A Man of Peace**

Nale's team was heading towards their ship, collectively wondering what just happened and what to do next, when they were met by Hona and a team of Angels. She stopped them and said, "You're coming with me."

They balked at it, but she said, "We lost the attackers but we know where they're headed, and whatever you people are after, it'll be there, too," and started walking.

They looked at one another, then started to follow her.

On the way, she explained to them, "The second we disengaged, I looked up the station logs. That piece you were inspecting came from a shipment brought in by one of our deep scouting teams, and it's part of a larger find. They were going to offload the entire thing here, but one of our military installations asked them to bring the other items in for closer inspection. They're on their way there now, but they'll be making a few stops on the way, so we can catch up with them if we hurry."

"Look, far be it from me to criticize this plan, and thank you so much for getting us into the merchant's office and out of that shootout at the warehouse," Nale said, "but *who are you?*"

"I'm the captain of a task force."

"... yes?"

"I'm also the one who can find whatever it is you're looking for, in exchange for some answers."

Nale shrugged, a difficult motion to make when one is walking fast. "All right. Lead on."

\*\*\*

A while later, they were onboard an Angel ship staffed by Hona's own hand-picked crew and heading towards the unknown.

Hona had told him she'd brought his team onboard for debriefing and to ensure she could keep an eye on him, and she had asked him several questions about the item they were after, expressing her worry that it was a weapon which could be used against her people. Nale had tried to reassure her while fending off the questions the best he could, saying only that it was a specialized type of healing device that only the Sisters could operate properly. Hona had ignored his own questions for the most part, and by the time each realized they weren't going to get what they wanted from the other, the atmosphere between them had grown chilled; Hona was outright angry, Nale merely frustrated and tired. Eventually she'd let it go at that and left him to his own devices.

He'd picked up some equipment from his own ship before leaving and was now playing with it in his new quarters, sitting on his bunk and tossing an inertial ball in the air. Every time he tossed it

up it would accelerate and hit the ceiling with a bang, then drop down again into his hand. It reminded him of the training camp, when things had been simpler.

The inertial ball was a metal sphere with a rubbery varnish, of the same type they'd used back at the gym. Its technology was based on the same principle as the inertial modifiers that keep spaceships from tearing themselves apart when they accelerate or decelerate at the incredible speeds they reach. Its insides were composed of gravitronic mechanisms that made the ball, once thrown in a consistent direction, continue to accelerate, so that it would hit its target at a far greater velocity than it started with. Upon impact it would immediately decelerate at a rate dependant on its contact surface; the softer the hit, the harder its internal mechanism would reverse and try to lower its impact, which meant that the few extra milliseconds it took to push into a soft-skinned surface would make for a lesser blow than if it smashed against steel.

Eventually Hona banged on his door, then walked right in. "What on earth are you doing in here?"

"Waiting."

"Well, wait more silently."

He stared at her, getting even grumpier, then made up his mind and got up from his bunk. "Are you busy?"

"I'm making a tour of the ship," she said.

"That's a no, then. Good. You can help me practice."

"What? No. What are you talking about?"

He held the inertial towards her. "Let's go find a corridor with solid-steel backing and you can toss this at me at high speed."

She opened her mouth to say something, stopped short, looked at the ball and then back up at him, smiled an evil smile and said, "All right. Follow me."

They made their way down to the bowels of the ship and found an empty storage corridor with a nice, thick steel wall on one end. They took places on either end of the corridor, Nale right in front of the wall.

"So I just throw this at you?" Hona said.

"Pretty much."

"Any last requests?"

"I'd prefer above-belt aim, but really, it's up to you."

She threw the ball at his head. It accelerated on the way but didn't hit him, and instead clanged off the wall behind him. He picked it up and tossed it to her underarm.

"Does it have any settings?" she asked.

"There's two poles on it, one red, one green. Squeeze the ball twice, then hold down green to slow it down, red to speed it up. Press both simultaneously to turn it off for the space of one throw, hold them both down for a couple seconds and you turn it off altogether."

"Red. Right." She pressed that one a few times, then threw the ball at Nale. It missed him again.

"You know, we really are quite grateful you took us with you," he said as they kept on the exercise.

"Not much choice," she responded.

"Not to question your judgment, but how do you plan to end this?"

"We'll get to the Angel transport ship first, while our real prey flitters around and shakes off imaginary tails. Then we hang back, keep a listen on the transport, and jump in once she attacks it. She wants what's on board, so she won't destroy the ship."

"All right." Nale considered more questions, and could only come up with, "So what's Angel life like?"

"Disciplined."

He picked up the ball from a missed throw and tossed it back to her. "Really? I've met some of you guys and you always seemed more of a family."

She caught the ball, but didn't throw it again. "When did you meet Angels?" she asked.

"There was a massive industrial accident on one of your mining colonies a few months ago. A capsuleer launched missiles at it but thankfully didn't destroy the entire place. My team was doing some unrelated exercise in the area, and we were all called in. Sometimes we're the only ones who can cut through the politics and actually help people."

She sighed and gave a slight nod. "We're not the best-loved of factions."

"You don't say."

The ball whizzed at his groin, but he sidestepped it at the last minute, laughing.

"How many did you save?" she asked.

"Most of them. The missiles mostly blew up silos and processing plants that had already been vacated. But there was one framework collapse in a populated mine that left a lot of people broken or badly cut. We had to pull them out first, which has its own problems, but it all worked out. The only ones we left behind never had a chance. A dozen had been either cut in half or crushed to a pulp by falling girders well before we found their bodies. Hand getting tired?"

She'd been holding the ball in one hand, idly waving it. She switched hands and gave a toss that bounced off a side wall, slowed and landed in Nale's open hand.

"Nice try, but first surface it hits, it decelerates," he said, tossing it back. "So what are you doing here? You seem really intent on catching these guys."

"I'm only really after one of them."

"Childhood friend?"

She laughed, and threw the ball. It wasn't aimed at him, and hit the wall with a satisfying thunk.

"My team was tasked with finding out who's been killing our undercover recruitment agents," she said. "I was contacted by one of those agents earlier today."

"Risen from the dead?"

"Watch it," she said. "He lost his recruiting partner recently, under strange circumstances, and he himself is probably dead now."

"Strange circumstances?" he said, reminding himself that he didn't always have to try to be funny.

"They'd been recruiting on a mining colony. They were ambushed and attacked, and he escaped. We never even found the body of his partner, only some spatters of blood. The local militiae got involved and practically shut us out, too. The trail eventually grew cold and we were taken off the case with no luck in finding who did it. The survivor was reassigned, too, but he remembered everyone who was involved, and he had a particularly nasty feeling about one of the cops there. And right after you arrived he contacted me, saying that she was here, on my station."

"She? Oh. That one."

She gave him a look. "If it's escaped your notice, women sometimes do rise up the corporate ranks."

"If it's escaped your notice, I work for a faction that rather does imply the fact."

She nodded, and he added with a grin, "Though of course you're best left at home, watching the children and cooking, and serving us-OW!"

The ball finally hit its mark. She gloated at him as he gingerly rubbed his right side, then added, "Wait here," and left. She returned a little while later with a gun in her hand.

"Uh..." Nale said.

"Relax. Rubber bullets. They came with a shipment we got from Gallente merchants, and they're soddin' useless. Too much friction, too little weight. But you've been dodging the ball so easily that I might as well try this on you instead."

Nale stared at the gun for a while, then shrugged. "Okay. Tell me, at least, why you even let this woman undock. And that last toss is going to raise a welt, by the way."

"You deserve it," she said, taking careful aim and firing. Nale managed not to be in the shot's way.

"How do you *do* that?" she said, exasperated.

"I've got a talent for taking things in, little details. The undocking?"

"I wanted to keep it under the radar. Those guys I saw at the warehouse weren't amateurs, and I'd prefer not to risk any more of my people than I have to." Another shot, another miss. "Besides, Angel ops'd be just as likely to arrest these people, both on-station and on-ship, and as soon as they discovered the woman was a damn cop they'd probably let her go. Empire goodwill, and all the rest."

Another shot, but this time it connected with Nale's thigh. As he hopped around, yowling, she said, "I can't have that. I want to catch these people and take them out. Right before we left there was a general notice that an Angel had been killed on-station, and the initial description matches the man who contacted me. Last I knew he'd been following that witch, so I pulled in my contacts, tracked her down, and found her in the process of tearing your group apart." Another shot, a near-hit. "These people deserve no sympathy and no mercy. I don't expect you to understand."

"Why not?"

"You being a man of peace, and all."

He sighed, and ran his hand through his hair. "Yeah. Right."

She rested the gun on her shoulder, leaned her head to one side and asked, "This *is* a peaceable mission you're on, right? This healing machine of yours and all."

"It's supposed to be," he said.

"Supposed?"

"Well, it's ... this machine, it can be dangerous. We're supposedly going after it because we want to prevent it from falling into the hands of people who'd misuse it."

"Who are these people?"

"My superiors say the Sansha."

"Sansha? Nale, I've met them, and I've also met the people they sometimes hire; skittish, frightened men with a terrible darkness about them. The ones at the warehouse were not Sansha agents."

"Yeah. I know. The Sansha rumors were probably spread back at our base to distract us from the real goals of the mission."

"So you're being lied to."

"Everyone is lied to."

"Oh, come on. That's simplistic pessimism."

"Is it?" A cold glint came into his eye. "When you're sitting hip-deep in blood on a mining colony, surrounded by wreckage from some capsuleer's missile, and cradling in your arms a boy who's lost his legs and can't even feel it because he's so deep in shock, do you tell him he's going to die? Or that he's going to be fine?"

"That's an extreme example-"

"So what? It happens all the time. The more you know, the less you want to know. Can you honestly say that you're a better person now that someone you know has been killed? All that evil which surrounds us, does it change anyone it touches for the good? Even if we do manage to catch up with the people presumably responsible for all those murders you mentioned, and even if we do manage to wrest the machine from them and you end up putting a bullet into their heads, is that going to make your life any better than it was back when you didn't know about any of this? This burning sense of guilt, shame and regret over not having been able to prevent something from happening, is it really preferable to just being unaware and blissful? Sometimes we need people who know what's happening and who handle it without excuse and without sharing it with the rest of us."

"Strange words coming from a Sister."

"Nobody halfway sane does this job," he said with a sigh. "It's rewarding, but it gets to you."

"No kidding. So why join?"

"Because it's right. It's the only thing that makes sense." He leaned against the wall. "Look, I didn't so much join as get recruited. But I believe in the cause, and I believe that just as man can

be cruel to man, he can also be kind. Yes, sometimes we lie, or cheat, or hurt one another. Sometimes we have to deceive. It doesn't mean we're unworthy of our existence, and it certainly doesn't mean that a person can only be either a saint or a sinner. What makes you into a good person isn't the endless purity of your actions, it's their sum total, and if you can rise above your own mistakes and make something decent come of your life, you've cheated death. The marks you left on this world will outlast you, their echoes will affect other people who will then carry on the work you started, however small, and when you finally come to look into that cold blackness of eternity, you'll know that you will never truly die."

"I'm impressed," she said.

"It's nothing really deep," he said.

"No, not that. I don't think you inhaled even once during that speech."

He stared at her, then burst into laughter.

"So you think you can change the world?" she asked, a little smile creeping into her expression.

"I don't know. We all hope to, I suppose. I'd be happy if I could just dodge those damn shots properly."

"Must be hard for a leader, to think so much."

"Am I the leader?" he said.

"The others follow you. If you hadn't noticed, it probably makes you a natural. But you always find ways to torture yourself. Every mistake becomes a damnation of your abilities, and every failure something that must be corrected."

"You think so?"

"Trust me on this," she said. "Besides, why else would you keep obsessively testing yourself? It's your one failing, the thing you've latched on to, and deep inside you believe that if you could just get this one thing right, you'd feel more at ease with the rest of your life."

Nale looked at the ceiling, then closed his eyes. "I thought I was supposed to be the one with all the serenity and answers."

"Leave it to a real woman to think things through," Hona said. "They're called Sisters for a *reason*, you know."

He grinned, then furrowed his brow. "It's just ... we so have to get this right. Not only because we're clearly risking our lives here - I don't care about that, which I know sounds strange, but we truly have accepted our lives and their impending ends-"

"You're talking to an Angel captain. I understand, believe me, I do."

"-But it's the task we've been given. The Sisters trusted me with this, and that matters to me. The machine has great potential, I'm sure, but that's not mine to think about. All I'm concerned with is keeping it out of the hands of the wrong people."

"And the Sisters are the only right people?" she asked.

"Gods, I hope so. Because I can't think of anyone else. I need to find the Book, and I need to take it into my care, and I need to do it before that woman does. With any luck and grace, I will, and everyone will be safe."

She looked at him for a long time, then said, "I hope you're right."

He sighed. "So do I."

"Not about the machine," she said, shaking her head and holstering the gun. "About yourself."



## **Black Mountain: Some Dying Angel**

Nale and Hona were sitting side by side on their ship's bridge, each listening in on the broadcasts from the Angel ship they were tracking.

It was the usual external stuff about docking plans and routes, along with internal notes concerning commands and confirmations of commands. They were doing it in shifts, each crew member on Hona's ship listening to the individual channel of his corresponding member on the Angel ship. Hona had twice already predicted, erroneously, that Draea's ship was about to attack the bait, and everyone was rather tired of waiting, herself foremost. She had used executive privilege to wiretap the Angel ship without its knowledge, and would have to answer for it later.

There was a buzz, and one of Hona's crew said, "Wait, they're being hailed. And ... wow. Locked, webbed and scrambled." Immediately a lot of Hona's crew raised their hands, in quiet acknowledgment that their own channels had filled with related data.

"Alright, let's get moving," Hona said. "While they're bargaining, we'll-"

"Captain, they're boarding!" someone said.

"What?!"

"Enemy team's already attached to ship. They're boarding now."

"Get us there right now and ready for boarding," Hona said in a fast and clear voice. "Team assemble in dock area, now. That includes your people, Nale, in case we need medics."

As the personnel put the ship on autocontrol and rushed out with her, Nale and his team followed. "What's going to happen?" he asked on the way.

"Idiots decided to board the Angel ship instead of bargaining with them for releasing your precious cargo. Which means that people are going to die, on both sides. It's stupid and reckless, and I can't imagine what type of person would take it this far."

"The type that stalks my teammates and fires veinshredders into their throats?" Nale said darkly.

Hona glanced at him but didn't comment. She turned to someone else who had a wireplug in his ear and asked, "Time to board and status on vessel?"

"One minute hard, two on soft, two-four-zero on dark," he replied, "and our people are getting torn to shit. Ma'am."

"We'll board dark, then."

"Ma'am?"

"Angel crew's been on recon missions that included contact. They're close-combat trained. If they're losing, it means we need a different tactic."

"And if the attacking crew didn't all breach, ma'am? What if we're spotted by someone aboard the enemy vessel?"

"If these psychopaths decided to board an Angel ship and have a shootout, I don't imagine any one of them wanted to hang back and look out the windows. Get in gear, we're sneaking in."

They poured into the Angel ship, Hona's men and Nale's team. Monitors inset in the boarding corridor showed their destination, hovering still in space, the red light from the sun glinting off its carapace. It seemed dead to Nale, and in a small way helped him get ready for what he'd see on the inside.

The situation was nothing new to the Sisters, who were used to working as medics in hostile grounds, but they still found themselves in an awed silence of horror when they boarded the vessel. Draea's team had reveled in death. There was blood and viscera everywhere; walls were spattered with vermilion sprays, and corridors were covered in what had once been parts of human beings. Where Nale walked, his boots stuck to the floor.

They made their way through the ship, following the trail of blood. Back in basic training the Sisters had offered lessons in army lingo and signage, and Nale, hungry to master everything on offer, had taken to it. When Hona's team communicator whispered coded status commands, Nale understood him.

*General fighting. Local team retreating.* Hona shared a look with her team member. Draea's forces weren't going for their prize right away; they were exterminating the ship's crew. She whispered back to him. *Cargo bay. Setup.*

They took up places in the cargo bay, which on this industrial was thankfully large enough to easily accommodate their teams. Nale estimated that Hona's crew outnumbered the assailants three to one, and his own men - outfitted as they were now with the minimum of armor and weaponry - added a few to the mix. He did not feel very hopeful about the entire situation, but at least he took comfort from the thought that only he and his team knew the full, true nature of the machine. If his enemies did anything with it, he and the rest of the Sisters should be the only ones left standing.

It really wasn't much of a comfort, come to that. Especially with Hona around. Nale really did not want to see her get hurt, and it shamed him that right now he apparently cared more about than about Berkhes's death. Still, it was Sister credo: The living before the dead.

Nale surveyed his team. Everyone was holding steady, in alcoves and behind obstacles that would hide them from view. He moved silently between his men, giving them encouragements and ensuring they were keeping their nerve. The only one who startled when Nale walked up to him was Shiqra, who surreptitiously grabbed at one of the pockets on his combat suit. Nale asked him if everything was all right, to which he assented.

After getting back to Hona, he asked her, "Think one of your men can do me a favor?"

"Depends," she said, then added in a more pleasant tone, "But I'm sure we can try."

"One of my men is holding something I don't think he should be. Right-hand pocket, on the thigh. I've no idea what it is, but I have a feeling he's going to do something stupid, and I don't want a confrontation right now. One of your soldiers is located next to him, and I want him to keep an eye on my man. If he makes a move, opens his pocket or whatever, restrain him."

"You got it," Hona said. "I've no more patience for rogue agents than you do."

"Thanks," Nale said, and gave her a smile that she returned.

It wasn't long before Draea's people entered the bay, stalking in as if they owned the place. There were four of them, and Nale, hiding with Hona behind a crate, marveled sickly at how they'd been able to take down an entire crew of Angels, even if the poor soldiers had been completely unprepared.

Draea went over to a particular box without hesitation. Nale surmised she had pulled its location from some dying Angel.

The box was situated on a low shelf, and Draea pulled it out and placed on the floor with apparent ease. It was under electronic lock, which she fixed by placing the barrel of her gun alongside the mechanism and shooting it off. Gunfire wouldn't harm this ship; like so many others it was just as well-protected from the inside as from the outside.

Draea reached in and, with a grunt, lifted out the Book of Emptiness and placed it on the floor, where she regarded it for a few breaths. After it did not turn on, glow, smoke or explode, her three teammates visibly relaxed. They walked in closer and gave the machine a look.

It really was inconsequential in appearance. Only a few oddly curved lines here and there, and the strange way in which it caught the light, gave the faintest idea that it might be more than a glorified Quafe vendor.

"Heavy, is it?" one of Draea's people asked.

"Wouldn't want to carry it far," she said.

It was at that moment Hona gave the signal to her men, who broke cover, rising and aiming their weapons at Draea's team. "Move and die," Hona said.

To their credit, none of Draea's teammates twitched. They slowly looked in Hona's direction, and Nale, who had gotten up and was standing next to her, felt uncomfortably like he was watching a pack of animals deciding on their prey.

"Drop your weapons and step away from them," Hona said.

Draea and her team mates looked at one another, then shrugged and dropped their guns, though none of them moved nor raised their hands. "What are you planning?" Draea said, coolly.

"Taking you back in for questioning," Hona replied. "Nobody needs to get hurt."

Which was a complete and utter lie, Nale knew. She was planning to kill everyone on Draea's team. But she apparently didn't want to risk the Book, which he knew said more about her interest in him right now than it did about the machine. He felt a small wave of gratitude that was immediately washed out when he noticed what Draea was still holding, palmed in her hand. It was a catalyst. And her thumb was gently turning its sphere.

Time crystallized, and two truths materialized in Nale's mind. The first was that Draea's team, for whatever ungodly reason, was likely immune to the machine, which contradicted everything they'd been told so far. The second was that Draea was about to turn the blasted thing on, the effects of which would be completely unpredictable except for the very real and definite mind-death it would likely have for all of Hona's crew and for Hona herself.

In a moment he would later not know whether to rejoice in or regret, he turned to Hona, said, "I'm sorry," and, to her brief surprise, hit her square on the jaw. She crumpled to the floor, and Nale barely had time to turn back as he saw someone in Draea's team plunge something into his own neck, while Draea grinned and clicked the catalyst.

There was an infinite whiteness.

\*\*\*

Nale is walking through a desert. It is night-time but he doesn't feel cold. There are other people here, he thinks; they're almost visible, like shadows detached from the earth, milling about in every direction.

He comes to a leafless tree whose limbs extend like the entirety of space, their buds glowing blue and red. A wind whispers through the branches, gently hissing his true name. He keeps walking, the tree bending to stretch its branches in his direction.

He comes upon an entry to a small quarry, the ground before its dark opening surrounded with rounded, polished rocks. He picks up a rock and it turns soft in his hands. He drops it again and walks onward.

The desert ends, and turns to black basalt. He keeps walking.

The further he goes, the clearer his path becomes. His doubts begin to melt away. He is here. Of course he is here. He has always been here.

He comes to a cliff face, and he sees a dark ocean below, its seas black as the earth.

Around him the spirits flow over the cliffs and plunge into the ocean, joining its waves. He wonders if he should turn back, but he knows that even if he tried, the onrush of spirits would turn against him and push him off. This is his path. This has always been his path.

He stands there, looking into the abyss.

For a moment he is filled with fear, uncertainty and loneliness, the last vestiges of his past existence. But they fade away like the other shadowy spirits, passing out of him, never to return. He knows what he is and what he wants, what he has always wanted.

He steels himself, and he takes a deep breath, and he jumps. And as he falls he turns in the air, looks up and sees Draea standing at the top of the cliff. She glares down at him, her pale skin standing out among the ethereal shadows that surround her. One of those shadows seemed more substantial than the rest, hovering motionlessly behind Draea while the others float back and forth, but he can't make out what or who it is.

He plunges into the black sea, shattering on impact. There is no pain.

He remains conscious and feels himself be slowly torn to pieces. It eats him up, pulls him apart, disintegrates him.

He's gone. He's void. There is no him any longer; he is of this world but no longer of this world. He is the black sea, and he is the black sky. He is the black sea, and he is the black mountain. He is the black mountain.

The shadows speak to him in a cacophony of voices. He hears them all. They tell their stories, and he understands as one can only understand when one hears all voices and not merely the faint whisper of the one.

Slowly, a new presence begins to rise, and it is him. He parts from the black sea, but he does not part. He leaves the black mountain, but he does not leave. He floats up to the black sky, but he does not need to join it.

He is the black sea below, and the black sky above, and the black mountain which casts its shadows over the world.

He understands everything.

He rises.

\*\*\*

Everyone was lying on the ground, some moving, some not. Nale hauled himself up and surveyed the scene.

Hona's entire team lay sprawled, their eyes rolled back in their heads, froth on their mouths. Draea's own crew was beginning to stumble around, shaking their heads as if to dislodge cobwebs. Draea herself was now standing, swaying but keeping erect, staring fixedly at Nale with an expression that was half murder and half wonder.

Then at once, the people who were conscious seemed to do a kind of mental shrug, looked in the direction of the machine, and realized that it was no longer there. Neither, for that matter, was Draea's bounty hunter, Yorlas.

Both Nale's people and Draea's remaining crew started to draw their guns, but Draea raised a hand and yelled, "No!" In their daze, the people obeyed her and lowered their weapons.

She rubbed her eyes, grimaced and said, "I really wish it hadn't come to this. Krezek, open comms to our ship and get a speaker going."

There was a crackle, and then Yorlas's voice was omnipresent. "Boom," it said. "Hello, Draea."

"How'd you manage to break out of the fugue so early?" Draea asked.

"Adrenaline shot," Yorlas said.

"Were you working with someone else?"

"Man called Shiqra, on other team."

Nale quickly looked around, and saw that Shiqra was gone. His Angel guardian was lying on the ground, comatose. Beside the angel lay an unused mini-syringe full of a strong soporific. Nale realized Shiqra hadn't been immune to the Book and must've been planning to render himself unconscious, trusting that Yorlas would come to his rescue.

"He's with you, I imagine. Book take him out?" Draea said.

There was a moment's hesitation before Yorlas said, "Yes," and the undertones Nale heard in word encapsulated far more than he would ever be able to put into words.

"And you have the Book, on our ship, currently en route to destination unknown, right?" Draea asked.

"Still in system, but getting ready to leave," Yorlas said with some satisfaction. Piloting ships all alone was difficult; their AIs compensated well, but there were a lot of minute adjustments that needed to be made. "Otherwise, yes."

"Excellent. To sell to the highest bidder, I imagine"

"Yes. Was supposed to be private project of true art, but with Shiqra gone, no point," Yorlas said.

"How sad." Draea said. "By the way, did I tell you I was promoted? Team leader."

"Congratulations. I'm very happy," Yorlas said.

"You should be. They gave me executive privilege." Out of her pocket she pulled a small, circular disc, the one she'd acquired at the Society's direction and activated with their assistance just before they'd set out. "Any last words?"

"What?"

"That'll do." She pressed a button on the disc. There was a squelch from the radio, followed by silence.

"Cranial explosive," she said to the others, who were staring goggle-eyed at her. "They didn't trust us. Good for them. Krezek, get over here, please."

The tech rushed to her, clearly eager to obey.

"Can you disable this ship? We'll take the one from the Sisters to ferry us to our old vessel."

He hesitated, then said, "I can, yes, absolutely, but are you sure it's a good idea?"

"It'll attract less attention. We might get hailed by Angel troops on our way to pick up our old ship and the Book. Besides, we've left this one a little red, and it won't be long until those people start to smell."

He nodded, and walked off, leaving her and Polok in the bay.

She turned and walked up to Nale. "Anyone left on your ship? And by the way, if I see any of you little peacekeepers reach for their guns, Polok here will ventilate you."

Nale shook his head. "We took the entire troop."

Draea walked closer and slowly reached out her hand until it closed on the neckline on Nale's shirt. She grabbed it tight and pulled close, so that she and Nale were standing chest to chest. "If you try to follow us," she said in a low but clear tone, "you do realize what will happen to you."

Nale just smiled, and Draea's face took on something that, in a person not homicidally insane, might be considered simple contentment. And with that, she left, her enforcer following on her heels.

Nale looked at the prone figures around him and said, "Yeah, I guess we'll have a little explaining to do at some point. Zetyn."

The Sisters' own tech guy stepped out from behind a crate. "Yeah?"

"Radio any nearby Sisters teams for help and get them to send a scouter vessel, one with a mechanic onboard. We'll get them to dispose of this while we hunt down the Book."

"To be honest, that ... stinks of a coverup," Zetyn said.

Nale turned to him and in a very relaxed voice asked, "Do you want us to explain to the Angels why we were found sitting in a roomful of their men that have all effectively been lobotomized?"

Zetyn raised his hands in surrender, turned and started prepping his comms equipment.

Monas, another of his team members, walked up to Nale and pointed behind him. Hona was sitting there, propped up against a support girder. She looked vacant, and tired.

"What'll we do with her?" Monas asked, and immediately answered the question himself. "We should leave her."

"No!" she suddenly said, loud and clear. "Hell, no. I'm going where you're going. I'm going to get this damn woman."

Nale turned to Monas. "You heard the lady."

Monas rolled his eyes. "Alright, boss. So how do we find this Draea?"

Nale said, "I've got a feeling," and pulled something out of his pocket. A disc, covered with sockets and wirings, that Draea had dropped there for him to find. A tracking device.



## **Black Mountain: Hyperconsciousness**

Despite its attempts in recent times to project the image of a network of high-class academic establishments for New Eden's elite, the Society of Conscious Thought remains first and foremost a research institute with a vigorous interest in the technical advancement of society. This is no secret; after all, the Jove are an inquisitive lot, and in the protective isolation of the Society's enclaves, called *kitzes*, there's no telling what new developments may be brewing.

That's not to say the Society has had free rein in their choice of projects. A checkered past, which includes political machinations and some rather dubious human experimentation, nearly spelled the Society's end. A turning point came when an internal investigation brought to light their association with Sansha's Nation. It was common knowledge that Sansha Kuvakei combined Jovian capsule technology with illegally modified brain implants in order to start off his notorious army of sycophants, but Empire attempts to replicate his research have always been unsuccessful, and it had long been postulated that the Jovians may have been one of the shadowy forces who secretly supported Kuvakei, supplying him with clandestine technologies in order to see what he could make of it. This was part and parcel with the Society's brash approach to technological advancement, and after an investigation revealed discrepancies in the research logs of certain *kitzes* that seemed to implicate them as having worked with the Sansha, the Society's funding, power and autonomy were severely curtailed, and the *kitzes* themselves vanished without a trace. It is, of course, not known whether the retributive actions against the *kitzes* truly were imparted for their corroboration with the Sansha or merely for their inability to properly hide it.

While information on the development of any part of Jovian society remains scarce, it is at any rate clear that the other sections of the Society took this development to heart and greatly shifted their focus, eventually even opening their gates to non-Jovians in an attempt to dispel at least some of the dark mystique that had begun to envelop their organization. Aside from this paradigm change from investigation to instruction, the Society also made a subtler shift in their research focus. Jovian inspectors found that while the Society dutifully abstained from resuming its prior level of hard-science technological research, the *kitz* governors, along with Societal scholars, simply started looking into soft-sciences instead. They focused extensively on the humanities, in particular sociology, education, theology and psychology.

This development received tacit approval from the inspectors and was allowed to continue uninterrupted for quite some time. In their wisdom, the inspectors recognized that the Jovian nature of endless tinkering could not be suppressed, lest it move out of the inspectors' reach and back into darker channels, and while there remained some technological hard-science aspects to the Society's new research methods, they were considered to be harmless. In particular, scholars had been tinkering with electronic mood enhancers - alpha wave transmitters and suchlike - but as the Jovians are very much in favor of anything that might help combat depression and ennui, the experiments were given a blind eye.

Many of these research projects started out as unofficial experiments among Society scholars, who kept them secret for about as long as any scholar will keep secret the results of his tests. They soon developed into an organization of work among various *kitzes*, and thanks to the

excellent communication the Society kept up among its enclaves, some interesting projects soon saw the light of day. One of those was the fabled Hyperconsciousness agenda.

Certain scholars had noticed an emergence of new patterns in the relation between the training they gave their students and the results those students showed. As had been long established, while one could set down a baseline for a proper lower-level education - a focus on maths, languages and social studies would always be necessary - any higher degree of education would always depend as much on the individual student as it did on the curriculum. Members of the Society found that it was, in fact, possible to identify certain patterns in the early academic development of each individual student and then use those patterns to tailor the education to the student rather than the other way around. The exact nature of these patterns remains jealously guarded by the Society, but from the results it has produced in the last few decades, the method clearly works.

And if it had stopped there, the Society would still be on its merry way to being considered a slightly unorthodox but very much an ivy-league educational establishment.

The pattern detection they used for analyzing student abilities got better and better, to the point where they found they could map out various other aspects of a student's abilities and tendencies. And somewhere along the line, some enterprising scholar decided that training the students to be better persons wasn't enough. They should also have some of their detrimental tendencies curbed.

In itself, this aim was nothing new. Part of the *raison d'être* for any educational establishment is to even out the rougher edges of its students, not merely setting them on the right path but keeping them from straying. Society scholars argued that the old, established ways to do this were outdated and generic, and likely to backfire. Instead, they advocated a student-tailored approach, whereby one individual might be given physical tasks to resolve, another might have his academic liberties curtailed, and yet another might be given a stern talking to on certain specific points likely to hit home. Nothing harmful, and nothing excessive.

The trouble started when they began combining this pattern work with advances in their mood enhancers. Certain scholars argued that instead of dealing with the outcome of negative, hostile and aggressive behavior, it would be easier and more effective to eradicate the problem at its source. Not only that, but in using these mood enhancers they might actually help their students reach heretofore unscaled heights, complementing their already natural abilities with more positive attitudes.

This kind of project would have been seen as brainwashing in any other circles, and reportedly made even certain Society scholars uncomfortable, but Jovian inquisitiveness prevailed. Nonetheless, the Society was careful to keep its true agenda secret, weaving its patterns into the tapestry of its curricula and thus keeping them hidden from casual onlookers. The codeword for this agenda was Hyperconsciousness.

Hyperconsciousness, or HyCon as it became known among insiders, produced a great many students whose academic careers were imbued with excellence. It also produced further

improvement in the HyCon's theoretical basis, as the Society constantly improved its methods and technology based not only on the results of its living experiment, but on additional technology supplied by Jovian benefactors who were impressed with the Society's academic achievements while remaining entirely in the dark about the truth of the Hyperconsciousness agenda. A major windfall came when some mysterious benefactor bestowed on a select Society kitz the responsibility of destroying the Book of Emptiness.

The Book was well-known among the Jove. It was yet another failed attempt to curtail the Jovian Disease, that scourge of humanity which still reduces many of their number to broken, darkened shells and eventually drives them to death. The Book, named after a fabled Amarrian holy text that supposedly brought its readers to a higher plane of consciousness and serenity, was a small, unobtrusive machine that, when activated, would remove negative thoughts and emotions from anyone in the vicinity. The Jovians had hoped the Book would at the very least cure them of melancholy, and in a way it did, but not before it turned its subjects into drooling idiots. At lower levels the effect was not permanent but did have the effect of strongly affecting the subject's personality to the point where they lost their ability for purely logical thought; at higher levels the subject would be rendered permanently catatonic. Needless to say, the Book was deactivated, dismantled and consigned to the dustbin of scientific history.

Or so the Jovians thought. Under the auspices that only the Society, with its experience in behavioral patterns, could be trusted to handle and destroy such a device, one of the Book's caretakers gave its parts to them upon their request, with the intention that a few be put on display or under examination, and the rest destroyed. It is a measure of the immense trust the Society had rebuilt at that time, and probably of their image as slightly doddering but well-meaning and intelligent people, that they were given this chance, and nobody seemed to realize it was like throwing meat to a Slaver. The person who supplied the Society with the Book's collective parts undoubtedly did so knowing that they would first inspect it for its secrets, but it's doubtful even he realized that they had the ability and the theoretical knowledge to reassemble it.

The Society took its time, and even put a few duplicate parts on display to reassure its trustees that the rest had been destroyed. It never quite managed to recreate an original, fully functioning unit, but its experiments were successful enough that a simulacrum of sorts eventually emerged. This new Book, whose existence was kept a closely guarded secret, had the same basic abilities as the old unit but mainly affected non-Jovians, and of those it couldn't even be made to work properly on the worst (or, in one regrettable mistake during an illicit test run by very frustrated researchers, the best) students of HyCon.

Some valuable bits of technology did emerge from studies. One was the Oblivion Cocktail, a group of nanobots whose ingestion made the subject highly vulnerable to effects of both the Book and, as it turned out, some of HyCon's own corrective measures. Another was an amnesiac agent that, while completely ineffective as far as a subject's mood went, would completely remove their memories over a specified length of time and force their brains to compensate by inventing a hazy and completely inconspicuous gap in their memories, although anything more than a couple days' worth of amnesia would likely require hospitalization and some degree of rehabilitation. The amnesiac agent proved extremely helpful under circumstances where people had suffered great mental trauma or stress, and was later put to use by various psychological

institutions, but there have also been rumors that it has been used for darker means, up to and including assassinations in the midst of crowds.

Despite these gains the project was considered a failure, and the Book was put in deep storage pending further secret study. There it sat, supposedly untouched and gathering dust, and would have been resigned to forgotten academia and pernicious rust had its caretakers not begun to hear that the Book had been sighted elsewhere in space. Lo and behold, they found that their own unit had disappeared.

They kept out probes for the Book, but to no avail. Thankfully, while the Empires had long since heard the stories of the Book's existence and potential power, word of its availability did not get out. As a result, the Society had time to recruit and train special task forces, staffing them with individuals who had a natural immunity to the Book's effects, and keeping them on standby while hunting down clues as to the Book's location. It was a tough task, as it had to be kept secret, but the kitzes' isolation came to good use. Several offered their services as training grounds and ended up breeding some very effective and quite intimidating groups of HyCon ops, many of whom never knew who they were working for.

Their progress is documented elsewhere. The Society continues to operate, and its HyCon agenda is still very much a part of their methodology, though in a form far removed from its original version. Society scholars have gone on record stating that while they feel the Book's prolonged storage in Society kitzes certainly was a mistake, this little misstep should not reflect badly on HyCon nor on the Society's contributions to education in New Eden. It is certain that in specific circles the Book debacle has reawoken suspicion that the Society may be hatching new plans of political dominance, but the enormity of its efforts to retrieve the Book has gone a great way towards assuaging those doubts.

It is, of course, entirely possible that the Book's disappearance was no accident. Cynics might claim that the Society was beginning to worry that its Hyperconsciousness agenda, and the careful manner in which it had educated and molded its wealthy and powerful non-Jovian students, might be seen as the starting moves in a new political game of strategy, and that the hunt for the Book was meant to serve only as a decoy. If so, it was an incredibly dangerous move, and likely made with the arrogance of superiority. It could very well be that the Society never expected that any other force in EVE might find out so quickly about the Book's existence and start its own hunt for the item.

## **Black Mountain: Pushing Towards Bliss**

"How're you feeling?" Hona asked. She had just entered Nale's cabin, and was sitting alongside him on the bunk."

Nale rubbed his temples. "Feeling fine."

"You don't look it."

"A lot of things have changed. It's tiring."

She turned to him. "I'm not blaming you, you know."

"I know."

"About my entire crew being turned to vegetables."

"I know."

"I should be, but they knew the risk, same as me. All that matters now is to stop her."

"Yeah."

"But I still want to know-"

"Because I didn't realize her people would be immune, too. If I had, I'd never have let you or your team board that ship. I didn't imagine in a million years they would set off the Book. I thought they were thugs." He ran a hand through his greasy hair.

"Guilt?" she asked, before regretting it.

"Tired," he simply said.

"Could you tell-"

"It's made by the Jove. They wanted to counteract the Jovian Disease, that immense sadness which kills them. But it didn't help, and all it did was brainwash people. At lower levels you'll be left happy, calm and without much drive to do any harm. Higher levels, well, you've seen those."

"Can-"

"Yes."

She got angry at that. "Cut that out. How do you even know what I was going to say?"

He looked at her with eyes that were far too much at ease. "I can."

"Oh really? Can you see what I'm thinking, too?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Fine, mister psychic. What number am I thinking of?"

"Two."

She stared at him.

"It's in your eyes, and the way you sit," he said. "I can see everything now. Everything."

She kept staring at him. "That machine changed you."

"Yes."

"The others, too?"

"No, just me. At least on my own team."

"Why you?"

He sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "My trainers would probably say I showed immense aptitude. I beat everyone else in the tests they laid for us. I'm a bit of a prodigy, it turns out. But that's not it."

"Then what is it?"

"I'm dying."

Her jaw dropped. She started to say something, but he interrupted.

"Don't. Please. It's chronic, but causes no pain or discomfort. One day my brain will simply tell my body to stop. It's a condition far older than this mission of ours, and it should've killed me ages ago, since exertion is known to bring it on, but apparently I'm tougher than I thought." He inspected his nails, searching for the words. "Anyway, ever since I found out I was going to die, I saw things in a different light. It's weird, really. I sat in a small room, listening to a voice tell me I was a dead man, and it felt like I was the only thing in this world left untouched. Yes, I was the one who changed, I was the one who found out that my own personal sphere of existence had been irrevocably altered. But I was still the same person, or at least I felt like I was. The world itself, everything that is not me, *that's* what changed."

"Or your perception of it."

"Precisely. And I can't tell you how liberating it was. All those old worries of the world, they vanished. The rules had changed, altered, gone even. Ever since I got the diagnosis I could feel my mind casting off its weights. But even so, something remained. It's like being told the answer to a puzzle, but not having figured it out yourself. You can see why it is the way it is, but you can't intuitively understand it, and thus it feels like you haven't got the answer at all."

"I know what you mean," she said.

"And then, as luck would have it, the Sisters swooped in and carried me away. And for a while, it helped, but it still wasn't enough. It gave me purpose, gave me an answer, but I still hadn't figured out the question." He got up, picked up a backpack and said, "Let's go for a walk."

They left his quarters and headed towards the cargo bays.

"You're different," she said, in the tone of one who's earned the right to say a thing like that.

"Yes. It's the Book."

"How did the Book change things?" she asked.

"It opened my eyes to the larger picture. It explained the answer and the question, at long last. Even after joining the Sisters I'd still been playing the same game, with all the same worries and doubts, right until the encounter on that ship. You can't do that and honestly expect to make a change. What happened showed me that people can be freed from fears and terrors. They can be made to understand everything."

She furrowed her brow, then asked him, "You're not seriously suggesting what I think you are?"

"Well, I can't rightly free someone the same way that it happened to me, through a chronic illness leading to death. That would be a horrible thing to do. So we can use the Book instead."

"That *is* horrible."

"It's what my people were planning to do all along. I just didn't realize it until I thought the whole thing through. You're a captain, you've been in your share of fights. Have you never had a moment where you wished you could make everyone stop? Where you were so utterly tired of wading through blood that you wanted to grab the world by the throat and scream in its face?"

"Of course I have. So you want to lobotomize them?"

"No. At lower levels the machine simply erases warlike thoughts. There's probably a subsection of the human race it won't affect - the people we're after are apparently immune, for instance - but for most people, they'll be granted peace and serenity. They'll be a little sluggish, I'm sure, but they won't be killing one another, or suffering the same endless doubts that I did."

"Do you even have approval for this?"

"It is right. I need no more approval."

"Nale, you're talking about taking away people's will, and their freedom of thought."

They rounded a corridor, and walked down a metal stairway. Their feet clanged on the steps.

"Let me ask you a question," Nale said. "Why are you a captain?"

"What do you mean? It's what I do."

"Great, that's how it should be. Why?"

"Because. Because I want to do my part in protecting the Cartel. And because I'm good at it."

"Do you like doing things you're good at?"

"Of course."

"And do you like doing your part for something you believe in?"

"So long as my conscience can live with it, yes. And before you say a word, I may not always be perfectly happy with the way the Angels run things, but it doesn't compare to what you're planning."

"Never said it did. Why do you like doing those things?"

"What do you mean, why?"

"It's your life's work. It's what you spend most of your day engaged in. Why?"

"I don't know. Because it gives me satisfaction, I suppose. I'm part of something, and I get to do it well."

"Why?"

"Look, is there a point to this?"

"Absolutely. Keep answering the questions. Why do you want to be part of something and do your part well?"

"Same reason everyone would, I guess. To feel my life has a purpose."

"And if you feel your life has a purpose, what does that do for you?"

"It makes me happy."



"Precisely," Nale said and gave her a frightening smile. "Anything you do, any purpose of your life, it'll eventually boil down to happiness. That's all we want; that's all everyone wants. The way we tear each other apart every day is borne only out of frustration that we cannot find the happiness we seek."

"Funny, I thought it was a bit more complicated than that."

"It is if you let it. Most people don't truly think about why they do what they do, no matter whether it's drinking a bottle of Quafe or putting a bullet into someone's head. But you take almost anyone in this world and ask them why, believe me, it'll boil down to happiness in the end."

"You know, even if you were right, there are other ways to achieve this. People don't need to be brainwashed. You could simply encourage them to seek their own paths."

"Most people are self-destructive, and unreliable even toward themselves. As a rule, they don't put much effort into their search for happiness, and no amount of positive encouragement is going to change that. Why do you think holoreels are as popular as they are, and meditation isn't?"

They came to a door. Nale took off his backpack.

"Still," Hona said, "You could do it differently. You don't have to push people towards bliss. You can encourage them to seek it themselves."

"I'm not going to stand there, like a mad prophet, constantly harping on other people to go after their true purpose in life. All I'm going to do is eliminate the roadblocks."

Hona stepped in his way, and looked him straight in the eye. "Don't do this, Nale. Don't. If you even manage to regain the Book, you've no guarantee it'll work like you think, and even if it does, you'll be taking away people's basic rights. You'll be no better than the capsuleer who ruined our mining colony. And besides, how on earth will you achieve any change? What if the effect is only temporary?"

"Then we will use it on the right people first; the ones who determine the lives of others. Everyone at the top of the social stratus. Leaders, and dictators, and every capsuleer we can get to. After that, we will find ways of duplicating the Book, and we'll start to spread its word to the masses."

She goggled at him. "You're talking about a revolution here. You're going to be violating people's basic rights on a fundamental scale."

"The fundamental right of man is to be happy," he said to her. "You'll see. This is right. It's the only thing that makes sense."

He went around her, opened the door and stepped into the empty storage room beyond. He removed something from the bag, then dropped it outside the open door.

Hona looked at what he was carrying: Four inertial balls. She gave him a puzzled look.

"I've modified them slightly," he said. "Removed the acceleration inhibitors."

"Are you trying to die?"

"I'm trying to see if I'm worthy of the task I've undertaken."

"How will you even know, apart from not ending up a bloody mess?"

"I'll hear it on Black Mountain."

She hesitated at that, unsure of what to say, and he turned away from her, whirling the inertial balls in his hands. There was a soft sound and a click, as of a gun being drawn and cocked.

Nale did not look back. "Now or never," he said, and after a moment he heard the door close behind him.

He smiled, and closed his eyes. The spirits moved around him, their hazy shadows enveloping him. Their whispers told him the truths.

He threw one ball. It bounced off the floor and sped up; bounced off the wall and sped up; bounced off the ceiling and sped up. Soon it was a blur, zooming through the room at bone-breaking speed with a cacophony of gongs as it bounced off the walls. Nale listened closely, and every time, stood where the soaring missile didn't go.

He threw the others, moving lithely from place to place as they bounced around him, his eyes opening and closing in tune to the blinking lights on the tree that still reached for him. He avoided its grasp, and he avoided the soft, soft rocks that bounced around, beckoning to him to hold them, to let them touch him.

They went faster and faster, until the entire room was covered in hazy, half-seen trajectories, the rocks tearing their way through the empty air. And still he dodged them, at a speed unimaginable, as they roared through the rapidly heating air, their hisses melding with that from the frustrated tree of kingdoms. The spirits guided him, and slowly the floor disappeared, until he was floating above the tarry sea of the shadowy angels and shared unconscious, seeing everything, knowing everything, in tune with the world, on this path that led inexorably to freedom.

## **Black Mountain: The Canvas**

The infrastructure was looking shaky, but the hidden patterns told Shiqra he was safe, and he was sure they could get to a few more people before risking collapse. He'd been leading his team deeper into the bowels of the asteroid colony, finding survivors, tagging and prepping them for assistance, and verifying structure integrity so that the rescue squads could move in.

Shiqra was leader of a Sisters of EVE scout team. They ran in first, moved fast, found the victims who needed help, and moved on. Most of their equipment, which was kept as light as possible, consisted of structural and explosive gear. They had scanners, too, ones that searched for heat and electric signatures, but these rarely worked all that well in environments that were falling apart.

The path they were on forked into three routes, one of which was open, the other two caved in. Adjusting his ocular scanning, Shiqra saw high heat beyond the closed entrances. There would be blazing fires on the other side, which wouldn't threaten the Sisters but did block out any chance of automatic life detection.

Shiqra stood there for a moment, regarding the three routes. Long waits were not an option; life would be running out for whoever was trapped in the mines. He picked the leftmost path, one of the caved-in ones, and signaled to his teammates to hole it through. They all wore fire- and shock-resistant suits with full-head facial masks that were outfitted with air filters, night-vision specs and inbuilt voice transmitters, though the transmitters were rarely active. They were easy to use, but the team had long since gotten into the habit of nonverbal communication. Words were a waste, down in the darkness. Words were empty when you were cradling the dead.

His team, which was unquestioning in their obedience, immediately set up a Spoke bomb. Spokes were supercompressed constructs of interconnected tritanium pins encased in an isolated chamber, with a small discharger set at their center. When a Spoke ruptured and the tritanium came into contact with air, it would expand violently, blowing away anything in its immediate vicinity. The tritanium spokes would click into place and form a complex prismic polyhedron, similar to a hubless wheel. The spokes were perfectly balanced, and effectively created a hole in a wall through which a person could pass. It wouldn't be big enough to let through a rescue team laden down with equipment, but then, it didn't need to be. The scout teams only found people; they did not cure them, and the proper rescue teams had their own demolitions gear.

The team passed through the Spoke gap and rushed on. Down holes and chutes they went, Shiqra first, and it was as if he were hunting for ghosts, chasing the steady clockwork rhythm of a heart before it could beat it last. He took each turn with no hesitation, rushing through with complete assurance of motion. He could never tell anyone else this, but he knew his way around by now. He was starting to pick up the patterns.

He found himself distancing from the process, going out of his body as if his corporeal self were controlled by some outside force, and he thought back to the first heavy-carnage missions he'd been on.

He'd done a few regular scouting missions, and loved them, but was still hesitant about the job. He was escaping a bad life of drug use and self-abuse, and had really found himself in the Sisters, but he was always afraid of relapsing, of losing control. It felt like there was something curled up within him, something that he'd never been able to control, and even as he got over the withdrawal effects and experienced the joy of helping people - and the sadness and horror of losing them - this core remained, untouched and waiting.

It wasn't until he went on the first mass-rescue mission, in yet another pirate refinery wrecked by some murderous capsuleer, and came upon the first mass of writhing, screaming humanity trapped within, that he truly felt this core inside of him start to crack open. It was horrifying, so horrifying that his mind left his body and he looked down upon himself as he tagged all those people - putting markers on them that would let the rescue teams find them and prioritize their care - and then kept on going in search for more life. It wasn't until much later that he realized he hadn't disconnected to save his sanity; he had done it because he felt, at last, like he was part of something larger than himself. He was no longer the focus and the center of his own little perceptual world, and that little core inside of him, that compressed ball of potential, began to respond to this new widening of the world. It started to unfurl, to stretch out.

Back in the present, Shiqra found himself at another passage. They'd passed a couple more people, tagging them as they went along, and were now at the entrance to the mine's deep, less traveled sections. The rock here was too thick for any signals to pass through, so they'd have to go entirely on instinct, and without any communication. There were several possible ways they could go, and Shiqra immediately split the team up into pairs of scouts, directing each pair towards a particular entrance. One of his team members, possibly nervous about going dark and losing all chance of communication, spoke out loud to Shiqra and commented with far too much cheer how he always seemed to know where to go, to direct them so they didn't end up under the falling girder or the exploding vat of acid, or whatever. His voice broke the silence like a shot and made the other team members nervous, but Shiqra laughed, and replied that he'd done a lot of these missions. It was no answer, he knew, but in the suffocating darkness of the mines, it sufficed, and calmed.

The scout pairs went their way; those who were going into open entrances started running, while the ones who needed to clear away rubble readied their Spoke bombs. Shiqra watched while his team trickled away. It was policy to travel in teams, but his status as team leader, and his renown as one of the Sisters' best scouts, was sufficient that he could travel all alone. His reasoning was that when he found a trail he would travel so fast that others had problems keeping up with him; and his team, which had worked with him for a while, uniformly agreed.

After he'd seen off the last of his teammates, he set off a Spoke on a remaining passage he'd indicated he would explore. He waited until he was sure that everyone else was out of earshot, then ran back up the passage they'd come, until he reached a side tunnel that they'd missed. It was hard to spot; the entrance was in a dark part of the mine that even their night-vision didn't cover well, and it hadn't been shored up properly, so it looked like a boundless cul-de-sac full of rubble.

Shiqra knew better. He'd seen the signs.

He used free-form explosives to clear off some of the rubble, then a Spoke to make a hole through which he could crawl. When he was through, he disabled the Spoke's safety and deactivated it. Rubble fell back into the hole, and it looked as if it had never been there.

Shiqra descended.

As he'd done more missions, he'd felt a growing need to partake in the bloody ones, the missions where participating rescuer workers usually got put on leave for a few days after completing. That feeling of being a part of something greater, of being nonindividual and yet being important, was constantly on his mind.

And eventually, he began to see the signs. The other pieces of the mosaic. The other strokes of the brush.

That thing which was curled up inside him, that core no one could see, was the dawning understanding that someone was behind this. Someone had created these situations and was using them to make a kind of living - and dying - work of art, and in Shiqra's attraction to them he had become an element of the masterpiece.

It was entirely possible that he had gone mad, of course. He didn't doubt that. But he also didn't doubt his feelings, and he listened to them. Other team members often spoke about numbing yourself to experience, but that kind of attitude was anathema to him. He wanted to feel it all. And by and by, he started to find the patterns.

He began to exhibit an amazing ability to find living survivors where local interference meant scanning equipment couldn't detect any. But he knew he was simply being led there, and being tested. At every turn there would be an omen. Sometimes it would be obvious to him, though nobody else would notice: an oddly broken rock lying among the rest, a tatter of clothing hanging from an inconspicuous part in the ceiling, or some barely noticeable spatter of blood on a nearly hidden surface, all of which were out of place. He never mentioned these signs, but merely followed them. As he progressed, they started disappearing, replaced with the far more potent absence of anything important at all. The silence and emptiness in certain paths told him just as much as the noise and the visuals had done before. They spoke of unfulfilled potential; something *could* have been here, they said, and as it wasn't, he should investigate further.

There was something responsible for these catastrophes, Shiqra decided, a pattern to the blood and fire, and it was leading him on.

It happened only sporadically. Not every rescue mission he took brought him closer to transcendence. But he learned to recognize the ones that would, such as when they occurred and under what circumstances, and managed to find more and more. And every time, he progressed deeper, and his core stretched out and began to fill his body with truth and art.

He was going down the hole now, being led through dark places, following the patterns. Sometimes he'd see a hint, sometimes he wouldn't. This was initiation as much as invitation.

And at last he came to another pile of rubble that clearly was empty and devoid of any kind of interest. The absence of life was all the invitation he needed. He detonated a Spoke, opened a hole to the other side, and crawled through.

He made his way into a large, circular room that was a testament, a living altar. Bodies were strewn about, shredded and burned, and the few who seemed still alive were barely so. There was mining equipment here, and it had been put to use.

And in the middle of the room, sitting on top of a pile of equipment as if he were an emperor on his throne, sat a man who he'd later know as Yorlas, holding a massive rifle called a veinshredder.

Yorlas, who was apparently quite comfortable where he was, leant even further back and watched Shiqra with languid eyes. Then he raised the veinshredder, pointed it in Shiqra's direction, and fired.

In that split second, Shiqra's instinctive reaction was not to dodge the shot or move from its trajectory, but to stand still and accept it. It took his body a moment to realize that nothing had yet torn through his body, and he was truly surprised, not merely instinctively but intellectually, at not having been shot. He realized that he had accepted the firing, almost as a rebirth, and that this man, who he knew without doubt was the one responsible for this catastrophe and so many others, was the artist whose red, red paint had covered Shiqra's canvas core.

Shiqra then realized that something else had been shot, and that whatever it was, it was thrashing about behind him, making horrible screeching sounds. He didn't look back. What mattered was in front of him: The artist, and the masterwork, and, approaching them with equal trepidation and joy, their supplicant.

With the barrel of his massive gun, Yorlas pointed towards a glinting patch on the floor. A knife lay there. "Take it," Yorlas said, "And kill yourself."

Shiqra hesitated, not out of unwillingness but simply surprise at the request. He walked over to the knife, hefted it, gently tested its edge. It was sharp, and he knew that once he turned on its diathermic field, it would slide in without any resistance.

He didn't want to do his. He wanted to live. Of course he wanted to live. But that was not what this was about. He was not the artist, and it was not his to decide what his own fate would be. He was the brush with which the work was painted, and the canvas that gratefully accepted its art. Tools could not disobey their masters. He felt a budding kind of pride, because he realized he was being reminded of his place, and while he still felt that he could be of use, he didn't question the art. He knew he would serve a purpose that reached far beyond himself.

Yorlas put the veinshredder aside, laced his fingers together under his chin, and watched Shiqra intently.

Shiqra pointed the knife against himself and was about to plunge it in when Yorlas yelled, "Stop!"

In the silence, there was nothing but the silent breathing of the walls, the condensation drops falling on blackened rock, and the cough and gurgle of the life that lay around them, passing away.

Yorlas said, "Change of plan," and nodded his head towards an inert form that lay in a corner. It was a person who was barely moving, having been cut and beaten quite badly. It was a woman's form, in torn miner's clothing. She was thin and apart from her injuries did not look very old or worn; she couldn't have been working in the mines for more than a year. She had long, white, curly hair. Possibly she had been an overseer, or one of the engineers making an inspection.

And without hesitation, but without any hurry, Shiqra, still holding the knife, went over to her, took hold of her hair and rolled her over so that her neck was exposed. His grip on her hair was firm, lest she struggle, but there was no need for it; her eyes rolled around in their sockets to catch a glimpse of him, but otherwise she was completely docile. Shiqra crouched, and slowly sunk the knife in her throat.

She made coughing motions, but otherwise did not move, and Shiqra idly wondered what the artist had done to her to procure this kind of serenity. They must have been here a while. He knew she was dying now, but it felt like something more was expected of him. He repositioned her and cupped his hands under the bloodflow. After he had a full hand, he began to walk the room, sprinkling and smearing the blood on the walls like the apprentice painter imitating a master artist.

He did this until the blood ran dry. Yorlas didn't speak much during the entire process, but then, he didn't need to. His actions had set the stage, and Shiqra was merely signing the work in his name.

And when it was over, and the sacrifice done, Shiqra stood with his eyes closed, and felt that unfurling core reach out to its full length, the canvas stretching itself taut, until he had lost almost the final vestige of whatever had held him back.

But something remained. There was a purpose for him here, something that would keep him going forever, the brush in the artist's hand, but he had to know one thing. The last doubt, rubbed away.

"How did you know I would kill myself?" he asked Yorlas.

"Why do you need to know?" Yorlas asked in return, with unhidden amusement in his voice.

"I've done everything else. I *am* someone else. The one I was always meant to be, I think. But still ... how did you know?"

Yorlas leaned forward and, in three short words, completed the change, and stretched the canvas to its full and unyielding size.

"You were smiling," he said.



## **Black Mountain: A Pleasant Surprise**

Draea's team was convinced they'd thrown off any trails, and contacted the Society for further flight instructions. They received a bookmark labeled "hidden kitz", along with two pieces of coding information that they added to data chips they'd picked up along the way.

The bookmark took them to an ancient stargate that looked like it was falling to pieces. There was no detectable activity on any part of the gate, and after trying several times to establish basic contact Krezek threw up his hands in disgust.

"Have you tried the password?" Draea said. She was sitting at the controls on the other side of the bridge, running last-minute checks on their weapon systems in case the gate flung them anywhere interesting.

"There's no point in trying the password unless I can get a channel to the gate."

"Try the password."

"There's no point!"

"Krezek-"

"No!"

Polok, who was standing behind Draea, leaned in and murmured, "We're all on edge here, so don't push the boy too hard. Remember the nestlings."

She stared at him in incomprehension, then ordered Krezek to get out of his seat. She moved over to his place, and he started hovering around her like a parent having his infant inspected, asking what she was planning to do. She said, "I'm planning to drill a hole in your head if you don't stop breathing down my neck. Go have a drink."

Polok hung back, without comment. Once Krezek had left, Draea said to him, "I don't think that the dead piece of metal we're seeing on the screen is only that and nothing more. I'm going to open a monoplex channel to the gate and throttle transfer from the data chip. You, on the other hand, are going to explain the nestlings."

Polok had taken Draea's old seat and was leaning back in it so much that he could place his feet up on the control board. He grinned and said, "I figured you knew about this already. Krezek and I worked on some assignments a few years back. Ugly stuff, mostly, with a lot of tense downtimes and waiting in bad places, so we ended up shooting the breeze. Krezek was good backup, by the way, but he was an absolute A-type who just had to do things in his own orderly, logical fashion. He gets a strange kind of peace out of it, and if things get too chaotic - not messy, just nonlinear - he'll develop some really weird tension relievers."

"So far, nothing new," Draea said, "neither on the gate nor Krezek. Nestlings, explain."

"When Krezek was a boy he was, like the rest of us, rather ... special. Brilliant, but he had no concept of right or wrong, or why on earth he should follow social mores. I do this stuff because I like it, you do it for whatever reason you have, but to Krezek, death and torture are just ways of relieving the tension, and bringing the universe back to order."

"Still nothing. Maybe I should open multiplex instead. Keep going," Draea said.

"One day, after he'd suffered some particularly vicious beatings from his stepdad, or his teacher, or whoever put that dark little seed into his childhood head, he went down to the local bird-feeding park and sat down by its little pond. They were using Soft Crumbs there, you know, stuff that's chemically designed to attract birds so they won't be frightened off by hyperactive, screaming kids. So he brought a few bags of Crumbs, tossed a handful out into the pond in front of him, and these tiny little baby birds start swimming up to him. And Krezek, wonderful, twisted Krezek, starts picking them out of the water, then so calm and relaxed from eating all that chem-laced bread, and he wrings their necks. He picks nestling after nestling out of the water, calmly twists its neck so its tiny beak is pointed towards its tail, and lays it to the side, until he's got a nice big pile of dead little birds. And the funny thing is, he doesn't do it with any kind of menace or satisfaction. It simply feels like something he needs to do, to fulfill his role and adjust the balance of the cosmos or what have you. He opens bag after bag of Crumbs, tosses endless handfuls to the poor young, and by the end the pile of birds is bigger than he is. He only stopped because his hands were getting too greasy from their down."

Draea stared at him. "That's ... messed up," she said at last.

"Yes."

"I've cut more throats than an army of barbers, and that's still way messed up."

"That's Krezek. Any luck on the transmissions?"

"No, but I've got an idea. We've been sending this signal encoded - which is stupid because there's nobody here to spy on it anyway - but since we're not actually getting a response from the gate, we've no idea whether it's accepting the transmission method. And if it isn't, the rest of the message it receives is just going to be some random stream of garbage. I'm going to try sending it with just the base encoding, nothing fancy."

"Is this all highly complicated?"

"Mmm, not so much. Why?"

"Because I've been looking at the control board, and you've been doing quite a bit more than just hailing the gate."

"Mind your own business," she said, without much rancor, but paused her actions.

"It's almost as if you're sending data to someone else, too."

"Yeah?"

Polok ambled over and sat down beside her. "It's no mystery, you know."

A smile crept into Draea's features.

He continued, "I don't mind. I like a good fight. But I can't help wonder why you want *him*. I doubt he could fight his way out of a tent."

She said, "To be honest, I'm not even sure myself. You can have the rest of them as far as I'm concerned, but him, I need to talk to. When we activated the Book, something happened, and he was part of it. You didn't have any visions during the blackout, did you?"

"Nope. Stone cold," he said.

"Figured. I did."

"And he was in it?"

"He was. And what's more, it feels like we're connected now. He feels like the other side of me, one I wasn't even aware that I had."

Polok gave her a strange look.

"I know," she said. "I don't like it much, to be honest. I saw some things in the fugue that I need to clear up, and I've got an ugly feeling that if I don't deal with him now, he's going to become a much, much bigger problem later on. So I'm leading him to us."

"How do you know it wasn't just some total hallucination?"

"Two reasons. First, it felt more real than anything. Second, well ... toss a bullet." She pulled out a small knife from her belt, and stood up, but remained where she stood and did not turn to face the bridge.

Polok looked at her askew, but got up, pulled out a gun, took out its clip and dislodged a bullet. The manufacturer's initials had been stamped on the circumference of its rear end.

"Face the bridge," Draea said, still facing away from him and staring out at the stars. "Toss. No countdown, just toss."

He shrugged, and threw the bullet in the air, away from them.

Draea leaned her head down, closed her eyes and lifted her shoulders. She then raised the knife and, without turning, threw it back over her head.

She kept her eyes closed, and heard Polok say, "However the hell you did that, you shouldn't have been able to. And you owe me a bullet."

She laughed, sat again and opened her eyes, then pressed the activation button for the data sequence to the gate. For a few moments, nothing happened. Then there was a spark, a series of sparks, and the gate became illuminated in electricity which arced towards their ship and surrounded it. Draea saw her vessel start to move, align, prepare and, finally, warp.

A few seconds later, they dropped out of warp in front of an abandoned station of Gallente design.

They flew up to it. Draea transmitted the second code she'd received, and the station, its immense bulk floating inert in space, opened its docking bay and pulled their ship inside.

\*\*\*

Once they were safely docked, they got out of the ship and into the bay proper. A special container for the Book was waiting for them, so they yanked it out of its original box, which they'd been wheeling around on an electric pallet, and put it into the container. It instantly closed and auto-sealed.

Using passwords sent by the Society, Krezek accessed the station's status monitors and found that large parts of the station were dark: Not in use and unable to power up to any kind of active functionality, although the atmosphere systems were apparently kept working on minimum capacity. The only fully functioning areas were a few kilometers away, in a complex of labs both scientific and otherwise. Krezek got more and more excited the further he inspected the data; apparently these were real complexes, with hi-tech facilities, torture labs - no one had said the Jove were nice - and all sorts of automated machinery to change the systems around and even alter their interior architecture. The deeper one got, the more mutable the systems appeared to be.

Polok asked Draea, "Those passwords for the station controls, you didn't share those as well, did you?" She shook her head.

Krezek was too enraptured to notice. He said, half to himself and half to anyone in the vicinity, "Gods, I'd love to try out some of the stuff they've got here. Do you see this? Self-modifying walls! And it's all wired up. It's like the blueprint for the world's biggest rat maze."

"What's keeping you?" Polok asked.

"Well, there's not much I can do with it, apart from make it reform itself. I'd need a live subject if it's to be any fun."

Polok looked at Draea, then back at Krezek. "I think there I can offer a pleasant surprise."

\*\*\*

The Sisters ship docked at the abandoned Gallente station. Its crew - a blithe Nale, a watchful Zetyn, a frowning Monas and a very angry Hona - made its way onto the bay.

Nale had plugged the tracking device into his ship and used it to find his way here, though it wasn't until the device received data directly transmitted from Draea's own ship computer that they'd really taken off.

Zetyn checked if they could access the station's status monitors, but no luck.

Nale took the lead. They took another few careful steps, Nale at the forefront, until he stooped and picked something up. It was a little bronze pellet, and as soon as he touched it, tiny blades shot out and nicked his fingers. He didn't flinch, but lifted it to his face and smiled.

"What's so funny?" Hona said.

"We're being ambushed," he replied.

There was a tink-tink-tink sound as something bounced towards them. It was a multiburst grenade, set to kinetic. As all but Nale started to turn and run, it exploded, and the shockwave threw them unconscious onto the floor.

## **Black Mountain: The Sanctuary**

The keyword for the Sisters is care. Not only care for others, but care for themselves. Carefulness, in fact. They've gone to great lengths in establishing themselves as a neutral party in the world of New Eden, and while some activities among their internal factions may be less than savoury, their name still stands unflecked and untainted.

The bulk of the Sisters' factional manpower is drawn from their synonymous corporation, the Sisters of EVE (SoE). This manpower is applied in all manner of ways, depending on both the individual projects at hand and the agendas of the three blocs that make up the Sisters faction. Sometimes the Sisters need faithful healers; sometimes they need worldly diplomats; and sometimes they need people of quite a different caliber.

The first bloc is the SoE themselves. As has been chronicled elsewhere, the SoE is a philanthropical organization dedicated to bettering the life of New Eden's denizens. After their performance in the Caldari-Gallente war and the Minmatar recession from Amarr, they gained the grudging respect not only of the four major empires but of various other factions as well. The SoE are the only party which can freely enter war zones irrespective of which forces are locked in combat, and they are renowned - or notorious - for assisting pirate factions in rescue operations, often following capsuleer attacks. While the SoE never choose sides in any fight, it has to be said that as a rule they do not think highly of capsuleers and their unfettered indulgence of bloodshed and mayhem; and, in fact, much of their information and even some of their equipment tends to come from faction pirates as thanks for having saved the lives of those who the capsuleers left for dead.

The second bloc is the Food Relief corporation. While Food Relief (FR) are ostensibly responsible for delivering necessities - primarily food and medicine - to those in need, they have taken a few steps into the political arena. Those steps are tentative and small, as befits any agency whose goodwill and clout are based primarily on its neutrality, and are for the most part focused on diplomatic relations such as improving dialogue with both army leaders and insurgents. FR have never officially withheld their deliveries, but in recent times there have been occasions where their medicine drops were delayed or reduced due to unforeseen events - environmental conditions, usually, or a sudden outbreak of hostility on their caravan routes - and some political analysts maintain that these delays indirectly affected the outcomes of other factions' military campaigns. The warring forces may not need FR's supplies, but they do need some manner of public support, and if the public is made to starve, so will its support. Once the media then picks up on the suffering innocents and starts broadcasting their images throughout the constellation, it becomes even more apparent to the warring factions that FR should be given due reverence and assistance.

It should be noted that the Food Relief corporation itself only deals with administrative matters, such as where to focus its drops and how much it should give to each side. The SoE contains the workforce pools themselves, and FR and the Sanctuary both draw on them when engaging in projects. The disparity between the SoE and FR is administrative for the most part, though there are subtle ideological differences: The SoE bring healing to the masses and proclaim their faith, while FR is more focused on practicality, numbers and diplomacy.

The third bloc is the Sanctuary. It is a scientific research institute, and is easily the most secretive of the three. This secrecy may seem to run counter to the institute's purpose, but has proven vital for the Sanctuary to maintain complete neutrality. There are various forces in New Eden who would much like to gain access to the Sanctuary's data on troop movements, combat avoidance tactics and combat stress resistance techniques. There are also various forces in the world of the media who would be very interested in publicising information on the Sanctuary's theological research. A century's worth of goodwill has gotten the Sisters far, but it wouldn't take much for the public's fascination with cults and occultism to override that goodwill, particularly in an organization so revered for its benevolence. Everyone loves a fall from grace.

The Sanctuary, as with Food Relief, is an administrative institution. They have their overseers and their employees, but their test groups are pulled from the SoE. However, this should not imply that the members of the SoE are all part of a faceless mass, waiting to be chosen at random by the powers above. Each member will, if he shows loyalty and talent, be given the chance to offer his services to the bloc he prefers, and work for them on a permanent basis. Faith, diplomacy and science all have their place.

This factional division, natural as it is, has caused some ideological disparity among the Sisters blocs. As a result, its leaders have been developing new ways to unify their forces. Despite some initial hesitance on the leaders' side to encourage it, the most effective way is in fact one that has cropped up naturally among the workers themselves.

The Sisters have always been unified in love, but they are also increasingly becoming unified in hate. This is not as paradoxical as first might seem. Everything has its inverse, and if you truly and honestly devote yourself to a particular entity, whether it's a physical object, a living thing or an abstract ideal, you will invariably find yourself at odds with that entity's antithesis and enemies. The Sisters of EVE have devoted themselves to saving lives, helping the sick & wounded, and gently prodding humankind to sacred ascendancy; and what foils them at every turn, in greater measure than politics and weaponmaking and natural disaster, is a force that continues to grow: The capsuleers.

Of course this is an oversimplification, and the people in the Sisters of EVE realize that as well as anyone else. Capsuleers, in and of themselves, are no more of a uniformly evil force than any average Empire subculture, and they are nowhere near the only one that routinely causes death and destruction. There are countless atrocities performed on any number of planets, let alone in space, by groups and armies and factions entirely unrelated to ship pilots. But to the minds of many Sisters, and even of many others, the capsuleers have come to represent this malevolent nadir of humanity: They are powerful, and they use that power in the ways of the old gods, delivering it with fire and noise and blinding lights and leaving a wake of anguish, all in the name of whim and immediate desire.

This has given the Sisters something to rally around, and even if it's subtle, it helps them do their job, cursing and growling at the concept of capsuleers while they patch together yet another whimpering group of collateral damage. It should be noted that since the Sisters of EVE cannot afford to antagonize the capsuleers, they use only dutifully appointed representatives that

actually quite like ship pilots. But on the ground floor, things are a little different, and with this kind of dark unification factor, there will always come those who take it too far and want to become proactive. There have been stories of the SoE doing more arms training than before, and of Food Relief taking decisions that are decidedly more militaristic in nature, even going so far as to demand personal information on capsuleers in exchange for providing assistance.

In and of themselves, these developments are not that surprising: The SoE always have to be ready for combat and thus periodically renew their teaching syllabus, generally putting a higher focus on self-defence each time; and Food Relief want to plan their operations without having to fear interference by rogue capsuleers, which means they have to know something about them. It is the Sanctuary who have taken their anti-capsuleer stance to the furthest and most dangerous point, and they are the one corporation within the entire Sisters of EVE faction that can now be said - carefully, for nothing they've done has been proven, and as the Sisters tread with care around us, so must we around them - be schisming from the rest. There were even hushed rumours of their theo-technological research having taken dark and occult turns. One particularly enduring tale is that at some point an informant gave the Sanctuary information about something called a Book of Emptiness, a powerful machine once developed and hosted by the Society of Conscious Thought but now adrift in space, and that this same informant included a piece of proof called an Oblivion Cocktail that was based on the same tech. It is said that it was easy work to adjust the Sanctuary training of its SoE recruits in order to prepare for possible engagement over this thing - search and rescue missions were already part of their agenda - and to filter out from the SoE masses anyone who was immune to the Book's effects and vulnerable to the Sanctuary's propaganda. If true, this godsend would give the Sanctuary an opportunity to further its agenda without sharing too much with the other blocs, to a point where they might even attempt to gain control of the entire Sisters faction, followed by so much else. The current status of this rumoured project remains unknown, but given how far-fetched it sounds, the public doesn't seem much bothered. Besides, even if it is true, there is cause to rejoice, for the rumour has a second part: There is a counter-revolution within the Sanctuary, a force of individuals who are against this secret development, having seen its subtle poison, and want to turn the corporation away from its evil, dangerous path and back towards the Sisters' true purpose, without risking that their corp or the faction as a whole lose its reputation and power in the process.

If one lends credence to rumours, it might be assumed that these underground forces for good don't stand much of a chance, for evil tends to prevail. But the Sisters of EVE are masters at handling themselves in adverse conditions, and it is in their nature to face reality and deal with a situation as it is, not as they'd like it to be. They will not be led by dogma for long.

This counter-revolution, if it exists at all, will undoubtedly proceed under the Sisters byword. They will let their enemies think that everything is alright until the time is right, and they will not impose on, expose or affect anything until they are ready. They will be efficient, and they will be swift, and they will be very, very careful.



## **Black Mountain: Polymelia**

Zetyn came to, and rubbed his head. He was wearing most of his clothes but had lost all his gear and, oddly, his shoes. His bare feet felt cold on the hard metal floor.

He was sitting in the centre of a small crossroads. It was dark in there but not too dark to see, and as he looked around he saw that everything - the floor, the ceiling, every wall - was made of equal size metal panels. The wall panels had inset windows made of thick, glasslike material that rang out dully when Zetyn reached up and knocked on it.

Faint fluorescent lights shone out between the edges of the panels, giving the space a dusky luminescence. The corridors were wide enough for a man to barely touch them with arms outstretched, but the ceiling was low and oppressive.

There were four ways he could go, but each way was a tiny cul-de-sac, terminating in another metal panel. Zetyn had no idea how he had even got in here.

He went to his hands and knees again, feeling too unsteady to walk. His head still throbbed, so he crawled all the way to the end of one corridor. He reached the end not even intending to put his weight on the wall but simply to touch his forehead there, against the cool wall. As he did there was a crackle, a feeling like a million little needles all jabbed into his head, and he was thrown backwards with a scream.

He lay on the floor, quivering and breathing rapidly. He felt his forehead but there didn't seem to be any bleeding, though he was now sweating so much that it was hard to tell in the gloom.

A voice spoke, "That was stupid."

He looked up. There was no one there.

The voice spoke again. "Try the other doors."

Zetyn dragged himself to his feet, being careful not to touch anything around him. He focused inward, pushing his panic down, reaching back to all those times he had been surrounded by blood and despair and yet had kept his head. His body finally stopped trembling, and he started looking around, wondering who it was that was watching him.

The watcher apparently misunderstood his intent, for the voice said, "Oh, the side walls are perfectly safe to touch."

Zetyn didn't trust him. "Who *are* you?" he asked.

"I'm the one who put you here."

"Why? What's this all about?"

"Not dying," the voice said, with an emphasis that implied this would be the last it would speak for now.

Zetyn gingerly made his way to another end of the crossroads. On the way there he peered out the windows but saw nothing on the other side. There were perhaps the faintest outlines of other windows beyond them, but Zetyn was not sure if it was really that or just a reflection of his own corridor.

He stood in front of another door - the ends of the corridors looked exactly the same as the rest, but the voice had called it a door and Zetyn was now starting to do the same - and took a deep breath. He reached out a hand and paused, listening intently for anything - the crackle of static, the faint whisper of a laugh, anything - but there was total silence.

He pulled his hand back a little, then punched it forward, smacking his entire palm against the panel.

Nothing happened. His jaw began to ache, and he realized he was gritting his teeth.

The voice piped up again and said, "Well done." The panel he'd touched slid aside, revealing another crossroads beyond that looked exactly the same as the one he was in.

Zetyn stood there for a while, not crossing over, beginning to realize the kind of predicament he was in. He wondered whether to try for flattery, then decided it was too early and he might as well test his warden's ego before getting hit even harder. "I'm not sure I trust this thing. You made it?"

"Yes," the voice said, with no discernible pride.

"How do you know it won't just kill me outright?"

"That depends on the choices you make. But it'll work like I say it works."

So. He was convinced of his abilities, at least, Zetyn thought. He stepped over the boundary and into the new crossroads. Behind him, the new panel slid noiselessly back into place.

"Is there a single exit here as well?" Zetyn asked.

The voice said, "Possibly."

"And anything that's not an exit..."

"Will be a circuit closer. The floor's electrified, but you're fine so long as you don't touch the wrong exit. I might be a little more lenient if you can tell me anything juicy about your friends"

Zetyn rubbed his eyes. "I dunno what you're talking about. Is that the reason? Did your own people put you up to it? Why are you doing this?"

"Well, the setup itself is a little experiment of mine, one I've always wanted to do. Behavioral therapy and biofeedback research. And yeah, I wouldn't mind knowing more about the people you travel with. But really, this whole thing ... with all the stress and annoyance you've put us through in the whole hunt, I wanted to set the world right again, and find a quiet little corner in it for myself. So I guess you could say I'm putting you through this just because I can."

And that was that. It was, Zetyn had to admit, the most honest answer he could possibly have received to the question.

He stalked to the opposite end of the crossroads and put his hand on the panel with determination and vigor, both of which disappeared the instant his flesh touched the metal. There was a crackle, and Zetyn screamed and dropped to his knees, clutching his hand.

Above and around him, the voice casually stated, "You know, as a hint, there's only one way out of this particular section. All you need do is find it."

Zetyn got back to his feet, stumbled to another part of the crossroads, tried to empty his mind before he touched it, and was immediately thrown back from the force of the shock."

"There you go," the voice said. "Only one possibility now."

Zetyn was on the floor, breathing rapidly, tears of shock running down his face. The panic rose and he couldn't hold it down, so he let it grow, let it erupt, and let the anger take over. He rolled to his hands and feet, sprang up and ran screaming at the fourth and final door, slamming into it with all his might. His shoulder hit first and the impact numbed him down to the fingertips, jarring his entire frame, and left him in a heap, on his knees, his head hanging down.

In front of him, the door slid open.

"I admire your verve, if not your intelligence," the voice said. "I hope you can keep it up, little nestling."

"What..." Zetyn tried to speak, but had to catch his breath. "What kind of place is this?"

The voice, sounding happy to be asked, immediately replied, "The panels aren't that special, least not the base design. They're electricity-based, more than you realize, and can be programmed to do any number of things, from electric fences to vidcasting. This place has an insane amount of them, probably mean to construct a training grounds."

As Zetyn half-crawled into the next chamber, the voice continued, "They're set on tiny rails that slide under their own power and can be made to continually reposition the panels, so that you've got a self-adaptive, semi-autonomous scaffolding. It doesn't even have to be big; the one you're in is only a few rooms back and forth, constantly sliding and adjusting. I give the system a few parameters and it does the rest."

"And what were your parameters?" Zetyn asked in a hoarse voice.

"Make a deadly maze," the voice said shortly, then returned to talking about the hardware. "Regular panels can't have their electricity set too high, but that's easily fixed if you know what you're doing. The first versions were far more potent but got outlawed shortly after, when people started getting seriously hurt. They were called skimmers, and the name stuck."

Zetyn really didn't want to know, but he asked nonetheless. "Skimmers?"

"From how they could skin the flesh off your bones if you weren't careful."

Zetyn sighed. He sat with his back up against a wall, eyes closed, head hanging down.

The voice said, "Look up."

He didn't look up.

The voice said, "If you look up, little nestling, I'll tell you which door is the right choice."

Without letting the damning, spiteful thoughts of his own cowardice surface in his mind, he looked up.

There, behind a glass pane, stood a man. He was a Caldari, rather thin, with a silly haircut and a pale face. He had a stare that Zetyn recognized; it was the gaze of a man who no longer saw the life around him, or felt part of it. Zetyn had seen it in dying people, and in those who'd caused their deaths.

"I'll be your guide," the man said, and his voice suffused the chamber.

Zetyn stood up and walked to the window. He stared at his tormentor for a while, then snarled and slammed his palm hard on the glass. The man didn't even blink. It was stupid, Zetyn knew, and wouldn't do anything to help him get out of there, but he couldn't help it. He composed himself and said, "What is your name?"

"Krezek," the man said. "What is yours?"

"Zetyn."

"Glad to meet you, Zetyn. Take the first door on the left."

"How long do you intend to keep me here?"

"As long as you need."

"Need for what?"

"To get out. The parameters for the skinner rails generate a code-based maze. If you figure it out, you can go free without so much as a scratch. If not, well, you won't."

Zetyn said, "I was never good at maths."

"That's a shame. Especially since the code is self-modifying based on operational feedback. Make too many mistakes and the patterns will start to change, and you'll need to start all over again."

"And you're going to stand there, to watch."

"For people like you, I've got all the time in the world," Krezek said.

"People like us?"

"Nitwits who think they can change the world, make it unstable. I wonder where your friends are."

Zetyn looked around the empty metal maze. "I wonder that myself. In fact, I wonder if I know them at all."

"You're not with them, I take it. You just got pulled along for the ride. A victim," Krezek said.

"No more victim as anyone else, I suppose," Zetyn said, "but at this time, in this place, I have no friends. Guess I should get better at making them."

Krezek, leaning in a little closer, said, "I suggest you also get better at maths, real quick, and stay away from the electric skimmers. Eventually the shocks will wear out your heart, and you'll start to get palpitations. They can be quite unpleasant, I hear. Fatal, even."

Zetyn stared at him, then walked away silently and headed for the first door on the left.

\*\*\*

His flesh felt like it was going to tear itself off his body, and he didn't care. He'd stopped crying; had left behind those gasping sobs of sorrow and hope, and moved beyond them, into a place of darkness and acceptance. His hands wouldn't stop trembling, but he viewed them outside himself. He was a machine now; his sole purpose to keep moving, keep looking, keep being shocked and keep opening doors, until he could finally find the one that would end this.

At one point he'd pressed a lucky door and suffered no shock, but the floor panel itself had slid aside, dropping him so far that when he landed and his head hit the ground, he'd heard the crunch on the inside of his skull.

Sometimes the panel overhead would open, and he'd be forced to climb up, his entire body shaking with the effort. The first time this had happened he hadn't noticed, and had screamed

with frustration, thinking this was the end and all he could do now was roam around until he finally died.

Krezek had followed along; sometimes voicing support or commentary, sometimes appearing in windows. He had, he said, programmed the skinner complex so as to always afford him a parallel route to Zetyn's gauntlet, so that he could follow along and peer in on his subject whenever he wished.

And so it might have gone till infinity and oblivion, but Zetyn heard a whisper. It said, "Right turn, and watch the floor."

Zetyn looked up. On the other side of a glass panel stood Krezek, as usual, with his composed, aloof expression. The whisper had not been his voice; it was full and resonating while Krezek's voice, with which he'd spoken at full volume the entire time, was a pinched and whiny thing, like a winged insect trying to escape from under a thumb. Krezek didn't appear to have noticed it.

Zetyn wondered momentarily if this were a trick, but discounted the notion. His torturer's mind games were mechanical, not interpersonal.

He hauled himself over to the right-hand door and stood in front of it. He told himself he was weighing his options, but in truth, he was trying to savor the moment, to enjoy the budding little seed of hope that could blossom into the assurance of deliverance. The instant he would touch the door, he'd know.

Then he remembered what the voice had said about the floor, and he turned on the spot, putting his back against one side of the corridor and pressing his legs against the other end. It hurt like blazes, but the pain felt good, and he used it to push harder, until he was reasonably sure that he wouldn't tumble down if the floor gave out.

"What are you doing?" Krezek said from behind the glass prison walls.

"Changing the game," Zetyn muttered, not truly caring whether his tormentor heard him. Keeping himself clamped up against the walls, he reached out one hand and gingerly touched the door. If this failed, he knew, he would die; the last ember of hope would be extinguished and he'd fall down like a pile of dead ashes.

His finger brushed the door. There was no current, no arc, no crackle. The floor panel beneath him merely slid open in silence, and Zetyn let himself slide down slowly as well, trying his hardest not to hope.

He hadn't been on the new floor for five seconds when the whisper was heard again. "Opposite door." He got up, walked over and pressed its panel. It opened.

He walked through, and the whisper said, "Left turn." Through a glass panel he saw Krezek show up, running along. Krezek's face registered surprise, the first expression he'd shown so far.

Zetyn turned left, rushed through that door, and waited for further instructions. There were none, and for a moment he thought his benefactor had abandoned him. Then Krezek showed up on the other side of a nearby glass partition, and Zetyn understood. The whisperer wanted to make itself known.

"The next one is going to be left, then straight, left again, right and the ceiling, and straight," the stranger said. It was no longer a whisper but a full-fledged voice, and while there was an odd tonality to it, Zetyn immediately recognized its owner. It was coming from Nale.

"Who is that? Who's there?" Krezek demanded. He put his face up against the glass and goggled at the room, his head moving back and forth. When he saw no one but Zetyn, he seemed to settle down a bit, and even flashed a brief smile.

Nale spoke up again, "Actually, you think you can memorize a longer sequence?"

Over Krezek's outraged screams, Zetyn grinned and nodded.

"All right. Take the ones I told you, then left, left, straight, left and floor, right and floor, straight, right and ceiling, left. Got it?"

"Got it," Zetyn said and set off, Krezek yelling at him all the way. It occurred to Zetyn that his upset wasn't perhaps from fear of his own life from the intruder, but from frustration that this little world he'd created was being upended. In his rush of hope and relief, he couldn't help but feel amused.

Nale kept giving him directions, and Krezek kept yelling. There were bangs and hammerings on the panels, which Zetyn imagined were from Krezek either taking out his frustrations or scampering around trying to find Nale. If Krezek's description of the maze had been right, Nale would have had to have been incredibly inventive to hide from the man, but he'd apparently succeeded so far. Zetyn himself had discovered new reserves of energy and was now rushing through the maze at high speed, slowed only by the time it took the doors to open.

And eventually, they got to the end. Zetyn stepped through yet another open door, and the corridor he entered was lit up with a green light. It was small and faint, but in the endless gray gloom Zetyn had suffered it felt like a blazing torch was shining into his eyes. He stumbled towards the light, feeling with his hands, and found that it was a panel set in the door on the opposite side of the crossroads. The panel was about the size of Zetyn's chest and had no borders. Its black surface had a green hue about it and was overlaid with a grey rectangular grid. When Zetyn touched the surface his finger left green ripples, as if he'd dipped it into water, and the grid realigned itself into concentric circles. He touched it again, and it changed to a series of digits. Another touch, another ripple, and the grid changed color to a bright turquoise and reverted back to squares.

"Good luck with that," Krezek said. He was standing on the other side of a glass panel right by Zetyn's side. Their faces were half an arm's length apart, and at that moment Zetyn wished more

than anything he had in his life that he could punch through the glass and tear Krezek's throat out.

"The lock is adaptive. It will adjust to everything you touch and realign its key accordingly," Krezek said.

"You're such a delightful human being," Zetyn said, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice. He was so close to getting out, he could feel it in his bones.

"The adaptation formula is based half on the one that modified the maze you just got through. So with your little drone helper hovering around somewhere, and believe me, I *will* catch him eventually, you shouldn't have any problems."

Zetyn thought about that sentence, and the quiet satisfaction it seemed to exude. He said, "What's the other half?"

"A code only I know."

"... right."

"You can find it, mind you. As soon as you'd left the first room, I dropped in a note in there with the code. All you need to do is backtrack to the start. Shouldn't be hard. Oh, and the currents in everything but that black panel are now lethal."

"You do enjoy this," Zetyn said, trying to keep calm and desperately hoping Nale had something up his sleeve.

"Damn straight I do. And while you're been working your way through my maze, I've been readjusting the panel controls. I know exactly where your little angel is going to be this time around, and even if I can't get to him, all I need to do is electrify every panel in his room, and he'll be gone."

"We better get it right the first time around, then," Nale said, appearing behind the glass on Zetyn's other side. "Do as I say at all times. First touch the upper right corner of the panel to reset it."

Zetyn did so. Both of his people, angel and demon, watched the scene closely.

"Now, don't touch the panel. Instead, slowly hover your finger over its top left corner and drag it to the right, as if you're tracing a straight line. When you get to the end, bring the finger back to the left, just below where you started, and do the same. Push the panel only when I say."

"What are you doing?" Krezek said.

"Getting him out," Nale said. "Do it."



Zetyn started, slowly tracing his finger a fraction over the panel's surface. He hadn't made more than three passes when Nale suddenly said, "Push and repeat."

Zetyn obeyed, touching the screen, then starting again. It took a few more passes this time, and he was almost down to the bottom of the screen when Nale gave the command. Each time he pushed, the screen would realign itself into new types of grids and colors.

And there came a point where Nale told him to stop, and said, "This one will be the last. Once you touch it, and once the door opens, run and don't look back."

Krezek, who'd fallen sullenly silent, exploded. "You couldn't possibly have done that! There is no way you could have backtracked to the first room, gotten in, and gotten back out without altering the skinning order. How the hell have you been doing this?!"

"Faith," Nale said, which shut him up.

Zetyn pushed the panel. It made ripples that spread continuously outwards to its edge, so that the panel was still rippling by the time the door slid open.

Zetyn ran through, into a long corridor with a light at the end, and did not even hesitate as he went through the light and was in the air, flying and running, and even after he fell into the safety net below, his feet were still moving. He scrambled out of the net, not sparing even one glance upward, and made it down to the ground proper, where he managed all of ten steps before the adrenaline ran out and his legs gave way. He crawled on all fours until he made it to a wall, and noticed with an ugly grimace that he instinctively shied from touching it. He made himself lean up against it, and turned around, looking at his old prison.

The maze was a strange thing when seen from the outside. It was like a facsimile of a piece of pollen; a roundish creation from which protruded countless metal bars and jutting panels. Its metal gleamed in the lights from the ceiling. Every now and then a panel would be retracted and another pushed out instead. Clearly, the maze was still reconfiguring itself. He wondered if Nale and Krezek were still in there. If Krezek were to emerge as the winner, Zetyn didn't even know if he could find the energy to scamper away. He kept an eye peeled on the one exit in the maze, the one he'd come out through.

The panels stopped moving. There was silence, then a few bangs, then nothing. Zetyn held his breath.

There was a whirring sound. A panel slid over the exit, and the maze was sealed.

Zetyn exhaled, and kept exhaling until his vision darkened, his eyes rolled back in his head and his consciousness faded away to blissful oblivion.

\*\*\*

A noise awoke him with a start. It came from around him, but his first instinct was to look up at the maze, and he saw that it was open again.

He scrambled to his feet, unsteadily. It felt as if he'd been sleeping for days. He didn't know whether Krezek might be around somewhere.

There were steps to his right. His heart did double beats.

Out of the shadows, Nale appeared. He walked close to Zetyn but remained out of arm's reach. "Rest easy," he said. "I am still with you."

Something in his manner made Zetyn's flesh crawl, but he attributed it to the horror of the maze. "Krezek?" he asked.

"Krezek is gone," he said.

Zetyn felt awash with relief. He started to crawl towards him but Nale backed away slightly. "I have work to do now," he said.

"What do I do? Are you going to get Monas?"

"Monas is gone, too," Nale said. "I could only save you."

Zetyn covered his face and tried to keep his breathing steady. After he felt he could speak again, he said, "So what now?"

"You go by yourself. Get to our ship. Leave."

"And go where?"

"Back to our people. Tell them what happened." Nale turned and started to walk away, but hesitated and said, "Well ... leave out the ugly parts, though."

"What are you going to do?"

"Find salvation," he said, and resumed walking away.

Zetyn watched him recede, and realized that he might never get another chance to ask a question that had been burning into his mind. "Nale?"

"Yes?"

"How *did* you manage it? In the maze."

Nale smiled faintly. "I listened to the rails, the way they slide together. I didn't conceptualize Krezek's mathematical formula, whatever it was. I simply saw everything as it was, and acted accordingly."

"And the code?"

"I watched Krezek as your hand hovered over the panel. His eyes told me when to press."

Zetyn stared at him. Finally he said, "Nale?"

"Yes?"

"Don't take this as any kind of judgment, please, but I don't even think I know who you are anymore. I love you, man, I truly do, but you've gone through the wall of craziness and out the other side. Whatever you are, I doubt it's human."

Nale's smile turned into a grin. "We're all just limbs of the same body. Good luck, my friend." And he was gone.

After a while, Zetyn got to his feet, and started making his way back to the ship.

## **Black Mountain**

Nale and Hona stood in front of a large warehouse. It was an unnerving place; the entire area was suffused with a strange smell, and there was absolutely no action, movement or sound detectable in the surroundings. The doors in front of them, the height of a five-story building, were locked with complicated electronic safeguards.

"Are you sure it's here?" Hona asked him.

"It's here," he said. "This is the end, and a new beginning."

"She's going to kill you," she said.

"I've died twice already," he said. "One more time won't hurt."

"Twice?" she said.

He nodded. "Once when I found out about the illness and joined the Sisters. And once on Black Mountain."

She was about to respond when the locks turned off in unison, and the massive doors creaked open.

They walked into total darkness, and the doors slowly closed behind them. The smell here was far more intense. It reminded them part of the sea and part of badly cleaned space ships.

A vast light blinked on overhead, and they saw what was in front of them. The room was dominated by a huge, open pool of pod liquid, and stretched over an expanse so vast that even with the light above they still couldn't see to the room's other end.

In the ectoplasm floated various pieces of regenerated humans, or some things that at least seemed within shouting distance of humanity, including various organs, half-formed rib cages, spines of varying sizes, and yellowish, mottled limbs. There was a square grid marked on the floor of the pool.

Lights flickered on in the entire hall. It was circular, with only two ways to get past the pool and to the other end. Across from them, a faint sight in the distance, stood Draea, with something box-shaped beside her that was covered in wires and glowing with red lights.

Speakers on the wall buzzed into life, and her voice echoed through the hall. "When I got here the pool was covered with plexiglass, and each sample was kept in a separate compartment. A few commands to the control system and all that glass slid aside. This place is so adaptable. I love it."

On her shoulder she had slung a large gun. "One of my men is busy with his hobby, but the other I've lost contact with. And I see you brought a friend, someone who looks suspiciously like I met

them in the past. How did you find me, by the way? And no need to shout; there's sensors that'll pick up your voice."

"The same way I found Zetyn. I just followed the path," Nale said. Behind him, Hona, who'd shivered at the word 'hobby', slowly drew her gun.

"What path?" Draea asked.

"My own. Have you forgotten what you saw at Black Mountain?"

"I try not to think about it too much."

"Then you are lost."

"Big words coming from a-" Draea said, then stopped in mid-sentence and threw a knife at him. It hurtled through the air, aimed not at Nale but at Hona, and even at that great distance it moved so fast that she could not react in time. It speared the gun out of her hand and kept right on going. On the wall behind them there was the sound of steel breaking.

Hona looked at it, then over to Nale, then back at the remains of the knife. "Nale, she broke the knife's blade."

"We'll be fine."

"You don't understand. There's a dent in the wall. She threw that knife hard enough to break its *blade*."

Nale turned to her. "Don't lose faith. She was only testing us. We're doing the right thing here."

There was a sigh in the air and Nale bent almost imperceptively. The knife headed for his neck missed him by a hair's breath and, like the last, broke against the wall.

Sounding completely unperturbed, Nale asked. "Is that the Book beside you? Did you bring it here?"

Draea pointed to the box beside her. "That's it. I could wire it up from practically anywhere in this station, but I liked this place. Keeps people at a distance."

Nale visibly tensed. "Wire it up?"

"You didn't know? We're supposed to destroy it. The Society didn't trust us to do it on our own, so they made us find the thing and bring it all the way here. I've got it plugged into their system so that they can verify it hasn't been tampered with, opened up or copied. Once I give the command, those same systems will disintegrate it, to the point where there'll be nothing but atoms floating on the breeze. I'll be done with my mission and will go get my reward."

Nale stared slowly walking around the pool and towards Draea's distant form. "I saw you there," he said. "At Black Mountain. Why would you ever want to destroy the Book?"

"It's what I'm here for. Why do you want to keep it?"

"Because it can save the world."

"From what?"

"Blood. Violence. Hatred. We can change the world, Draea."

"That's nice," she said. "Tell me about Black Mountain."

"You saw it, same as me. A walk through a desert, surrounded by spirits. A hike up a steep cliff, where the spirits begin to meld and rush forth. And, beyond that, the sea of dreams, overseen by the stars."

"Why did it change us?"

"Because we were ready. I was hoping that you would also be ready for the next stage. We're getting closer to ascendancy."

"And that includes dying, does it?"

Nale stopped short at that. "What?"

"In the vision. I realized that you were dying. Is that part of this grand plan of yours?"

Nale smiled, and began walking again in her direction. "We're all dying. Just some faster than others."

Draea sighed. "Over the last few days I've gained incredible focus. I can hit harder, move faster and aim better than I ever could in my life, and believe me, I was no slouch before. I was hoping that you could cast some light on this. I'm not in the mood for religion."

"That's a shame." He began to walk faster. At that, she pulled out another knife and, without even turning her gaze away from him, threw it into the air. There was a ping as the knife ricocheted off a wall, and a scream shortly after. Far away, Hona dropped to the ground, clutching her leg.

"One more step and your girlfriend dies," she said. "Stop trying to sneak."

Nale said, "If it's necessary, then so be it," and kept on walking.

From far behind they heard Hona choke and cough. Draea grinned wide. "I'm surprised," she said. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"She's just another spirit," Nale said. "But why bother? It's me you want."

"It is?" she said, still grinning, but the grin had turned cold.

"We've had a melding of consciousness. The spirits flowed past us, participants in an endless cycle none of them can break out of. None except you and me. We stood there, on Black Mountain, and we saw the dream-sea. I accepted and joined it, I drowned, and gained an oversight over the entire world."

"And that talent allows you to dodge everything in sight."

"Yes. And it uncovered the truth of the Book and of everything surrounding it. This is something we need to do. This is what's right. You had the same experience; surely you've come to the same conclusion. We need to save this world from itself."

"No."

"No?"

"Your focus widened, fine," Draea said. "Mine narrowed. What I saw in that unconscious moment was not some hyperextended superconsciousness, it was a shrinkage. I stood atop this Black Mountain of yours, and the entire world narrowed to a point, reduced, brought directly into my aim. And now I've got you in my sights, you and your craziness."

Nale stopped cold at that.

"I would never be part of this world you want," she continued. "This grand design of yours, this satellite view, it's nothing to do with me. I am the focus; I am a laser. And all I want is to get better at what I am and what I do."

"You are hyperfocused. You are alone of your kind. You are alone in this world," he said, in a dead voice.

"You lie," she says with a smile, remembering a similar lie so long ago. "There are others like me. And now you're made up my mind."

Nale started walking again, a determined expression on his face.

Draea quite relaxedly raised the veinshredder. "Not only have you made it amply clear that you're perfectly useless at helping me improve my skills or explain what happened, but you want to rid the world of all people who harbor hatred, rage and war in their hearts. People like me. We really can't have that."

Nale was running now, far away from her but still close enough to aim at.

"So all the reasons I let you in here are no longer valid, and you've become nothing but a weak, sad opponent with delusions of grandeur," Draea said. "You're wrong, and you're probably insane. I hurt and murder and kill for my own personal reasons, but I never dream of thinking that it's morally right or just. It's what I do, nothing more or less. Some might say that it makes me a lesser monster than you, but I suppose it doesn't matter. Any last words?"

"Die," Nale said.

Draea smiled, and fired the veinshredder. The spheres zoomed towards Nale, curving gently in the air so as to compensate for his moving heat signature, but he easily slipped past them. Draea emptied the clip, but none of the shredders touched Nale's moving form as he zipped and weaved on the wide walkway. She reloaded and kept firing, her deadly missiles pinging off the walls and falling into the ectoplasm below. Nale bobbed and dodged as he ran, sweating madly, his eyes unblinking as he approached. Draea's smile faded as she concentrated on hitting him, but every shot, even as it curved towards his head and body, managed only to whiz by him and hit the walls around his running form.

At last he got too close for safe range, so Draea tossed the gun, pulled out a knife and set her feet. He lunged at her, she ducked and swiped the knife, and he wasn't quite quick enough to turn out of range, the blade leaving a bleeding surface trail on his torso. She turned, intending to plunge the knife into him, but he'd already pirouetted and now went for her knife hand, clamping on to her forearm with both his hands, stepping outside it and violently turning his shoulder into hers. She got levered down and for a split second felt like her shoulder was going to be wrenched out of its socket. He started kneeing her in the thigh and ribs, and she dropped the knife, spun around and punched him in the throat. She had little weight to put into the punch, and it was weak and flailing, but it was enough; he gagged and let go, and she yanked the arm back and started backing away, on instinct pulling out a gun and aiming it at his momentarily still form.

It was too late; he spotted it and launched after her. She dropped the gun and barely managed to put her hands up before he was on her, bowling her down to the ground, sitting on top of her with his hands closing around her throat. She buckled, rolled him over and managed to break his grip, but as she started punching and elbowing him, he was able to dodge every blow with ease. She jumped up and looked around for a weapon, any weapon, but he rose with her, more in tune with her motions than any practice partner had ever been. They exchanged blows, most of hers missing him by a hair's breath but visibly tiring him when they connected; his hitting her, but her years of work in the violence of the mining colonies had left her well-prepared for body blows.

They said nothing; the words had run out and all they had now was grunts and actions, sighs and gasps and blood. His eyes, already wild, opened even wider, and his nostrils flared. He backed up, but before she could think of what to do he ran at her again, not jumping this time but instead clamping his arms around her and running towards the open pool of pod fluid, and in sheer terror she realized that he intended to drown her. Her arms were trapped, but at he drove her backwards she managed to kick up a knee and hit him in the groin. It wasn't dead-on, impacting right above his thigh, but he stumbled, and she used that same leg to stamp down hard and spin them in the air as they fell into the pool, Draea landing on top of him.



Sounds disappeared. The liquid was viscous and warm. Nale loosened his grip and resumed hitting Draea, but the ectoplasm reduced the power of his punches. She hit back a couple of times, but he dodged so easily that she changed tactics, going instead for the throat, trying to crush his windpipe. His eyes were so wide open they nearly bugged out, and as she grasped harder, and the veins in his throat pulsated and throbbed, his lips parted, revealing teeth gritted in madness. A tiny trickle of blood weaved its way from his mouth, as if he'd bitten his tongue.

She hardened her grip but he kept hitting her, and now his blows were coming in with more force, whether from desperation or pure anger. They roiled around in the liquid, spinning in a downward helix. She was so focused on crushing his throat that she didn't immediately realize they were at the bottom, so it was his feet that got planted first, and they gave him enough pushback to hit her hard, in the temple and on the jaw. The two blows rocked her, and she realized that she was almost running out of breath. She was out of knives, too, out of weapons completely, and the look in Nale's bloodshot eyes indicated that he was really no longer there as a human being.

She made a desperate choice, letting go of his throat with one hand and punching him hard on the nose; he didn't even shirk, and kept pummeling her even as he bled freely. She felt her feet touch the floor now, and out of the corner of her eye, through the mist of blood and encroaching blackness at the edge of her vision, she spied something floating around. She grasped hold of Nale's clothes and, putting all her strength into the motion, yanked him with her towards the floating object. Nale was oblivious, pounding away, and with her receding consciousness Draea realized that he truly enjoyed this, that he believed not only that he had won but that he was right, and in his eyes and in his frenzy she saw a mind she recognized so well. The recognition echoed in her head as she got close enough to the object, half a spinal column that tapered down to a point where the sacrum should have been, and it was with infinite sadness and a fading glimpse of understanding that she reached for it, grasped it with all her might, and, before Nale could realize what she was doing, plunged it deep into his eye.

He immediately let go, pulled back and screamed, air bubbles mixing with the spurts of blood from his face. She pushed herself off the bottom and floated languidly up, too shot from adrenaline backwash and oxygen deprivation to paddle with her arms. Her head was covered with goo as she rose from the pool, and she barely had enough life left to gasp for air before paddling sluggishly towards the edge.

Once she had a handhold on the pool's plexiglass border, she looked back. Nale was surrounded by a cloud of blood, but appeared to be moving towards her, like some amphibious carnivore. Her adrenaline surged and she hauled herself out of the pool, coughing and wheezing as she stumbled towards the machine. She had no illusions any more of stopping Nale, of playing with him like a toy, of grabbing a gun or a knife and facing off. He was a monstrosity, almost beyond her comprehension. Her life was secondary; all that mattered was that the Book not fall into the hands of this madman.

She reached it just as he hauled himself out of the pool, and even through his wheezing and gurgling she heard a throaty, phlegmic sound and realized that he was laughing. It stopped just as

soon as he apparently saw where she was headed. He screamed incoherently, a string of almost glossolalian words, and gave chase.

She grabbed the catalyst sitting beside the Book and slammed it on top of the machine, rolling its sphere back to green and holding it there. It jittered for second, and then the sphere spun out of her control. Both it and the sensors on the Book itself rolled through their scheme of colors, blinking green, red again, then yellow, orange, blue and indigo, and just as Nale reached her with his hands going for her eyes, the sensors hit purple.

There was a loud hum, and the last thing either one of them ever saw was each other's face, Nale looking like the maddest of prophets, Draea content and grinning like a harpy. For the last time she looked deep into his eyes, and she saw him realize, at the same time as she herself did, that the reason the Society had brought them all to this prepared, pre-wired place that nobody would ever miss or wonder about if destroyed, was that this was the end, the place where they would bring armageddon to being. In that infinite moment Draea acknowledged to herself what she'd always known, what she'd been told so long ago, that all her life she had wanted to be caught, and to be caught in fiery, destructive glory.

Beside them, the machine began to glow, smoke rising from its innards. There was a rumble far away that slowly turned to a roar; the floor began to quake and the pod fluid sluiced up out of its pool; and if either one of them had hesitated in their death-dance, they would have heard the walls start to come down.

Metal tore, and plastic melted, and stone turned to glass.

And in a flash that blinded everyone in the instant before they were vaporized, the end of days arrived, and the entire station exploded like a nova.

## **Black Mountain: Dismantling**

The repair facility falls to pieces. The metal debris which dotted its floors now flies through the air, shaken like dust in a gale. Some of it has been here almost as long as the station itself.

For the longest time it had seemed like the station wouldn't get built at all, surrounded as it was by scandal, controversy and rocketing costs. Planetside resistance was immense, and build approvals were only ratified after the Gallente government threatened to use the planet for experiments in geoengineering. As it turned out, the station became so beneficial to planetary business that when someone suggested, years later, that commutes between the two be curtailed for reasons of security and planetary independence, it effectively ended his political career.

The facility was among the first rooms of this station to be built, and it was a symbolic one, meant to indicate that in the tumultuous process of creating the spacestation all wounds had been healed and all reputations repaired. Unfortunately, the ratification process had taken so long, and deadlines were getting so close, that shady deals were made and substandard builders were given contracts based on promises of speedy work.

While no major catastrophes occurred, various niggling problems would hound the station operators for a long time afterwards. There were always indications that some of the raw material used to build the station hadn't been quite as fresh as the builders claimed, but had instead been brought in from destroyed ships and ruined colonies nearby; the lesser the costs of transporting it through dead space, rather than constructing it from scratch down on the planet. Surprisingly, while it sometimes interfered with more complex operations, this mishmash of construction did not affect the station's basic stability - amalgamates are always stronger than pure metals - and if someone noticed an odd curve or bend in the architecture as the station was being assembled, they didn't comment.

Long after, when the station had been abandoned and cut adrift, its new inhabitants did not even venture once into the repair areas. This was a secret place, not a safe haven, and you did not dock here expecting refuge.

\*\*\*

One of the pieces from the repair facility, a massive metal girder, pierces the already weakened blast doors and goes through, crashing onto the walkways below. They shudder from its impact, the tremor leading through the walkways and up into the walls, where it combines with the station's own trembling death throes until the air is filled with a discordant hum, like a hymn sung by machines at prayer. The vibrations get worse, until the station seems to be breathing, its nooks and crannies shrinking and expanding in tune. The windowframes suffer for this, and in short time the few remaining windows are shattered, even the bulletproof ones, even the blastproof ones, showering their glittering edges onto the broken paths below.

Worn hands built these walkways. Tired souls fitted the glass in its brand new window slots. There was hope and hard work here. The rumors were that the entire project might be endangered, so people pulled together, and people worked hard. Some of them didn't last, and

left silently on shuttles that took them anywhere they wanted on the planet below. The ones who did make it through stood in their places of honor at the station's inauguration: Down below, in the gloominess of steel, machines and noise, where they had to be if anything broke or bent out of shape. Nobody else saw them, but they didn't need to be seen. They were everywhere, in the rivets and welds and wirings of the world around them.

\*\*\*

Glass breaks all over the station. The main walkway, where the shopkeepers used to hold court, gets covered, and it's as if there was a blizzard. There are no signs here any longer, no marks of past vendors, and the only thing that lasts is the graffiti etched into the stores' metal walls. Then the walls themselves begin to topple, one after the other, revealing the dusty, vacant spaces inside. After one set of walls falls over it lets out a mass of antiques, priceless artifacts in almost pristine condition, trapped in there as if they'd been in invisible amber.

To ensure fairness and discourage agglomeration of big business, vendors were let into the station according to a weighted lottery. Some known trademarks made it in without question - Quafe was one of the first - but the end result was a varied selection of known and lesser-known names. Laws were passed on the amount of money a company could funnel into its station stores and on-station advertisements, and some restrictions were placed on the extent to which larger companies were allowed to browbeat the smaller ones into submission through sheer force of presence, but that was it. This being the Gallente, it was expected that once business started, the best man would win.

The brotherhood that had formed among the station creators did not extend to the shopkeepers, and dirty tricks became the rule. Surprisingly, the small businesses did much better than the large ones, at least initially; their owners had clearer memories of their startup days and had less inhibitions about bending the rules. Everyone loves the underdog, and every time the small businesses put one over on the big companies they became all the more popular. As time went on this led some small businesses to become medium-sized businesses, and eventually the smallest ones got squeezed out. It was harsh, but that's how it went.

When several stores banded together to create a mutually operated mall - one of the many workarounds around the merger laws - one still resisted. Since this rebel was located right in the middle of the other stores, they focused their attention, pooled their resources and, after luring away key employees who had insider knowledge of the lone business, managed to put it out of action. As it turned out, the business space was in a dead zone of the mall area, so the others merely walled it up untouched and turned it into a general notice area. For years that area would serve as a reminder of the futility to stand against free enterprise and, to more cynical eyes, as a plastic-decorated war memorial for the dead and gone. Its contents, like a sacrificial offering to god, were never spoken of nor touched.

\*\*\*

Close to the shopkeepers' areas there is an open square. A gigantic piece of the roof breaks away and falls onto the square, goes through it and doesn't stop until several floors below. There is a

pause, then a rumble, and what is left of the ceilings above is lit up by an orange light. The light changes, gets brighter and starker, and for a moment its glare is reflected down to the chaos below. Shadows are cast, flickering and black.

A fireball erupts from below, roars through every level and sets the floors ablaze. It doesn't scorch the debris but melts it, disintegrates it, blasting through everything in its wake until it hits the ceiling, where it spreads out like an inverted tree taking root, its magmatic tendrils trailing through the air and hissing as they land on the ground below.

This square was once the base of operations for a fledgling union movement. It started with one woman, a low-level engineer frustrated at low pay and plexiglass ceilings, who began meeting with other workers and speaking of the hazards and dangers of station repair jobs. She was charming and well-spoken, and had that governor's combination of steely presence and welcoming aura that made her audience both appreciative and attentive. When the group began to grow and people started to worry about reprimands by station authorities, she made the remarkable choice of moving their operations out into the open, settling on a small square where they spoke freely among themselves. Any outsider could stop to listen and hear their plans, or see them argue. It was a brilliant but dangerous move, and it worked; they were wiretapped, of course, but the powers that be didn't know anything more than everybody else who passed by, and eventually the crowds began to grow. When the police threatened to disband the meetings due to overcrowding, they set up keyless video feeds, ones that were streamed live through other open datafeeds, piggybacking on their signals, and could be decoded at receiver ends with datakeys that were given out freely and anonymously. The authorities never quite knew for sure who was watching.

\*\*\*

The seething magma melts through the floor and pours into tunnels and crevices below. There are crackles and sparks, and the square's electrical wirings give out for good. There is a series of twangs as the remaining cables, overstretched and overheated, finally give out, lashing their way out from the gaping hole in the center and flicking at one another like mad fencers. Eventually they, too, give out, and hang there limply, pointing at the abyss.

The authorities, annoyed at the stir the group was creating among station workers, eventually decided that people, deep down, didn't want to risk the station's own well-being, and that an aura of assistance and goodwill would better resolve the problem than harsh tactics would. So they gave in to the various demands for workers' rights the group had posed, but declared that as the station would now have to re-budget for assured self-sufficiency, and since they could not levy more taxes on the general citizenry, they would have to cut nonessential services. For some unexplained political reasons these cuts, which restricted availability of everything from unlicensed mind clash game broadcasts and non-brand egone sets to Quafe shots and low-grade alcohol, affected recreational activities enjoyed almost exclusively by the lower classes. Right after the cuts were implemented there was a surge of crowd control issues on station, to which the administrators responded by cracking down even harder on imports of various incendiary goods, adding that these restrictions would be reviewed after the workers' rights issue had been resolved. Cheap alcohol and budget risque entertainment products fell right off the radar.

It wasn't long before the masses reacted. Graffiti denouncing the workers began to appear in the more rundown areas of the station, followed by barroom conversations that got increasingly loud and spirited. The flashpoint came when a channel formerly reserved for sports was shut down and replaced with direct vidcasts from the activists' meetings. Someone in the bar put down his glass, got up, yelled incoherently at the video screen for a while, then drunkenly marched off proclaiming that he was going to give the activists a piece of his mind. Others followed, word spread, and by the time the progression got to the square it numbered in the hundreds (though minus the original instigator, who'd stopped at a street corner to pass water, fallen over his own legs, and passed out) and was in very red spirits. The activists were dragged off and nearly beaten to death. What saved them was a group of station police officials, who, eventually, made their way through the angry crowd and set up an inertial shield around the beleaguered activists. This effectively trapped them inside, like animals in a zoo, while the mob pounded on the shields from the outside.

When the crowd finally dispersed and the police lowered the shield, the activists walked away, each in a separate direction, without saying a word. Their group was disbanded from then on. The station took them in, healed their wounds, then offered them each a lucrative and quite public corporate job. They each took the offer, and worked with loyalty and dedication and unquestioning verve for the rest of their lives. Their offices, by their own request, were located so that they looked down on the square, through unopenable windows that housed bulletproof glass. Nobody else took up the mantle, and since the activists' meetings had all been broadcast through unofficial channels, station archivists did not keep copies of the group's discussions. Restrictions were lifted, alcohol and entertainment returned, and whatever it was the group had fought for was forgotten, as was the group itself.

Not every action has a reaction, and not every movement leaves a trail.

\*\*\*

The living quarters have all but collapsed. The first ones to go were the high-rise buildings, spacious and fragile, followed by the ones standing unsupported next to open spaces that once housed parks and fashionable market areas. Even the apartment buildings, the stalwarts of cramped living that towered over the darker parts of the station, have given way to the fire. Remarkably, the only spaces still standing are the Rust buildings, tenements meant for people who'd fallen on the hardest of luck and were stuck on the space station with nowhere else to go. Space is always at a premium and so the Rust flats are squeezed in tight, with little space for anything but sleeping and eating and despairing. But there's such a mass of them, huddled together like animals for warmth on a cold, cold night, that they practically support each other. They don't give way until the ground itself gives, and even then they take a long time to fall.

Back in the days when its inhabitants were breathing, every now and then love floated through Rust, catching the unwary in its grasp. And sometimes he beat her, and a few times she was afraid she was pregnant by someone else, but they loved each other, and their relationship outlasted many others, for that is what love does, for better or worse. Their quarters were small

but big enough, and they raised several children there, those of whom survived to adulthood eventually lived in bigger quarters than their parents, and wore grey clothes and grey faces.

\*\*\*

After the Rust collapses, everything goes. Corridors throughout the station crumble, taking with them whatever they were holding. Plummeting alleys, once dark, are lit by the rumbling fires below before disintegrating. In one of these a man known as Polok can be briefly seen before he, too, falls into the fire. His work takes longer to fall, as if it wants to hang on and endure, if only a few moments beyond Polok's last breath. At last it gives way, to be licked by the flames, engulfed, swallowed whole, and in their crackling roar the unseen listener can still detect its tearless sigh of relief. Everything ends. Everything always ends.

A long time ago, a childless, middle-aged Amarrian couple walked through this territory for some unthinking reason, and in their shiny shoes and unholed clothes were set upon by several denizens of Rust. Bitter and frustrated, the inhabitants took their life's anger out on the poor couple, demanding things they couldn't give, threatening to take even more, and eventually making good on that threat. Whether by accident or brief, unthinking intention, they left the man dead in the street, and ran away before any of them thought of taking the woman's life as well.

The couple were religious, and as the man's life ran out he struggled to say a prayer he'd learned as a child, one that supposedly would guarantee his passage into the heavens. In his life he had long since learned that this guarantee would come not from words praising the next world but deeds honoring this one, but at this moment, in this cold and lonely place, it was all that came to mind. His wife, crying silently, comforted him the best he could, but he died with the prayer unfinished on his lips.

Afterwards, every year on that particular day, she would return, alone, carrying blessed water in a small container. She would go down on her knees and begin scrubbing the area where her husband had bled to death. Word spread, and it was made clear by official and religious authorities both that any unpleasantness towards this lady would lead to a scouring of Rust.

People guessed that she was trying to wash away her husband's blood from the unholy site where he'd been slain. In reality, she was sanctifying the ground that had received his warmth, and praying, to any gods that would listen, that even though her husband had not managed to finish his invocation, he would nonetheless be let into paradise.

\*\*\*

And now the structure gives way for good. Central walls are shaken down, support girders are parted like chaff, and the destruction moves to the core of the station's heart. The fires tear their way through every part of the station like ink in water, so omnipresent that they can no longer be distinguished from their surroundings. This place *is* fire now, it has become an inferno and no longer a station, and all that remains is for the outer walls to part and crack and reveal the gutting within. A station's exterior is always the toughest part of its structure, for whatever happens inside may never be allowed to breach the outer shell.

Someone went insane. Nobody minded, because they were a colorful breed who talked to themselves, to others and to anyone who was or wasn't there; perfectly charming and civilized. An old man who walked through this little world, telling people he would go on until the end of time. He lived in the same place for most of his life, and while nobody knew when he'd moved in, everyone felt that it was as if he'd always been there. People liked him.

And now, when he's been long forgotten, a secret place is breached, somewhere that was also long forgotten by all but this man and the ones he brought here. This place is among the last to go, and it spews out whatever had been stored inside. Leather straps. Drawings and discolored photographs. Little shoes.

They're shaken out, and burned in the fire, at last, at long last.

And with that, as if breathing its own sigh of relief, the station, purified and clear in purpose, goes nova. Steel and stone, plastic and rock, and everything else that ever was, all grind themselves apart like the station is trying to fall to pieces and stay together and reach out in a thousand directions at once.

And with a flash that glows through the vastness of space, all these memories are gone.



## **Black Mountain: Sounding the Horns of the Hunt**

Jonak and I were bringing our vessel back to home when we got the call. I had recently switched teams within the Sisters of EVE, joining the Sanctuary at long last, and the missions could be draining. I'd been hoping for this one to be a nice, quiet trip back to base for reassignment briefing and a bit of a rest.

We were in Ammatar space, and there were no other Sister ships in the immediate vicinity. The only reason we were even coming through here was that our ship needed a quick overhaul from the station mechanics. It was secure space, which the Navies patrolled, and help calls were usually routed to them.

We did have other teams on standby, but the emergency call we received was from a ship, not an orbiting object. This was unusual, since ships were far more volatile and thus didn't usually have the time to call for help from anyone but their own supporting forces. Still, the call indicated there weren't many people onboard, and that it was a serious emergency, so we changed course and sped to their position.

As we flew there, more strange information came in. The ship was apparently an Ammatar caravan, which was natural enough, and was located in a system that bordered the Angel space nearby, but they were broadcasting on our emergency band. This meant they had foregone their own corporate channel to request backup, and while the emergency band would bring in the Sisters, it might also attract scavengers.

We made it to the ship and found it a smoking husk, its engines barely firing and its hull cracked to pieces. It didn't seem to have ruptured, though, which meant there might be people alive inside. The ship was a caravan and wouldn't have had any offensive gear to speak of, but I noticed several wrecks in the vicinity and suspected those were the remains of whatever force had been here to protect it. I couldn't see whether the wrecks were Navy or pirate ships, but it didn't matter. Nothing else moved, and nobody made to attack us. It didn't feel like a trap, and for veterans like us, that feeling is really all we need to decide whether to engage.

Deeper scans verified the caravan's structural integrity and life-support systems, and so we had official permission to board. We suited up, let our ship clamp on to the caravan, set up the tube connectors, and boarded, into smoke, fire, blood and screaming.

\*\*\*

*#1: What are we going to do about this case?*

*#2: Well, there've been reports of the station being destroyed, but nobody's really that interested in something that's been a derelict for ages, so there won't be any press. When our cleanup team got there for official emergency assistance, the damn Society had already cleaned the scene and gone. There was nothing left to salvage.*

*#1: Not even a bit of the machine?*

*#2: Especially not the machine. It's gone, and gone for good if I'm any judge.*

*#1: So there's nothing left? Whole mission was a wash?*

*#2: No, not at all. We found out some interesting things, and there's still someone out there who we might extract valid intel from if we can find her.*

*#1: Who?*

*#2: Some Angel woman.*

\*\*\*

We moved through the ship, judging who was salvageable and who wasn't. Cherrypicking is a cold concept at best, but when you're surrounded by the rapidly dying, you don't have time to give succour. Since there was a decent amount of ground to cover in a very limited time, we covered the main areas first - ops levels and living quarters - and checked the vitals on whoever was still in one piece. There were lots of people in shock, but they'd be alright. The hardest ones to leave were those who'd had some kind of surface damage; you never quite know if they'll be in so much pain that they'll cling to you and demand assistance, and sometimes you have to be nasty and give them a little tap on the injured area, just to make them let go.

We were checking on someone whose ribs weren't all intact, when he started asking about angels. It took me a moment to realize he was talking about the pirates, and that there was probably an Angel on the ship. I gave Jonak a look, then gave our patient a quick booster shot to clear his head, and asked him who he meant.

"There was an Angel representative on the ship," he said. "He rushed to the exits when we were attacked."

"Was he armed?" I asked.

"No, just had some strange device with him, but it didn't look like a weapon."

"What was it?"

"This curved metal thing, with a red ball in the middle."

I looked at Jonak again and said, "Doesn't sound like anything I know."

He gave me a strange look and said, "No, me neither."

After we'd strapped in those cases who were near-critical and prepped them for removal, Jonak told me he was going to look for the Angel, and that I should take the casualties to our own ship and stay there. It was a perfectly sensible idea: Someone had to tend to the wounded and, if

something went wrong, be ready to make a getaway. Everyone else on the caravan was in good enough shape to live but not good enough to defend themselves if some pirate started wreaking havoc. And besides, Jonak had a lot more combat training.

I kept the criticals conscious as I shuttled them through the tube back to our ship. It would make the ride more unpleasant for them, but until I could get them into our sick bays and do a more thorough scan, I couldn't risk having them slip into a coma. I kept up a gently rolling dialogue all the way, asking them about their trip here, and keeping their minds off things as much as I could.

They told me things I already knew, that they were an Ammatar caravan that had gone to the border of Angel space for some strange business. I nodded and hummed and encouraged them to keep talking, trying to judge their state by the strength in their voices. It was a secret mission, so the Ammatar corp they belonged to had washed its hands of them beforehand. If they landed in trouble, they'd be on their own. Their Ammatar employers had heard that the Angels had been making deep-space incursions into hereto unexamined pockets of space and digging up various items, including some that might prove of marked value in the future. The Ammatars didn't particularly know what these items were, and had little interest in any particular ones, but they wanted to strengthen their illicit trading ties to the Angels just in case they could reap some profits or get first dibs on lucrative offers. That was why, I realized, they hadn't sent out an emergency call to their company, but only to the Sisters.

Everything had gone smoothly, they said, until the capsuleer showed up. He'd likely been on a pirate hunt and had destroyed every Angel ship around them, then gone for the caravan. Since they'd been without protection, no Navy forces had shown up, and the capsuleer only stopped firing instants before the caravan was about to explode. He untargeted, sucked the pirate wrecks dry of hardware, and left without a second thought, though whether he'd run out of ammo or merely out of patience was anyone's guess. Of all that had happened to these people, I heard their voices take on the hardest tone when talking about that capsuleer.

I'd only just gotten them into the sickbeds and hooked them up when there was a warning sound. I rushed to the bridge and checked the scanners. The Ammatar ship was going critical. I hailed Jonak and yelled at him to get out, but got no response. I was about to check whether our connecting tube was still intact when there was a bright, bright flash, a shower of stars, and whatever was left of the caravan was reduced to a dead tangle of metal. Nobody could have survived that explosions, and my quick scans showed no life vessels of any kind in the vicinity. The ones we'd left on that ship were gone, and Jonak with them.

I pinched my eyes shut and rubbed my temples. You distanced yourself from this, of course you did, and you shoved it down into that place where the memories lie, but you knew it would rise again, some day.

I was about to set my ship on course when the scanners informed me that someone had entered it just before the explosion. My stomach turned, and for a moment I had the strongest feeling that it was the Angel, or one of the dead Ammatars, or someone else I didn't know at all. I immediately checked the person's identity, and breathed out deeply. It was Jonak.

\*\*\*

*#1: Have our guys come up with anything to explain what made Nale lose it so thoroughly?*

*#2: We're looking into the nanobots, whether he got too high a dose of them. Personally, I doubt we'll come up with much. Might've been the bots, or his previous illness and whatever that did to his head, or something entirely different. We don't know everything about what happened out there.*

*#1: And nothing useful from Zetyn?*

*#2: Very little. In his lucid moments he's been perfectly willing to talk, but it's half fact and half religious diatribe. Quite frankly, I don't think we can trust anything he says, other than that Nale was definitely getting unbalanced towards the end.*

*#1: Shame. I don't like losing operatives, or losing control of them. We're supposed to be better organized than this.*

*#2: I agree. But with an operation of this magnitude, you can never plan for everything. If something catches you by surprise, you deal with it as swiftly as possible, contain the ripples, and move on with your plan.*

*#1: My thoughts exactly.*

\*\*\*

I immediately asked Jonak if he was okay, and he nodded his head. I was about to ask whether he'd found anyone, but held my tongue; everyone on that ship was dead, we knew that, and Jonak's face understandably didn't look open to any more questions. And besides, we needed to take care of those three survivors on our ship.

I began keying in the course, assuming I'd be going with Jonak to sick bay, but he told me to stay at the helm. He said he could easily take care of our patients - at this point it was mostly an issue of keeping them comfy and hoping they'd survive the trip - and he preferred me to stay at the helm for manual adjustment so we could get to base in better time. I agreed, so we took off.

Warping wasn't an option with our patients, and Jonak retreated to sick bay to watch over them during our lengthy trip. We had monitors on the bridge that showed our patients' status, but I knew from experience that I'd be way too busy working with the AI to get us home in good time, so I kept them off to avoid the distraction. If anything were to go wrong, either with Jonak or the patients, several emergency procedures would immediately notify me.

At one point I did turn on the sound feed from sick bay, just to give it a quick check. All I heard was Jonak murmuring quietly to one of the patients, and, after a while, the patient whispering some response. The sick man's voice was haggardly and full of pain, and I felt very relieved that he had Jonak there with him.

\*\*\*

*#1: What's Zetyn's state?*

*#2: The same. He still suffers from acute claustrophobia and is making even less sense than he did before. We're keeping him under examination, but I doubt it'll be for much longer.*

*#1: Did we really get nothing useable from that man? He was a solid operative, reliable and quick.*

*#2: Right now, all he does is rock back and forth in the isolation compartment, asking us what the formula is. Sometimes he'll throw himself at the walls, and if he sees anyone on the other side of the safety glass, he screams himself hoarse.*

\*\*\*

At last we got close to base, so I hailed sick bay and said, "Docking in a few. Get ready for evac."

A couple of minutes later, I heard Jonak return to the bridge. His steps were soft and slow, and he laid a hand on my shoulder, saying, "Don't bother."

I turned and silently looked at him.

He said, "It's quiet now, back there."

I closed my eyes and sighed deeply.

We'd been so close, and with everyone we'd lost, I really had hoped we could save these three.

So we docked in silence, and we made preparations for the burial of the dead. That should have been the end of it.

Until I found that video.

Something gnawed at me, something about the whole trip I couldn't quite make sense of. On a sleepless night, some days later, I made a nocturnal trek to our offices and called up the videos from our flight. The sick bay ones hadn't been filed - we Sisters are good at humans, usually, but bad at bureaucracy - and all I could get my hands on were general monitoring records for the ship's entrances, bridge and exits.

I went over some of my own actions while I'd been in route control, and kept looking for some kind of flight bump or course deviation that I knew I hadn't made. It wasn't so much to assuage my conscience, but rather to completely eliminate the chance that what I was looking for was anything as normal as a simple mistake.

It wasn't until I had switched to the other videos and watched Jonak's miraculous entry a dozen times that I noticed what I'd been missing, or rather, what he'd been missing when he finally turned up on the bridge.

Setting the viewers to magnify and sharpen, I focused, and focused, and focused, aiming the unseen eye directly at Jonak's pocket. There was a clear bulge in there, one that definitely had not been present when he entered the caravan, nor when he came back to me on the bridge.

Focus, focus, focus.

A curved bulge, its axis slightly more voluminous, like it had a ball set in its middle.

Like the Angel had brought on board.

I didn't want to know any more. I didn't want to be on the roads that would lead to a place I'd never quite escape from. So I shut down the viewer, and I left our office, and I went home, and some time later, I finally slept.

\*\*\*

*#1: And this one, we're sure he never told anyone else?*

*#2: Positive. We took him in for soft questioning, got his report, then administered the nanobots.*

*#1: How's he now?*

*#2: We're keeping him isolated while we clear up his business and set up the accident. We should be able to execute in two weeks' time. The biggest hurdle is the coroner's reports, since the Sanctuary always has to give such incredibly detailed ones when our people die.*

*#1: Is it going to be a problem?*

*#2: No. And when he's been dealt with, along with that poor bastard Zetyn, we'll have finished this sorry little venture. The remaining catalysts have already been put into recycling.*

*#1: It's a shame. I liked working with him. If he hadn't taken a look at those videos, or seen what I carried back onboard the ship, he might've survived this whole damn mess of a project.*

*#2: Still. Loose ends.*

*#1: Yes. Speaking of which, there's still the matter of the Angel woman.*

*#2: No matter. With everyone else gone, she'll have a hard time finding anyone to believe her story. We'll keep out some long-term feelers for her, but it's nothing we need concern ourselves with. As far as this institution is concerned, the Book is tightly closed shut, forever.*

## Daughters of the Revolution

It was chilly on the roof, even though the house was only a few stories high. There was little in the way of shelter up there: a few receivers and antennas, and the metal railings of a fire escape attached to one wall. Most of the buildings in this part of the station were like this; spare, low and nondescript. If more people moved into the area, new stories would be slotted onto this one like a combination toy. It wasn't quite the poor section, but it had even less personality.

A young woman lay on the roof, on a small blanket, looking up at the station dome. It was high enough that it couldn't easily be glimpsed in the dusk, and most of the lighting came from massive advertising screen in the distance, the reflection of their flickering images rendering the sky full of multihued moving images, like rainbows taking on a strange life.

The woman sighed.

There was a noise from the fire escape. The steps were metal through and through, and even in the night-time hiss of busy life, the clanging reverberations of feet stomping determinedly down could easily be heard.

The woman sat up, frowned and looked to the escape.

After a while, two wrinkly hands could be seen gripping the top railings, followed by the ascendancy of a head of grey hair. An old woman came up the stairs, one step at a time, and crossed onto the roof. She was wrinkled and thin, but her footsteps didn't waver, and she walked assuredly over to the young woman with a set, unsmiling expression.

"... Gran?" the young woman said in amazement.

"I'll thank you not to hang out on any roofs in the future, young miss," Gran said. "I went to the university grounds, and even tracked down that place where you're always talking rebellion with those tattooed nincompoops, and nobody knew where you were."

The old woman brushed herself off and straightened her dress. "I'd have lost you outright if one of them hadn't mentioned your little hangout here, though I won't ask why he knows about a thing like that, or what you're doing bringing boys up here with you." She regarded the young woman with a mix of annoyance and barely concealed amusement. "Your mouth's hanging open, dear. Do close it before ships start to dock."

The young woman's mouth snapped shut with a click. "Gran, you shouldn't be up here," she said. "If you fall, or if something happens--"

"It'll hopefully teach you to talk to your Gran first before rushing off to nowhere parts, though it's better than that hideout of idiotic chatterboxes you usually hang out with." Gran said. "Your mother was getting worried about you, Beliah."

"Don't mention her, please," Beliah said in a firm tone. "I couldn't go to the RU because I was too furious to talk to anyone, and it's because of her. And I'll thank you not to speak about the political and sociology students like that. They've got a lot of interesting things to say about rights and rebellion."

Gran walked up to her and slowly sat down on the blanket, grunting and sighing. Beliah scooted over to give her room, and decided to press on. "Do you know what kind of a state we're in, Gran? Everyone's talking about revolution. Karin Midular's losing support, while blind Maleatu Shakor is gaining it, and there's no love lost between those two. It's Shakor that my friends look up to, the one who isn't always giving way with the Amarrians. I admire Midular, I really do, but we're not a people that are easily led, and I think - my friends at RU think - that he's our only real hope out of this mess."

Gran had been sitting quietly, catching her breath- which Beliah found a little overdone, seeing as how the old woman had just scaled three stories without apparent effort, but didn't comment on - Gran said, "We'll leave be for now those wise young students of yours. You know, dear, it's because of your mother that we're even on this station. She spent all her savings to get here."

"And we're practically in the Rust quarters," Beliah said, feeling petty for saying it.

"Then it's your job to work your way out of it, and not waste all that time babbling about revolutions."

Beliah got up, brushed off her legs and started walking around, though she didn't stray too far from the blanket. "Look, I can't stand it any longer. You know about the Amarrian?"

"I do, dear."

"She's dating an Amarrian!"

"Yes, she is."

"Look, all I'm saying, it's just not right. Not with the battle that's going on."

"Battles of all sorts always have two sides, Beliah."

Beliah stopped, and looked at Gran. "Yeah, they do. Right and wrong," she said.

Gran got a stern look. "I'm not your real grandma, of course, so I don't have any say in over what you do or don't do."

Beliah relented a bit at this, protesting, "No, I'm sorry. Look, you're as close to one as I ever knew."

"No, no," Gran said, "Your real grandma lived down on the planet below. And she lived through the rebellions there. She could've told you stories."



"I don't doubt it," Beliah said, relieved to change the subject, even if it had to be through a bit of passive aggressiveness. "I know she had some rough times. And I still think a shame that none of the rebellions succeeded."

Gran's look changed from caution to something Beliah couldn't quite define. The old woman said, "I don't know about that, dear."

Beliah stared at her. "You'd rather we remained under the heel forever?"

Gran slowly got to her feet. Beliah moved to help her, but the old woman waved her away. She brushed off her skirt, walked over to the edge of the roof and leaned on the parapet, looking over. After a moment, Beliah came and joined her. They stared at the sparse traffic for a while: people below, going about their lives, either in motion or standstill. Eventually, and keeping her eyes on the distance, Gran said in a quiet voice, "You really think the Amarrians are that bad? That you'd not even let your own mother find happiness in whatever way she can?"

"Don't put it like that," Beliah said.

"Then how do you want to put it?" Gran asked.

"I just wish the rebellion had succeeded," Beliah said. "Do it once, get it over with, and never think about revolution again."

Gran sighed. Beliah made to speak, but Gran interrupted. "No, don't say it. Whatever it is. Let me tell you something." She turned to face Beliah. "The kind of people who start a revolution aren't always the kind of people who can finish it."

"They tried," Beliah insisted. "They did the right thing."

"Did they now?" Gran said. "Is that what you're taught in that place? What were those right things?"

"Well, they amassed an army. Liberated supplies of Vitoc. Fought their way through various areas and held control points for a while."

"Then what?" Gran asked.

Beliah frowned. "Then they were betrayed, like people always are by the ones closest to them," she said with a hint of bitterness, "And it all fell apart."

Gran said, "Let me ask you something, little bird. Is this all you've learned in those palaces of wisdom you've gone to for most of your life? And don't tell me it's because the media is Amarr-controlled, because you're not too old for me to spank you."

The young woman smiled. "They don't teach much about it," she said. "Not in detail. We're given a timeline of all the uprisings that took place, and told a few generalities about the final rebellion, and that's it. It's hard to find data, but I've never wondered much about that. It's history, and I need to know it, but I need to know a lot of things in the present."

Gran sighed. "This is true. Sometimes, mind, I wish they'd teach you the rest, even if it's not for children."

"What do you mean?" Beliah asked, and added, "I'm not a child anymore, you know."

"You've never heard about the daughters of the revolution, have you?" Gran asked, watching her sharply.

Beliah shook her head.

"You're sure? Not from anyone?" Gran said.

"I would remember."

"Yes," Gran said, reaching out and stroking a wisp of dark hair back behind Beliah's ear. "I believe you would, little bird." She sighed again, and turned back towards the traffic below. Someone was arguing with someone else, their hands moving about a lot. The words didn't reach up to the roof, but the noise did.

"The reason the army failed wasn't because of a traitor," Gran said. "As I said, these things have a way of falling apart, particularly if they're being held together by the same people who started them. And if you've never wondered why this revolution, which was incredibly successful for some dirty meaning of success, has been glossed over, then it's for the best. It's something everyone would rather forget."

"Were you there?" Beliah asked. "It happened in your lifetime. I've never asked you this, for some reason."

"I wouldn't have answered, likely than not," Gran said. "If you weren't getting so muddleheaded about your mother doing what she wants with her life then you would never be told this. So listen, and remember, and keep it to yourself." She closed her eyes for a while, then opened them again and looked skywards, towards the reflected lights of the ad screens. "Slave army, yes. Managed to get a hold of Vitoc. They knew it wouldn't last; even if they got control, the Vitoc would eventually run out. So they were riding high on their luck, but they were never going to rule the planet. They were good with their words, and good at getting people excited, and they only wanted to lash out, like some young people do without heeding the consequences when they don't know anything else." Gran gave Beliah another look, but the young woman kept quiet.

"And they did so in terrible, terrible fashion," Gran continued. "They went through the land, destroying everything they saw. Anyone who tried to stop them was automatically a sympathizer

with the Amarrians, and was dealt with as such. If it was men or boys, they'd be shot on the spot. If it was women, or even girls, well, there's some things we don't talk about.

"And at some point, one of the rebel leaders got the bright idea that they needed to change tactics. They called it polluting the enemy, I hear, but what I call it is stupid men with guns deciding they don't need to play by any rules anymore, and giving their souls to the devil. So instead of leaving the sympathizers on the side of the road to die, they started to round them up, and they built camps. Men were made to work, and women were made to do a different kind of work."

Gran took a deep breath. "Eventually something happened, as it always does, and the rebels were trapped, caught and shot. It was a better ending than they deserved, the poor fools, and their bodies were quietly buried in unmarked graves. But they'd left their marks. There were a lot of babies born later on, and most of those babies were shifted away to foster care of some sort, to them's as would have them. Your mom was lucky, because she was taken in by a family and not an institution, and by the time she was old enough to work, slaver had fallen out of favor in that part of the world. But she suffered for it. Oh lord, she did. A daughter of the revolution," Gran said, spitting out that last word.

"So here's your lesson, little student" she said to Beliah, who had tears in her eyes. "I didn't come along until later, to sit for the family. They were good Matari who did their best, and money was never scarce, but your mother's scars run deep, and in the end she had to get away from them before she could turn them into the monsters she sometimes sees in our people. So she ran." Gran stroked back her own hair, which the strengthening breeze was playing with. "I'm not sure she's ever stopped running. I kept working for the family, but much later, after I'd long since left, your mom tracked me down and invited me up here. I expect it's to make up for leaving her adopted parents, who'd already died in some calamity or other. She's a hard worker, your mother, but no master at personal relations."

Beliah nodded silently, and Gran went on. "Your father, for example. Not a bad man, but he did lose his temper a few times, and that's all she needed. She will not abide that, and in truth, I'm not sure she ever would be with one of our own people unless he was unstable enough for her to eventually leave him. She's got a hard core, looking for something to aim at. Like some people I know," Gran said, with a little smile.

Beliah nodded her head, giving a trembling little smile.

They looked at the traffic for a while. The argument below had stopped, and each person gone quietly to wherever they were headed.

Eventually Beliah went back to her blanket, folded it, and started walking towards the fire escape.

Gran said, "If you think there's right and wrong, little bird, it's before you now. Are you going to your mother's, or to the university?"

Beliah stopped, but didn't turn around. "Neither. I'm going to get something to eat." She stood stock still, looking at the massive screens in the distance, and added, "And then I might buy some flowers." She turned and gave Gran another brittle smile, then walked away.

## Hometown Heroes

"Have a seat, and explain to me why you're still aboard this ship," the Captain said.

Lieutenant Pars Kheelan walked into the Captain's office and took a seat. The office was large, with several chairs sequestered near the walls. In front of Pars was the Captain's large desk, covered with datareaders, and beyond it his personal chair, its seat far more worn than its arms. To one side there was a global recon table that, when activated, would project a 3D hologram. The window behind the desk and the Captain's chair was capable of displaying any manner of vids, both army and private, but now showed nothing but the blackness of space. To another side was an unobtrusive door connected to the Captain's own living quarters. The Captain himself was standing behind his desk, with an immobile expression, and his arms clasped behind his back.

"I wonder that myself sometimes, sir," Pars said. When he saw the Captain's expression, he rubbed his eyes and added, "Sorry, sir. It's been a long day." He reached into a pocket and pulled out a small datakey, leaned forward and put it on the Captain's desk. "These are the people named in the riot. We're treating everyone as a suspect, but there are only a handful who got so involved that they had to be thrown into the brig. The rest were returned to their duties."

"Any more trouble?"

"No, sir. People are keeping quiet and waiting to see what we do."

"Well then, Lieutenant Kheelan," the Captain said and leaned forward, resting his outstretched arms on the desk for support, his knuckles on its surface, "Seeing as how this happened in cafeteria E-1, which was occupied by your Delta unit, staffed with Delta men, and damaged with Delta weapons, what is the leader responsible for Delta going to do about it? And why were there weapons out in the cafeteria at all?"

"To be fair, sir, the weapons damage was one discharge of an emergency weapon located on-site, fired by a man who'd never handled a gun but nevertheless got the clever idea to break it open and fire a warning shot. He wanted to calm the crowd, I'm told, but managed to fire the gun directly through three adjoining walls. The bullet stopped at the inner shield."

"What is this man's present status?"

"Sick bay. He barely missed the head of Ensign Mjern in the head, and Mjern proceeded to knock him out flat on the spot."

When the Captain didn't comment, the Lieutenant continued, "Sir, it's been a hotbed recently. When it's like that, it only takes one person to light the fuse. I'm not one to single out my men for blame, but I've spoken to several people and in this case it's obvious who's the main party responsible for this."

The Captain stared at him for a while. Then he sighed, lifted his arms from the table and sat down heavily into his chair. His knuckles had gone white from the pressure.

"It's that bloody nitwit Crayan again, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you spoken to him?"

"I have, sir. One of the other Deltas made the usual lunchtime comment about sexual relations with someone else's blood relative, and Crayan took it personally, electing to stab the offending party with his fork and beat him severely over the head with his tray. In his words, his hometown hero never took no shit from no Matar and neither will he. He apparently feels this should count to his benefit."

The Captain grimaced. "I've been reading up on your man, as it happens. Found out some interesting things. This isn't the first time he causes trouble, Lieutenant."

"No sir, it isn't."

"He's a race-barker. Beat up some Minmatar Ensign, and when the man dared file complaints, Crayan drugged and stripped him, took a handheld laser to his tattoos, and defaced them in such humiliating ways that the Ensign dropped charges, lest he be seen and photographed like that. Crayan got a month in the brig for that. Didn't teach him much."

"No, sir. Nor did his other stay in the brig after he torched another Ensign's pet fedo and left it on the Ensign's food tray. He spent much of his solitary time singing songs he learned back home, and talking loudly about this hometown hero of his. Apparently they're distant relations."

"So what do you recommend?" the Captain said.

"Summary dismissal, sir."

The Captain leaned back in his chair and knitted his hands behind his head. "As I recall from the last incident involving your man, Crayan is on a five-year contract, low interest, three years locked in service. Do you propose to break this contract? Because if you do, I know quite a few Lieutenants, Lieutenant-Captains and Captains who will be after your blood."

"But still--"

"These contracts were created for a reason, Lieutenant. How do you think we keep people in the Navy these days?"

"God only knows, sir," Pars said, and winced in regret the second the words were out.

There was silence in the room. Eventually Pars added, "How bad are things, sir? Truthfully?"

The Captain said nothing.

"Sir, we've served together for a while. We're in this to stay. I'm seeing more riots and less signups, and the people we do get aren't anywhere near the old standard. Something has gone very wrong. What happened?"

The Captain turned in his chair, rotating it so that he could look sideways and see out the window. Their vessel was stationary, but anyone looking out into empty space for too long would likely start to feel that the blinking stars were slowly moving by. "It's a nice view," the Captain said. "I've always liked it. Usually it makes people sick after a while, which is good when I'm tired of strategic planning and want them out of my office."

He turned back to Pars. "You seem to be doing fine," he said with a wry smile.

The Lieutenant returned the smile and said, "If it did that to me, sir, I shouldn't even be here."

The Captain nodded. He frowned, then seemed to make up his mind about something; got up, and walked slowly over to the recon table. He activated it and a flat green panel lit up in the air in front of him. Its surface was covered with various tactical display options. The Captain selected one, and the display changed to a space map, highlighting various nearby constellations. "Since our area is one of the Navy's fleet accumulation points, it's a decent representation of all other such locations," he said. "These dots here are the outlying points, frontlines in case of skirmish."

Several points on the display lit up, and the rest darkened. The Lieutenant stood up and walked over to take a look.

"Do you know who's manning these?" the Captain said. "The points of utmost importance in case we get called on for anything more than capsuleer patrol? The Matari." A disc expanded around each point, its area pie-sectioned like a flower blooming with petals purple and green. Each circle was composed of far more purple sections than green. "Distribution of troops according to race. Matari outnumber us and everyone else."

"Those guys have always sought out the army," Pars said.

"And now we're putting them in the line of fire. Doesn't it strike you as odd that the people supposed to die for this empire are the ones who probably came here to find a better life?"

"It's the way of the Navy, sir," Pars said and shrugged.

"It was, Lieutenant," the Captain said. "Except now our own people beg off serving there, in the apparent belief that the Navy should offer them a nice, safe working environment, preferably with a corner office. Look at this." The entire map was lit up and each Captain point sprouted a disc, this time sectioned into greys and greens. There were vastly more grey sections everywhere.

"Don't tell me those are non-Gallente, sir," Pars said.

"Those are non-humans, Lieutenant, though likely a step over some in Delta squad. They're drones. Those are our defense capabilities, measured in drone and human output. I hardly need tell you that we're allocating record funds to drone tech manufacturers, money that is not being equalled in our recruiting departments." The Captain sighed. "Long and the short of it, Lieutenant, we're not getting the people we need, nor the type of people we need. Everyone has it too good planetside. They'd much rather do a terraforming project or two and settle down in a bungalow somewhere than risk their necks in a fleet that's going nowhere fast. All we're getting these days is the hotheads and the idiots, and we're having trouble even holding on to them. Even the Minmatars - who're fine workers and decent people, don't get me wrong - even they don't join up anymore. Some of the tougher ones still show up in the army, and I expect we'll always have a steady trickle of Brutors happy to fight anyone we put in their way, but by and large they treat this as a land of opportunity, with a stable government, and they work hard and make their own way, leaving us stuck with what remains. I just hope we can stay out of trouble, Lieutenant."

Pars blinked a couple of times, then stammered in surprise, "We're the *Navy*, sir."

"Exactly," the Captain said, and sat back down at his desk. He knitted his hands behind his head, put his feet up on the desk, leaned back and stared at the ceiling. Pars sat back in his own chair, waiting patiently.

Eventually the Captain seemed to reach a decision. "I'm not going to put you through hoops, Lieutenant," he said, "because frankly, there's no point. You're no more responsible for this mess than I am. Delta is what we have to work with, they and everyone like them, and regular punishment won't cut it. If all we do is push people, we'll eventually push them out. We need to get back to our roots as a proper fighting force, which includes the break-and-rebuild tactics. And Crayan is a perfect example of that. If we can remould him, the rest are going to follow. We only need to find the right entry point, something that'll unsettle him enough that he'll be easy to shake to pieces after that."

"What do you suggest, sir?"

"The problem with Crayan is that he's got an ego complex. Breaking and rebuilding him won't get rid of that; it'll only push those things so deep we'll never reach them. And this hometown hero thing of his is another anchor. He clearly believes that he's going to achieve the same fame, and it keeps him going. So we'll take that away from him." The Captain smiled again, but without warmth. "Ops contacted me recently, as a matter of fact. They're starting in on one of their outreach programs for young recruits, where they pick someone and make him our spokesperson in ads shown all around the empire. Crayan wants to be famous; we'll make him famous."

Pars raised an eyebrow. "There's a catch to this, sir, and I'm waiting to hear it."



"Of course there is," the Captain said and gave him a big, bright smile. "Ops have given up on the usual macho stuff and are going for those weird ads again, the surreal ones some marketer cooked up to grab the eyes of our shellshocked, vidwatching youth. So this isn't some guy going," the Captain's voice shifted down an octave, "*It's great to be in the navy. Be a man in the navy.*" It's something else entirely. It was suggested a while back and was quickly shelved due to being too stupid, but Ops is feeling the pressure same as me, and they're digging up any old idea and dusting it off. Personally I don't think it'll help a bit, but it wouldn't do my career or yours any harm to show a little spirit for once."

"What'll Crayan have to do?"

The Captain's smile widened even further. He spoke slowly, as if enjoying the passage of words. "He'll have to dress up as a Fedo and talk nonsensically about synthetics for ten seconds, after which we'll flash our logo and something about a different life. He'll be in full costume, but even so, his voice will be unaltered, recorded separately. I imagine that eventually someone in his hometown will recognize it."

"That's ... insane."

"That's what we need to show our civilians, apparently. Shock them a bit, so they'll pay attention to the final image."

"He'll never go for that," the Lieutenant said. "He'll be shot into space rather than do this."

"Funny you should say that," the Captain replied. He stood up and walked to the door, and the Lieutenant followed. "As I said, it's all about breaking points. You find one, and you push it hard, knowing that something will give way. Once he's done with this ad, he'll crawl over broken glass to do anything else instead, and that's when we'll start him in on proper retraining. To make him do the ad itself, all you need is to create enough uncertainty that you can manipulate him into it. Cut him off from his anchor, his idol."

"His hometown hero," the Lieutenant said.

"Precisely," the Captain replied, ushering Pars out the door. "I looked through Crayan's records, same as you, and same as others, I'll venture. But I looked one further. And this guy he so worships, the one who drew him into service, the one in whom Crayan's belief has seen him through the roughest of times?"

"Yes?"

Before the door closed, the Captain said, "He never made it to deployment. Old tale spread to his people back home to preserve the poor boy's integrity. He barely crawled through basic training, got drunk as a dog on the way to base, landed himself in all sorts of trouble and ended up jettisoning himself into space by accident. Might want to mention that to Crayan, right before you give him the one big chance for his own grab at fame."

The door closed on an astonished Pars.

## The Lottery

The sound echoed through the halls, a sonorous trumpet calling the children to Home. The lottery had begun again.

Two boys, Arbjan and Bryd, had been moving around some furniture for another arrival on the colony, while another nearby boy called Sispur had been dragging around a chair. They all stopped short at the noise. Arbjan and Bryd looked at one another, then in unison put down the table they'd been shifting around and started moving towards the doors. Sispur was a little slower on the uptake and took a couple of steps before realizing he was still holding on to the chair. They moved into the vast corridors and saw kids from other rooms doing the same, everyone moving in the same direction. Arbjan and Bryd first walked, then jogged, and finally broke into a sprint, with Sispur trailing behind and trying to keep up.

They entered the main square, which was already thronged with kids, most of Minmatar origin. The square was vast, connecting all other sections of the space colony like a hub. Its ceiling was domed and reddish-gold, and the light from outside often shone down to create glowing spears that slowly pointed their pendulum tips in accordance with the sun. By rights it should long since have been turned into an impromptu playground, but there was something off-putting about playing in an area so clearly meant for work and quick passage. As a result, the square was rarely used for anything except the lottery.

Sispur caught up with Arbjan and Bryd as they stood side by side in the middle of the crowd, looking expectantly at the video screens hanging overhead. The two boys had been friends for a while, which counted for a lot here. Sispur was the younger brother of sorts, having wormed his way into their little group. Younger kids who had no friends and couldn't take care of themselves did not have a good time in this place.

They only knew the space colony as ABF, which some smartasses had rendered forevermore as A'Beef, but it was the square that got called Home. For most of the children in this place - and aside from the guards there were *only* children in this place - it represented their one chance at getting out with any prospect of a life. The ones who won the lottery were chosen into service for one of the Amarr Heirs, where they were put to use in all manner of administrative duties from sweeping the floors to overseeing transport businesses. Some of the roles the winners were given wouldn't be very exciting, but it certainly beat the alternative.

Once a child of A'Beef hit a certain combination of physical maturity, mental maturity and biological age, they'd be shipped off to the colonies for a lifetime of slave labor if they hadn't won the lottery. Nobody knew where the cutoff point was. Some of the younger children found their friends shipped off years before they'd expected, others stayed on the facility longer than anyone would have thought possible, and one or two were even promoted to guards, but Sispur expected that once you found yourself really worrying about it, you'd probably made it to the danger area.

A familiar face lit up on the video screens. It was Uncle, a light-skinned, bearded old Minmatar who often introduced the vid shows they watched in the evenings. As usual he was dressed in a

fairly traditional manner, the way Bryd imagined that older people generally did, and looked quite comfortable in his clothes. A tiny patch of bare skin between his beard and the collar of his suit showed the spike an old tattoo, one which station rumor held was the remnant of a Voluval test of his youth.

Uncle's baritone voice rang out from the speakers, announcing the latest draw. The children never knew how often the lotteries would be held or how many would be drawn, but it had been at least a couple of months since the last one. "Five have been chosen, one to serve each heir. Here are their names. First, drawn into service for the house of Kador, is Arbjan Haede..."

Arbjan, Bryd and Sispur erupted in cheers, hugging each other and jumping around with glee. Still listening intently, the other kids hissed and shushed them, their eyes focused on the screens with the unfiltered hope and despair that only a child can muster.

As the roll call went on, Sispur noticed some kids looking crestfallen. They were getting older and likely wouldn't have many draws left before being sent to the colonies. He hoped they'd get out of that, somehow, and that he would be picked before ever reaching that stage of fading, desperate time. He imagined it wasn't very pleasant.

Uncle said, "And finally, chosen by the house of Tash-Murkon, is Bryd Krooear. Those are the five lucky ones. There will be one more announcement in the coming days..."

His speech went on, but the trio of friends didn't hear it. They were staring at one another in amazement. Sispur felt his heart lift and his stomach tie itself into knots. He was so happy for his friends he couldn't even describe it. He was about to suggest they go somewhere and do something - leave the furniture and spend the rest of the day playing games - when some older kids approached them.

The older kids split into two groups, and they were all smiling. They congratulated both Arbjan and Bryd on their immense good luck, and each group focused on one of the boys, asking them how they felt, telling them how great it would be, and gently guiding them away from the crowd and from Sispur. He went to follow Bryd's group, but the kids in it gave him looks that said they would not be happy to find him tagging along. The last Sispur saw of his two friends was them being escorted away in different directions, surrounded by smiling faces and wiry bodies.

\*\*\*

The chosen ones had a few days to prepare. Sispur, meanwhile, went about his usual tasks. He saw less and less of his friends, and when their paths did cross all he saw was two boys looking increasingly haggard and unhappy. They didn't want to talk about it much, though he wasn't sure whether they wanted to protect him from something or if they just didn't want him to remind them of the life they were about to leave behind. They had also begun neglecting their duties, a common enough occurrence among lottery winners. Since nobody paid any mind to them or anyone associated with them, Sispur was free to spend all his time wandering about the place alone.

The facility had many sections. There were the living quarters, where the children spent progressively more time as they got older; playroom locations that had both toys and larger recreational equipment; and a few areas reserved for schooling, although not everyone was required to attend. There were lots of large, empty rooms, often beset with climbable metal supports and with nooks and crannies that offered crawling and hideout opportunities. There were also some administrative areas, but the kids had little interest in those. One was the Baby section, where new arrivals were kept while they were acclimatizing to the facility. None of the children knew what criteria had been used to select the facility's inhabitants, nor did they remember anything of their past lives, although a few recalled the Baby section being peaceful and bright. Right next to it, nameless and uninteresting, was a section where some of the young girls were taken after being doomed to the colonies. It was whispered that marriage ceremonies took place there, the girls married off to Minmatar men and taken to new lives where they could serve Amarrian masters for five years without Vitoc before being set free. Every now and then a cargo ship would dock, stay for a day or two and then depart, which spawned rumors that the men from those ships had been boarding the facility to get married. Sometimes larger ships also came, although they only stayed a few hours.

Sispor wondered what his life would be like on the A'Beef from now on, and whether he'd ever be chosen. The lottery was fickle, and most children would be sent to the slave colonies. Tests of all sorts were periodically conducted for the children, and there were countless myths about how to perform in those to improve one's chances of being drawn, but nobody had yet discerned a pattern. In some of his darker moments Sispor had even thought that it really was a lottery, and that the tests were merely fakes. He didn't like to dwell on that too much..

And then it was the day before Arbjan and Bryd were slated to leave. Sispor had neither seen them for a long time nor been given any indication that they wanted to see him. He'd been out all day, staying away from people and ignoring everything he saw and heard.

As he wandered through Storage Section 4A - a place he once used to visit with his old friends - he heard a sound and followed it.

In a cubbyhole they often used for hide-and-seek, he found a badly beaten Bryd, bloodied and covered in scratches and bruises. Bryd screamed when he saw Sispor's face and scurried further back into the hole, but relaxed slightly when Sispor said, "Hey, it's me. It's just me. What happened to you?!"

Bryd blinked a couple of times as if realizing who he was looking at, then said, "Get out of there, quick."

"Look, it's okay. I'm alone. There's nobody coming." He leaned in close and caught a good look at Bryd's swollen face. "What did they *do* to you?"

Bryd sniffed a couple of times, wiped the snot and tears from his face with one sleeve, then used the other to wipe out the inside corners of his eyes. He blinked a few times, took a deep breath and looked back to Sispor. "They told us we were enemies now," he said. "They said we had to

fight, that we were the generals in these armies. We'd been chosen, and we couldn't let our side down."

Sispor sat closer to him. Bryd didn't seem to mind or notice; he looked out into the distance. "All I've been hearing for the last few days is how great I am and how much Arbjan deserves to die; how the house of Kador is crumbling and worthless and only the house of Tash-Murkon can save what remains of the Empire. But they need good people, and for the others to get out of the way. So tonight we were going to find Arbjan and his army."

"To do what?" Sispor said quietly.

"To destroy them," Bryd whispered.

They sat there for a while, listening to the sounds of their own minds in motion. Finally Sispor said, "What happened then?"

"We'd heard where they were and were about to head over there, but I couldn't do it. I chickened out. I waited until everyone else was busy with their own thing, and then I took off quietly. I went through some of the back areas, but someone must've seen me and snitched, because Arbjan's group caught up, and they started to beat me."

"Was Arbjan there?"

"I don't know. I didn't see him. My own people came and attacked the ones who were beating me. There was this huge all-out fight, and in the middle of it I managed to escape. Some of Arbjan's people ran after me, but I shook them off and came here." Bryd gave him a miserable look. "I don't want any of this," he said, tears rising again in his eyes. "I want things to go back to the way they were."

Sispor nodded. Hearing Bryd refer to the thugs as his and Arbjan's "people" made him cringe. He tried to think of something to say, but couldn't. Eventually he settled for, "I'm sorry."

Bryd nodded, though Sispor felt he was acknowledging something else. "Now get out of here," he said.

"I'm not leaving you," Sispor replied.

Bryd gave him a look of something that had equal measure of love and hatred. "If you don't go, I'm dead for sure."

"I am *not* going to tell on you, Bryd."

His friend leaned back, pinched his eyes shut and bobbed his head up and down, as if trying to contain himself. Sispor didn't know whether he was trying not to laugh or cry, and looked away, towards the empty hall.

At last Bryd spoke again, but the words were unintelligible. He cleared his throat harshly and said, "You really don't know? About you."

"Know what? What are you talking about?"

This time Bryd laughed, and for an instant Sispur saw his old friend shine through, the one who'd make fun of him but it was *okay*, because it was just Bryd. "You were chosen," the beaten boy said.

Sispur's breath caught in his throat. "What for?"

"It's all over the A'Beef. Uncle announced it in Home today. There are guards looking for you, and you're supposed to be leaving. I don't know if Arbjan's guys will let that happen if they find you here with me, though."

"What are you saying, Bryd?"

"You've been chosen to serve the Chamberlain himself. Nobody can hurt you. You're untouchable now," Bryd said, and started to cry. "You won. You won. You won."

Sispur got up in a daze. He left the hidey-hole, leaving Bryd behind, and slowly walked out of the hall, going through the A'Beef for the last time. Any children who saw him kept their distance. Eventually the guards came, and took him away.

## Murder and Creation

Antel falls down in the mud again. It's been raining for days in the forge, and the long slog from his quarters to the iron works is tiring his feet and chilling him to the bone. He hauls himself up to his knees and rests for a while before standing up. He's so tired these days, but his sense of purpose is unflagging and it's not long before he's on his way to work again.

This life fills a void in him, as it does with so many of the other Caldari here. They are working for the State and serving their purpose in bringing it to greatness. It is his job to do his part. Most people have the same attitude, though some find it harder going than others.

He has never given much thought to how this void was created, or how it might otherwise be filled. It's there, and the harder he focuses on serving the State, the less he feels its presence. This is where he is, and this is where he'll always be. He can only change reality in some small measure, through diligent work, but he can change his perception of the entire world, and he chooses to serve.

He only wishes he wasn't always so tired.

The rain drives down. Antel overhears some people muttering about cold air and bad heating and the broken-down railway line that should've been fixed like so much else in this place, but he tunes it out.

A loudspeaker sounds as he approaches the factory grounds, blaring out his group code. He approaches a guard and asks what he should do, and the guard tells him that there was a mine crash in the night. They need people to clear out the rubble and anything else left inside. Antel has a lot of experience with this particular mine. He worked it for years, him and his friends.

With a sick feeling in his stomach, he heads over to the mine and meets up with those still living. They're given excavation tools and measuring equipment, and told to run checks on the infrastructure.

They proceed into the mine, which has been shored up. They find it in better shape than expected. Explorers are working in pairs, and Antel works alongside Foraani, a dependable man he's known for years. They know each other and the mine so well that they can move in silence, placing markers and inspecting fixtures with ease.

The mine is in decent shape, but the body they find is not. It has been crushed so thoroughly by a falling girder that there is little recognizable left of it except the head, which lies a little to the side. It seems almost untouched above the neck, something that strikes Antel as grotesque for a reason he cannot explain.

They peer closer and find that they recognize the face; it is an old friend from their shared time in the mining days, a man who never quite managed to get promoted out into the open air. Antel goes utterly cold. Foraani turns very white but says nothing, either, though he starts nodding to himself. He keeps doing it, even as they clear out the room and keep inspecting the mine, and



when they emerge at last, he is still nodding almost imperceptively, and wringing his hands. They go their separate ways without speaking.

Antel is told to take the rest of the day off. He obeys, and takes the long walk back to his living quarters, where he returns to his bunker, files a work report, then removes his work clothes and puts them in the cleaning bag. He takes a shower to get rid of the smell, puts on fresh work clothes and goes out behind the bunker, staring hard at the grey, muddy ground and breathing deep. He closes his eyes, is seized by vertigo, and opens them again, still staring at the ground. It's like clay, and the pink flesh of his hands stands out in contrast. He feels outside of himself and, for the first time, feels like he belongs to something he is no longer a part of, like his friend's head, untouched but without a body, staring in blankness at the grey ceiling above.

\*\*\*

Night. It takes him a long time to fall asleep. He feels that he should be mourning his friend, but for some reason he cannot. It takes him a considerable amount of time to come to the conclusion that he no longer views himself or anyone around him as an individual, but merely as a bolt in a ship, a cell in a body, a wheat stalk in a field.

It has been a long time since he last saw a field.

When there is acceptance of one's fate, and of one's place in the body politic, one finds peace. One does not mourn the loss of another cell, because it means the body is renewing itself, cleansing itself.

At last he sleeps, finding solace in dreams about the past.

\*\*\*

At work there is little talk, though in sequestered corners people are discussing yesterday's tragedy and others like it. Antel hears one say this is the last thing they're going to take, and hears another tell him that he needs to wait a little, that they've got plans. When he tries to listen in, they move away. The ironworks belch black plumes of smoke into the sky, turning it a little more grey. It has stopped raining.

He feels completely isolated. He is a Caldari first and everything else second, but he cannot stop seeing his friend's face. He hasn't eaten a proper meal in so long that he's no longer sure such a thing even exists. Nobody buys Gallente luxuries anymore, and they're not available on the market anyway, not for people like him. There is nothing to do but walk through the day like a cell flowing through the body, doing what needs to be done, and fulfilling its purpose.

At one point Foraani comes up to him, still as grey as the metal sky. He explains to Antel that something is going to happen and asks if he wants to join. He adds that the others don't trust Antel, but he's known him for years and years and knows he will not let down the cause, and that after everything that's been done to them in all that time, he cannot imagine Antel can go on anymore like this.

Antel asks if their lost friend caused this, and Foraani says that he did; the company should have taken more security measures, and their entire attitude in this has opened his eyes to how thoroughly everyone is being abused. Antel asks Foraani whether he does not want to serve the State any longer, and Foraani says all he knows is how to serve, but a worthy cause needs worthy masters. He asks Antel whether he will join them, and Antel says that he needs time to think about it. Foraani looks at him for a long while, then nods once, says that he has less time to think than he realizes, and leaves.

\*\*\*

The next night he lies awake again, feeling the panic rise in him like the tide, ebbing and swelling. There is going to be a revolution. There is going to be a break. He is a cell turning cancerous. There will be a revolution. He is a cell. He doesn't understand how a cell can consciously rebel against the body.

At last he gets up, calmly walks out and behind his bunker, barely catching a glimpse of the grey ground before his pink face opens its mouth and the pink contents of his stomach erupt from his pink body and splatter on the ground. He dry heaves a few times more, then spits off the strands of saliva and walks unsteadily back into his bunker, to sleep. He dreams about the future, and continually wakes up in cold sweats. He knows that something has gone wrong with him, but doesn't know what, or whether it was wrong all along.

\*\*\*

The last time he wakes is an hour before reveille. He lies in his bunk, his thoughts flowing past as intangible and unstoppable as a rushing river. There is a void in him now and the thoughts pour into it, circling it like a funnel and hammering at all sides, hollowing it out even further. He had tried to fill it with his love for the Caldari and his servitude for the State, but now it seems bottomless, unyielding and hungry for something else. He is here - he will always be here - but he no longer knows with certainty if his place truly is here, though he has no idea where else it should be. Even if he transfers his allegiances to another cause, thereby betraying everything else he stood for, he doesn't know whether it will fill him up any better than before. He wonders whether a cell can switch bodies mid-stream without self-destructing in the process.

It occurs to him that most of the effort is on his side, has always been on his side, and that sometimes you can put in so much effort that you effectively become what you're trying to uphold, giving yourself to it as if the cell had become the body.

His stomach hurts. He rises and walks to the window. It's not grey outside, but orange; the sun is rising and the industrial works are bronze-colored with its light.

Anyone who tells on a coworker will be rewarded. Rebellions are crushed mercilessly. Those who attempt them are not true Caldari, Antel has taught himself, but traitors who want to ruin everything the State has built.

Antel cannot help but wonder how it would feel to be the body and not merely a cell; to be the field growing slowly in the orange sun.

He goes to work. At some point during the day, he meets up with Foraani and tells him he'll take part in the rebellion. He swears a simple oath, for everything is simple in this place.

\*\*\*

Night again, and he sleeps soundly. He dreams about the present, about the sun on the fields below; about floating away happy as a cell carried by the torrents in a body of his own making. When he awakes, he feels light, for the first time in years, as if the wind could blow him away.

\*\*\*

He wakes up a betrayer, and heads out to work. On his way to the forge he deviates from course and eventually finds himself outside a guard's cabin. He stands in front of it, his eyes closed, head tilted up towards the sky. He realizes that anything beyond himself is no longer part of him; it is the body's to think about, and not the cell's purpose to question. So he can go into the cabin, or he can move on, a betrayer either way.

And in that moment it *hits* him with a force so hard that he is brought to his knees: he has a choice in this, he is in a current of his own making, and whatever he does truly will affect only him, in his own cell, in this body that by extension is his, too. Nothing matters beyond that context. He is going to betray something, and in doing so he is going to rise beyond the cell, acknowledge his own endless efforts, and at last become the body proper.

He walks into the cabin and tells the guard all about the secret plan. The guard listens intently all the while, saying nothing. When Antel stops speaking, the guard tells him that there are more people who knew about this plan than Antel realizes. Then the guard pulls out a gun and points it at Antel.

He is in the field. He is here at last.

The guard says something, but Antel is too busy smiling to hear him. He has become the body.

The sun shines bright.

He is free.

## **A Boy and his Slaver**

The corn was tall and the boy was not, which doubled his sense of exploration. His father had always forbidden him to wander through the fields, even if Jecal followed, and he was only here now because of the panic back home.

The boy's father was one of the most powerful slave-owners on the planet. Knowing of the boy's wanderlust and realizing that the exhortations not to explore the fields were little more than inducements, he had trained a slaver hound to follow the boy and protect him. Under most circumstances the slaves treated the boy politely, even when Jecal was nowhere to be seen, but in these troubled times it paid to make certain.

A little earlier in the day, the boy had secretly listened in on a meeting between his father and some of the field heads. It had been conducted in hushed tones, and the boy had heard mention only of an "unfortunate accident" and "strange movements on the horizon" that apparently demanded they redistributing the workers and doubling the guard at the palace. There had been disarray, and for once no one had been paying the boy any attention, which was all the opportunity he needed to slip out of the house unseen and head into the fields. Jecal had followed him but the boy sent him off several times, telling the slaver hound that he needed to be seen about the palace so they'd think the boy was there too. Three times Jecal had returned, only to be sent away. After the last time, he did not return, and the boy wandered on through a large field of corn while feeling the crisp giddiness of being slightly lost in forbidden places.

A sound caught his attention, so he changed direction and headed towards it. He pushed through a thick layer of corn only to tumble through and land on empty ground. He found himself on a small plain, an open circle in the middle of the field. In that field were three men, sitting hunched over on wooden stools. They were slaves, and the sun glistened on their black skin. Each man either held a large glass bottle containing clear liquid or had a corked one lying in front of him.

At the boy's arrival they all looked up in unison. One of the men hissed slowly and rolled his bottle between his hands. Another one picked up a bottle from the ground, uncorked it with deliberate slowness and took a long drink, not letting his gaze off the boy for a second. The third man, who was bigger than the others, put down his bottle, wove his fingers together and sat absolutely still. He looked at the boy for a while, then looked away and stared at the corn instead. It looked to the boy like he was praying, though the slaves supposedly didn't have any proper religion.

The large man kept looking at the corn, but the other two stared right at the boy. He stared back, having been taught not to be intimidated by slaves and not to say anything to them unless they deserved it. He thought he remembered seeing these people before, but wasn't sure, and he didn't know their names.

The big one suddenly got up and started walking to the boy, slowly and a little unsteadily. One of the two remaining men also got up, but the other grabbed him and pulled him back down.

The one who'd tried to stand up said, "You know what they'll do to us. The Vitoc." The undertones of panic in his breathless tone made the boy even uneasy.

"No," said the man who'd pulled him down. "Because we weren't here. Pick up your flask and go."

"It won't bring anyone back," the first one said.

The other one gave him a hard look and said, "That's not what this is about. We're going now. Don't look back, and don't say any more in front of the boy."

As they got up and left, the large man continued sauntering towards the boy. The boy wanted to flee but remembered his father saying that he shouldn't ever bow down to these people. So he stood firm while looking the man in the eyes.

The man walked up to him, and the boy smelled sweat and grime and something he imagined was alcohol. He kept looking at the man's eyes and was amazed to see that the man seemed to be quietly crying. The sight transfixed the boy, and as the man started to do something with his hands he paid it no attention. The man's face didn't change at all; the tears merely ran down, like little children left in the fields.

At last the boy looked down and saw that the man was slowly unwrapping something. It was an item packed in layers of a thin, shimmering material that the boy thought might be silk. The wrapping was pink, though it had a lot of dark stains, and was the same fabric as a thin, blue cord that had been knotted up and tied around the man's left wrist. As the boy looked on, the man unwrapped the package and took out a knife: a short, solid blade with a handle made of dried leaves wrapped around one end, the type of knife that the slaves often used at harvesting time to husk the corn. The blade was clean and looked very sharp.

On seeing the blade, the boy's breath caught in his throat and he began to feel very cold. Forgetting any rule he was ever taught, he looked up at the man and said in a low voice, "Mister, what are you going to do?"

Staring at the knife he'd unwrapped, the man frowned and leaned his head to one side, as if being asked to consider an unfavourable business proposition. "Hold still," he said. "Hold still and it won't hurt so much."

The boy couldn't move. Everything had become so real that it overwhelmed his senses. The sky was blue and cloudless. The corn smelled of earth and dinners. Things rustled, buzzed, creaked and squawked all around. The man was so impossibly tall he blotted out the sun, and he smelled like hard work. The boy took all this in without thinking about it because anything he could think right now would lead him somewhere he didn't want to be.

"Mister, what are you going to do to me?" the boy said again, not wanting to know but unable to think of anything else to say.

The man pinched his eyes shut and shook his head as if adamantly refusing a request. He had started crying again and wiped off the tears with the back of one hand while clutching the mottled silk. The other hand held the knife, pointed directly at the boy.

Once he'd wiped off the tears and softly cleared his throat, the man leaned over the boy, knife in hand. There was a louder rustle from the corn, followed by a rising growl, and Jecal burst out from the stalks, jumping onto the man and knocking him to the ground. The man swung the knife at the slaver a second too late, and the animal went to work on him with wide open jaws.

The boy stood frozen on the spot and watched what Jecal did.

When it was all over and the sounds of nature had resumed, the boy regarded what lay on the ground. He knelt beside it, picked up the silk cloth that lay on the trampled corn, and stuffed it in his pocket. He felt that something had been taken from him and that he should take something back, as revenge, or compensation, or simply as confirmation of a memory destined to lie deep.

He turned and began walking back home, slowly making his way through the corn with Jecal at his side. He kept touching Jecal as if to ensure himself that both he and the slaver were still there. Once he'd made it halfway to the palace he started to hear the voices of his father's people, who appeared to be anxiously shouting his name. There were noises from the sky and the earth, and gray clouds were amassing overhead. The silk cloth bulged in his pocket.

## **A Life in Three Acts**

The body rests. The thalamus, deep core and center of all things, resonates with itself at a rate so slow it's barely a murmur. All limbs are still and metabolism is kept to a minimum, with nothing floating through the bloodstream but a few hormones placidly drifting towards breakdown. The heart beats, the lungs inflate and deflate, and everything ticks over as it always has. In a dozen places the skin quivers slightly from nearly imperceptible electrical currents passed through it by the attached monitors.

A foreign substance hovers into the lungs, squeezing past the bronchioles alongside the oxygen and insinuating itself through the capillaries into the bloodstream. Moments later the central nervous system is dampened, and while there's possibly a flicker of activity in the thalamus, the state of rest remains unaltered.

The skin is broken for the first time. Several punctures are created right above the crook of each elbow, and in the skin a finger's breath below the heart. Needles slide in with mechanical accuracy, pierce veins, and begin to pump in chemicals. Several smaller punctures are made along the base of the spine, and a line of very narrow, very long needles slide in at a glacial pace, penetrating the subdural region. These needles pump in a single dose of something that immediately dulls the entire autonomic nervous system, leaving the brain unaware of the changes occurring to it and disinclined to start making a fuss.

The body begins to change. Since the chemicals are initially pumped away from the heart, the first parts affected are the limbs and the less complex internal organs; and, of course, the blood. Regular blood cells begin to die off, their walls eaten up by the intrusive substance while new, more robust ones are pumped out of bone marrow by the millions. These new cells, whose oxygen-carrying capability far exceeds that of the old and dying ones, grow to maturity in a matter of instants. The lungs then kick in, their alveoli adapting to letting in more oxygen than this body has ever been able to assimilate. The muscles swiftly respond, followed by various other organs, gorging themselves on this new red breath.

Once the chemical reaches the brain, change begins in earnest. Sinews strengthen and lengthen without overstretching. Bones are eaten away, their porous, paper-like remains left covered in a sticky residue that seeps into the remaining calcified matter, links and reacts, and eventually hardens into matrix-like structures far stronger than the original material. The heart is less altered, its ventricles merely expanding to deal with the onrush of new blood to a stronger body. It suffers some palpitations, but these even out quickly and the needles do not stop pumping in the chemicals.

\*\*\*

The body is being put through extreme rigors. Muscles are tensed and flexed consistently, alternating between upper and lower sections of the skeleton, and reknitting themselves into stronger versions at a pace far beyond any past results. While the heart's rate of growth has remained less than might be expected, lung capacity has increased by leaps and bounds. All other

organs remain in line, having picked up the pace much as a child who'd learned to walk and is now reveling in the joy of an endless run.

With this growth come new natural limits that also get tested with a vigor bordering on self-destruction. There is sleep deprivation, and the thalamus that once served its purpose with hushed consistency now regularly gets yanked in and out of REM without mercy, its waves spiking in dull panic. The skin routinely gets shocked with extremes of hot and cold, but the brain is learning to compensate for these differences, blood vessels constricting and expanding with high rapidity. Despite their increased size the new blood cells are more pliable than the older version and manage to get around beneath the outermost layer even when it has restricted and blocked off all outside interference. This is a powerful and resilient system now: locked down, coiled, and waiting.

There is a moment when the body relaxes, going as deep into theta as it consciously can. Some adrenaline still courses through the bloodstream, and various systems are on semi-prepared standby, but the brain orders all to stand down, fall back, and hold position. There is a wait.

A mild electric current passes through the body, its contact point located at the ankles. It causes the leg muscles to tense, jerk and finally convulse, pulling against each other. Every muscle is slowly worked over: The current brings it to its maximum twitching power, its glycogen stores are exhausted and its lactic acid is pumped back into the bloodstream. The lungs work overtime to the point where the visual cortex starts having issues decoding information and the labyrinth in the inner ear fails to maintain a proper sense of balance. Sensing this, the brain - still keeping the thalamus calm and producing delta waves - orders the diaphragm's contractions to ease up. It does so, reluctantly, and general equilibrium is slowly reestablished. The electric current moves up past the calves and the thighs, then separates, one contact sliding up the ventral nervous system and another one going up the lateral. They alternate their efforts over various muscles on either side, and things start to go wrong.

One back muscle, rarely trained, overstretches. In response the body's torso, which has been trained to much higher levels, cramps up and heaves. The effort combines with the current and begins to tear the back muscle apart, its striated cords snapping like the wires of a bridge in a tornado. The adrenal glands go nuts, pumping out adrenaline and other corticosteroids at the highest rate they can. The thalamus, by now used to being pounded into activity, jerks awareness back into action. All conscious control of the lungs is lost and air is expelled at high rates, the vocal cords vibrating so hard that their mucus lining begins to dry. Blood gets pumped into all extremities at twice the normal rate, which only accelerates the body's thrashings and the destruction of the back muscle. The heart, in fact, has an agonizing time keeping up, but its skipped beats are masked from detection by the flood of adrenaline.

The skin gets broken, a vein is pierced and sedatives begin to flood in. The pain stays constant but the system begins to relax involuntarily; cramping slows and finally ceases, brainwaves even out, and the battered adrenal glands return to normal. For a while there is utter stillness. Then a spot on the back, on the skin over the torn muscle, gets covered with something that begins to intrude. The skin is not broken but permeated, as if water were passing through a wet cloth, and it grows very warm. The muscle also warms up even as the blood drains from it. Its tendrils



reach out and hungrily eat a glut of nutrients carried to them by the surrounding cells. They start to intertwine, growing stronger and more pliable, morphing into cords of much greater tenacity.

The skin is uncovered. Very mild electrical pulses are applied to the torso, and the body slowly bends, stretching the back muscle. It stays unbroken, and the dulled brain, awake but unmoving, registers no signs of danger.

Eardrums, until now blessedly free of irritants, receive sounds that quickly dull the alpha waves and bring consciousness back in with speed. The brain becomes fully conscious of its state again, and the body's muscles gently flex and tense. The adrenal glands squirt a little in nervous anticipation, but nothing gets torn. The body is ready.

Later on it will receive a shock in motion that impacts hard enough to test even the matrices of the bones, but they withstand it.

Eventually the body experiences a lift, and a drop, and olfactory senses report that the air smells very different.

\*\*\*

Rest comes harder than before and delta waves are barely even present; the body jerks itself into consciousness at the least little irritant, whether on eardrums, nose, or skin. The adrenal glands, in good practice, happily help out each time with generous supplies of corticosteroids, but eventually the brain reins them in.

The temperature shocks prove to have been helpful as the skin is now exposed to higher fluctuations over greater lengths of time than before. The heat doesn't cause damage but does interfere with gastric control, and there are several occasions where the adrenaline, the heat and high activity in the prefrontal cortex cause the stomach to vacate. Eventually the composition of ingested contents alters, lowering slightly in fat and starch and increasing in complex carbohydrates, fiber and various phytochemicals. There is also less alcohol ingestion, and eventually the stomach settles down and remains stable.

Over time the body settles into a groove. Everything goes at its pace, all glands function, and if there is the rarest of half-missed beats from the heart, the rest of the system more than makes up for it.

So when, at last, the eardrums are assaulted and the thalamus shocked out of deep delta waves, and the body is fairly thrown to hands and knees, the shock isn't quite enough to cause any immediate lockup. The eardrums keep taking in and filtering everything they can, while both visual cortex and motor control narrow their focus, accomplishing in linear order several tasks that are so practiced they have long since been ingrained in the subconscious. The body rises and begins to run, the hands slightly tensed to hold their deadly baggage, the skin on the fingers cooling from steely contact. Now the visual cortex takes over, the head craning back and forth while the legs piston and the lungs work, and every now and then the body will stop, crouch, process visuals and react through hand movements, either a wave or a slight pull of a finger.

It is during the exit from one such crouch that the eardrums process a loud whine, and immediately after the skin is massively broken, not merely torn but shredded off, veins pieced and muscles taken off in chunks. The abdominals contract with all the power they can muster, and air is forced out of the lungs, the vocal cords vibrating at high frequencies. All systems go independent; legs give out, hands cramp up and eardrums vibrate with a merciless rat-tat-tat; bladder goes into overdrive and so does adrenal gland, pumping like there's no tomorrow. Adrenaline courses through the system at unprecedented rates, while the blood cells, engorged with oxygen, deliver it to whatever extremities they can before flowing through the broken skin and out into the unknown; and in all these imbalances and all this stress the heart, having ticked away in duty and stress forever until this very moment, at last loses its grip: cramps up, goes on strike, stops. The body convulses, eyes rolling around in their sockets, and in those last shooting moments of pain and confusion there is just enough time for the brain to realize it has been cut off from the flow, and for the eardrums to process one last noise fast approaching, before the body is crushed, cut and burned by a force far greater than it has ever experienced, and even the matrices of its bones give out at last, their cracks the final sounds before the quiet, definite and final onfall of death.

## With Acknowledgments to Mad Dogs

The first time I saw the madmen, I was too slow on the button and they escaped into a narrow strait between the generators and a nearby warehouse. It took me a moment to realize what was happening - I was up top, photographing the last precious strains of a fading sunset through an industrial haze and smog, and had only noticed the activity below when I looked away from the lens - and before I could wonder what on earth they'd been doing climbing over the plant's security railings, I heard a low sound, a thrum in the earth, followed by a sudden and violent silence. I was shoved so hard backwards from the parapet and onto the rooftop that I hit my head on the brick floor, and lay there looking dazedly at the debris that showered over me. It's a wonder I didn't lose an eye, since half of the stuff was metal shards still too hot to touch. My hearing was gone, too, replaced with a constant, high-pitched whine. My photographer's instincts were intact, suicidal as they are, and as soon as I had my balance I rushed right up to the parapet again and started snapping pictures before I even knew what I was seeing.

Whatever role the generators had once fulfilled, they were now rubble. A foul-smelling smoke emanated from their broken husks and I could hear live electricity flying about. I wasn't too worried about the camera, which was insured by my employers, but felt the usual mild concern that some kind of radiation from the accident might affect its memory or the backups that I'd had implanted in my skin. I always worried about this if I was doing active fieldwork, though probably less due to any valid reason - the memory chips are sealed from outside interference, and if I ever have to worry about the skin chips I'll likely have much bigger problems to deal with - and more over transferal of emotion. When you put yourself in the line of fire, time on end, all that anxiety of self-preservation has to be put somewhere, lest it eat you up from inside or turn you stupid and make you act like you're immortal.

I had snapped a few shots of the smoking ruin when something on the warehouse wall caught my attention. I was too far away to see it with bare eyes, and the smoke still obscured most of it, but by zooming in and panning about I caught most of it.

If it had been a regular painted tag I'd have looked past, ignored it and focused back on the wreck. Most graffiti is applied either with paint composites or, for the hipsters, with detachable projectors that cast all sorts of visual tricks. This one, on the other hand, had been applied with ScArdite, a highly flammable substance normally used to treat metal surfaces. It was sold in large, sealed containers but if you knew what you were doing - and didn't mind risking your skin and eyebrows - you could siphon it into pressurized containers. When applied in steam form to metal it would leave scorch marks that couldn't be missed.

This one said, "Leave or die, Caldari".

I snapped pictures of it, nicely framed by the surrounding smoke and debris. They were thoughtless images, taken almost at random by someone who'd been there purely by accident.

A day later I was paid a high commission for the whole set, and two weeks after I was notified that the pictures would be set up in a prestigious current events exhibition. It was during this process I discovered the rest of what had happened: Those generators had fuelled security and

auto-response systems over various areas in the city. Backup systems were in place, but they weren't sufficient to prevent a group of Gallenteans from sneaking about under the cover of encroaching darkness and assaulting both Caldari people and Caldari landmarks. The generators' destruction hadn't been a single and conclusive act of sabotage; it had been a call to arms.

\*\*\*

The world was worried. The news was the same, but news analysis, which is where you hear what people are thinking, was turning more and more jingoistic and paranoid. I didn't know anything more than anyone else but I could see that something was starting to go very wrong.

I found myself thinking about those people. They'd wanted to send a message, and they had, but I wasn't even sure of what that message was, and neither were the pundits. The Caldari section of the populace was clamoring for the police to find, try and judge those responsible with the harshest penalties possible - this was Caldari Prime, after all, and we'd already suffered enough at the hands of the Federation - and demanded increased surveillance of Gallente youth. The Gallenteans, I have to say, took it all in stride, supporting our demands and agreeing with our politicians to whatever extent they could.

But it didn't make sense. A concentrated effort like the generator sabotage took planning and resources, if one ignored the stupid tags they'd left behind. Something like that was done with a clear and direct purpose in mind. You shut down power, you robbed the bank, and you escaped. The outcome of this, the assaults and property damage, wasn't a crime in the traditional sense; it was a generalized and violent political message, something you'd expect from a group of animals too stupid to know what else to do.

I couldn't stop thinking about it. I found myself visiting the landmarks they'd defaced and walking through the areas where they'd hurt all those people. I figured it might make for a good series of follow-up images but in truth I was doing it more for myself.

In each space I found something familiar, in that way I can never quite explain. When you take pictures you're dealing with three layers of reality: That which can be seen and is what it is, that which can also be seen but represents something else, and the dark limbo in between that's so abstract you can barely identify it at all. Fiction has the first two - storyline and metaphors - but usually lacks the third. It is the framework, the organization of everything so that it can tell its story; a meta-layer of conveyance.

And I saw it, the same thing, in every one of those locations. There was something about them that made them stand out. From a simple public park to the most imposing of Caldari monuments, it was there. This setting, light and lines, that gave an area its unmistakable flavor. This framework.

Whether the attackers had known about it, I had no idea. But I was a photographer and I'd wandered the streets of this city for a long time, long enough to know where else to find moods like this.

Probably I should have called the police, told them I had a suspicion of where they'd strike next. And probably they would have laughed, and thought I was some artist with an ego. Or they might have listened; I don't know.

I remembered a place in the city, one of many monuments to the fall of our planet. It had the same feel as the ones I'd seen, and it also had some nice vantage points where a person might hide out.

That same night I stocked up and took my gear to one of those vantage points, where I waited all night for something to happen. I was nervous and jittery, and would snap an image at the least little thing. In early morning I left my spot, tired and frustrated, but relieved, too; not merely for the sake of the monument but for my own.

I was between assignments and still felt too attached to the sabotage, so I slept during the day and returned to the same place the night after, with better equipment and a more patient attitude.

It served me well. That night they came.

\*\*\*

The pictures caused an outrage. It was a proper series this time, from start to finish, that documented how a group of Gallente utterly reduced a Caldari monument to smoking ruin. Some of them - the ones who'd used acid and other things - wore gasmasks, but the group otherwise seemed entirely unconcerned with identification. At the end, they even pulled down their pants and urinated all over the remains of what they'd destroyed.

I had another exhibition during which someone asked me in fairly shocked tones why I hadn't done something. I kept a cool demeanor and asked what I should have done, alone, against a group of rampaging, violent criminals. My interrogator's spirit was dampened somewhat at this, so I put my arm on his shoulder and explained that sometimes all we could do was tell the others, to make sure society could see what was happening in its midst, and leave the rest up to the people in charge. He was mollified at this, though I don't think for a second that he truly thought any action would come of what was being displayed on the walls and in mid-air. It was a personal insult to him, what he'd seen in my pictures, and he was less concerned about society than his own fragile bubble inside of it, for if someone would do this to cherished and well-established landmarks of the city, someone might well take it into their head to go after its cherished and well-established patrons, too. Everything is personal, in the end.

This wasn't the first time I'd done war photography. Of course, in my head everything with violence in it could be called a war, the only difference being one of scale. Those people who maintained that a picture of mad dogs fighting in backyard matches was different from spaceship armadas launching torpedoes and ammo volleys at one another were really only deluding themselves. And as I looked at my own pictures, hovering there so gargantuan they blotted out the rest of my sight, it began to dawn on me that the raw power of this particular series - that unnamable framework - wasn't drawn forth so much by the violence that I'd seen a million times before, nor whatever political machinations might lie behind, but by my own emotional response

to it. I could see it in the angles I had taken, the lines I had cut without even realizing it: the pictures were in perfect harmony not merely to the actions of their subjects, but to the situation itself. A situation that I had let myself become part of, both physically and emotionally. I had all but put myself in front of the lens.

It wouldn't be the last time, either. I had *known* where they would be and deep inside I felt a quiet reassurance that I also knew where else they would go. That budding realization, that this possibly hadn't been a fluke but instead a recurring relationship between me and these mad dogs, excited me beyond measure, and frightened me more than I can possibly explain.

\*\*\*

I began hunting them, as one would stray animals. The framework was always there, waiting for me to find it and settle down to wait.

It amazed me how they didn't seem shy at all. They truly were like animals, acting out their nature unashamedly and with great vigor. Not that they had nothing to fear, for the authorities were after them in force, but they were good judges of any situation and responded to real threats rather than nervous imagination. A slaver hound will without hesitation tear apart a human being, taking its time to eat the flesh and muscle, and so long as you don't get between it and its meal it won't care at all that you're near.

The waits got shorter and I began to know their patterns so well that at times I could swear they were practically leaving me signs for where they'd strike next. Most of the images I took, I didn't even release myself. Aside from growing police interest in me, there's a limit to how much a client or exhibition hall is willing to pay a single photographer, and I'd long since set up various fake middlemen for those occasional times when I was especially productive.

Public attention in their crimes rose accordingly and hit such a fever pitch that I could afford to devote myself exclusively to the subject. I could probably have afforded a nice, long vacation as well, but as time passed it became less about the job and more about the hunt. There is a special flame that lights inside you when you spy the perfect framework, that dead limbo you want to capture forever, and I needed to keep it lit.

In fact, it had all been going so terribly well that what happened during my last session has robbed me of sleep and all peace of mind.

It was near sunset, my favorite time of day. I was high up in a disused building on the edge of town. It overlooked a trickle of a river, on the other end of which was a cemetery with a special plot for war veterans.

I'd been there on and off for almost sixty hours, but between my thermo mattress and some quite pleasant instant meals it was all right. My sleep was peaceful and rested, and motion scanners warned me of any possible appearances. It had been a few hours since I'd set up my gear and settled into that pleasant meditative state when one of the scanners pinged and I snapped to attention.

They came quietly, disabling security and pouring through the gates. I couldn't help but admire their movements; they looked so nonchalant and purposeful all at once, a hungry pack out on a hunt for easy prey. The group moved directly to the veterans' quarter and I felt the familiar trickle of excitement on my skin. With luck they would do their work before the light ran out.

At no point did I feel responsible for their actions; they were repulsive, and my excitement was always tempered with disgust at both them and myself. But that didn't stop me from shooting pictures.

And there must have been a glint from my lens, because even as one of them was straightening up, having defaced a Caldari grave in ways beyond comprehension and taken off his gasmask, he turned around with a bright blue smile, and he looked towards the abandoned building, and over the vast gulf of that dead limbo we suddenly both inhabited he looked directly into my eyes.

\*\*\*

I felt my blood freeze. My mind turned in on itself, trying to comprehend what I'd just seen and whether it had been coincidence. I didn't even consciously see him any longer, though I kept shooting on instinct. They finished their task and the man never looked my way again, but long after they'd gone I lay there, trembling, rationalizing to myself the way someone does when they've long since crossed the line and now look back to see where it was.

For this framework, this dark limbo between reality and deeper meaning that I've been hunting all my life, is more all-encompassing than I ever imagined.

When I got home and inspected my pictures, I saw it.

Another thing I know about animals and respect them for is that they don't take a conscious decision to participate in whatever horrible acts they perform. It's instinct at most, but never calculated intent. The outcome looks much the same one way or another, but the reason matters. It matters to me.

My pictures are growing more and more popular, and I've sold them in the firm belief that I am merely a chronicler, nonexistent and outside the framework they convey. But I was so wrong. And yet I am going to keep taking them, because I must. I have become part of these events, and if I stop, then they will cease to exist, and so will I. The framework includes me, as it always did.

I have in my home a picture that I will never show to another human being. It shows a Gallentean, his face so nondescript I can barely describe it once I make myself look away. Beads of sweat are glistening on his countenance and the defaced gravestone by his feet bears the marks of the small drill in his hand. In his other hand he holds an empty canister of acid, droplets spilling from its edge and onto the grass below, and on the ground before him lies a used gasmask. He looks happy. He has just poured the jug's content all over the earth on which he stands, and the smoke that arose to envelop him has been blown to the winds. Soon the acid will

seep even deeper into the ground, find its way to the bones buried in there, and dissolve them, leaving behind only a blackened, foul-smelling tar.

He is staring into the camera, one animal acknowledging another, and he is winking directly at me.



## Of God and her Beast

When he dropped the golden vial, Antar knew he was a dead man.

They were in the garden of contemplation, Lerege and he, arguing about the tenets of faith and their service to the Chamberlain. Both of them were privileged Holders who had done a lot of work in the royal court, and the constant friction of daily interaction had filed them into two smooth blocks of solid rock, smashed for so long against one another that they grated past with a minimum of fuss and agony, each waiting for the other to finally crack and break.

Before the vial had even touched the ground Antar was already kneeling for it, his fingers reaching for its shiny surface and his mind working on some suitable excuse. By the time he'd snatched it up again and put it in his pocket he had already decided not to say anything at all, and prayed instead that Lerege would think the fallen object had been one of the golden buttons on his robe.

And Lerege didn't seem to notice, going on as he did about the futility of self-devotion when there were so many issues to be dealt with every day. "You don't get anything done if you're on your knees in prayer all day," he said. "The Empire expects results."

Antar, who wanted to get out of this conversation before his trembling hands gave him away, forced himself to shrug and say, "Then I guess we'd better get to it." Lerege sniffed at him and walked away.

Once he was alone, Antar walked over to one of the benches and sat down heavily. He felt the vial inside his pocket, pressing against his skin.

He had an appointment with the Chamberlain himself in less than a day's time. He needed to keep a clear head and not fill himself up with trash and paranoia.

So he'd gone into the garden of contemplation, picked his thousandth fight with a man who loathed him, and right in the middle of things he had started fiddling with the golden vial that contained his emergency supply of drugs. The golden vial that he had started bringing into the court for no reason whatsoever.

He rubbed his face with his hands, then spread them on the bench, leaned his head back and listened to the susurrus around him, with closed eyes and progressively calming breath.

It was not in the nature of man to deny his own nature. He enjoyed sitting on this bench and having the sun stroke his face. He also enjoyed doing drugs, not merely riding their highs but suffering their calamitous drops as well.

That last part had been a revelation. The pressure of living in high Amarr society, not to mention working for some of the most high-powered men in the Empire, was such that most everyone had to find some manner of release. This was natural and expected, and people dealt with it with prayer and piety. You were expected to suffer for your faith and that you did, meandering

through the random mazes of humanity's constructs in the hope of finding enlightenment on the other side. The stress and the pressure meant that you had a need for God beyond the everyday.

But not everyone found themselves able to alleviate the stress through prayer, and sometimes would turn to self-flagellation. It was not uncommon for high-ranking officials to be seen on slow walks around the many gardens in the Chamberlain's courts, gingerly feeling their way towards benches or tables after an evening of bodily abuse. This was smiled at, if not actively encouraged, by the church.

Drug use was forbidden, as was imbibing too much alcohol, synthetic drinks or anything except the mildest brews. But to Antar it came to much the same. It made no *sense* to self-harm, nor to lose yourself in invocation, because both depended on your strength and willpower to see it through. When you gave your autonomy over to someone else as your faith demanded, Antar felt that the very least God could do in return was to provide an unblocked passageway to Him.

He had gone to the drugs out of frustration and shame at being unable to take the pressure, and out of unwillingness to devote himself to the increasingly useless prayer and pain-threshold testing. And in the aftermath of fugue and tremors, he found himself at last.

He was supposed to suffer and that he had certainly done, spending what felt like centuries in panicked agony of visions, sweats and paranoia. But when it wore off, all he could think of was to do it again. The highs gave him sacrament and the lows gave him vindication. It felt perversely like being closer not only to God but to himself as well: Being true to his own nature and true to the punishing demands of his faith, by enjoying life to the fullest and then suffering for it.

It was the one and perfect way of achieving wholeness, and Lerege had embraced it wholeheartedly.

He got up, brushed off his robes and looked around. The day was drawing to an end. Sunlight glinted off a nearby statue of a Slaver hound, cast in bronze. Its presence comforted him, for if God had created this vicious, merciless animal, then surely there must have been some concession on God's side to the animalistic nature of human beings.

Antar headed towards his quarters. Tomorrow would be a demanding day and he needed to clear his head.

\*\*\*

"My dear boy, so good to see you," the Chamberlain said. His antechamber glimmered in the early daylight. The ceiling was high and ended in tinted windows whose glass changed hue according to the strength of sunlight. In the afternoon it would be golden and regal, and in the early evening a bronzed blood red, but the mornings were bright and uplifting. From beyond came the sound of birds.

The walls were covered with icons: Woven tapestries illustrated with the crests of the five Heirs and beset with their iconic gemstones, small crests and smaller paintings of Holders that had performed high service to the Empire, and massive decorations of all sorts that depicted the glorious Emperors of ages past. There was barely room for God.

Antar, still kneeling, murmured into his chest, "I am always at your service, Your Honor." There were no guards inside the room, which was not that unusual. They were for decoration as much as anything, and the Chamberlain often sent them out so he could discuss personal business.

"And so polite as well!" Chamberlain Karsoth said with a laugh. "I trust you've had a good stay in the palace quarters."

"They never fail to bring me happiness," Antar said. This was true. He'd emptied the vial last night and disposed of it for good. The visions had been quite marvelous.

"That's good to hear. I like hearing positive words. We should have more of that in this place, us pitiful, unworthy sinners."

Antar remained silent. He'd always liked the Chamberlain, an opinion that had him in the minority among the court, but the man's conversation style was dangerously comfortable. A genial chat with the wrong word let loose could mean a trip to the cleansing pits.

"Are you contemplating the heavens?" Karsoth asked him in silky tones.

"Always, my lord," Antar said. "How may I serve you?"

This time the Chamberlain did not answer. The silence was so complete Antar could hear his own heartbeats, and he realized with a tiny bloom of terror that the birdsong had fallen silent as well. The audioblocks had been set down.

He kept his eyes resolutely on the ground. Before him he heard the noise of the Chamberlain rising to his feet, the metal pistons in his legs hissing as they supported the man's frame. There was a thunk and another thunk, repeated at higher volumes as Karsoth walked closer. Perfume wafted over Antar.

"From this height I could take off your head," Karsoth said in the same quiet voice.

"I believe you could, milord," Antar said, keeping his breathing as steady as he could. His legs trembled slightly, though whether from strain or panic, he didn't know.

"Lerenge spoke to me last night," Karsoth said.

Antar said nothing.

"I had your chambers searched," Karsoth said.

Antar remained resolutely quiet.

"Do you have something to tell me, servant of the Empire?"

For the first time, Antar looked up and directly into the eyes of Chamberlain Karsoth, highest representative of the celestial court, supreme authority in the Amarr Empire, and the conduit to the living God.

And saw something he recognized.

"Nothing you don't already know, milord," Antar said.

Karsoth smiled and pulled something out of a pocket on his golden robe. Antar had no doubt that he fully knew what crimes Antar had committed, for the man's dark network of spies and information was vast, but seeing the vial in the Chamberlain's hands was still a shock; not merely because it was the final embodiment of Antar's doom, but he was absolutely certain that he had destroyed it.

"Show me how faithful you are, Antar," the towering Chamberlain said to him, that same strange smile still on his face. "Talk."

Antar knew that whatever he said in here wouldn't matter. His fate would have been decided already, and his confession was no more than an amusement to the Chamberlain. Whether he begged, pleaded, threatened or cajoled, he would still end up in the cleansing pits. Nothing mattered now; but conversely, nothing was forbidden. Through the pounding noise of his heartbeat, there surfaced the realization that he was free to say what he wished, in this last confession.

So he began to talk.

In the silence he spoke of pain and punishment, of the fracture between body and spirit and of the ideal nobody could possibly fulfil unless they explored all facets of humanity. He told of the heavenly visions he'd encountered outside himself and the hellish aftermath of the fall back to reality. He confessed his constant, infinite, unyielding frustration with the Empire's insistence on denying itself the divine imperative to be animals.

At some point, through the fugue of quiet panic, he realized he had stood up and was looking the Chamberlain in the face. He kept talking.

And at last he stopped, falling abruptly silent like the last page turned. He felt clean and empty, like anything Karsoth could do would be an afterthought to a life already ended.

The giant man watched him for a long time, the smile on his face not completely faded. Then he leaned in, the supports on his legs creaking with effort, and said, "You are the man I've been looking for."

Antar stared back, with a dull and uncomprehending mind.

"Do you know what is going to happen to you, faithful one?" the Chamberlain asked.

"I will die," Antar said. "Eventually."

"That you will. But first you will follow me." Karsoth turned and walked to the wall behind his throne. For a moment he stood in front of a painting of someone Antar had never known.

There was no sign; no laser outline, no shimmer and nothing that indicated a change. Karsoth merely gave a short grunt of satisfaction, walked towards the wall and melded into it.

Not vanished, Antar's brain told Antar's incredulous eyes. The Chamberlain had not been abducted or turned invisible, but neither had he merely walked through a holograph. He had entered the wall as if it were a porous membrane, and the wall had melded itself to him, rippled and moved, and let him pass through.

Karsoth's face pushed back out, its surface area such a picture-perfect replica of the wall he'd entered that Antar could only make him out by the outlines of his jowls. "The passage is active for a few more seconds, acolyte," he said. "You come now or never."

Antar's feet took over from the rest of his stupid body and propelled him through.

On the other side were ... people. They seemed to be enjoying themselves. There was no external lighting, but torchlight glinted off naked skin. Some of them were ingesting things.

"Contrary to what you might believe, I am extremely faithful," Karsoth said, as if in passing. Antar nodded, unable to tear his gaze from the mass of humanity writhing in front of him. The air in the room was heavily perfumed, and the people were making low sounds. He felt light-headed.

"But I despise the god of the people we serve, for it is not the one true god. He would encourage indulgence and unfettered belief."

"He?" Antar said absent-mindedly, not having heard a word.

Karsoth misunderstood him. "Or She. God can be anything you wish."

"What happens to these people?" Antar said, still not entirely back in reality.

Karsoth gave him a stern look. "What do you think happens?"

"Before I saw this, I would have said the cleansing pits," Antar replied. Karsoth grunted.

They watched the display for a while. In a controlled voice that betrayed the slightest of tremors, Antar said, "Milord, I should ask, for I expect the question includes me as well. What does happen to these people?"

Karsoth put a hand on his shoulder and in a benevolent voice said, "They are forgiven, my son. And they go on."

"Where, milord?" Antar said. He thought for a moment. This was Karsoth. "And in one piece?" he added.

The Chamberlain laughed out loud, a raucous roar of noise that echoed through the room. "Yes, Antar, they'll be fine. They come here now and then to tell me news from the darker parts. Most are free to wander the court as they please, but they tend to prefer each other's company until they depart."

"Quite, milord."

Karsoth turned to him. "Understand, acolyte. There exist a people who think like this. I found them through much the same crisis of faith as you extemporized to me, a truth that defied the death you were staring in the eyes. I will send you to them now, as my emissary. You have served me well in the past, and you will serve even better in your new position."

"Milord, I... - well, what is there to say? I serve," Antar said, and bowed.

"So you will," Karsoth said. "There is an enemy out there that needs to be dealt with, for she stands against all that we are; not in innocence, which is easily enough countered, but a different kind of darkness altogether. You will never see her, for it would kill you, but you will hunt down the ones closest to her. And you will do it among your own kind at last."

"Yes, milord."

"So you will be off, but I need to know now - and believe me, I will see the lie on your face - do you *want* to go? Do you understand that you will leave behind everything you knew and disclaim every trace of the life you had?"

"Yes, your grace," Antar said. "Yes, yes, a thousand times yes. Who are these people?"

Chamberlain Karsoth smiled. "They are called the Blood Raiders."

## Silent Furies

[*Note: Written by CCP Gnauton*]

This configuration was new to him. A beautiful one, though it lacked the smooth subtlety of the Kaulas patterns, the ones from before the revolution. The Thukker as a whole had tended toward violent motifs after the great save, its people too drunk on their own rage to remember they were free, and every creation from its cultural womb since then had in some way borne fury's jagged stamp.

He set the object on the table. Before him was a wall, three quarters window, a tinted expanse of transnano stretching several meters to both sides and displaying the beginnings of a sunset upon the quarter beyond. Underneath the window was the small table, its contents cast in deep sun yellow, and at it he sat, his mood darkening with each passing minute.

He stood up, made his way to the desk in the opposite corner of the room and sat down at it. On the desk, a modcom was chirping.

"Shakor," he said.

"Emissary Shakor, this is Central," sounded the machine. "Your afternoon appointment just arrived at the compound. Are you ready to receive him?"

"Is this Sergeant Ermika speaking?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your name isn't Central."

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"I said your name isn't Central."

There was a brief pause, then a small nasal exhalation on the other end. "Thank you, sir. Forgot."

"No harm done, Sergeant. Let him in."

"Yes, sir."

Shakor leaned back. Resting his elbows on the chair's metal arms, he locked his fingers together across his stomach, tilted his head back against the top of the headrest and let out a long breath. He rubbed his eyebrows smooth with two hard strokes. Then he stood up, straightened the front of his shirt with his hands and walked back over to the window. He was standing there, pensive, when the door buzzer sounded.

"Yes."

Sound of someone entering, then a voice. "Admiral Morata is here to see you, sir."

"Very well." Shakor turned half in the direction of the door and waited. There was a shuffling of footsteps, followed by brief silence.

"Good afternoon, Your Honor," came a voice.

"Hello, Hakram," replied Shakor warmly. "No need for formalities, least of all when they no longer apply." He cocked his head now in the other man's direction, as if sniffing something out with his mind's eye. "At ease, soldier," he said presently.

Hakram Morata, Vice Admiral of the Republic Fleet, veteran of hundreds of battles, stiffened a bit, then relaxed. He shook his head, slowly. "How do you always know?"

"Blind luck," said Shakor. "Have a seat."

The two men made their way over to the small table and sat down at each end of it. A cool draft played through the sparse chamber as the door slid closed.

"I'm assuming you've heard," said the Vice Admiral, removing his cap and straightening his carefully creased dark olive trousers. "About Yun." He studied Shakor.

"I heard something," said Shakor.

"It's true."

"I have no doubt. Tonight, was it?"

"Yes," said Hakram. "A little under three hours from now."

"I see." Shakor cleared his throat. "How that boy has grown."

He stood up and went to a carved wooden cabinet set into the wall, from which he gingerly retrieved a glass bottle filled with an opaque liquid of darkest brown. He unstopped it. "Care for a drop?" he asked, somewhat perfunctorily, as he began to pour the liquid into two small glasses.

Hakram smiled. "You know me."

"That I do," said Shakor, handing him one of the glasses. A rich aroma filled their corner of the large chamber. "To ours."

"To ours."

They drank. Shakor sat down again.



“So. What can I do for you today, Hakram?”

There was a studied silence, and then Hakram spoke. “Well, sir, I want to ask you to consider some of the things Keitan is going to talk about tonight.”

“A-ha.” Shakor’s brow creased. “Which things, in particular?”

“Well, he is going to cover a fair few subjects. For one, he’s going to urge you to come back.” Shakor sat very still and did not react.

Hakram’s eyes fixed on the spiked orb sitting upon the table. He picked it up. “You’re really in a unique position to do the things that need doing, sir,” he said, quietly.

“I’m not in a position to do anything,” replied Shakor. “I’m tired of the things that need doing. I’ve been a member of this carnival for too long. I’m tired of collateral damage and lives on my conscience. Tired of getting tangled in the political underbrush.”

“Tangled?” Hakram put the orb down. “But you dealt with the Elders, sir. You worked with the Thukkers. You circumvented every protocol there is.”

“Yes, at the cost of a good woman’s political career and the stability of our government. Those aren’t dues paid lightly.”

“But you did what needed to be done,” Hakram said. “You shook things up enough for them to be set right again. Why finish with the job half done? There is a groundswell of support for you, at the public level as well as within the entire structure of government.”

Shakor laughed. It was a deep and abrasive sound, the pounding of a punctured war drum. “Hakram. My boy. Do you think public support means anything, with things the way they are?”

A tiny blink escaped one of Hakram’s eyes, a momentary crack in his mask of equilibrium. He sat upright in his seat, glad, as so often before, that the old man was blind.

“Not the public’s, necessarily, but the ministers have...” he began.

“The ministers? That great thunderous gaggle of short-sighted polemicists? Oh, yes, I’m sure they love me. They’ll love me until I do something that doesn’t quite serve their interests, and then they’ll hem and haw and harrumph and draft legislation and set their lackeys to screaming, and before you know it we’re back to the low squabbling that keeps us stuck in the mud.”

Abruptly he stopped there, and smoothed his eyebrows with a sharp upward motion of both hands. He stood up. Hakram waited, watching him intently.

“I’m not the person for it,” said Shakor. He walked back over to the cabinet, found the bottle and returned.

“Sir...” said Hakram. Shakor quieted him with a gesture, then held out an open hand. He gave his glass to the old man.

“I appreciate your making the trip all the way out here,” Shakor said, in a more convivial tone. He poured them two more drinks. “Did you have any problems getting in?”

“I was questioned a fair bit,” said Hakram. “Nothing too bad.”

“They know what they’re doing.”

“I have no doubt, sir.”

“If I’m not mistaken, there should be some domes perched on the horizon there.” Shakor pointed in the direction of the window. “They’re synthesizing plants from the homeworld over there.”

“Really?” said Hakram. He looked over Shakor’s shoulder. Past the sprawl of squat metal buildings beyond the window he saw three gigantic skulls jutting out of the landscape, retiring rays of sun laying checkered patterns over their silvery pates.

“Genesis vaults, they call them. They’re aiming to eventually have specimens of every known plant from Old Mother.” Shakor took a sip of his drink.

“Impressive,” said Hakram. “Very impressive. Wouldn’t have expected it from the Thukkers, to be perfectly honest.”

Shakor set his drink on the table. “I wouldn’t have expected it from anyone,” he said.

A period of silence passed between the two men, leaden with quiet consequence. Shakor was sitting with his elbows on his knees, flat palms pressed together, leaning forward. Hakram was sitting back, his hat in his lap and his left ankle resting on his right knee.

He switched legs, dusted a bit of lint off his calf and said “Maleatu... how can I get you to reconsider?”

And so the afternoon went.

\*\*\*

“I have a message for you,” said Hakram. He was standing by the window, looking out at the flat tops of the surrounding buildings, the tiny motes of windowlight like insect eyes in featureless faces.

Shakor raised his eyebrows and lifted his head slightly in the younger man’s direction. “Oh?” he said.

Hakram came back to his chair and seated himself. “You spoke of collateral damage earlier. About making sacrifices and never knowing whether they had any meaning.”

Shakor nodded.

“Do you remember a decision of that sort that you made, twenty-six years ago, when you were fighting in Ammatar space?”

Shakor remained quiet, his face impassive.

“When the rest of the militia heads asked you to leave the front because your presence was bringing down too much heat on their heads?”

Shakor gave a slow nod, barely perceptible.

“When, despite their insistent cajoling and threatening, you stayed an extra two days in order to be able to gather crucial intel that would, it turned out, end up saving the lives of millions?”

“Yes, yes,” said Shakor. “Very theatrical. You have my admiration. Get to the point.”

“My message is from one of those commanders. Do you remember Silbraur Makusta?”

“Of course. He’s a high-ranking member of the Justice Department.”

“Yes, but back then he led a group called the South Rixarn Army. It was one of the smaller militia groups active on the Derelik fringe back then.”

Shakor’s eyebrows lowered and his jaw clenched. “I remember the SRA,” he said.

“Close-knit group, largely family. Highly specialized. Came from a...”

“Hakram.”

“What?”

“Just give me the message.”

“Yes, sir. Senior Counsel Makusta heard through a common acquaintance in Fleet brass that I was going to go to the Sanctuaries to try and convince you to come back. When he did, he had this message delivered to me and said that it was to be given to you verbatim.”

“I assume you’ve memorized it.”

“You know me.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Well, sir,” Hakram began, then hesitated.

“Let’s *hear* it, Admiral,” said Shakor.

“He wants you to know that every single one of them would have willingly chosen their fate, had they known the stakes.”

There was a long pause.

“Very well, Admiral,” said Shakor. “Thank you for coming.”

\*\*\*

As the mantle of dusk continued its gentle slide over the moon’s dry skin and its inhabitants began to lay themselves to rest, his modcom sounded again.

“This is Shakor.”

“Emissary, Ambassador Keitan Yun has requested to speak with you.”

He spun the orb in his hand for a few moments. How jagged it was.

“Put him through.”

## The Paths They Chose

The Garden was a man-made construct through and through, several acres of carefully tended flora and woodland encased in a massive transparent dome. Souro Foiritan, president of the Gallente Federation, had it constructed long ago as a meeting place between dignitaries of the various empire factions.

In this it served its function admirably, for a twofold reason. First, a peaceful garden was much more conducive to a genial atmosphere and agreeable spirits than a meeting room ever could be. A visiting diplomat, weighted by worries and demands, would feel so much more calm sitting by a babbling brook or a tree in budding bloom than he ever could on the top floor of a high-rise, no matter how good its view. And second, it was so well secured with anti-eavesdropping technology that visitors could discuss the darkest topics of their hearts' desires without so much as a glance over their shoulders.

The dome's outer surface was dotted with holographic projectors that melded in with the surface, making it impossible to detect from the air, and the materials of its hull utterly blocked every possible emanation from within: light, sound, heat signature, electric signals. Its insides were beset not only with equipment that regularly scanned for any anomalous signals, but motion-sensitive audio-scramblers that made it impossible even for servants and cohorts to hear what their leaders were saying to one another.

With all the layers necessary for its shell to be impermeable, real transparency was not an option. Instead, the rivets holding its outer plates together had inset tiny cameras that continuously recorded the outside view and passed the imagery along to a central broadcast mechanism inside the dome that used volumetric projectors to cast it onto the dome's inner wall. The effect was exactly the same as if you were looking right through the wall, and removed the sense of claustrophobia and secrecy that otherwise would have hovered over the Garden. It was peaceful, and perfect.

Mentas Blaque, Head Senator of the Gallente Federation, walked down a stone-tiled trail, past brush and brooks, until he arrived in a small circle of paths surrounded by tidily cut grass and several tall trees. Birdsong emanated from the trees, and unseen insects clicked and chirruped from the bush. There was even a small fountain in the distance, hissing gently at the world.

And in the circle, by the edge of the green grass, he encountered two men. One stood at attention. The other hung suspended from a silver rod, his face blocked by a deathskin mask.

The man who stood was Souro Foiritan, president of the Gallente Federation, leader of one of the four major Empires in New Eden, and Commander-in-Chief of the Gallentean armed forces at a time when they had just suffered the worst invasion and armed conflict in Federation history. His maroon outfit, which usually flowed with him like a second skin, looked worn, crinkly and unwashed. He had his head tilted slightly upward, as if watching the clouds. Even from a distance, Blaque could see how tired he was.

The suspended man was unknown to Blaque. He was fit, and something in his musculature - thinly covered beneath tight white clothes - brought to mind a military background. The deathskin mask, a covering of breathable material that overlaid his face, was expressionless.

Blaque walked up to them but said nothing.

Foiritan regarded him. Blaque noticed his hair was dirty, too, its oily sheen catching the sun's rays. There were bags under his eyes, and for some reason his knuckles were bruised.

"You can speak freely in here, you know," Foiritan said.

Blaque nodded.

"You don't seem too curious about why you're here in the first place."

"I was summoned by the highest authority in the Federation," Blaque replied icily. He and Foiritan had been at each other's political throats long before the invasion. "I assume you had your reasons."

Foiritan furrowed his eyebrows but didn't comment. He turned to the suspended man.

The silver device which held him up, a modified medical instrument not often used, was called a dead man's needle. It was a long metallic stake affixed to a cross-like stand, and it was literally melded onto the man it held. The stake had small circular protuberances that went into the man's back along the ridges on his spine, holding on to them like rings on a finger and supporting his body from the ground. Some of those circles would be pumping sedatives into his spine and the back of his head, keeping him asleep and mildly sedated. His hands were fixed at the body's sides, and his legs hung straight down. His skin, what could be seen of it beyond his clothes and mask, had dark purple bruises turning to yellow.

"This is Jordan Keel," Foiritan said, and walked a slow circle around the crucified man. "You wouldn't know it, but he helped bring about unprecedented events in New Eden's history."

Blaque regarded the man briefly before returning his gaze to Foiritan. "He seems a little worse for wear in that regard. Sir."

"So it might seem. In fact," Foiritan looked at Keel's suspended body and smiled humorlessly, "compared to what happened to some of the people whose lives he ruined, his own seems absolutely pristine."

The leaves whispered in the trees, brushed by hidden wind generators. Everything was too real here to be true.

Blaque walked closer and inspected Keel. He snapped his fingers in front of the man's face, and poked him in the ribs. Keel didn't react, nor blink or twitch. Blaque raised an eyebrow.

"The needle-sleep only lets him react to intense stimuli. Massive pain, for instance," Foiritan said.

"What do you need me for?" Blaque said after some hesitation.

"There is a war on."

"I know."

"A person's loyalties will get tested in a war."

"I know, Mister President."

"You weren't always a politician, Blaque. I've seen your locked files. I know what you did in the service of the Federation. There's one particular image, the remains of a Serpentis ship crew your troop once boarded, that'll crop up in my darker dreams for quite a while yet, I fear."

"There is a point to this, sir?"

"I need you to kill this man," Foiritan said, the same humorless smile on his face.

"Go to hell," Blaque replied and turned to leave. He had gone a few steps before Foiritan's voice said, "If you don't, then the aftermath is on your conscience."

"Don't associate me with your little criminals or whatever they do with their lives."

"Not his life, Admiral. Our lives, yours and mine. This man started a war."

Blaque stopped at that. Foiritan walked up to him and said, "It was on Keel's initiative, along with god knows how many others, that the Gallente Federation was attacked, invaded, and forced to capitulate under circumstances and terms that can be called nothing less than brutal."

Blaque turned to face him. A breeze from the hidden fans tugged at them, wafting the scent of flowers and grass through their senses. The man on the silver needle seemed to have no odor at all.

"We lost thousands of people in that invasion, Blaque," the president said. "They sabotaged our defenses, and they came in, and they tore everything to pieces. What they could have achieved with diplomacy they did with fire and death, reducing the lives of everyone who survived on that planet to a grey nightmare. And this one right here, this man who was supposed to be one of our own, he held the door right open for them."

In a grave but incredulous tone, Blaque said, "So you called me in here, sir, because instead of having this man tried by a military tribunal, you want the highest ranking senator in the Federation to put a bullet into his head."

"No. The person standing before me is not the Federation's highest ranking senator."

Blaque's expression turned to frost. "You just presided over the greatest military setback in Federation history, Mister President. Your power base is unstable and you're tottering on its wavering peak. I suggest you think very carefully before destabilizing it any further, or dismissing any political entities you may see as your enemies."

"That's good advice. It's exactly what I'd expect from the head of my new intelligence agency, and the overseer of its special projects division."

"...Beg pardon?"

Foiritan smiled, this time genuinely, and looked out through the dome of the garden. In the distance, beyond the land and the air, could be seen the faint crystal spires of New Hueromont, some so high they pierced the clouds. "The entire Federation is tottering. We've been hit so hard we barely know who we are anymore."

"So let's hit back," Blaque said, looking at those same crystal spires.

Foiritan didn't answer, and appeared lost in the view.

"You know," he said after a while, "I grew up in this area. I've had this view for so long, as man and boy, I can't ever imagine the city not being here. And I honestly never thought I would be in a position to even contemplate such a thing, living in a world where other people are actively seeking the destruction of something that feels not only like the reality of today but the very fabric of my memories. It's like they want to wipe out a part of what makes me the person I am."

He turned to Blaque. "I made a terrible mistake. I allowed myself to imagine that this universe was composed of good and honest people who could be induced to find a solution to any problem, no matter how severe. And now I find myself playing catch-up with wickedness.

"That's our problem, we Gallente," he continued. "We can't hit back. We're this great hulking beast that's been asleep for eons, being poisoned by ticks and leeches. We're full of rage and energy now, but if we roar into action unprepared we'll do nothing but get pummeled into submission. Worse, we'll still have those parasites in our blood, weakening us and hampering our fight, and it'll sap our spirit until we claw ourselves to death merely trying to get them out. I want those parasites gone, Blaque. I want them eliminated and I want our people to know it."

"And you want me to pull the trigger," Blaque said, with something approaching resignation.

"Blaque-"

"How'd you even find this guy?"

"We'd been running data mining on all registered actions, civilian and military, covering the time span that led to the great betrayal. His name came up, we ran some matching statistics, he looked



more and more likely. I signed a court order for immediate retraction of his statutory rights, then looked into his personal files and immediately found communications that clearly and directly linked him to the Tripwire fiasco. We hauled him in, and immediately he put up a front. Locked up, wouldn't say a thing. You ever see those guys, Blaque? You ever deal with someone who stonewalls you from the first moment on?"

"Every day on the senate floor, Mister President," Blaque said flatly. He sighed. "But most of my life I've dealt in warfare rather than politics."

"Then you know what it means when your enemy tunnels in."

Blaque looked to the crystal spires, then gave a nod so small it was barely perceptible. "So you had our people in white go to work on him?" he said.

"Almost. I had them all ready. But before we were set to start, I looked at the pictures of some of the victims, and I looked at Keel sitting in the interrogation chamber. And I lost it, Blaque. I went in there and had them take off all the restraints, then sent out the guards on orders not to return until I gave word. I had Keel standing before me, as free as I was, and if he wasn't quite as angry then he certainly wasn't in the mood to talk. And then I beat him to within an inch of his life."

Blaque looked at Foiritan with a new-found respect. "That so?"

"He talked. Gave us some information we needed."

"There's diplomacy for you."

"You would have done the same," Foiritan said.

"What makes you say that?" Blaque asked.

Foiritan waved his hand angrily at the world around them. "Look at it!" he yelled. "How can you possibly see this, and all it means to us, and not want to do everything you possibly can to protect it? How can you not want to lay down your *life* to save it from harm?"

He stalked over to the prisoner, his face turning red. "We helped them," he said in a tone full of quiet murder. "We did all we could for them and their rotten little empire. We poured money into their open hands. And now they do this to us. We didn't kill or destroy anyone over there. We didn't ruin their businesses. Before this all started I was set to make the greatest economic concession in history, merely to make sure that someone *else's* goddamn home," he kicked the needle at the word, and it vibrated in the breeze, "could be kept from falling apart. Everything could be solved by diplomacy and goodwill, I thought. And now I have before me a pitiable man, one of my own Gallente citizens, who was partly responsible for the loss of an entire planet and the deaths of countless of our people."

"So why didn't you finish it off?" Blaque asked. "Why not end him, or throw him to the wolves? The entire Federation feels the same way you do."

"Would you?" Foiritan asked him. Blaque fell silent.

"I need to know who's on my side, Blaque. Now more than ever, I need allies, people I can rely on to get things done. You dealt in warfare, where the enemies stayed enemies and where words have weight. All my life I've dealt in politics, where my friends could be my enemies and where the words I hear are just words, fitted and molded to the occasion. I need to know who I can trust."

"You want me to kill a comatose man."

"I want you to find the traitors, all of them, and I want you to bring them to justice. Whatever it takes." Foiritan reached into his coat and pulled out a datapad and a gun, both of which he laid on the ground before Blaque. "On the datakey is incontrovertible evidence that Jordan Keel was involved in the Tripwire incident. It would be enough to get him tried for treason in any court and punished accordingly."

"So do it," Blaque said, but without much conviction. "Have him executed."

"I could," Foiritan said. "But that's not enough. There are others like him out there and I need someone with the experience and the guts to root them out. Someone willing to go all the way."

Blaque stared at him in amazement. He said, not disapprovingly, "What happened to you, Souro?"

Foiritan rubbed his eyes. The bags under them were dark. "In my time I've committed acts that were selfish or even outright wrong, but so have you and everyone else. We did it for ourselves, but somewhere in our hearts we always did it for the Federation as well, because we believe we truly are the best for this empire. This here, though, this is ..." He faltered, and waved his hand vaguely at Keel. "Being in power at peacetime, that's easy. But being in power when things go wrong and you have to fix them by any means necessary, that's hard. That's when you find out who can act as well as talk, and who's just a blowhard."

Another breeze passed through, carrying the garden to them in its invisible hands. It was far too serene here for deaths and treachery.

Foiritan said, "The world has changed. We change with it. Or we die, buried in the grass. It's that simple now."

Blaque knelt and picked up the datapad and the gun. He rose and weighed one in each hand, like hearts on a scale. It had slowly dawned on him that they stood not on the cliff's edge debating the fall, but had possibly long since gone over, and were merely looking at the ever approaching abyss. "You're right," he said in a shaky voice. "You monster. You're absolutely right. I don't even *like* you, Foiritan, and you're right. I wish to god you weren't."

"So do I, believe me," Foiritan said.

"You know how you're going to look if you do this. The measures instigated, the freedoms prohibited. .. Even if you're successful - especially if you're successful - you're going to be a tyrant. You'll be feared and hated. And so will I, as your hit man."

"Then that's the role you'll have to play, like all the rest of us actors."

Something in Blaque gave way, though whether it was the rising revulsion of a darkened path he thought he'd long since left, or the dismantling of the last obstruction to his breakneck passage there, he really couldn't tell. His feelings broke through, and he screamed at Foiritan, "This isn't a play!" His arm shot out, pistol in hand, the barrel aimed directly at Keel's head. "Is this what you want, President? Is this what you're ready for? You're brave when it's fists in a room, but how many times have you looked a man in the eyes before you killed him? How can your conscience ever take that on?!"

Foiritan waited, expressionless, until Blaque had lowered the gun and caught his breath.

"Yes, it's a test, of loyalty and guts," Foiritan said to him. "Everything is, these days. But those men whose deaths he caused? They were just as much your responsibility as mine." He stepped closer to Blaque and took hold of his gun arm, raising it to his own sternum as if he were the condemned. "You owe them this, in your own conscience and soul."

Blaque looked into his eyes, and whatever dark fellowship he saw there broke the last barrier. A wave of revulsion passed over him, washing over his new, unwavering purpose. His face wrinkled in disgust at himself and he said, "Damn you. Alright. But I will *not* murder," and he turned to Keel and shot the man in the kneecap.

"This is what happens when things get ugly!" he yelled, loud enough to set the birds flying from nearby trees. "This is what you've sanctioned, Souro! You can undersign orders for hunt and interrogation, and damn it, I'll follow them to the end, but will you stand it when the screaming .. when the screaming ... starts." He faltered, and looked back to Keel in amazement. The prisoner hung from the silver needle, serene and quiet. The blood pouring from the gaping wound in his knee was staining his white clothes a deep maroon. He showed no signs of waking up.

"Good job, Blaque," Foiritan said, a smile not quite crossing his lips. "I need a man who will do horrible things for our Federation, but who'll detest doing so. I need a civilized man, so that I can be the monster."

"What ... but ...?" Blaque stammered.

"A body can't let out a scream if there's no mind to carry it."

When no response was forthcoming, Foiritan laid a hand on his shoulder, leaned close and said, not unkindly, "You just shot a clone."

Blaque stared at him, then at the datapad in his hand.

"Fake," Foiritan said.

Blaque stared back at Foiritan. His eyes bulged, and a vein started throbbing in his neck. He took a deep breath and said, "You trickster. You *goddamn*, good-for-nothing poli-"

His tirade was cut short by Foiritan's fist, which smashed into Blaque's cheek hard enough to spin him around and drop him onto the ground. The senator got up not with the shocked, angered or dazed look one might expect from someone who's just been clocked, but a curious expression. A red welt was rising on the skin over his cheekbone.

"Welcome to the new world," Foiritan said. "Don't forget who you are."

"Gloves off, I see," Blaque said.

"I needed to know where you stood. You'll be immersed in lies, disinformation and violence from now on. Might as well get used to it."

Blaque looked at him for a long time, and at the thing on the needle, and at the crystal spires in the distance. He was an ethical man, in his own mind, but a practical one as well, and decades in military service had tempered those ethics with a thorough understanding of humanity, particularly that wicked and terrible side which rose out of its murky depths only under duress. Through the rapidly fading mist of rage he realized that under enemy fire the most one could hope for was a leader cruel enough to do what needed to be done, and compassionate enough to understand why it needed doing.

"I am not at all sure, Mister President," Blaque said, his anger giving way to the dark humor that Foiritan had always admired in his adversary, "that this new world order should include the President striking his chief of internal security."

Foiritan kept up his poise, but Blaque noticed the slight untensing of shoulders as the president, "I'll say. I nearly broke my goddamn knuckles."

The sun was beginning to descend. The garden's ambient noise quieted accordingly.

"We need to align the people, and to do so we need a leader who fits the season. I'm going to be the monster, Blaque," the president said. "And you're going to be the thunder that announces my passage."

## The Dark End of Space

Kezti Sundara, Grand Admiral of Amarr's Imperial Navy, stood alone inside the massive cathedral, dwarfed by the icons of eternity that glinted distantly in the lamplight. He remained utterly still, head leaned towards the vaulted ceiling. Quiet times were hard to come by in the Empire these days.

There was a metallic clank. Behind Sundara, on the other side of the cathedral, the massive doors slowly swung open. Footsteps echoed off the marble floor, then stopped.

"Welcome, Captain," Sundara said without turning around.

"Admiral," the Captain said.

"Captain, why do you think you're here?" Sundara asked in a quiet but clear voice.

"Tell me, sir," the Captain said in noncommittal tones.

Sundara noticed the Captain's reticence. He turned and stared directly into the Captain's eyes. "We're going to war, Captain. Fulfilling our lives' purpose. Aren't you pleased?" he said, with the slightest hint of irony.

"I really couldn't say, sir."

The Admiral sighed. "Alright. Speak freely. It'll be the last time in a long while, so enjoy it while it lasts."

The Captain made as if to speak, hesitated, and shut his mouth again. He broke the gaze and looked at the cathedral walls, whose tinted windows had changed hue and added a shining bronze to the evening's red rays. Eventually he said, "I don't think we can win this war. I don't even think there should be a war."

"Recent events pass you by, Captain?" the Admiral said. "I hear we had some action. A bit of revolt, even."

"Sir-"

"The largest armada of Minmatar forces ever seen crosses over into our space, abducts millions of souls and causes untold destruction and havoc in the life of perfectly innocent people. The only thing that saves us right before the wave breaks is an intervention so definite and miraculous you could almost call it divine. And you, a leader of the Emperor's own holy fleet," the Admiral added, walking close enough to the Captain that their chests nearly met, "Don't think there should be a war."

This time the Captain held his gaze. "No, sir. I don't."

"Explain yourself."

"We're still reeling after the Minmatar onslaught. We're changing leaders, which always throws a spanner into the works-

"Master politico-theologians say we're experiencing a glorious sea change of unprecedented proportions, with nothing but celestial glory and heavenly fate that awaits us."

"Theologians can suck my Apoc, sir. We're the ones manning the guns."

Sundara betrayed a smile. "Alright. Carry on."

"Look, sir, I'm as happy as the next man that Sarum is back in power. I honestly am. But we're a sea of people, vast and heavy. She'll need time to route everyone to her cause, even the ones who believe in it. And if the Reclaiming is to restart in earnest, we'll need to do it properly right from the start. The effort won't allow anything less than a unified front, a genuinely unified one; not just the sycophants and paranoia of Karsoth's old court. We need to clean house before we move into anyone else's."

"You've given this some thought, Captain."

"Well, my superiors insist on adding complexities to my job, sir. I'm merely trying to adapt."

\*\*\*

The Grand Admiral thought this over. He was sitting in a very comfortable chair, considering very unpleasant things. His Captain stood before him, a small figure in a vast and well-lit room. They were in a penthouse within shouting distance of the Crystal Boulevard. Lower military orders were ensconced in bunkers beneath the Boulevard's translucent shields, but the Admiral refused to let himself be cowed into those. Besides, in his career he'd attended many long meetings in close quarters with overexcited navy brass, and he knew exactly what it would be like. People thought better, up here in the fresh air.

"Complexities such as?"

The Captain took a deep breath.

"Aside from the time we need to sort out internal chaos, the external situation is so fragile that we can barely do anything at all. You can't sneeze in Luminaire without both our side and theirs locking and loading. If we fire even one volley ... well, their captains might have sense to hold back, but CONCORD will roar right in and stomp around, getting everyone excited, and sooner or later some idiot hotshot will see his path to glory. Everything gets set off, and all that's left of every planet in Luminaire is a series of smoking craters."

"Duly noted, Captain," the Admiral said. "We can't start another war in Luminaire, which burns some of our hawks no end. And we certainly can't ignore or withdraw from CONCORD unless we want to supercharge the current chaos. What else?"

The Captain, staring straight forward, kept a carefully blank expression. "There is something else, sir?"

"Captain, we just lost an entire planet to a madman. You've served under me for years. This is no time for doubts or secret thoughts. What else? And stand at ease, for goodness' sake."

The Captain maintained her stance but her voice softened somewhat. She said, "Sir ... what are we going to do about the capsuleers?"

Anteson Ranchel, who had been Vice Admiral of the Gallente Federation Navy right up until the point his predecessor made one of the biggest military blunders in Federation history, gave his best Captain a big grin. "Well now," he said, "That's a bit of a problem. A group of people so powerful they're practically a faction unto themselves. Immortal, fearless and wealthy beyond imagining. Born of all four empires but beholden, in truth, to no one but themselves. And utterly untapped, in this little skirmish of ours."

"We need them, sir."

"Of course we do, Captain. They'll turn the tide of the war. Every capsuleer worth their pod should be taking a stand right now, and helping the forces of right against the tyranny and violence that envelops us."

The Captain nodded.

"And where, might I ask," the Admiral continued, "should that stand be taken?"

"A long way from here, if it were up to me, sir," the Captain said. "Last thing we need is opposing forces of pod pilots shooting at each other right outside our planet."

The Admiral smiled. "Good. I'm glad I've got some people left with more brains than bravery. So where, Captain, do you suggest we put them?"

\*\*\*

"The dark end of space, ma'am."

"If that's a euphemism, Captain," the Grand Admiral said, "Believe me, I've heard enough of them already."

For a Minmatar war room, it made a number of concessions to sanity. There were only two persons there, not several representatives arguing about policy or sharpening their weapons. The

walls had tactical maps on them, not tribe banners, and the surfaces of the recon tables were completely free of small arms, painblades and replica Khuumaks.

"Long meetings, ma'am?"

"If I ever see another member of the Minmatar government it'll be an eon too soon, Captain. Might end up putting them the same place you're suggesting we put our capsuleers. Sounds like a rotten use of good people, though."

"The government?"

"The capsuleers."

"Not really, ma'am," the Captain said. "We need the lowsec territories. We need the resources there for anything and everything we'll be doing elsewhere."

The Admiral resumed her pacing around the room. Voices could be heard from somewhere far outside, either arguments or chants; it was hard to tell which, sometimes. "I don't like this, Captain. We did a full frontal attack and it was one of the most glorious moments in Minmatar history. We beat the Amarr nearly to a pulp, we flexed our might like never before since the great revolution. And we freed millions."

"Yes, sir. We beat the Amarr nearly to a pulp."

"Captain-"

"Up until the point where they burnt us to cinders and brushed away what was left of the ashes."

The Admiral rubbed her eyes. Her name was Kasora Neko, she was in charge of the Minmatar Fleet and she had not slept for a long time. "Captain, I've had three meetings today with various Minmatar political officials who think that brandishing a Khuumak gives them free rein with war metaphors. I value your services, but understand that if you start the same, I will turn your innards into poetry."

"Ma'am."

"As it happens, I agree with you. I think we do need the capsuleers, more than many people realize. I think they're going to turn the tide of the war. I think they're going to *be* the war, in all honesty. There is no way we can get away twice with the stunt we pulled at Halturzhaz, which means we'll need resources for a longer-term war, and we'll need to move around CONCORD. That means lowsec, and the only people crazy enough to fight to the death to hold those territories are the capsuleers. And that's not all. You know what's the most valuable resource in lowsec, Captain?"

"Well, there's Omber, and Noxcium, and probably Hemorphh-"



"It's people."

"Right."

"You're going to ask me what they refine to, Captain."

"The thought did cross my mind, ma'am, but you've had a long day."

"We need them for our efforts. And the Amarr want them for whatever hellish plans they're cooking up. The Empire fleets won't dare come into our territory again, not when they don't know what we're capable of, and not while they're sorting out their problems. So this Reclaiming," she spat the word, "or whatever they want to call their excuse for today's dose of misery, is going to start in lowsec, where we've got millions of people we can't possibly defend."

\*\*\*

"And it goes beyond that, Captain."

The Captain was silent. His superior had not asked him a question.

"We've only just begun," the Admiral continued. The garden was quiet apart from the bubble of the sand waterfall and the distant whispers of the laser birds. "This first achievement is one of many to follow, so long as we can keep everything together on the home front."

The Captain looked to the birds. Hearing his Admiral, who had served in the Caldari Navy for a long while, criticize the State's infrastructure like this set his nerves on edge. There'd been enough instability already without the high powers consistently making it worse by acknowledging it.

"What do you think about going into lowsec, Captain?" the Admiral asked.

The Captain cleared his throat. Fleet Admiral Morda Engsten was an intimidating presence, and when she asked a question like that, she wanted a good answer.

"Well, ma'am ..." The birds were approaching, their halogen outlines flickering in the sunny air.

The Admiral sat down near the sand waterfall. "Speak, Captain," she said, not unkindly.

"I think it's an excellent idea whose implications are sure to be vast, ma'am."

"You think it's dumb."

"Like a rock, ma'am."

Engsten reached out and put her hand into the waterfall, palm upwards, fingers spread out. The sand flowed around them unrestrained. "Tell me more, Captain. You're not going to ruin anything, least of all your own career."

The Captain allowed himself to doubt this. Nonetheless, he had been asked a question, and he admired the Admiral. He took a deep breath. "I don't understand why we're going into low security space, sir. It feels like we're running away. Say what you wish about Heth's rise to power, he lined us up at last, and made us kick hard at the Gallente. We've got Caldari Prime back, which I didn't think would happen in my lifetime if it ever did at all. We've got a war *here*, Admiral."

"That we do, Captain," Engsten said. "Now tell me what gains we're fighting for."

"Well, our people have been oppr-"

"The gains, Captain," the Admiral interrupted. "Not the ideology. I want our final military goal."

The Captain began, "Well, there is Luminai-...", then caught the Admiral's gaze and fell silent. He thought for a while, then said in quieter tones, "We're not talking about Luminaire, are we, ma'am?"

The Admiral slowly shook her head.

"Ma'am ... we're taking this all the way, aren't we?"

The Admiral nodded without smiling.

"Luminaire is a bomb right now, one that could be set off by anything and which nobody can control." It felt like he was mindreading the entire military council in absentia. "So we go into lowsec space to test out our capsuleers and build up resources. And as we make those gains, we also gain territory. Gallente lowsec territory. Which brings us closer to Gallente highsec space."

"And Luminaire at last," Admiral Engsten said.

"And Luminaire at last, ma'am," the Captain said, a slight tremor in his voice. "Along with everything else. We'll take their edges, and then there'll be nothing left but the center. We'll do it, Admiral."

The Fleet Admiral put her hand in the sand again. "And there is no doubt in your mind that we can do this?"

"Of course not. We're Caldari. And we're in the right."

The Admiral smiled. The sand hissed as it flowed through her fingers.

\*\*\*

Aside from the hiss, the room was entirely silent. The five Jovians inside sat and stared into the ether. They were surrounded by polycarbonate windows that showed the starry space outside.

The hiss came from an open comms line.

The Jovians waited.

\*\*\*

In four different elevators on four different stations, two diplomats got in on the top floor. One, who represented an Empire Faction, took out from his pocket a small datapad and cracked a joke about wars. The other, who represented CONCORD, accepted the datapad, signed it with his identity key, and laughed at the joke.

The elevator ride was long and the diplomats spoke swiftly, coding and signing the necessary digital back-and-forth with practiced hands. By the time they got out, the four empires had petitioned CONCORD to ratify an emergency capsuleer militia procedure, and were now officially at war.

## The Better Part of Valor

"But no one's gonna come down on me for this, right?"

"Don't worry about a thing. The agency will cover your back legally, we'll assign a pseudonym, you'll be absolutely fine."

"Yeah. I just need to be sure there's absolutely no..."

"Mr. Sitsui. Remember what we talked about."

"I know, I know." The young man tugged absently at the dark tin figure-eight woven through both nostrils. The sight of his skin stretching made her nauseous.

"Okay," she said, with more finality than she felt. She fixed her gaze on the table between them. "Whenever you're ready, go ahead and start from the beginning. If you want to reword something, just stop and say 'I'd like to reword, please.' If you aren't sure you're remembering something correctly, it's very important that you mention that, even though you're going to give us the events as they transpired to the best of your recollection. All clear?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

She leaned back in her chair and briefly thought about lighting a cigarette, then decided against it. Better to let them ease into it on their own. Wait until they find their feet in the story, then light the torch as a sign that everyone's at ease.

"Okay. So we're sitting there, there's about four of us..."

"Wait. Start by telling me a bit about who you are. Sorry."

"Oh. Okay. I'm Orin Sitsui. I'm, uh, I'm a materials tech for Caldari Constructions, here under service contract with Kaalakiota Second Command, currently on eighth year of service."

"All right, that's good. Thanks."

"Sure. So, yeah. Four of us, I think maybe five, but I'm pretty sure four."

"This was where?"

"In my section. The east ridge, level 55. My hab was in a real sweet spot, right next to the Syntact galleries and a row of restaurants. A small group of us who'd been in training together, we used to always hang out there. And this time that I'm talking about – we're all pretty new, you know, and most of us have never been exposed to how strict the regulations really are up here. I mean, we were told in training but I guess they didn't do a good enough job of

hammering it in or something, because almost everyone I knew would have a story within like a week. One guy got trapped in the laundry room after hours and had to be rescued by maintenance drones. One guy wore a wristpiece that covered up a part of his ID derm and got zapped by his own doorway. Everybody was adjusting, you know?"

She nodded, bunching up her toes inside her shoes. That cigarette was calling her.

"So, right. We're sitting in one of the places near my hab on a Wednesday afternoon, and we've just finished a long bout of shifts so we're looking at four days off. We're drinking, you know, getting fast on cheap stimstickers – yeah, legal ones, of *course* – and just having a good time, and then there's a commotion. Turns out there's a capsuleer coming through. Now, this was before the big boom, so eggers were ultra-rare. None of us had ever laid eyes on one.

"Turned out there wasn't much to see. He was really short. Dark hair, nondescript face. Civire, I'm pretty sure. He had a contingent of Home Guard guys with him, real nasty pieces of work. You constantly heard about the Home Guard guys on the station. Infantry grunts, right? Signed up for war. Getting put on space station guard duty, for these guys, was like being told to cook and eat your own face. One of the guys in our section had a brother who was a Home Guard recruiter, and he said the guys who got assigned to the space stations were all being punished for insubordination, even if they did end up leading squadrons of the contract grunts. He said they joked that being a Station Sergeant was a demotion from Private.

"I really should have known better, I guess. Should have, I don't know, I should have put two and two together. But whatever."

She took the cigarette case from her pocket and nimbly fished one out, then placed it between her lips and lit it. Distantly he stared at the cherry of her flame for a few seconds.

"Would you like to take a break?" she said. "There's no rush. If this is hard for you to tell, we can wait a bit." She blew a column of smoke into the air-conditioned swirl above them.

"Nah," he said, leaning back in the chair and putting his hands on his knees. "Nah, I'm fine." He resumed his story.

"So I'm quite lifted, you know? I got four days off, I'm getting pretty loose off the stim-alcohol mix, and Janeira's on the other side of the table giving me all the right signals. And at one point I look over, and I make eye contact with one of the Home Guard guys.

"This guy had the weirdest look. He was staring right at me when I looked over, but still it felt like he couldn't see me somehow. At first I thought it was 'cause of my skin, since there aren't many halfbreeds like me running around on the upper decks. But then I realized it was because of the way I was sitting. I was sitting on the back of my chair with my feet on the seat, and station regs frown upon that, you see. I felt ridiculous suddenly, like a kid in a lunchroom who was about to catch a whack from the minder. And, I don't know, maybe that was exactly what made me do it, but out of nowhere I looked back at him and then pursed my lips in a little kiss.

"And just as I do it his eyes sort of widen a little bit, and Janeira notices me doing it and looks back, and when she sees who I just did it to she goes into this barely-subdued fit of laughter, and then the other people at the table catch on, and all the while the guy's just standing there, glaring back at me with the meanest god damn expression you ever saw. I felt this weird combination of fear and elation, like I was playing this danger game and it could go either way, you know, and I think I acted it too. But it was all for show, really. As soon as I made that air-kiss, something deep inside of me just went 'oh man, you did it now,' and this creeping sense of dread set in.

"So after staring at me for a few more seconds the guy breaks his gaze and goes back to looking around, guarding the egger guy, and the egger by this point is talking with another guy who's arrived at the table. Things are quiet for a few minutes, and I kind of stop worrying about that glare and start thinking I lucked out, you know, got away with it. And then suddenly there's this mad shuffle of movement, and the egger stands up and kind of stumbles back, and the guy he was talking to is just kind of sitting in his chair shaking, and something black and round falls from his hand, under the table.

"Took me a while to notice that the grunt who'd been staring at me was holding out a little pistol-shaped thing in the guy's direction. He had this intense look of concentration on his face, but hateful too, like he was gonna end this guy right then and there. A couple of seconds pass and the guy's just sitting there, jiggling and foaming at the mouth, and all the grunts are just kind of staring, and I mean, us too, everybody in there is just staring at this guy get slowly roasted.

"Then all of a sudden the soldier stops and the guy just slumps forward on the table. The Home Guard guys go into this big huffing kind of secure-the-perimeter dance and one of them leads the egger away. We're just sitting there slack-jawed, looking at the whole thing unfold, right? And then I notice that, sure enough, the one who'd been staring at me is making a beeline for our table, and my feeling of dread just comes powering back. We're all kind of rattled by the scene, so as he approaches we're sort of half-standing up. My friend was about to say something to him, but he just walks right up to me and grabs my arm. He's pretty flustered, like he doesn't know himself exactly what he's gonna do next, but there's this anger in his eyes, this absolute insane rage, you know?

"So he grabs my arm and I instinctively resist, right? I don't know what he wants with me, so I kinda pull my arm back and it makes him lose his balance momentarily. I start to say something, but just as I'm starting the sentence he whirls around and just smacks – he's carrying this compact bullpup piece with a chromed handle-end, right, and he just smacks it right into the bridge of my nose.

"Now, I'm no fighter. I grew up in a KK creche, never been in a scrap in my life, never had much interest in any of the fighting sports. So I guess up until that moment I had a pretty dim idea of what could happen and how bad it could be. Man, it was *bad*. First thing, my eyes just open up. I mean a full force torrent. I couldn't see anything. There was this disgusting crack, and I fell back down on the chair with this slick heat spreading all over my mouth and down my neck. I wanted to say or do something, but I was way too shocked to do anything but sit there and blink and sputter.

"Jaseira told me later that the guy took another look at everyone around the table, just sort of coldly took stock of the situation and then decided it was well within bounds to do it again, so he did. Twice. The second one made me black out, thankfully."

She regarded him with what she hoped was a compassionate look. He was tugging at his nose contraption again.

"I was too scared to register a complaint but I found out a couple days later that Jaseira had gone and done it anyway, behind my back. She was way more angry about the whole thing than I was. I guess maybe she felt partly responsible because she'd laughed at the guy too.

"Anyway, we never saw him again. I got some kind of standardized letter of apology from their station commander a couple weeks later, but it didn't say anything about what they'd done with him or whether they'd even done anything at all."

"You're positive it was him?" she asked.

"Yeah. I wouldn't have called you guys otherwise. I'm not stupid. I know things have a way of getting out despite best intentions, and I know this isn't gonna make me very popular with the guy or his cronies. I just need the money. I'm splitting."

"A few of you are, huh?"

"Yeah. Just doesn't feel right around here anymore. I mean, we worked for the glory of the State before there was a big man at the top. We worked for the State because of what it represents. And there's one guy up there now with everything under his heel. What happened to the needs of the many outweighing the gains of the one? I mean, I like what he's doing, some of it anyway. The mood here is more optimistic than I've ever seen it, and there's this really strong sense of purpose, but I just, I don't know. I guess I got my reservations about what kind of foundation it's all built on."

"Where are you gonna go?"

"I'd rather not talk about that, if it's all the same." He looked at her for a few seconds, then gave a rueful little half-smile.

"Okay," she said, giving the signal for the recorder to be shut off. "Okay, well, I think we have everything we need. Your compensation should be in your account already. Thanks for your candor, Mr. Sitsui."

It was evening in the office-box of Executive Editor Harben Mullar, and outside its two small windows the studio assistants were busily disassembling the day's sets, tools whizzing and clicking under the artificial light. She was standing in front of his desk. Her finished piece was lying upon it.

"The story was corroborated by three of the four other witnesses. The girl has been relocated to a different part of the region. I wasn't able to get a hold of her."

Mullar didn't look at her. He drummed his fingers on the table. "Okay," he said.

"Sitsui himself says he doesn't think the attack was racially motivated, but I think the story will speak for itself."

"Uh-huh."

"It's funny. He has this ancient reconstructive wire-mesh thing in his nose. Vherokior tech from hundreds of years back. I asked him why he didn't just get it regrown. Said he needed the reminder to not do stupid things. All very dramatic."

Mullar nodded. *Bi-di-dim, bi-di-dim*, went his fingers on the table.

"Everything checks out. Heth was with the Home Guard at the time, and he'd been assigned to the station in question just three weeks earlier. He was dismissed four months after the incident. The official reason was budget cuts, but this wasn't an isolated incident and I doubt his superiors could ignore that type of thing for very long."

Mullar ceased his tapping and leaned back in his chair. He sighed. "I know it all checks out," he said. "It's a good piece, Rekka."

His tone had a terribly familiar ring to it. She looked at him for a long while.

"No way, Harb," she began.

"Yup. Just got a call from Agency Central. They're redlighting the piece."

"No way, Harb," she said.

"Yup. Indefinite standby. Directive came from right up top."

"But it's a good piece. It's inbounds. It's not a bullet." Her voice was rising. "I thought we agreed, we're just illustrating..."

"We agreed, Rekka, but you know as well as I do that if AC decides we can't run it, then we can't run it. It's out of my hands."

"Did they give a reason, at least? Or is it the usual need-to-know bullshit?"

Mullar fished a cigarette out of his case. "Take tomorrow off," he said, screwing it between his lips. "There'll be time to talk after the weekend."



She stood there, staring at him. For a while she stared, as he clicked open a small lighter and briefly bathed the end of his cigarette in blue flame. He looked at her with resigned firmness and blew a plume of smoke into the space between them.

She turned on her heel and walked out.

The door shut on the office of Harben Mullar, and as it did the studio's lights winked out, one by one by one.

## All These Wayward Children

Jetek, sleepless, walked down the empty corridor and headed for the stars on the ship.

Every space vessel had a viewing platform somewhere in its design, its purpose varying from celebration to contemplation. On some it might be a great hall, decorated and warm and beset with equipment to watch the stars. On other, smaller ships, it could be as little as a room with a window and an information vidscreen beside it, where you could call up all human knowledge on the planets in view.

This chamber was somewhere in between. It was round, had only one entrance, and its few metal chairs glinted a muted gold in the faint lights from the high ceiling. The walls held Amarrian religious icons, forms and images, but most of these were partly covered by the recently hung banners of House Sarum. Aside from the metal chairs the main type of furniture, spread mostly over the center and far end of the room, was small backless benches, soft and upholstered with a purple, suedelike material. The entire far end of the room was overtaken by a curved wall of transparent polycarb glass, and through its unbreakable wall lay open space, infinite and constant. Vast nebulas the sizes of small kingdoms dominated the view.

Sitting on those low benches in the middle of the room made you feel small, almost like a child again. Jetek longed for that feeling sometimes, in these complex times. He came here when the roars of the rivers in his head needed calming, and this little alcove of the moving world, this small forest of metal and stars, never failed to offer its lulling quiet.

Jetek had been hand-picked to this crew, as had everyone else. He'd been vetted by psych and doctor teams both, and while he'd never gone to great lengths to advertise his loyalties - he was a crewman, not a politician - they stood unquestioned.

Which was why he was onboard this ship, entrusted with bringing Empress Jamyl Sarum to her destination on this multi-day trip.

Her retinue kept to itself, maintaining court in their section of the ship's living quarters, and while the crew was permitted to enter at will, their intermingling with the royal entourage was subtly discouraged. One knew one's place on this ship.

So when Jetek entered the room and sat on one of the benches, with most of his own crew safely asleep and the Empress's own people presumably all secluded in their part of the vessel, he did so with the expectation that it would be as blessedly empty as it had been all the other times he had taken refuge there.

When someone cleared their throat, it raised the hairs on the back of his neck, and when he turned and saw who was standing in a darkened part of the room, he felt like his skin was going to tear itself off his body in fear.

Everyone had known who Jamyl Sarum was, long before she reappeared, and everyone knew exactly what she'd done in the recent Minmatar invasion, though no two stories of the event ever

seemed to match. All agreed, though, that she'd stopped the Minmatar in their tracks. She carried with her a reputation so legendary that it was reaching mythological levels, and her images showed an extraordinary beauty that brought decidedly secular thoughts to the minds of young men. She was as godly as anyone in this world could be.

Before him, not ten steps away, stood Her Highness, the ruler of Amarr Empire, Empress Jamyl Sarum the First.

He made a noise somewhere between a mewl and a stuttered choke.

She stood there and regarded him, then took a few slow steps closer. His legs, now made of jelly, wanted to run away but didn't manage more than a twitch. In some panic-frozen part of his head he was thankful the fear had paralyzed him, for running away blindly from Her Highness would likely be one of the very few things even worse than walking in on her without leave or purpose.

"What is your name?" she said. He merely stared back, unable to speak.

She stepped closer. Her brown silk robe trailed behind her like a second shadow, and the gold decoration on its folds glinted in the faint light. Her long chestnut hair cascaded down her back, so dark that it was almost indistinguishable from the robe. She smiled at him, which made it only so much worse.

"I'm tired of speaking to no one but my retinue," she said, in a voice that felt like warm sunlight. "It is stifling. I want to reach out to others, particularly the isolated souls in the darker reaches. We mustn't ever fear the unknown." She leaned her head to one side. "Are you all right? You're gaping wider than a Slaver at feeding time."

His throat decided to let air through at last, and as he gasped he found his voice. "Empress, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to intrude, forgive me, I'll be off-"

"Stay, please," Sarum said. "I could do with the company. On this long journey there's been little else to do but think, or talk to oneself."

"I really didn't mean to sneak up on you, Empress, and I don't think I should be this close-"

"Oh, hush. I don't feel the slightest bit insecure. And I heard you coming," she said.

This surprised Jetek, who could have sworn he hadn't made a sound when he entered, but it put him at ease. He rose from his seat and kneeled in front of Sarum for a moment, then got up again and went to the window, standing there at a respectable distance. She walked up to him, making his skin crawl again in apprehension, and stared out at the same stars.

"What is your opinion of God's great work?" she said.

"I'm sorry, Highness?"

She gave him another wonderful smile. "The skies, Jetek. The seas you sail."

He thought about this, hoping to stop sounding like a moron. The best he could think of was to say, "I think they're wonderful, Empress. That's really the only word I can think of."

"It's a good word," Sarum said. "But what about the people who inhabit them?"

"Some of them are wonderful too," Jetek replied, biting his tongue lest it left his mouth. The Empress's alignments would be different than the Chamberlain's, and going against the supreme leader's worldview was a bad idea no matter how likeable they might seem.

She seemed to notice his hesitation, for she smiled and said, "Yes. Some of them are wonderful indeed. But what about the ones who are not? What should we do about them?"

"I'm sure Her Highness knows best," Jetek replied promptly.

She looked back to the stars, giving no hint whether she approved of his noncommittal answer. But her expression changed, growing steely and blank. It reminded Jetek of nothing so much as passing to the dark side of a planet. He hoped he would make it out of the room alive.

"There was someone, I forget his name. I did everything I could in difficult circumstances and it wasn't enough for him," she said. "He had to take a stand. For some, when they're desperate, it simply isn't possible to solve things reasonably. They must have noise and fire to match whatever's in their heads."

"So what do you do?" Jetek asked, despite himself.

She fixed him with a steely glance. "You react. Sometimes you have to hurt someone to make them understand how badly they're hurting themselves. You have to come to the rescue by being the villain, not just for them but for everyone they touch, lest they lose themselves in that same hellish fire." She turned away from the stars and took a seat, never letting her gaze waver from Jetek's presence. "So there is punishment, which is the wrong word for the right thing, something that marks them for life, brings them under control, makes them a productive part of society. What's the word I'm looking for, Jetek?"

"I wish I knew, Empress. I truly do." Jetek remembered this man. His name had been, and likely still was, Kerrigan Orsha. During a fiery speech he had shouted at and berated Jamyl Sarum in an open assembly, calling her names that really shouldn't be uttered at the impending supreme ruler of one's own empire. The assembly session had dissolved into chaos and Orsha's own family had renounced him in an attempt to save themselves. It had worked, after a fashion: Lord Orsha had been judged and found guilty of heresy, a charge that carried the death sentence, but the Empress had granted him clemency of a sort. Instead of death, she had decreed that he have the words of his outburst tattooed on every part of his skin. She had offered him the option of withdrawing to a convent to study the scriptures for the remainder of his life, which he had gratefully accepted, his old and public life effectively ended at this point.

The Empress had a faraway look. She said, "... Benediction."

Jetek shivered.

"I wanted to bring him into our fold, for if I hadn't, he would have railed and thrashed until he shook himself to pieces, and we'd have had no choice but to put him out of his misery," she said, looking to the stars again. Her expression softened, and it was like the sun rising again.

"Do you think I'm beautiful?" she asked in a much milder tone.

"Yes, Highness," he replied without a moment's thought.

"Do you think I'm awesome?" she asked, every syllable of the word clicking smoothly into place.

"Yes, Highness," he replied again.

"Do you think I'm terrifying?" she asked, as if they were all the same questions.

"Yes, Highness," he said, understanding that in fact they were.

Quiet fell on them. Nothing could be heard but the hum of the ship itself, the tiny little creaks and thrums that came from anything alive and moving. It consistently amazed Jetek how something so powerful could be so quiet.

She was still looking at him with that faraway gaze, though whether it was in expectation, or if she was merely lost in thought, he couldn't tell. He didn't dare disappoint her, so he said, "It's more mercy than he could have expected before your time, Empress. People ought to have respect."

She nodded and stood up, walking to the window. The silk of her robe hissed softly as it was drawn off the seat.

She said, as if to the stars, "The man had five children and twelve grandchildren. He had friends, even if he's lost them now. He was a known person. And respect, just as the lack of it, is like little fires that need to be kept lit and alive."

The ship turned slightly, creaking.

She looked back at him and her expression resembled the sun itself now, blinding and majestic, peaceful and soothing, focused and completely engulfing all at once. It was like being cradled in the arms of the end of the world.

"On his flesh, among the words of scripture, we tattooed the names of his children and his children's children," she said, and Jetek would swear to his final days that something flashed in her eyes, as if wanting to break free, "And he will never forget who he is, or who we are."

She fell silent again. He swallowed audibly, realized his mouth was hanging open, and snapped it shut.

"But you won't tell anyone about this meeting," she said. There was no menace in her tone, no threat nor promise of danger; merely a relaxed, even concerned, conscience.

"Of course not," he said.

"Of course not," she repeated. "I know you won't."

The stars seemed cold and uncaring to Jetek, and his fate like a stuttering flame, soon extinguished.

The Empress looked out at those same stars. "We need to save them, all of them, from themselves. We need to reclaim their fates and envelop them in ours. And we need to love them, no matter how much it hurts."

She touched the glass and added, "All these wayward children."

## **Masks of Authority**

*[Note: Written by CCP Gnauton.]*

Since the early days of the Caldari State, the eight corporate police forces of the Chief Executive Panel have played an important role in Caldari society. Figures of great public attention, reviled and worshiped in equal measure (often by the same person), these eight private militaries collectively match the official Caldari Army in numbers and far exceed it in training.

What are these forces, how do they operate, and how did they come to be?

### **Necessity and Invention**

Some years after the dust of the Caldari-Gallente War had settled and the eight corporations of the Chief Executive Panel were getting acclimated to running an independent Caldari State, the issue of defense spending was raised at a national budget meeting. The Kaalakiota Corporation and the Sukuuvestaa Corporation were by this point well established as bitter competitors for the top of the revenue pile, and the subject spawned a heated debate between the two corporations' CEOs.

The passage of time had done little to diminish the Kaalakiota leadership's wartime alertness; they had long been advocates of increased military spending, particularly towards protection of assets in the homeland. The Sukuuvestaa, meanwhile, wanted the available funds diverted towards land partitioning on newly settled planets, reasoning that the creation of new assets was every bit as important as the protection of existing ones. That Kaalakiota dealt primarily in arms at the time, and Sukuuvestaa primarily in real estate, were topics not raised at the meeting.

Due to the rivalry between the two the discussion soon escalated far beyond its purview, and what began as a simple debate swiftly turned into a heated argument rife with overtones of power struggle. The remaining executives of the CEP, uncomfortable with this potential disruption in the works, voted to momentarily shelve the topic.

Kaalakiota was not happy. Shortly after the meeting, they announced that the corporation would be bringing its own financial resources to bear in forming an independent internal security force, "tasked with maintaining peace and order on all Kaalakiota holdings." This organization they called Home Guard, a name taken by the corporate-political community as a pointed reference to the dispute between the two leaders. Sukuuvestaa responded in kind by releasing a statement curtly announcing their intention to create their own military arm. In a direct jab at Kaalakiota, they named their force the "Peace and Order Unit." The other mega-corporations, not to be outdone, soon followed suit. Within the year, all eight members of the Chief Executive Panel had either announced or begun formation of their own internal security forces.

### **Smoke and Mirrors**

From this bed of bluster sprouted the eight organizations known today as the Chief Executive Panel's faces of power. Equal parts propaganda tool and police force, the corporate forces are in

many ways the most direct outward representation of their parent corporations' power, affluence, style and cultural significance. Seeking to capitalize on the relentless propaganda battle between the powers that be, Caldari entertainment interests have in recent years made very lucrative deals with these forces, hurling their desired images into the cultural zeitgeist in return for a slice of the profit pie.

Avoiding direct competition in favor of finding their own niche, each of the eight has diversified into their own particular area. Spacelane Patrol, CBD's corporate force, is continually portrayed as a cadre of brash hotshots who travel from one corner of the universe to another on missions that usually involve much purposeful strutting around exotic locales. The Lai Dai Protection Service, meanwhile, are regularly shown to be a group of dashing handsome tactical geniuses who devise complex original stratagems at the drop of a hat, usually under circumstances of extreme duress. Kaalakiota were the first to make this type of entertainment deal and have arguably been the most successful: Home Guard's image is second to none, not just among the corporate corps establishment but also in the popular cultures of all four empires.

The glossy tropes of the public relations holoreels and the beige glamour of stylized war worship stand in stark contrast to the reality of these agencies, but most people have only a muddy awareness of the dichotomy. A man can be rudely treated by a brusque and superior Ishukone Watch officer and silently curse him for hours, but as soon as he gets home that evening he is just as likely to prop his feet up and enjoy a rousing serial where the Ishukone Watch's superior technology and cunning allows it to root out Gurista spies and double-cross them into revealing their hideout. So pervasive is the propaganda that it is highly doubtful this man ever draws a parallel between the real thing and the image; the connection he draws, instead, is between the image and the mother corporation it represents.

Internal Security, the Nugoeihuvi Corporation's force, poses a curious irony in this regard. Though the Nugoeihuvi conglomerate's main preoccupation is the entertainment industry, they have consistently failed to change the prevalent cultural image of their troops as a pack of rough-and-tumble thugs culled from the Caldari underworld, given to the grossest abuses and atrocities. It's very rare for elements of the Caldari State to find the rumor mill outgrinding them in their efforts at propaganda, but that's what's happening to Nugoeihuvi. (In reality, for the record, Nugoeihuvi's soldiers are not any more or less savage than those of the other corporate forces, though broadly speaking they have been noted to harbor a slightly greater proclivity toward drink and drugs.)

### **Cloak and Dagger**

Of course, the strong public relations utility of these forces does not mean that the good men and women that serve within them are mere puppets on a stage (though there exists, of course, a contingent of people willing to proclaim just that). It is an integral thing, for obvious practical reasons, that these militaries be proven without the shadow of a doubt to have aptitude in their profession. For this purpose a training summit is held each year at an undisclosed location, where the corporate forces lock horns in a series of combat- and survival-related challenges. This is the Haadoken Summit, and it is an event of great significance in Caldari culture.



Since nominally none of the corporations want the results to get out, the proceedings carry a veneer of secrecy. Betting on the event is strictly illegal, but it nonetheless creates underground gambling revenue far exceeding that of any official State sporting or entertainment event. Despite ledger upon ledger of regulations and reprimands, information about the results is invariably leaked by someone in the winner's camp, and so it is in this crucible of competition that the holoreels, the slogans, the commercials and the claims are either gloriously validated or revealed as nothing but empty spectacle.

Though nobody is ever declared deceased during the proceedings, it is a matter of public record that at least a dozen die each year and many more are injured (the families of the fallen receive standardized letters of condolence claiming their loved one has died in a training accident). Being essentially a contest between corporate ideologies played out in a quasi-military arena, the event touches many nerves in the Caldari soul, and its various obstacles and scenarios have been immortalized in countless holoreels and serials. The winners of the last three Haadoken summits have been the Ishukone Watch, whose level of training and tactical skill appears to be currently unmatched within the corporate forces.

## **Bread and Butter**

These agencies also perform the more mundane duties of a mega-corporation's internal security force. They ceaselessly patrol the perimeters of their territories; they conduct counterstrikes against pirates and terrorists; and they are responsible for security on every ship, outpost, station, moon and planetside facility owned by their mother corporations. They are also granted legal authority to act as police proxies within corporate jurisdiction, though in all cases where regional police have a presence their authority supersedes that of the corporate police.

Corporate forces are often criticized for their policework. Some of the more common accusations are gruff and uncaring demeanor, propensity for unnecessary violence, and lack of response time (particularly to non-acute, non-violent crimes). There is a simple reason for this: among the corporate forces, policework – which invariably involves dealing with the great unwashed masses – is seen as a lower-rung duty, a job for those unfit to serve in more of a military capacity.

Worst of all is policework on space stations, which tend to be overcrowded with travellers from a staggering multitude of places, each possessing a different set of legal rights based on his nationality and organizational affiliation, and each of which is cranky and in a rush and probably sweating. Additionally, corporate interstellar law dictates that stations' rental offices and other commercial zones be segmented into a patchwork of diplomatic units, each with its own rules and regulations. Policework on stations therefore tends to be an affair fraught with jurisdictional pratfalls and covered in a tangled underbrush of red tape.

To their credit, corporate forces do have a well-deserved reputation for responding swiftly and decisively when circumstances truly call for it. If things get very bad very fast – if there is a hostage situation, if there is a large brawl, if there is some sort of large-scale accident or disaster – the corps will be there, fast, and they'll attack the problem with everything they've got. People

may grumble about rudeness and laziness and bureaucracy, but regardless they rest content in the knowledge that if a true crisis presents itself, they're in good hands.

## **Steel and Plasma**

Altercations between the corporate forces exist on record, but in almost every case they have been small incidents based on misunderstanding, with warning shots the only ordnance released. A notable exception is an incident known as the Ingalles incident, where soldiers belonging to the Wyrkomi Peace Corps opened fire on a Hyasyoda convoy being escorted by the Hyasyoda's agency, the Corporate Police Force.

The Hyasyoda detail had received advance clearance for entry into the outpost, a high-tier classified Wyrkomi research node buried in the shadow of a Citadel moon. They were to escort the CEO of a subsidiary of Hyasyoda's, Santra Alloys, to a meeting with a high-ranking Wyrkomi scientist. The arrangement was legitimate (if unusual), but the Wyrkomi Peace Corps saw incongruity in the direct meeting of a CEO and a scientist.

They stopped the convoy and conducted a heavy-handed interrogation. Due to a fatal combination of bad intel and jittery nerves, they then ended up attacking it, killing four people and destroying the reputation of their police force for years to come. (To this day, the Wyrkomi Peace Corps are something of a laughing stock among the corporate forces, and to compound things they consistently place near the bottom of the yearly summit's scoreboards.)

## **Today and Tomorrow**

It is unclear at this moment whether Tibus Heth, the Caldari State's newly instated Executor, has any specific plans for the corporate forces. It is considered likely, however, that he will try to gain control of them and use them for his ends if hostilities with the Gallente Federation escalate any further. Doing so will be easier said than done, as these organizations retain a great deal of power in the name of their public appeal, to say nothing of their competent and well-equipped soldiery. The allegiances of the complex network of sponsors, affiliates and marketers they associate with, however, are wholly unknown.

During the invasion of Caldari Prime, all eight forces lent manpower to various aspects of the operation, from tactical strikes to civilian relocation, and the squadrons who participated have now mostly come back. Some scarred by atrocity, others whetted and ready for more, they are returning to their compatriots bearing tales of woe and grandeur on the blasted front. Where their loyalties will fall – and what sort of influence they'll spread – is anybody's guess.

If and when the time comes for Heth to begin making inroads, it remains to be seen what the CEOs of the Chief Executive Panel will do to hold on to these flagbearers of their outward image. One thing is certain, at any rate: whoever commands these forces controls a good deal more than just a group of men with guns.

## Her Painted Selves

Even at this height, where Braea felt a twinge of sickening dizziness, the roars of the crowds below could be heard. They were muffled through the polycarb glass, and when one of many assistants urged Braea to step closer to the edge of her sealed balcony overhanging what seemed like the world below, she got the momentary impression that she could simply keep walking: Out through the glass, into the air and through the station ceiling, out into space and into the unknown and unending dark. She had to stop herself from taking another step lest she bump into the glass wall. The cameras would capture that, as they did everything else, and she couldn't imagine the hundreds of thousands down below all laughing at her.

The floor was carpet-clad but the walls all around them were transparent, and everywhere she looked down below she saw countless tiny heads, like little fallen stars, all of them looking either up at her or at the massive quartet of video screens that hung above her crystal enclosure and flashed her image to the four corners of this floating world. She ventured a quick look up, but the sight of herself cast on those screens gave her even more vertigo than the heights had done.

In that brief glimpse she saw the camera zoom out from her face and show her entire figure in that tight dress she hated. She'd put on weight, first from the stress of what happened to Gerets and then as comfort against the shock when he got back. It was nothing that an expensive designer couldn't fix, she'd been told, but she knew her own body and she knew what she was. Most of the time, at least.

She quickly looked back down and cast a glance at Gerets, who stood beside her and had not made a sound. In this place, with the crowd's overbearing adoration of them and what they stood for, it felt easier, more real, to look at his face, destroyed as it was. It was not their first public appearance after Gerets' checkout from the rehabilitation ward, but she was continually amazed to find herself here.

Gerets was her fiancé. He was a member of the Gallente armed forces. He had been stationed on Caldari Prime during the invasion. Orbital bombardments had hit his barracks, killing everyone else. He'd been so disfigured that they had to use RNA scans to confirm his identity. That's what had happened, and that was how it was. She had to accept that.

His face looked like a child's paper drawing of a man that had been smudged with water and grime before being crumpled into a ball and flattened out again.

She bit her lip, hard. This was how it was. No panic and no backing out.

His costume covered him from neck on down, but Braea knew what lay beneath.

He would be fixed, but not for quite a while, for it was on him to be the symbol of perseverance and strength in the face of stark, brutal reality. This was what they'd done to Our Boys, all the reason we needed to go out there with fire and thunder. After some time - maybe a year or two, or three or four, they'd been told - he would quietly be given the funds needed to fix himself, followed by a total news blackout on him.

She looked to her side and pretended to wave, sneaking a glance at the capsuleer who'd hid in their entourage. He stood off-camera, looking like one of many assistants. His cranial socket was covered with a skin patch which in turn was concealed under a tight hood. He'd showed them the setup when he first came into the deal, explaining that while some people would undoubtedly guess his identity, it shouldn't be publicly acknowledged by anyone on the team. The capsuleer had offered an unknown addition to the funds the Federation had earmarked for Gerets' operation, enough to secure him a watcher's position in the press circus that surrounded the couple. He wasn't shy about his support, though its scope was unrevealed, but this effort wasn't supposed to be about him.

They had agreed, as they had agreed to so much, initially for the hope of a new beginning and eventually for the raw need for an end.

\*\*\*

The show ended and they all headed off for the VIP greeting session. The Federation had made substantial advances in the direction of total conquest, the news had said, and whatever else those advances were, they were undoubtedly absolute reason for rejoicing.

On their way into the main floor of the skyscraper, one of the tallest buildings on the station, some of the assistants quietly asked Gerets to follow them to the makeup section. There would be press.

Braea turned to follow them, but the capsuleer touched her elbow. "We're taking a little side route."

She furrowed her brows. The capsuleer said, "We'll get to makeup soon enough, and Gerets'll still be there." He looked towards Gerets and she followed his gaze. The skin on her fiancé's neck had gone reddish and some of the pustules residing on it had pushed their way out, dotting a flabby skin fold that dangled limply over his neckline.

Braea stared at his neck, then walked up to him, gingerly put a hand on his shoulder and said she'd be right along.

Gerets turned and looked impassively at her, then looked away and kept walking.

She told herself, for the thousandth time, that this sullenness was his nerves, nothing more than his nerves and the regimented behavior taught in the army, and not a lack of caring. Then she followed the capsuleer down another path.

They walked down a long corridor inset with soft light and entered a private elevator that took them down only a few floors. The elevator had one-way glass. Braea looked out, unseen at last.

"We can dim it both ways if it makes you feel queasy," the capsuleer said.

She blinked, looked at him, then said, "No, no. It's not that."

He leaned his head to one side, but said nothing more.

They left the elevator and walked out onto a floor that was one huge space, stretching throughout at least a third the length of the building. It was beautifully laid out, with touch-sensitive pads that left heat-signature tracks of her steps; furniture of leather and wood; and hologram paintings on the walls. Braea looked hard at each painting she passed, more than anything to take her mind off the world, and something began to catch her eye. It took her a moment, but eventually she spotted it in every one. That one rogue element: Herself. Hidden somewhere in the room would be cameras that took her image, processed it for presentation, and strategically projected it in the landscape of the paintings. She was an underwater diver, a resident in a dirtworld farmhouse, a captain of a spaceship. All the unwitting roles for her to play, a star even less real than the scenery.

She nearly bumped into the capsuleer. He'd stopped and was gesturing for her to take a seat in one of the leather couches. Leather, like wood, was a commodity on the stations and one she felt decidedly uncomfortable with, but the seat he was directing her to had a worn appearance and its leather surface had hairline cracks. "My favorite reading spot," he said.

She realized he was trying to help her feel relaxed and the small gesture set her at ease. She sat. "Is this someone's apartment?" she asked him. "Is it yours?"

He sat beside her, at a respectable distance. "Yes, it is. This is the entryway."

"How much of this floor is yours?"

"All of it," he said. "But I didn't bring you here to impress you."

She doubted it, but said nothing.

"How did all that fanfare make you feel?" he asked.

She narrowed her eyes and remained silent. Although he'd been in the project almost from the start and had remained affable throughout, he was a capsuleer. She and everyone she knew had an ingrained awe of his kind that was equal parts fear, admiration, distrust and wonder. The gulf that existed between him and everyone else was not easily bridged.

Also, she didn't yet know what he wanted out of all this. His monetary gift to the program had been quite substantial.

Also, she was very tired, not least of being stared at by people with ideas in their head about who she was.

"It's uncomfortable," he says. "Doesn't really feel like it's really you they're seeing or want to see. I know how that is."

She debated how forthright she could be with him and decided to try the waters. "Not to be ungrateful, but how I feel is a little complicated and I'm not at all sure I understand it myself yet. Is there a reason we're here? I should be with my husband."

"He's only your husband to be," the capsuleer said. His tone would have felt insultingly dismissive to Braea, but it struck something that she was too bright to write off as mere pride. "That's the big part of the news, isn't it?" he continued. "You two, despite everything, still aiming to get married sometime in the near future. I don't even think you've picked a day, have you?"

"We did," she said. "But after ... after what happened, it's all up in the air."

"Yes. I'm told you were convinced to put it off. Some war message agents came over. Guys who thought our supportive masses would like the idea of the girls supporting our troops but wouldn't quite want to confront the idea of what would happen on the wedding night. And you know what? That delay is actually a good thing."

She firmly ignored thoughts of the wedding night and focused on the capsuleer. Whatever he was leading up to it felt like he was on her side, though whatever side that was she didn't know yet. "Is it?" she said, then bit her tongue.

He smiled again. "It is, actually. The fanfare is necessary for the people, but you'll find they really don't care about the aftermath. Aside from a few newsmen scrounging for follow-up human-interest stories, you'll soon be pushed out of the limelight, never to return."

She looked down. "Maybe that's for the best," she said quietly. She felt so tired.

"Maybe for some," he said. "But I've got my own ideas, and the ability to follow through on them. Half the money is yours, by the way."

"Thanks," she said. She'd heard this said before. Unity and strength; we all stood by each other's side.

"I'm not speaking figuratively. Today's reception is the last in this grueling press run you've been on for the last few weeks. Once you finish it, half the funds allocated to you and Gerets will be put into savings that he can rely on, released in substantial installments over several years, and will cover not only his rebuilding procedures but practically anything else he might desire. He'll get a new body and a better life to live it with.

"The other half of the money is yours and will become immediately available. It's registered to you and is yours to handle as you see fit. You have no more duties. Not to me, not to the government or the press, not to the people, not anyone," he said. "Not even your fiancé."

She stared at him, not knowing what to say.

The capsuleer said, "People can be regrown. I've been destroyed enough times to know that, and I understand the process better than most. One day, a while from now, Gerets will be rebuilt. It'll

take a long while and will be agonizing even for a man who's experienced plenty of pain already, but it'll happen, at least on a physical level. There'll be physiotherapy and there'll be bad days that slowly get better.

"But there's nothing that can be done for the spirit. That'll have to take care of itself for now. Therapy will help, but after you've been broken and rebuilt, well..." He raised his hands, palms upwards. "You're never the same."

"Why are you doing this?" she said in a whisper. On the wall, her painted simulacrum leaned down with her, nearly invisible in the colorful backdrops.

The capsuleer leaned forward too, resting his face on his hands. "You're a very pretty young woman, and I say that as someone who has absolutely zero interest in you in that way. You could have your choice of men, but you chose this one and you stuck with him. Until now it's been out of love and duty. After this point, it could've been out of duty still, or possibly out of darker motivations."

"If you're implying it was all for the money-" she said, but he interrupted. "No, I'm not. It's for the duty, and for what you once had, and for what you might have in some imagined fantasyland. But you've got smarts behind that pretty face and you know as well as I do that with this kind of commitment there comes self-doubt, even self-hatred, and a twisted kind of loyalty that you can never quite get to. If you stay with Gerets while he's like this, not just physically deformed but mentally scarred over it, you risk turning yourself into a martyr and poisoning everything you might have had with him."

"Do you want me to leave him?" she said, a small tremor in her voice. "I can't. I can't do that."

"Let me tell you something," he said. "The people who organized this, as far as they're concerned, Gerets is no hero. He's a terribly unlucky everyman, chosen to be a poster boy of what the enemy did to our people and handed a little bone to chew on as a thanks. Before I came into this deal, the plan was to stagger the release of regrowth money so much and thrust it behind such masses of red tape that you'd effectively have been serfs of the government in perpetuity. I brought in ten times what they'd set aside for you, and even that amount is less than I can make in a day. You owe them nothing, nor me, nor anyone else."

"You're not doing this out of sympathy alone," she said in a cold tone.

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm not?"

"I noticed the hints you dropped during the procession. Even if you know what it's like for people to think of you as something you're not, it wouldn't have made you do all this."

He regarded her for a while. His expression quivered slightly, and Braea realized he was trying not to smile. Eventually he said, "Well, you're right. In my defense, altruism was a real factor in my offer. But there's more to it; of course there is."

"I've been hurt, and deformed, and even killed. I've woken up in a clone vat more often than I can recall. I've never gone through what Gerets will, but I've been burned nonetheless." He leaned forward again. "There comes a point, Braea, where you're so far gone that you lose the ability to reach out to the people who matter. When you reach that point, having someone who's there only out of the duty and the darkness, and not out of pure and unfiltered love ... well, that someone will make you want to stay inside and wait for them to go away."

He took her hand. "How long's it been since Gerets touched you?"

She pulled her hand away, and looked at the walls. All her colored selves looked over their shoulders, too.

The capsuleer said, "If you think he doesn't know what's going on-... no, if you think he can't *see* how you feel, that he doesn't know every thought in your head, you're dead wrong. I spoke to that young man. He's bright. Morose, naturally, but still very bright, and he pays attention. And he's in terrible, terrible pain that you're only going to make worse if you stick around and force yourself to pretend that everything's the same."

"Then what do I do?" Braea said, still not looking at him.

"I had someone who clung to me. She did it for glory, me being a capsuleer, and even after I'd had my head scrambled by too many clonings in too little time, even when I made her life this absolute passive-aggressive hell, she still hung on. And eventually what was left of the love evaporated, because even as I wasn't the same person anymore, neither was she. The balance changed and she changed with it."

He stood up. "I want you to do what's right. This does include being to Gerets what he needs you to be, but to be honest, that's a secondary concern. You shouldn't carry him any more than you should carry a banner for the government's propaganda. Your duty is to yourself, always, and only to others through that. If you can be to Gerets what you want to be, then do it. If not, well, now you have a choice, and an obligation to realize that choice."

She stood up. Her painted selves rose with her.

He grinned slyly. "And heavens, you need makeup. Your cheeks are *streaked* with tears. You can't be seen like this; think what your husband would say!"

She let out a choking laugh. They walked back to the elevators. The tiles left tracks that gently faded in the wake of their passing.



## Cities of Refuge

Keeler was running through the ruins of his city. Its adults might be worried, but it was a darkened, broken paradise for its children.

The planet of Caldari Prime had recently been re-taken by Caldari forces after more than a hundred years of Gallentean occupation. Keeler was Gallentean and so were his parents.

Thanks to rising tension the city had been segregated even before the invasion, which kept the occupying forces from having to indiscriminately slaughter Gallenteans when they came in. Keeler remembered the day when the rains came; thunder and whine, red clouds at night, and black shapes in the distant skies. After the local military had been levelled the skies had darkened again and mountainous shapes had descended from the skies. Smoke and fire gusted from their blackened hulls as they settled on whatever was beneath, reducing it to rubble. The hulls had opened and armies of Caldari soldiers poured out, and whatever forces the Gallente could muster didn't stand a chance. Keeler had run out of sight before seeing what happened, but he'd heard the sounds. For weeks after his parents had been too shocked even to talk about it.

But the children saw it differently, for it was frightening and exciting like a child's life always is, and the ones who saw things they shouldn't have - blood on the sidewalks, shots fired into flesh - merely incorporated it into their imaginary worlds, needed now more than ever, burying it so deeply that it surfaced only through fantasy. Keeler envisioned it as two animals, one large and bulky like a toothless old dog whose flesh hangs slackly from his bones, the other a sleek, sharp cat with tensed muscles writhing beneath its skin, ready to attack and tear its prey apart.

As Keeler approached his hidehole in the silence of the late evening, he heard a noise.

All the children in this city, Gallente and Caldari both, had hideholes unknown to others, little cities of refuge, and if you found out someone else's you kept it to yourself. The hideholes were holy, as were all the secret paths through the cordoned-off parts of the city.

If the invading soldiers had realized this they probably could have dominated whatever remained of the city's initial resistance, but the children saw no pressing reason to help them, and they apparently so no pressing reason to talk to children.

Keeler stopped, having all the time in the world, and listened for the sound. There was a breeze and at first he thought the noise might merely be a piece of something flapping in the wind. As he listened on, he discerned a raspy tone to it, and a stifled irregularity punctuated by longer, harsher gusts. Someone was in there, coughing.

For an adult this might have been an agonizing dilemma: run away and hope not to get a bullet in your back; find a guard and risk betraying one of your own; or go in and investigate. For a child, no dilemma.

Keeler went in.

The man had crawled deep into Keeler's hiding place, stopping only when the wall barred his passage. He lay there in a fetal position, apparently asleep. There was precious little light in here, but enough that Keeler recognized his clothes as the old Gallente army type. They were torn and dirty, and soaked, which was bad news in the cold climate on Caldari Prime. There was still a little snow on him, which meant he hadn't been here long. Whatever remained of the previous occupying army - which the media called guerillas and the locals called freedom fighters and Keeler's dad called a goddamn pain in the ass - had retreated to the open country and the mountains, where they still held out and relied on outlying towns and villages for supplies. When Keeler had wondered how they could survive under those conditions, his dad had given him a look and said, well yes, for a city kid like you there's nothing in the frozen countryside except perhaps all the food a civilized society needs. But heaven help them if they need any lawyers.

In the gloom Keeler noticed what looked like small pieces of rectangular paper lying on the ground, some of them soaked from blood that had trickled from the man's legs. He leaned down and picked one up, and found that it was thick, lukewarm and much drier than it should be. It rustled in the silence.

The soldier cleared his throat and said, "Stimpacks. Bodywarmth."

Keeler froze. He thought the man had been asleep.

The soldier seemed to hear his thoughts. He slowly rolled onto his back, looking directly at Keeler, and said, "Didn't dare sleep. Been listening out for intruders." His face twitched into a smile that turned into a cough. The soldier clamped his hand over his mouth, trying to choke it down. When it had passed, he added, "Didn't hear you for a second."

Keeler said nothing. In this ruined city there was nothing to say.

"You going to tell on me?" the man asked. There was an evenness in his voice, a tone of equanimity. No hint of the condescension from adults who appended "kid" to everything they said, but no forced camaraderie, either. The soldier was speaking to him as an equal.

Keeler shook his head and saw the soldier exhale deeply.

"Why are you here?" Keeler asked.

The man took a while to answer, taking in slow, deep breaths. Keeler wondered whether he was badly hurt. His legs looked in really bad shape; the strips of cloth that had been tied around his thighs and ankles were dark with blood.

"I have a message," he said. "An important one."

"To who? Secret military message?" Keeler thought it over for a second, remembering some of the gooier plots he'd seen in books and vids. "Or to your loved ones?" he added.

The soldier grinned, or grimaced. "Why can't it be both?" he asked.

Keeler didn't have an answer. Instead he said, "I'll take it for you."

"I can't ask you to convey it," the man said. "Even if I could, I wouldn't. It's mine to bring. But I am going to ask you not to tell on me. I promise I'll try not to put you in danger."

"The troops would never catch me. I can stay safe," Keeler said.

The soldier barked a breathless laugh, leaned back and closed his eyes. Sweat glistened on his face in the fading gloom. "I'm sure you can," he said in a tired voice. "Probably better than me at this point. But I got this far. It's all on me. I'll see it through."

He stared at Keeler for a while, but Keeler got the impression the soldier wasn't seeing him. Eventually his eyes rolled a little up in their sockets and he leaned his head back, exhaling. Keeler stood there for a while, waiting to see if he'd say anything else. Eventually it got too dark to see, and when he heard faint snores from the man, he left and went back home.

\*\*\*

They were having dinner, an eternal affair measured by the ticking of the clock on the wall. Keeler slowly mashed his food together with one hand, resting his head on the balled fist of the other. His dad was talking about a possible promotion.

"You say that like nothing has happened," his mom said.

"I'm still trying to rise in the ranks, hon," his dad replied. "We've got new leadership in some places, but it'll take them years to sort out the ownership issues with the Caldaris. Until then, whoever's proven useful might be kept on staff."

"There are other changes, too," she said. "Or haven't you looked outside recently?"

His father shrugged and kept eating.

"All those deaths-" His mom seemed to catch herself, casting a glance at Keeler, and continued, "All this tyranny, and it means nothing to you?"

"What means something to me is my family, and the food I put on your table," Keeler's dad said very quietly, staring directly into his mother's eyes. "Right now the millions dead out of billions still alive, the destroyed houses in cities that still stand, the loss of money in an economy that somehow still rolls on and puts food *on this very table*, everything is secondary. It has to be." Without even looking at the plate, he speared a piece of beef and stuffed it into his mouth, chewing in defiance with bulging cheeks.

There was a clatter as Keeler's mom put her fork down hard, then picked up her plate, stood up and said with a tremor in her voice, "I'm going to eat in the kitchen."

After she'd left, Keeler quietly laid down his own fork on the still half-full plate.

"You're not going to eat?" his dad asked, too loudly.

"I'm not that hungry," Keeler said. He added, "Dad, can I take some leftovers? I'll just eat them later."

His dad looked at him for a little while, then seemed to accept the peace offering, smiled and said, "Sure. No problem." Then, as he almost always did, he added, "Don't go too late to bed, now."

Keeler nodded. His parents were much too busy with their own worries to add him to the mix. As far as he knew, they never checked on him before bedtime, and so long as he washed off any visible grime they had no reason to think he'd been out late. He packed away the dinner, took it to his room, put on his sneaking clothes - greys and browns, a life in dust and dirt - and left through the window, the food warm in his hands.

\*\*\*

For a city that had recently been invaded, it was in surprisingly good shape; tattered but working. Military and rescue workers had done an amazing job clearing out the fallout from the invasion. Keeler had spied on their progress and seen his first corpse, dragged out of the rubble of a barracks. There had been massive destruction, but the Caldari had been attacking a planet partly populated by their own people, and they had been as careful as they could. Some incidents during the invasion had forced them to go in with a heavier hand than planned, but most of the casualties had still been connected to the military. Everyone knew *of* someone who'd died, but not every family had lost a member. People still went to work. Order, such as it was, had been restored. Nobody knew what would happen tomorrow, and there were conflicting tales of all the past yesterdays, but for now they were alive and living. For some, including Keeler's dad, that was enough.

Keeler had to weave his way through areas cordoned off by Caldari troops. There were mobile soldiers stationed at checkpoints - they used the MTACs less in the cities after the invasion - and their sleek movements in their black body-warmth outfits and thin grey helmets made them look like hovering ghosts in the dark.

Getting past the main checkpoints was the hardest bit. Heat- and motion-seeking equipment was plentiful, but mostly focused on the paths that an adult would reasonably take. Even if the troops didn't go too hard on the kids they caught, you had to be careful, lest an annoyed guard lead you to explain a bloodied ear to your parents. In general the guards had been pretty good to people here, and mainly picked up the ones who caused major disturbances.

In one of the increasingly common arguments over the dinnertable, Keeler's mom had pointed out that the temporary peace was only that, while people got their bearings and took stock, and that a major civil rebellion was inevitable. Keeler's dad had replied that be this as it may, it wasn't as if they'd been left all huddled together in empty buildings, lighting fires with dead people's furniture, and that every man needed to have a good, long think about what exactly he was fighting for, and what would happen to those he loved if he lost. Aside from being unable to

travel outside their sectioned area, he said, and having less money to spend than before, things hadn't changed all that much. Keeler's mom had said that this fragile semblance of daily life was the least those murderers could have done, for if it hadn't been established then the occupying forces would have had to pacify a lot of angry people with too much time and too little food on their hands. She had left the table early that time, too.

Sometimes it felt like they were living in two cities, each trying to become something different.

Keeler entered his hiding place, dinner in hand, and found nobody there.

\*\*\*

The next night at dinner they had the vid on, common for post-argument evenings when they, in the words of Keeler's dad, just wanted to get through one damn dinner without one damn argument and pass the damn potatoes, will you please.

Keeler, still wondering what had become of the soldier, didn't pay much attention to the vid or anything else until the announcer's voice caught his ear. A Gallente militant had been caught in the city. Brown hair, medium build. Badly wounded legs.

According to the newscaster, the militant had been responsible for several deaths of both Caldari and Gallente, including civilians. He was likely here to seek shelter with conspirators or terrorist sympathizers.

"Good riddance," Keeler's dad said.

Keeler's mom said nothing. Keeler looked to her and said, "Is it really true? Was he a murderer?"

She looked sternly at his dad, then to him. "Maybe," she said. "It's hard to know, these days."

"Maybe they're lying," Keeler said with much more empathy than he had expected to have. "Maybe he just wanted to bring an important military message to people here. Or a message to his loved ones."

His mom smiled at him. His father grunted and said, "Man was a killer. Not some heavenly messenger."

Keeler's mom snapped, "You don't know that."

Keeler looked at them for a while, then asked in honest wonder, "Why is always one or the other? Why can't it be both?"

While they were both taking deep breaths for angry answers, he got up and left the room.

## And to Live in Peace

The landscape was beautiful and serene: The sun, recently set, cast the remnant of its reddish rays over clear blue skies; long fields of wheat billowed in gentle winds; farms with flowery gardens dotted the honey-golden vistas. It was nearly perfect, aside from the group of special ops quietly making their way through the land.

They moved in pairs, and the high stalks hid their passage. Arek and his partner Klar had the closest building and so moved slowest, insinuating themselves through the grass. Their clothing, light khakis and greens, was beset with ocular fibers that reflected their surroundings. It wouldn't fool heat scanners, but it didn't need to. Their intel, limited as it was, indicated that their prey had no high-tech apparatus in his home, not even proper weaponry. It was an idyllic existence insofar as such a thing existed for people like him.

He was a former army general for the Caldari. The first war was long since past, but war, like love, rests unquietly beneath its velvet facade. There had been a thousand skirmishes in a thousand places since, and in truth the hostilities had never properly ended, nor peace been fully agreed to; the fighting had merely petered out, like a sputtering flame. But some people had expended much of their breath keeping it alive.

In the Caldari State the general's war record was pristine, all the blood having been thoroughly washed off before it got a chance to dry. The Gallenteans knew better. He'd been responsible for countless silent atrocities against them, and in particular against the corporation whose agents now flowed over the landscape. After his retirement he had, at his express request, been rewarded with a quiet life living on a plot of land in the outback of space, a lowsec area where none of his enemies would ever think to look for him.

But wars find their soldiers, and the new war had found him.

Hostilities in this particular lowsec system had propelled Gallente agents to scout out its planets. Orbital photography, atmospheric probes and data mining had unearthed the general, hiding like a worm. Intel indicated his fixed location could be on any of several farms in the area, and while the first reaction of the Gallentean warring forces was to send a bomb or two down to the general area, it was quickly vetoed. The man was a minor war hero in his own empire and a war criminal in the Federation. It was determined that he was needed alive so he could stand trial for his crimes, and, of course, to pacify the increasingly revenge-hungry Federation masses. Besides, it was still early in the war, and inflicting unnecessary casualties could have carried grave implications, particularly in a Federation that had just suffered a terrible planetary invasion.

A group of black ops was assembled and brought up to speed. Retrieving the general alive was of primary importance, so much so that they were allowed only nonlethal weapons.

There was some dissent.

"Why's he coming in alive?" Arek said during the mission briefing.

"PR," the captain replied. "He comes in dead, he's useless to us."

"But we're going to kill him anyway."

"Not necessarily. He might be used as barter."

"I want an MTAC," Klar said.

"You're not getting one," the captain and Arek said in unison. The rest of the team looked on, not hiding their grins.

"Still want one."

The captain said, "This is a top-secret mission that has to be executed with stealth and precision, and you want to bring along a mechanized skeleton that'll thump the ground like god's own hammer."

There was silence in the room.

Klar said, "MTACs shoot rockets."

"Group dismissed. Get out."

So they'd kitted out in light, nonlethal gear. Tiny multiburst grenades locked to EM, instahardening foam bombs, and subvocal communicators, along with whatever personal gear they needed. Everything was passive except the communicators and their relays, and their power use was negligible. Anything else that might show up on scanner, including heat-vision gear, was left behind. In an isolated hostile location with no chance of backup or rescue, you relied on your own damn abilities.

They were dropped in so far away that it took them several days to make their way to the target point. They'd been lucky enough to escape injury, and nutrition tablets took care of malnutrition fears, but all the same the strain of the journey had rendered them a hair cranky by the time they reached the farms. They didn't know on which one the old general resided, but it was immaterial; they'd hit them all simultaneously.

Arek and Klar snuck up to the side of theirs, edging towards the windows. The general had not gotten to his old age through stupidity or lack of perception, and even with the agonizing care they'd taken not to be noticed on their way here, it paid to be careful, which meant not barging in through the front door.

Arek sent out a call to the other agents. *Everyone in position?*

Responses came in a minute later. *Team Beta, position. Team Gamma, position. Team Delta, position. Team Epsilon, position. Team Zeta, position.*

Arek nodded to Klar, who pulled out a multiburst grenade. The house was on two floors and Klar had hotly argued his ability to accurately toss in a grenade on the second story, but had been voted down by Arek, who claimed to be allergic to having grenades bounce off windowsills and fall on his head.

Arek pulled out his own grenade. He nodded to Klar, clicked it and tossed through the closed window. The sound of the breaking glass pierced the summer day and was echoed from the other farms, where the other agents were doing the same. The two operatives shut their eyes tight. There was a muffled noise and the air was filled with fractured light like a kaleidoscope come to life, so bright that it filtered even through their eyelids. Arek heard Klar mutter, "... nine, *ten*," and break the glass as he tossed in the other multiburst. It went off, and the second wave of fractured light made Arek nauseous. If the general hadn't been thoroughly disarmed by the first grenade, or had been elsewhere in the house, his roused curiosity or antediluvian tenacity would hopefully have been taken care of by the second.

Klar rose, shook his head a couple of times, moved to the front door and kicked it in. He had one hand raised, holding a foam bomb, though Arek noticed his other hand was lodged in a pocket.

They quickly scouted the area. As with most buildings on this continent of the planet, its outsides were concrete and the insides from wood, and the architecture favored large, open rooms favorable to inhabitants and kidnappers alike. Arek could never get used to the utter stillness after an EM-set multiburst had been thrown into a room. Quietness, yes; after you throw a proper live grenade into someone's living room there's not going to be much noise apart from a few dying gurgles. But the utter undisturbed serenity of a post-EM room, with everything in its place and all the pictures hanging undisturbed from the walls, set his teeth on edge. It was like firing a laser in the dead vacuum of space; you found yourself looking for the burn marks merely to prove the act of violence to your very own senses.

Not only was there no disturbance; there was no body. Arek caught Klar's gaze. Uh-oh.

He started to subvocalize a command but Klar caught his unspoken thoughts and quietly padded to the basement stairs. Arek pulled out a foam bomb and headed upstairs.

Calling it a second floor was laying it on a little thick. It was fairly large, but the slanted roof was low enough to call up a vague air of claustrophobia, and the only concessions to human inhabitation were a large bed, a dresser and various smaller clothing storages, and a large, intricately carved wooden desk. On the desk, surrounded by several framed pictures of people Arek assumed were his family, lay a single piece of paper.

Arek did a quick sweep, but the dressers were empty and the underside of the bed held not even a speck of dust. That left the desk, and the paper, and an unpleasant foreboding in Arek's mind. When he saw that the message was written in Gallentean - the Gallente tongue, one that no man on this planet was likely to know save the team and the general himself - he snapped it up immediately and began to read:

*Welcome. I knew you'd come one day, whoever you are, so I made arrangements.*



*First off, this is my home and you're not welcome. I hope they're paying you enough to run fast and far away when my people go after you.*

Arek rolled his eyes. He kept reading:

*I have access to substantial funds, so it may surprise you to find the place so rustic. It's how I like it - I've always appreciated simplicity, and after a lifetime of serving the greatest army in the world, with all the myriad complexities inherent in such a career, I decided it was time I lived, at last, like a civilian. Also, this lifestyle helps me fit in with the people in this area. They're nice people. I like them.*

*But in the event that I ever got visitors, I made a few concessions to complexity and chaos.*

*Underneath this farm is a bunker.*

Arek immediately subvocalized a warning to Klar, who gave an all-clear and said that if there was anything down there apart from firewood and mice, he'd be surprised.

*It's hidden beneath the floorboards.*

Arek subvocalized this. There was a splintering crash from downstairs, and Klar sent a subvocalized string of curse-filled surprise that served as confirmation.

*There are similar bunkers underneath every farm in this area. Once I'd gotten to know the local citizenry I found them quite amenable to having their housing upgraded ever so slightly. I explained that I had a military background and that some people disagreed with my past work and protection of the State. I was surprised at how easily they agreed to have the bunkers installed, for I had feared they would simply run me off, or at the very least shut me out with that narrow-mindedness one expects of the rural stereotype, but I was proven quite pleasurably wrong. It turns out that here, on the edge of the world, people are used to protecting themselves against natural disasters, be they typhoons, floods, fires or anything else unwelcome that comes their way. The idea of a group of cowardly little men scurrying into their houses at night robs these people of no more sleep than the knowledge of rats scurrying in their walls, and they cheerfully accepted my proposition. A number of healthy subsidies for their work here didn't hurt, either. Their children will all go to State colleges.*

*Add to that a subtle early-warning system, and we all found ourselves ensconced in the safety of our respective steel boxes before you even got within sight of this place. I sent off an emergency call to my own forces, and even now they are on their way here to extract me. I would not want to be in your shoes if you are still here when they arrive.*

Arek cursed. This deadline changed the mission parameters considerably.

*Each bunker has all the supplies necessary for a long and healthy life, inasmuch as one*

*remains trapped underground. The atmospheric generators will work almost indefinitely and, dare I say it, will be ticking away long after you are all dead and gone. There is plenty of nourishment - most of it locally grown, actually - that I've had freeze-dried to last a long, long time, and the filtered liquid dispensers match those on any spaceship you care to name. To stave off boredom we have vidscreens, of an old and dependable brand that won't break for a while, and if they're not quite as exciting as the latest holoprojectors or Egones, I made up for it by including a substantial library of entertainment.*

*Lastly, each bunker is quadruple the size of the house below it, to detract from the risk of cabin fever. They lie far enough in the ground that they don't disturb the crops, but I'm sure you have people who can use sonar to verify my claims.*

Klar subvocalized his impatience to Arek, who replied with a team-wide broadcast telling people to hang back. The others vocalized back, confirming that each team had found a similar note in their own entered houses.

*There is another feature, mind, that I did not feel compelled to share with my neighbors. Every bunker except my own contains a canister of poisonous gas.*

Arek sent a subvocalization to Klar telling him to back off now.

*Not only will the gas kill whatever poor soul that enters the bunker without a mask, but everyone who inhabits it. It's a combination nerve gas and blistering agent that'll make each bunker's inhabitants keel over in pain, vomit blood, break out in horrific sores, lose their sense of reality and probably attack anyone who approaches them before their organs finally turn into a liquid mush and they go into massive cardiac arrest.*

*Every bunker is connected to the others with a transmission system. I daresay you could block it, but by the time you move in that kind of gear my supporting forces would long since have extracted me from this place. Perhaps if you ask them nicely, they'll let you keep some of your vital organs, though I imagine they'll likely leave some of you draped over the walls.*

*So if a single bunker is opened, they all start pumping the gas. That's not to mention that the bunkers cannot be safely opened from either side unless you know a specific code, and the only person who knows it is, I'm afraid, myself. If I die, my lovely neighbors will die, too - the men, women and children who even now are living their lives underground, waiting for the moment when my smiling countenance meets them at the entryway - and you will have all their fates on your conscience.*

*So you go ahead and break me out of the bunker to drag me off somewhere unheard of, and eventually I'll be returned to my State in exchange for political gain. All it will cost you is the cold-blooded murder of several innocent families. Look at my desk. Their pictures are there.*

Arek looked at the desk. The pictures were there.

*Good luck, whoever you are. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes.*

Arek dropped the letter back to the desk and sighed deeply.

It was typical Caldari. Never do anything the easy way.

He communicated this to Klar and the rest of the team.

Klar sent back a question. *So unless we get this guy out real soon, we're up in our asses in State soldiers.*

*Yep*, Arek replied.

*And the only way to get him out is to breach the bunker, which'll gas everyone else who lives here.*

*Yep.*

*Damn.*

*It fits his profile, I suppose*, Arek said. *He's a rotten one, from skin to center.*

*What do we do?*

*We have to abort.*

*The hell we are.*

*Look*, Arek said, *we don't have a lot of time. We get out, make our way to the pickup point and hope that our people can get there without being shot out of the sky. What do you want to do, just tear in there and kill him on the spot?*

*If we lose him now, he's gone for good.*

Arek sighed. *That's how it has to be.*

*The man is a monster*, Arek.

*I know. What else is there to do?*

*You said it yourself*, Klar says. *He's built a career on a lifetime of evil that's now hidden in this cover of old age. I'm sure he was real charming to the people here. Remember how charming he was to the Gallenteans he caught, back in the day?*

*Klar-*

There was a sound downstairs.

*Klar, what was that noise?*

*You know, these people you want to protect, they didn't ask any questions. He just gave them a lot of money and they took it. Nevermind he installed a bunch of hi-tech stuff in their homes, and they took it all, without even once thinking what this guy did to warrant that sort of protection. He said there were pictures up there, of those people. You saw the pictures we have? Of what he did to the Gallenteans he caught?*

*Arek rubbed his eyes. Klar, tell me that sounds wasn't a gun being cocked.*

*You know what they found in one of his old cells? Remember that pic, Arek? It was a small one, because there wasn't a lot left.*

*You brought a gun with you, didn't you, Klar?*

*Everyone in this place is complicit, and don't think for a second that anyone in Caldari is ever going to know, because then they'd have to admit that their old star general built a deathtrap for all the people who sold their souls to him.*

Arek was going to argue with him, but something caught his attention. It wasn't a sound in the distance, but the absence of sound at the very edge of hearing: a stillness that comes when something very large is being very quiet, very far away. It was a sound that he'd last heard emanating through the walls of his own dropship. The enemy was coming. Time had run out.

And in that moment came the absolute clarity of two immutable, undeniable facts of life: The first, that he didn't want to do this, for it was absolutely wrong, it would make him a murderer and a marked man not only among the Caldari but in the eyes of the powers on the other side of life itself, and even though he was in this line of work he still had a shred left of resistance to the idea of murdering an entire community; and second, that in this place, doing the wrong thing for the right reason was the only option reasonably available to him as a human being.

*Hell, he said. Go.*

*Be happy I didn't bring an MTAC, Klar said with undisguised glee. There were several sharp retorts and the sounds of crunching metal as he shot his way through the door and made his way into the bunker below. At some point Arek thought he heard a scream.*

## **A World Where No Such Road Will Run**

My name is Janus Bravour. I am thirty-two years old. I am going to die.

The room in front of me is vast. It belonged to a high-powered Caldari executive who, like most of his ilk, was on the wrong side of the revolution. I would have preferred a smaller room. A room this size means you can't see everything around you, can't contain all the events occurring within its space. This is important. When you're a member of the Caldari State leadership, you need to contain all events within its space, lest they spiral out of control.

This room has spiraled out of control.

We gutted some of the more indulgent architecture - my leader and State ruler Tibus Heth took entirely too much delight in tearing out the cages that had held the strippers and soldering them into a box that now serves as the executive's new office - but the basics, the less-noticed ephemera that were truly Caldari, we kept. There is a sand waterfall, and laser birds that light through the air, and quiet sigils, cast on the floor, that morph from one meaning to another.

My name is Janus Bravour. I sit in a room with a waterfall running down one of its walls, the sand hissing as it trickles through the invisible gutters below.

I approved of the reconstruction. I take life seriously, as I've had to in these serious times. There are indeed those among us who feel that life is but a joke. They disdain the work we've put into rebuilding this empire, gutting it and retaining only the purity of our State, and they would like to see life return to the ways of old. These are our enemies, and I take them very seriously.

The birds flit through the air, oblivious. Their movements give me a little hope, deluded though it may be. I notice they always fly in pairs or groups. I had never seen this before.

My name is Janus Bravour, and I am the Chief Operating Officer of an entire empire. I am second-in-command to the most famous person in the world, a citizen revolutionary named Tibus Heth. Under Heth's guidance we toppled the ruling body of our empire, we reclaimed the planet that was our birthright, and we went to war.

Tibus Heth has many enemies. So, by extension, do I.

Heth is an impulsive man in person, governed by a roaring undercurrent of emotions. He is a brilliant military strategist, but his expertise is on the field, in the smoke and the carnage. The silent fighting that goes on in the everyday business of running an empire he leaves, truth be told, to me.

I support Heth and what he has accomplished, and have laid down my life as a wager. But I am not an impulsive man, which is why I complement his ruling, and thus he and I will never see eye to eye. I serve the interests of the State, as does Heth, but I do not feel that I serve it alongside him. We are each pulling it in a particular direction, and it is by this pull, this constant motion that is nonetheless fixed in place, that the State is given the power to continue existing.

If we were lovers, which we are not, we would be running our shared home right now, wondering whether a friendship and a shared set of ideals will carry us through the arguments in times ahead.

I envy the birds their synchronized flight. If I were to try the same I would die in an instant. And yet I must remain in some kind of motion, no matter how still it might seem. Stagnation is death. The moment we stop moving, we stop being viable human beings and become mere animated husks, solemnly waiting to die.

I see everything so clearly now. I expect it results from this personal revelation I've had of my mortality. I am going to die, and thus my mind is taking in every last detail it can before the final call.

I am being entirely too clinical about this. Given the circumstances, mind, I think it's excusable.

Aside from the birds, the sigil and the waterfall - all of which are intangibles of one sort or another, and don't really count towards the furniture in this room - there is nothing here but the closed door at the far end and the desk at which I sit. The window behind me casts a nice warm shadow on my workspace, and I know if I turned I would see the sun. I'm trying to resist the temptation.

On this desk are three things. The first is a glass cylinder set on a small, black base. The cylinder is about the length and width of my palm. Inside it are interconnected spiraling tubes, like strands of DNA woven into a tapestry, and inside those tubes are two globules of a silvery liquid reminiscent of mercury. The two blobs constantly pass through the tubes, pouring through them in defiance of gravity and inertia. In their paths they revolve around each other like electrons around a nucleus, inextricably entwined but always at a distance. They never touch, neither each other nor the invisible core they encircle, and they never stop moving.

It occurs to me that neither I nor Heth will ever truly be part of Caldari Prime. We encircle it, keeping its core contained. If we should fail, the core will not be compromised, but only so long as another one takes our place posthaste. I truly hope this will be the case.

The second item on my desk is a picture, taken from space. The background is a rich maroon, halfway between blood and rust. In the foreground, if such a term even applies to a thing as monumental as this, is a white globe inlaid with golden lights and frozen masses of clouds. This is Caldari Prime, the core of my existence.

The third item is a message, a greenish halo lit up in the air above my desk. I am sitting deathly still in my chair. Only my eyes have moved. Everything I've ever done has brought me to this point in time: Sitting here, in my office, unmoving, reading the news of my death.

This message is from an unknown sender, and I have no doubt that if anyone looks for it later, they will find it has disappeared. It doesn't recriminate, nor does it chastise. It is brisk, clear and honest. It says that this room has been filled with a poisoning agent that was activated at the reception of the message and will respond to human motion. I am breathing it in right now, into

and out of my lungs, as I have been ever since I sat down in this room. If I move, wave my hand or even cast a last glance at the sun shining behind me, the agent will coagulate into a material that will stop my heart.

Somewhere in this building there will be a person - several persons, likely - who fell from their orbit of duty. I will move and I will die, and they will ensure the room is thoroughly ventilated before any investigation takes place. They will also guarantee the investigation finds I died of natural causes, and that I get a funeral befitting a Statesman. Honor will be upheld, I'm sure.

And while all of this was completely unnecessary - the poisoning agent and the traitors and the whole setup will have taken lot of time and effort - it was meant not merely as an assassination but as an insult, one to put me in my place. I have entered a trap where nothing I do will help. I am powerless to interfere. If I act, if I do anything other than sit perfectly still in this little kingdom of stagnation, I will die in an instant.

My name is Janus Bravour. All the roads are open to me, and all of them lead to my end.

And it is this that decides me, this realization that I am experiencing right now, in this moment that is both infinite and infinitesimal: That a man who is alive, who is truly alive, cannot but keep in motion lest he stagnate, and that this tiny glimmer at the back of my mind is not merely the resolution of my impending actions but the hope - an irrational hope, absolutely, which in truth makes it a faith, and I'm having to bite back a smile at the thought - that through the swiftest of motions I can cheat this final and absolute death, if I can but move, faster than light, faster than time itself, if I can exhale and inhale and ready my nerves and *go-*

## **All Tomorrow's Bodies**

### **Day Seven**

In the cold, hyperlit metal corridor, the two women faced one another at firing distance. Jeanelle, who'd brought them here, slowly lowered her hands to her hips, resting them on the handles of her guns. Skids, who'd kept them alive, kept her hands crossed behind her head, as if she planned to take a nap. She looked entirely unconcerned.

In one swift and silent motion, Jeanelle drew her guns, aimed at Skids and fired.

The deafening noise echoed through the corridor. In the aftermath of the muzzle flash, Skids stood with hands on her hips, an astonished expression on her face. She looked down at her body, in search of the vermilion stain, but before she could find one her eyes rolled back in her head, and she dropped to the floor.

### **Day One**

They were in a meeting with a very nice man who spoke softly and had a face that was easily forgotten. This man, who had not given his name, told them that their team was one of many that qualified for the hunting of former Grand Admiral Anvent Eturrer.

Eturrer, or the Great Traitor as he was now known, had been instrumental in causing the Gallente to fumble their response to a mass invasion by hostile forces. As a result they had lost an entire planet to the Caldari, and had been forced into war on their outlying borders. Eturrer had disappeared right after his betrayal. The Gallente wanted him found.

Jeanelle, Skids, Kardeth and Asadir - Gallente, Caldari, Amarr and Minmatar respectively - had been called in. They were a merc team, one of many that worked in the corporate halo of 0.0 space. Their different backgrounds, national and corporate, allowed them a great flexibility in their operations, even if it made for the occasional bit of friction. Asadir was a tech head, excellent with machinery. Kardeth was a Wanderer, a clandestine subsection of the Speakers of Truth tasked with bringing the faith into the darkest of places. Skidochi was a supreme fighter, nimble and merciless, but her rebellious nature was in constant conflict with the guilt over her inability to properly serve the Caldari State. Jeanelle had a background in politics and entertainment, and a rather checkered past in her pursuit of happiness.

As it turned out, this past was proving surprisingly useful. One of the people Jeanelle had charmed in her passage was Uriam Kador, one of the Heirs to the Amarrian Royal Throne. The relationship was long since over, but Jeanelle had a way of making friends where she went and still had a lot of contacts in Kador's court. This was good, the nameless man said, because one of Eturrer's many possible hideouts was in Kador's part of space. The Gallente didn't know where, he said, and they certainly weren't going to risk any of their own people in these black ops stunts unless they had a very good reason to believe they'd get their man.

"Why not just have us extract Eturrer?" Kardeth asked.



That was not an option, the man said. Even if it turned out he was located there, their team would never get close to the man himself - he'd be too heavily guarded, and all they could hope for was reaching one of his co-conspirators - and any failed attempts to that end would drive him even deeper underground, ruining any chances the Gallente had of catching the villain at last. The team's task was the extraction of information, nothing more.

"Why do you think Jeanelle wouldn't just warn Kador instead?" Kardeth said, nodding his head at his visibly annoyed team mate.

They had a good track record, the man said. And besides, betrayal would mean they'd have Blaque's Black Eagles to deal with.

"Let me just add something to this," Jeanelle said, loosening something around her chest and standing up. She turned to Kardeth, glaring at him, and dropped her top.

"See that scar, running right between my breasts?" she said.

Kardeth, eyes wide, nodded wordlessly.

Jeanelle pulled the top up again and took her seat. "Kador's private persona is not the same as his public one. He gets excited. And he can't handle failure. I liked the people who worked for him, idealists who believe in hard work and loyalty, but I don't owe the man anything."

Skids said, "I've known you for years, but I don't remember that. Was it before we met?"

Jeanelle looked at her, then looked away. "Something like that."

Kardeth tried to rally. "Alright. Anyway, yeah, we'll do our best to triangulate Eturrer's position from whatever our sources reveal." Asadir snorted, and Jeanelle rolled her eyes. Skids, legs drawn up to her seat, said nothing.

The man thanked them for their time.

## **Day Two**

They were gearing up, receiving shipments of equipment to their ships. Jeanelle and Skids were checking over the data.

Casually, Jeanelle said, "Everything all right?"

Skids was silent for a while, going over ammo schematics. She said, "Yeah, it's fine. I don't like working for the Gallente, though."

"I know. But it's a job like any other. Asadir hates it when we do Amarr jobs, too."

"It's not just that. Eturrer's treated like a hero, back on Caldari. I don't like the thought that we're going to ruin things for him."

"I think that it's unavoidable," Jeanelle said. "He called this over himself the moment he betrayed his fleet. They would never let him go."

She put her arm around Skids' shoulders and gave her a quick hug. "And besides, it's not like the Caldari would venerate you even if you skipped out on this mission. They've got strange ways of showing their appreciation. You've seen that before."

"I guess," Skids said. "Still don't like it."

Jeanelle nodded and went back to the schematics. "You'll be fine," she said.

"Jeanelle?"

"Yes?"

"What do you mean, I've seen it before?"

Jeanelle thought it over. "You come from one of the most rigid empires in the world, where people are kept locked in place their whole lives. And yet you now work for a mercenary crew. That really says it all, sweetie. Go to sleep."

### **Day Three**

After having adamantly refused to use Jeanelle's contacts in Kador's court, Kardeth received information from his own people in the dark end of space. He brought it to the team, proud and boisterous, and they set up and headed there quick.

According to Kardeth's sources, their target was a small colony staffed with very religious people who had some information on Eturrer's passage. The inhabitants, Kardeth maintained, would undoubtedly respect his rather clandestine authority as a Wanderer and lend unto him any assistance he required in his hunt. They would arrive late, have a prayer session and a nice dinner, get some proper sleep, and sort out their business in the morning. When Jeanelle asked whether the colonists knew the real purpose for their visit, Kardeth merely grinned.

?

### **Day Four (or very late in Day Three)**

The main street was empty, as befitted a late night in a religious colony. Light posts shone on the grey stone below.

But there was a rumble in the air, and a few of the posts started to tremble, their lights jittering and swaying.

Skids came first, her slim body racing down the street. Jeanelle followed, her ampler proportions and more decorative clothing slowing her pace.

Kardeth, who'd stayed behind to reason with his people, came last, his sandals beating a tattoo on the ground, and his face as stony as an icon. Behind him came an army of Amarrians screaming raw bloody murder. The team had certainly unearthed something, but once their real intentions were discovered the colonists had not been happy.

Asadir, who had waited for them onboard the ship and already started the launch pattern, laughed his ass off as they jumped onboard. As the control panel closed, a yelled conversation could be heard between him and Kardeth.

"Welcome to my world!"

"Shutup."

"How'd you like it on the Matar side!"

"Shutup."

"I got a Pax Amarria in my nightstand, in case yours got a little dirty!"

"Shutup."

### **Day Five**

Jeanelle took over and sent out feelers to some of her own sources in the area. Kardeth, chastened, grudgingly and rather sheepishly allowed himself to be assigned tech prep duties instead. On one of his trips into the hardware section of the cargo hold, he showed Asadir a list of the items they were going to use: simple, non-electric weapons that wouldn't show up on scanning or break at the worst possible moment. One of those items was a familiar one.

Asadir reached Jeanelle at her quarters. She did not seem surprised to see him.

"You know that Skids has a quickdraw implant," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"On your list is a miniature EMP bomb. You know what it does."

Jeanelle nodded.

"Are you just going for the quickdraw?" Asadir asked.

"No. I need you to mod the EMP, like you did in the Caldari space mission we did a while back. I need to run it twice."

Asadir stood there for a while, looking at her. Eventually he said, "You think we'll have to take this all the way."

"You've seen how she's getting. More sullen. Withdrawn. I don't think she's comfortable with this mission at all. I know she'll do it as well as she can, but there'll be a breaking point, and I don't want to have anyone get hurt."

"So you want the Dead Man's Switch."

"Yes. And I need you to do something else, too," Jeanelle said.

"Blanks for your gun."

"Yeah."

"I hate doing this to the child."

"Well," Jeanelle said, in a tone that indicated this conversation was over, "You know what alternatives we have. It's this, or end it for good."

Later in the day, a source sent back a coded message. It contained the locations of a colony that housed one of Etrurrer's old lieutenants, a fellow traitor who'd eloped with him.

Asadir missed it, for he was stuck in the lab, working on the EMP device.

### **Day Six**

They'd docked at another colony and been given permission to enter the place. It was still Amarr space, which meant that Asadir was, in his words, staying inside the ship on pain of death and religion and dumbasses. Kardeth stayed in as well, in the embarrassed and probably true belief that showing his face to any Amarrian in Kador space would complicate the mission. Jeanelle and Skids disembarked and headed for the bars.

It was a social hub of sorts for the nearby area, but heavily sectioned off. Colonists, these hermits of the world, knew how to respect privacy. The two women took a while to get familiar with the place, during which Jeanelle socialized heavily with every group they met while Skids grew increasingly morose. On one occasion they nearly wound up in a fight with the locals, when someone offered Skids a drink and she batted it out of the man's hands. Jeanelle made good but quickly retreated to another locale, taking a mumbly apologetic Skids with her.

Eventually they managed to confirm the lieutenant's presence and approximate whereabouts on the colony. Unsurprisingly, he was being guarded by devout servants of Kador, who was used to taking good care of his people. Jeanelle knew many of these people from her last extended visit with the Kadorians, and it wasn't long before she was let into the circle. Skids, who could no longer disguise her discomfort with the colonists and the mission, hung back and did reconnaissance.

## Day Seven

Jeanelle eventually returned, victorious and shining. She located Skids in an alleyway nearby, where the Caldarian was pacing about and kicking at rocks. Together they set off to find a secure communications terminal.

"How'd it go?" Skids asked on the way.

"Better than I dared hope," Jeanelle said. "You leave anyone in the dust?"

"Not so much, really. Anyway, did you have to do anything to get the info?"

Jeanelle gave her a bemused look. Skids blushed. "You know. I hate talking about that stuff outright."

Jeanelle laughed and put an arm around Skids' shoulder. "It's alright. I love what I do. But no, we really just talked. It's a shame. He's a good-looking man and I was hoping he had some interest in more, but really, he's under so much pressure that it took fairly nothing to open him up."

Skids raised an eyebrow. "So he gave Eturner away."

"Not at all. But he talked about military installations and resource flow, in the delightful belief that a woman couldn't possibly understand it all anyway. Really, he thought he was using me as a sounding board and little more."

"And from that you can..."

"Deduce more or less where Eturner is, yes," Jeanelle said. "Which may or may not be worth spit, if the guy moves or if anyone finds out there was a leak, or even if I was being told the truth. But we'll get paid either way."

"So where is he? Is he even here, in this part of space?"

Jeanelle put a finger up to her lips. "That would be telling."

Skids said nothing. Jeanelle asked, "How did your shift go?"

"Nothing much happened. Some people made a little trouble, but I sorted it."

Jeanelle, who knew Skids, understood this. "They still alive?"

"They weren't happy with your meeting. Thought you were a security risk. They were going to investigate us."

"And that would have been bad trouble," Jeanelle said.

"They're still alive, no worries. Are you sure you know where Eturrer is?" Skids said.

"Yes. Are you happy with the way the mission turned out?"

Skids briefly looked at her and said, "Absolutely," with not much conviction. They kept walking.

Eventually they made it to a narrow metal corridor in a reinforced part of the colony. A lone terminal was located there.

"Now we'll just have to send off the data and we'll be home free," Jeanelle said.

Skids had been walking in front of her for a while, and now turned to confront her. "I'm afraid not," she said to the merc.

Jeanelle sighed. "Skids ..."

"I can't let you do this. I can't."

"Yes, you can."

"You need to tell me where Eturrer is," Skids said.

"So you can contact the people who hate you and try one more bribe to change their view. It's not going to work, Skids. It never does."

Skids blinked, and said, "I don't recall having been the team traitor, but yeah, that's how it goes. I'm so sorry. I hate to do this, but I can't just help the enemy this way."

"You mean our employer."

"I mean the Gallente Federation. I don't expect you to understand, Jeanelle. Please give me the code."

"Why didn't you just tell on me? Sounds like you've joined the other side already."

Skids looked shocked. "I would never put you through that. Do you have any idea what they would do to you here if they knew what a traitor you are?"

"About the same as what the Caldari have wanted to do to you for years, Skids. Don't be stupid."

Skids didn't move. "You don't understand. Give me the info now."

"Let me put this in language that *you'll* understand, Skids. If you don't step away from that control, I'm going to blow you away."

Skids tensed, then relaxed and slowly grinned. "Go on, Jeanelle. Draw."

Jeanelle slowly reached into a pocket and pushed a button on something. Then she withdrew her hands and placed them near the guns on her belt.

Skids, in her element at last, stretched languidly to the ceiling.

\*\*\*

Jeanelle sighed, walked over the body of her merc companion and keyed in a code on the control board Skids had been protecting. On the other side of the thick metal walls, wires crackled into action, switches passed on live currents, and a brief message was shunted out into the ether. Its contents spoke of the greatest traitor in the current history of the Gallente Federation and where he might be found, and they eventually weaved their way onto large monitors that cast reflections on the darkly grinning faces of his betrayed people.

Jeanelle picked up Skids' body and headed back to the ship. On the way there she contacted Asadir, confirming successful completion of the mission, and its collateral cost.

"Bring her back to the bay and I'll reset the Switch," Asadir said through the comlink. He added, "She'll be fine," though Jeanelle didn't know whose conscience he was assuaging.

She breathed deep and looked at the Caldarian's inert body. Unbeknownst to Skids, her quickdraw implant had an extra function. When set off with a specially prepared, deliberately focused EMP bomb, the implant would knock her out and erase all her recent memories. It wasn't healthy and it didn't work as well as it should - her past selves leaked into the present like trickles of water through the dam of quiddity - but it was necessary for someone like Skids, whose identity issues reached far beyond her conscious mind. She'd work things out some day. Until then, she needed support, and enough jobs to keep her abilities fresh.

The team did everything they could to keep her from harm. It was a unique and bothersome requirement of the Dead Man's Switch that its victim had to be made to feel as if she were dying. If they merely turned on the switch without faking Skids' death, the risk of irreversible psychosis rose by several orders of magnitude. So they loaded guns with blanks, and they faked hull breaches, and all the while they pressed little buttons and made their friend go through yet another death, to awake an earlier, cleaner self.

"You're sure she's not going to remember this one?" Jeanelle said.

"No more than the others," Asadir said. "Way we've tuned it, she'll go back to herself before this mission even started. We just need to remember to keep our mouths shut."

"That's alright. We forgive her. Just like last time, and the one before that."

"She's a good one," Asadir said.

Jeanelle nodded in the gloom. "Yeah, she is. A little lost and out of control sometimes, but she's a sweetheart."

In the distance she could see the docking bays, steel and iron, waiting.



## Tomorrow A Dream

*[Note: Written by CCP Gnauton.]*

Through the years, the Caldari State's reigning ideology has been broadly defined by its emphasis on hard work, sacrifice, and the welfare of the collective over the welfare of the individual. Central to the Caldari mindset is the assumption that people work better when motivated by a feeling of contribution to a greater good, but even more important is the idea that people naturally gravitate toward the sphere of craft they are best suited for, as well as the position they should occupy within it. How has this philosophy been shaped over the tumultuous lifetime of the Caldari nation, though, and where does it stand today?

In the early days of Caldari-Gallente relations, when the two nations had just come into contact with each other, the somewhat unusual structure of Caldari government was explicitly set up so that no one person could wrest power from the council. The notion of individuality, so prized by the Gallente, tended to be viewed by the Caldari as little more than selfish blindness to the grander scheme of things, and was frowned upon by the vast majority of their leaders as well as the industrious masses that made up the civilian populace. After the first Gallente-Caldari war, the Chief Executive Panel – the corporate heads making up the Caldari State's ruling body – went even further with this ideology, soon enough taking their seat as polar opposites to their hated nemeses. While it may seem tempting to ascribe this to the ideological rubberbanding sometimes experienced by newly independent states, there is a great deal of historical data that suggests that even as far back as the time of the Raata-Oryioni empire thousands of years ago, the people who would later become the Caldari were already highly collectivistic in outlook and action.

For the newly-at-peace Caldari State, however – a nation bruised and bleeding from a lengthy war – things took on a different tenor. In the sudden absence of a unifying enemy, the people who at that time made up the Chief Executive Panel found themselves gradually turning their attentions to each other. Internal competition between the eight ruling corporations increased. Suggested initiatives and reforms usually served to somehow pad the coffers of the corporation that came up with them, ideally at the expense of their most direct competitors. While competence and devotion to the State were still held in overt esteem to as great a degree as ever – and, indeed, used as religiously in the nation's propaganda as they are today – the foundations these values were built on had begun to subtly slide.

As time passed, the entrenchment of those in power, as well as their fierce devotion to their internal competition, began to have trickle-down effects on the Big Eight's top tiers. Believing their own modes of governance and management preferable to whatever successors the Board of Directors would offer up, the CEOs of the megacorporations began to pull the strings behind the scenes, making sure their own protégés ascended to positions where they would take over the reins when the time came. They also made sure that key positions within the corporate hierarchies were occupied by people whose goals and opinions coincided with their own. Thus, slowly but surely, covert dynasties began to snake their tendrils around the Caldari State's power structures.

By the time the capsuleers started making waves on the world scene, the State's hierarchies were crowded with individuals who had come by their positions through the mendacious maneuverings of well-placed superiors, and this played a significant role in the sharp economic downturn faced by the Caldari State. Each of New Eden's four major nations had suffered some form of economic setback in the wake of the ultra-rich capsuleer class's meteoric rise, but the Caldari, due to their set-in-stone mentality and reluctance to adapt, were perhaps the hardest hit. Unemployment skyrocketed. Goods and services rose in price. Imports and exports declined.

Sensing the shift in worldwide power, the Chief Executive Panel responded by cocooning themselves from the outside world and taking up isolationist policies. Diplomatic relations, never a strong part of the Caldari political skillset, became almost nonexistent. Even in the wake of such disasters as the Protein Delicacy incident (where Caldari-manufactured luncheonette foods were found to cause mental deficiencies in Gallente schoolchildren) or the Insorum incident (where a chemical compound capable of reversing the effects of one of Amarr's most relied-upon slave drugs was leaked from a Caldari biolab), the State's diplomats did little to placate those aggrieved by their mistakes. The Caldari nation was as mighty as ever, but it was hardening up from the inside out. It would take a major change to shake things up, and in YC 110 that change came in the form of a radical new leader, Tibus Heth.

Finding nepotism-spawned inefficiency all over the State, Heth instigated several reforms intended to bring Caldari back to its roots as a meritocratic society. To this end, he employed his most trusted director, Janus Bravour, to set in motion a series of initiatives that would root out those undeserving of their positions and install in their stead people who had truly earned the right to be there. With the proper gears meshing in unison, the State would once again take its rightful role as a trampling juggernaut of commercial, industrial and military might.

Heth's reforms reached into every sector of corporate activity. He began by confiscating the wealth of mid- to high-tier managers and executives all across the State and redistributing it among the lowest rungs of the workforce. He created programs that made sure people received adequate compensation for hard work, in the form of annual leave and early retirement. He greatly increased funding for education and re-education initiatives. He promoted worker summits wherein individual ingenuity was given an outlet. The main goal: to make sure that no matter which rung on the ladder a person occupies, they stand at least a fighting chance of making it to the rung above them – provided they truly deserve it.

Under the new system, social status is no obstacle to advancement. Within ten years' time, over half of the State's schools will be equipped with advanced screening methods for detecting unusual aptitude, so that those so gifted can be directed toward areas where their talent will do the most good. Institutions are being set up to give grants to armchair inventors and small business owners who never had the chance to take their ideas to a higher level. Government spies already are being disseminated among the ranks of the corporations and tasked with weeding out nepotism wherever they find it.

In the time since Heth took power a sizable number of citizens, believing the rule of a single man to contradict Caldari ideals, have left the country. The assumption among them has been that like the despots and dictators that litter history's pages he would surround himself with a power

clique and leave the rest of the nation blowing in the wind, eroding the nutritious soil of cultural values that had kept the State strong throughout its existence. The nationalistic bent of his policies and his military ruthlessness have also caused a degree of alarm, prompting some citizens to question (quietly, of course) how their morality and their national identity fit together in these latest and darkest times.

In the span since Heth's inauguration, however, the turnaround in economic growth has been undeniable. Caldari have more money in their pockets. They are more secure about their retirement. People who under the old system would have found themselves forever excluded from certain positions now reside within those positions. The general feeling, on the streets and in the stations, is that for better or worse something great and grand is underway, that the previous system was ailing and outmoded, and that the New Meritocracy (as it has been dubbed by the press) is a return to form for a great nation shackled too long in the chains of favoritism. Averting their eyes from the darkness all around them, the Caldari people now for the first time in years set their sights on a brighter future.

## Wild Earth

Haatakan Oiritsuu - once-CEO of Kaalakiota and now deposed, in exile, on a barren snowy estate long from the action of the Caldari State politics - held a living plant in her hand, took out the sharpest knife she had, and with careful but precise motions sliced the thing open lengthwise, exposing its layers all the way to the green of its deepest, glistening core. She held the plant over a small pile of peat, squeezing out little drops from its stem. With nimble fingers she drained it dry, running her hands over every inch of its body until there was nothing left but a shredded husk.

The peat, already enriched with nutrients and chemical concoctions, had needed more. All manner of reactions were ongoing in its soil, but in order to sustain them, proper fuel was needed. Dead liquids only went so far; in the end, as was always the case, a sacrifice had been necessary to feed the hungry earth. The best nourishments for the fresh plants in this greenhouse came from the ones that had grown here before. And for every flower, there came a time for the bloom, and a time for the cut.

\*\*\*

She had always loved being in nature, particularly the kind that lent itself to quiet, long-term observation. Haatakan had grown up in a hard family: not a rough one, and not a hand ever laid on her, but an environment where everything you did and everything you said would be remembered, and judged, and brought up if the occasion required. She had a tiny garden spot behind the house that she tended when everything got too much, and it was there she discovered that flowers were not only beautiful - one must never lose sight of the beauty in life - but how delightfully they responded to control; how carefully they must be tended and grown.

She had made herself the child's promise that one day she would be super powerful and mega rich, a million times more wealthy than the second-wealthiest man in the world, and on the day that she made it - for she surely would - she would spend the rest of her life in a garden of her own, far away from people, tending to the quietly growing plants.

That was her unit of power: a garden. Then she grew up, and she became very powerful indeed, and very rich, and she never forgot about it. When she had this place built, as much in the middle of a wilderness as she could make it without offending the people of the State, she added a greenhouse easily half the size of the entire palace. She spent most of her time there, patiently waiting for the world to catch up with her plans.

\*\*\*

Most of the plants in the greenhouse were flowering ones. Haatakan chose one of the most beautiful - a lovely lilicae possessing a thick, stiff stem topped with a pristine, bulblike blossom - and uprooted it, placing it carefully in a temporary pot on her table. There were machines that could do this, little nanoids that would turn the earth around the roots into slippery oil, and pressure-sensitive metal arms that could then pull out the flower without dislodging a single one

of its tendrils, leaves or petals. Haatakan didn't believe in those. The moment you gave your life over to automation - to any outside process, really - you invited a quiet disaster.

She had invited disaster, but it had not been quiet.

She picked up her knife. Its blade was short, like that of a scalpel, and sharp enough to cut through practically anything that lived. With the lilicae standing tall in front of her, she got to work on its flower. It had blossomed but not yet bloomed, so the petals were still closed in, like a shy maiden on her wedding night.

She put the tip of the blade against one of the petals and rested it there. It was so sharp that it began to slide in, ever so slightly. She pushed down the blade in a slanted fashion, then lifted it back up and slid it down the other way, as if carving the first two sides of a triangle. Instead of cutting the third and removing a piece from the petal, she used the tip to tease out the top part of the cut, then folded it down like a flap, leaving a little window into the center of the flower. The flap's edges curved slightly inward, and on each of them she traced a very faint line, topping off the carving with a single faint press of the knife tip to the top of the cut, leaving the tiniest of dimples.

After cleaning the knife with a purple silk cloth she did this again, to the same petal, cutting and teasing and shaping the triangular flaps until the petal looked more like a well-traversed honeycomb than anything grown out of nature. When she was finished she moved on to the next, and the next. Eventually the flower had been completely pierced and cut, and daylight shone through its gaping wounds.

Haatakan slid the knife down alongside its stem and sliced off every leaf, leaving the plant naked as day. For every tiny join where a leaf had clung to the stem, she inserted the knife tip deep into its fresh wound and gored out a small hole, removing even the final possibility of more growth. Little trickles of opaque sap ran down, over her fingers. When at last the cuts would stop bleeding, the area around them would wrinkle and change color, turning a little darker and lending the flower a marvelous, damaged hue.

It was a cruel way to create beauty. But anything this lovely could not be allowed to stand unspoiled.

\*\*\*

At one time she was one of the world's most powerful CEOs. She ruled one of New Eden's superpowers, sharing the hot seat with seven of her countrymen. They were feared, as all good leaders must be, but Haatakan had not realized how extensively they were hated.

For the extent of her professional career she had closely followed the Caldari system of governance, where found good use for her indurate upbringing. People knew their place. Anyone who acted up - or worse, failed - would be dealt with, calmly and professionally, and whatever threat they posed to the delicate equilibrium would be eliminated.

\*\*\*

She uprooted another plant and brought it over to the polycarb glas sink, which she had filled with water. The plant was bottom heavy, composed as it was of a thick knot of roots the size of a closed fist, from which rose single long stem with leafy sprouts, and a large, bulbous flower reminiscent of the lilicae.

Haatakan placed the plant into the sink, where it sank to the bottom, to slowly drown.

This plant, which was renowned for the ferocity with which it drained its earth, would live remarkably long underwater. It would suck in as much of its surroundings as it could, becoming bloated and heavy. While it would retain the framework of its shape until the very last, each part - the flower, the leaves, the stem and even the roots - would grow to several times its original size, engorged on the water the plant would never stop ingesting even as it died. The plant would grow large and beautiful, with a glistening sheen on its turgid surface. In time, the sheen would take on an oily nature as cellular walls began to break and release the plant's essential fluids out onto its surface.

\*\*\*

A revolution began, one she expected to be quelled without too much trouble. She had become complacent; not weak but laggard, lumbering like a giant tired of striding over the land, no longer bothering to look where he walked, and taking the smallest of satisfaction in the panicked screams below.

If enough people showed fear, she reasoned, then she must be feared, for she saw none who seemed fearless. This, she found to her cost, did not mean they didn't exist, merely that they had the good sense not to step out in the open. Until they did, breaking through all the walls she'd erected, and breaking everything else along the way.

\*\*\*

In one section of her greenhouse she had a small tree, still in its pot. It was about her height, with a branchless trunk that looked weedy and pale, and a small crown of leaves that drooped in the greenhouse heat.

Its trunk was enveloped by a thin, heavily-leafed vine that looked in perfect health. This vine, which was a parasite, hung on to the tree by a million microscopic needles forced into the tree's trunk. A third of those needles would have little hooks on the end, the better to maintain their grasp; another third would be slowly and gently sucking out nutrients when they were needed; and the last third would be injecting something instead: a chemical, the likes of which had not yet been properly synthesized, that induced the tree to believe it was being fed with delicious, complex nutrients. The tree's own constant outstretching for food and nourishment would be curtailed, and with it all other processes, including the production of antibodies that might poison the parasite. So long as the tree thought it was being fed well, it didn't bother to do anything else but wait for the rest of its ever-shortening life to pass.

\*\*\*

One of these demolition men was Tibus Heth, who rocketed into the limelight on a tornado of smoke and fire. He was a volatile man, an angry man, and Haatakan did not expect him or any of his plans to last a Caldarian day. Angry men were easily dealt with. But Heth had backing, and even when that backing seemed to disappear, he had a support system, overseen primarily by a very stable, very quiet man called Janus Bravour.

\*\*\*

She looked in on a single large plant, one that had been growing in its large bed for quite some time. She had recently placed a number of smaller plants, all sorts of varieties, dotted around this one in close enough proximity that their roots had begun to touch it.

This plant, a particularly aggressive rosoid variant, had sensed their presence. Even though they weren't weeds and were of no immediate threat in this rich ground - which had been fortified with the hungry peat of her own creation, and seemed to enhance the aggressive properties of some of her more contentious flowers - it had began to extend its thorns and channel all its energy into keeping off every other plant in the plot. This had left its stem shriveled, likely to break at the least little touch, and its petals so thin and weak that they were not merely translucent; Haatakan could see the thin veins in the flesh beneath the surface. If she stood there long enough she fashioned she could see the plant's vital liquids being pumped and forth, as if from a photosynthetic heart beating its last before the collapse. She would wait until it was spent, then deadhead it, and place its frail little flower with the others she kept in a small bowl in the foyer of her palace.

\*\*\*

Janus, she thought, would have the long-term plans. He certainly seemed the antithesis of Heth, and that was dangerous, for the men who believe they know better than others - and are capable of acting on it - will eventually overtake the others' responsibilities. It was clear that Janus formed an integral part of the framework that held Tibus Heth in place. Heth himself was still the main threat to Haatakan and the other seven dispossessed CEOs, for he was the instigator and enforcer of the new State, while Janus sat quietly in the background, oiling the gears and ensuring they turned.

Until Heth made his latest move: a reorganization of the Caldari State, a return to the meritocracy they had been founded on. A bureaucratic move, no matter how heavily couched in revolutionary terms. A bold plan, clearly intended to bolster Heth's fragile standing with the State's citizens, and one that relied on something more than fire and fury to work. It needed a quiet mind to minister, lest it fail colossally.

And thus Janus Bravour became, overnight, ground zero for every revenge plan in operation.

\*\*\*

These two plants, now, had been growing for a while, but not as long as one might imagine if one looked at their towering stems.

Haatakan stroked her fingers over them. Each was nearly as tall as a small tree. She'd had to put their shared pot down on the ground. They were rare, small vitis variants, not inclined to climb walls or do much at all unless given the right impetus.

All that was needed, really, was another plant of the exact same sort. The vine's nature was to rise over its surroundings, and when something began to claim its place, it would do its utmost to reassert its dominance. Not only did it nearly triple its own growth rate, but it would attempt to entwine itself around its rival, keeping it down and stealing a rise on its laurels. If the rival was another vine, it would do the same; and if the two were carefully trimmed and guided, they would encircle each other like strands of DNA, rising to the ceiling in a quiet ballet of mutual competition until, at last, they died from exhaustion. Their lifeless stalks would remain, as monuments to their folly, and with care could be preserved, by drying and lamination, still stuck in each other's snake embrace until the end of time.

\*\*\*

Haatakan had watched the news. Janus Bravour had suddenly been taken ill and was now in hospital, in some manner of serious condition.

Truth be told, she had been neglecting this greenhouse for months. After Tibus Heth had come in and thrown her out into the cold, she'd spent a lot of her time brooding in her palace. She was resigned to staying here. The terms of Heth's dictated that her safety was guaranteed only on her own grounds. If she left and headed to the metropolis of Khyyrth, the citizens would recognize and kill her; and if she fled into the forest, Heth's own agents would either remove her from this earth, or the cold and the woods would simply swallow her whole.

So she had retreated to her ivory tower, and remained there inert, staring at the walls. Her initial rage had subsided and given way to resigned depression, bringing back memories of all those years ago when she'd been at the mercy of other forces, paternal in name but dictatorial in nature, and had wished nothing more than to be free of them. The gardens had taught her otherwise - freedom was achieved by working around your restraints, for if you waited for them to be removed, you were merely asking for another master of your fate to step forth - but she ignored its lessons, and let herself grind to a standstill.

Janus's fate, whatever it truly was, had changed that. The wheels moved again. Heth was alone and unsupported. Despite the man's volatility, he was a brilliant military strategist; and despite his avowed morality he was, she believed, an unscrupulous one. A military man would take extreme measures to conquer his enemies; so long as his cause, or his belief in that cause, remained just and honest, the ethics and justifiability of his methods did not matter.

Heth understood power on a visceral level, far more so than most of the people he had deposed. As much as she despised him, she could not deny this fact. Right now, with Janus out of the picture and the CEOs mounting their subsequent counter-revolution, he desperately needed



someone who knew the intricacies of the highest political level in State and was willing to do what was necessary to achieve her goals; someone who had her hands on the strings and was willing to pull them.

The speakers in the greenhouse rang out with a long, sonorous note.

She had a guest.

\*\*\*

A single fruit hung like a pendulum from a drooping branch of the plant. The fruit was ripe, ready for picking. It was beautiful, also, and stood in stark contrast to the plant that had born it, whose body was tired and worn.

This one plant could and had been induced to put all of its effort into the fruit of its creation, diverting every nutrient and scrap of energy it picked up through its questing roots and channeling them directly into the soft, soft pulp. Once the fruit was ready, the plant would likely die.

Haatakan grabbed it on her way out and took a juicy bite.

\*\*\*

Her guest held a small monitor on which Tibus Heth's face was visible. Haatakan ignored him and focused on the woman who had entered her palace.

"I know you," Haatakan said.

"Indeed you do," Tibus Heth said through his monitor. "She's the one who brought you here."

"Last time I saw you, I was having terms dictated to me," Haatakan said to the woman. "You asked me if I knew how much the people hated me. And you said that if I tried to escape, into the woods, I would be lost forever." She walked up close to the woman and was pleased to see the merest glint of sweat in her combed-back hair. "People *do* get lost forever here, you know. People who chose the wrong road."

"Janus Bravour is dead," Tibus Heth said from waist level. Haatakan stepped back and looked at him at last.

"I know," she said. "And now you're going to fall."

"Not if you can help it." Tibus leaned in closer on the screen. "I need your help, Ms. Oiritsuu."

"You, the destroyer of the State, need the help of an old lady out in the country? My goodness, how the mighty have fallen."

"The other megacorps are conspiring against me. All seven of them. But not you. I've had my agents thoroughly vet every one of you people, and Kaalakiota, in which you still have your witchy little tendrils, stayed out of the whole thing. Why?"

"For the same reason I imagine you sent this particular messenger to me. We owe our allegiance to a cause, and that cause is ourselves and our view of the world. Everything else is secondary. And every alliance is an opportunity of chance, nothing more."

"I work for the State," Heth said.

"Funny. I used to say the same thing, when I was on top."

"So you refuse? You want SuVee and the rest to rise again?"

"Certainly not. There is no reason for those idiots to regasp the reins of power. But you need to understand, Heth, that I don't see any pressing reason to help you stay on top. I will still be stuck here, tending to my plants, watching you take this great State to pieces."

"We can work out the terms. You didn't make it this far without an ability to negotiate," Heth said. He leaned back from the screen, and Haatakan saw he was sitting in a chair, likely in the office he'd taken from one of the CEOs. "I think you see plenty of reason to make this happen. I think you're lying, and that you're snapping at the chance."

Haatakan leaned her head to one side. "Do you think I killed Janus?" she said.

The question did not seem to catch Heth off guard, which surprised her. "In all honesty?" he said. "I don't know. You might have. If I know you and your scheming ways, this conversation is merely a point in a long, branching plan you'll have made, one that ends with you being back in power to some degree. I'm alright with that. I've dealt with less trustworthy people than you."

She gave him a long look. At last she said, "We might be able to make something out of this."

Heth grinned, and she grinned back, like two carnivores passing by over a meal.

She had been planning, ever since Janus died. And her renewed time in the greenhouse had taught her to mix that roaring hunger for power that resided in her deepest, unconscious core with the learned quietness of thought that floated up in her conscious mind.

"How would you do this, if you manage it at all?" Heth asked.

There would be seven forces to neutralize, each one of which had some sort of vice. Everyone had a vice. It was to the eternal frustration of Haatakan's enemies that hers was merely a twisted sort of gardening.

You could plan with groups of people, or with the currents passing through society - abstract plans, often, but workable - but individuals were a different matter. Especially mercurial ones

such as Heth, who remained a mystery to her. The best option with those kinds of people was to get close and stay close. Study. Presumption had cast her here, and understanding would eventually get her out. That, and patience.

But the others, whom she'd known for so long; they were no mystery. They could be worked on. She'd been practicing.

"Leave it to me," she said, reached out and turned off the screen. She returned her gaze to the Provist woman holding the dead monitor, whose eyes were glazed over with utter dread. "Now, my dear. We're going to have to deal with you."

From a small pocket at the back of her dress, she withdrew the little knife with the very sharp blade, and concealed it in her hand.

There was a large compost heap that needed feeding, and flowers that needed their nutrients. One had to plan for the future.

And, in fact, all her practice in the greenhouse had done more than prepare her for the oncoming little wars. She felt as if she had been engaging in self-purification, cutting away the dead limbs that had grown out of the trunk of her old self. She was cleansing herself and casting off the refuse - not her sins, for those follow as surely as age, but the old mindsets and assumptions - and preparing for a new chapter of her life. To bloom, in this wild new earth.

## **The Part Where I Play the Devil**

Let me tell you about the mad man and the wonders he performs.

My name is Alder Brenean. I am one of the aides to His Royal Highness, an Heir to the throne of the Amarr Empire, beloved charge and leader of his fiefdom, Aritcio Kor-Azor.

I have not been doing this job for long and already it is a marvel beyond anything I had imagined. I do not sleep much. I eat at irregular hours. I hold conversations - brief, fleeting words, and of a servile nature, but still spoken out loud and answered - with men who operate at the highest level of government, and with men who operate only in the shadows.

My lord has not always been loved. There was a time where he was considered merely a shrewd politician, fitter to rise than to rule. There was also a time where he had ruled so terribly, and done such awful things, that the people rose against him. A religious man intervened, a Speaker of Truths, and he saved my lord, but for such a price that I cannot speak of.

When he returned to his duties he was a new man. He was also a kind man, one who thought very hard about the lives of his subjects and how to better them. He has been on that mission ever since: To improve the lives of the people who serve him and whom, he strongly emphasizes, he serves in turn.

Part of that rejuvenation was to bring on a new group of people, ones who could help him rule his heirdom in the most humane, efficient way possible. I am one of his new recruits. I took my exams, and without divulging how I did on them, I can attest that I did not fail in my duties.

When I was interviewed the lord asked me whether I was faithful. I said I was. He asked me whether I was faithful to the people, the ruler, or my lord God. I said that as far as I was concerned, these three were indistinguishable. He smiled, for the first time in our interview. A day later I was brought on.

\*\*\*

One of the ongoing missions begun by my lord is to travel around his kingdom, both to familiarize himself with his people - and them with him - and to ensure their lives meet the standards he has set for a Kor-Azor person. This applies equally to Holder and Commoner. It even extends to slaves, whom my lord believes are no less worthy, in their way, than the people they serve. In this he is assisted by a cadre of able people among whom I proudly count myself. I am trusted with secrets, and I believe my lord sees something in me that I may not see myself, for he routinely has me on hand in meetings of a most delicate nature. He does not ask my opinion, but he does enquire of my analysis on certain court matters. I suspect he may find my perspective of some use, unfettered as it is by actual experience with political intrigue.

Our agents had determined that the subjects on a particular planet in my lord's kingdom were ... not fomenting rebellion or anything of that sort, but certainly murmuring in increasing unrest. This had not, our agents stressed, been reported nor acknowledged in any official capacity, and

thus my lord would have to be careful of political repercussions if he were to present himself as a peacemaker.

The main problem with this planet, they explained - and one of the factors in the unrest of its people - was the political machinations inherent in its rule. The people were governed by several lords - Holders all, of course - each of whom in turn owed their allegiance to a continental overseer. Those overlords served under a planetary representative, who in turn filed regular reports directly to my lord and master. We noted that in his recent reports there had been no mention of any trouble.

This setup of governance was not the typical one in our Empire, and had been put in place long before my lord's ascension to heirdom. Not only was it tied down with strings that would prove costly to cut, but the planet's economy was so enmeshed in labyrinthine pacts by the ruling body that were my lord to intervene in a lawful and justifiable way, it would be a long time before we could even hope to wrest control of the planet over to us. This struck me as a strange state of affairs, but my lord explained that it was in fact a common one, and that the Heirs, even with their ecclesial authority, did not have as much secular power as they liked to pretend. He added that despite this state of affairs and our agents' reports of planetary issues, we should not necessarily assume that there would be trouble. Many of the most highly complex, politically sensitive problems of our age could be solved with a simple, elegant solution that more often than not did not tackle the problem head-on, but instead caused it to cease to exist. All one needed to do was find the right angle, and to act decisively, with the solution clear in one's mind. Never waver, he said, once you know what you need to do, and never lose heart.

\*\*\*

We arrived in terrible weather. The space elevators, secure thought they might be, made me nauseous. It wasn't merely the travel - though the occasional sense of sideways pressure never failed to remind me that we were swaying in midair halfway between the earth and the stars - but the idea of traveling back from the skies and down to solid ground. There are people, and I know many of them, who prefer to stay on solid ground all their lives, making it the bedrock of their faith. I cannot do this. To me, ascension is literal; I feel that to be closer to God, Man needs to rise to meet Him. For some this might be a metaphysical ascension, for others a physical one. But to descend again, into a strange place where I would meet people who lived their entire lives *out of preference* under what they saw as a closed-off, threatening, solid metal sky - that descent would truly put me among strangers to my faith.

My lord arrived to great fanfare, none of it of his own making. Speeches were expected and given, and we took a few days merely to travel between areas, visiting different locales and gauging the crowds' reactions to my lord's presence as much as his words. It became clear, through the murmurs and our hushed listening, that they did not want him here. They were receptive to his presence, which sounds contradictory to their standoffish reception but was not a surprise. To them he did not represent hope - and it was clear these people needed more hope - but merely another leadership figure in a long line that grew ever more threatening and unpopular the higher up they looked at it; and the fact that he was speaking to them with a

message of positivity merely made him a novelty. Or, in some of the more hostile areas, a politician and a liar.

Nevertheless we sensed an openness, a subdued willingness to hear what he had to say. The people turned up in droves, and as much as they might not believe in my lord's words or what he stood for, they listened attentively to what he said.

I must add that the continental overseers did not quite follow suit. For every word of praise or support my lord spoke to the masses, the leaders, in turn, spoke a subtly negative one of stilted progress; or, even worse, they spoke not at all. Before too long it had become clear that they were very happy with this situation and had no intention of allowing my lord - the presumption these people had! - of allowing my lord to intervene, no matter how unstable and unpleasant the life on this planet had become for the poor commoners.

Thus the first few days and nights passed. I prayed in the evenings while my lord met with his private councilors. Many of them arrived at his quarters, spoke briefly, then left for parts unknown.

Eventually he knocked on my door and informed me that the next part of our journey here would commence. The time for speeches was over and the time for inspection had begun. If I had not known my lord's ways as well as I do, I would have thought of him in much the same terms as the poor, earth-bound people on this planet: As a politician, who, having spread his prattle, now intended to make a few symbolic appearances in mock fellowship with the locals. It was a rote item of schedule for many politicians in all parts of the world.

My lord, however, had his own reasons for ambling down this well-trodden path. The public appearances required neither his presence of mind nor his oratory faculties. He could attend, no matter how tired and worn, and have the brunt of the effort undertaken by those he was visiting. And at night, when no one saw, he could undertake the true purpose of this part of our mission.

\*\*\*

The true measure of a people is not the attitude they have towards their leaders or visiting dignitaries, no more than you can judge children by how they speak to their parents or guests of the house. Those whose minds represent the truth of their selves will have the sense to keep up their masks at all times, or at least maintain proper decorum, and those who cannot even do that are usually too crazy to be useful as barometers of temper and mood. If you want to see how children truly feel, don't look at the way they behave towards their parents; spy on them and find out how they treat their siblings. You may have to wait until there is a crisis, something that puts pressure on the children to interact with each other, but then you'll surely see it: Who pushes their brothers into a corner, and who embraces them.

Our people went out into the night to find out these things, and my lord did the same.

I can not think of any politician or ruler who does this. Even if they tried, I cannot imagine any who could do it to their advantage. It takes an extraordinary degree of precision, finesse, insight and ability to react to go out there into the open and be amongst people as if they were your own.

They would come in during the mornings, tired and worn, and confer with each other on the night's progress. My lord wore his protective gear, of course; morph fields that blocked him from sight and identification, and permeation-proof lightweight armor that would protect him from direct assault. He remained partially vulnerable to natural disasters - floods, fires and building collapses - but he took care with those, he said, and did not put himself at undue risk. My lord routinely did this on the trips he went on, and while I will admit that at first it gave me grave suspicions - I have never quite trusted those stories of high-borns going out in disguise among the public, suspecting as I do that their disguises were highly transparent and that their social explorations were carefully steered by their retinue - I soon noted that he had a skill for it, and a Commoner's instincts for survival, that served him well. He had never been found out.

I had always had my suspicions about my lord's nightly endeavors, and that they might be about more than merely sizing up the temperament of the local populace, but I was shocked when I saw him stumble in one morning, leaning against walls and clearly having a difficult time with movement. When I asked him whether I could be of assistance, he let out a little laugh and asked me to help him out of his armor. I did, and gasped when I saw his back.

Something had fallen on him, hard enough to rupture the armor's defenses, and it would likely have left bruises had there been any unblemished skin to affect. My lord's back was burnt and scarred, as if he had walked through the hellfires themselves. I asked whether he needed the services of a doctor, at which he let out a wheezing laugh and declined my offer. He had, he said, suffered the services of the doctors in the past. These days he preferred to let his own body rebuild itself

His hands and feet were sore, too, reddened and worn, but the gloves and boots he'd worn had luckily taken most of the brunt. They were gone, he said, their tatters left somewhere on the streets of this strange earth.

He did not explain the burns, but merely said they had taught him all he needed to know about inhabitants on this planet. They were not a distant or rebellious people, he added, but they needed a proper rallying cry, along with someone they could trust to shout it from above.

I *did* check the next morning's news and discovered there had been a massive fire the night before. Volunteers had arrived from all over in an attempt to extinguish it and save innocent people from harm. Pursuant to this I combed through any available articles for a mention of mysterious strangers, or a vision of some blurred corner in a picture of the fire, but found none.

Some might have felt he was wasting his time - not in saving people, which is never a waste, but in spending his time among them like this. But he has told me often that the big picture is made out of many small details. You must be among your own people, he says. You must. If you lose that connection, you stand to lose so much more.

He had his dreams that night; the ones where he screams. But in the morning he was very calm.

\*\*\*

The penultimate part of our journey was a meeting with its planetary leader. As I explained, the economic and political situations on this planet were very much intertwined. Old independence agreements, most of a financial bent, had held off any direct changes brought from the outside, while the extremely complex interplay between various internal forces on the planet meant there was no way for my lord or anyone else even to squeeze in among the cracks as a private investor and start working any change in that manner. The intermediary continental leaders had given us no support. Unless we received backing from the planetary representative, we were going to have a hard time enacting any change in this place, no matter how positive.

The representative had invited us to his office, at the penthouse on one of the tallest buildings on the planet, but my lord politely declined the offer. Instead he asked that the meeting be held in his own quarters, which had been furnished with his personal belongings and were spacious enough to hold a platoon of soldiers. The representative was quick to accept this counteroffer, sending us a brief acknowledgment to that effect. I suggested to my lord that the man was eager to see us gone from here, and he nodded, adding that before this happened, changes would have to be enacted. He asked that I remain in the meeting as a secretary of events and a representative. When I enquired whether it would not behoove my lord to present a show of strength - a small cadre of stronger men to better face off the team our representative was likely to bring - he gave me a brief and not very humorous smile, and said that if his suspicions about the man and his persons were correct, he would not be bringing anyone at all.

I could scarcely imagine anyone insulting my lord like that, but I agreed to his wishes.

Shortly before the visit I went through the room to ensure nothing was out of place. I aligned my lord's copies of the Pax Amarria, and his selections of ancient scriptures. The banners were hung in the appropriate order, while the ceremonial weapons were kept, at my lord's request, well at the back. Subtly hidden among them was the Khumaak, a weapon not many Amarrians would dare keep in their possession. I had always had my own sentiments about my lord's reasons for keeping a copy of this bloodied relic among the more proper holy ones of our own people, but what happened later that evening cast its presence in a new and disconcerting light.

The administrator came in and was immediately hostile to my lord's suggestions. He said, in response to my lord's worries on the increased instability in various regions, that he did not intend to let anything disturb his rule of this planet. Leaving aside the dictatorial attitude reflected in that comment, it was a vicious and grossly inappropriate jab at my lord's attempts to improve the life of his constituents. I had seen some of the intermediate members of the heirdom act like this after my lord returned to his duties, though thankfully they were growing ever rarer.

My lord asked if the governor simply intended to quell any opposition from the commoners, and the governor said that he would. When my lord added that the Caldari governing board had thought the same, and that it had not turned out so well for them, the governor grew visibly flustered. He cast me a look - I had sat in a corner of the office and barely been noticed by the



man - that seemed to imply I was responsible for my lord's approach, as if I were one of the poor Commoners he ruled and clearly disdained.

The governor told my lord that, in all honesty, life on this planet was going to continue unaltered, and that while my lord's benevolent probings - he actually used those words - were certainly laudable and guaranteed to carry favor with our newly elected Empress, they were far removed from the political reality of the world this governor ruled. There would be no change while he was in office, and given his political ties with others on this planet, there would be no way that my lord could attempt to oust him, no matter how many of those filthy little people - that language again - he brought to bear.

I was speechless by the man's audacity. My lord, on the other hand, calmly got up, walked over to the governor and, smiling wide, extended his hand. It took the governor a few moments before he extended his own and smiled back. My lord said that the situation was clear and that he truly did appreciate the situation: That as long as the governor was in power, no matter what instability reigned, things would go on as before. He understood this, he said.

The governor made as if to speak, but my lord continued, saying that how unfortunate it was to have any unrest, tend as it did to spiral completely out of control. He added that despite this, and despite the fact that this unrest, once it *did* spiral out of control, would inevitably end up at the shores of his own royal offices, he did understand the governor's way of thinking. After all, he said at last, he had once held much the same viewpoint.

The governor fairly yanked his hand out of my lord's grasp, but maintained his smile.

My lord turned to me and politely asked me to leave.

I was surprised by this, but said nothing and got up from my chair. I walked quietly by the walls and towards the exit. My lord followed and met me at the doors, opening them for me. I gave him a quizzical look

"This is the part where I play the Devil," he said, with such a mixture of regret and relief as I have never heard from a man.

He saw me through and closed the doors after me.

Not knowing what else to do, I stood outside the room, waiting for the meeting to be over. I did not spy or eavesdrop; I could not have even if I had tried, for the walls and the doors were made of thick material. After a brief while, though, I heard raised voices, mostly from the governor. The voices rose until one of them became a shout. It was punctured by several muffled thuds, rising to a near-shriek, before falling quiet altogether.

The door opened a crack, and when I saw my lord's face peer through, I let out a long exhale that I had not even realized I'd been holding in. His hair glistened with sweat, though he seemed to have thoroughly wiped it off his face; and his eyes were wide open. He asked me to call up certain members of his retinue, for he had something they needed to take care of.

This I did. I did not mention to them or anyone else that I had seen the Khumaak lying on the ground behind my lord.

\*\*\*

The day after, I saw a glut of news reports, all of them detailing the governor's disappearance. It seemed that his p.v. had malfunctioned while in mid-flight and crashed into the ocean, hours before his scheduled meeting with my lord. The news included a quote from Heir Aritcio Kor-Azor where he exclaimed not only his profound sadness over the loss of this great man, but his disappointment that their meeting on the political and economical future of the planet had not taken place. The papers went on to quote my lord in that he hoped he could still hold meetings with the various overseers of individual continental entities, and that these meetings could conclude with a better outcome than this terrible, terrible occurrence.

When my lord embarked on the last series of journeys over this strange earth, his speeches received a much better reaction from the workforce. This might have been helped by recent concessions announced by the continental leaders, who had decided to embark on massive audits of commoner health, safety and economic troubles. Unfortunately, this sudden development meant they were all too busy to meet with my lord, but he took it with his usual good humor, and we started preparing for our departure.

\*\*\*

As we were travelling back up to the waiting ship, in that hellish elevator, my lord turned to me and said that the lives of everyone on this planet would be improved. He asked if I was happy with this.

I understood the question that he had asked, and the one he had not. I said that yes, I was.

He smiled and said that was good; for he wanted everyone to be happy.

I believed him.

We rose to the skies.

## Beasts of the Field

The scene is a bar in the Great Wildlands, at the outskirts of Minmatar space. It is very late at night.

A recent war in New Eden has spurred the three lost Minmatar tribes to return home. The Thukkers, wanderers of space, have been invited to rejoin the Republic, and are preparing for their section of space to become an autonomous part of the Minmatar collective. The Nefantar, also known as the Ammatars, who were thought to have been traitors against their own people in an older war, were revealed as protectors and invited back after their homeworld was ravaged. The Starkmanir, once thought extinct but kept alive through the good grace of the Nefantar, were rescued and offered to rejoin their people.

It is a time of war, and integration of these three tribes has temporarily taken a back seat to the efforts on the front lines. In the meanwhile, refugees and hopefuls from the tribes have situated themselves in refugee stations such as this one, waiting for permission, visas, housing and jobs in Minmatar space. The bar is in the middle of one of those refugee areas.

SISPUR, a Nefantar, sits at his table, drinking. ANNES, a Starkmanir, enters, gets a beer from the bartender, looks around at the empty hall, and eventually goes over to SISPUR's table, pulling up a chair.

ANNES

This free?

SISPUR

Sure.

ANNES sits.

ANNES

Didn't think anyone else would be here. Most everyone is at home, asleep.

SISPUR

Most everyone clearly doesn't have any worries about uprooting from their home, taking whatever stuff they could carry and plonking it down here while they wait to hear if the homeland will take them in at last.

ANNES

It'll take us in, there's no doubt about that. You know it as well as I do.

SISPUR takes a long sip from his drink.

SISPUR

Yeah, I guess I do. But I hate the waiting. I had a life back on Ammatar, sad as it was. I was appreciated in my own way. I don't like waiting to be taken into a place where I'm not appreciated, much as I want to get back.

TRIAT, a Thukker man, enters the bar, grabs a drink and sits down at the same table without a word.

TRIAT

How's it going?

ANNES and SISPUR look at him wordlessly.

TRIAT

Pretty dead here tonight. Thought I was the only one alive.

TRIAT laughs.

TRIAT

So what you guys doing up here so late? You selling?

TRIAT looks at the two stone faces, then laughs again.

TRIAT

Nevermind. Anyone catch the game recently?

TRIAT drains his glass, burps and waves at the bartender.

TRIAT

Hey! Fill-up!

SISPUR, in a frosty tone

So, is this the part where you show us your tattoos?

ANNES

Or puke all over the table, maybe?

TRIAT stares at them. The bartender comes over and fills his glass. There is a tense moment; then TRIAT rubs his face with his hands, sighs and chuckles a little.

TRIAT

Not coming off too well, am I?

SISPUR

I've seen Fedos with better personality, really.

ANNES

But you're welcome to join us, if you like. Not as if there's anything else to do right now.

TRIAT

Sorry, guys. I've been hanging out with the thuks too much. I'm Triat.

SISPUR

Sispur.

ANNES

Annes.

SISPUR

I'm the local traitor, and Annes here's the local revolution symbol, and we were just talking about how our motherland seems to want us here and gone all at the same time. What's keeping you up this time of night?

TRIAT leans back in his chair and gives this proper thought.

TRIAT

The same, I guess. I dunno if you know how we live, travelling through space and selling our stuff, but there isn't as much insecurity as you might think. If you're going to eke out some kind of existence up here, you need to be real good at being proactive, finding your own sources of raw material and working your own deals.

ANNES

And you think rejoining the Republic will damage that.

TRIAT

Well, if all that independence is completely taken away, and everything is out of your hands, you're going to get uncomfortable. Stop sleeping, maybe. Drink instead and act like a fool.

SISPUR

But you guys are joining up by choice, or at least you voted to have the Wildlands turn into some quasi-esque part of Republic space. You all retain your holdings and your independence. It doesn't seem like your life has to change that much.

ANNES

I don't think that's what he's after.

SISPUR

Oh?

ANNES

I think he's one of the Thukkers who's actually moving house, into the Republic

TRIAT nods.

TRIAT

There were votes, and talk of independence, but the writing really is on the wall for anyone not too stupid to read it. The Republic is going to go through an upswing. And as much as we Thukkers brag about living on the edge, we do spend a lot more time than we'd ever admit simply trying not to look down.

ANNES

So you want safety.

TRIAT looks a little hurt at the comment.

TRIAT

I think it'd be nice simply to have a home again. Some base of operations where I can solidify, get my act together, and rely on tomorrow being the same as today. Somewhere that doesn't tremble as it moves. Or move at all, come to that.

SISPUR

And it looks like that's about to happen. So why're you awake, and drinking?

TRIAT

Because I think too much. Like I said, you stay proactive, always looking for connections and deals, which is about the same as looking for a way you can crowbar yourself into someone else's business. It's about being dominant. And that's impossible in this life I have now, when I'm waiting for some outside system to lay down the law for me.

TRIAT takes a drink

TRIAT

But it's better than that dead uncertainty. It has to be. How is it with you guys?

SISPUR

I'm pretty certain.

TRIAT

That's good.

SISPUR

I'm certain I'm going to be treated like crap over there.

TRIAT

Really?

SISPUR

Sure.

TRIAT

I thought you guys were heroes.

TRIAT points his glass at ANNES

TRIAT

For saving your asses. No offence.

ANNES smiles.

SISPUR

That was only a small group of people. The rest of us ...

SISPUR takes a deep breath.

SISPUR

The rest of us just tried to get stuff done the best we could. Live our lives and not leave anyone off any worse than we had to. We weren't traitors of the Minmatar cause, any more than we were saviors of the Starkmanir.

TRIAT

But people treat you that way.

SISPUR

Either or, yes. Scum of the earth or savior of the people. We're not humans in their eyes, we're symbols.

ANNES

No, I think we're the symbols.

SISPUR

Well, all right. True. Then we're the mirrors. People use us to see what's inside themselves. If they want to see Minmatar having been betrayed, ruined and left in tatters, then that's what we are to them. If they want everything to have worked out, with the saviors of the slaves and all that, then that's what we helped accomplish. They externalize their feelings on us.

TRIAT

We've had some of that, too. But we're used to people ragging on us. Comes with being a merchant.

ANNES

We're not used to it at all. I don't know what we're used to. I don't even know what we are.

TRIAT

People seem to think you're simpletons, for the most part.

ANNES



What do you think?

TRIAT takes a sip from his drink

TRIAT

I think you know when to be quiet, which is a lot more important than most people realize.

ANNES nods to SISPUR.

ANNES

I don't want to be accepted back to the fold.

ANNES nods to TRIAT.

ANNES

I don't even want to find a new home. I want my old home back. It wasn't an easy life, but it wasn't bad, either. It was just a life.

SISPUR

Half a life, some might say. And thanks to us - or despite us - you're now being brought into the full glory of what you can be.

ANNES

Apparently those people know me better than I know myself. You know what's funny? Those very same people are treating us Starkmanir like the beasts of the field.

ANNES lifts his glass close to SISPUR, and stares at him through it, wide-eyed.

ANNES

They'll go up to us and say, "THIS ... IS CALLED ... A KHUMAAK. CAN YOU SAY KHUMAAK?"

ANNES lowers the glass again, leans back and takes a sip.

ANNES

Apparently we're budding geniuses and slobbering retards all at the same time.

TRIAT

And you were taken from slavery and left floating in space, so now there's a huge amount of insecurity brewing in your ranks.

ANNES

Yeah. Because we really don't want to be ungrateful. Really, we don't. But we've suddenly had this new identity thrust on us, and have no idea who we are anymore. Just the same as you guys-

ANNES nods to SISPUR

ANNES

-and now we're just ... there. Like figures carved out of wood.

TRIAT raises his glass

TRIAT

Beasts of the field, man.

TRIAT, ANNES and SISPUR clink their glasses together. ANNES starts to say something, then stops.

ANNES

This ... drunken woman came up to me the other day. Thoroughly, thoroughly drunk. It was in some bar, before I was transferred to this camp. I was on my own, minding my own business when she said to me, way too loudly, that she wanted to take me home and have sex with me.

TRIAT and SISPUR's eyes go wide. TRIAT takes a sip of his beer to cover his surprise.

ANNES

She said she'd never done it with a Starkie

TRIAT chokes on his beer.

ANNES

Hey, you okay?

TRIAT nods and takes a moment to regain his composure, with ANNES looking on concernedly.

TRIAT

Uh, how'd you get out of that one?

ANNES smiles faintly and looks at the air.

ANNES

Who says I did?

TRIAT and SISPUR fall quiet.

ANNES

It wasn't that great. She had nice breasts, though.

TRIAT and SISPUR remain quiet.

ANNES laughs.

ANNES

What? You guys think I'm backwards, too? Come on.

TRIAT takes a small sip of his beer.

TRIAT

No, you're right. I guess we're all human.

SISPUR

And that's really it, isn't it? I mean, on paper my choice was either to leave or to remain in a politically unstable shithole. But even if it wasn't, I can't say that I'd still have stayed behind.

TRIAT

Even if you're being treated like you shouldn't be here? Or that you should be grateful? It's the last chance to turn around, you know. You could join up with the Gallente. They love us.

SISPUR

Even despite all that, no. I still want to go in. I don't know anybody in Minmatar space, and I'm certainly reminded of that on a regular basis, but I still feel like I know, if not the people, then the nation itself. You know?

TRIAT nods to ANNES and grins

TRIAT

*He's* certainly gotten to know the people.

ANNES

That one occasion aside, I don't even have the background that you guys have. All I've ever known is that I was destined to live in Ammatar space, growing up as part of a system that had little to do with the Minmatar and everything to do with the Amarr. And to be honest, even if I'm treated like a freak, for the first time in my life I feel like I'm somewhere I belong. It's not that I think these people wanted me in their lives, but it's ... it's clear they needed *something*. There was a gap, there was this dark, raw opening where the people of my tribe were torn from the body of the Minmatar all those years ago, and the remainder of that body cannot rest until we're rejoined.

If there's an adjustment period, and there will be, and if there's pain, and there'll certainly be plenty of that before we start to heal at last, then that's how it has to be. I have to accept that, and play my part in the healing the best I can.

ANNES looks at TRIAT

ANNES

Even if you left of your own accord - as a nation, I mean - and although you personally may be returning for your own reasons, I think you're partly brought back by the same force that pulled me in.

TRIAT

By being part of something greater? Yeah. Could be right. Some greater whole. Something outside ourselves.

SISPUR

And something we can be proud of, something that stands for the same things we do as individuals.

ANNES

And lets us stand for something, not merely what we represent but who we are.

TRIAT raises his glass, as does SISPUR and ANNES

ALL say, To Matar!

## Under the Sea, the City

My father...

... well, never mind.

\*\*\*

The Gallentean smiled when I hit him. I had him up against a wall, hands pinned by two other Provs, and I'd already cracked his ribs and beaten out a few teeth. He smiled. It wasn't that rictus, either, the one where they're in so much pain their faces tense all up.

"Enjoying this, eh?" one Prov said.

"Shut up," I said. I didn't like baiting, never had. What you gave the mark was clarity, a purpose to his pain. You made him understand, yes, that you enjoyed this and would gladly do it forever unless he made it stop, but that he *could* make it stop, too. Not right away, necessarily, but if he changed and found himself a new focus in life, there would be hope. The mark could never be made to feel like the entire thing was merely a heartless joke.

He was exhausted and his head lolled down. I put my hands under his chin, lifted it back up so he'd look me in the eyes.

"Why did you do those things?" I said. "We're here to stay. You're not changing that. All you're doing is making *trouble*." I raised my other hand and hit him hard in the solar plexus. Air and blood gushed out of his mouth. I would have to clean the jacket before going on the day shift tomorrow.

This time he lifted his head of his own accord. And he smiled again. One eye swollen shut, mouth a bloody mess. There was no defiance in that smile, none of that stupid attitude you get from someone who's trying to ride the pain. No taunting, that weapon of the weak and powerless. He was somewhere else already and I hadn't put him there.

"Let him go," I said.

The Provs were stunned. I sighed, and wondered - and not for the first time - where the hell the force had gotten these guys.

"Next person goes deaf gets twelve weeks on the tundras," I said.

They dropped him like a bag of rocks.

We left him there, coughing blood on the scuffled snow.

\*\*\*

I was twelve when I was accepted into the Caldari Army. I was strong for my age and I had long since learned what the world did to people.

It wasn't running away, though it was an escape. I had learned many things and one of them was patience. So I trained hard and I studied as much as I possibly could, though I knew that I'd never go as far as I'd like. What mattered to me was serving the State.

Some people, when they joined, seemed to have nothing to do but complain. Not loudly, and sometimes not even in words, but they resented their place and easily forgot just how much the army had done for them. It took us in, all of us, no matter how broken we were. It forgave, in its fashion. It gave rules and discipline, which was nothing new, but it never strayed from them, and that amazed me. If you screwed up, you paid the price and were usually allowed to carry on, and if you kept yourself in line you were left alone. You did what you were told.

I couldn't bear the standard, not always. I lost my temper. Something in me needed to lash out at the world. What I got from the army wasn't a cure - the anger was a part of me that couldn't die without leaving me diminished - but an environment where I could take it to the edge without jumping off. I could be myself as much as was possible without the threat of failure.

So while I didn't move upwards I crawled a slanted sideways path, rising through persistence rather than brains or kissing ass. That was all right. I accepted that. And when the time came they needed people to take care of our new world - this smoking crater of a homeland, this iceworld they called Caldari Prime - they didn't come to the ones who had brains, for brains go remarkably soft on frozen tundras, and they didn't come to the ass- kissers, for their lips would've chapped in the cold. They came to the ones who knew damn well how to survive.

\*\*\*

Morning after, and another meeting of the city overseers. I paid the best attention I could, but I was still tired from last night's dark round and kept zoning out.

I did appreciate the necessity of these meetings. We needed to hold an entire planet using a force half staffed with thugs. Equal measures of peacekeeping and intimidation had kept a lid on the angrier locals - I took an active part in these - but that wouldn't be enough for the average man on the street. Life had to be kept going, rolling on from one day to the next. It was a supreme irony that in a society whose governance had been torn from the hands of one power by another, our greatest efforts went into convincing people that nothing much had changed. They needed to stay indoors late at night, and luxuries had been restricted, but this was nothing new on a planet made of ice. What they really needed was to be left alone, to not be reminded of how much had changed now that they seemed to be settling into some kind of a groove.

So we had evacuated one of their underwater cities, a massive place encased in a polyglas dome, and we had taken all the major troublemakers - the ones whose absence would be less a diplomatic problem than their continued presence - and we had put them down under.

Nobody knew what went on in that place. There were plenty of guesses, and everyone knew someone who claimed insider info, but talking about it did little more than generate rumors. The higher-ups didn't mind. We'd even subtly been given leave to spread some rumors of our own. I think the way they figured it, the more people talked and worried about that place, the less of a risk that any of the locals would want to go there. We already had hundreds of thousands, but the dome could room millions.

We were scrolling through the list of new recruits - we call them 'recruits' because it sounds so much better than 'abductees' - when a face caught my attention. It wasn't bruised and had a conspicuously full mouth of teeth, but it was unmistakably the man I'd been working on the night before.

"Stop, hold, wait a sec," I said. "What'd this one do?"

The presenter checked his records and listed a series of crimes against the State, some more severe or ideologically motivated than others. Many of them were familiar - were, indeed, the reason we'd seen fit to have our little talk with him - but there was a spate of offences that absolutely marked him for down under and which I had nevertheless missed when going over his records before the beatings. I found this very uncomfortable and asked when he'd committed those crimes.

The presenter checked the data again and raised an eyebrow. "Quite recently. He got through three of them yesterday, between eighteen hundred hours and evening call."

Which put it after the time I'd last checked his record, but before we'd caught him. He knew he was going down under.

I thought about him. That smile.

My ears heard my mouth say, "I'm going with him."

The presenter blinked.

"In the shuttle. The shipment he's on when he goes down under. I'm going to be on it."

In the silence I felt an explanation was called for, but the best I could muster was, "I want to be sure he doesn't make trouble."

I kept quiet for the rest of the meeting, but I had some friends of mine do a little datamining afterwards.

\*\*\*

The shuttle had several dozen individual cells, each of which contained one prisoner, one bunk bed and one vidscreen embedded in the wall. It also had a small area reserved for the accompanying guards.

The underwater trip would take us a little over twelve hours. It could be made faster, but expenses were kept to a minimum with these guys. Their cells were soundproofed and the vidscreens, which were cheap and kept behind unbreakable barriers, were voice-activated. We could have drugged the prisoners for the duration of their trip, but that would have brought us into, hah, muddy waters. You were only supposed to administer drugs to prisoners if you had a clear reason to consider them a threat, and in doing so you brought the whole process one step closer to barbarism. Strictly speaking we didn't have to provide them with any kind of way to pass the time - there was a clause somewhere in the law that allowed us to call this a temporary solitary confinement, much as the one in regular prisons - but leaving a civilian in an empty cell for twelve hours with nothing to do but think would not make for a nice disembarkment down under.

Besides, there was one person I wanted to keep awake.

When I entered his cell he was sitting sideways on the bunk bed, looking pointedly at the wall. His bruises were dark purple and yellow.

He didn't seem to recognize me at first. When he did, he visibly stopped breathing for a few seconds, then let out a long exhalation and smiled. He was afraid of me, but he knew something I didn't, something he thought would keep him safe. That was good. That could be worked with.

I went to the wall across from him and sat on the floor. Our interrogators believed in taking on a dominant position; I didn't. I believed in starting small, from a weakened position, and letting the subject build an image of you in his mind far greater than the real you.

There was something about his smile. They'd given him new teeth, but there was something more. It was almost as if I'd seen it before.

When it hit me a few second later, it hit like a hammer, and I was glad I was already sitting.

He noticed me gasp, and his smile faded. "What?" he said.

"I know you," I said.

"You beat me up a few days ago," he said.

I leaned my head to one side. It was there; it was definitely there. I couldn't believe I hadn't seen it before.

"I knew someone once," I said. "A kid. Tough one, as it goes. He'd had a rotten time of it, been smacked around and plenty worse, but he had that look. I still remember seeing a picture of him, taken when he enlisted. It said, I am free. I've gone beyond. Nothing you do will matter now, nothing you say will reach me now. I belong to something greater."

His eyes narrowed and I knew I had him.



"You've joined the rebels." I said.

The smile returned.

"You're on your way to down below of your own goddamned intention," I said. Not in a tone of surprise, but annoyance. "Nobody does that. So you have a plan. But you couldn't do it alone, not if you want to make a difference. So you've joined the rebels, and you have someone waiting for you down below."

He kept quiet. I had not asked him a question, nor given him an order.

"You have no idea what you'll be in for, down there," I said. "Nobody does. So you couldn't possibly be planning a coup, or a disruption, or anything that requires a reasonable degree of forethought. And you have no specialties; I've checked. All that you have is a life like everybody else."

"Not anymore," he said.

"Well, no," I conceded. "Not anymore."

"Not after you came."

"Let's not get into the whole occupation business. It wasn't my call any more than yours," I said. I waited a beat before adding, "I'm sorry for your family."

"That's alright," he said with complete equanimity. He was leading me on. He didn't care about any of that. The moment we'd moved away from down below, he'd gotten more comfortable with answering back.

He'd given up his old life, and he had no reason to believe he could make anything constructive of his new one. Time to push him.

I got up, brushed myself off and said, "I'm turning this shuttle around. Have a nice day."

I had not even taken a step before he let out an outraged, "*What?*"

"You heard me. I can't let you get anywhere near that place. You're a security risk."

"You can't do this," he said. "I have to get down there. I demand you take me down there." The smile was gone. His hands trembled.

"Well, that's a first," I said. I felt for him. I truly did. Had my dream been snatched away from me like this, it would've been the end of my life, too.

He got up. I thought he was going to attack me, but instead he backed himself into a corner. "Don't come any closer," he said.

"Hey," I said, "I wasn't planning to. I'm going to leave this cell now and-"

"I'm carrying a bomb," he said.

Some words change everything. 'Sniper' is one. I'm told 'love' is another. 'Incoming' is pretty big these days, being the bastard child of 'invasion'.

"You were strip-searched and scanned before you got onboard. Anything conspicuous in your system would've been flushed out on the spot. You're lying," I said, more out of hope than any real conviction.

"Transfusions," he said.

I was stunned.

It was possible, in theory, to replace certain bodily fluids with explosive counterparts. You could alter a person's glands to produce the new type, so long as you ensured his body had enough raw materials to draw on, or you could swap out the old type for the new along with an agent that would keep it from breaking down.

It was hideously expensive, extremely unreliable and utterly destructive. Even if he

never set off the explosive reaction, a person who underwent something like this would die of massive organ failure within a few days. The body was not happy being turned into a chemical weapon.

I'd had my agents do some datamining, and it had revealed connections between this man and ten others on this very same shuttle. All of them had committed crimes serious enough to warrant transport down under, but worse, all of them were connected to an *earlier* transport that just yesterday had brought a lot of fresh people to the city. Gods knew how many of them were walking bombs.

"You were going to blow up the city," I said. I couldn't believe it.

He stared at me, silent and defiant.

"It wouldn't be enough with just one of you, but with everyone you know on this shuttle and all your friends who got in there yesterday. You..." I simply could not get my head around this.

"There are hundreds of thousands of people down there. *Your* people."

"They're dead to us," he said. "Everyone is, once they're sent down under. For all we know it may be an empty husk."

"But you're hoping it's not," I said, the realization dawning in merciless light. "You're pulling a Nouvelle Rouvenor. You're going to find some spot and you're going to goddamn detonate

yourselves, in the hope you can crack the dome and destroy the entire city. And then you're going to get it all blamed on us."

He smiled again, and I remembered feeling that smile on my own face, all those years ago.

"So now you have a choice," he said to me. "You can let the shuttle dock and send me off. You'll leave. I'll stay. Whatever happens is no longer your concern."

"Or we turn this thing around and you blow it to bits."

He shrugged.

"Those friends of yours that arrived yesterday?" I said. "They're still in the investigation lounge. But you knew that. What you didn't know is that I had them tagged, which means they'll be held there until I give the go-ahead."

"You're lying," he said.

I was. "Maybe I am," I said.

He got to his feet.

"This shuttle is getting turned around," I said.

He lifted his hands and looked at them, as if he were seeing them for the first time.

I told him, "I knew someone once who thought he had all the answers. Took a while before I realized he didn't; he just stayed in control of the questions."

He looked at me now.

"Last time I saw him was through a bulletproof pane of glass. I was leaving and he wasn't. I'll never forget that expression. I was going somewhere he wasn't, I had become something he would never be, and he *knew* it."

"You're a vicious thug," he said to me.

"I'm a part of the State," I said. "And you are not. No more than he was. And his gutted expression, all those years ago, is the same one you have now."

I raised my own hands. "He would have taken you up on your offer. I will not."

As he started to move, I lunged for him.

## Kameiras

[*Note: Written by CCP Ginger.*]

# Federation Transcript, FIO Report #453-RT3.

# Security Level: Red-Gamma-Alpha

# The Kameiras Program.

Throughout its history, the austere Amarr Empire has conquered many peoples. In its expansion it has encountered fractured Neolithic tribes, egalitarian societies, industrial behemoths and everything in between. All were crushed and enslaved: Some were eventually integrated into Amarrian society, some remain slaves and others were simply forgotten - for only the largest societies are recorded in any detail. On the Ni-Kunni homeworld, for example, one whole continent was inhabited by a fierce indigenous people who were judged worthless for anything other than the most lowly slave castes. Their rich culture and heritage has long since been eradicated and their people reduced to mere half-breeds scattered among the countless multitudes.

With improved military oversight, this tactic of burnt earth and ruined people eventually changed. In its conquests, the military made note of the most naturally warlike, aggressive and resilient and dubbed them Martial Races. It then indoctrinated these into its armed forces, mostly as expendable cannon fodder to be used up instead of the righteous chosen of God. Some excelled, and achieved such repute that they became a staple of the Amarrian military machine. The most successful - and, indeed, feared - of these are the Kameiras.

The Kameiras are one of the products of the infamous Human Endurance Program (H.E.P.) that the Amarr ran on their Minmatar slave populace. It began as an attempt to measure the Minmatar tribes' durability and effectiveness when it came to various labor tasks - to see how far they could be pushed before breaking, much like a tool would be stress-tested. Over time it evolved into much more than that, becoming a tale of horror for the Minmatar as Amarr scientists began to explore the true limits of their body and psyche.

The program came to the attention of the military who, having witnessed the tenacity and ferocity of the Minmatar defiance first hand, were keen to explore their uses in combat. The H.E.P. scientists, eager to get military backing, began research into methods to re-educate the strongest Minmatar slaves and train them into obedient, effective soldiers. Disappointingly, initial training methods proved mostly ineffective. The idea was thought to have merit, however, and a dedicated team was assigned to advance the program.

Finding it difficult to train unruly adult Minmatar warriors in obedience and faith, the team opted for a more extreme measure. They began a breeding program, selecting the best specimens from their slave population and creating the strongest of offspring, raising them according to a scientific regime they had devised. The regime went through several revisions based on data

gleaned, and was altered considerably in the initial stages until it became the Kameiras program that exists today.

### **The beginning**

Every maturing fetus of the breeding program is rigorously monitored, subject to a series of genetic tests to see if it is developing to the exacting standards of the Kameiras. If the specimen is found to be genetically unworthy – if it would be born short, weak, sickly or afflicted with any of a multitude of genetic abnormalities - then the pregnancy is terminated. Any surviving neonates are given over to a specialized care centre where Amarrian females take responsibility for their upbringing in supervised crèches until the age of six, whereupon the infant enters its first Subigo House, a place of training and education.

### **Junior Subigo**

Here the subject begins a vigorous physical regime. The Amarrians have learned that this is the most effective time to begin adapting the Minmatar body for military duty. Increasing in pace and vigor as the body grows, the training regime pushes the child to an established limit that will not adversely affect its later growth. The youth is schooled in combat arts and forced to attend an extensive indoctrination program. This program forms the foundation of maintaining control over the Kameiras when they are fully fledged adults. They are institutionalized into the Amarrian faith - taught about the Amarr God and his love for them, their place in his creation and their duty to uphold his law for the good of all. For all intents and purposes, they are taught that they too are Chosen. Although this continues to be a hotly debated topic within certain circles of the Empire, time has proved it to be the most effective form of control.

### **Senior Subigo**

Most survive the rigorous Junior Subigo and undertake the testing trials at the age of fourteen. If they survive this tortuous experience they are moved onto the Senior Subigo House, where they are divided into combat-sized groups. In teaching them to act as part of a greater whole, their instructors take their training to a whole new level: The young neophytes are schooled in a wide range of skills including strategy, tactics, survival, personal combat and the use of firearms, body armor as well as wide range of military equipment and vehicles. If they survive this intense period they then undertake the final and most testing trial. If this is passed, they are accepted as adepts; if they fail, they do not return.

### **Kameiras**

At the age of nineteen the trained Kameiras adepts are indoctrinated into their operational unit and serve as junior members until they have blooded themselves in combat. The Amarrians retain strict control over the Kameiras, as they have by necessity raised intelligent soldiers that can react and adapt autonomously to varied combat situations. Their education nearly always keeps them from questioning their place. A soldier sees much, though, so the Kameiras do not serve as one company but rather are attached to standard armed companies as their strike force, maintained apart from the regular infantry. The very nature of their purpose - to serve as special

operation units and front line forces - means that in the very rare cases where a Kameira might suspect something is not well with the world, he doesn't remain alive long enough to act upon it. That being said, it is often true that the Kameiras troops are more devout than their true Amarr cohorts. They have been indoctrinated and trained for this way of life since they were born, and they know or want nothing else. For the most part, Kameira units are led by Amarrian officers. An individual may be promoted some way up the command chain if he is deemed loyal enough, but these cases are relatively rare, and individuals that achieve this sort of modest rank are kept under close surveillance.

However, certain traits tend to creep in. Most are relatively trivial things that are easily brushed aside by their officers; for example, Kameiras troops are allowed to keep their hair long, something not permitted and strictly enforced in the regular Imperial army. There is one tradition among the Kameiras troops that is particularly abhorrent to the Amarr, who have banned it in theory and only relented in practice due to negative effects on morale of the otherwise indomitable Kameiras units. Thus, the tradition is officially banned, but under the furtive light of dark moons it continues.

In the aftermath of battles, Kameiras gather what bodies they can of their fallen and burn them in great funeral pyres. This is done in a matter-of-fact way, without emotion. Once the fires have burnt out the surviving Kameiras cut themselves and then rub the ash from the pyres, the ashes of their dead brethren, into their open wounds. In this way, a permanent mark is formed. The Kameiras carry their dead with them, and the mark serves as a lasting reminder of those who fell. An old soldier may have many scars of the lost covering his body and in this way can come to look akin to his free Minmatar brethren. No one knows how this tradition crept in - not even the Kameiras themselves - but it now persists throughout all units in the Kameira war machine.

## Chained to the Sky

*[Note: Written by CCP Gnauton.]*

It was the morning of the twenty-fifth of the month in the district of Torsad-Laur, and the dread orb of the Amarr sun was just beginning its slow climb from the shimmering puddle of the horizon. As soon as his cold feet hit the warmth of the platform he felt the familiar throb and whistle of the quarter as it began like a great lumbering beast to rouse itself, scratching and snuffling in the umber haze of dawn.

The young Minmatar passed the mudbrick walls of the terminal with its sputtering praydrones and its ragged rush of beggars, felt the dark heady breeze caress the back of his neck as the day's first frying smells slithered dustborne into his nostrils. He hadn't missed Dam-Torsad, it was true; but now, upon returning, he had to give it its due. Few places in the universe – certainly none he had visited – possessed in the same proportions that uneasy mingling of purity and rot which forever straps the Amarr soul to the rack of its own contradiction.

Izoni Square was much the same, he reflected as he exited the terminal. Even at this early hour business was booming. Handmade cutlery, bootleg holosymphs, off-world condiments of varying legality, scriptural terp mods, Adakul manuals, the latest in carefully faked Caille leather. Plumes of smoke rose from innumerable stalls. A thousand smells wrapped around each other in the thick air, creating the unique melange that was the hallmark of Torsad-Laur and the reason for its nickname, the Cauldron. Most likely the flesh of every creature in New Eden was being cooked somewhere in this sprawling expanse, animal souls ascending from the shadow of the city's bladed spires to find salvation in the copper skies. Groups of slaves passed through without cease, but whereas in other parts of Dam-Torsad they would be ghosts among the multitude, here they comprised the essence of the district's beating heart.

Resisting the temptation to indulge in broiled blackfowl, he made his way past Chopamaia Yard, where children played among the cracked statues and worshipers swayed in communal rapture, their god-intermediaries whispering sweet eternity to them through embedded earpieces. He passed under the arch of Nekater, with its sad white little angel-guardians that every day shed tears of stone into the currents of beleaguered humanity flowing underneath them. He navigated the narrow cobbled corridors of the quarter's south side, weaving among the people and gradually quickening his step until, some ten minutes later, he arrived at a squat flat-topped house nestled between two much taller ones. The road wound back sharply in both directions here, so that the little house gave the impression of being right outside the curve of a giant horseshoe. He looked around and sniffed the air. Flowers and ozone still.

"Da?" He rapped a few times on the basement door. There was no answer initially, but his father hadn't been a fast man even in his younger years. A faint glimmer of light appeared inside the door's window, then the door was thrown open. "Darmad!" shouted the old man. "Father," he replied, smiling and stepping inside. The two embraced, then exchanged the happily abashed pleasantries of a parent and child who haven't seen each other in several years.

His father, Engru, was a tenth-generation indentured professor to The Hedion Academy Torsad subcampus, and a specialist in the ancient texts of several nations the Amarr had conquered in the course of taking over the planet they now stood on. His days were spent in his little basement translating manuscripts and taking notes and reconstructing languages several thousand years dead. Over the course of his time living out on the coast Darmad had become accustomed to plenty of fresh air, and now the familiar overpowering mustiness of his father's apartment – a consequence of several dozen plants, intractable mold and very little ventilation – made it hard for him to breathe. They decided to visit a taproom located not far from the house, where they could take in their morning meal.

"How are things at the research facility?" asked his father as they ambled along the broadstreet, occasionally ducking a hoverstroller or an autocaravan. "Is your holder still giving you trouble?"

"Not really, not anymore," said Darmad. "He's been more accepting of me since that small success of mine last year."

"I was proud of you for that one," said his father.

"I'm surprised you even heard. It wasn't really such a big deal," said Darmad.

"A polymer synthesis technique that could revolutionize high-altitude building materials? Sounds like a big deal to me, son."

"I don't know about revolutionize," said Darmad. "And remember, as far as everyone's concerned it wasn't Darmad Intajaf who made the discovery, it was his grand highness the good Lord Lucretio Kor-Azor."

"Of course," said his father. "No use in the slaves mucking up the works by getting famous, is there? We're here. Mind your step, now. Welcome to the Font."

\*\*\*

The place was basically one tremendous elongated corridor, a tall narrow space floored with cork and festooned with dormant string lights which hung powerless between corbets set high on the rough stone walls. From the corbets great plants of all shapes and sizes arched and drooped and spread their branches across the airspace. "I can see why you like it here," remarked Darmad as they took their seats in a small booth with synthetic leather padding just a touch too red for its surroundings.

It was midmorning and the place was sparsely occupied. As was typical of Torsad-Laur alone among the districts of Dam-Torsad, those few who were in here mostly kept to themselves. Dam-Torsad's people had a great general tendency to stay in direct active communion with one another while in public, either chanting or praying or speaking loudly and at great length with their companions. At all waking hours their environment encouraged them, subtly and unsubtly, to do this; through praydrones and billboards and other disruptive phenomena, a habitual preference for communion over solitary contemplation was constantly reinforced in the



populace. The Font, meanwhile, had people indulging in all manner of solitary idiosyncrasy. At one table a heavysset girl with a pretty face sat munching on something, absently combing her thick hair. At another, a man rolled a cigarette contemplatively in the slanted rays of the morning sun while his companion read a book. Darmad felt relieved to be back. It was as if the chain around his soul had been loosened slightly.

They passed the morning in idle chatter, eating a light breakfast, content to simply enjoy each other's presence. At around midday, morning prayer being over, the place's regulars started filtering in from the busy streets of the quarter. His father on more than one occasion remarked that the crowd was strange this morning, that there floated about a faint apprehension quite atypical of this bustling straightforward place. Shortly after midday, Darmad was in the middle of relating an amusing anecdote when a great shout rose from the middle of the room and a figure detached itself from the throng.

"Well, look here!" It was a big man whose black beard and receded hairline framed a face deeply carved with smile-wrinkles. Darmad slid over one seat and the man sat down next to him.

"Hello, Crofton," said Engru.

"Engru," replied Crofton. "Your houseborn's back, I see."

"Just for a short while," interjected Darmad with artificial cheer, annoyed at being spoken to in the third person. "How've you been?" The old discomfiture returned; growing up, he had always by turns been impressed with Crofton and frightened of him.

"Oh, you know. Keeping busy," said Crofton. He flagged down a waiter and ordered kacha root tea. "Perused the day's palaver?" he said to no one in particular as the waiter carefully poured the dark green liquid into his cup.

Engru nodded faintly. "Vagaries and hearsay as usual, I suppose."

"I don't think so. Not this time," said the big man. The waiter finished pouring the tea and bowed. Crofton grabbed the cup and perpetrated a gregarious slurp.

"Pray tell," said Engru.

Crofton began to speak in the deliberate diction that was his custom. His words were habitually infused with gravity, and propelled by his powerful voice they became missiles of rhetoric. He had been a leader once, an orator capable of moving men and mountains, but after consenting to a speaking engagement in Ammatar space he had been captured and given to the same university subcampus as Engru. This was Amarr's preferred way of silencing her enemies. Killing was too crass. It acknowledged too much fear. The real victory didn't lie in brute extermination (except in cases where required on a large scale for logistical or geographical reasons), but in defeating your picture of things with theirs.

Of course, particular sorts of people are immune to such tactics, and Crofton was of that general sort. A stodgy Brutor warrior-poet who had never had much truck with rigid self-image or outward appearance, he had never seemed to mind his lowered status. Toward his masters he indulged in the sign language of submission expected of every slave, but his area of expertise – representational systems of governance and their application in a pan-planetary setting – gave this "democrat savage" a certain degree of leeway toward the bemused scholars of Hedion. Time and time again, regardless, he had had to accept punishment for expressing his heretical views too loudly; but to Crofton, there were worse things than the electric lash.

Most of the people who made this quarter their home were similar to Crofton, though the vast majority were high-generation houseborn, slave children to slave children. Artists, musicians and academics, preachers and weirdoes and vagrants and madmen, all played their parts in the great cruel mechanism of the empire. It was said in the high halls of Amarr society that Torsad-Laur was the only slave-inhabited quarter where the gentry could walk at night without being attacked – and where, moreover, one could even have a conversation with a slave, if one were inclined toward an evening's debasement.

"You feel the tension in the air, I can tell," Crofton was saying. "When was the last time people were set on edge this bad?" Another grand slurp and his cup was finished. He gave an imperious wave toward the waiters' corner, then returned his attention to his boothmates.

"I know a man at the Civil Service office over in Torsad-Unan," he continued. "He's not technically supposed to consort with me, but we maintain a bit of a clandestine correspondence. All very romantic and revolutionary. He wrote me," and here he leaned in towards the center of the table conspiratorially, "that something very very big was afoot. High-stratus decisions, perhaps as high up as the new Chancellor." Abruptly he stopped, then turned to look at Darmad. "You work for a Kor-Azor, don't you?"

"The technical term is 'owned by,' but yeah," replied Darmad, somewhat acridly. "Distant cousin to Chancellor Aritcio several times removed, but a Kor-Azor."

"And you've heard nothing?"

"No one at my facility ever hears anything," replied Darmad.

"Ah," said the big man. Pensively he rubbed the brim of his saucer. "Normally I would dismiss it as a flight of fancy – my friend is a young man, and prone to those – but the general mood of the Cauldron today seems to support his notion that something is going on."

"Have you spoken with anyone around here?" asked Engru.

"Not yet," replied Crofton. There was a period of silence at the table as the waiter returned and refilled the cup in front of him. Presently the waiter left, but the silence remained.

Looking around, Darmad saw that the crowd in the place had dwindled significantly. As the other two men at the booth began to take their own notice, he became aware of a cadenced din, a distant whisper traveling over the city, reverberating off its tired walls.

"What is that?" said his father. Crofton stood up and made to exit the place, with the other two following. Just outside, standing on the portico which overlooked the gigantic expanse of Izeni Square, they squinted against the searing midday sun and were able to make out, through the plumes of smoke and dust, the face of Empress Jamyl on several billboards around the area's far perimeter. Despite the preternatural hush of the assembled thousands who had broken with their daily business to listen, the trio were unable to make out her words.

Darmad had the sudden queasy notion that there was going to be some great change to adjust to, and giving up the useless effort of trying to understand the words he sat down heavily on the portico's stone floor, cold in the shade of the canvas canopy. The two older men stood stock still, craning their necks comically toward the indifferent skies.

A young man came tearing up the steps to the portico, his incoherent screaming preceding him by almost a full minute. Crofton stepped into his path and the smaller man barreled into him with a thudding impact. Crofton swiftly grabbed him by the shoulders. "Relax. Relax!" he shouted at the man. "What is it?"

The young man made a conciliatory hand gesture and gently shook free. "The slaves," he said, panting. "We're... freeing them. Us. We're being freed." He coughed.

"What?" said Darmad.

"They're freeing the slaves," said the man, still coughing.

Engru blinked, once, twice. "I'm sorry. What?" he said.

"Us," he panted. "Minmatar, ninth-gen and up, all the preachers, all the academics."

Crofton just stared.

The young man pointed vaguely out toward the tremendous crush of people, some moving to and fro, some wide-eyed, others on their knees.

From the far end of the Cauldron, a roar was rising.

\*\*\*

"No good. No good," said Crofton, shaking his head. He had just repeated the phrase "No good can come of this" about twenty times, and was now down to simply "No good." Around him, the Font was packed with people thrashing and flailing amid laughter and cries and shouts, each person reeling in their own way from the unexpected crumbling of a wall in their mind.

The three had spent the afternoon lost in the wash of people, watching preachers and podiumites deliver sermons and speeches, watching street musicians play instruments they had up until now not been allowed to touch, watching hustlers and beggars in crazed jubilee on the city's whirling boulevards. When they had returned to the Font in the late afternoon to discover their booth taken they had repaired to the end of the bar and promptly switched from tea to alcohol. With the string lights now draping a warm glow over the encroaching darkness, Crofton had begun to elaborate.

"It's a brilliant public relations coup, I'll give her that much," he was saying. "She's definitely figured out all the angles here. Anyone who points out the practical flaws will be drowned in a torrent of righteousness. Never mind that up until a few hours ago, these people were all subhumans unworthy of the legal rights bestowed upon proper people. The fact that it's a cynical political maneuver will be completely drowned out by the cackling of the righteous."

"What makes you think it's entirely cynical?" replied Engru. "Perhaps she's had a change of heart. 'Who can tell what winds yet sway the soul of man?'" he quoted, from a favorite scriptural passage.

"Woman," corrected Darmad, quite unhelpfully.

"States are not run on compassion, Engru, not even states that are built around religion," said Crofton. "Speaking of which – what do you think will happen to the slaves who have practiced their own religions? If they want their marriages and families registered as legal units, they'll need to take up the state religion. How many of them will be able to afford the registration? How many of them will be able to afford or figure out how to pay their own taxes, for that matter? Who's going to teach millions upon millions of freshly minted freemen how to survive within the system? She's not banking on these people to stay, let me tell you that much."

Neither of the other two said anything. Darmad was about to speak, but just as he opened his mouth a young woman with a tray of drinks fell foul of the crowd and crashed into him. After helping her up and sending her on her way, he turned back to his companions and gave a little shake of the hand, sprinkling droplets of grain alcohol onto the countertop. "Getting rowdy in here," he remarked.

"That's another thing," said Crofton without skipping a beat, his great head swiveling around to scan the crowd. "She knows this will cause them to get so excited that there will be mass gatherings in some places which are going to turn ugly. More fodder for the spin machine."

Darmad made his own survey of the place. At every table and every booth, on chair arms, in laps, on table corners and windowsills, the smiling faces of young people and old people commingled. Though he generally considered himself a rational man not given to easy emotion, he nonetheless found to his surprise that it was almost impossible not to get swept up in the roiling elation that pervaded the room. You had only to look up and you would feel it.

He looked back at Crofton, who had his head cocked to the side and was staring at one of his own elbows, which rested on the bar. It was impossible to see what he was thinking. He snuffled once, then ordered another drink.

"Ploys, ploys, they're all ploys," he began again. "She wants the docile ninth-gen Mins to go scurrying back to the Republic and start the Reclaiming for them. She wants everyone to see how well-behaved they've managed to make them. As to the rest of them, she just wants to make it known how they function better shackled than free."

"Us."

"Pardon me?"

"Us, Crofton. The rest of *us*. You and I are free, too."

A small silence, then Crofton said: "The thought never even crossed my mind." He downed his drink.

Darmad suddenly had one of those small epiphanies that seemed to him only to take place when circumstance and mindset conspired in the human soul to strike a perfect chord, one that would allow the recipient for a few precious seconds to reverberate in unison with the rest of creation. He was standing with his back to the bar, looking at a beautiful girl who stared back at him from one of the booths further along the opposite wall. There was a look in her eyes that he would see in every face around here, for the rest of the night and well beyond.

"I'm not so sure it's as bad as you're making it out to be," he said, turning back to Crofton. "I mean, look around you. Are you even taking note of what's happening? She may have, as you said, figured out all the angles, but I don't think her conniving soul even realized what freedom – the *idea* of the thing she's just given us, you see, the *concept* of it – does to a man."

"What does it do to a man?" asked Crofton in a low voice, barely audible over the raucous din.

"Well. It gives him hope, I suppose."

At this Crofton laughed and laughed. He smiled a strange smile and then laughed some more and then fiddled with his glass and looked at Engru, and then he looked back down and grimaced, and just like that a little tear dropped into his glass. With a great deal of dignity he retrieved his coat and made his excuses, and when he said goodbye he didn't look in Darmad's eyes but only at his chest.

\*\*\*

The boy and his father sat silently through the night, savoring in their souls the bittersweet taste of history while Dam-Torsad's, and the entire Empire's, myriad dramas mighty and small unspooled around them. Come morning, with the revelries dying down, the pair made their way to the door.

"Boy."

"Yes, da?"

"Proud of you for that one, too."

He took his father's elbow and gingerly the two of them made their way down and out, out into the bright and terrible morning.

## Two Deaths

[*Note: By the request of CCP Abraxas, this was the EVE Christmas chronicle of 2008.*]

The hangar floor, decorated as it was, had barely a dozen people waiting. Banners of the Amarr Empire slowly swayed in a wind that seemed omnipresent and cold.

The small crowd was a mix of station crewmembers, carefully vetted, and Royal Guard staff devoted to Empress Jamyl I and loyal to the death. Their conversation was kept to a minimum. They did not dislike one another, but the circumstances felt so solemn and vaguely unpleasant that most of them suspected they would be going their separate ways after the whole damn business was over, trying to wash away the memories through an infinite pour. A ship was soon to arrive, bearing the corpulent symbol of everything evil and spiteful in the world they knew.

\*\*\*

*In the Gallente Federation, down on Gallente Prime, on an open arena specifically adapted for this very occasion, a ship hovered into view. The crowd, numbering in the millions, was already reaching boiling point, having been pumped up by political speeches interspersed with popular entertainment. Here and there, massive towers holding building-size vidscreens broadcast every possible glimpse of the ship as it made a slow approach to the landing strip. The crowd reacted, and its screams were so loud they fed back through the speakers, creating an infinite loop of raucous hatred.*

\*\*\*

When the Empress stepped out of her temporary quarters and onto the main area of the landing bay, the quiet murmur of uncomfortable conversation dropped to an utter silence.

With the high ceiling, the banners, and the near-infinite echo of hushed voices, the place felt like a cathedral. The massive polyglas windows showed the cold space outside.

\*\*\*

*The crowd roared when President Foiritan took the stage. He waved to his people and smiled. It was not a wide smile, as one might exhibit when winning a game, but a smile carefully tempered with sadness, a smile that said its bearer had suffered through loss but come out a victor, and acknowledged the same in everyone the smile was aimed at.*

\*\*\*

The ship docked. It was a small vessel fitted for protection, although the armor and shielding were more for show than anything else. Its cargo had been transported from the dark end of space in all manner of ways, but in this area, under the aegis of the Empress, nobody would interfere.

There was only one passenger. He was the greatest traitor to the Amarr Empire since its inception. He had been brought here to die.

\*\*\*

*The ship doors opened and Anvent Eturrer was led out, blinking at the light and the noise. He was a former Federation Navy Grand Admiral, having been fired by President Foiritan for what appeared at the time to be gross incompetence during the Caldari State invasion. It had later proven to be treason, and had placed Eturrer at the top of the Most Wanted list of enemies of the Federation.*

*Eturrer's guards hung on to him, leading him to a separate podium stationed far enough from Foiritan and the presidential crew that they wouldn't be associated with him. The entire path they took was covered with unbreakable glass on all sides, lest Eturrer's death be brought to him before its allotted time. The guards were strong and clearly supported Eturrer, who appeared a little confused and stumbling. He had not been visibly harmed, but the vidscreens that zoomed in on his face, to the raw screaming of the attendant crowds, showed a faraway look.*

\*\*\*

Chamberlain Karsoth was led out of the ship and unceremoniously dropped onto the hangar floor. He lay there, wheezing and coughing, in front of the Empress and her retinue. His massive bulk was such that he could not even stand on his own.

Keeping her gaze firmly on the doomed man, the Empress spoke.

"Help him up."

When her guards hesitated she moved her head a slight touch. Her gaze rested on Karsoth, but there was the implication that it might be transferred onto someone else.

The guards jumped into action and heaved Karsoth's bulk upright. He winced when they touched him. His silk robes, tattered and soiled, rode up the limbs of his manifold body, displaying the cut and bruised skin below. The girth of his distended center was such that three men had to push at it, while a taller woman braced herself against his sternum, right where his heart would be. Karsoth's flesh was as pale as her flesh, but mottled with enflamed marks the rivaled the red color of her hair.

\*\*\*

*President Foiritan spoke to the attendant millions, and to the trillions watching through the live broadcast. His words were lost on most of the listeners, who heard what they expected to hear and filled in the gaps with a plenitude of rage. The gist of his speech was that the Gallente Federation had got their man, as the President had promised. There were difficult times ahead, ones where every man and woman in the Federation would have to make concessions to freedom*



*in order to secure the safety of the entire nation. But for now, in this place, they had the proof of those sacrifices.*

*The crowd responded to the intonations in his voice. It seemed to undulate towards him, like a wave of hatred crashing on the surf. There was a large security area between the President and his people, walled off with unbreakable glass and monitored both by humans and hi-tech security hardware, and it only served to fire the crowd's emotions to roaring heights.*

\*\*\*

Even the torture had been done for purification and spirituality, and it had been done in quiet. The people of Amarr had the good sense to be embarrassed about what had happened under Karsoth's rule and just wanted to send the man on his way to judgment.

\*\*\*

*Everything was noise and light. There had been no obvious torture as such, but they'd made damn sure the prisoner didn't sleep or make himself comfortable on his journey. The Gallente people deserved a show.*

\*\*\*

The Empress stood in silence, looking at Karsoth. Eventually she asked, "You've made your peace with your God?"

He nodded quietly. A tiny bubble of snot inflated and deflated from one of his nostrils. The crew had retreated to the side, rubbing their tired arms and legs. The woman who'd held Karsoth up had been given leave to wash her hands.

\*\*\*

*In the middle of his speech, President Foiritan listed the accusations leveled against Eturrer and the outcome of their evaluation. He turned directly to the prisoner, who stared into the dead air, and spoke of the failure of Tripwire, the giving of information to the enemy, and the loss of Caldari Prime and countless lives in the process. The president added that thankfully the Federation had established a new order to ensure that the rest of the poison in Gallente soil would be rooted out without mercy.*

*He nodded to Mentas Blaque, who stood at the back of the podium, dressed in the now-familiar black costume of his newly formed Internal Security institution. They were informally known as the Black Eagles and Foiritan called them by that moniker in his speech, thus securing their name in history, for better or worse.*

*Returning to the subject of treason, Foiritan directed his words back to Eturrer. He said that the Federation had held a trial in Eturrer's absence, and added with an evil grin that he'd proven a hard man to get a hold of.*

*The crowd roared. They loved him for this.*

*There was, Foiritan said to Eturrer over the microphone and the vidscreens and the booming noise over millions of people, such overwhelming evidence of his guilt that he had not been needed to testify in his defense.*

*"You may speak when I am done," he added, "Much good it will do you. That is your right. In the Federation, everyone has a voice. Even the people whose lives you destroyed."*

*Mentas Blaque, whose Black Eagles had many other prisoners, nodded in agreement and said nothing.*

\*\*\*

The Empress said to Karsoth, "You allied with the Blood Raiders. You ruled through lies and terror. When the Minmatar came, your failures nearly cost us the Empire. Whatever commerce you brought to this kingdom, it was blackened money, tarred by the ties with the underworld that you brought upon the highest office in the land. You corrupted the innocent, betrayed those loyal to us, and turned this kingdom into an orgy of corruption and hedonism."

He took a deep breath and asked, "And for this I deserve death?"

The flags swayed gently in the cold wind.

"No," she said. "But what you deserve is beyond what this Empire can be bothered to do with you."

\*\*\*

*At the end of his speech, Foiritan turned to Eturrer again and asked whether he had anything to say.*

*Eturrer was handed a microphone. He took it and stood quite still. The booing from the crowd rose to a crescendo, threatening to drown him out.*

*He looked at Foiritan. For a moment the two men shared a look of strange understanding. The camera, seeing first the glint in Eturrer's eyes and then the uncomfortable expression on Foiritan's face, swiftly focused its eyeless gaze on the crowds.*

*Eturrer then looked at Blaque, and stared at him for entirely too long.*

*The crowd was losing its mind in angry anticipation.*

*Eturrer grinned at them, this entire world he had helped bring to ruin, and let the microphone drop to the ground.*

\*\*\*

Karsoth took a deep breath. "You disgust me," he said. "You rule over a kingdom of weaklings, all of whom are so lost in their piety over the next world that they've forgotten how to live properly in this one. All they do is look to their Almighty God to put things right, and just when I think that some of them might be coming around, you come crawling back like some worm out of Hell to make them all believe again." He stopped, swallowed. "You disgust me," he repeated.

She walked up to him and raised her hand. He flinched.

She gently stroked her cheek and said, "You fear me."

Some small twinkle of an impulse to sneer alit in his mind and was extinguished just as soon. For she smiled at him, and in that smile was a terror such as he had never known in his life. The flesh on his body trembled. Although she was much smaller than he, she appeared to tower over him.

"Do you hate me?" he asked almost pleadingly.

"I do, at some level," she said. "But true hatred is a powerful emotion, and you are too pitiable for it."

\*\*\*

*It was time for the execution.*

*Souro Foiritan, president of the Gallente Federation, turned to his people and said, "It is time for us to decide. I will bear any burden for you that I can, but I can not be allowed to do this on my own. This is us, here and now. Some of you will have studied the evidence in this traitor's trial, but even if you have not, you can see the verdict."*

*The vidscreens switched to Eturrer and projected a large, red "GUILTY" beneath his face.*

*"We must all pull together now, and make the call. For our future, and for the continued freedom that we enjoy in this Federation, we have been willing to sacrifice much. Now we must make the ultimate sacrifice. We must show the world what it means when evil attempts to shake the foundations of our civilization."*

*Gigantic sound receptors slid down from the vidscreens. The screens themselves altered their picture: It still showed Eturrer, but now added a graphic overlay that pictured an audio level, trembling at the bottom rungs.*

*"The traitor's body has been injected with a chemical that will respond to sound waves of a certain frequency. We are going to monitor the voices of the people here tonight, filter them, and pipe them over the traitor. If they are loud enough, the chemical mixture will be activated. Your voices will be heard."*

*Even though the receptors had not activated yet, they trembled with the roar of the masses.*

*"One last thing, people of the Federation. We took great care in preparing this chemical and inserting it into the traitor. It will disrupt, alight, or otherwise distort a number of cell clusters in his body. Cells are small, and a few disruptions would not do much. But we paid heed to history. The chemical was made to infect one cluster for each of the individual whose lives this traitor led to loss.*

*"This is your call, my fellow citizens. This is your moment."*

*The receptors activated. The crowd's voices crashed on it like a tsunami.*

*On the vidscreens, Eturrer's body dismantled itself in an orgy of immolation. His skin bubbled, reddened, smoked and burst; his hair self-alit, and his bones bulged and rippled as tumors and other malignant growths forced themselves through the soft flesh of his organs and tore their way to freedom. Eturrer's mouth opened to let Eturrer's voice through, but his screams were lost in the crowd.*

\*\*\*

"You may speak your case, if you wish," the Empress said.

Karsoth breathed deeply but said nothing. He looked at her with those damaged eyes, and whatever was in them spoke of a conviction long since passed beyond words.

The Empress nodded, acknowledging his answer. She raised her hand and indicated a nearby passageway. "Walk through there to meet your end."

The nameless woman who'd pushed against his heart now walked in front of the old Chamberlain, her nimble, ghostly form leading the way to his death. He waddled in her wake, the guards holding him up.

The Empress stood there for a long time after, looking through the massive windows in the ceiling.

Outside, a star shone bright in the distance.