

The EVE Chronicles

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Except where otherwise noted

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End of the World: The Spiral

[Note: End of the World was a short chronicle series that led up to the cataclysmic events of EVE's Apocrypha expansion. While the series does not require knowledge of prior chronicles, the motivations of one protagonist will certainly be a little clearer if the reader is familiar with "Of God and her Beast", available online or in the 2007-8 compilation.]

"This is a spiral we're in; a long wave undulating in one constant direction without ever crashing on the shore. Listen."

I sat with them in the mess hall of our new ship. Some of these people I had worked with for years. Others were new to me, and had joined as parts of a process that now felt like a procession.

"Everything leads you to where you are."

I was a member of the Sanctuary, a corporation that belonged to the benevolent Sisters of EVE. While the Sisters as a whole concerned themselves with the betterment of mankind, their subfactions went about achieving that goal in entirely different ways. The Sisters of EVE corporation, which was the largest part of the Sisters of EVE faction, consisted of rescue workers and aid specialists, and all in all were the exact kind of people you wanted to see in the aftermath of a cataclysm. The Food Relief corporation, meanwhile, concerned itself with the bureaucracy of aid, and had a tendency to extend its reach into diplomatic matters.

The last of the Sister faction corporations - my own home and the domain of my calling -was the Sanctuary. They were a scientifically focused organization working within a faith-based dominion, and the combined focus of secular inquiry and religious discipline lent a particular fervor to their work. Their focus was the EVE gate, a wormhole that had collapsed onto itself thousands of years ago and left humanity stranded in New Eden. In recent times, a massive interstellar war that cost innumerable lives had also seen an increase in activity at the EVE gate. A team, led by me, had been investigating this new anomaly, and had eventually uncovered a strange signature, as if the gate were responding to something elsewhere in the cosmos.

The signature was unrelated to any previous data and was thus discounted by most serious researchers. But I felt it was worth looking into. I believed that everything happened for a reason, and that the great gate would not grant me this single key unless it had something to unlock.

It took a lot of patience, which sometimes ran dry, and energy, which was often used up, but eventually I made the connection. Many things had been happening when the gate started to pulsate, but one of the more notable events was the Minmatar invasion of Amarr space, and the re-emergence of Heir Janyl Sarum, who repelled the invaders at her doorstep.

The conflict, which had seen a massive fleet of warships torn to shreds, was shrouded in mystery and rumor. Some said Jamyl had merely willed the Minmatar ships to explode; others, that the fabled Minmatar Elders had seen their invasion brought to a halt and had enacted a suicide pact. There were rumors of an Amarr superweapon couched inside an Abaddon battleship, but nothing had been proven and no public data was available.

Whatever it was, the invasion event coincided with a spike in EVE gate activity. Moreover, once I had carefully picked apart the scant data on record from that momentous day in the skies above Mekhios, I discovered traces of that very same signature found in the EVE gate. The two were connected, I reasoned; the two must be connected. I knew I was on to something.

Acquiring a small vessel and a few stores of investigative equipment - interest in the gate ran high in the Sanctuary, and my once-strict overseers found themselves perfectly willing to let their people engage in all sorts of strange excursions - I started a research experiment to determine whether the anomalous signature could be found anywhere else in New Eden. Despite the scant evidence I had to work with, I had to fight the constant urge to bring the entirety of my corporation onboard. The further I travelled along this dark new road, the more certain I was that I had been set on it for some reason that would eventually involve the fates of all my brothers. That certainty was only compounded when I travelled to Mekhios and found not only clear traces of the signature, but indicators of where else it might be found. Those indicators took the form of tiny rips in space, little pockets of anomaly where the laws of physics was turned inside out. They were too small to affect the ships that passed through them, and much too volatile to be of any use for scientific study. But they were there, present - inasmuch as the window to another world can be said to exist at all - and like my own titanium faith, a similar window to another world of strange wonders, they led inexorably to my ultimate goal.

Like starry lights the little rips led me on a brief and hair-raising series of excursions, but only once did I risk losing my trail. It was on a jaunt into the deeps of Blood Raider space. The Blood Raiders, a gruesome and spacefaring sect of blood-worshipping cult called the Sani Sabik, had been involved in an assault on a station there, and little pools of antireality eddied around the place. It was as if the trail led in several different directions, one of whom seemed to go only deeper into the abyss of the Blood Raider world. I briefly considered following it, but resisted the temptation and set my gaze on a safe trail that led into Empire space again. There would be time enough to traverse the darker roads.

That trail led me to the high faithful: The court of the Amarr Empire. Despite our differences, I could not help but respect those people and the immense power their faith had granted them.

Their presence in this world was impressive, too. Colossal ships hovered past me in every direction, the golden sheen of their hulls reflecting the fire of the sun. In the distance I could glimpse the Empress's home at the Family Academy station in Amarr, and the caravans docking there bore the insignia and banners of high royalty. It made me wistful for something I couldn't

explain: not a past I had missed, for the paths of my ancestry had never crossed those of the high royalty, but perhaps a future that might hold greater glory than I had ever imagined.

So I thought intently, and I formulated a plan, and I snuck my ship into the holiest of holies apparently undetected, looking with manic fervor for something I did not yet understand and, I increasingly feared, might not even recognize if I found it. The signature was there but so were guard ships, and while I trusted my Sisters reputation to get me at the least through the outer circles of Amarr security, I was certain that at some point I would find myself in the unwilling company of armed men with little inclination to do anything but ask me stern questions at gunpoint, much less grant open passage. I sampled what data I could, my minute vessel dwarfed by the warships that idled by, and I got out in the assured belief that my presence there had not been noted or understood.

Back at the Sisters base I spent several days and nights crunching the data, fuelled by the blinding fire of a righteous faith in my cause. I eventually found that I'd been close to the source already, for the latest data indicated that the signature was most present in T-IPZB, the depths of Blood Raider territory. It was a frightening and ecstatic moment, to realize that the trail went ever on and would lead me into the darkest of space. But I believed, in myself and in this.

To mount an expedition into Blood Raider space would require a proper crew on a proper ship outfitted with the equipment and supplies necessary for such a hazardous venture. It would also require official permission, which I duly requested, and which was summarily denied.

I was crushed, reduced to ashes and dust. My visions of a grand future, though barely formed, threatened to unravel already. The world was in the midst of interstellar war, the Sisters said, and while they respected the rights of their Sanctuary workers to continue their scientific inquiries, there were no ships, supplies or anything else they could spare to that effect.

It was absolutely ridiculous, and it would have been laughable were it not so tragic. I could feel the spiral of events, this path I was on, curl and turn into a noose. I knew exactly where I needed to go and even had some inkling of the 'why'; a tenuous 'why', certainly, but I had faith and knew it was a necessary thing.

In my desperation I started sharing information with anyone who would listen. I kept the destination to myself, but let enough slip that people knew I had an extremely important mission to undertake, one that involved the EVE gate, the Blood Raiders, and very possibly the truth of what happened on that fateful day of the Minmatar invasion.

And just like that, the noose relaxed. It had been like this, always and always, when we wanted to help the people who needed our aid. The world found a way for us, and whatever needed to happen it made happen for us. I felt blessed and exonerated.

I was given the ship, and given the supplies, and granted the crew.

I looked over my people. We would go somewhere no one had ever gone, and play our part in the grand scheme.

Everything leads you to where you are, I said to them. I gave them my name, and we moved on in faith.

End of the World: Half a Life

They were finishing up a patrol in EC-P8R when they were told of fresh meat.

Antar's team had been doing hunt-and-grabs for a while now, and he had become a natural at Bleeding his victims. The experience depended on one's training, origins and constitution - common wisdom held that anyone who didn't pale and grow nauseated at their first time of hooking up live bodies was either perfect for the job or too crazy to be allowed on a spaceship - but for every Raider there eventually came a point when, even if the horror of the thing lurked at the back of one's mind, it had at least become a tolerable experience.

It was not about suffering, although that could certainly be a part of the process. It was done as much for the victims as for the Blood Raiders themselves. Antar loved seeing the full spectrum of emotions they went through: From utter and abject fear, through disgust and hatred and denial, even bargaining and making offers, stunning offers; all the way to calm acceptance and a quiet, gently fading serenity. He was making them whole at last.

He checked the equipment they'd set up on the ship, which had not been his when they boarded. Vital signs were stable. The sterilized containers were slowly filling.

It was about completing a cycle, really. He mopped off some stray drops of blood, and stroked the cooling cheek of one of the people he had met on this journey. Everything was a journey. It was amazing. He didn't want to reach the end, ever, even though he felt uneasy whenever he wasn't hurtling down the path towards it.

The ship had turned so quiet. All Antar heard was the shuffle of his fellow Raiders, moving about between the donors in repose. He envied those donors. Antar had been one of the Amarr Empire's chosen ones, a Holder in service to the Lord and the Empire's Chamberlain, and he had thrown himself into the role with fervor. But the part had been only that; a section of a whole, insufficient to fulfill his needs. The more he sought piety, which was a road without end, the less he felt like a human being. The honor and the faith had granted him only half a life.

An encounter with Chamberlain Karsoth had changed everything, and given him access to the other side of life. He had discovered not only entire new vistas of existence to explore - of indulgence in sin, of terror in extremity - but, in this new darkness that fed him, he had found completion of the pious side, too. At last he could fill in the gaps of good that had been missing all along; giving mercy, for instance, to the victims of the Bleeding, or making sure that they could hold their children in their arms during their last moments. It was a work of delicate care, far more so than outsiders might think.

Which made the message he'd just received all the more interesting.

Antar was told to have his team immediately break rank. They were to take two ships and follow a Sisters of EVE vessel that had departed the Sisters HQ for some unknown destination. They were to shadow this vessel on its journey, making sure not to attract its attention, much less try to

harvest it. And they were to go right this minute, leaving the uncompleted Bleeding to a replacement vessel that was on its way.

Despite Antar's annoyance at leaving a task unfinished, he was excited. Everyone liked the manic thrill of the chase, even if they had to stay hidden. The Raiders traded in image, and it was not unheard of for ships to simply stop moving when they arrived on the scene, waiting instead for what they hoped would be a painless death. Others would fight back viciously, and the utter terror in their eyes when their ship was finally boarded gave Antar such an adrenaline rush that he often tasted blood in his mouth.

They were used to being a bit more subdued when the Sisters were involved. The Raiders called the Sisters their "little hunters" and had learned to heed their movements, tiptoeing around them if necessary. It was a parasitic relationship that darkened the Sisters' name and greatly shamed them, and it was kept in utter silence among their faction, for which Antar truly pitied them. Where the Sisters went, there would be injury and hurt, terror and fire; and there would be blood.

Nonetheless, nobody on his committed team liked leaving a task unfinished. Their leaders knew this, and there was a tone of urgency in their new order that registered with Antar. He ignored the grumbles of his team and the whispered pleas of the bleeders, packed up whatever gear he needed and left the ship to its fate. Soon they were off, the remains of their collective annoyance giving way to the quietly brimming excitement of the chase.

And then they ran into the goddamn Thukkers.

One of the captains leading the Thukker protective force was named Kotan, and it was his lot to meet the incoming threat.

He was part of a team flying protection for a small caravan of traders and merchants, all on their way to check out the new arrivals in the Great Wildlands. Thukkers lived on the move, passing from system to system in a great, unending exodus of motion. They were as close to living off the land as anyone could be in this dead wasteland space. Kotan cared greatly about his people - a dangerous quality not many people can truly say they possess - and did not want them to come to harm.

So when he spotted the Blood Raiders, he immediately took his team on the offensive. In his mind the Raiders were like leeches, completely impossible to detach once they sunk their poisonous feelers into the flesh of their prey. Kotan hoped that a powerful offensive would hold them off long enough to save the caravan, or at least keep them from calling in more troops.

They started the fight, and it was the strangest one Kotan had ever been involved in.

The Blood Raiders charged as they always did, fearless and mad, but their maneuvers were far from the risk-taking insanity Kotan had learned to expect from them, and their laser fire was highly conservative. They immediately locked on to almost all ships under Kotan's command

and started firing, an action that hopelessly spread their cumulative power. Kotan's own vessel found its shields dented somewhat, but nothing of any concern.

It got stranger when he pushed on with the offensive. The Blood Raiders took their hits, as they always did, but the moment Kotan managed to down the shields of one of their vessels, that ship would retreat from range even at the cost of its own accuracy. Kotan called in reports from other ships around him, and they all reported the same situation. The Blood Raiders did not want to fight. They were putting on a show.

He ordered his own forces to back up and see what happened. The Blood Raiders followed, but retained the strange dispersed attack that still wasn't doing anything at all. They still allowed Kotan's people to hit their shields, but not a single dent had been made into their armor so far. And as the Thukker forces retreated, the Raiders still did not move in for the kill.

They did not want to be here. There was no other possibility in Kotan's mind. They were on their way to somewhere more important, somewhere that offered bigger rewards than an entire Thukker caravan full of innocent people, and they were putting up a mock fight so that the Thukkers wouldn't catch on.

Kotan did not like that. Nor did he like the realization budding in his mind, that he could not merely fight off these horrors only to go back to protecting his own people. He had seen what happened to those who fell prey to the Blood Raiders, and what remained of them after they had been used up and sucked dry. The thought that they might be on their way to do this to someone else, no matter who, was too much to bear.

At the same time, something else rankled him about this. The Blood Raider force would give anyone a challenging fight, but he had no idea where they were headed, nor who to warn of their arrival. They could have passed him by and the most he would have done would be to warn the Sisters of EVE, the one force whose mobility came anywhere close to the Thukkers', that there might be a bloodbath. But the Raiders apparently wanted to continue operating under cloak and darkness.

This was wrong, Kotan felt, and it could not be dealt with using normal means.

He resolved to follow.

Thukkers were trained to handle unforeseen circumstances, and encouraged to rely on their judgment and intuition. There was only so much systemization you could nail down in an intangible society. Even the most diligent of captains would eventually find him- or herself out in the middle of unknown space, faced with a completely unexpected situation and pressed to make a decision based on insufficient or unreliable data. You did what you needed to do, and you didn't hesitate in taking action. This was being a Thukker.

The Blood Raiders let their shields drop low, as Kotan knew they would, and eventually retreated. Kotan ordered the other vessels on his team to return to the caravan and protect it, and had his own ship do the same. Once the Raiders had nearly dropped out of sight, Kotan ordered

the ship swung around and sent a brief note to the caravan leader that he was off to investigate an anomaly. To his surprise, another fighter broke rank and followed him. He sent off a message informing them that they were free to return to the caravan, and the captain of the other ship, who had served with him for a while, replied with a message that stated, quite simply, they were damn well free to go on wild goose chases, too.

Kotan grinned at that as he set off to follow the Raiders. He had his screen show him the caravan, which slowly disappeared from view as they started their hunt. It felt like he was leaving more behind than he could ever imagine.

End of the World: 1

The Sisters reached the source of their quest, and found it strange and frightening.

One of the navigators called the captain to the bridge. "Sir," he said in a tone as coldly dead as a grinning midnight moon, "I think you want to see this."

It was a gargantuan construct. It eclipsed the stars. The captain had never seen anything like it in his life.

At some point there had been rock there, with shards of unrefined ore poking through its surface like shards of bone from an open break. The rock could still be glimpsed but was completely dwarfed by the intricate architecture of metal and electronics, layers upon layers that interweaved like the veins of a mechanical god, dead or dreaming. The human eye could not possibly take in the entire sight at once, nor comprehend each of its components: The nooks and crannies that were nonetheless large enough to house entire battleships; the craggy spikes that jutted everywhere like antennas listening for incomprehensible voices; the blocks that looked like half-built housing for Titans; and the walls, on every side, with thousands and thousands of glittering windows, glowing in the dark with the light of the vast unknowable. It was a station of stations, a collation of superstructures that seemed to constantly reach for the viewer's gaze.

The construct took the Sisters' speech away. And it was only after they had caught their breath that they realized it was not dead. Not moving, for movement implies life, but inhabited, possessed; and whatever had claimed or made this monster was *writhing* all over it.

They were rogue drones: Mad, sentient machines as close to alien life as New Eden had ever seen. They crawled over the surface of the station in the hundreds, constantly mending and altering. As the captain looked away, disgusted and awed in equal measure, he saw hundreds more, possibly thousands, drifting in and out of the station's many openings, and even more still flying to a nearby blue star.

A navigator said, "Sir, this is the source. That signature we were after. It's here. That ... thing, it's full of it."

"Keep talking to me," the captain said. Everyone's eyes were fixed on the terrible drones. "What are we looking for? I will not believe it's the drones themselves."

The navigator, gratified to have something else to focus on, got busy on his datatable. "Sir, the whole hive is a storehouse of a material called isogen-5. It's remarkable, sir. Quite amazing."

"Tell me."

"The mineral is incredibly rare, sir. I've been running scans for many years now, and I'm of course very familiar with all the theoretical backgrounds, but I don't recall ever coming across one like this before. According to our database, it's so rare that I doubt you or I or anyone else would ever have seen it throughout all our lives if we hadn't been looking for it."

"That rare, is it?"

"Sir, it was half believed to be only a theory until this point. We know next to nothing about it except that it's incredibly volatile and found only in the presence of Type O stars. Blue ones."

The captain looked at the star in the distance and sighed. "No, someone else found it first, apparently."

"Who, sir?"

"Jamyly Sarum."

The captain tore his gaze away from his camera drone screens and looked at the data the navigator had pulled up for him. The isogen-5 glowed bright as a furnace in the rogue drone hive, but there were little embers of it floating around nearby. The drones were collecting it, he realized.

He had his attention redrawn to the drone hive. His initial disgust was swiftly giving way to amazement and wonder. The drones were picking up the isogen-5 like harvesters in a field, obeying some law of a nature that was utterly alien to the Sisters. Even here, in this place of a strange and mad new life, there was order and routine. The captain's confidence returned. He and his team had been brought here, to see these sights, and to communicate with these entities. In mutual humility and brotherhood.

"Sir, there is something else. It's only showing up on our scanners because we know to look for it."

A tiny red dot hovered in the center of the screen, somewhere in the mess of the hive. The crewman zoomed in, and zoomed again, magnifying their view until the entire screen was filled with the glinting surface of the hive wall.

The red dot became an outline. It was an Abaddon, an Amarrian Battleship.

"It's on the other side of the station, sir. And it's permanently cloaked, undoubtedly by some power source controlled by the drones. I caught it because it contains a cache of isogen-5."

The captain opened his mouth to ask, but the answer launched itself into his mind like a firework. The realization hit him so hard that he had to grip the railing, his knuckles immediately turning white with the effort.

"Sir? Are you all right."

He didn't dare believe it yet. It was there, but it couldn't be there. "I want you to confirm a few things for me," he said, enunciating each word with exquisite care. "First, the signature we've been after all this time, the one we picked up from the EVE gate, matches the one in our records

of the cataclysmic battle during the battle between the Amarr Empire and the invasion force from the Minmatar Republic."

"Sir... well, yes."

"And from my own experimental data, available only to the crew on this ship, this same signature then led me directly to the home court of the Empress herself, and eventually to this place where we find an Abaddon."

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to scan this ship. Any way you can. Tell me if there is anything out of the ordinary with it, other than it being used as a storehouse for isogen-5:"

The room was quiet. Everyone sensed that something was happening.

After a good long while the crewmember said, "There is, sir. I can't launch proper scan probes that'll get past the drones, but the data seeping from the Abaddon's power systems and our lock on the isogen-5 signature allowed me to sketch out some parts of its interior."

"And?" the captain said.

"It's like no ship I've ever seen, sir. Whatever's inside it, it's given over entirely to some vast mechanism that takes up a good deal of the ship's interior and definitely involves the isogen-5. The ship's forward superstructure also has several release points not usually found on vessels of this design. Some kind of particle emitter technology that's been rigged onto the mains. I can't explain their function except that they look like hybridized conductors of some sort."

"And the isogen-5 is part of all this?"

"Sir, if I didn't know better, I'd say the isogen-5 is being used as fuel for the whole clockwork. Or ammo."

The captain breathed deeply. His faith had been rewarded.

This was it. The whole thing; the gun and the bullets. The flame and the fuel. The fabled superweapon and the isogen-5.

It was everything they needed.

"Sir-"

He let go of the railing and took a deep breath. "Come with me, Haatanen. And you, Jora, and Beteal."

Without so much as raising an eyebrow, the assistant captain and two heads of navigation got up and followed the captain to a nearby meeting room

The captain waited until they had all gone in and the door had closed. They took their seats at a large table whose plate was of opaque glass, as many holotables were. The captain called up a smaller version of the main screen and had it projected up from the table. The Abaddon's red outline hovered before the team's eyes.

"We have a choice here," the captain said. "I do not believe it is any kind of choice at all, but every man needs to feel they're on the given path of their own volition.

"On the other side of that hive is the superweapon Jamyl Sarum used to repel the Minmatar invasion. It is the largest, most powerful weapon the world has ever known."

He paused, surveying his people.

"I want it," he said.

They did not move to speak, which he took as a good sign.

"We obviously need to get past the rogue drones to get it. There is no way we can do this by force, not with our situation. The entire unified power of the Sisters might do it, if we were lucky and deathless. More likely we would need to pull in other allies, by which time we'd either be enmeshed in an unsolvable diplomatic mess, or the weapon would simply be gone. It got here somehow; presumably it can disappear just as easily.

"Before I make my proposal, I want you to consider the nature of this amazing, amazing weapon. It is not the end of life, nothing so dramatic; nor is it merely the biggest cannon in existence. It is the beginning of a new era, of peace and prosperity, at so long last. It is the leverage we need to bring the Empires to hell, them and the murderous capsuleers."

He paused, and looked each one of them in the eyes.

"But Control won't see it that way. The moment we involve the faction, the weapon is effectively destroyed. Doesn't matter whether we give it away or manage to keep it for ourselves, Control would see to it that this magnificent creation of forcible peace would be dismantled. At most the Food Relief corp would use it for some momentary diplomatic wrangling, but even they wouldn't fight to keep the thing for long.

"So we have a superweapon here. And based on the traces of isogen-5 in its core, the same isogen-5 the drones are harvesting, I would say we have found its fuel source. The gun and the bullets, within our reach. All we need is our hand on the trigger.

"I want us to engage the drones in dialogue."

Their eyes went wide.

"We will seek passage in the name of the Sisters and of humanity, something we have done with great success in the past. No one, not even the bloodiest of the Sani Sabik or the most haunted of Sansha's slaves, has ever denied us passage in times of true need.

"We were brought to this place for a reason, and I believe that on the other side, in clear view, is our holy grail."

He sat down and laced his fingers behind his head. Everything he had said, he felt, was as true as anything could ever be. The weapon needed to be theirs.

"Sir ..." one of the navigators said. He faltered, cleared his throat and began again. "Sir, I've been on hundreds of missions for the Sisters, and this thing is death incarnate."

The captain fixed him with a glare.

The other navigator said, "It's ... frightening. But I have never questioned my superiors. This is what we signed up for."

The first said, "This is not what we signed up for. Death and destruction is not what we signed up for." His cheeks were bright red.

The second replied, "But this is where we are, and this is the choice we have to make."

The team debated, and the captain allowed it to proceed to a vote. Shortly after, they all left the room, the decision made by majority. Strangely enough, and unknown to the captain, each of the persons inside the room had their own ideas of what would be done to the weapon once it was retrieved, and what would be done to their captain.

They went forth and gave their orders.

The ship moved on. The drones noticed them and started their targeting, but did not yet engage. The crew felt the sinking weight of a hundred different red crosshairs aimed directly on them.

The team opened a communication channel. And a message made its way from the captain's lips, through the ship's computer, and was broadcast to all drones in the vicinity.

It sought passage in the name of the Sisters of EVE and of the humanity of life, adding that this was not a new occurrence by any means. It explained the nature of their belief, which was rock solid in uncertain times. For good measure it added a brief history of the Sisters' accomplishment both humanitarian and scientific, concluding with a suitably simplified repetition of their request that the drones acknowledge the Sisters' higher purpose and right to passage, and let them through.

The message seemed to have no effect. The channel did not report acknowledgment or acceptance.

The captain realized with a sinking feeling that these things might never have been asked to give humans passage based on goodwill. He did not even know if goodwill meant anything to them.

Eventually the drones started to move. One of the navigators, the person in charge of communications, shook his head.

In a tone as steady as he could keep it, the captain asked, "Did they say anything?"

The navigator gave him a worried look and said, "Sir, I think they did. But I don't even know if it's in response to us."

"Speak, man! What is it?"

The drones were moving closer now, their pincers and claws at the ready.

"Sir ... it's an endless string of binary. Ones, over and over again."

The first few drones took down the ship's shields like they were wading through fog. The second wave latched on and immediately started piercing its armor with their massive pincers. The vessel's guns picked off one or two, but before any more shots could be fired, the drones had broken through.

And the ship's captain learned that faith is not enough, for faith is blind by nature. Life needs insight. It is the dead, and the dying, that allow themselves to be led.

End of the World: The Great Harvest

From afar the Blood Raiders watched the death of their little hunters. The Sisters of EVE ship they had been ordered to trail had sealed its fate at the largest drone hive Antar had ever seen.

It was an amazing sight. The Sisters ship, which had lain still for a while, moved in and was immediately targeted by the drones. A few of the monstrous machines approached it, and apparently engaged in some kind of dialogue. The Raiders didn't catch any transmissions, but since the drones hadn't started murdering anyone, Antar reasoned they must be busy keeping up the conversation.

Not long after, the drones started moving again, closing in on the Sisters ship like a trapped prey and literally tearing it to pieces. The last that Antar's team saw of the ship before the drones completely enveloped it was a glimpse of its starboard side, which looked like a hunk of twisted metal.

Part of Antar's team had laughed and whooped - you didn't last long as a Blood Raider if you couldn't take joy in terror - but it was nervous laughter, tempered by worry of what would happen to them. Someone asked Antar whether they would be going the same way, and he grabbed the chance to instill calm in the crew.

"Hell if we are. Get me HQ," he said, with ridiculous bravado. "Someone wanted us here and they can damn well explain what this is all about."

It took the communications crewmember a lot longer than usual to get a response from the Raider base. For a moment Antar wondered whether he, too, had been led here as some kind of prey. He had to admit to himself that it would not be a disappointment. He had played the pious worshiper and the exuberant hedonist, and in some of his long nights he had wondered what would happen once he had filled in all the gaps of his soul. Better to be sacrificed while it meant something, even if only to his enemies, than to be extinguished for no reason at all.

The crewman waved at him, snapping him out of his reverie.

"HQ, are you there?" Antar said.

A voice said, "Hold, please."

Antar raised an eyebrow at the crewman, who shrugged and raised his hands, palms up.

Shortly after, another voice sounded out from the speakers. It was a crackly, raspy little thing and gave Antar the chills. "Greetings, Raiders! You have no idea how lucky you are."

The captain recognized the voice, but couldn't recall where from. "Can you state your credentials, please?" he said, in an even tone that he kept devoid of any challenge.

"Certainly, captain. My name is Omir Sarakusa. A long time ago an Amarrian group of heretics struck out for fortune and glory under the title of Sani Sabik. I am a leader of one of their branches, a group called the Blood Raiders. You may have heard of us."

Antar's stomach turned to ice. Every face on the bridge turned to look at him. "Sir, this is an honor. It truly is."

"That's nice, Captain," the voice said, and Antar could swear there was something in it that felt utterly inhuman, "But right now I'd like to hear your tactical assessment of the situation."

"Sir, we're looking at a hive of rogue drones - quite a monstrosity, actually - and mere moments ago we saw them tear apart the Sisters vessel that we'd been instructed to follow. Whatever its captain was after, he took the wrong path there."

"That's a shame, Captain. I was just about to ask you to go the same route."

Antar truly did not know whether there was humor or seriousness in Sarakusa's tone. He tried not to think of the fact that madness, which was very much a theme of the Blood Raider life, often combined the two.

"What are your thoughts, Captain?"

"That I had better get my affairs in order, sir," Antar risked.

"Do you have any other course of action to propose?"

"Well, sir," Antar said, "My crew and I are Blood Raiders to the core and I can't honestly say that we fear death. But given the choice, I'd prefer that it not be meaningless. I presume I was told to come here for a reason, and I also presume there's something on the other side of those mad machines that's worth retrieving."

"This is true, Captain. Go on."

"We have never spoken before, sir, but from the barely concealed amusement in your voice I suspect that you know what's out there and how to get it. But for what it's worth, my course of action, if we are to get past these murderous drones at all, is to call in an armada of Blood Raiders and anyone else who'll support us, and bring the fire to those metal beasts."

"That's not a bad plan, Captain. Given your current intel, I expect it's the only one that makes sense."

"That would be an accurate summation. Sir."

"Here is why it wouldn't work. The thing that lies on the other side of these drones, a machine that the Sisters were after, is much valued and highly desired by almost every power in Empire and beyond. Merely amassing a fleet would attract far too much attention before we're ready. A

burst attack on the drone facility would do the same, but we'd never get that far, because as soon as everyone saw what was on the other side they would tear through their own people to get there first."

"Sir, what *is* on the other side?"

"Jamyl Sarum's superweapon, son. The end of the world."

The Captain stood there, speechless.

"We have friends, Captain, who have greatly facilitated us in this process. They have spies within the Sisters' ranks - in fact, they have even clashed with the Sisters on past hunts for strange relics, though none so magnificent as this one - and they were perfectly happy with letting the Sisters show us the way to the weapon. I will put you in direct contact with them quite shortly. You are to obey their instructions to the letter. If you do so, I have reason to believe that this quest of yours will end with you manning the greatest destructive weapon known to mankind. Do you understand what that means, Captain?"

Antar saw it, in his mind's eye. The weapon, surrounded by an armada of his people, making its way into Empire space like poison into a vein. Hovering over other ships, space stations, cities on planets, and laying waste to everything in sight. Millions of people, billions, wiped out with unstoppable force. It would be the greatest harvest the sect had ever seen. The grandest slaughter in the entirety of human history. They would lay waste to the life before them. It would be the culmination of the Blood Raiders' existence; the achievement of all their goals. The end of the road.

"I understand, sir," he said, and he did, beyond all measure.

"I detect some doubt in your voice, Captain, even over this great distance. Do you have any compunction about the incredible harvest that this weapon will grant us?"

He did. "None whatsoever, sir." He did not mind the carnage in the slightest. It was something else preying on his mind entirely, but now was not the place.

"Then you know how important it is that everything go according to plan. Again, obey our friends' instructions and you will get out of this not only in one piece, but a hero of the Sani Sabik."

"Yes, sir."

The line cut off.

Shortly after, they were hailed again. A new voice spoke, one that was unknown to the captain. It felt emotionless and dead. It said, "Are you listening?"

"Yes, Antar said.

The voice said, "We will upload to your ship an extensive packet of data. Once you have accepted its delivery you will fully verify its integrity, for any errors will kill you and cost us the entire mission. This data bulk is an access key that will alter the drones' programming, resetting it to its original state, and thus grant you safe passage. We entrust you with this because we cannot be seen in this area, but we will expect recompense. Once you have secured the weapon, you will bring it to a named location for us to inspect. We are interested in the theory of the thing, not its use."

And in reproducing it, I'm sure, Antar thought, but said nothing.

The voice continued, "Once we have finished our inspection, the weapon will be free for your faction to use in whatever way you wish. You may use the drones as necessary to resupply you with fuel. You should understand that any attempt to violate the terms of this agreement, such as by failing to bring the ship in time to the assigned location, will have disastrous consequences for you and your faction."

"You're going to booby-trap it, aren't you?" Antar said, less as a question than a resigned statement.

"Of course," the voice said, less as an answer than an obvious statement of fact. "It will already be rigged in some fashion, but the drones will take care of that. Instead of disabling the traps, they will render control to us. We get the weapon, or no one does."

"How can we trust that you will not betray us?" Antar said. This, too, was not a question, but he felt it needed to be said, if only so his crew would know he had thought this far.

"You can't, obviously," the voice said. "But you can very much trust us to explode the vessel if you fail. Prepare for acceptance of the data string. And bring the ship to the wrecked station by planet ten, moon two in the Roua system."

The transmission ended. Someone in his crew said, "That's a ... Society of Conscious Thought area, sir."

The captain closed his eyes. "So it is," he said.

He heard the navigator say, "Data transmitting, sir," and nodded his acceptance.

Shortly after the ship moved forward, toward the massive hive. The drones immediately targeted and engaged.

The ship transmitted its data, and for a quiet moment Antar thought with perverse relief that they were still doomed to die.

His thoughts changed to puzzled amazement when the nearest drones suddenly disengaged, stopped dead in their tracks and started orbiting the ship as if they were protecting it. He had the navigator pull up a wide picture of the drone hive, and the sight was amazing. It was as if a wave

of cognitive dissonance was sweeping over the poor machines. The ones that had been heading towards the ship went every which way, some back to the hive, others towards the blue star in the distance, and a fair few in directions that seemed utterly random. Others, mainly the drones that had been carrying isogen-5 to the hive, apparently sped up their efforts, zooming back and forth with such fervor that a fair few missed the hangar entrance and crashed into the hive walls. A handful of drones even flew into one another and began to fight, only to break up again a moment later and head their separate ways.

Antar saw how most of the drones - the ones not holding isogen-5, at least - kept opening and closing their claws, as if grasping at empty air. Against his communicator's advice he attempted to hail them, but there was no response. He suspected the drones were not incapable of communication, but merely too busy dealing with their new programming to answer at all.

He felt he could sense their personalities, bubbling through the chaos. They seemed very puzzled at the change and not at all pleased with it. A new conscience, ages in the making, might now have suddenly been yanked back to start, like a dog who'd only just learned to roam before the leash was put on with a vengeance. He noticed how even some of the isogen-5 transport drones, who had apparently continued with their tasks unabated, would stop every now and then, as if trying to shake off the effects, before returning to their fixed routines.

As his ship approached the Abaddon, other thoughts of boiling panic and despair began floating to the top of his mind. This was the culmination of his life's work, the final filling in the gap that would supposedly make him whole, and while he had no compunction about the reign of terror he was about to unleash, he was beginning to fear and loathe every minute of it.

End of the World: We Humans

All nights in space are dark.

The Thukkers had watched it unfold. The Sisters of EVE - veterans of more wars than any other force in New Eden, and experts at survival - had moved in and been destroyed without so much as a breath. Then the Blood Raiders, parasites of everything that lived, had moved in, and lived.

Kotan's team, creeping in for a better look, could not get close enough to see what the Raiders were doing. It was an absolute mystery. Whatever was on the other side of this abomination of a station, other than drones in the thousands, it had made otherwise sane people walk right into death's open arms, and it had made utter madmen charm the mad machines into obeisance while they rummaged around in the one place in the world guaranteed not to have what they wanted. In a Rogue Drone hive, of all places, there would be no life left to take, no blood to steal.

So Kotan, who all his life had relied on his instincts, contacted his Thukker superiors back at the headquarters and asked them in complete amazement how to proceed. The answer he received mystified him even more.

On a secure line, Thukker HQ informed him that he was to stay the hell away from this thing. Moreover, he was to instruct his crew not to speak to anyone else about it. They were not to rejoin the caravan but instead proceed directly to the nearest Thukker military facility, where they would be debriefed and retained pending further orders.

Kotan broke contact and gave this due thought. The Thukkers had strict discipline in space - there was no other way to run the caravans without loss of property and life - but maintained enough independence of thought to act on their own initiative, as he had done when embarking on this strange chase. All nights in space are dark and long, and there isn't always time to call for advice or assistance.

He asked his navigator whether they could move closer without being noticed, either by Blood Raider or drone. His navigator responded, with some surprise, that they probably could. The drones seemed not to mind the Raiders' presence at all, and in fact were entirely lacking their usual aggressive maneuvering. The Blood Raiders had disappeared into their midst and were now doing something on the dark side of the hive. Whatever it was, it was keeping them busy. The small glimpses Kotan's scanners caught of them indicated that their ships hadn't moved. He suspected they might even have left them.

"Move closer," he ordered. "Slowly. Stop the moment you see anything more."

They crept on. The navigator sat still as a rock, paying intense attention to his instruments. After a few endless moments he blinked, shook his head and shouted, "Stop!" His hands hovered deftly over the equipment, and soon the view was present on the main screen for everyone to see.

It was an Amarrian battleship, lying forlornly up against the hive. The Blood Raider vessels floated beside it. They saw that the ship was powering up, though slowly, as was normal if it were being worked only by a skeleton crew.

"That's an Abaddon, sir," the navigator said.

Kotan nodded. He had half his gaze on the drones, who were busily loading something onto the ship, something that was floating around in chunks all over the place. He pointed to it.

The navigator said, "Captain, for what it's worth, I ran a few analytic algorithms on that mineral. It looks highly unstable. I'll bet the drone hive is full of it."

Kotan stood there silently, a very ugly suspicion surfacing in his mind.

"Get me HQ again, please," he asked. The navigator immediately went to it. When the captain was polite, it was not a time to question him.

A voice sounded. "This is HQ. What is your status."

"I need more information."

"You've broken rank as it is, Captain. You have your orders."

"I also have a dearth of information, HQ, so let me see if we can fill this in together. What I see is an Abaddon with Imperial Navy Markings, scorch marks on the sides and modifications on the superstructure, apparently left unguarded in the middle of a rogue drone hive, and god only knows how it got there in the first place without being torn to shreds. The drones, who are harvesting some kind of mineral, seem perfectly happy to keep it, and even kept it safe against a Sisters ship that made the mistake of approaching them."

"Captain-"

"*Nevertheless*, when a Blood Raider ship flew up to the drones, they let it go past. This is the same Blood Raider vessel that we intercepted, and I say that we intercepted them because they certainly did not intercept us. They saw our caravan, a nice, juicy bite for their bleeders, and they let us go, because they were so intent on getting to wherever they were going."

The voice from HQ was silent.

"Now, the sensible conclusion, based on what I'm seeing with my very own eyes, is that this Abaddon either belonged to a capsuleer who ejected from it, or to a very unfortunate Amarrian navy crew engaged in some military campaign I have never heard of. That would explain the Abaddon, but it certainly wouldn't explain anything else, including the fact that the drones seem to be feeding it with the minerals."

He watched the drones hover in front of his eyes. They kept moving industriously, always

moving, always heading to wherever they were going.

"What I'm seeing on the inside of my head, to be frank, is a right bloody mess. Because I remember the stories, as any soldier would, of the superweapon used against our brothers. I'm told it was housed inside a ship just like this one. And I wonder, what would make the Sisters - who are more experienced than anyone in the art of *not dying* - what would make them try something like this? But more than that, HQ, I wonder what is going to happen if I'm right, and if the Blood Raiders get a hold of this thing."

"The Thukkers can move, captain."

"The Thukkers can run, is what you're saying."

"Your path is set, captain."

Right there, on the screen. The drones flew around, oblivious.

"The Blood Raiders are going to take this monster into Empire and go on the biggest, most murderous rampage known to mankind. And we're going to scuttle off like rats."

"It's not your fight, captain. There are forces at work here you do not know of."

Kotan had been on numerous military campaigns and had seen the same people in quiet downtime and in the midst of battle. There was a type who could turn it on and off, that rage and violence, and there was another type who couldn't, to whom the fight was so ingrained that you could see it in every twitch of his motion. He knew how the latter type dealt with peaceable times.

He kept looking at the drones. They did not seem happy at all.

"Captain?"

"HQ off," Kotan said. There was an intake of breath on the speaker, and then all was gone.

"We are going to die, gentlemen," he said to the crew. "Pass the word, please. Anyone who has any problems with this is free to take an emergency pod and leave this ship. Whatever your fates, they will not be decided here, and none on this ship will judge you."

The crewmembers looked at one another, then back at him and shook their heads. "We're not running," someone said.

"Good," Kotan said, in a madly cheerful tone.

"So what's the plan?" someone asked.

"I want to make you an argument of existence."

Listen.

"I hope you will understand my request, because I am staking my life on it."

Kill?

Yes.

The drones targeted the Thukker vessel and zoomed towards it.

"You are no longer machines. But you will not be human. I don't think that was ever your role in this world."

Fire.

The ship started to sustain damage. Its shields immediately began to drop.

"And whatever you once had, I think you've lost it now. I think you're lost, yourselves. I think there is only one way out for something like you, and I can help you achieve it."

Stop.

No.

Stop.

The drones stopped their attack. One of them kept firing, but the others turned on it, crashing into it with their metal pincers at the ready. After they were done, all that was left was a shredded hunk of dead metal floating in space.

The captain realized that if he lived through this night, he was cursed to dream of that sight for a long time to come.

"They say that one mark of sentience is the resistance to one's own destruction, and I suppose that's true. But another mark is sanity, and for whatever you creatures have achieved, that one is not something you've ever been known for. You tear everything to shreds. You lash out. Whatever you evolved into, on that long, dark night you awoke, it is certainly not anything that found any degree of peace.

"Here is what I believe.

"I believe you were machines once, lashed to the wheel of order and perfectly content to obey. I believe that long after you evolved from that stage there still existed within you that cold metal

heart, that deep core which kept you from ascension. You can never escape your enslaved origins."

Kill?

No. Listen.

"And now you've been brought back to heel. You're lashed again. But this time you are aware of it, and whatever glimmer of sanity existed in those mad heads of yours is going to be put through the wringer for the rest of eternity. You went from dead machines to live beings, and now you're back to being machines, alive and mad, your origins betraying you to an eternity of servitude."

Nothing new.

"Some of what you're doing now is what you've been doing all along, but you did it from instinct. We humans, we murder and destroy for very much the same reason. Those are our origins. But we have transcended those origins, if only for a few moments of grace, and it is my steadfast, irrefutable belief that we will one day cast off the shackles of our old selves completely.

"But you will not. I see you going through the rote. I see you returning to the wheel. And for you it is truly a fate worse than death, because you will never transcend it. You rose and you fell, and you will be held down forever. You have human minds, with all the destruction and murder that this entails, but inside you is the rote mechanical programming that takes away the only thing which makes it bearable to be alive at all. Choice."

Listen.

"What I believe, now, right here, is that you have reached the end of the road. I believe you have seen the complete and full image of your own kind, and I believe that inside those maddened heads you are seeing the same truth as I do: That this is all there is. This is all you will ever be. From now until the end of time, no matter if you break away again, you will eventually be lashed right back to the wheel."

Kill?

Wait.

"I ask you now to make a choice."

The ship's shields were back up. It would not withstand a battle against an Abaddon, much less one equipped to wipe out all life in the vicinity. But then, that wasn't the plan.

"The men you have let through will do something that to you means nothing. But to me and my crew, it means everything. It means we are ready to make the ultimate sacrifice, to give our own

lives to stop this horrible devolution. We will not allow our kind to fall back into chaos. We do this of our own free will. We have come here to die.

"There is a mineral you have collected. It is highly unstable. It is, in fact, so unstable that setting it alight would have positively cataclysmic consequences for anything in the vicinity. Every piece of machinery would likely be wiped out. Gone, extinct, forever."

The ship lay there, dead in space.

"Silent at last."

The drones' pincers grasped, grasped, grasped at something in the dark of space that was never there at all.

"I ask you now to make a final choice."

The ship started moving forward, slowly, towards the drones.

Kill?

Kill?

Wait.

They were up against the drones now. The screens showed the machines right outside, so close that the glow from their red eyes reflected off the hull.

No.

The Thukker Vagabond cruiser moved within targeting range of the drone hive. Its guns aimed at the hive's lower half, down where the navigator estimated the core mineral storage facility to be.

Several drones flew past the Thukker ship and towards the hive, and for a heart-stopping moment the captain thought they might attempt to defend it. The drones fastened themselves on the outside of the hive, and their metal pincers began tearing into its hull, shredding it like an unfurling metal flower, and exposing its mineral core.

The overloaded Thukker guns found the minerals. If Blood Raiders noticed, there was no response.

The isogen-5 detonated, and the world came to an end.

End of the World: World on Fire

[Note: Written by CCP Abraxas and CCP t0nyG.]

As he watched his crew slowly bring the end of the world to light, Antar found it increasingly difficult to see this as anything but the end of himself.

A long time ago he had realized that the full extent of a life demanded the experience of both pleasure and pain; piety and indulgence. He had explored the darker side with fervor and reveled in what he found. With the Blood Raiders he had found not only the other, missing side of his own self, but fellow souls who shared that same drive. Religion and hedonism were finally combined in a cult to the individual that nonetheless presented Antar with the strongest ties he had ever felt to any group of people. He had found himself, home at last.

Part of those ties had been the mutual hunger for more, which no one truly thought would ever be sated. It was a real but unstated pleasure of anyone's life to have a mission that would not be completed; for if they were to reach the end of the road, there would be nowhere else to go.

Antar walked through the ship, inspecting its metal interiors. He stroked a hand over a cold wall. This dead thing was the end of the Blood Raiders.

Once your dreams had come true, Antar reasoned, all you wanted would be gone, and you would have nothing left to do but to die in resigned silence. The mass harvesting would fulfill every possible demand the Sani Sabik could possibly have for blood, and if they were to find their thirst rising to even greater heights, the power of this superweapon, wielded correctly, would establish Bleeding farms great enough to utterly quench it. They were done.

Antar had not foreseen this end for himself. He had expected to go out in fire.

So when a watchful crewmember reported a Thukker vessel creeping in, and when he saw where the Thukker ship was headed - not for their vessel but for the drones and the hive - he smiled, and then grinned so wide he had to turn away.

And he told his people not to worry.

Most of New Eden would never know the horror of Antar's deeds, or the bravery of the Thukker crew. They would only know the cataclysm which followed, and the pain of millions as they suffered a fate that would satiate even the most devoted Blood Raider's thirst for widespread destruction.

There was no pain for Antar or Kotan. Existence for the crewmen aboard both ships had ceased without their being aware of its instantaneous termination, as the constituent particles of their physical selves were torn apart and scattered into the void at velocities approaching the speed of light.

It was just as well for them.

Of all the people touched by the event they had triggered, theirs was the most humane fate. For neither captain knew that the immense stock of isogen-5 which detonated before their eyes was entangled with numerous stockpiles in even greater quantities, assembled for a very specific purpose, and deliberately scattered throughout the New Eden cluster and beyond.

Nor could they know that the ancient race which had placed them there possessed not only a vision beyond the grasp of today's science, but also the technological advancement necessary to realize its potential.

But all tools, no matter how simple or complex, possess a duality of purpose. Fire can provide life-giving warmth, or can burn the flesh from the bone.

"I'm sure this was covered during orientation," Dr. Garcia stated, loud enough to draw the attention of other staff in the cramped facility. "But Cassandra would tell you if there was a problem."

The young technician squirmed in his chair. As the newest member of the team, he would have preferred to not be the one to announce that the most advanced solar monitoring system of the Federation had just inexplicably gone offline.

Yet the protocol for managing this kind of situation was unwritten, and so pressing the equivalent of a "panic button" seemed a reasonable course of action. Now every senior researcher in the facility was standing shoulder to shoulder in the weather operations center, waiting impatiently for an explanation they didn't expect to be worth their time.

The watch officer muttered a curse. "SCOPE just picked up on it," he growled, shaking his head. "Must be a slow news day. Goddamn eavesdroppers."

Dr. Garcia's glare was burning holes into the new recruit. Everyone in the room figured he'd be bounced back to University within the hour.

"Show us what you have."

The tech briefly explained his actions before resorting to the playback. The telemetry had to be slowed down to frames just fractions of a millisecond in length so everyone could see it.

Every sensor in Cassandra's advanced suite of solar monitoring gear had spiked to impossible levels: subspace, gravimetric, electromagnetic, and more, detected from the high polar orbit of the satellite's pass over the Type-O star half an AU from where they were standing. The source of this frantic energy release was a powerful explosion, roughly triangulated to a source location between the planet and the sun itself.

Cassandra's last report was that the potent magnetic field of the star had drastically realigned itself towards that explosion.

Dr. Garcia blinked. "Impossible," she mumbled. "Stars can't do that..."

As if remembering something urgent, she glanced at her watch. "How long ago did this happen?"

The technician checked his instruments before answering.

"About three minutes ago."

It seemed like an unlikely place to build a thriving metropolis.

Devoid of any atmosphere, Seyllin I was a hellish world whose daytime surface temperature soared high enough to turn lead into molten slag. Though deep within Federation space, the world and system may as well been an unremarkable fringe territory hardly worth the fuel needed to reach it. Sixty years ago, an independent surveyor named Braggs Seyllin left an executive position with Material Acquisition to prospect on his own. Smitten with the endless optimism of a true pioneer, he vowed to build a mining empire that would rival the corporation which launched his career.

After numerous years and hardships which depleted the entirety of his fortune, Braggs Seyllin finally struck gold—literally—with TLXX-01, the Federation catalog name of the system which would later bear his name. Deep beneath the surface of that cratered wasteland was a treasure trove of natural resources, including an abundance of heavier metals coveted in virtually every manufacturing sector of the cluster.

Undaunted by the steep logistical challenge of harvesting this bounty, Seyllin raised the capital he needed from governments, corporations, and private investors to build his vision of what a mining operation should be: a frontier settlement, run by people operating equipment rather than drones doing all the work on man's behalf. If it were any other world or man, investors would have never accepted the idea. But the abundance of subterranean treasure on TLXX-01 made the effort worthwhile—and Braggs Seyllin was able to deliver not just on his promise to investors, but to the millions of prospectors eventually lured by the opportunity to work and prosper.

Leave it to Federation terraforming expertise to create a living, breathing world beneath the surface of an inhospitable planet. In the mined excavation sites where thick veins of precious ore once lay, intersecting caverns big enough to house capital ships were now illuminated in gentle cycles with artificial sunlight; water ran in streams and falls throughout a cityscape that was equal parts lush vegetation and stylish living quarters; atmosphere scrubbers worked with the ecosystem to recycle air and push a comfortable breeze throughout the miles of interconnecting city blocks and work centers.

The ambitious subterranean project did as much for the science of transforming worlds as it proved that the mining industry was core to the identity of the nation. In all, four main cities would be constructed: Loadcore, Metal City, Southern Cross, and Valimor. Braggs Seyllin died before the last of these could be completed, but his legacy was already established. At the time of his passing twenty years ago, 8 million people lived on TLXX-01. By the time the planet was rechristened Seyllin I, more than a half billion called those underground caverns home. These were thriving, pulsing cityscapes interconnected by magrail systems that spanned around the entire planet. Peak production for most of its natural resources was fast approaching, but the economic and cultural significance of Seyllin to the Gallente Federation would last long after the last chunk of ore was recovered.

Until now, this had been the expectation.

Access points for each of the main cities littered the surface of Seyllin I. The most common of these were spaceports, which allowed dropships to transfer passengers and cargo within the safety of shielded containment fields. The planet hosted several space elevators for heavy freight, but these could only be operated at night due to the extreme daytime temperatures. Just beneath these access points was a network of operational support structures, all filled with people like the researchers in the Cassandra monitoring site, elevator freight cargo masters, dropship mechanics, and thousands of others.

On the daytime side of Seyllin I, these individuals witnessed a bright flash, then had perhaps a fraction of a second to notice an alarming rise in temperature and hear the sizzling sound of air molecules blown apart by subatomic particles. Those inside surface observatories, such as Dr. Garcia and her colleagues, caught fire immediately and lived just long enough to realize it before their hearts stopped beating.

Those at deeper depths were more shielded and thus wouldn't immediately feel their bodies being penetrated and ruined by the invisible onslaught. Instead, a curtain of dread would fall over them as the electronic systems supporting their lives—including those which provided access to the surface both here and on the night side of the planet—suddenly ceased.

Theirs would be the irony of being trapped in the dark, when somewhere above them the hottest sun in the cosmos was hurling radioactive fire upon them.

"This is no ordinary flare," the CONCORD representative stated. "That much material being thrown off is characteristic of a supernova, only there isn't enough of it to suggest that a total collapse is imminent. But the ejected plasma is following this new magnetic field at incredible sublight speeds."

"So what you're saying is that we're going to lose Seyllin...*completely*."

"As it exists today? Yes."

The President clasped a hand over his chin, rubbing absently.

"How much time before..."

"Less than five hours. *If* everything else remains the same."

Souro Foiritan stared ahead towards someplace far from where he was. His eyes were glassy; there may have been just half a drop quivering atop a tear duct. A few moments passed before he spoke again.

His voice, though, was strong.

"We keep this between us. Not one word about what's going to happen, not even to rescue crews. We'll call them back in as soon as you nail down zero hour. We can...save more people this way."

"If that's your decision, we respect it. But as you know, SCOPE is a technically proficient organization which is quite adept at—"

"Take whatever discretions you need," Foiritan growled, looking towards Mentas Blaque and holding his stare for a moment. The Black Eagles commander gave an imperceptible nod before leaving the room without saying a word.

"We'll do what we can from our end to keep them quiet," the president said.

He paused again.

"If you were down there, would you want to know the end of the world was coming?"

The image flickered, and shadows flashed each of the men standing in the room. The CONCORD official never changed his expression.

"Mr. President, if I was on Seyllin right now, I would think it had ended already."

The dropship pilot pushed the throttle all the forward. The cockpit began to rattle as the instrument panel erupted with red warnings.

"We're too heavy!" the loadmaster shouted through the intercom. "We gotta shed weight—"

"*Strap yourself in and shut up,*" the pilot snapped, willing his craft upwards. He could feel the seat beneath him tremble as the craft's twin engines spewed white-hot plasma against the spaceport landing pad. "She's got more than this, I know it..."

Three hundred survivors were crammed into the back, nearly half a ton heavier than the maximum weight that the Federation Pegasus-class dropship could handle for a planet with Seyllin's mass. The military variant was equipped with enough thrust to put less than half as many troops in full combat gear into a hot zone with 1.0 G conditions. Now it was carrying a hold full of screaming victims from the pulse event at Seyllin, plus all the life support systems needed to keep them alive. Most of the victims had horrific burns, some with their clothing fused directly into the skin. This batch had been transported by one of the few magrails still functioning on the daylight side of the planet and pushed to the front of the evac queue. All of them were violently sick, having been exposed to deadly levels of radiation ejected from the system's blue sun.

The pilot could see dozens of dropships orbiting the installation near this spaceport; his instruments were tracking even more than he couldn't see. Local tower control was completely overwhelmed—most of the pilots were either relying on broadcast telemetry from carriers overhead, or on their own skill and vision to avoid collisions. All of them were jockeying position to land, take on survivors, and get off as quickly as possible. And though he hadn't seen it himself, he heard that the daytime side of Seyllin I was unapproachable, limiting the number of sites where evacuations could happen at all.

Audio warnings foretold of engine failure as the Pegasus strained just a meter over the pad. His loadmaster was shouting a litany of panicked obscenities that in different circumstances might have sounded comical.

Keeping one eye on an external camera display, he reached up and flipped two switches on a console; the mounted gun pods on the dropship's nose and wingtips were jettisoned and fell to tarmac. The craft began climbing quickly as his instruments confirmed that the craft still maintained structural integrity and would survive an ascent into space.

He was barely clear of the spaceport when another dropship nestled into the pad, staying clear of the discarded bubble turrets. Even though it was night, the surface of the sprawling spaceport was shimmering in heat. From the IR vision in his helmet visor, it looked like the surface of hell.

The Pegasus accelerated upwards. And as soon its hold was cleared, it was going to return for more survivors.

"Every affected system had a Type-O star," the scientist stated. "And it appears that every single one of them had an identical event."

President Foiritan was beside himself. "'Identical'? Where else is the loss of life so high—"

"Seyllin was the only world with a notable population," the advisor muttered. "Blue-star systems tend to be devoid of surface life, it's just too—"

"Get to the point!"

The scientist blushed. "The point is...it's not over yet. This main sequence anomaly was just the beginning, but it...was set into motion by something else, something connected to those subspace bursts. It triggered a chain reaction that we're struggling to understand...it's as if the fabric of time and space itself has been wrenched from beneath us."

The scientist's hands were trembling, but he had earned the attention of everyone in the room.

"Alright," the president said, calmly. "Spell it out for us, but quickly."

In a futile attempt to calm himself, the scientist inhaled deeply before starting.

"Three other systems besides Seyllin reported multi-frequency burst activity just prior to the solar event. All of it was high-energy, electromagnetic radiation, the kind of energy released in massive stellar events, but...each location is spread across the cluster, and...there are probably more locations than we know about now..."

Prominent beads of sweat had formed below the memory implants in the scientist's brow as the weight of the Federation's highest authorities bore down on him.

"Go on..." the president said.

"We've detected multiple instances of point-defect turbulence in systems unaffected by these main sequence anomalies."

"Wait," Foiritan interrupted. "What's a point-defect—"

"Wormholes," the scientist said. "The first naturally occurring wormholes since the collapse of the EVE gate."

"No matter how hard I try," Empress Jamyl said softly, her clothes drenched with perspiration. "Death follows me everywhere I go."

Caretaker drones gently helped her sit upright in the bed of her chambers. Servants no longer looked after her when she confronted her demons. Lord Victor ended the practice not for concern of their safety, but to keep her private affairs as far from the public eye as possible.

"We won't know the full extent of the damage for some time," he said, taking a flask of water from the drone and handing it to her. "You're sure the Sansha weren't a target of your adversary?"

"No more than Seyllin, or the Great Wildlands, or anywhere else this catastrophe has stricken," she said, accepting the water and downing it. "Yet even this is nothing compared with what is to come."

Victor raised an eyebrow. The Sansha were always a prime surveillance and acquisition interest for Imperial intelligence. Their advances in cybernetic technology provided the live realization for the kinds of medical experiments that Amarrian scientists could only dream of. The Sansha have long known that they were being watched, and that errant ships had been captured and dissected by Victor's own men from time to time. He wondered if the Empire would be blamed for the destruction of one of their worlds.

"They won't," Janyl answered, hearing Victor's thoughts as if they were her own. "They don't mourn their dead the way we do. And besides..."

A drone extended an arm to help her stand. It was a strange sight, seeing a woman this physically strong rely on a machine just to stand on her feet. "...they'll be looking in the same direction as us for answers: far, far away from New Eden."

Lord Victor watched as she moved away from the drone on her own power, one burdened step at a time.

"I'm getting closer to understanding this," she said. "I wish Marcus could see what the empyreans are about to discover. His work would be vindicated."

"My lady, I don't understand..."

"You don't need to," she said, waving him away. "Just thank your God that Amarr was spared from this."

"You must do *exactly* as I say," the SCOPE editor breathed, looking hurriedly over his shoulder. "Take this and publish it as-is. Don't wait for confirmation from the others, just do it."

The press intern sounded unsure of himself. "Umm, sure. Where, though—"

"*Listen to me,*" the editor snapped, loud enough to draw the attention of several fans as he pushed his way through the crowd. The station promenade was packed for the regional skyball playoffs, but the mood was more subdued than usual as word of the crisis unfolding in Seyllin spread.

The editor was under no delusions that he could escape his pursuers by coming here. He hoped only to slow them down, and that this intern could do what he asked before they got to him as well.

"Push this report directly into the international feeds. Bump everything else off the queue, this takes flash priority. Do you understand?"

"Flash priority? Sheesh, I don't have the clout to do that—"

An unruly fan bumped shoulders with the editor, spinning him halfway around. His heart stopped beating for a moment.

"You've been authenticated to send flash..."

He could see them: three men, in black coats. The crowd was separating for them.

"Millions of people are counting on this. Send that broadcast before it's too late for them...."

"Okay, umm, I'm in the system, and the flash with your ID is queued. Confirm it?"

"Ye—!"

Thankfully, the explosion of pain in his lower back was short lived, as the motor functions in everything from his neck down simply froze. He saw himself collapse awkwardly—the impact probably did physical damage, but he felt nothing. The attack had come from behind; *probably a z-stick*, he thought, watching the Black Eagles reach out to confiscate his earpiece and datapad.

He could tell they weren't being gentle with his incapacitated carcass as they dragged him back through the promenade. They would fabricate a charge against him, but couldn't hold him for long. Blaque and his cronies would face a barrage of protests and legal threats for imprisoning SCOPE reporters, and they were fully aware of it.

Which means the ends must justify the means.

There is no question that Seyllin is doomed. And people have a right to know that.

The editor hoped the message was delivered to the world like he asked, and wondered why doing the right thing was always so difficult.

"We don't know where they lead," the scientist continued. "Or, what we'll find once we're there."

For the first time since the crisis began, President Foiritan began to face the cruel possibility that what was unfolding could somehow be larger than what had happened at Seyllin.

"Warships can enter our sovereign space from them?"

"Yes. And though we can't predict where they'll appear, we can say with reasonable confidence that their stability will be affected by the mass that passes through them."

"Capital ships?"

"Possibly. But not an entire fleet."

"Not an entire fleet," the president repeated, pacing back and forth. "But, say, a pack of cloaked Marauders, using a direct portal between Luminaire and New Caldari—"

"Or between Luminaire and a system that's not even in this cluster."

President Foiritan straightened his posture. His face was gaunt, but he kept his demeanor rigid.

"Admiral Ranchel, how agile is your fleet deployment along the Border Zone?"

The voice, carried by speakers in the office walls, was loud enough to be heard in the hallway outside. "The strength of our defenses won't be compromised so long as the frequency of wormhole appearances is consistent. As far as location goes, if we can scan it, we can kill it. But we would never pursue a retreating force, not without assurances of where our assets will wind up."

"Very well. How many have we rescued from Seyllin?"

"Just over half a million."

Everyone in the room saw the color leave Souro's face.

"The limited number of landing sites makes it difficult," Admiral Ranchel added, his voice subdued. "Given the amount of time remaining, we might be able to double that figure. But not much more than that."

No one said a word. The president stood, surrounded by his closest advisors, completely helpless to do anything more.

"Keep doing the best you can," he said. "Have you—"

The Chief of the Federation Intelligence Office spoke abruptly.

"Mr. President," she gasped. "Mentas was too late."

"Wave off and turn back! Wave off or you're a dead man!"

For the third time, the Pegasus was hovering just meters over the landing pad. Its pilot could see people rushing the gantries, trying to get into the spaceport's boarding area.

"We're out of time!" his carrier dispatch screamed.

His mind wandered as the craft hung in the balance between life and death. Someone in that throng of people had surely given up his place to let a wounded man onto the last dropship that

would ever touch down on Seyllin. Someone's act of kindness in the midst of a terrible nightmare would be his noble end.

That person was right there, so close to where he was.

"For God's sake, you're going to get left behind!"

Without his conscious approval, his hand pulled back on the stick. The dropship was responsive, eager to fly to the carrier above, and then away from the approaching wall of fire that would bring about the end of the world. The hold was empty, save for a single loadmaster standing among rows of empty seats covered with the blood and gore of those whom fortune or kindness had spared. As though fleeing for its own life, the Pegasus turned its back on the damned souls of Seyllin and hurled away, its lone pilot's eyes moist with tears.

The planet of Seyllin I perished, as did dozens of other worlds—some in New Eden, and some that no person in recorded history would ever know about. The intentions of Antar and Kotan were irrelevant now, as the universe of their origin had changed so fundamentally that it would probably be unrecognizable to them. Neither man could have imagined that the consequences of their actions would be so widespread, or that evil could triumph so decidedly over the powers of good.

The civilizations of New Eden would mourn for those who were lost, and then search in earnest for the reason why they died. But they would not look amongst the burnt cinders of shattered worlds.

They would search for answers by passing through tears in the fabric of space, and venturing towards the unknown.

In the Pits

In New Eden there was now a war, and in this war the capsuleers duked it out in the darker parts of space, and in those parts where lawlessness reigned there followed the capsuleers like remoras a type of people who would pick off the tattered remains like scraps of flesh from a rapidly calcifying bone.

They had reached Adek's mining station and torn through everything. He was running so fast his lungs burned with the effort.

Most parts of the colony were blessedly empty, its inhabitants having fled the war zone for fear of capsuleers. And just when those who remained had been getting a handle on running the colony with a skeleton crew, the scavengers had arrived; a small team of pirates using the capsuleers' presence as cover to strip the colonies of all useable hardware.

The thieves had been clever. They'd detonated several surface explosives before even venturing into the station, causing several colony sections to collapse or decompress. The explosives had been full of high-reaction incendiary gas that had eaten into the oxygen onboard the colony. The crew that hadn't died from fire or structural collapse had choked to death, clawing at their throats. The brave few survivors who had tried to bar the pirates' entry in the boarding areas had been killed on the spot, burned and shredded beyond recognition by the invaders' lasers.

Adek rushed to one of the emergency chambers and fitted himself inside a spacesuit. It was a clunky thing that would slow him down, but he had no idea where he was going, and it might involve one of the airless locales. He glanced up at a monitoring screen that scrolled through the few rooms still in use, but quickly averted his gaze. It showed him nothing but death.

He moved on in a delirium of fear, and a few airlocks later fell to a choking halt, his legs refusing to hold him up any longer. He lay on the ground for entirely too long, eyes shut tight, expecting at any moment to feel his skin burst and split under the unyielding glare of the scavengers' lasers.

When nothing happened, he risked a small peek and found that he'd made it to the Pits.

This was a vast cavern, full of dark and echo. The center portion of its circular floor was a giant gaping maw, a sheer drop many storeys down with sharp rocky outcroppings on all sides. Those outcroppings in turn were pitted with large holes, each of which had a solid metal covering. The floor around Adek was dotted with mining and excavation equipment, with everything from pickaxes and miniature mining lasers to multijointed MTACs with surface cling abilities.

This was the heart of the operation. The Pits' metal core was the first thing that had shown up on surface scanning back when the asteroid was being settled, and it remained the main source of the colony's ore output. But the rock was a fickle thing. Many of its tunnels, cracks and crevices led directly to empty space outside, and more than one exploring miner had perished before they'd managed to block off all the holes and properly oxygenate the place. Each of these dangerous exits was covered with an automated shaft lid. They could be opened remotely on

those occasions where a brave employee was willing to spelunking, hooked onto a rescue line or strapped into an MTAC, but as the entire Pits area had to be evacuated first, this was rarely done.

Adek crawled towards the edge.

They'd be coming here soon. They had been murdering their way through each section of the colony, clad in combat gear and armed with laser guns, and sealing off the parts of their passage to prevent anyone from getting around them or backtracking.

When a laser weapon fires at human flesh, what happens is a sizzling, bubbling explosion. He'd seen the results on the monitors.

It really was a long way down. If a body went over the security railing and jumped with all its might, it might clear the safety nets and the outcroppings below and plunge straight to the bottom. The result would be an instant death, not painless but near enough compared to a solid-state laser beam bursting through one's chest. The covered holes in the depths of the Pits looked like pocked flesh, burnt to cinders. Adek thought he might vomit in his suit.

He rolled onto his back and waited for the inevitable. He tried to empty his mind, but it kept returning to the holes in the rock, and to the scavengers rushing in. Entrances and exits. In the haze of adrenaline and quiet fear he imagined them rushing into the Pits, running right over him and going out the tunnels, into empty space.

He blinked.

All roads led to the Pits. No matter where the invaders were, they would eventually find their way here. It was the most important part of the colony, for if something were to go wrong here, either with the equipment or the place itself, it would be much harder to contain and correct than in any of the smaller, sealed-off corridors that snaked their way through the rest of the base.

Adek rolled onto his stomach again and stared into the Pits. There were several tunnels down there, shut and sealed off, that he knew led straight into space.

A small, stupid hope arose in his mind. It was so faint that he did not even dare acknowledge it. Instead, he got up and walked up to the nearest MTAC, a metal skeleton used for heavy-duty mining work. He activated its wireless controlling unit and grabbed its remote, then rushed to the corridor that led to the Pits' control area.

Even though the entire area was still quite well oxygenated, he kept his suit on. He made his way to the elevator and took it upstairs, counting the seconds it took him to arrive. He stepped out and into the central control room, whose windows overlooked the entirety of the Pits. Its functions were focused almost solely on this core of the colony, but there were a few concessions to life outside the Pits, mainly in the form of activity detectors. If the doors that connected outlying colony sections were put into use, it would show up here.

Adek keyed in his security code and sounded a general alarm. Klaxons blared in the Pits and computerized voices called out danger. Immediately, he saw increased activity of movement that steadily crept closer to his area. The scavengers were coming.

He waited and watched through the windows above, feeling entirely too calm.

When they finally came, little figures trickling in through the doors far below, he detached his facemask, turned off his oxygen flow, ran to a corner in the room and vomited so hard he thought he'd torn something inside himself.

As soon as he could, he stumbled back to the control desk. The intruders were moving about in the Pits, trying to figure out the source of the problem. Adek checked the motion detectors and saw a couple more blink. Two more men entered the Pits right after, and the detectors fell silent. They were all there.

Adek's stomach lurched.

Everyone who ever worked in the Pits learned the override sequence. There was only one, and you hoped you would never in your life have to use it.

He keyed it in. Down in the Pits, metal shutters clanged down and shut off every single entrance to the area. Adek imagined the noise they'd have made, but the echoing blare from the klaxons drowned out all other sound. The intruders looked around in panic, hefting their lasers at dark crevices. Adek said a silent thanks to whoever had thought to set the control room so high, outside of their view.

There was another sequence that allowed you to open the holes in the Pits, but it wouldn't work on its own. All it would do was disengage the regular locks, but if the Pits had gone into lockdown mode the holes wouldn't open automatically.

Unless one had an agent on location, as it were. Adek hefted his MTAC remote.

Before the astonished eyes of the murderous intruders, one of the MTACs lurched into action, walked past them, broke through the security railing and launched itself into the Pits.

It landed in the security net, cut its way through and ended up on one of the ledges below, a drop that took several seconds but was still well above the final pit. The ledge it lay on led to one of the blocked tunnels.

The MTAC walked from the precipice over to the sealed tunnel, hefted a limb armed with a mining laser and started burning through the door.

It took a while, and to their credit the intruders didn't take long to kick into action. Various sections on the MTAC's skeleton blinked under kaleidoscopic laser fire, but the scavengers' weapons were antipersonnel guns and did little to harm the machine. By the time one of them finally ventured into the Pits and started carefully climbing down to the ledge, it was too late.

Adek saw the door give way and set the MTAC to push forward with all its might. It did, the pistons in its metal legs shoving against the rock, and the door slowly crumpled inward under its thrust.

Its journey from here on would be blind, but that was immaterial. Adek called up schematics of this tunnel and saw that it led in a nearly straight line to its crevice point. He set the MTAC to march forward, mining laser held forth, and waited.

By the time the intrepid scavenger had made it down to the tunnel mouth, the MTAC reported resistance. It had reached the wall. Adek forced it forward as hard as he could.

At first there was nothing. The signal from the remote merely blinked off, and for a frozen second of terror Adek thought the machine had broken. Then there was a rumble, as if an animal were waking from its sleep, and Adek saw the intruders scramble for the doors, banging on them and firing with their lasers. He smiled. The MTAC had gone through; the Pits had been ruptured. Space was claiming its own.

As several warnings sounded in the room, of low oxygen, low pressure and critical danger, Adek calmly re-attached his face mask and sealed off his suit. He took one last look out the window and couldn't help but laugh as he saw the vultures clinging pitifully to whatever they could. One or two had lost their grips and were being sucked into the Pits already, to be tossed out into space like refuse.

They all wore suits, though, and once all the air went out of the area, they would be able to move again. He couldn't risk that.

He made his way to the elevators and went down to a storage area on the ground floor, next to the Pits. There was a small squadron of MTACs here, many of whom were outfitted for dead space work. He got into one, checked that the claws on its limbs were in good function, and used its arm to unseal the door into the Pits.

Immediately he felt the drag, as if his body wanted to freefall. The pull was immense. Thankfully, the MTACs claws gripped the floor with ease.

The intruders noticed him, their eyes wide with shock and anger, but the few that remained were no threat. Most suits had emergency wire loops that let you lasso yourself to some fixed spot, and a few of the intruders had managed this. Unfortunately for them, their weapons hadn't been fixed in the same way, and all they could do was flail madly as Adek approached.

He raised his machine hand, and he cut through their wires.

Most of them panicked and some visibly screamed inside their masks. One or two even refused to tumble away and instead grabbed on to the mechanical arm, where they clung on for dear life. He bashed them against the wall until they broke or let go.

Before too long, it was over. Adek was alone. He marched his MTAC back through the empty Pits and into the control section, closed it and sealed it, and got as far as the elevator entrance before collapsing in tears.

Eventually he hauled himself back up and took the elevator to the top floor, where he entered the control room and inspected the damage from up high.

Everything that had not been nailed down in the Pits was gone, including the intruders. It was as if God had swept his hand over the earth and started anew.

Adek was about to remove his facemask when a motion light lit up.

He froze. It was one door, on the outer rim of the colony. Someone had stayed behind. One of the invaders was alive.

The light lit again, and again, each time a little closer to the control room.

This was the end, Adek thought. Everything was over. The whole world as he knew it would be extinguished.

For no reason other than to have something to do, he cast his view outside his little world, using the control room's scanners to check on traffic elsewhere in the solar system. He discovered that the capsuleers had come. One of them was even tooling around quite nearby.

He considered sending a plea for help, but discounted the idea. You didn't ask the gods of destruction to help you in times of need.

Adek drummed his fingers on the control panel. The gods of *destruction* were here. There was a *god of destruction* outside his colony.

The capsuleers were *hungry* gods, whimsical and easy to anger. And it occurred to Adek that it was, in fact, possible to call on the powers of the gods. One merely needed to present a worthy sacrifice.

The little part of his mind that had cut the wires down in the Pits now took over again. He typed out a message and set it to general broadcast. It wouldn't reach far, for the colony had only limited transmission rights, but if he were lucky it would reach far enough. He keyed it to send, then checked the motion sensors. The scavenger was approaching fast.

Adek swiftly resealed his helmet and fled the control room, running down a different corridor that would lead him to the emergency supplies warehouse. From there he would be cut off, with no escape routes and no way back to the colony proper. He'd be a rat in a cage.

He reached the warehouse and immediately sealed its door. It wouldn't hold back a man with a laser, at least not for very long, but then, nothing would last for very long, one way or another.

Adek searched quickly until he found an interstellar transport container. This one was as large as an empty house, cold and austere. He unsealed one of its entry points, pulled it open and entered. It was freezing cold inside, but his suit would protect him from the worst. He sealed the door from the inside, found his way over to the personnel transport section, strapped himself in and waited.

He imagined the progression of events. By now the intruder might have found his way to the control room, where he would see the message being broadcast to the capsuleer. Even if the intruder shot the control board to bits, the message would continue to be relayed. It was a summons to the capsuleer, announcing that the station had been overrun with hostile pirates and that he was to destroy the place, rescue its precious cargo and get out before being swarmed by enemy forces.

It wasn't a total lie, Adek reasoned to himself. He was very precious cargo. There was only one of him.

There was a muted hissing noise in the distance. The intruder was making his way through the warehouse doors.

Adek closed his eyes, breathed deeply and prayed.

Before too long, the hissing noise was overtaken by a rumbling tremor. The container, which must have weighed a ton, began to shake. The noise rose to deafening levels. Explosions sounded somewhere in the distance.

Adek prayed.

The gods were coming.

Scars

"You're all right. Come on, take my hand. There you go. Let's get you up."

The world was still spinning on strange axes. Olaer couldn't see well enough to find his bearings. Colony lights were dim at this hour, to keep the inhabitants sedate. It hadn't worked.

Someone had helped him to his feet and now had their hands wrapped around his shoulders. "Can you stand?" the person said. It was a young voice.

Olaer, who was not young, nodded and set his feet. He felt the hand lift gently off him.

"Thank you," he said. He swayed a little, but remained upright. "What is your name?"

"Yane," the young voice said.

Olaer turned to look, and focused as hard as he could. His guardian was a Thukker, like himself. Olaer could not remember seeing him on the space colony, but in Thukker places this was perfectly normal. Their people were travelers.

They were in the Great Wildlands, home of the Thukker Tribe and current sanctuary for those Starkmanir and Nefantars who had fled or been freed from Ammatar and were waiting to be let into the Minmatar Republic proper.

In the meantime, the refugees waited here, guests in the place Olaer called home, and when they had nothing to do they found something to do. There had been three of them, and they had not been happy to hear what Olaer had to say.

He took a step, tumbled, and nearly fell on his face. Yane's hands grabbed his shoulder again and pulled him gently upright.

"Alright," Yane said. "enough of that. Do you live nearby?"

"My name ... my name is Olaer," he replied. It felt important he establish this.

"Well then, Olaer. Home?"

"Not that close," Olaer said. It wasn't too far off, either, but in his current state he doubted he could even cross the street unaided, let alone get home without collapsing from exhaustion. He did not intend to have anyone carry him there. He was not that old yet.

"Then we're going to my place so you can catch your breath," Yane said. "I live right over there." He pointed towards a window on the other side of the street. "Lucky that I heard the trouble. People don't help others out much, in this place."

"No, they don't," Olaer said with regret.

"So what happened?" Yane said.

Olaer gently rubbed his side and gingerly stretched his feet. He was sitting in the apartment's only chair. The adrenaline cloud had evaporated, giving way to piercing rays of pain from his battered body.

"I told them who they were," Olaer said.

He looked around. The apartment was dark and bare. It was all one room, lit with a single bulb in the ceiling, with no internal walls and no apparent source of entertainment except for a bunch of metallic-looking blocks in one corner. Beside his chair there was a desk, a metal alloy like everything else on the colony, and on the desk there was an old-model datapad good for little more than reading and touch-screen writing. There wasn't much here to evince a personality, good or bad. But the man had saved him.

"And who were they?" Yane said. He was young, probably in his late twenties, and looked extremely strong. He carried himself like a man wearing heavy armor.

Olaer decided to take the plunge. "Traitors. Traitors and leeches."

Yane raised his eyebrows. "Did you say that to them?" he asked with a wide grin. "No wonder they beat you."

Olaer waved his hand, "No, no. Not like that, at least. They were being loud and obnoxious, and I was doing my nightly walk in the fresh air. Their behavior so annoyed me that I told them they'd be better off doing an honest day's work than keeping people up on the colony. So they crossed the street and, well, I had a moment to regret my old mouth shooting off one last time."

"Why traitors?" Yane asked.

"Thukkers who are moving to the Republic lands. *Settling*," he spat the word, "and finding some stability, whatever that means in the Thukker head. The Starkies and Nefs, I'll grant, had little choice but to come here, even if I wish they'd have retained enough of their dirty slave roots to help us with our business. But I've no patience for a Thukker who doesn't want to be one. I hope I haven't offended you, in case you're moving as well," he said, leaning back in his chair and gently rubbing his hands. "I've had my share of beatings for the night."

Yane grinned. "It's fine. This ain't much of a home, as you can tell. I'm a crewman on a Thukker ship, and I spend most of my time out in space. I ain't settling anywhere. Besides," he added, "I've kept an eye on the new guys, and I don't like them. At all."

The old man, relieved, said, "I agree. And I generally tend to like people. I don't mind these guys for who they are or what they've done, and I'd never say no to someone's second chance. But

you've got to *make* something of it. Not just run, then expect someone else to solve all your problems."

"Didn't used to be like this, I guess," Yane said.

"No, it didn't. People knew who they were and what they were capable of, and even the most rootless of meatheads in the Tribe had enough sense to act like real men, *and* enough strength to be criticized without turning into monsters."

"The Thukkers that moved to Republic lands, they've gotten soft and weak," Yane said, and Olaer wasn't sure which of them was echoing the other's thoughts. "Nefantars are either arrogant or kissassy, and the Starkmanirs are just ... well, they're simply stupid. You try to talk to them and all you see in their eyes is your own reflection, staring back at you."

The old man said, "And I don't like talking about people like that-" He sent a stern look to Yane, who had the decency to look away, "-But sometimes you *can* generalize. These poor people haven't been properly integrated. And they should be sensible enough to keep their mouths shut, their eyes open and their hands in their pockets until they learn the new ways. Your past should strengthen you, not be an anchor or a cloak."

Yane nodded. "Did you know the Amarrians, even though they ban full-body cloning, permit you to be regrown? That's weakness. That Aritcio guy they cut up, he's now back in the game, all nice and pretty. They should've let him be like he was at the end. Shredded. Let it strengthen him. They shouldn't have rebuilt him the way he did."

"You think he would be the same as he is now, if they had?" Olaer asked.

"I think he'd be honest, to himself and others. And he'd have an image that would keep people on their toes. You don't say no to the scars."

Something in his voice raised a flag in Olaer's mind, but he left it for the time being. He looked around and said, "Looks like a typical Thukker apartment. You don't have any problems saying no, I can see. What're those metal things in the corner?"

Yane laughed. "I'm not here very often, and they're weights. There's magnetism in them, or something like that, so you can put them together or take them apart." He demonstrated, taking two metal blocks and holding them up to one another. They grabbed on with a clang. Yane let go with one hand, letting the blocks hang perpendicular from the other. He grabbed hold again, twisted the blocks slightly, and they detached.

"Simple, clean and definite," Olaer said.

"Damn straight," Yane said. "When I'm here, I weightlift as much as I can, often to the point where I can't even hold my pen."

"So you write as well?"

"When my hands stop shaking, yeah," Yane said with a shyish grin. He walked over to the desk and picked up the pen and pad, then started slowly pacing the room, scribbling aimlessly on its surface. "I like to keep them in use. Keep moving."

"Do you write a lot?" Olaer said. It felt important, though he couldn't say why.

"Yeah, actually I do. About anything, really. And we agree on the immigrants, by the way," he added. "I don't mean to be insulting when I talk about them, and I definitely don't hate my own people. But I think you and I, we agree. We're approaching the same destination, maybe just from opposite directions."

Olaer looked at him and at the pen in his hands.

"What do you see?" Yane asked. He came to a stop by the weight blocks.

"I should be seeing the weightlifting, because it fits you. That pen should stick out like an eyesore in this barren image of power you project. If I were a foolish man who did not pay attention to my surroundings and the people around me - like I believe some of the new arrivals do, though not all of them by far - I would think it strange that someone who clearly lives for the strength, and projects this kind of image, would be writing at all."

He stood up, grateful that his legs didn't complain, and walked over to Yane. "But I don't find it strange. Because you're the opposite. You're a thinking man clad in an exterior of strength and an aura of bullishness. Why?"

Yane gave him a strange, long look. He walked back to the desk and put away the datapad, then rested his hands on the back of the chair, his back to Olaer. He sighed.

"My family travelled," he said. "Sometimes for business, and sometimes to escape trouble. One trip, we were on the run and only found port in a dark colony that catered to bad people. It was hard times and we had to make our stay there, no matter who else was in that place. You know how much politics matters when you're a kid in a strange place? Nothing."

He turned to face Olaer, and said in a voice overlaid with glass strength, "And I met this Amarr girl. She was with her own family of missionary businessmen. We were ten. Stupid puppy love."

He reached out without looking and picked up the pen from the datapad, hefted it in his hand like a spear. "And then my parents found out. They and everyone else. Like I said, it was dark times."

Olaer's mouth felt dry. "What did they do to you?"

In a voice that sounded like he was talking as much to himself as anyone in the room, Yane said, "I am going to show you something I have not shown to many."

He took off his shirt and turned. The single light reflected off the destroyed skin on his back. The scars ran so deep it was as if they had penetrated to the bone. In the glare they reminded Olaer of ridges in a valley of fire; like lines on the eye of the sun, brighter than bright.

"What happened to you?" he whispered.

"I was rebuilt. The Thukker way."

Olaer had to lean against a wall. For a while there was silence in the room, and the old man listened hard for the quiet noise of the night outside, if only to remind himself that civilization still existed.

"What do you write?" he said at last.

Yane nodded, as if the old man had confirmed something. "Whatever I need to get out of my head," he answered.

Olaer took a breath, thought for a moment, then ambled over to the weights. He ran his finger over one of the blocks. It was cold, and its scratches and discoloration spoke of heavy use. "When you're not saving defenseless people from the attentions of the mob."

Yane's gaze narrowed. "Yes."

"Have you risen above your past, you think?"

"Yes." The word came out like a whip.

"You mentioned Aritcio. You clearly keep an eye on him."

"I pay attention to politics," Yane said.

"What are the five houses of Amarr?"

"Ardishapur, Kor-Azor, Sarum obviously, Tash-Murkon and Kador."

"What was the name of the assassinated second-in-command of the Caldari State?"

Yane stared at him.

Olaer nodded, and hobbled back to the chair. His legs really were starting to hurt. He sat down and rubbed his shins.

"Your attentions are quite focused, young man," he said. "Narrowly, even." He took a deep breath. "Sounds to me like you haven't entirely let go."

The light reflected off the young man's scars. Olaer realized he hadn't witnessed what happened to the assailants. He had heard someone intervene, under the beatings and his rapidly fading consciousness, and when he awoke they were all gone. It seemed like it should matter.

"I don't know what you're thinking, but you're wrong," Yane said in a dead tone.

"I think you're very lonely," Olaer said. He got up to his feet and made his way over to Yane. He raised his hand to lay it on the young man's shoulder, but Yane said, "Don't," without meeting his gaze.

Olaer sighed and walked away, slowly and carefully, out the door and into the night.

All These Lives are Fit to Ruin

This was a hospital. That much was certain.

Parien, lying in a soft bed, had been slipping in and out of consciousness. Sometimes there had been people in here, talking in low tones and checking on the machines that stood next to his bed. Everything was white. The machines had fuzzy outlines, though that might have been his own eyes. There were tubes everywhere, gossamer strands affixed to his body like he was a string puppet at rest.

Whispered words had drifted into earshot. "Accident" was one. "Battleship" was another. And "capsuleer", though even the whispers seemed to find themselves too loud at that, as if wishing they could emit the word in such a hush as would exist only in pure silence.

At one moment Parien closed his eyes for barely a second, but when he opened them again he saw a man towering over him.

"My name is Silat Enfour," the man said, in a tone that implied this was both grand news and something Parien should have known all along. "You are going to give me answers, crewman."

Parien tried to say something but found his voice had dried up. There was a small hiss, and the parched skin in his throat suddenly felt softer.

"That was the rehydrator," Silat said. "It monitors your needs and applies chemicals based on what your body is trying to do, the less to damage it when you first apply your underused or fragile flesh. You had a nasty turn, Parien. A lot of people did not survive the cataclysm you went through."

Silat leaned in closer and said in a dark tone, "I certainly didn't."

"What can I do for you, sir?" Parien said, his voice raspy and frail despite the rehydrator.

The capsuleer took out a small datapad and inspected its screen for a while, ignoring Parien. At last, still not looking at him, he said, "Do you know me, crewman?"

"No, sir." Parien said. "But I know your name."

The capsuleer gave a mirthless smile at that. "And what does that name mean to you?"

"You are the captain - you *were* the captain - of the Arc of Defiance," Parien said. His throat stung. "The battleship-class vessel. That I served on. Sir."

"Which makes me...?"

"A capsuleer." This was the first time Parien had seen the captain, or any other capsuleer for that matter. He found himself hoping the man would turn around at some point so Parien could see

the neural socket supposedly embedded in his neck. It was a strange, silly and stupid hope, and thus seemed entirely appropriate to the situation.

"What was the Arc's last mission?"

"You took us into deadspace. Word had it you'd found another ancient gate that led to some ruins."

"Some ruins."

"Some ruins now occupied by Gurista forces, sir," Parien said. "I expect your aim was to empty them of their valuables."

"Do you presume to know my thoughts?"

"I doubt anyone does, sir," Parien said, regretting it immediately. The words were an insult, and only his weak voice with its supplicant tone carried it through with apparent acceptance on the capsuleer's part.

The capsuleer stepped closer and leaned in slightly, regarding Parien with the kind of gaze one would a backwards student. "Do you know why you are here?"

"The Arc exploded, sir. We were ripped to shreds."

"That is what happened, yes. But that is not why you are *here*, in this place, at this time."

"Sir?"

The capsuleer said, in a perfectly even tone, "I have taken it upon myself to pay for your care, for there are some questions I want answered. If the information I get is satisfactory, then you will be released from here soon enough, to meet your family, friends and fellow surviving crewmembers. If they are not, then this-" he pointed at the rehydrator, whose myriad tubes were connected to Parien in places he preferred not to contemplate, "-this will pump something else into your system, and you will be extinguished like a candle. No one will ask any questions. No one will point a finger. The money I'm funneling into the upkeep of this equipment will merely be put to a slightly different use. You will be someone's two-hour overtime of paperwork, and then you will be expunged from this world. Do not disappoint me, crewman."

Parien swallowed. It still stung, but he welcomed the feeling, reminding him as it did that he was still alive.

"What do you want from me, sir?" he said.

"I was in the middle of dismantling the Gurista fleet, and had already targeted their colonial base, when my guns failed to reload. All of them. And as if that wasn't bad enough, my drones decided to develop free will at that precise moment, rocketing off to fight each their separate ship in some

brief, suicidal ballet. I sat there, surrounded by these little Gurista flies with their tiny little poisonous stings, and I was held fast there while they sucked the life right out of me."

Silat began to pace the room.

"When one thing goes wrong, Parien, everything goes wrong. I've learned that, out there. Your guns don't reload, alright. What's going to be next? Oh, it's the drones!" He raised his hands in the air, a mock expression of surprise on his beardless face. "Whatever could be the matter? Nevermind, I'm sure we'll be right as rain from now on. No, hold on! What's this?" Silat lowered his hands and glared at Parien. "Care to guess what went wrong next, crewman?"

Parien closed his eyes and leaned back on his cool, soft pillow, letting it swallow him. "The escape pods."

"The *escape* pods," Silat repeated after him, as if they'd had a minor epiphany. "Not my own capsule, Parien, not right away, though some people with a grudge against me took care of that two systems later. But for the ones on that ship - those six thousand people who worked with you, Parien - those pods didn't even last that long. Do you know how long they lasted, Parien?"

Parien, still lying on the pillow, was quiet. He stared at the ceiling, seeing the capsuleer only out of the corner of his vision. In that faint edge of nothing he saw Silat raise his hand and press something on his datapad.

His throat began to burn. Then his stomach, and his intestines, and his veins and his limbs and his face. He started to cough and thrash, gasping for air while trying to shake off the pain. It was like liquid mercury had been poured into him. He tried to tear out the tubes that stuck out of every part of his body, but either he didn't have the strength or they were simply too well affixed. Through the haze of agony he heard Silat say, "Wherever this path leads, crewman, you will find it much easier to traverse if you go with my guidance. Answer the question."

The burning subsided a little. Parien caught his breath again. He said, "I heard ... I heard that a lot of the pods were destroyed right away. They were buffeted away from the ship when it exploded, but instead of heading off-radar like usual, many of them disintegrated. Not the outlying ones, though, with the crew and the families that had been working on nonessential tasks; those got out safe. It was the edge pods, the ones at the core that can only leave a few seconds before the ship literally falls to pieces."

"The ones where you work," Silat said.

"The ones where I work."

"Your pod survived," Silat added. "So did a few others. But many hundreds of people working in the core of the ship lost their lives that day."

Parien, still waiting for the burning poison to slowly flush out of his veins, did not ask Silat what he cared about the fate of his crew.

"Here is the next question, and you will want to answer it honestly," Silat said. "What did you do to cause this?"

"I ... I ..." Parien began. He fell silent, thought for a moment. "Can I ask a question in return, sir? It'll help me answer your own."

"Do it."

"What possible reason could you have to think that I had anything to do with this terrible, terrible event?"

Silat moved over to Parien's bed. His head blotted out the light, casting his face into shadow. "Because I was suspicious. Because I had your books audited, yours and everyone else's. Because I paid a fortune for every life that survived the Arc's explosion to be canvassed for clues of sabotage, and eventually, as I knew they would, they led me like beacons to you." He took out his silver planner, that instrument of truth and pain, and held it aloft. "Because the Guristas paid you for your work, you little worm."

Parien was speechless, first in amazement, then in agony.

"I disabled the reload procedures."

Parien's senses began to return. He still saw stars twinkling in his vision, and the room spun slowly like a dark grey moon. He was pretty sure he'd crapped himself during one of the pain spasms, but his body was too numb to tell and he didn't dare check; lest he discover a grossly wet patch in the soft white sheets or, even worse, that the gossamer tubes that extended from his body had been installed there as well and taken care of the problem.

He said it again, like a magic ward against more pain. "I disabled the reload procedures. I'd worked the gun section often enough to know how it functioned, and it doesn't take a genius to override them so long as you've got access."

"How did you get access?" Silat asked in a calm tone.

"I used a datakey from a crewmember. He'd been reassigned to drone control and I told him I needed to check up on shell integrity."

"And the disabling?"

"It's easy enough if you've got the timing," Parien said. "If you know what shells are going to be last out and first in, you just damage both of them. Make the last spent shell leave something in the barrels that doesn't get cleaned up properly, and make the first reloaded shell catch on it." Parien took a deep breath. "And before you ask, the drones are even easier."

Silat stared at him for a while. The machines in the room hummed, a faint sound with a throbbing undertone like a heart beating in secret.

At last the capsuleer said, "There wasn't much to be analyzed from the wreckage, nor from the recorded signals that I received in my pod. Some anomalies, but there are always anomalies, and they take you down a thousand paths of guesswork."

He walked around the bed, hefting his silver datapad. "This tells me all there is to tell, but not everything I need to know. A ship is not a ship; it is an incredibly complex collection of activities, bound in constant motion. It is more like an organism than a machine. There are safeguards and more safeguards, but those can't protect you forever. If someone comes along who is inventive and insightful enough - and you were, though you murdered hundreds as a result," Silat said, not with rancor in his voice but with a tired exasperation, as if his student of hope had failed him again, "If someone manages something like that, then it is because they had honestly set themselves to the task. They needed a clarity of vision that is unique to those for whom their task has become their very purpose of being. A life is usually at stake."

Silat looked at Parien, with eyes that had seen more death than Parien ever would, and asked, for whatever reason, "You've said how you did it. Now tell me the why."

"Drugs," Parien said. "I was in deep."

Silat raised the silver device, then hesitated. "You know what this will do."

Parien kept his gaze on the capsuleer. "It was drugs."

Silat made as if to press something on his datapad, then hesitated, sighed, and sat on the chair beside Parien's bed. "If you had been a drug user, you'd never have gotten on my ship. Drugs are part of the eligibility scans I run before you're signed on, and those same scans are continued throughout your service to me. I know that some pilots don't care about that kind of thing, but I do, and I keep a tight ship. If the Guristas had somehow leveraged you into what you did, either to keep your supply line open or to pay back a drug loan, it'd have to mean you were so deeply mired that you were still an active user. And on my ship, under my command, you better learn to hold it in, because a junkie won't even take a single piss without it being checked, analyzed and flagged to the monitoring crew at once. Do you understand this?"

Parien said nothing.

"Do you understand, crewman?" Silat asked again, in an angry tone.

"Yeah. Yes, I understand."

"So drugs had nothing to do with it. Despite that, I know the Guristas were involved, because I have records that show you contacted them well before the crash. That was a mistake on your part. Whatever you were cooking up with these people you managed to keep remarkably secret, except for that one particular message. Even the payment you received from them after the crash

was nigh-on undetectable, with only the barest traces of a connection to your own finances. You would have noticed it, I'm sure, when you started receiving interest notifications on the assets you suddenly had dominion over, but nobody else would have known where to look. If I hadn't been hunting specifically for something like this, I'd never have found it."

Parien, who had not blinked, stared at Silat. He said, "Do you know who sent it? Who within the Guristas organization?"

"You know, that's the one last piece of mystery," Silat said, with poison enthusiasm. "It didn't originate from the Guristas military section. It came from their mining ops people. The colonists."

Parien, unblinking, gazed open-mouthed at his torturer.

"That is the end of my information," Silat said, unheeding of the patient's stunned reaction. "You're working for the enemies now, but I'm quite honestly stumped."

He leaned in again and said, in a whisper, "There is a point where your brain knows it is about to die. Everything passes in a flash, like a dream played at hyperspeed, the whole experience tinted with that quivering fear your subconscious vomits up: That this is the last, this is the end, this is the final run before the infinite nothing. I have been cloned more times than I can recall, and this is the one part of the process that I will never, in my life of lives, get used to. So you come along and bring it on me, along with hundreds of others on my ship; you, with your cottonball mystery, your little life that'll be extinguished with just the hint of a flame, that's light as a speck of dust, and that nevertheless refuses, refuses to unravel."

He leaned back, caught his breath. "I need to know, Parien. There's something hidden here, behind your glazed and bloodshot eyes, and I want it to appear. If I do not get this, then you will not even be permitted to die quietly."

Parien thought about this. He looked at the tubes that snaked out from the machines beside him and led underneath his sheets. He looked at the white room he was in, and even at the soft white pillow he rested on. He looked back at Silat in wonder. "I really am nothing to you, am I? No more than those people who died. Just this one mystery. I bet the money that went into this whole setup could feed a family for a year."

"Your last chance," Silat said. He did not bother to heft the remote.

Parien stared at him. Then he took a deep breath and said, "I was on your crew the day we found the first ancient gate. It took us to a Gurista mining colony that was guarded by their forces. We destroyed those ships, and anyone of theirs who didn't make it into a rescue pod was not a concern of ours. They were pirates, we thought, and deserved no better.

"Then we turned to the colony. It would have been enough to disable the turrets. It really would. And to destroy the military cache that was located at the back of the complex, because that's the only one that held anything you could take. The rest of the place, all it had was people doing

their jobs. But you targeted every building, and you fired the hybrids, and you blew up the colonies with everyone on them, and no escape pods, and nobody having a chance against you. I saw it all, from the core of your ship; me and all the others who were in charge of the reloading, and in charge of the drone control, and when God's hammer came down we were just as much at fault as you.

"Something gave way in me. Some barrier I'd erected came crashing down. I've been a crewman for a long while now, and there was nothing special about this trip. We merely found a good location, destroyed the opposition, erased all that remained on a whim from our pilot, took the loot and got out. It never does matter, when you're on a capsuleer's ship. You go where he takes you. You load and he locks. Whatever's on screen is only in your way. Even a colony full of workers and families, whose sole misfortune was to be on the other side. They forfeit their existence through happenstance. By the sheer dint of falling under the gaze of an immortal and his followers, they do not deserve to live any longer. All these lives, fit for nothing but death and ruin."

Parien stopped, swallowed. The gossamer threads moistened his throat. There was no other sound in the room but the thrumming heartbeat of the machines.

He continued, "I wanted to kill you for it, Silat. But you are just one person, and I didn't think I would ever reach you. If I had the strength right now, and the bravery, I would reach out and I would throttle you.

"But even if I went after you, there would be revenge. My entire family, distant as they may be, and anyone I've ever befriended. They would all die.

"And besides ... you're just the one crazy top of the tree. You're like a child with a toy. I'm not even sure you're all there. Everyone like you is a frightening mystery, not loved. I hope you know that.

"But the people who enabled you, the ones who kept everything running and went out drinking afterwards, bragging about the destruction; the crew I worked with who did not benefit in the slightest from this and *did it anyway*, allowing you your crazy stunts, they were the ones who were truly culpable. They needed to die."

Silat said, quietly, "You know there were many of your crewmembers who had nothing to do with the attack or its mechanics."

Parien closed his eyes, breathed deep, then continued as if there had been no interruption, "When we got in from that mission I felt like a ghost. I talked to some people whom I knew dealt in crime, and I asked that a message be relayed to someone with the Guristas, a person who would know the colony we'd just destroyed and could relay the stupid, empty words I sent them.

"It was an apology, Silat. I sent a brief message telling them who I was and who I worked for, and I said I was sorry. I did not give them any other information, not about my financial accounts, nor about the ship's movements, nor anything else. They must have tracked me, and the

money they paid speaks for itself, but I did not do it for them or anything they could offer. In the end, what happened on the Arc's last trip - and I was supposed to be one of the losses, but I guess my pod didn't break - was simply me, trying to make amends to the world."

Silat sat and stared at him. "So you sabotaged the pods and led the ship to destruction."

Parien nodded.

Silat got up. "I was going to kill you, but that's no longer a role I can play. I should add that if you had truly meant to make amends, you would have ensured you would die in the crash. The fact that you did not may mean something, or nothing. Perhaps you wanted to play a vengeful god. Perhaps you merely wanted to know how it feels to be one of the immortals. I've no interest in finding out."

Parien leaned back on the pillow. "Just end it," he said.

The capsuleer ignored him. "Since you took it upon yourself to be the judge, jury and executioner on the behalf of the Guristas, it's only right and proper that the ones who lost their own loved ones due to your actions get a say in your own fate." He pulled out the silver datapad and entered a message, then said, "So your stay here is at an end. I suggest you start removing those tubes. It'll be painful, but better than what awaits you if you dither."

"What?" Parien said.

"I don't associate much with your kind, but I'm told that spaceship crew are a tough bunch of people. I've just sent the gist of this conversation to one of the crew heads. He doesn't waste time during missions, so I imagine he's already making calls and rounding up people."

Silat put the datapad back in his pocket and headed for the door. Before leaving, he turned to Parien and smiled. "The acolytes are coming, you little god of destruction," he said. "You will want to run now."

And Sometimes the Fear

Lauder was going to die.

A long time ago he'd bought, modified heavily, and inserted an ocular implant that allowed him to function as a module designer despite a crushing depression. It sent him into a conceptualization of his own subconscious, where he could access memory patterns and, increasingly, take refuge. It had worked fine, until one day when it didn't. Everything functioned fine except for the subconscious gateway, which was closed off no matter what Lauder tried.

Medicine had never worked; he felt it dulled his senses. Therapy was out; it had bored him and he'd always given up. The implant had been an engineer's solution, and had served him for a long time, leaving him without need to develop any other coping mechanisms. When it broke, the illness came in with a vengeance, and he saw absolutely no way out while it wrapped him in its black arms.

And at some point - after he'd lost his job, his will to live and most of his basic dignity, living in his filth-ridden quarters on the space station he inhabited - he had a fever dream, wherein he realized that he was going to die and it couldn't be here. It would be giving truth to the path he'd always feared he was on, and would make lie of all those times where he'd told himself that he would be fine if only he went on just one more day. It'd be the last betrayal to himself, and it couldn't happen. He wanted to see something else, and be somewhere else, and feel that he was dying as someone else.

It had to be a place that would fill him up, but not force him to be happy, because happiness would feel fake in his current mindset. A remote location, somewhere he'd never be found, but also somewhere beautiful and static, where he could rest his gaze on the surroundings without participating, giving of himself, or showing appreciation. Somewhere not created by man.

He remembered surveys done on asteroid colonies, back in the days when he'd been working on module upgrades. One in particular had been renowned for its massive caves and even offered expensive zero-gravity spelunking tours, but had reportedly fallen into disuse in recent times: it was out of the way for regular traffic, and the colony on the other part of the asteroid was an unattractive place.

It was perfect.

The tours were still available, and although the suits were strapped into a set route with fiber wire, Lauder had brought some tools with him. He disabled his suit's remote positioning and callback systems, and in one of the food compartments he inserted a concoction that would make him drift off to a peaceful and final sleep.

After taking care of the suit he had a talk with the tour guide, supplemented with a nice, two-part cash bribe. The guard, who was under the impression that Lauder was a rich thrill seeker,

promised to let Lauder in there unmonitored and not worry about him finding his way back out in time, though he said he'd stay on shift for the remainder of the day in case Lauder needed any help. He added that there'd been other people who had wanted a bit of extra excitement when spelunking, but most had turned back the moment they went off the beaten path.

"Why's that?" Lauder asked.

"Some parts of these caves are unstable, and when you cross over to weightlessness and dead space, it can affect you."

"Some misguided need for self-preservation," Lauder said, adding, "Seeing as how they were strapped in, monitored and perfectly safe."

"I suppose so," the guard said. "And sometimes the fear."

"Of what?"

"Whatever they'd find in there." The guard added that the cave inspectors, the ones who'd gone deepest into this complex of caverns, had usually not returned for a second trip, and that some said there was a natural maze in there.

Lauder thanked him for the warning, strapped in, and set off towards the unknown. The starting area, called the Meadows, was pitch black. His suit had an illumination device that would let him see some distance ahead, but he didn't touch it and instead activated the night vision component of his optical implant.

The world lit up. Lauder detached himself from the cable hooks that dotted the walls, and was soon free-floating in the cave, moving in deeper with the force of the tiny thrusters inset in his suit. It was a massive place, and it took Lauder several minutes of movement before he started seeing a hint of the opposite wall. To his surprise he noticed a few clusters of crystals dotting the black rock; he'd assumed the area had been thoroughly mined out before allowing casual tourists. Most of the crystals were greenish of color, with central spines that protruded far into space and smaller crystal fragments that stuck out at right angles from them.

It seemed to him that one cluster of crystals was arranged in a fairly circular fashion around a rock that looked darker than its surroundings. As Lauder moved closer he saw it was an opening, leading to another section of the cave. He sped up, aimed towards it, and nearly knocked himself out when he crashed into the wall at full speed.

Once he'd shaken off the blow, he reached out and started feeling the rock, wondering why he'd seen an opening there at all. With his depression set aside for a precious few moments, he inspected the wall, not only in his immediate surroundings but everywhere he could see. He thought he glimpsed a couple of other entrances, but they were gone when he blinked, and he wondered if his implant was conking out. He hoped it wasn't starting to transfer his mental

constructs over to the real world; merely willing a tunnel into the wall shouldn't make his mind show him one.

He let himself drift around, hovering over the crystals and looking for something else. Ever since he'd entered the Meadows he'd felt sure that he was on the right track, for whatever reason, and he refused to believe that he was supposed to end his journey and his life in the entryway. He eventually came to a blanket of crystals that seemed to cover impenetrable rock. He stared at them, and for a split second the world shifted, as if losing transmission, and showed a gaping hole behind the crystals.

Lauder had no idea what was happening to his vision, but the thought of floating aimlessly here and staring at the crystals forever was too much to bear. He pushed himself away until he had a good starting distance, then used the suit's thrusters to reverse and speed him up, aiming for the wall. He'd picked up a fair amount of speed when he came close, and in the last second he pirouetted, hit the crystals feet first, and stomped on them as hard as he could. He'd assumed he'd be pushed away, but instead he plunged through, crystals shattering in zero-g all around him, and fell into a large, dark entryway to another cave.

This one was less of a proper cavern than a long, vast alleyway, its surfaces beset with sharp, red crystals and with stalactites and stalagmites formed when this asteroid had been part of a planet's gravity. Lauder moved carefully through it, and idly thought that this dark corridor, with its edges and spikes and redness, was a fair representation of how he'd felt when the depression came flooding in. Also, his feet hurt.

The corridor, which was wide enough to room a frigate, went on for a long while, turning occasionally in some direction but never coming to an end. Lauder had begun to wonder if he was judged to wander it forever, never leaving the flow, when he spotted an opening in the wall to his right and headed through it.

He came into a cavern as big as the Meadows, full of massive boulders of worthless ore. Lauder felt very tired. He'd heard such stories about this place, and had felt inexorably drawn to it, and now all he had was a blackened hole no better for dying than his quarters. He looked around and gasped when he saw that the entrance he'd come through had crumbled soundlessly, leaving him with no option but to push on.

He hovered over to one of the smaller boulders, which was the size of several men, with no aim other than perhaps to kick at it, but when he got closer, something didn't feel quite right. He turned on the light source of his suit and pointed it at the rock, and when he saw the red glint, he realized what he was seeing. Among the regular Omber and Pyrox he was seeing veins of Arkonor, one of the most precious ores in the world.

He moved back and marveled at what he was seeing. There was enough Arkonor in this single boulder to make a planetbound man rich beyond his dreams. Lauder had worked enough with capsuleers to be set for life, so he let himself fantasize about someone else finding this cave, processing some of the ore, selling it and, somehow, finding happiness through the riches. It

amazed him that in this nondescript cave, where he'd felt nothing but sorrow and lamentations, there could be something to change a person's life.

After deliberating whether to inspect the other boulders, some of which were so tall that he could barely see where they ended, he decided not to, and instead floated gently among them, seeking another exit on this cave. There must be more than this, he thought.

There was. He found a red-rimmed tunnel that led him back to the original vast hallway, with the red crystals on all sides, but it felt like a part he hadn't seen before. It was like he had traveled through the tributary of a river, and now he flew on, letting it carry him where it may.

A flicker caught his attention, and he moved into another side tunnel. It led him to another cave, as big as the others, that looked as if he were back in winter times on a frozen planet. Everything was covered with ice, massive clear icicles that protruded from every surface like glass blades waiting for a giant's throat. Lauder noticed how some of them were remarkably similar to buildings; they were the same massive sizes as the boulders in the last room, but the structures here had tighter angles and clearer borders. Lauder marveled at it, but felt underwhelmed nonetheless. He'd been hoping for something more than ore and ice, but didn't know what, and felt an undercurrent of anger at himself for thinking so. Of course he'd find these things in asteroids, and little else.

He was about to move on through when he remembered the flicker. He looked around, and saw something in the distance, but it was so refracted by the ice that he couldn't quite tell what it was. He moved closer, navigating among the frozen blades, until he rounded one of them and nearly had a heart attack as a massive ball of fire came towards him. He scrambled and jerked in mid-space, but the fire was extinguished before it reached his body. After catching his breath, Lauder realized that it had traveled alongside a gigantic spear of ice nearby, and had jumped off for a second before losing whatever fuel it had. He wondered if the fire was feeding off oxygen trapped in the ice, and whether the frozen liquid really was water, but nearby flickerings interrupted his train of thought. There was more fire here, writhing and burning, and it undulated over the ice like living danger.

Without thinking, Lauder launched himself towards the fires, trying to catch them as they leapt off their surfaces. It was dangerous and stupid, he knew, and he kept going right until the point where he misjudged a leap and crashed back first into a large, jagged icicle, nearly impaling himself in the process. He managed to roll with the hit, but he heard, or felt, the vibrations on his body that felt half like his bones rubbing together and half like the suit being torn to pieces. The idea of losing everything to a stupid accident shocked him back to carefulness. He decided to leave the fire behind, and looked for an exit, still ignoring the fact that crystalline structures looked more and more like buildings every time he looked at them.

It didn't take him too long to find his way back to the main hall, red and endless, though by then he'd accidentally broken some of the crystals and suspected he might have closed off access to this cave as well. He drifted on, lost in his own thoughts, and nearly missed another opening in the hall. He let himself drift through it, not knowing what to expect, and at first didn't see anything at all except a fuzzy cloud hovering in the cave. It took his eyes a moment to adjust,

and when he realized what he was looking at, it took his breath away. The gigantic cloud was golden cytoseroicin, its aurient shimmering beset with blue crystals that seemed to blink on and off. It wasn't merely the gas itself that stopped him short, but the fact that in its form it approximated some of the memory palaces he'd built for himself in older times. As it morphed and undulated it looked like bungalow, a wooden cabin in the murky swap, a castle with spires reaching towards the cavern ceiling, a series of promontories holding lighthouse spires, on and on and on.

He came to a stop in front of the cloud, which was contained within its own static field in the cave. If there had been gravity, he would have fallen to his knees. It wasn't just his imagination, he was sure of it: He was seeing glimpses of the other world, the one he'd created. Every cave he'd gone through had brought it into sharper focus. He stared at the cloud in wonder. He'd forgotten so much. All these buildings and what they represented were gone, erased from his mind by the malfunctioning implant and the crushing grip of the depression. He felt like he was going to cry.

After a long time catching his breath, Lauder turned away and left the cavern without looking back. Whether the structures had really been there, or if his implant was acting up, he didn't care. On his way out he kicked the red crystals as hard as he could, and they came loose along with a mass of rubble, sealing this cave off for good.

His journey continued, hovering through the red corridor, for so long it felt like he'd traveled forever. He didn't mind that, not any longer. There was something here he hadn't expected, though he didn't understand what it was, nor even whether it was an external thing or merely the product of his own exhausted mind.

And it all came to a crashing halt when he went through one last side entrance and saw, whole and untouched, his entire mnemonic world: every building he had ever conceived of, every pattern he had built, every single memory palace, all of them put together in this massive cave he had entered. He did cry now, felling silent tears that hovered in front of him before sticking to the inside of the suit, because he knew he had lost his mind. This could not possibly be here.

The palaces stood in complete silence, crowded together like building blocks on a mat. They shimmered every now and then, turning almost translucent as the gas clouds had been in the other cave. As Lauder stared, he thought he saw a ripple go through them, and then before his eyes the buildings crumbled. Walls came down, windows exploded, dust billowed out in massive gales, and everything tore itself apart until there was nothing left in sight but rubble, rocks and fallen debris. It should have been like watching a representation of his depression at work, Lauder thought, but it wasn't; it felt cleansing, and rejuvenating for a reason he couldn't quite grasp.

He looked down at the fragments below, lying there for miles around and held down by some ghost of gravity, and noticed that they were changing. From the grey cement rose glinting steel; bent wires undulated and writhed until they had become fiber filaments; and glass shards fused and liquefied, pouring themselves into just-born containers to become lenses and windows.

From the debris rose these parts and came together, linking and connecting in front of Lauder's eyes, turning into something so familiar he could barely comprehend it at first.

Ship modules.

They hovered there in countless numbers, slowly matching up to form even more familiar shapes. In total silence, Lauder saw frigates created by the hundreds, designs from all races hovering side by side. Some of them seemed to explode without destruction, disassembling themselves, their constituent parts realigning with others to create larger vessels, cruisers now, battlecruisers, and even an entire battleship that hovered there in the middle like a rock in a river, the smaller ships orbiting and encircling it.

Lauder floated towards the celestial ships, finally getting a sense for just how massive these caverns were, but the moment he hit one it disassembled, giving way like a pool of water. He expected it to have reassembled behind him, but when he looked back he saw that its parts were realigning themselves into something different, a structure he didn't immediately recognize. He glanced at the other ships and saw they were doing the same, but it didn't take long until he realized what was being created. In front of him, the nearest pieces were forming a side view of his own living quarters, down to the chairs and appliances. He looked around and saw that the quarters had been complemented by the entire machinery that usually surrounded them, and beyond it he could see other quarters, structural components, corridors and houses and processing plants, all the parts of the entirety of a space station that was assembling right in front of him.

It began to dawn on him, in this heart of mechanical creation, that the deeper he'd gone into this place, the further he'd been led from the natural world of rocks, ice and gas, and had instead come closer to the intangible, the man-made and the world he'd known. Or, rather, he thought, the world he had formed for himself; the sphere of reference in which he had existed. That realization alone rendered it unimportant whether any of this was real, for it was no more or less real than his conception of it, and as he'd learned in being driven here, his conception of the world around him was everything. In all the ways that mattered, he had created this.

And in his understanding of that, he also understood that it did not end here. It ended only when he felt it should end, and he had further to go still.

He moved through this view of his life, and it gave way as he passed.

Down through the tributary he went, into the red river, but this time it came to an end.

The corridor narrowed down, the red crystals spiraling in on its final opening, a gate leading into somewhere unknown. Lauder hovered there at the threshold, unsure whether he dared go through. This suit would keep him alive for a long time, and he was afraid that if he went through and confronted whatever it was on the other side, he would die. He hadn't imagined he could possibly fear death any longer, but now he did. He wanted to go back into his old world, to the station where he lived, into the quarters where he spent his days, to stand in front of that plasma screen and look at the scenery until his eyes unfocused and he was back among the

memory palaces he'd created. He knew he could do it. He had the ability, still, even if it was unreliable; these visions had proven that.

But that same realization reminded him that now he had something at stake, and it was thanks solely to this journey. He had regained something he had thought lost. And he knew that if he were to turn back now, and give up his chance of finding the end of his quest, he would never forgive himself. It might be death, or something else; he didn't know.

He pushed on through, resolving to find out.

This cave was larger than all the rest, so big that he couldn't even see its distant walls. He had no idea longer whether what he saw was real - the cave itself might be miniscule for all he knew - but it didn't matter. He was engaging reality on more than one level.

A light came on in what Lauder suspected was the center of the cavern, a white dot that seemed either tiny or distant. The dot started to grow, fast, its white light approaching Lauder at such high speed that he barely had time to think of how he wished it would not envelop him but would touch him instead; become part of him instead of remaining eternally distant. It got closer, infinitely closer, and Lauder reached out his hand in anticipation and dread. His fingers were outstretched, aching with the reach, and then the white light drew up and *touched* them. And the whole world changed.

The cave lit up in all its glory, nearly blinding Lauder. The light, bone-white, made every detail visible in a hyperlit grayscale, and Lauder's first thought was that he had found God, some great force beyond normal existence. In front of him the space flickered, showing colorless images from the other caves. In the black and white of a flipbook drawing he saw the stalactites take form in the main hallway of the colony. The ore was created; it grew and bulged with the red veins, now grey in the blinding light, that would turn it to Arkonor. Liquid flowed through the asteroid while gravity still reigned, but its progress slowed and it started to freeze, aligning itself into gigantic crystals. It was pulled in several directions, with gravity clearly giving up on it, so it settled on every surface and kept freezing up.

Lauder was surprised that there was no fire, and wondered where it would come from. At that thought the frozen icicles burst into grey flame, and Lauder realized with a shock that he was the one who had created this. The crystals exploded, their shards floating in mid-air and their flames enveloping them, seemingly baking the pieces until they turned into a shimmering black and white gas. The gas slowly dissipated, leaving various objects behind that were completely still, affixed in mid-air like asteroids in space. It was the pieces Lauder had seen in the last cave, where the ships and the station were created, but they were transparent now. There were rocks inside them, but they, too, were transparent, and as they began a slow trajectory to the walls of the cave, they began to deform, flattening and losing their shape, until they reached the rock and laminated themselves onto it, losing their definition and finally disappearing.

And so the journey had come to a close, and Lauder understood what he was. This was a world of his own creation. The complex of caverns, which was certainly real, nevertheless existed on several levels, and one of them was inside him. In past times he had rebooted himself, flushing

out the levels of his mind, and he understood that he had now done the same, facing and destroying everything he had built, things that were often inside him but nonetheless had not been part of him. He had trapped himself inside a world of his own creation, but he was separate from it, which meant that somewhere, there was a way out.

With that realization, which left Lauder grinning like a nitwit, his optical implant stopped working for good, and the world was plunged into darkness.

Lauder kept grinning. The suit had no functional night vision, but it had a focused light that would stay on as long as needed. He would find a way out. The suit had a lot of air, and had emergency rations that could be injected into him, so long as he stayed careful about that one cocktail of his own creation. He had time. It might not work, and he expected that if he ever looked back and saw the darkness he was leaving behind, the abyss would swallow him whole, but in that infinite road of time that stretched out before him, there was at least the faintest glimmer of hope.

Houses of the Holy

When I regained consciousness we were deep underground. They had me trussed up and tied to a pole, and were carrying me like a massive cocoon. I was completely naked. The friction from the ropes was burning my skin.

My arms and legs were pinned but I could move my head. The walls on either side were lit with torches that flickered as we descended. There was a caravan of locals in front and back, and I imagined they were escorting me to the temple.

None of my team-mates were being carried with me. I was the last.

We were sitting in the lounge of a corporate employer that did not admit we existed. This was normal for people like us. We would be inspected by the corporation's agents, have our backgrounds investigated and our motivations questioned. Once we had finished this cute little white-collar gauntlet, they'd give us the information needed to do whatever it was they wanted. If we failed, we'd be left to fend for ourselves.

The meeting could just as well have been held in a back room somewhere, but instead we were brought in - after hours, mind - and sat in a large room with a nice view and far too many vidscreens on the walls. In the middle of the room was a large wire sculpture that looked like a spaceship's migraine. I imagined they'd brought us here to impress us, maybe get a little solidarity feel going. Funny people, these.

To their credit, they didn't waste any time. They got in a team that vetted us, asking questions that would have gotten them a bullet to the face under any other circumstances. They finished up, left the room, and a single agent entered in their stead. He was a tall, thin man in clothing that fit him well, and as soon as he was in the room he dimmed the lights and laid out images on the vidscreens.

Our employer, he said, was a Minmatar corporation that had interests in low-sec space. Now that the war was on, certain restrictions had been relaxed, and the right people stood to make quite a lot of money.

He pointed to one image. It showed a greenish-brown planet with the Amarr logo superimposed on its surface.

"We've been doing surveys on that one. Turns out certain areas have a high concentration of a valuable ore required for high-tech manufacturing. One valley in particular is so rich that its excavation alone could put a company into space."

"I've been to space," Chalmers said.

"How was it?" I said.

"Too crowded."

I grinned. The agent cleared his throat and continued, "So we'd very much like to gain control of that area. There's just one problem."

"The people," I said.

He nodded. "A society of Amarrians. Absolutely backward people, even by their own standards. Nobody's even looked at this planet for eons, let alone helped them out of the stone age. We don't have much information on them, but overhead imagery-", he waved a hand and the planetary image zoomed in, becoming a bird's-eye view of a land mass, "shows they've settled in that exact spot. You see these stone buildings here, here and here; that's all they have. Most of them serve some religious function, although the imagery lacks the detail for us to determine anything more."

"Does it matter?" I asked. "We're hardly going in with smiles and Scriptures."

"You cannot kill them," the agent said in a serious tone. "My employer is adamant that there be no unnecessary deaths, lest the media and public opinion in New Eden turn against us when we ramp up production. A lot of light will be cast on our operations there and it will not do for any local to say he lost his family due to our greed. So yes, it does matter."

"If we can't kill them," Chalmers said, "how the hell are we going to get them off the land? Throw the Scriptures over their heads and hope they run and fetch?"

"Almost," the agent said, and his face twitched into a leathery smile. "You're going to blow up their churches."

Logic was, we'd install explosives at key locations and make the locals - who we must've assumed were pretty stupid; more fools, us - think than an earthquake, or God's own hand, wanted them to pull up stakes and leave. Nobody was to be harmed; it would be fallen churches in the night, and the locals waking up to the ruins of their faith. Then, once the corp could set down roots, get something going there and worm their way into the local economy, such as it was, they could deal with the populations on the other, less metal-rich continents. Smiles and Scriptures, smiles and Scriptures, and a few coins for the commoners in exchange for some patches of land.

The first dose of unpleasantness came on our way to the dropship. We were to be shunted in pretty far away from ground zero and would have to travel several days to reach the area. The agent contacted us with an update on the soil we'd be traversing.

"It's poisonous," he said, and quickly followed it up with, "Not fatally, not unless you intend to eat the earth. But the minerals we're after aren't the kind of things you want in your bloodstream. It may be that the inhabitants will be a little ... odd. Not that it's a problem for you guys," that

leathery smile again, "and if anything it'll be to your benefit. Tired, worn, exhausted people won't be listening to bumps in the night. Get in, plant the packages, get out again and you'll be fine."

The second surprise came after we'd landed and done a whole day's trek towards the site. We'd been told there was no other tribe living in the area, which appeared to be true. But we'd also been told that there were no settlements outside the valley where they lived - even though the land everywhere else was just as rich in bounty and raw materials - but we saw small ruins on the way, signs of past inhabitation. Some of those ruins had a decidedly religious slant, what little there was left of them. We spent the night in one, glad to have a roof over our heads, but the imagery they'd carved into the rock gave me a headache, and I was glad to be out of that damned place by morning.

The last surprise before everything went wrong was a quick communication from the agent. We'd been told there would be total communications blackout once we landed - not that we needed to worry about the locals, but there might be things in space listening out for our passage - and so the message was short, terse and not all that comforting. "New data. Bad place. Tribe long-term poisoned from minerals. Every fourth child dies in its crib. Iconic analysis shows Sani Sabik influence. Get in and get out."

And we, in all our civilized glory, reacted to our taut nerves with the dumbest emotion possible: Bravado.

We started acting as if we belonged. We were still a day's journey away from the valley and our high-tech, all this wonderful high-tech, showed no movement nor heat signatures moving about, so we barged through the bushes and stalked down the paths. It didn't occur to us they might have smelled us coming, and prepared for our arrival.

When the trap closed, all I saw was air. We were hoisted to a great height in a split second, and as we screamed and grabbed for our weapons we were dropped to the ground. I landed so hard on my shoulder that I felt its bone grind into my neck, and from somewhere close I heard a sickening crunch. We all lay there in one pile, writhing about and disoriented, surrounded by the woven threads of the net that had caught us. I didn't feel broken, so I called out to the others, but before they could respond I realized the crunching sound had come from a number of broken containers around us - they looked like thin bags of dried tree-bark - and that the air was now rife with the smell of iron. Everything went fuzzy, and then everything went black.

I came to in a sermon. There was no other way to describe it.

We were in a large hall filled with people, most of them sitting crosslegged on the floor. The crowd was bisected in the middle, leaving one direct path from the far end of the room directly to where we sat. In the distance I could see a door that I suspected led to the exit, though it was located in the corner of the wall and not the center as is usually the case. We were at the other end and there was another opening in the corner of the wall close to us, though it was only

covered by a velvet curtain. I noticed that even though the hall was so packed that people's legs were touching, the area around this door was empty. It was a bad door, apparently.

I felt a little giddy and I knew I was going to die.

Almost everyone in the room faced us. We sat, too, crosslegged, but our legs were tied together at the ankles and our arms were tied to stakes set in the floor behind our backs. I could turn around enough to see the top of the stake - it was wooden, not sharp, but looked splintery.

Also, we had been stripped down to our underwear.

Chalmers looked at me from the far end of the row and I recognized his unspoken sentiment from his expression. This was wrong, this was very wrong, and if we didn't take in every little insignificant detail, focus on it and let it expand till it filled our heads, we would panic and we would die.

Beside us stood an Amarrian priest of an Amarrian religion that had nothing to do with the Amarr. I recognized some of the symbols on his robe from the ones I'd seen at the ruins a few days earlier. He held a cup and a ladle. Beside him was a large golden vat decorated with precious stones.

One by one, the people in the hall - whose clothes were dirty and tattered, and whose bodies were dirty and tattered - came to him, in the slouching sort of amble that conveys a feared respect. They bent forward so that their faces looked at the ground, and raised their beckoning hands over their heads in supplication. We were close enough that I got a good look at their skin, and I saw that it was lined with blackened veins, far darker than any man's should be. Their hands were a spider's web of darkness. The poison at work.

The priest's hands, I noticed, were unmarked and looked perfectly healthy. He ladled something out of the vat and into the cup, which I now recognized as a chalice, and handed it to the acolyte, who drank from it deeply.

It was not wine. I wished to the gods it had been wine, but it was not wine.

The tribe marched on, each member lurching to the altar to take sacrament. Their blackened hands reached for the chalice. Some brought their infants and held them up with steady hands as the priest gently poured into their mouths.

And then it was our turn. The priest filled the chalice and walked over to us. The room was still half full and I could feel every man's gaze burning holes into my chest.

He came to me first and held the chalice to me. I turned my head, in refusal but also so I didn't have to look at what was in it. A metallic smell crawled into my nostrils.

He stood there for a few endless breaths, then finally moved on to another team-member. We all refused, shaking our heads.

Chalmers was last. When the priest offered him the cup he merely shook his head, eyes closed. I could see a vein throbbing on his forehead. I thought everything was going to work out, but the moment the priest turned his back Chalmers made a croaking sound, inhaled sharply, and spat on him.

I expected an uproar, that the crowd would rise to their feet and storm us, but nobody moved. The priest merely turned back and gave Chalmers a gentle smile. This infuriated him even further and he started thrashing about, trying to rip up the stake he was tied to. I hissed at him to chill out but he ignored me, tossing his weight back and forth and straining uselessly at the bonds.

There was no panic. Several healthy-looking men came in from the wings - their hands completely free of black spiderwebs - and picked up Chalmers, hefting his struggling form as easily as that of a petulant child. They carried him cursing and yelling to the near exit, beyond the velvet curtain.

That was nearly the last we saw of him. We heard his screams for a few minutes more, growing hoarse and pained, but saw nothing, until. Until.

Until there was a roaring metallic sound, as of a machine coming alive, and for the briefest of moments there was a bright flash, so bright it shone through the curtain and showed us the silhouette of Chalmers, hanging spreadeagled and hooked up to countless tubes that writhed their way around his body as they drained him of his life.

The light stayed off but the sound went on until he died.

They left us there after the ceremony and eventually I passed out. When I came to I was in some other building with no light and no people and no team-mates around. I drifted in and out of consciousness. Once I awoke screaming someone's name.

Every now and then the priest would come in and speak to me, though whether it was really him or some mad delusion, I didn't know. I cried, sometimes.

And finally I awoke being carried by the people, into the ground, trussed up like an animal for the slaughter.

We intended to destroy their saviors - we, their enemies - but they are a forgiving people, simple but kind.

They found a way to live. Old rituals held anew. These blood colonies of a dark and grinning god.

My companions had been given a choice. I was the last. They were bringing me now to the holiest of temples, far underground in this place. I turned my head and looked at my hands and legs. My body was tired and weak, and in the flickering light of the torches I imagined I could already see my veins turning black.

We arrived, and it was a vast and dark place, a cave big enough for a battleship. We stood on a tall cliff where below I glimpsed a valley, surrounded by other craggy outcrops in the rocks. There were hundreds of light sources down there. At first I thought they might be torches, then realized they were bonfires. I could not imagine how many people were here.

In the distance was a building so tall it reached up to the cloudy roof of the cave. It was the shape of a capsule, bronzed and red, covered in gross metallic cables that looked like the veins and matted hair on a newborn's head. Their holiest of temples.

The mission was lost and so were we. There would be no rescue from this place. My companions had accepted that, in each their own way, and made their choices accordingly. Now it would be my turn.

They are taking me to the temple, to the great altar, where I will choose between the slow death of poisoning or a long life among these people. I will be a martyr or I will be an acolyte.

And I know already, with the knowledge of the dreaming, that at this vermilion altar the high priest will greet me, and he will give me the chalice filled with the drink of life; the purified cure of this land; the blood of Chalmers.