

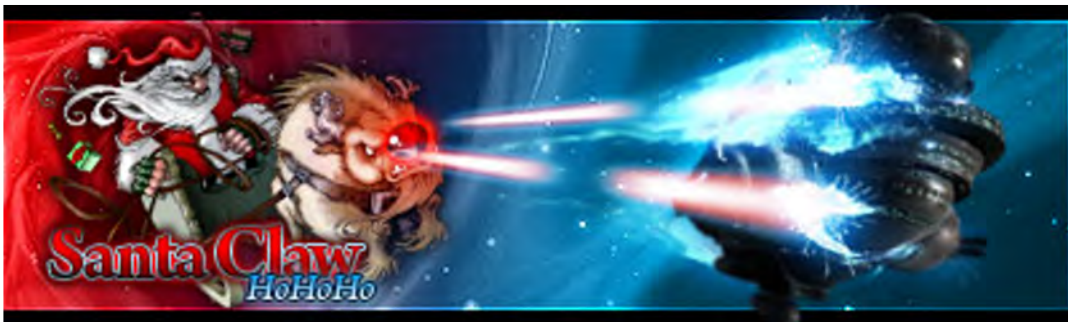


The Book of EVE

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compiled by



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The world of EVE is inhabited by five major races: the Amarr, Caldari, Gallente, Jove, and Minmatar. All of these races are of human origin; their ancestors entered this little part of the universe thousands of years ago through a natural wormhole. Though most of the first settlements collapsed when the wormhole suddenly closed, a few survived. Today's races are the descendants of those scattered colonies.

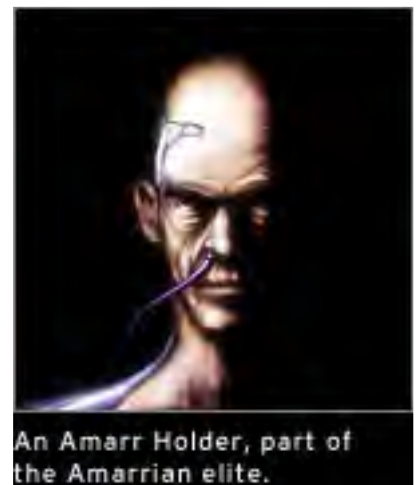


The largest of the empires in the world of EVE, Amarr spans 40% of the inhabited solar systems. The Amarr Emperor is the head of a ritualistic, authoritarian imperial state, and below him are the Five Heirs, the heads of the five royal families from which a new Emperor is chosen. The Emperor's authority is unquestioned and absolute, but the archaic and bureaucratic system of government makes it difficult for him to exert his rule unless directly in person. Otherwise, the Five Heirs rule in his name, dividing the huge empire between them.

The Emperor and the Five Heirs can expect to live for at least 500 years. Extensive cyber-implants keep their frail bodies alive, even when their organs begin to fail. These cyber-enhancements date back many millennia, and have become a symbol of royal divinity in the eyes of the Amarrians.

Always a deeply religious people, religion remains of great importance to every Amarrian, a fervour which at various times has been responsible both for great good and great evil. Shortly after recovering from the closure of EVE, they began to expand their realm at the expense of neighbouring states. The nations they conquered were enslaved, a practice justified by their religion. Ever since, the Amarrians have enslaved every nation and race they have encountered, and today slavery is an essential part of Amarr society. This has, of course, tainted their relations with other races, especially the individualistic Gallenteans.

The Amarrians were the first of the races in EVE to re-discover Warp technology, notably Jump gate technology. After accomplishing this more than 2,000 years ago, they immediately began expanding to nearby solar systems, slowly building up their empire in the process. On the way, they encountered two human races, both of whom suffered the fate of being enslaved by the far more powerful Amarrians.



In recent years, however, the Amarrians have begun to run into serious opposition. First, they met the Gallente Federation. Although much smaller than the Amarr Empire, the Amarrians soon found the economic and military might of the Gallenteans a match for their own.

Soon after, the Jovians arrived on the scene and the Amarrians made a futile attempt to subjugate them, resulting in a humiliating defeat. To make matters worse, the Minmatars, enslaved for centuries by the Amarrians, used the opportunity to rebel against their slave-masters.

Since these fateful events almost two centuries ago, the Amarrians have learned restraint. They have slowed down their expansion and are less forceful in their dealings with other races, but still view themselves as the most powerful race in EVE, if only because of their sheer numbers.

Heirs

The Amarr Heirs are the heads of the five royal families, the highest caste of the Holders apart from the Emperor family itself. Even if the emperor is the head of state his power outside his immediate vicinity is limited. The entrenched bureaucracy and the semi-feudal governing system means that all over the empire there are local lords that enjoy almost complete autonomy most of time. The Heirs are the most powerful of these lords. Each heir family has vast domains spanning dozens of solar systems. The power of the heirs can best be seen in the way each of them shapes their domain to fit his own wishes. The result is that the Amarr Empire is a patchwork of rules and regulations, customs and traditions.

The power of the heir families originates in the changes made during the Moral Reform some 1500 years ago, when the influence of the Apostles was curbed. The Privy Council, the unofficial government of the empire, also dates from this time and all the heirs sit on it. Four of the current heir families are the original families given royal status during the Moral Reform. The fifth is a recent addition after the Khanid family was exiled. The five families are: the Ardishapur family, the Kador family, the Sarum family, the Kor-Azor family and the Tash-Murkon family (the new one). The heads for three of these families are introduced below. The Heir of the Ardishapur family is Yonis Ardishapur, a champion of the faith and avid collector of religious artifacts, some thought to date since before the closure of the EVE gate. The Sarum family has yet to name an Heir to replace Jamyl Sarum; its domains are currently run by its House Chamberlain.

Aritcio Kor-Azor

The last thing that Dorian Kor-Azor did before leaving for the inauguration ceremony was to name his son Aritcio as the new head of the Kor-Azor family, to the dismay of many. Aritcio is a master politician, having just the right mixture of dishonesty, paranoia and charm to ooze his way up the political ladder. Yet for all his slyness and cunning in carving himself a power position at the top Aritcio is totally clueless when it comes to the problems of the common man. His total naivety on the matter stems both from his sheltered life at the top, but more from his total lack of interest in the fate of the masses. Considered by most to be an egotistical, cold-hearted bastard, Aritcio was careful to cultivate the relationship with his father, who refuses to believe anything bad about his cherished son. The citizens of the Kor-Azor, used to the benevolent, fatherly rule of Dorian, are already trembling at the thought of what their new master might get up to. The only thing they can do is hope he doesn't suddenly become interested in fulfilling his civic duty and take an avid interest in the daily life of his subjects.

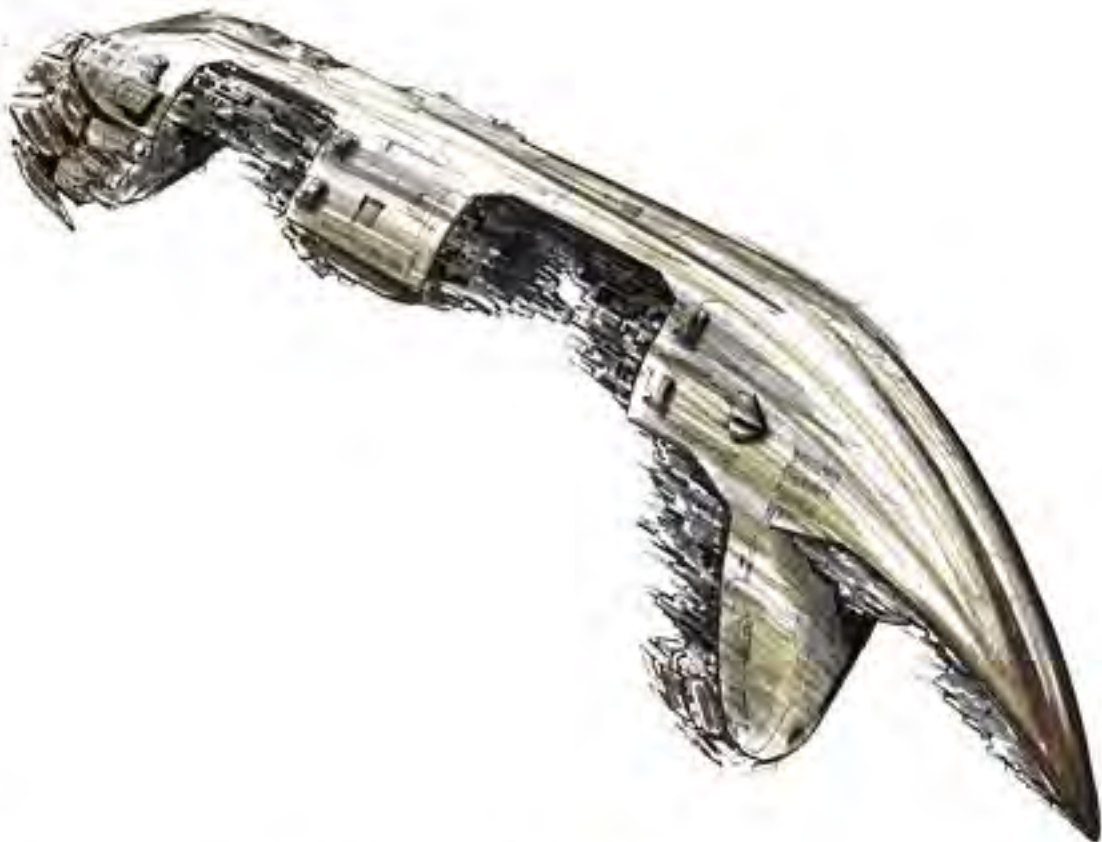


Uriam Kador

Uriam personifies all the traits that the Kadors hold so dearly: his tall, splendidly proportioned body gives him a majestic aura of grandeur, his keen intellect makes him a master of oratory and rhetoric and his refined manners inspire loyalty and respect. Uriam is a true leader of men, but his ambitions lie not in the realm of power and rule, but rather in the realms of the mind. A noted philosopher and poet, Uriam's view on life is very cosmopolitan. Not a true liberal or humanitarian, he is still positively enlightened compared to most of his fellow Holders. He has held various high-level posts within the empire, which have given him a thorough insight into every aspect of Amarrian society. He has already indicated that he will modernize the stale, conditioning education system within his domain, as well as streamlining the entangled, cumbersome trade laws. The only taint on his otherwise excellent carrier is his not-so-well hidden relationship with a Gallentean woman of high stature. His family hopes that Uriam, with his new responsibilities and duties, breaks these shameful ties with his mystery lover.

Catiz Tash-Murkon

Catiz Tash-Murkon is the youngest child of the late Davit Tash-Murkon. Yet it came as no surprise when he named her as his heir. When she was still in her teens she refused to follow the safe, but boring and restricting path her siblings took in the upper echelons of Holder society. Instead, she headed out on her own as a lone miner. From this humble start so many years ago she has slowly worked herself upwards, establishing a business empire to rival even that of her own father. All this time she has refused aid from her family, determined that what she built would be hers and hers alone. Now that she has inherited her father's vast domains to merge with her own the already formidable economical power of the Tash-Murkons is now stronger than ever. People are already jokingly saying that when Catiz sneezes the whole empire quivers. This is not far from the truth and many now anxiously wait to see how Catiz will wield her power. Few believe that becoming the richest person in the empire suffices to quench her burning ambitions.



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Bloodlines



True Amarr

True Amarrians – direct descendants of an ethnic group that conquered all the civilizations of its home world – are proud and supercilious, with a great sense of tradition and ancestry. They are considered arrogant and tyrannical by most others. The Empire's defeat at the hands of the mysterious Jovians, and the Minmatar uprising that followed, left an indelible mark on Amarrian culture. This double failure, a turning point in their history, has shaped an entire generation of policy and philosophy among the imperial elite.

Racial Traits

Amarr males tend to be condescending towards those without faith, and possess an unflagging belief in their own superiority. Although a clear hindrance to conducting international business, it still affords them with fortitude and a great sense of purpose. Capable of bringing unwavering focus to bear on issues, they are outstanding planners, and their composure gives them the perseverance to see their plans to fruition.

Amarr females tend to be class-conscious and formal in their dealings with others. Masters of subterfuge and machination, they forgive little and forget nothing. They are natural matriarchs who are fiercely protective of loved ones and obsessed with preserving the integrity of their family name. For the Amarr female, the family bond

is sacred and unbreakable, persisting across generations.

Ancestry

Religious Reclaimers

Many Amarrians still dream of the glory days of the Empire, when it seemed that no power in the cluster could defy the will of the Empire. They abhor the conciliatory policies of recent regimes, regarding them as weak and counter to everything the Empire has stood for in its magnificent history.

Liberal Holders

Holders, the major landholding class in Amarr society, are generally conservative traditionalists. A few, however, have elected to break ranks with their hidebound and power-hungry peers, instead supporting the modernization of their society's religion and substantial economic reform. Their champion is Catiz Tash-Murkon, the Udorian Royal Heir.

Wealthy Commoners

Some commoners manage to break out of Amarrian society's rigid class divisions and carve out an elevated niche for themselves, usually through trade or other mercantile activities. Though they can never attain political office within the empire, they are free to accrue vast amounts of wealth – along with no small measure of power and influence - through interstellar trade.

Ni-Kunni

With the exception of the Khanid, the Ni-Kunni were assimilated into Amarr society far more easily than the majority of Amarrian conquests. Conquered more than 1000 years ago by the Amarr Empire, only a small minority would still be considered “enslaved” by the rest of New Eden. Their home planet of Mishi IV in the Aridia Region is an inhospitable place, dry and desolate. The Ni-Kunni attribute their innate resilience and strength to the challenge of merely surviving in this harsh environment. Most Ni-Kunnis are tradesmen and artisans - occupations traditionally eschewed by Amarrians, but still a vital part of their society.

Racial Traits

The Ni-Kunni male is sly, cunning and unscrupulous. Because wealth is their only means to scaling the Amarrian social ladder, Ni-Kunni males are often misread as being obsessed with money. But they are not greedy. They are skilled dealmakers, excelling at brokering solutions in which all parties win, and they never hesitate to search out new potential trade partners.

Ni-Kunni females are deceptively engaging individuals. Harboring an innate suspicion of others, they often use their charm to probe people for weaknesses. They are masters of reading intentions and motives while disguising their own emotions, and thus find gainful employ in numerous professions, legal and otherwise. Beneath their measured and delicate manner, Ni-Kunni women are more sly and cunning than their male counterparts.

Ancestry

Free Merchants

The Ni-Kunni, originally a slave race within the Amarr Empire, are today almost fully integrated in society as free people. They have used the Amarrian upper classes' inherent dislike of mercantile work to their advantage, and Ni-Kunni merchants now dominate many sectors of the Empire's economy.

Border Runners

The Amarr Empire imposes strict trading rules with other races, all but encouraging smuggling operations to flourish. The wily Ni-Kunni are experts when it comes to exploiting black market opportunities, and have spent generations perfecting their smuggling methods.

Navy Veterans

A large population of the Ni-Kunni remain impoverished, and many reside in underdeveloped districts. When no economic opportunities are available, one of the few ways for them to escape is to enlist in the Imperial Navy, where they receive the career training and education they need to make a prosperous—if dangerous— life for themselves and their families.

Khanid

Among the oldest of the bloodlines to be assimilated by the Amarr, the Khanid people have endured the political turmoil of their leaders with great dignity and calm. Originally fellow settlers alongside the Amarrians on the planet Athra—known today as Amarr Prime—the Khanids were swept up by the nation of Amarr and the powerful message of their faith during the height of the original Reclaiming. For centuries they were exalted members of Amarr society, until a bitter feud between the Empire and an Amarrian heir representing the Khanid forced an outright secession of the bloodline's majority, and the subsequent creation of the independent Khanid Kingdom. Today, a large Khanid population remains in Amarr, loyal to the faith and royalty of the Empire. Many of them yearn for the day when the two kingdoms reunite. They may not have that much longer to wait.

Racial Traits

Long before the Amarr Empire took to the sky, Khanid males were recognized as the best infantrymen in the Empire. During the Reclaiming, Khanid warriors were at the forefront of the subjugation of the Ealurians, the Ni-Kunni, and the Minmatar. Though physical stature and bravery count for less today than it did then, many Khanid males have fully embraced the warrior tradition.

Modern Khanid society was shaped by the ancient warrior lifestyle of their past. The Khanid female tends to be fiercely independent and resourceful, long accustomed to fending for herself. She backs down from no one, and is very much the mistress of her own destiny.

Ancestry

Cyber Knights

Many of the Khanid want to keep their warriors competitive, but the only way to do so in the modern world is through extensive body enhancements. The advanced knowledge of cyber implants possessed by the Amarrians has proven exceptionally useful in this regard. Some Khanids still aim to excel in physical combat, while the more progressive ones seek to become masters of modern warfare.

Unionists

A number of Khanid were unhappy with the break from the Amarr Empire. While they never resorted to armed resistance, they are pleased by the improving relations with the Empire and hope the two nations will unite once more. They are eager to do whatever is necessary to achieve this, including taking on the common enemies of the Empire and the Kingdom.

Zealots

The Khanid are not generally known to be as devout as the Amarrians, but those who are tend to be fanatics even by Amarrian standards. Religious Khanids are often inducted into zealous cults, generally based on their interpretation of the Scriptures. The Amarrians regard these religious Khanids with suspicious interest; on the one hand the cultists' extremism alarms them, but on the other their religious fervor often results in deep theosophical insights.

State of the Empire, 110.06.11

Huge swaths of the Empire are either shell shocked, grieving for lost loved ones, or largely exuberant as a result of yesterday's world-changing events, all because of the invasion of the Elder Fleet and Jamyl Sarum's triumphant return from death to save the day.

Citizens

The common assumption had always been that the Minmatar "Republic" was simply no match for the Amarr Navy; the Minmatar people were always seen as poor wretches in need of assistance (as well as a useful source of manpower). Following the destruction inflicted by the Elder Fleet, though, people are struggling to come to grips with a world where the Minmatar are, if not military equals, at least worthy of consideration in this regard. Many are grudgingly re-evaluating their feelings about the Minmatar.

Most, though, don't even want to think about what would have happened had the Elders been able to complete their mission unopposed; only Sarum's timely appearance and subsequent annihilation of one third of the invading fleet ensured that that didn't happen. While the circumstances of Sarum's somewhat miraculous return have raised more than a few eyebrows, the majority of the population are happy to take her successes as a sign that God is still on their side, and her strident advocacy of a return to the Reclaiming of old gives a clear message about the relationship between Empire and Republic that most find comfortably familiar. As such, they're generally happy to ignore any niggling doubts and thus to allow her to lead the Empire, provided that the good fortune that's accompanied her return does not suddenly evaporate. They're also very keen on anything which departs from Karsoth's less-than-stellar reign.

Military

The military, as a whole, is even more rattled than the general population, because they know the Minmatar should not have had the strength to do what they did. They're still trying to figure out where the hell all those Minmatar ships came from, and a drastic shakeup in the intelligence gathering arm of its operations seems imminent. With the near-annihilation of the 7th Fleet in the Bleaks and the general failure to hold any kind of defensive line, there's significant internal turmoil.

Sarum not only saved a lot of Amarr lives, but she's also following up on the Sarum family's traditional pro-military stance and, as a corollary, effectively absolving the Navy of blame. Generally, the military is more pragmatic about her than the citizenry. They can see that her return is not entirely in keeping with tradition, but they'd rather have her on the throne than any of the alternatives, and they certainly agree with her professed goals. For the foreseeable future, they are likely to be fervently loyal to her.

Leadership

The Holders and the members of the five Houses have much more diverse opinions on Sarum's return. The great game of Imperial politics is already shifting up a gear, the vicious muddle of Karsoth's reign giving way to a far more expansive and increasingly ideological struggle for dominance. The Chamberlain's allies in particular have either fallen out of view or are shamelessly attempting to realign themselves into a pro-Sarum stance. There are winners and losers everywhere, and Sarum's apparent magnanimity makes many feel they've been let off the leash at last.

The next few years look to be a very active and interesting time for the Empire.

Vertical Slices

The Empire can generally be divided into five blocks of opinion, each shaped by one of the Heirs and most prevalent in that House's home regions.

Ardishapurites

Centered around the Ardishapur systems in "lower" Domain, these people are ardent traditionalists. This element of the Empire is the least happy with Sarum's return, they're only grudgingly accepting of her leadership, and quite unhappy with the circumstances of her return. Due to their strict conservatism, reluctance to trade with other groups, and inefficiently strict treatment of slaves, they're now certain to become one of the least advantaged groups within the Empire.

Kadorites

The most vocally patriotic group, these people are strong advocates for the glory of the Empire. They have no particular uniting ideology beyond this, and no particular qualms or preferences about how to advance this goal—they just want to be on top. They'll follow the strongest leader and jump ship the second they find a better candidate. They're decently well-off, not particularly bothered about their slaves (provided the work gets done), and generally content with their situation in the hierarchical scheme of the Empire.

Kor-Azorites

After Aritcio Kor-Azor's "removal" left it in rather more secure hands, the Kor-Azor region had experienced an unprecedented economic boom. These people were decently well off, and decently happy. In the past, they've approved of the Empire and of tradition and expansion (and "all that stuff"), content to look away so long as their status quo was preserved. But now, they have been thoroughly rattled by the Elder's attack; the Kor-Azor

worlds were the hardest hit by the Elders within Empire borders, and its planets and stations were the scenes of some of the fiercest fighting in Amarr history. These people will readily cling to anyone who can promise that such a calamity will never happen again. Their comparative wealth gives them disproportionate political leverage at all levels and buys them some time to recover from the widespread damage inflicted by the Elders, but their coffers aren't limitless. They're going to need help eventually, and they're not likely to be particular about who or where they get it from.

Sarumites

With their core in the Sarum worlds of "Upper Domain," the Sarumites are aggressive expansionists who want to further the glory of the Empire directly—i.e., by means of conquest and re-education. They're big on the Reclaiming, big on getting more slaves, and big on working tirelessly to educate those slaves in order that they might have a chance at entering paradise. They're not particularly affluent, as Holders go, but as a group they're not particularly materialistic either, so it doesn't much bother them.

They are largely ecstatic at Jamy's return, because many are still loyal to her. Their reading of the Scriptures has always focused on more pragmatic aspects, so her message is more important than worrying about dogmatic details.

Tash-Murkonites

Common in Tash-Murkon but present all over the Empire, these people are the beaten-down and the up-and-coming. Udorians, Ni-Kunni, and Khanid, as well as some freed slaves and even a few disenfranchised True Amarr, they're generally on the lower rungs of the social ladder and, for the most part, keen to work their way up. They work hard and pray hard, and are prepared to use more liberal policies in various areas if it helps them out; still, they are pragmatic enough that they treat liberalism as a tool rather than an ideal. For instance, they usually treat their slaves well because they are so valuable, but they won't hesitate to drive them hard if they need to. They're a little put out by Sarum's effortless return to power, but don't have time to worry about it unless they can see how her position might be of direct benefit to them.



A state built on corporate capitalism, the Caldari State is run by a few mega-corporations which divide the state between them, controlling and ruling every aspect of society. Each corporation is made up of thousands of smaller companies, ranging from industrial companies to law firms. All land and real estate is owned by a company which leases it to the citizens, and government and policing are also handled by independent companies.

Although this gives the corporations dictatorial powers, they are just as bound by Caldari customs and laws as the individual, and the fierce, continual competition between the corporations ensures a healthy, consumer-based social environment, which benefits everyone.

While the Caldari State may not be nearly as big as that of the Gallenteans, let alone the Amarrians, they are still universally feared and admired. Their economy is strong, and their military might parallel to that of the larger empires. Coupled to the fact that they are more unscrupulous than the Gallenteans and more combative than the Amarrians, this makes them in many ways the most meddlesome of all the empires. As most Caldari trade is conducted by individual companies rather than the State itself, this makes it difficult for the other empires to deal with them at a political level. If a company is found guilty of unethical business dealings, it simply disappears into its parent corporation, and before long another one appears to take its place. But if a Caldari company is threatened, the whole corporation and often the whole State backs it up with full force.

Caldari society is steeped in military tradition. As a people, its members had to fight a long and bloody war to gain their independence, and even had to surrender their home planet to their hated enemies, the Gallenteans. It was at this time that the corporations established themselves as the driving force behind creating and maintaining the new Caldari State. Even if the Caldari have not engaged in war for many decades, they still strive to be at the cutting edge of military technology and their vessels, weapons and fighting methods are inferior to none but the enigmatic Jovians.

To curb their aggressive tendencies, the Caldari actively pursue and sponsor a range of sporting activities. Many of these are bloody, gladiatorial-like competitions, while others are more like races. But whatever the sport, the Caldari love betting on the outcome, making gambling a massive industry in the State.

The Caldari State offers its citizens the best and the worst in living conditions. As long as you keep in line, do your job, uphold the laws and so forth, life can be fairly pleasant and productive. But for those who are not cut out for this strict, disciplined regime life quickly becomes intolerable. They lose their respect, family, status, everything, and the only options left to them are suicide or exile. Although not xenophobic as such, the Caldari are very protective of their way of life and tolerate only those foreigners that stick to the rules.



Coporate



The Caldari State stands for corporate capitalism in its purest form. There are eight great Corporations that together own more than 90% of all property within the State. Each of the corporation is made up of thousands of companies of various sizes and various sorts, ranging from simple mining companies to powerful police companies. There is no single, unified government as such, each corporation rules it's territories like their own kingdom with little or nor interference from the other corporations. In higher matters, such as in foreign policy towards the other empires, the Board of Directors, which consists of the CEOs of the eight major corporations, has the highest authority. The Board of Directors also makes sure that the social infrastructure of the State remains intact and settles all major quarrels between the corporations.

The eight major corporations are named: Kaalakiota, Sukuuvestaa, Nugoeihuvi, Ishukone, Wiyrkomi, Hyasyoda, CBD and Lai Dai

Bloodlines



Ancestries

Tube Child

Acutely aware of the small population of the Caldari State versus the sprawling Gallente Federation a generation ago, the Deteis once utilized artificial procreation to increase their population. While this program is no longer sponsored by the State, the Tube Children of today were raised in inhospitable, government-run orphanages. Many are fiercely independent, strong individuals loyal to the Caldari State.

Scientists

The Deteis beautifully combine efficiency with inventiveness, which makes them superb researchers and scientists. Between these talents and their cultural determination, the Caldari State is leading innovator of bleeding-edge technology.

Merchandisers

The Deteis love nothing more than having complete control over their enterprises, especially industrial production. They seek personal mastery of every aspect of the process, all the way from the procurement of raw materials to the manufacturing and marketing of the final good.

Civire

Whether engaged in trade or combat, the Civire are absolute masters of focused aggression. Highly competitive individuals, they thrive under chaotic circumstances and frenetic activity. They are often employed in highly stressful industrial and military professions due to an innate ability to think quickly on their feet and remain composed under pressure.

Racial Traits

Civire males typically follow a strong, inflexible moral code, and often see the world in rigid terms of black and white. Never at ease when idle, they identify themselves through their work and expect others to do the same, often at the cost of personal relationships.

Like their male counterparts, female Civire strive for excellence in the pursuit of all endeavors. Their strict devotion to a moral code makes them highly judgmental of those who fail to live up to the Caldari standard. Renowned disciplinarians, they are also great teachers, and proudly embrace the responsibility of passing the Caldari way on to the next generation.

Ancestries

Dissenters

The cold discipline of Caldari society does not appeal to everyone, nor is everyone happy with the stranglehold that corporate rulers have on everyday life. While not outright rebellious, dissenters nonetheless invest considerable time and effort in trying to change the system from within. The State keeps a close eye on these individuals.

Deteis

The Deteis are regarded as the face of leadership in Caldari society. Commonly possessed of sharp, ordered minds and articulate tongues, they are mostly found in positions of authority within military and political spheres. Driven by the cultural premise that the good of the whole must come before the needs of the individual, they have made the responsibility of upholding the integrity of the entire Caldari State their own.

Racial Traits

Able to quickly assimilate the essential data of any situation, the male Deteis is a strategic thinker, but is also a stickler for rules and regulations. While somewhat vulnerable to bureaucratic formalities, the Deteis male tends to do everything by the book—but does so to impose order and stability wherever he goes.

Female Deteis tend to be composed individuals with a wry sense of humor and a no-nonsense outlook on life. Highly intelligent and ambitious, they are much more receptive to bending the rules than their male counterparts, provided the reason is sufficient justification on behalf of the greater good.

Mercs

Many Civire have a deep fascination with the brutality of battle. For these brazen individuals, the promise of steady combat is what drives the eager sale of their own services to the highest bidder. Some even hail from families who have followed the mercenary tradition for generations, albeit within the shadows of society.

Entrepreneurs

Civire are not usually known for business acumen, but when they choose to engage in business affairs they conduct themselves with the same aggression and confidence as they would on the battlefield. To them, business is a battle of wills, to be pursued with focused vigilance and ruthlessness.

Achura

Achura has been part of the Caldari State for three centuries, and yet their culture has always remained something of a mystery. Originally from the Saisio system, they are reclusive and introverted, and show little interest in the ephemeral phenomena of the material world. Intensely spiritual, Achur pilots have only recently taken to the stars, driven in large part by a desire to unlock the secrets of the universe. The Achur homeworld is Saisio III, simply referred to as 'Achura'.

The Celestial Imperative

There are a series of missions that can be accessed through use of the Caldari Graduation Certificate (Signed) that divulge more information on Achur spiritualism. In this story arc the pilot will come in contact with Aviekkö Ta, who requests various tasks be completed relating to an ongoing search for missing relics stolen from 13 Achur temples.

The sacred pieces believed to be from the Rod of the Creator were stolen from under the supervision of the Achur religious order. The Caldari State has pledged enormous resources toward tracking down the thieves. However, the Elder Visionaries of Achura, unsatisfied with the pledge and not trusting of the Caldari government, sought further action.

They devised the Celestial Imperative. Atoa Issa took leave of his prominent position within the Caldari Navy to oversee the search for the perpetrators of the crime, as well as the relics themselves. Together with Seer Chakai Potan, representative of the temples of Achura, he controls the resources the Achur government and the temples have supplied to fund their investigation.

Racial Traits

The Achur male is reserved in manner and a master of disguising his own emotions. Never rash or impulsive, he meditates on every decision of consequence. Compassion is not alien to him, but his tendency to focus on the big picture makes it easy for him to sacrifice short-term gains for long-term benefits.

Female Achur are highly regarded teachers and mentors. Driven by their intense interest in the metaphysical world, they are brilliant scientists and keen observers of the world around them. Yet despite their remarkable intellect, they are humble, patient, and capable of empathizing with anyone.

Ancestries

Inventors

According to Achur beliefs, those who can reach inwards and sense the interconnection between all things are capable of accessing the universal consciousness, returning from it with novel ideas. For the Achur, inventions are almost regarded more for their spiritual implications than scientific significance. Creativity is thus a cherished attribute amongst the Achur, with inventors held in high esteem.'

Monks

'Thousands of monasteries are scattered around the Saisio System, operated by dozens of different monastic order. While each order has its own code of conduct dictating behavior and lifestyle, they all adhere to a fundamental belief: only through an understanding of the universe can the soul be perfected.'

Stargazers

The spiritualism of the Achur is not an organized religion, but the Achura nation nonetheless holds seers and visionaries in high esteem. While the Achur refuse to attribute this vision to supernatural ability, they will acknowledge the Stargazer as possessing a profound awareness and understanding of the living universe'



Name:
Kaalakiota

CEO:
Haatakan Oiritsuu

Headquarters:
Soji VI

Chief activity:
Kaalakiota has its fingers everywhere and in everything; they're the closest of the corporation to being a state within the state.

Brief history:

The mighty Kaalakiota humble beginnings date back to the time when the primitive Caldari were being economically exploited by the much more advanced Gallente Federation. The Kaalakiota, or KK as it's often called, dabbled in trade with the Gallenteans, but soon started raking in wealth on real estate and manufactures. The KK was at the forefront of the Caldari opposition against the Gallente Federation, something the corporation used to its great advantage.

Sukuuvestaa



Sukuuvestaa, or SuVee as it is commonly called, is the second largest Caldari megacorporation and is heavily focused on agriculture, mining, real estate, and consumer products. According to estimates from the House of Records, over a third of all Caldari real estate is owned by SuVee or one of its subsidiaries, though most of it is largely uninhabited, used for vast automated farms or hazardous environment mining operations.

SuVee has a reputation as one of the State's most ruthless corporations, seizing smaller rivals and selling off the pieces to ensure its dominance. While this often causes tensions between it and the other megacorporations, even allied ones like Nugoeihuvi and CBD, it has also forced them to think twice about challenging Sukuuvestaa in any market where it has significant influence.

Since resettling in the Achura home system of Saisio after the evacuation of Caldari Prime, the corporation has become the sentimental favorite of the Achura population for both employment and purchasing decisions. Many of the corporation's high level positions are filled by Achura, and images from Achura culture are often used for corporate products. However, corporate philosophy is still dominated by SuVee traditions that date back to its origins on Caldari Prime, not Achura culture.

Peace and Order Unit is the police and security arm of the Sukuuvestaa mega corporation.



Name:
Nugoeihuvi

CEO:
Morimo Yagala

Headquarters:
New Caldari

Chief activity:
Nugoeihuvi is the largest manufacturer and distributor of entertainment products, as evident by its name (Nug-oei-huvi means play-relax-enjoy, the corporation is commonly called NOH).

Brief history:

NOH was originally a conglomerate of small companies that manufactured all kinds of luxury goods, ranging from delicatessens to quality furniture. But once the Caldari had formed their independent empire, they filled the void created when the Gallente entertainment business was cut out. Over the years the entertainment business has slowly become the main activity of NOH. The NOH have many times been accused of having dealings with the underworld, those rumors have never been proved or disproved.



Name:
Ishukone

CEO:
Otro Gariushi

Headquarters:
Yria Prime

Chief activity:
The Ishukone corporation specializes in producing hi-tech equipment, as well as machinery. It possesses the most advanced technology outside Jovian space.

Brief history:

The Ishukone was for a long time the weakest of the corporations. Their main activity at this time was in research, but they never seemed able to benefit greatly from any of their discoveries. Only in the last century or so have they bloomed and are today becoming one of the most powerful corporation in the Caldari State. The Ishukone corporation has always had strong connections with the Jovians, but no one knows how deep those connections reach.

Hyasyoda Corporation



Hyasyoda is one of the oldest Caldari megacorporations, formed shortly after contact with the Gallente. The corporation is conservative and cautious in its business dealings. Hyasyoda focuses on bread-and-butter industries such as agriculture, mining, and consumer products. Its operations are largely contained to the State itself, although it has partnerships with foreign companies to market many of its products in foreign territories.

The corporation is still largely controlled by the Osmon family that founded it, though much of its stock has been sold off over the company's long history. Perhaps as a result of this history, Hyasyoda's corporate culture is just as conservative as its business strategies, with a strong leaning toward old school corporatism and established tradition. The amount of social pressure on Hyasyoda employees to "fit in" is extremely high, even for the Caldari State, where such pressure is part of daily life.

Hyasyoda is also extremely distrustful of the other megacorporations, the exception being Ishukone, their longtime ally; the corporation is also wary of any hint of centralized State authority. As a result, Hyasyoda has been one of the strongest critics of the Caldari Providence Directorate, despite joining it voluntarily shortly before the Caldari Prime invasion, and has led opposition to the Executor in the CEP.

Corporate Police Force is the police and security arm of the Hyasyoda mega corporation.

CBD Corporation



The CBD Corporation is one of the biggest export/importer in Caldari space. The corporation has established trade links far and wide, with huge amount of goods in constant fluxuation.

Spacelane Patrol is the police and security arm of the CBD mega corporation.

Wiyrkomi Corporation



Known and respected throughout the cluster, the Seituoda name has been the driving force behind the Wiyrkomi corporation ever since its inception in the years prior to the Gallente-Caldari War. With a reputation built upon the unimpeachable word of its founder, Tyunaul Seituoda, Wiyrkomi continues to enjoy unique relationships with many of New Eden's most influential corporations. Given the reputation of most megacorporations, Wiyrkomi is regarded by those inside and outside the State as a curious anomaly, though one that is not to be underestimated.

Stoically patriotic, the Seituoda family's love of the Caldari State and its stubborn insistence on the promotion of Caldari ideals above all else has been criticized for limiting the company's ability to expand its market share beyond the manufacturing and industrial sectors. The company has traditionally enjoyed significant success in these two sectors, namely through its multiple energized plating and containment field product lines. The media frenzy surrounding an alleged incestuous relationship spanning at least two generations of the family led to the Seituoda's increasing reclusiveness, and the family jealously protects its privacy. Only Duisla Seituoda, great-grandson of Tyunaul Seituoda, is ever seen in public, leading many of the family's most bitter detractors to label the secular heirs as irrelevant and out of touch.

Other theories about the corporation have even speculated that the Seituoda family is nothing more than an ingenious marketing ploy, devised and orchestrated to maintain the image of honesty and transparency that are the hallmarks of the Seituoda legacy. or that the family no longer exists, if it ever did. Despite the hearsay, the Seituoda brand remains largely untarnished, and the company has publicly stated its intent to reach out to high-end consumers outside of the established capsuleer demographic.

Though largely uninterested in Sleeper technology, Wiyrkomi has in recent years invested significant sums in developing small arms technology, with an apparent eye towards refactoring some of its most popular engine designs for atmospheric flight. Civilian versions of this technology are already being made available to interested parties in limited quantities.

Wiyrkomi Peace Corps is the police and security arm of the Wiyrkomi mega corporation.

Lai Dai Corporation



The Lai Dai Corporation is the primary corporation that makes up the Lai Dai Megacorporation. While the Megacorporation is involved in just about every aspect of business from starships to real estate to entertainment, the core Lai Dai Corporation conducts technology research and development and manufactures the products of its research programs. From its research programs and manufacturing lines, Lai Dai has produced some now common quality products.

Politics

The Lai Dai Corporation is politically part of the Patriot faction. The Patriot faction is lead by Kaalakiota Corporation and also includes Wiyrkomi Corporation. The political faction is chiefly concerned with the Caldari State's status versus the other interstellar empires economically and militarily and embrace their Caldari cultural heritage. As part of its political goal to make the State stronger economically, Lai Dai is the primary supporter of the School of Applied Knowledge.

In the wake of the May/June 110 reforms and liberation (or invasion) of Caldari Prime, the Patriot faction is concerned about the populism of Tibus Heth, but agree with many of the changes he has brought on and the liberation of Caldari Prime, albeit quietly.

Lai Dai's politics are not solely driven by its association with the Patriot faction. Lai Dai is heavily invested in both Amarr and the Khanid corporations. Lai Dai took advantage of the political alliance forged after the ending of the Caldari-Gallente War and invested in the Carthum Conglomerate and later Khanid Innovation, supplying both with an infusion of technological creativity needed to grow and reach their goals. This close relationship with the Amarr and Khanid mean that Lai Dai is unlikely to work against the Amarr in its interactions with the Caldari State as a whole. This some times results with the corporation having a conflict of interest concerning matters of the State and its normal political allies.

State of the Caldari State, 110.06.11

The State is riding high on a wave of jubilation today: It has finally proved its undeniable superiority over the Gallente Federation, and the ancient homeland of Caldari Prime is once again sovereign Caldari territory.

Citizens

Despite the declared holiday, the majority of State workers are already back at work and toiling harder than ever. Heth's exemplary leadership has given new meaning to their individual contributions, and they're eager to ensure that the State does not fail to capitalize upon its recent successes through lack of effort on the part of its people. Productivity is up, morale is up, and there's a new feeling of camaraderie between workers of all stripes. Where before they were working simply to keep their jobs (and to line the pockets of executives), today they are working for the glory of the State.

Most don't expect to understand the political maneuvering they know must occur at the highest levels of the State; while some murmur about the exact mode of Heth's rise to power, the fact that he now appears to be a true Caldari leader is enough for the vast majority of workers. When it comes to the Gallente, they're enthused by the State's demonstration that it truly is militarily, politically, and economically superior to the Federal model, and now that they've claimed their rightful place as the dominant power in this part of the cluster, they're keen to use the opportunity to correct other perceived inequities.

Military

The State militaries (i.e., both the Navy and the paramilitary bodies of the various megacorps) still have a lot of work to do in the wake of yesterday's surgical strike, but on the whole they're comfortable with the situation. Opinion is divided, though, over the merits of pre-emptive strikes in general and of this operation in particular: Some feel that the primary goal should be simply to ensure the defense of the State and that taking major risks to secure non-military targets is foolish; others counter that a demonstration of superiority is often the strongest deterrent, and that the consequences of retaking [Caldari Prime] thus make it a worthy target.

These concerns aside, there's very little dissent over the execution and outcome of the invasion. Even those arguing that it was an ill-advised plan admit to feeling a renewed sense of worth and purpose, and they certainly wouldn't go so far as to criticize the civil administration for doing what it did, at least publicly. The State military defines itself by its professionalism, and every man and woman, from the lowest recruit to the highest-ranking admiral, knows that it is not the military's place to second-guess its political leadership. Thus, their opinion regarding Heth is often that it's not their place to have an opinion at least, not while they're in uniform.

Leadership

Where the rest of the State is uncharacteristically united and calm, the upper levels of the megacorps are still divided and disoriented. Heth's combination of popular support and seemingly limitless financial backing has made him almost unassailable, but his victories have come at the expense of many of the most powerful individuals and cartels in the State. His recent reforms have fragmented the field of play, sending everyone else scrambling to secure political territory. While there are a few executives who wholeheartedly support Heth and his ideals, the majority see him as a threat and a menace to be controlled or removed as soon as the opportunity presents itself. While ideological positions still place many of the big players at odds with one another, shady alliances that would have been inconceivable a year ago are coming into being.

Players at this level, while they may be ideologically motivated, do not survive without the ability to be extremely pragmatic and realistic when required; they know they can't make a move right now, but they know they need to be absolutely ready when an opportunity presents itself. If military conflict provides that opportunity, they're all for it, but right now all it seems to be achieving is to strengthen Heth's position.

Political Groups

For the most part, what passes for political affiliation in the State is achieved at the corporate scale, with the majority of employees being indoctrinated into their corporation's prevailing philosophy. There are exceptions, particularly where employees have transferred between corporations, but these are few and far between. Although each individual corp is also a unique study in and of itself, containing within it many different positions and dogmas, the political mindsets of the Caldari can still roughly be grouped into three main factions.

Practicals

The Sukuvestaa, CBD, and Nugoeihuvi Corporations between them make up the Practical faction, which cares little for limiting concepts like ethics. Generally the most pro-Heth of the three political groups, the Practicals appreciate the new opportunities he's delivered, and while being forced to cede political control to his Providence Directorate is not a slight that they will easily forgive or forget, they're generally prepared to play along with him for as long as his actions remain productive. They're fully aware, though, that this state of affairs won't last forever, and they're quietly assembling plans to ensure that when he is brought down, the Practicals won't find themselves hamstrung by the other corporations. If in the end they have to topple Heth themselves, then that's what they'll do. In the meantime, they're content to beat the war-drums and use the fighting as a cover for their other activities.

Liberals

Comprised of the Hyasoda and Ishukone Corporations, the Liberals find themselves in a severely weakened position following the death of Otro Gariushi and the undermining of CONCORD authority by the Minmatar Elders. Espousing fair treatment for all, both within the State and without, they're somewhat ambivalent about recent events; though disquieted by the sneak attack against the Gallente and the atrocities that surround it, they recognize that it would be unwise to criticize Heth's actions publicly—and though they prefer not to admit it, they too have been invigorated by the State's recent military victories.

Overall, then, the Liberals are ambivalent when it comes to the Heth question. While they disapprove of his methods, many of his stated ideals resonate strongly with the faction. They're waiting to see what happens before deciding which side to come down on, but regardless, they are prepared to take decisive action to prevent their own goals from being subverted.

Patriots

Generally regarded as the most powerful faction, the Patriots are an alliance of Lai Dai, Wiyrkomi, and the mighty Kaalakiota, who between them and their subsidiaries possess capabilities rivaling those of the other two Caldari political factions combined. They are genuinely patriotic and extremely proud.

However, that rather jingoistic pride has been mortally injured by Heth's politically vicious rise. As a result, they generally refuse to admit, even to each other, that many of the things Heth has done are exactly what they themselves have wanted to do all along. While the wounds are still too fresh for them to feel anything but hatred for him, they realize that to defy him openly would harm the State (and their dominant position within it) immeasurably, so for now they play along with him and pretend (as much to themselves as to anyone else) that they're not immensely enjoying giving the Gallente a black eye.

Disassociated

Standing outside the traditional power structures are two distinct groups of Caldari who together make up the "disassociated." The first group is composed of those who've fallen off the bottom rung of the megacorp ladder. While they retain their citizenship, in practice these few people simply fall through the cracks between the megacorps and have essentially disappeared from the system, usually permanently. The second group includes those who've found themselves moving between two or three different corporations—usually upper-middle management transferred between corporations in a giant game of pass-the-personnel—and who have in the process realized quite how thoroughly indoctrinated the average employee is.

Those from the first group tend to take part on some level in the criminal underworld, while those from the second often end up doing very well in non-standard careers or in unlikely places within the corporate structure, united solely by their lack of adherence to any franchised corporate ideology. Their opinions as a result are incredibly diverse, and as long as this discreteness remains the case (and their membership stays as small as it traditionally is), they'll continue to exert little significant pressure on State affairs.



The Gallenteans. Self-righteous, meddling, pompous and tiresome, or virile liberalists and defenders of the free world. Love them or hate them, you simply can't ignore them. Everybody has an opinion on the Gallente Federation, it all depends from which side of the table you view them. For many, it is the Promised Land, where any dream can become a reality. Descendants of Tau Ceti Frenchmen, the Gallenteans remain strong believers in free will and human rights, despite numerous setbacks in their long history.

It has been said that, once you have seen the Crystal Boulevard in Caille you've seen it all. True, the view is spectacular, but if there's one thing you can never see in its entirety, that is the Gallente Federation. You may travel its length and breadth, marvel at the Sunspiral on Troux, climb the Akat Mountains on tropical Intaki or thrill to the Mendre dancers on Sovicou. Wherever you go, you will always see something new and exciting, even when you visit the same place again. Gallente society is in a constant state of flux, vigorous, vibrant and progressive.

Few societies display such stark contrasts. Many of the wealthiest people in the world are Gallenteans, creating a constant demand for luxury goods. At the same time, the ranks of the poor number millions, because while the liberal market-driven economy and individual freedom may allow everybody the chance to advance to the top, they make it just as easy to plummet to the very bottom of the social ladder.

In the world of EVE, the Gallenteans are the kings of entertainment, mass-producing everything from cheap porn-flicks to elaborate stage-shows for an ever-hungry public. They boast the most elaborate luxury space yachts, and the most glittering hotel reservoirs. Anything your mind or body could ever crave, the Gallenteans have plenty of it.

The Gallenteans are not alone in their Federation, whose boundaries are home to pockets of residents, varying in size and representing all the other races of EVE, most of whom left their own empires due to political or ideological differences, or simply in search of peace and prosperity. In addition to these there are two human races, the Intakis and the Mannars, both of whom the Gallenteans found while exploring and expanding their empire. Both were at a very primitive level when the Gallenteans found them, but since coming under the protection and guidance of the Gallenteans, both races have flourished and are today a full-fledged members of the Federation.

The Caldari were initially part of the Federation but deep-seated differences and mutual animosity between them and the Gallenteans drove them out to found their own empire. For a time, the two empires warred against each other, but as neither could gain sufficient advantage to claim victory, peace was settled in the end.



The three Gallentean governmental branches

The Gallente Federation was founded a little over 300 years ago. At that time the Federation consisted of 17 sectors or districts and four races. A district is a group of solar systems (of various sizes). The number of districts has steadily increased through the ages and now stands at 62. The four races at the Federation's creation were the Gallenteans (by far the largest of the four), the Caldari, the Intakis and the Mannars. The Caldari left a few decades after the Federation's foundation and set up their own empire. The other three remain and have since been bolstered by immigrants from all the races, most notably Minmatars. People of Minmatar ancestry number almost a third of the total population of the Federation.

The core belief of the Federation is that of individuality and individual freedom. But in practice this has created a paradox as the individual freedom to do what you want constantly clashes with the individual freedom from being oppressed by other individuals. Any governmental interference to keep things in check through legislation and policing is naturally perceived as oppression of the rights and freedom of individuals, constantly creating tension. But the Federation and its populace have learned to direct and control this tension, making it in many ways a positive thing. The result is an exceedingly vibrant society, constantly scrutinizing itself and its principles, spurring creativity and ethical notions.

The Legislative Arm

The Federal Senate holds 881 members, with elections held every 5 years. The Senate is responsible for passing new laws and in supervising that the administration and the courts are behaving properly. The most important function of the Senate is in overseeing the taxation and fiscal spending by the government. In addition to the Federal Senate, each district has its own parliament (simply called district parliaments), whose official function is to advise and support the Senate on local issues, but in reality the parliaments wield a great deal of authority over the affairs of their district.

Lobbying plays a big part Gallentean politics. The lobbying factions have become an integral part of the system, affecting and even regulating everything from the elections to what bills are presented before the Senate. The other races point to the entrenched lobbyists as a clear sign of corruption and in the supposed Gallentean democracy, but the Gallenteans themselves regard the lobbyists as a robust system for keeping the Senate in touch with society, comparing their role to that of stock brokers in the trade hall.



The Executive Arm

A president heads the executive arm of the Gallente Federation. The president is elected every 5 years and the same man cannot be re-elected. The intent of this rule is to make the president and his administration focus on running the Federation rather than focus on their own popularity. Nevertheless, because the presidency is so closely linked to the lobbyism factions and thus to the Senate, the Gallente Federation is often a huge spectacle where appearance matters more than efficiency.

The Gallente president is nominally the head of state and the most powerful man in the Federation, but this is not always the case. Some presidents were puppets of political factions acting behind the scenes, but most of them have acted independently, although always within the strict framework set by the lobbyist factions.

For many the president is nothing more than the smiling face of the government; an actor playing the role of the kind, considerate and generous father of the people. This notion is supported by the trappings of the presidency, its fabulous palaces and space shuttles, purposefully aiming to awe and amaze foreign visitors and Gallenteans alike.



The Judicial Arm

The judicial system in the Gallente Federation is ever vigilant in keeping the Federation as wholesome as possible. The system is not known for being fair in their dealings with the Federation's citizens, as it almost seems like there are two different penal systems in use depending on the wealth of the accused. But even if the rich can expect some leniency in sentences imposed by the courts they don't get preferential treatment in the investigation of the crime, meaning that you are just as likely to be caught for a crime whether you're at the top or the bottom of the social ladder. And history shows that the social rejection by their peers is even more efficient in punishing the rich than a few years more or less in prison.

The highest judicial power is the Supreme Court, which consists of 13 judges, appointed for life by the president and approved by the Senate. Beneath the Supreme Court are the District Courts, one for each of the 62 districts.



Bloodlines



Gallente Bloodline

Descendants of ancient settlers on the planet Gallente Prime in the Luminaire System, Gallenteans value freedom and individual liberty above all else. Founders of the only true democracy of New Eden, they have created an ethnically diverse, culturally rich, progressive society that encourages enterprise and initiative in its citizens. While slow to anger and occasionally indecisive, they are also capable of harnessing enormous military and economic resolve when tested—either by the charismatic leadership of a national icon, or by the searing injustice inflicted by a national enemy.

Racial Traits

Gallente males tend to be highly ambitious and inquisitive, though also opinionated. Honesty is the most valued virtue among them, and in their eyes the views of conscientious objectors and altruists earn just as much respect as those of famous leaders or war heroes. Gallentean men are generous in their friendships but also make ardent adversaries. They are widely recognized for their selflessness and valor in times when they sense that the freedom of others is threatened.

Born to work hard and play hard, Gallente females have a zest for life that is often times contagious. Assertive yet kind, their spirit is outgoing and lively. They are the model of self-empowerment, and can be very creative and resourceful. Extremely confident individuals, no profession is beyond their reach.

Ancestries

Activists

Gallente citizens tend to be more politically aware than the citizens of other nations, and many devote their efforts towards one or more of a multitude of causes that suit their ambitions. For such an activist, things might not be perfect, but things will never change for the better unless someone has the courage to fight the good fight.

Miners

While every spacefaring nation relies on mining the rich bounty of space for resources, the Gallente esteem their miners as the key providers that supported the rise of their civilization. Mining is a cultural icon for the Federation, which credits the pioneers of this industry as having selflessly braved the remote dangers of space to help pave the way for exploration and growth. Driven by consumerism and ambitious mega-projects, the Gallente Federation continues to generate heavy demand for minerals, and as a matter of national pride loathes dependence on other nations to acquire them.

Immigrants

No other nation is as welcoming to immigrants as the Gallente Federation. Between the huge demand for labor, the libertarian culture, and social policies of the government, hard-working immigrants of every race, creed, and color can build a dream life in the Federation, the land of opportunity.

Intaki

The Intaki are a major bloodline within the Gallente Federation and one of its four founding members along with the Gallente, the Mannar and the Caldari. Their homeworld is the fifth planet of the Intaki solar system, in the Viriette constellation of the Placid region.

Joining the Federation immediately after its founding, the Intaki remain one of the largest ethnicities of the nation. Exceedingly gifted communicators, the Intaki are today very prominent among the Federal bureaucracy. Though Gallentean culture has permeated their society to some extent, they still cling to their cultural identities and beliefs, most notably their unusual theories regarding the human life cycle—in particular, death and rebirth. These theories give them a unique outlook on life and the living, and many attribute the Intaki's stoic nature to this philosophy.

Because of political turmoil during the first Gallente-Caldari War, a number of Intaki were forced out of the Federation, eventually forming what is now the Intaki Syndicate.

Racial Traits

The Intaki male is methodical and reserved, never outspoken or confrontational. He generally enjoys quiet reflection, and Intaki homes are traditionally places of peace and tranquility. The typical Intaki has absolute control over his emotions and is able to remain calm even under the most trying circumstances.

Like their male counterparts, Intaki females are quiet and contemplative, moving through the world seemingly without making a ripple. Yet their contemplative manner often embraces great beauty through both physical and literary arts. A great number of the universe's most notable contemporary artists are of Intaki heritage, and among them a disproportionately large number are female.

Background

Homeworld

Intaki V is a tropical planet and a place of great natural beauty. In a speech, Vremaja Idama describes it: "Intaki V is a jewel among planets. It is tropical and filled with diverse lifeforms. We have lived and grown on this planet for time beyond measure.

I was born in the town of Asaya, sitting at the base of the Akat mountain range. These mountains mark the southern end of the habitable region of the north pole. My town was hidden from the harsh sunlight in the deep valleys that intersect the mountain range. Intaki V is a very hot world, and both polar regions were once thick with tropical forests. The equatorial oceans are exceedingly hot, and few living things survive around the equator. The rich and varied life of Intaki V has been confined to the polar regions, and in constant struggle for land, food, and shelter from the environment."

In contrast to the beauty of the planet's surface, the Intaki solar system has a 0.1 security status rating from CONCORD. Similarly low security status exists throughout most of the Placid region, with the elevated crime rates that come with it. This has been a source of political contention, especially among capsuleers.

History and Politics

The first contact between the Gallente and the Intaki was made in 22794 AD, 327 years before the founding of the Federation. At the time, the Intaki were technologically pre-industrial but socially and culturally advanced. Within a century, they caught up with the Gallente, mastering space travel to settle other nearby regions and holding positions in the Gallente government.

When the Intaki were negotiating for Federation membership, one of the stipulations of their joining was for a minimal Federal Navy presence in the system. "The original Intaki representatives asked for minimal protection at the founding of the Federation," according to Vremaja Idama. "We have always valued our independence and self-reliance." In the modern era, however, he says that "We have been left to suffer", referring to the lackluster response to the Reschard V disaster and the rampant space piracy that didn't exist when the original deal was made.

Intaki citizens in the Federation comprise the largest portion of the "Doves" voting block. Doves object to military action in all but the most clearly defensive cases, though do not endorse total pacifism and similarly extremist views.

The Gallente-Caldari War

During the breakout of the Gallente-Caldari War, many Intaki sympathized with the Caldari, both openly and not. This was a potentially dangerous position to have with the ultra-nationalist politicians that had taken over the Federation government at the time.

Of the active dissenters, those that were deemed the biggest threat to the Federation were arrested and exiled, forbidden to colonize any planets or moons. A group of these exiles built stations in lawless space and formed The Syndicate in the region that now bears the same name. Dorn en Diabel, governor of the station in Poitot became the de-facto leader and established The Syndicate as a free haven from the empires as well as a hub of black market trade. After his death in a freak accident, governorship of the station bounced between his sons until his daughter, Silphy en Diabel, came in and took over. Because of her ties with V. Salvador Sarpati, the Syndicate is now known to have connections with the Serpents. [1]

A group of more militant exiles went to the Caldari and joined the Caldari Navy. They were put under the command of the Caldari commander Muryia Mordu and earned a reputation as an elite fighting unit. After the war they were allowed to settle in Waschi City on the planet of Kamokor IV. They remained there until xenophobic sentiment among the Caldari there led to violence and ultimately drove them out. They called on Mordu for assistance and went on to form the mercenary corp Mordu's Legion. [2]

Vremaja Idama, who had been Reborn many times dating back before contact between the Gallente and Intaki and gave history lectures at the University of Caille described the situation of Intaki who remained with the Federation at the time.

"We were afraid of those "in power". (...) (Violence was) Never threatened openly. But when our fellow Federation citizens were bombarded, it was not a huge leap of reasoning to believe that any others expressing rebellious

Doves

attitudes would be similarly dealt with. Whether it was true or not, I don't know. But we were afraid, and so many remained quiet and sought other ways to continue. Some left. Others became politicians."

YC 105 - YC 109

Reschard V

On 2/8 YC 108, a planet-wide explosion struck the planet of Reschard V, destroying the agracultural, mostly-Intaki colony and rendering the planet mostly uninhabitable. The blast was eventually determined by CONCORD and Mordu's Legion investigators to have been caused by the deployment of a Judgement doomsday device from an Avatar-class Titan, which escaped through a cynosaural field accompanied by the activation of several other cynos to cover its tracks. It took rescue convoys from the Sisters of EVE over seven months to reach the planet surface safely, further complicated by pirate attacks on the convoys. CONCORD has never released details on the perpetrator.

(Unofficially, leaked AURORA documents pin the blame for the Reschard V incident on the terrorist group Equilibrium of Mankind. The event was all but abandoned by AURORA after player pirates crashed the rescue convoy.)

Gallente Elections

During the presidential election of YC 108, Intaki voters played a significant role in the re-election of Souro Foiritan. The controversial proposals of Mentas Blaque to segregate immigrant populations into designated districts and his ultranationalist leanings brought voters to the polls in droves, some would say an organized demonstration.

The RISE Incident

The Emphyrean Age - YC 110 to present

In the aftermath of the Caldari attack on Luminaire, most Intaki in the Federation were as appalled as the rest of their fellow citizens at the events. Those that associate with the Doves were equally appalled at calls for unrestrained retaliation and hope that Luminaire can be recovered as peacefully as possible. A fringe element still sympathise with the Caldari cause but so far it has not expressed itself in unrest on the scale of what occurred during the first war a century earlier.

Because of the CONCORD Emergency Militia War Powers Act, most of Placid, including the Intaki system, is part of the active war zone in the current war between the Gallente Federation and the Caldari State. Placid shares a border with the Caldari State at Black Rise.

Having watched in horror the bloodshed of the two temporary war zones, the station administrators of the Intaki Syndicate are having to ask themselves some very difficult questions. While nominally a wholly independent and non-aligned body, the Syndicate has nevertheless always retained strong ties to the Federation. Right now, their residents are feeling immensely sympathetic to the plight of their Federal brothers - particularly fellow Intaki - even to the point of suggesting a more moderate stance towards them. The more far-sighted officials, however, have a feeling that relations will get a lot worse before they get better.

In the third month of YC 111, Federation forces in the Intaki system fell to the State Protectorate, ceding occupancy to the Caldari state. Unrest and violence] broke out in places on the planet, divided between Pro-Federation, Pro-State and Intaki secessionist factions. Active protests mostly abated over the next few weeks, but the general unrest persisted amid worry over the intentions of the Caldari (who did not take control on the ground at the time) and [shortages of high-tech and heavy industry goods]. Panic resumed mid-August upon the announcement that the Caldari Providence Directorate would be auctioning off development rights to the occupied systems, prompting the planetary government [to instate a curfew]. Fear and speculation led to [a tense standoff] in one farming community between police and armed would-be resistance, although the standoff [ended peacefully]. The system was bid on and the auction won by Ishukone Corporation, which unknown to the general public were involved in a deal with an anonymous Gallente or Intaki capsuleer to acquire the system as a form of protective custody (see Blind Auction (Chronicle)). As with all other Caldari-occupied systems, Intaki was barred from voting in the Gallente presidential elections of November, YC 111 triggered by the resignation of Souro Foiritan, a fact which may [have hurt the chances of candidate Celes Agurd] against the eventual winner, Jacob Roden.

Culture

Ida - The Intaki Faith

In a speech given upon his return to Intaki from Bourynes, Vremaja Idama spoke of the Intaki "Way":

"We are considered by outsiders to be a quiet, reserved and thoughtful people. The unwritten laws, or customs, of the Intaki give rise to these impressions. We tend to think before we speak, preferring to give a concise statement rather than half formed thoughts. When someone is involved in a task we prefer to let them acknowledge our presence rather than interrupting. We also tend to look at problems in a more holistic way, considering all things connected.

Much of this is crystalised in our philosophy, or as others call it "the Intaki Faith". We simply call it Ida - the literal

translation is "to consider", and is a good description of the Intaki. Some try to belittle us by calling it "the path of least resistance", although that is a good description!

We who follow the Way aim to live a life of moderation, not succumbing to the extremes of self-indulgence or self-denial. Ida is a way of living, we do not have any beliefs in a heaven or hell, and do not take any writing or saying as "truth". Ida is a path, but Intaki are expected to walk it themselves.

One core tenet is that all things are in a cycle. Death leads to rebirth. A solution only leads to more problems. We know that the "soul" or "spirit" is eternal and will be reborn many times to learn new lessons, and once it fully understands the cycle it may finally move on. The Reborn are an important part of this. These were people who had reached a level of understanding that they may choose to be liberated, but choose to remain and teach others. In earlier times there were many tests and rituals to ensure that a soul had indeed been reborn, and through mental discipline and training these Reborn were able to continue their life work over many lifetimes. These rare people were given the title of Idama.

In modern times, with the assistance of technology, the rebirth process has been made more certain. In fact many of the techniques and experiences of the Reborn have assisted the development and perfection of psyche restoration and cloning. But even today the status of Idama is still reserved for those who have been reborn without assistance."

Notable Intakis

The former President of the Gallente Federation, Souro Foiritan is of Intaki ancestry. It was a sudden surge in voting from Intaki and Mannar citizens that secured his victory over Mentas Blaque, whose nationalistic campaign platform included a proposal to segregate communities of non-Gallentian immigrants.

A couple of Idama have made headlines among the capsuleer community in past years:

- * Vremaja Idama is an outspoken advocate of Intaki culture and the improvement of security for the Placid region.

- * Sundari Idama was involved in a drug-trafficking scheme which resulted in a major incident (commonly known as the RISE Incident), in which a Serpents carrier full of RISE was intercepted and captured by a fleet of capsuleer pilots under the temporary command of Vorada Kuvakei of the Illoren and then impounded by Inspector Xavier of Federation Customs.

Silphy en Diabel is the de-facto leader of the Intaki Syndicate after taking over from her late father and seizing power from her less competent brothers.

Jin-Mei

Original inhabitants of the Lirsautton System, the nation of Jin-Mei is the latest addition to the Federation, voluntarily joining just before the Gallente made contact with the Amarr Empire. The Jin-Mei took to the stars comparatively late, as it took generations for them to transform their rigorous caste system. Before this change, many qualified individuals were excluded from consideration for purely class-based reasons. Despite being at odds with the libertarian culture of the Gallente, the caste system has not been completely eliminated, nor is it likely to be further discouraged by the Federation government due to its cultural implications.

Racial Traits

The Jin-Mei male is generally carefree and good-humored about all things except his class status, which is of critical importance to his personal well being. Favoring security and stability, Jin-Mei men tend to harbor an aversion to change unless it guarantees an advance in social standing.

Jin-Mei females tend to be bigger risk-takers than their male counterparts, especially where it concerns advancing their own social standing. Keenly receptive to changes with cultural ramifications, Jin-Mei females were the largest supporters of lowering the social barriers to spaceflight.

Ancestries

Sang Do Caste

The Sang Do (Ji., "lord") caste is the ruling class in Jin-Mei society. To their credit, they tend to rule with a benevolent and charitable hand, unlike many other societies with a similar caste hierarchy. With inspiring demeanors and insightful natures, they have a distinct talent for winning loyalty from those under their dominion.

Saan Go Caste

The Saan Go (Ji., "standing high") are the "upper-middle class" within the social hierarchy of the Jin-Mei. They are most commonly employed as governmental officials and corporate directors. Resilient and amiable, they are generally well-educated and practical thinkers.

Jing Ko Caste

The Jing Ko (Ji., "good spirit") is composed of both middle and lower classes in Jin-Mei society. While the majority of this caste toils in obscurity, a select few of exceptional talent manage to rise above the masses. These driven, highly disciplined individuals usually attach themselves to a Saan Go or perhaps even a Sang Do patron, a relationship that can pave the way for their continued advancement.

State of the Federation, 110.06.11

The citizens, soldiers, and leaders of the Federation are reeling from yesterday's Caldari assault on Luminaire, trying to come to terms with the invasion and to understand exactly how this makes them feel. There's a lot of confusion and anger bubbling to the surface, along with the determination that this cannot be allowed to happen a second time.

Citizens

The dominant emotion among the citizens of the Federation is confusion. There are a lot of questions to which they want answers – from their leaders, from their military, and from themselves. How did this happen? Why did we not see it coming? How is it that we couldn't stop it? Are we really that soft and weak and defenseless? Who can we trust? What should we do? What should we feel?

Some blame Foiritan personally and some blame the political leadership as a whole, though few truly understand what happened or why. Others lay the responsibility at the feet of the military, trying to ignore their own complicity in the shortage of resources and personnel. Some blame their fellow citizens – particularly those of other races, occupations, or walks of life – often due just as much to older and deeper misgivings than to the current situation. There are a very few who blame themselves.

But all of them curse the Caldari - them and their barbaric leader Heth.

Military

Rumors of Admiral Eturrer's defection and subsequent disappearance have begun to trickle down the ranks. The consensus among those in the know is that he is the vilest of traitors, and solely to blame for yesterday's debacle. Many of the Navy's top personnel have spent years fighting for increased funding and additional recruitment, and the prevailing opinion is that the Federal Navy could have made a credible stand in Luminaire had they not been betrayed. With the horrific actions of Admiral Noir still fresh in memory, there are many who have lost faith in the command leadership entirely.

As a result most are angry and frustrated, itching for a chance to strike back. They recognize the wisdom in Foiritan's surrender but they fume at his weakness. The situation in the Luminaire system has everyone on edge. The military establishment knows full well that the Federation is about three hours and a twitch away from having every planet in its home system rendered permanently uninhabitable. They are also aware of their resulting helplessness against the Titan looming over Caldari Prime, and the feeling greatly intensifies their desire to strike back somewhere else.

Leadership

There's great turmoil in the Federal government. Most of its personnel, much like the general citizenry, have been left in the dark. Only those at the highest levels appreciate the full scope of yesterday's events, and they're frantically trying to predict even the most immediate consequences. The one thing already showing with crystal clarity is that the Federation is extremely scared, and that moreover this fear is likely to change soon, into extraordinary - and very dangerous - anger.

The President, the Senate, and the leaders of the various Federal institutions can see very clearly that they need to be ready for this seismic shift when it happens, and right now that's what everyone's spending every waking hour and no one's getting any sleep trying to anticipate. There's very little time for recrimination or finger-pointing, nor for any but the most basic politics; that will come later, and it will likely be a long and bitter struggle.

Voter Blocs

The habit of dividing the population up into broad blocs of voters is an old one in Gallente political circles, and five groups in particular have risen to distinction.

Hawks

Most prevalent among the Jin-Mei and Mannar populations (though naturally well represented among military personnel across the Federation), this is the ever-present fraction of those who advocate a militaristic stance. Maintaining this position requires an uncommon mindset the largest group among the hawks are the pureblooded patriots who believe passionately in the greatness of the Federation (and the need to spread its influence as far and wide as possible).

This political leaning often brings together retired generals and entertainment moguls, since the spread of cultural influence is clearly a valuable weapon. In light of yesterday's attacks, the hawks are calling for measured consideration of the situation, with an eye to the subsequent deployment of as much military force as is necessary to push the Caldari back and, following that, undertake a sustainable counter-attack.

Foiritan has never been a friend to the hawks they tend to find much more in common with Blaque but as serious professionals, the party leaders are willing to give him a chance to explain himself... before they call for his head.

Comprised mostly of Intaki and common among artists of all stripes, this group opposes military action in all but the most clearly defensive cases, although they're less averse to spreading Gallente beliefs through "cultural warfare." The recent history of the Gallente has made protesting against military action something of a challenge (there having been very little to protest), but the dove mindset has shown remarkable resilience over the years and still represents a relevant percentage of the population.

This group's popularity may in part be attributed to the considerable effort expended over many years by the movement's proponents to define a consistent and coherent position without lapsing into irrelevant extremism. They are, of course, appalled by the unprovoked Caldari assault, but are equally appalled by calls among their fellow Gallente for unrestrained retaliation. Most acknowledge the need to reclaim Luminaire, although with the caveat that any action should be managed as peacefully as possible. At the same time, fringe members of this group actually sympathize with the Caldari position rather more than is politically fashionable at the moment.

The doves have always accorded well with Foiritan although they've never fully trusted him, and while they're ready to forgive him for the losses sustained, they want to hear what he has to say first.

Vultures

One of the more predictable blocs, made up of military contractors and financial despots; Jin-Mei and ethnic Gallenteans; and others from all walks of life, right down to individual shop workers. This group will pounce on any opportunity to turn current events to their own advantage, usually without considering the true ramifications or the cost to others. If there's money to be made or power to be gained through a particular course of action, they'll lean hard on anyone they can pressure until they get their way. Unsurprisingly, they're by far the most effective lobbying community in the Federation.

For most of the vultures, the prospect of a full-blown war is the most exciting thing that's happened in the last fifty years, and they're already figuring out exactly what needs to be done to extract maximum returns from the situation. This is the group that is pushing hardest for the most extreme options; indeed, some are advocating simply piling the entire Navy into Luminaire and damn the consequences. They'll support whoever looks to be most useful to them at any particular moment in time if Foiritan comes through and grows some backbone they're fine with that, but they'll get behind Blaque in a heartbeat if he looks more likely to accommodate their demands.

Magpies

The magpies are easily the largest and most fickle group in Gallente politics. Though comprised of people from just about every profession and walk of life in the Federation, they are united by their short attention spans, a superficial understanding of politics, and the ability to become suffused with theatrical outrage at the drop of a hat. Typically they form a huge mass of fragmented interest groups, dissolving and reforming in a seemingly random manner as old causes become stale and boring and new ones sprout. The strongest force in Gallente politics occurs when a critical mass of these sybarites unite behind a particular cause, at which point support rapidly snowballs and they become nigh-unstoppable. This, thankfully, is a rare occurrence.

This group are still collecting themselves after yesterday's shocks, but the smart money says they'll throw their support behind some kind of counter-attack. The exact form this effort might take is open to speculation, but the retributive mood swing seems inevitable. The political and military leadership knows that these opinions will likely not endure once casualties start to mount but they also know that this group cares not one jot about which leader gets them what they want, so long as they get it.

Ostriches

These are likely the second largest bloc, encompassing a disproportionate number of ethnic Gallente, low-paid workers, and high-flying success stories. They have no real interest in politics or events on the federal stage. They're either happy enough with their lot or too busy to care, but the end result is the same. As many a politician has found out to her considerable cost, however, they cannot simply be ignored a fair number of them vote, if only because they feel they ought to, although typically they just vote for whomever they've actually heard of (or failing that, the one with the most interesting name). Woe betide any would-be leader who actually manages to get their attention by interfering with their lives; a number of aspiring statesmen have destroyed a rival merely by insinuating to the right people that the rival is planning to reduce worker protections, clamp down on wild parties, or just interfere unnecessarily with peoples' lives.

This group's interest in the war extends only to muttering over headlines or having expansively irrelevant arguments about it, and most individuals in this group couldn't even tell you the current President's name which is likely seen as a good thing by all concerned.



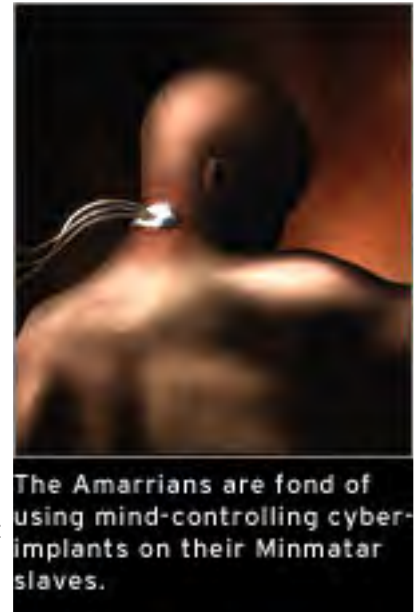
A tough, no-nonsense race, the Minmatars are a determined and independent people. Their home planet of Matar is a natural paradise, although centuries of abuse have taken much from its beauty.

For the Minmatars, the most important thing in life is to be able to take care of yourself on your own, and although kin and family play an important role in their society, they prefer identifying themselves by the clan or tribe to which they belong. A clan can have any number of people in it, and its size is largely dictated by the main activity of its members. Most specialize in one area of activity. While those who live on a planet can focus on agricultural or industrial activity, others who travel around the world of EVE concentrate on trading, pirating, and suchlike.

In the distant past the clans constantly warred against each other. Since then, however, Minmatars have learned that cooperation is more important, and although the clans still try to maintain their regional and ideological identities, they act as a single unit towards other races.

The fortunes of the Minmatars have ebbed and flowed continuously. At one time they had a flourishing empire with a level of mechanical excellence never before or since seen anywhere. Later, however, they had to endure centuries of enslavement, toiling and dying for the benefit of foreign masters. Today most of them have regained their freedom, but the legacy of their enslavement has been the diaspora of the race.

The Minmatars are the most numerous of all the races in the world of EVE, but their vast numbers are divided into many factions. While the Minmatar Republic is the official state, only a quarter of all Minmatars are part of it. The largest proportion, almost a third, are enslaved within the huge Amarr Empire, while a fifth resides within the Gallente Federation, creating a powerful political bloc which keeps relations between the Gallenteans and the Amarrians in a constant state of tension. The remainder, who are not part of any formal organization, live as freemen throughout the world. Many are itinerant labourers, roaming from one system to another in search for work. A fair number make their living on the darker side of the law, acting as pirates, smugglers and peddlers in all kinds of illegal goods, and many of the larger criminal groups in the world of EVE are run by Minmatars.



The Minmatar society is very much based on tribal society. There are seven major tribes or clans, Sebiestor, Krusual, Brutor, Vherokior, Nefantar, Thukker and Starkmanir.

Of the seven clans, four make up the Minmatar Republic, Sebiestor, Krusual, Brutor and Vherokior. The Starkmanir tribe was almost totally destroyed by the Amarrians after a crushed rebellion four centuries ago, only a handful remain as slaves within the Amarr Empire. The Nefantars collaborated with the Amarrians during the latter control of the Minmatars. They were driven out alongside the Amarrians during the Minmatar Rebellion and today make up what's commonly known as the Ammatars. Lastly, the Thukkers are scattered throughout the world of EVE, their tribal bindings are very loose and many of them don't even consider themselves to be a part of a tribe any longer. These people have rejected many of the strongest traditions of the Minmatars, such as the tattooing process.

The large, fertile plains of Matar, home planet of the Minmatars, with endless herds of hoofed animals, proved ideal for a nomadic lifestyle. The fabulous conditions on Matar coupled with more than enough space meant there was less incentive to struggle to keep up the technology level after the closure of the EVE gate. For ages the Minmatars roamed this paradise, slowly divided by time and distance into numerous tribes.

The tribal community was ideally suited for nomads, but remarkably the Minmatars kept their strong tribal ties after urbanization began, even if some of its more strict aspects have declined in recent times, such as the stringent caste system and (for some of the tribes) acreage serfdom for farmers and workers. To this day, Minmatars identify themselves first and foremost through their clan.

The Minmatar tribes evolved their own traditions over time, but limited communications between them ensured a few basic similarities in their social structure. One of these is the pyramid structure of the tribe: each tribe has a number of family clans, which are then further divided into sub-clans based on occupation, geographical location and other traits (this is different between the tribes even if the overall structure is the same). Each of the seven major tribes has a tribal leader; this person serves pretty much the same position as a president or a head of state for the tribes. The authority of the tribe leader is unquestioned within the tribe, but he has little or no power outside his tribe. The clan structure is both one of the main strengths and main weaknesses of the Minmatars. On the one hand the strong tribal bonds have kept the Minmatars pure in their cultural heritage, but on the other hand it makes them politically weak and vulnerable versus the other empires.

Here is a brief description of three of the seven tribes. The Amarrians gave each tribe a nickname, meant to be derogatory, but which the tribes embraced as being complimentary of their respective talents and uniqueness.



Tribe:
Sebiestor

Nick:
The Sinister

Tribe leader:
Karin Midular

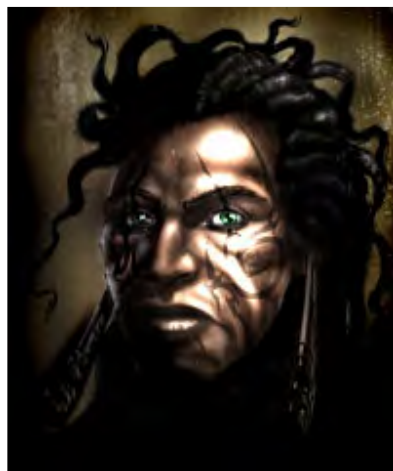
Physical description:

The Sebiestors are of slight build, but are lithe and often graceful. Pale, taut skin and thin frame is the norm and these looks lead many to belief they suffer from constant malnutrition and sickness. The Sebiestors favor simple tattoo forms – straight lines and clean patterns, but flowing, symbolic signs are not unheard of.

Brief history:

The Sebiestor tribe hails from the inhospitable steppes of the Mikramurka continent in the northern arctic region on Matar. The Sebiestors are the most

technically inclined of the Minmatar tribes and were at the forefront in the tentative space exploration program the Minmatars were undertaking just before the Amarrians arrived. Today, most of the Minmatar ships and stations are engineered by Sebiestors.



Tribe:
Brutor

Nick:
The Fierce

Tribe leader:
Wkumi Pol

Physical description:

The Brutors are a swarthy people originating from the island-ridden southern hemisphere of Matar. They are a bit larger and burlier than the other tribes, and as they favor physical prowess over anything else they can be frightening to face in the flesh.

Brief history:

The Brutor tribe and the Starkmanir tribe were once one and the same, living in the vast Eyniletti-plains. Some thousands of years ago one of the sub-clans of this tribe traversed the Mioar-strait and started settling the islands in the Mioar archipelago, moving ever more southwards. In the end, this sub-clan lost contact with their head tribe and the Brutor tribe came into existence. The Amarrians enslaved the Brutors in droves; due to their physical strength the Brutors were ideal for manual labor. A considerable portion of the tribe is still enslaved within the Amarr Empire.

**Tribe:**

Krusual

Nick:

The Crafty

Tribe leader:

Tenerhaddi Dykon

Physical description:

The Krusuals are tall, with brown skin. They keep their heads shaved at the sides, with only a narrow hairline running from their forehead to the back of their heads. The Krusual tribe uses flowing, often geometric tattoo motifs, seldom cluttered, always orderly and pleasing the eye.

Brief history:

The Krusual tribe initially inhabited the mountainous region of the upper Tronhadar-valley on Matar. The other tribes regarded the Krusuals as the most barbaric of them all, but that stemmed more from a lack of knowledge about the intricate culture of the secluded Krusuals rather than being an actual fact. The Amarrians had real difficulties subduing the Krusuals during their conquest of the Minmatars and the unruly Krusuals in their mountain bases were always a thorn in the Amarr side.

Bloodlines



State of the Tribe, 110.06.11

Sebiestor Tribe

Widely respected as being among the most innovative thinkers of the cluster, the Sebiestor are an ingenious people with a natural fondness for engineering. For the last millennium, they have been pioneering advances in applied sciences despite laboring under chronic material shortages. Sebiestor engineers believe they can build anything, with anything, out of anything. Veritable masters of deriving solutions from impossible circumstances, they are most commonly found working in shipyards, assembly lines, terraforming projects, outpost construction, and aboard starships.

- * Tribe Nick: The Sinister
- * Tribal Leader: Karin Midular

History

The Sebiestor tribe hails from the inhospitable steppes of the Mikramurka continent in the northern arctic region on Matar. The Sebiestors are the most technically inclined of the Minmatar tribes and were at the forefront in the tentative space exploration program the Minmatars were undertaking just before the Amarrians arrived. Today, most of the Minmatar ships and stations are engineered by Sebiestors.

The pragmatists of the Republic, the Sebiestor have greeted recent events with joy: the Minmatar people might finally be turning a corner. They're worried about the implications of open war for the Republic and the unity of the Minmatar, but the revelations concerning the other three tribes give them some hope that things might turn out well. Eager to distance themselves from Midular's "appeasement" foreign policy, they're largely in favor of aggression, but worried about the long-term consequences. They're hoping that the other three tribes can be integrated into the Republic, although they're not universally hopeful, and they're hoping that a well-handled war against the Empire will allow them to shore up the Republic and stabilize its position.

Racial Traits

Sebiestor males are contemplative and curious, charming and passionate. Unable to resist tinkering with any technology they can get their hands on, their inquisitive nature makes them well-suited for other professions besides engineering. Their boundless energy and enthusiasm tends to wear on others, but those who can keep up are often swept into great acts and deeds.

Female Sebiestor are generally kind and intelligent, and like their male counterparts have a natural talent for mathematics. But they have earned a notorious reputation for occasional cruel streaks— perhaps a relic of older, harsher times under Amarrian rule. Highly pragmatic individuals, they take most things in life at face value.

The Sebiestors favor simple tattoo forms – straight lines and clean patterns, but flowing, symbolic signs are not unheard of.

Ancestries

Traders

Many Sebiestor traders live as nomads and travel the cluster in search of quick profit. They rarely settle down to exploit a prosperous trade route, and instead prefer to keep moving in search of the big payoff—the one that will instantly make them rich beyond their wildest dreams.

Rebels

While most Minmatar are content to just build a normal life in the Republic, many cannot forget nor forgive the Amarrians for the countless and ongoing atrocities committed against their brethren. Instead, they have taken up the fight to free every single enslaved Minmatar in New Eden. These revolutionaries will use any means necessary to achieve that goal, no matter what the price.

Tinkerers

The Sebiestors are the engineers and inventors of the Minmatar. They are especially adept at adapting existing products into devices of their own unique design. Some Sebiestors seem uncannily attuned to the ways things work, making them extremely competent mechanics.

Brutor Tribe

A martial, strong-willed people, the Brutor hold their tribal heritage close to their hearts. Strong advocates of transforming the Republic into a tribal-based government, they would love nothing more than for all seven of the Minmatar tribes to reunite as one nation. The Brutor are renowned for living regimented, disciplined lives. Despite presenting a tough, no-nonsense exterior, they are deeply introspective and "in the moment", aware of even the smallest detail. Immersed in ancient martial traditions that begin at childhood, they are physically robust individuals and intimidating to face in the flesh.

- * Tribe Nick: The Fierce
- * Tribal Leader: Wkumi Pol

History

The Brutor tribe and the Starkmanir tribe were once one and the same, living in the vast Eyniletti-plains. Some thousands of years ago one of the sub-clans of this tribe traversed the Mioar-strait and started settling the islands in the Mioar archipelago, moving ever more southwards. In the end, this sub-clan lost contact with their head tribe and the Brutor tribe came into existence. The Amarrians enslaved the Brutors in droves; due to their physical strength the Brutors were ideal for manual labor. A considerable portion of the tribe is still enslaved within the Amarr Empire.

State of the Tribe, 110.06.11

Traditionally the most militant of the tribes, the Brutor are convinced that this is their time. They've always wanted to hit back at the Amarr Empire, and now their wish has been granted. Already there's a certain amount of hero-worship for Maleatu Shakor, whose star has well and truly risen, and most Brutor buy wholeheartedly into his rhetoric. Some older and wiser heads wonder quietly about the military realities of the situation, but most are too caught up in the prevailing sentiment to care.

Racial Traits

Male Brutors present a stoic front, but are patient, vigilant, and determined. They are keenly aware of their surroundings—physically, and socially—at all times. Despite their gruff demeanor, they are passionate individuals, and are capable of pursuing any task with relentless focus and determination.

Brutor females are in many ways the opposite of male Brutors. They are dominant, persistent, and egocentric. When they set their mind on something, they usually succeed. Between their wits, grace, and beauty, they are masters of manipulation.

Ancestries

Workers

Many Brutors have a modest background, and are often found performing backbreaking labor in the farms, mines and factories of the Republic — and before that, toiling under the yoke of the Amarr Empire. They still take great pride in their jobs, excelling as craftsmen and builders.

Slave Child

Millions of slaves within the Amarr Empire dream of escape, especially for their children. Every year thousands of newborns from enslaved parents are smuggled out of the Empire into the safety of Minmatar space, where they are raised by foster parents.

Tribal Traditionalists

Relegated to the most dangerous and inhumane tasks of the era, the Brutors were treated harshly by the Amarr Empire during the occupation. But this only strengthened the bond with their cultural heritage—the only thing the Amarrians could never take away from them.

Vherokior Tribe

Originally nomads in Matar's vast and inhospitable desert regions, the Vherokior are among the most diverse individuals of the Republic. They can be found in professions ranging from doctors to mystics, scholars to merchants. Their quiet work ethic and widespread family clans allow them unlimited social mobility in the Republic, with access to both the best and worst that society has to offer. While politically underrepresented in the Republic, the Vherokior are more than capable of influencing policy, and have no qualms with using that influence to benefit a relative or associate. The practice is common in the private sector as well, where Vherokior clan-run businesses thrive by avoiding the bureaucratic red tape of official channels.

- * Tribe Nick:
- * Tribal Leader: Isardsund Urbrald

History

State of the Tribe, 110.06.11

The Vherokior privately feel very good about recent events, but generally shy away from displaying this appreciation publicly. They're cautiously optimistic, but at the same time prepared for setbacks. While under-represented politically, they're a silent majority in the bureaucracy and public service sectors; while they don't have much control over legislation, they usually oversee the actual implementation of policy. As such, they're also worried about the civic disruption that would inevitably follow any attempts to integrate the three missing tribes into the Republic. Nonetheless, a war might allow for the liberation of more slaves, an undertaking they genuinely believe to be the most important priority.

Racial Traits

Vherokior males often possess quick wits and an easy charm. Socially gifted individuals, they seem to have an innate ability to blend into their surroundings and make people feel at ease no matter what the circumstances.

Vherokior females are famous for their shrewd business acumen. They tend to possess precisely the right mixture of intelligence and intuition to excel in both commerce and industry. Many are chosen to operate businesses run by the family clan, though under the watchful eye of the clan matriarch.

Ancestries

Retailers

Visit a market hub station in Minmatar space and stroll into any of the stores or restaurants lining the vast promenades. Odds are that it is owned and operated by a Vherokior. Determined merchants and peddlers since their caravan days, their business enterprises and expertise have spread steadily throughout the Republic.

Mystics

Vherokiors have always seemed strange to the other Minmatar tribes, doubly so when it comes to those with mystical inclinations. Vherokior mystics are both revered and feared by the Minmatar. The ancient Voluval ritual, where the soul and karma of the person is revealed through the unexplained emergence of a body tattoo on the recipient, was created by Vherokior mystics, and its secrets are closely guarded.

Drifters

Drawing inspiration from their nomadic ancestry, wanderlust runs strong with many Vherokiors. While many curb their thirst for adventure, there are those who simply cannot settle down in one place for long. Never at rest, they will always be lured by the horizon, as there are places to see and riches to be discovered.

State of the Republic, 110.06.11

The Republic is celebrating yesterday's events even though many are not entirely sure exactly what it is that they're celebrating. All they know for sure is that they gave the Amarr a bloody nose in a straight fight, liberating millions, and that the Elders—whom many never believed even existed—have returned to help restore their tribal roots, so they're generally happy.

Citizens

Finally, the Minmatar people have a reason to be proud again. Nowhere is this clearer than along the streets and alleys of the Republic. Minmatar warships have invaded Amarr space, beaten up entire fleets, and brought back countless liberated slaves. More than that, the Elders are involved, and while everyone has their own interpretation of who and what the Elders really are, pretty much everyone agrees that their return is a good thing. As a result, the mood is both jubilant and pugnacious, with many clamoring for the Republic to press its advantage and wipe the Amarr Empire off the map once and for all. Of course, this combative mentality conveniently ignores the actual scope of the raids and the losses suffered at the hands of Jamyl Sarum, but who wants to spoil the mood by mentioning that?

The events of recent days have also had an impact on the workings of the Republic, generally being viewed in a positive light. The removal of Midular's unpopular and largely corrupt government, the seemingly imminent rise of a warlike traditionalist regime, and Maleatu Shakor's rise to prominence are all seen as long-overdue changes, and any politicking along the way is largely glossed over. Of course, there are still those who feel that getting what you want isn't always a good thing, but they're mostly keeping their heads down for now.

Military

The mood among the military is more introspective than that among the citizenry. They were completely blindsided by the Elders' taskforces, and most sat helplessly by while their Thukker counterparts led the charge and took all the glory. Some captains threw caution to the wind and joined up with the task forces, and their current status is up in the air, with many being classified deserters or mutineers. Most, however, stuck to their orders and held back, and are now somewhat bitter that their own people resent them for not doing something similar a long time ago. This perceived inaction has always been a source of tension between the citizenry and the military, and now the former believe that the Elders have proved them right. The fact that the Elders' fleet was built with money that should rightfully have gone to the Republic and the Fleet has not come into it... at least not yet.

Politically, while most sympathize with Shakor's fiery rhetoric, the military has always been broadly supportive of Midular's moderate stance. However, they're also aware that times are changing and that the Fleet will have to change too. Given the shocks of recent days, the military's position during what is likely to be a lengthy period of government transition is unclear.

Leadership

The various clan chiefs and tribal leaders are still trying to figure out exactly what's going on and where they stand, but most of them realize that riding the wave of tribal patriotism from the masses is the wisest course of action. There's still some uncertainty regarding the return of the Elders, but most are banking on the likelihood that the Elders won't seek an active role in Republic politics.

As a result, the four tribes are each jockeying to find a clear and defensible political stance. With the formation of a new parliament, Keitan Yun, Shakor, the other three tribes, and even Karin Midular represent enough wildcards to make any transition destined for a rough road. But the smart money is a bet on a return to more traditional ways.

The Tribes

The main population of the Republic can be divided up into the four tribes that make up the majority of Parliament.

Brutor

Traditionally the most militant of the tribes, the Brutor are convinced that this is their time. They've always wanted to hit back at the Amarr Empire, and now their wish has been granted. Already there's a certain amount of hero-worship for Maleatu Shakor, whose star has well and truly risen, and most Brutor buy wholeheartedly into his rhetoric. Some older and wiser heads wonder quietly about the military realities of the situation, but most are too caught up in the prevailing sentiment to care.

Krusual

Ever the crafty ones, most Krusual view recent events as an opportunity as well as a cause for celebration. With the help of the Elders the Republic is now in a position to wield some real power, and the Krusual want to be a part of that. Many of them see through the tribal leaders' rhetoric and understand the situation for what it is, and while they realize that the Republic is by no means invulnerable they also appreciate that now is the time for action. They want to see the Republic integrate the other three tribes where practical, and to use that added strength to expand their influence and territory while they have the chance.

Sebiestor

The pragmatists of the Republic, the Sebiestor have greeted recent events with joy: the Minmatar people might finally be turning a corner. They're worried about the implications of open war for the Republic and the unity of the Minmatar, but the revelations concerning the other three tribes give them some hope that things might turn out well. Eager to distance themselves from Midular's "appeasement" foreign policy, they're largely in favor of aggression, but worried about the long-term consequences. They're hoping that the other three tribes can be integrated into the Republic, although they're not universally hopeful, and they're hoping that a well-handled war against the Empire will allow them to shore up the Republic and stabilize its position.

Vherokior

The Vherokior privately feel very good about recent events, but generally shy away from displaying this appreciation publicly. They're cautiously optimistic, but at the same time prepared for setbacks. While under-represented politically, they're a silent majority in the bureaucracy and public service sectors; while they don't have much control over legislation, they usually oversee the actual implementation of policy. As such, they're also worried about the civic disruption that would inevitably follow any attempts to integrate the three missing tribes into the Republic. Nonetheless, a war might allow for the liberation of more slaves, an undertaking they genuinely believe to be the most important priority.



The most mysterious and elusive of all the peoples of EVE, the Jovians number only a fraction of any of their neighbors, but their technological superiority makes them powerful beyond all proportion.

Although definitely human, the Jovians often seem to the other races as though they are not, the reason being that they embraced genetic engineering as the way to solve any and all the problems which plague the human race. Over the thousands of years since, the Jovians have experimented with every kind of genetic modification their technology allowed. As their powers grew, they began to believe they were capable of anything, and this led them into increasingly more bizarre mutations of their bodies and minds, a policy rigorously backed up by strict governmental control.

But one fateful moment in their history made them lose this control for a few generations, and the results were catastrophic. By this time the Jovians had begun interfering with their basic instincts, curbing their aggression and sexual instincts and cultivating strange new ones instead. Since the Shrouded Days, as the Jovians call their momentary social eclipse, they have been trying to put the pieces together again, but their DNA-structure has in many ways been damaged beyond repair. The consequence is the dreaded Jovian Disease. Genetic in nature, it is not infectious to other races, but among Jovians it causes a depression so deep and serious that the victim loses the will to live, and death results within a few days or weeks.

Despite this, the Jovians escaped the chaos that followed the closure of EVE remarkably well. Within the space of only a few centuries they had recovered, and were once again running a hi-tech society. They settled in a number of systems and founded an empire lasting for nine millennia, but even if the Jovians are by far the most technologically advanced of the races of EVE, they have still not recovered the splendour of their first empire. The disease within them keeps them in a reproductive straightjacket, preventing them from increasing their numbers sufficiently for their current empire to flourish.

The Jovians crave knowledge, any knowledge at all. Their superior technology has enabled them to infiltrate the other races with bugging devices and sensors, giving them unrivalled access to information, which they use to maintain their strong position among the races. The Jovians sell a lot of their advanced technology equipment to the other races and it is this, more than anything else, which keeps the others at bay.

Jovian society is mysterious and difficult to comprehend. For this and other reasons it remains very much closed to the other races, and few foreigners reside within the Jovian Empire.



Picture of Miko Bour, who united the Jovians in the Second Empire more than 3,000 years ago.



Fetus-tubes, the Jovian way of reproduction for many millenniums.

Jove Statics

The different branches of Jovians that exist are not the result of variations in geographical or climatic differences, but rather that of genetic engineering through the centuries. The Statics are one of the two main branches. Statics are generally introvert and prefer status quo, both socially and biologically. The Statics regard themselves as observers that should interfere as little as possible with the world. They believe that they are as genetically evolved as can be and generally frown upon large-scale genetic engineering programs.

The male part of the Statics is often aloof and condescending. They are the biggest hoarders of knowledge there is, but they enjoy sitting on their knowledge like dragons on gold, reveling in the knowledge of their own importance. Fortunately, they rarely use their power to influence world events.

The female part of the Statics is more open and friendly to outsiders. Though they are driven by curiosity the same as their male counterparts, they don't have the pathological need to sit on it by themselves and are generally quite willing to share in their discoveries. Female Statics pass for what can be termed leaders in the Jovian Empire; other Jovians acknowledge that their stable nature and extensive knowledge makes them best suited for the task.

Jove Modifiers

The different branches of Jovians that exist are not the result of variations in geographical or climatic differences, but rather that of genetic engineering through the centuries. The Modifiers are the enthusiasts of the Jovian family. They are curious and constantly willing to try or experience something new and fresh. Modifiers have lower life expectancy than other Jovians and are more susceptible to the dreaded Jovian Disease. It seems that by constantly living on the edge makes them burn out faster.

Male Modifiers are constantly in search of something new and different and can never stay in the same place for long. They're fickle and undisciplined compared to other Jovians and are prone to manic-depression. They are also the most reckless, which most often takes them into trouble, but sometimes it results in some spectacular new discovery that would otherwise never have been found.

Female Modifiers are renowned within the Jovian Empire for their constant body enhancing experiments. More than any other group, female Modifiers are taking genetic engineering to the extreme and back. There is little rhyme or reason in their experiments, as they're most often done on individual level. Although the results are often disastrous many Jovians put more stock in the chaotic gene therapies of the female Modifiers for finding cure to the Jovian Disease than the more respectable formal research teams.

Elders

The Elders were one of the first groups to use genetic engineering for a special purpose, namely that of slowing the aging process. Once, the Elders were a prominent political force in the Jovian society, but after they brought about the fall of the first Jovian empire they have become more reclusive. Elders can become many centuries old, it's uncertain exactly how old they can become, but some suggest they can outlive even members of the Amarrian royal families.

Unsullied

Genetic engineering has through the centuries transformed Jovian society in every aspect imaginable. Many Jovians believe that enough has been done. The Unsullied is a group of Jovians that have rejected further generic experiments and instead adopt conventional methods to deal with sickness and old age. They are advocates of cyber-implants and want to use machines instead of genes in the search for better life.

Existentialists

The Existentialists are the most energetic and vociferous Jovian group. They live for the moment and are always ready to experiment, even with their own bodies. To them, nothing is sacred. The Existentialists tend to have little to do with the other races, as they find them boring and uninspiring.

Puritan

Many Jovians dream of returning to their genetic roots, now long since lost during the Shrouded Days. Those that are most active in their search for the 'untainted' Jovian genes are called the Puritans. In the hope of cleansing the nation of the Jovian Disease the Puritans try out ever-more outrageous genetic engineering stunts, often with quite unexpected results. But unlike the Existentialists the genetic engineering of the Puritans has the specific aim to return the human element to the Jovians, instead of being just narcissistic in nature.

Lab Rat

All Jovians are artificially conceived. In most cases a family unit is involved, donating genes, taking care of the rearing and so on, but this is not always so. Often, persons are conceived for some altruist reasons, usually research purposes. These Jovians are treated the same as everyone else, but they tend to be a little 'off', due to the clinical way of their conception.

Stasis People

For many Jovians their race is in the twilight of their greatness. Ever since the fall of the first empire the Jovian society have been in a slow, steady decline. Most blame the Jovian Disease for this and believe that the Jovians can only hope to turn the tide once a cure for the disease has been found. The Stasis People are Jovians that voluntarily go into cryo-stasis for decades or centuries, hoping that when they wake a bright and better world will greet them.

Other Factions, 110.06.11

An overview of the state of the various factions of New Eden following the events of the Elder War. The overview for the empires exists separately.

CONCORD

Following the destruction of their most hallowed location, the Assembly station in Yulai, CONCORD is in disarray; a mass of fractured departments, each trying to fulfill their mandate to the best of their ability while a few brave officers attempt to put things back together again. Thanks to the professionalism of CONCORD staff it already looks like business as usual from the outside, but internally there's a lot of damage to be repaired before things are back to normal - and there are many who are already wondering aloud if the old "normal" is something they should be all that concerned with anyway.

Ammatar Mandate

The Mandate is struggling with the biggest crisis in its entire history. The direct effects of the Elder invasion and the wholesale destruction of large parts of the Home Fleet, big news in any other circumstances, have been largely ignored due to the more pressing issue that cuts to the very heart of the Ammatar identity - namely the revelation that the original defection was blessed by the Minmatar Elders so that the Nefantar could protect the remnants of the Starkmanir tribe.

While former governor Ana Utulf's urging to Ammatar citizens to defect to the Republic did elicit some positive response, mostly among the persecuted minority who still cling to their Minmatar roots, the majority of the Mandate viewed her actions as a heinous betrayal of the Mandate's principles. Traditional education in the region has always focused on teaching the value of the Amarr way of life and the Ammatar's privileged place at their side, and the news that their beliefs about the noble origins of the Mandate may be entirely false has been a crushing blow to the morale of many citizens. The Mandate is currently leaderless and in a state of huge turmoil - and there's no signs of returning stability on the horizon.

Khanid Kingdom

After briefly expecting the worst as the Elder taskforce reached towards their space, the Khanid came through the disturbances largely unrattled and entirely unscathed. Having dusted themselves off and told one another that they weren't really worried anyway, they're already looking towards the future. With their two major trading partners seemingly reinvigorated things are looking rosy, and Khanid companies are at the forefront of bidding for repair and salvage operations throughout Kor-Azor and even into Domain. Jamyl Sarum's return has also turned more than a few heads - they're unsure as to what exactly her policy towards the Kingdom would be if she was coronated, but they're keenly interested in the precedent it will set. Following their King's lead, they're sitting back for now to see how things pan out, but hard-edged interest lines their faces.

The Syndicate

Having watched in horror the bloodshed of the two temporary war zones, the station administrators of the Intaki Syndicate are having to ask themselves some very difficult questions. While nominally a wholly independent and non-aligned body, the Syndicate has nevertheless always retained strong ties to the Federation. Right now their residents are feeling immensely sympathetic to the plight of their Federal brothers - particularly fellow Intaki - even to the point of suggesting a more moderate stance towards them. The more far-sighted officials, however, have a feeling that relations will get a lot worse before they get better.

The Society

What The Society make of events is anyone's guess - they certainly aren't saying anything.

ORE

Beyond the consideration that a war will require volumes of minerals that only they can provide, the employees of the ORE consortium remain only distantly interested in the affairs of the four Empires. A true nullsec organization in mindset as well as geography, they assume that nothing that happens "in there" can affect them "out here." Besides which, of course, they have problems closer to home to worry about.

Mordu's Legion

The Legion didn't actually participate in the fighting, but their rapid response and clear willingness to get involved has earned them plenty of additional friends within the Caldari Navy and the megacorp security forces. On top of this, recruitment activity is at an all time high; soldiers from both the Federation and the State, united by their disaffection with their respective leaderships, are quietly knocking on the Legion's door. The rank and file are back to normal operational status now, but the word on the grapevine is that Mordu and his lieutenants are still ensconced in their war room and pumping a prodigious amount of encrypted data out into their strategic mainframes.

The Blood Raider Covenant

The Blood Raiders are both terrified and enraged with the return of Jamyl Sarum, to say nothing of their annoyance that their dealings with Chamberlain Karsoth didn't work out quite like they'd hoped. They are otherwise politically uninterested in the affairs of the heirs, at least to the casual eye. There's been an upswing in Raider incursions along the empire borders in the Bleaks and Devoid, and their priests are handing out some unusual assignments. But they remain bitter enemies with Jamyl Sarum, and are both scared to their core and -

to the extent that their new purpose in life is to eliminate her - inspired.

Angel Cartel

Those Cartel members who care about events in Empire are not much more enlightened than anybody else - some are still a little bitter about pulling back from Skarkon, but most are just figuring that conflict will result in a greater demand for their products and a decreased security presence on the fringes of Minmatar space where they operate. There's mutterings that the Dominations know rather more than they're letting on to the rest of the organization but, well, that's business as usual and surprises no-one. Of more concern to the average Angel is the loose faction that splintered from the Cartel. Historically the Cartel has garnered a great many recruits from Minmatar civilians disenchanted with the Republic; many of these individuals saw the rediscovery of the Starkmanir people and the Minmatar backbone as a sign that times were changing, and after re-evaluating their position decided that the Cartel was no longer for them. With the Republic reluctant to welcome them back with open arms, there are signs that they're beginning to group together in loose packs, and the Cartel is already worrying about their destabilizing presence.

Thukker Tribe

Having had their shining moment of glory, the Thukker tribe are feeling pretty good about themselves. After decades of toil, they finally have a brief moment where they can sit back and smile. There's a degree of uncertainty as to what will happen next - they don't know whether they'll rejoin the other tribes, for example, and they don't know which way the Republic is going to go - but the Thukker thrive on uncertainty, so a healthy bit of political confusion just puts a bigger smile on their faces. It's not all smiles and laughter, though. They are continually reminded of the disastrous landings on Mekhios; when Jamyl Sarum's superweapon obliterated the Elder fleet in orbit, the predominantly Thukker ground forces were stranded on the surface. While many unpleasant rumors circulate among the caravans, the total absence of any information about their fate is far more disturbing than any lurid story.

Serpentis

Like their sometime-associates the Guristas, the Serpentis are paying a great deal of attention to recent developments. Their business relies heavily on indirect links to the Federation, and it's rumored that Sarpati still has unfinished business there. Serpentis Corp employees were glued to the newsfeeds as events unfolded, and they're still talking about it today. There's a degree of uncertainty as to how exactly this will affect their work, and many are waiting on the edge of their seats to find out how the Federal government reacts.

Sansha's Nation

The bulk of the Nation don't appear to be capable of conventional thought, and as to the True Sansha, who ever knows what's on their mind?

Guristas Pirates

Unlike some of their more estranged brethren, the Guristas are paying a very active and often practical interest in Empire politics. The one imperfectly executed operation during the Caldari invasion that attracted news coverage turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as it ended up deflecting attention from the other incursions made within the same time frame. Many Guristas captains are asking each other how exactly the Rabbit knew to have all their ships conveniently positioned to make a synchronized strike on such short notice, but they're asking with a half-knowing smile on their faces. The next few months promise to be an interesting - and lucrative - time for the Guristas, and despite the problems caused by the renewed militancy of the State they're still confident they can turn events to their advantage.

Timeline

Forgotten Age (AD 2730 - AD 8100)

AD 2730

- * Old earth solar system fully colonized

AD 3691

- * Warp technology discovered

AD 3805

- * The Conformists, a group within the Unified Catholic Church, settles on Soekheviti, a planet within the Sol system

AD 3841

- * The Conformists take control of Soekheviti

AD 3897

- * The Conformists lose power and are exiled from Soekheviti

AD 4224

- * Warp drives for ships invented

AD 7987

- * The wormhole leading to the world of EVE is discovered

AD 7989

- * The first explorers venture through the wormhole. Mass colonization begins soon after
- * The Conformists start migrating to the world of EVE, spurred on by Dano Gheinok, one of their leaders. Gheinok manages to direct them to the planet of Athra
- * The second planet in the VH-451 system is bought by people from the Tau Ceti system

AD 7989-8061

- * New Eden and its neighboring systems and constellations are colonized rapidly

AD 7993

- * The third planet in the VH-451 system is bought by a megacorporation. Small-scale colonization starts soon after

AD 8000

- * Dano Gheinok proclaims himself Prophet and sets the foundations of the Amarr theocracy to come

AD 8017

- * The System CMS-17 is discovered, later renamed Pator. The main planet, Matar, is quickly colonized due to its very hospitable conditions

AD 8052

- * The last colony ship from Tau Ceti arrives before EVE closes

AD 8061

- * EVE gate collapses

AD 8061

- * The last group of Conformists arrives on Athra. The Conformists all settle on the continent of Amarr, from which they later take their name

AD 8100

- * Smaller settlements of gate settlers have perished, with only a few saved by larger settlements close by

The Dark Ages (AD 8100 - AD 16262)

- * Unknown

Age of Expansion (AD 16262 - YC 100)

AD 16262

- * First recorded civilizations emerge on Caldari

AD 16470

- * The first Amarr Emperor is crowned

AD 17453

- * The Raata Empire is formed, laying the foundation for what will later become the Caldari State

AD 17670

- * The Cathura Rebellion takes place on Caldari

AD 18622

- * Four distinct civilizations develop on Matar. They gradually become aware of each other, but primitive technology keeps them from maintaining steady contact

AD 20022

- * The Udorians arrive on the Amarr continent, spurring the static Amarr society into a period of rapid change

AD 20078

- * The Reclaiming is launched. The Amarrians start a war to conquer all the lands on Athra

AD 20371

- * The Amarrians conquer the last Udorian state

AD 20374

- * (Approx) Minmatar tribes amalgamate, forming a planetary culture

AD 20544

- * The Amarrians conquer the last state on Athra. They now control the whole planet

AD 20998

- * The Raata Empire falls and is divided into myriad small states

AD 21290

- * The Amarr build their first star gate, between Amarr and Hedion. This sparks a period of great expansion for the Empire

AD 21346

- * (Approx) Emperor Zaragram II takes power in the Amarr Empire

AD 21413

- * The first Minmatar space ship is built. During the next centuries, the Minmatar settle on a number of planets and moons in three systems, using ancient star gates

AD 21423

- * The Amarrians discover the Ealurians and subsequently conquer them in the spirit of the Reclaiming

AD 21460

- * Emperor Zaragram II's reign ends and the Council of Apostles comes into power in Amarr, purifying the faith and preserving the original scriptures through the Order of St. Tetrimon

AD 21656

- * Doule dos Rouvenor comes into power on the continent of Garoun on the Gallente homeworld, spawning a period of great cultural and technological progress

AD 21714

- * Doule dos Rouvenor III inherits his father's crown, starting a new calendar based on his ascension, the Age of Rouvenor (AR)

AD 21837

- * The Garoun Empire collapses, but its legacy remains and rapid technological advances are made among the Gallente

AD 21875

- * The Moral Reforms start. The status of the Emperor alters and the power of the Apostles is curbed

AD 21950

- * The Moral Reforms end

AD 22355

- * First contact between the Amarr and the Minmatar. Amarr immediately raid the Minmatar nation for slaves, an activity they will continue for 125 years

AD 22463

- * The Gallente spot the Caldari on Caldari Prime but are unable to establish contact

AD 22480

- * The Amarr escalate their slave raids into a war of conquest against the Minmatar, invade and conquer Matar, leave other worlds alone for the time being

AD 22517

- * First contact between Gallente and Caldari

AD 22588

- * The Gallente and the Caldari build their first stargate out of VH-451, sparking a period of expansion which mostly benefits the Gallente

AD 22631

- * The Cultural Deliverance Society (CDS) arrives on Caldari

AD 22684

- * Isuuaya, the first Caldari corporation, is established

AD 22762

- * Death of Amarr Emperor Damius III

AD 22794

- * First contact between the Gallente and the Intaki

AD 22809

- * First contact between the Gallente and the Mannar

AD 22821

- * The Sotiyo-Urbaata drive, the first warp drive, is built

AD 22947

- * The Starkmanir tribe is annihilated by Idonis Ardishapur

AD 23041

- * Heideran VII becomes Emperor of Amarr; Khanid secedes from the Amarr Empire; the Khanid Kingdom is founded

AD 23044

- * The Society of Conscious Thought is founded in the Jove Empire

AD 23058

- * Amarr discovers jump drive technology, allowing instant jumps between systems with no stargates and enabling far more rapid expansion

AD 23121

- * The Gallente Federation is founded. Caldari are forced by circumstance to join

AD 23146

- * (Approx) Quafe first appears

AD 23146

- * FTL Communications are discovered

AD 23149

- * The Jove make themselves known to the Gallente; engage in limited diplomacy

AD 23154

- * The Caldari secede from the Federation.

AD 23155

- * The Gallente-Caldari War begins
- * The Jovians cut off contact with the Gallente Federation

AD 23156

- * The Caldari leave Caldari Prime

AD 23180

- * First contact between Gallente and Amarr

AD 23191

* All four major nations of New Eden have by this point come into contact with each other

AD 23193

* The Jove make themselves known to the rest of the four empires

AD 23194

* The Scope news agency is founded

AD 23210

* The Gallente and the Amarr reach the Gallente-Amarr Free Trade Agreement of 23210.

AD 23216

- * The Amarr conquer the Eanna planet in the Hror system.
- * The Amarr-Jove war takes place, in which the Amarr are crushed.
- * The Minmatar Rebellion takes place

AD 23224

* The Jovians give capsule technology to the Caldari

AD 23233

* CONCORD is founded by the five empires

AD 23236 (YC 0)

* Eden Standard Time (EST) is agreed upon by world leaders at the historic Yoiul Conference. A period of accelerated space colonization by independent parties begins

YC 4

* The Angel Cartel is formed

YC 5

* Sansha's Nation begins to form

YC 7

* President Aidonis Elabon of the Gallente Federation dies

YC 11

* Gallente construction ship containing Ceul Darieux sets out for Ouperia

YC 12

* The Gallente-Caldari War ends

YC 37

* Sansha Kuvakei's experiments are uncovered, and his nation is attacked and dismantled by the four empires. Sansha himself is killed

YC 55

* Ceul Darieux reaches Ouperia system

YC 57

* Ceul Darieux builds stargate to Ouperia, becomes international celebrity, founds CreoDron

YC 75

* Salvador Sarpati purchases the Serpents system and starts building his organization there

YC 80

* InterBus is formed [13]

YC 95

* The Girani-Fa incident between the Amarr and the Gallente is defused by the Quafe Company

YC 96

* The Guristas pirate cartel is formed by two defectors from the Caldari Navy, known as Fatal and The Rabbit

YC 100

* Dorn en Diabel dies in a freak accident. His oldest son, Gare en Diabel, inherits his father's position of power in the Syndicate. [14]

Empyrean Age (YC 105 - Present)

YC 105

- * The capsule and the clone are joined. Capsuleers begin plying the spaceways and the Emphyrean age begins.
- * The Crielere Project begins as a major Caldari-Gallente joint endeavour and perhaps the greatest scientific project ever seen in New Eden.
- * Amarr Emperor Heideran VII is awarded the Aidonis for contributions to interstellar peace.
- * Heideran VII dies and Succession Trials are held, resulting in Dorian Kor-Azor ascending to the Imperial Throne as Dorian II.

YC 106

- * The Crielere Project dissolves in acrimony following the revelation that Ishukone Corporation had been unilaterally appropriating technology from the Caldari-Gallente co-operative project.
- * CONCORD reveal the existence of a series of deep space bases together with a network of 'smuggler gates' linking the lawless outer regions.
- * UDI terrorists strike at a major celebrity event in the Gallente Federation, killing many guests and narrowly missing a chance to assassinate President Souro Foiritan in what becomes known as the 'Elarel Massacre'.
- * President Foiritan succeeds in having the Gallente Federation constitution amended to permit an incumbent president to run for a second term.
- * The Jove Empire assigns Misu Baniya as a roving ambassador to the four major empires and other factions. Baniya is later disassembled in a freak teleporter accident but reconstructed after his molecular fragments are recovered.
- * Major rogue drone infestations are discovered across empire space.
- * CONCORD formally recognises capsuleer alliances and licenses starbase technology for capsuleer use.

YC 107

- * Zainou Biotech biochemist Ullia Hnolku goes missing, with his wife Eckarine Mitumi-Hnolku, taking with him the formula for Insorzapine bisulfate, known as Insorum
- * A Serpents strike force hijacks the Molyneux, one of the six Soltueur-class Titans controlled by the Federation Navy.
- * The Blood Raiders initiate a chemical attack on Mabnen I, allegedly using a modified form of Insorum, resulting in a horrific loss of life. This attack goes down in history as the 'Mabnen Incident'.
- * In retaliation for the Mabnen attack, the Amarr Empire goes to war with the Blood Raider Covenant and expels them from the Bleak Lands.
- * Emperor Dorian II is assassinated. Court Chamberlain Dochuta Karsoth assumes interim control of the Empire.

YC 108

- * An explosion in the atmosphere of Reschard V devastates the planet, killing almost all its inhabitants.
- * The Amarr Privy Council lifts the edict of suppression against the Order of St. Tetrimon, clearing the way for the Order to openly return to the Empire. The edict is later reinstated after conflict between the Order and the Theology Council.
- * Gallente Federation Presidential Elections are held with Souro Foiritan winning by a narrow margin.
- * Republic Fleet Captain Karishal Muritor steals a Republic mothership and his Defiants organization begins a long campaign against the Amarr in the Bleak Lands.
- * Violent worker uprisings take place in the Caldari State in Kassigainen and Sirppala systems.
- * Stargates to the 'Drone Regions' are activated and capsuleers rush to exploit these new territories.

YC 109

- * The Defiants succeed in destroying an Amarrian battlestation in the Bleak Lands.
- * Karishal Muritor is killed by Republic Fleet forces after refusing to hand himself in at a truce meeting.
- * Royal Heir Aritcio Kor-Azor found guilty of mass transgressions against the people of the Kor-Azor domain by the Speakers of Truth and suffers a traditional penalty stopping just short of death.
- * Continuing worker violence in the Caldari State is suppressed after the Brothers of Freedom organization is dismantled by Caldari security forces.
- * The Amarrian 7th Fleet arrives in the Bleak Lands and conflict with the Defiants flares up once more.

YC 110

- * Amarr Court Chamberlain Dochuta Karsoth claims that several Theology Council Justices were at the heart of a conspiracy to assassinate him.
- * Tibus Heth rises to the position of CEO of Caldari Constructions after a worker revolt and buyout. Heth later consolidates his position, forms the Caldari Providence Directorate and assumes control of the Caldari State.
- * The Nyx-class mothership FNS Wandering Saint rams into the Ishukone Headquarters station in Malkalen, killing Ishukone CEO Otro Gariushi and over 420,000 people in what becomes known as the 'Malkalen Disaster'.
- * The Elder Fleet attacks and disables CONCORD, starting the Elder War, before mounting a large-scale invasion of the Amarr Empire and Ammatar Mandate.
- * The Caldari State invades the Gallente Federation, occupying Caldari Prime, before a ceasefire is agreed leaving the Caldari homeworld under State control.
- * Jamyl Sarum, long thought dead, returns to the Amarr Empire and repels the Elder Fleet with a mysterious 'superweapon'.
- * CONCORD reasserts its control and activates the 'Emergency Militia War Powers Act', leading to the formation of capsuleer militias by the four empires.
- * Maleatu Shakor is elected unopposed as Prime Minister of the Minmatar Republic.

- * Jamyl Sarum is crowned Empress Jamyl I.
- * The House Kador fleet invades Gallente Federation territory and is repelled by a vastly superior Gallente fleet.
- * A retaliatory Gallente expeditionary force recovers the traitorous Grand Admiral Anvent Eturrer from Kador space.
- * Royal Khanid Navy operations against the Blood Raider Covenant result in the capture of renegade Court Chamberlain Dochuta Karsoth.
- * Anvent Eturrer and Dochuta Karsoth are executed.
- * Empress Jamyl I orders the emancipation of all slaves of 9th generation and upwards.

YC 111

YC 112

- * Current year

CLONING

CROMAUX INC.
OFFERING MEMORANDUM

The Capsule

Initially the hydrostatic capsule, as given to the Caldari by the Jovians roughly 120 years ago, contained no facilities for the clone-body retransplantation of those dying inside it.. In addition, it proved fiercely maladaptive to the human body in myriad ways. All sorts of physiological differences between ordinary humans and their genetically enhanced Jovian counterparts served to make the pod extremely dangerous to humans in its original incarnation, and even the most rigorous training regimens usually failed to save people from the horrors of the mind lock or wetgraving.

Added to this, the mere thought of hooking wires and tubes into one's body and stepping into something as seemingly alien as a hydrostatic pod, filled with fluid intended to nurture the body through a state of what is essentially suspended animation, didn't (and still doesn't) appeal to the vast majority of pilots. For decades horror stories abounded as to the hideous things that could happen to a person inside a capsule (most of which, unsettlingly enough, were true).

For years, no single political or commercial entity had enough vested interest in pod tech to attempt a change in this public perception. The Jovians had held the official patent on the technology since releasing it to the Caldari, but had adamantly refused all monetary remuneration for its production. For this show of apparent nobility they gave no explanation; nor did they make any attempt to increase the technology's practicality for those not endowed with their genetic superiority. Their motives in not doing so have been speculated upon broadly and extensively, but no consensus has ever been reached.

Throughout the period where the capsule and the clone had not yet begun their courtship, pods saw some use among those select few able to handle the intense nausea, hallucinations and general mental instability



engendered by prolonged occupancy. Stories are told of pod pilot heroes flying on the side of the Caldari during the twilight years of the Gallente-Caldari war, executing maneuvers unthinkable to those encumbered with a full crew complement and the bothersome necessity of using vocal commands and hand-eye coordination to steer their vessels. Such pilots were a rare breed, though; because of the technology's inherent dangers, capsule-fitted ships were not yet in mass production and existing models therefore had to be retro-fitted at great effort and expense.

Excluded from general usage due to drawbacks which rendered it a ludicrously expensive exercise in mortal danger, the capsule lay dormant for years.

Cloning

While new techniques in clone creation and retransplantation have made the process cheaper and more efficient today than ever before, the inherent unreliability of non-capsule cloning and the still-extravagant cost involved for prospective clients effectively prohibits the vast majority of planetside inhabitants from considering it an option. Additionally, moral and religious objections to the work done in the field have surfaced to some extent in every society where its products have become available. Derogatorily known as “Doomies” by those who don’t share their beliefs, these objectors, sometimes numbering among them major political and religious figureheads, have nonetheless exerted a considerable amount of influence on the way cloning is perceived by the general populace. Protests and riots over the issue, while rare, have taken place on numerous worlds since commercial cloning began, and while the cloning companies’ ceaseless marketing has yielded significantly greater public acceptance in the past few years, a number of people still feel strongly that the whole field represents a denial of humanity’s spirituality and should be abandoned for “safer” scientific pursuits.

Despite the advances made in cloning tech, in almost every single environment retransplantation of the mind at time of death is still risky ground. The crucial element in the process relies on a brain-scan snapshot being taken at the precise time of death and transmitted to the waiting clone, and so the transneural burning scanner required to do so needs to be mounted somewhere close to the person at all times. Since the snapshot itself causes massive physical damage to the gray matter, there can be no margin of error; it needs to be done at the exact time of death. In planetary vehicles, the cloning companies have experimented with mounting the transneural scanner in a variety of locations, but the almost limitless potentiality of planet-bound environments has proved time and again that it just isn’t safe – snapshots either go off due to false stimuli, leaving healthy clients in a vegetative state, or fail to go off due to circumstances unforeseen by the safeguard mechanism, leaving clients dead with no chance of retransplantation.

In the capsule, however, things are different. All the equipment needs to do is detect a breach in the pod, because – as every cadet has hammered into his head from the moment he starts training – pod breach, without exception, spells doom for the person inside. Therefore, the instant the egg begins to crack, two things happen: the wire-cap on the pilot’s head injects an instantly lethal nanotoxin into his bloodstream and the scanner sends its piercing light into his skull. Scarce seconds later, he begins the muddy climb towards consciousness in a new body, light years away.



A Match Made in Heaven

It was not until eight years ago that clone manufacturers realized the vast potential of the hydrostatic capsule as a platform for their own technology.

Funded by some of the largest megacorporation conglomerates in the universe, they set to work on capsule research and development, buying permission from the proper agencies to make modifications to the original blueprint.

After years of dedicated research, a breakthrough was made. In YC 104 (two years ago), the first transneural burning scan interface was successfully installed in a capsule; technology that would, within six months of testing, allow for perfect clone transplantation upon pod breach in 99.7% of tested instances – a level of reliability far surpassing anything the cloning industry had ever achieved before.

At that point, utilizing the considerable capital at their disposal, the cloning corporations managed through incessant and insidious marketing strategies to change the public perception sufficiently to allow them to push their industry into the limelight through the avenue of the hydrostatic capsule. After six months of exhaustive testing and tireless marketing, the transneural burning scan interface was finalized and public perception had been primed.

At the same time this was happening, CONCORD prepared and adopted legal acts which required every single manufactured capsule to be fitted with a transneural echo burning scanner, in addition to mandating clone contracts for every single pilot cleared to fly a capsule-fitted vessel. The official rationale given for the laws was that an increase in the viable applications of capsule equipment would allow for further exploration along the technological frontier as well as the trackless fathoms of deep space. It was, of course, widely whispered that the cloning companies had used their megacorp backing to effect these legislative changes, but those theories were never conclusively proven.

Whatever its real causes, the fact remained – the capsule and the clone were now inextricably joined, the legislative mandate consolidating their bond. Thus was born the PC pilot.

CLONING

CROMAUX INC.
OFFERING MEMORANDUM

Statement of purpose

Cromeaux Inc. aims to become the largest provider of high quality clones within the Federation. The cloning business is becoming one of the most lucrative industries in the world of EVE and an innovative and vigorous company can quickly get a good turnover. Cromeaux Inc. has in recent months hired some of the best scientists in the field and intends with their help to develop further its pioneering cloning-technique to gain a sizeable market-share within the next five years. Cromeaux Inc. was founded 7 years ago as an independent division of the Chema Tech, which owns 2/3 of the company. The rest is held by key employees (25%) and the Bank of Luminaire (8%). The funds raised in this round of finances will allow the company to grow to the level where it can start offering competitive products on a Federation-wide bases.

Business

Clones are a luxury commodity in high demand. The number of illegal clone clinics, often using inferior and even dangerous materials, clearly indicates that a substantial market is out there ready to be serviced by high quality, reliable and governmentally approved clones.

Cromeaux Inc. was founded 7 years ago by Dr. Yomir Veschens, an established expert in biochemistry and the entrepreneur Eron Jascete. Today it has more than 4.000 employees, including many of the leading geneticists and bioengineers in the world. Some of the key personnel currently employed by Cromeaux Inc. are:

- * Dr. Yomir Veschens. CTO. Graduated from SWS in '74 EST with a Ph.D. in both Biochemistry and Gene-design. Member of Dr. Jurg Akrael's team and contributed to its successes in perfecting the brain mapping technique. Co-founder of Cromeaux Inc.

- * Marika Alois. CEO. A respected manager, Alois has been director of several startup companies, including KS Manufacturing and DioSec. Became CEO of Cromeaux Inc. earlier this year.

- * Daphnie Fonterouche. CFO. Former bank manager for Bank of Luminaire. Worked as an independent financial advisor before joining Cromeaux Inc. four years ago.

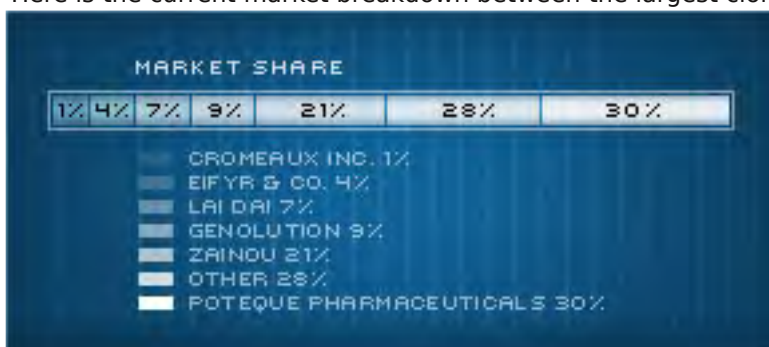
- * Dr. Roul Gonzi. Senior Engineer. Former employee in the clone department of Poteque Pharmaceuticals, where he supervised the clone research team.

- * Dr. Araham Keredin. Researcher. Dr. Keredin was a Biology professor at the Royal Institute on Amarr Prime before joining Cromeaux Inc. in the spring. He is an expert on mnemonic theories and psyche restoration.

Cromeaux Inc. already operates five cloning facilities in the Federation, all in high density, high yield areas. The company plans to open seven more facilities in the coming months, thereof four located on space stations. This is to tap into the clone demand from space ship captains, which are quickly becoming the largest group of clientele.

The largest manufacturer of clones within the Federation at the moment is Poteque Pharmaceuticals. Being the largest biotech company within the Federation Poteque made an easy transaction into the clone business as soon as the technology became financially viable and the laws for their use firm. However, the fact that the clone production is only a small subsection of the huge conglomerate means it is not a priority. Cromeaux Inc., on the other hand, by focusing solely on clones, have a unique opportunity to become a leader in the field of clone manufacturing.

Here is the current market breakdown between the largest clone companies:



Cromeaux Inc. intends to control 5% of the clone market in five years.

Operation

Cloning technology can be divided into three major components: clone manufacturing, brain growth & storage and clone quality. Each of these areas requires intimate knowledge and skilled staff to operate, something Cromeaux Inc. is very proud to possess in abundance.

Clone manufacturing:

Clones are manufactured using biomass. Modern methods allow pretty much any kind of biomass to be used. The best clones are constructed from human cadavers, but anything from animal carcasses to organic soups can be used. Using lower quality materials requires more extensive structuring and chemical processes and introduces a greater risk for error in the transfer of the customer's features.

At the time of purchase, the customer undergoes a thorough examination and several tissue samples are taken. This is then used to construct a clone of the customer – a clone that receives the consciousness of the original at the moment of death, granting a new life.



At Cromeaux Inc. all clones are made from certified human cadavers, all of them received from willing donors. The biomass has not been tampered with or thinned out – only highest quality preservatives have been introduced to hinder tissue decomposition. Cromeaux Inc. mission is to establish itself as the manufacturer of clones of the very highest quality and its clientele can rest assured that the underhanded tactics used by so many clone stations do not apply for its operation. All federal laws and regulations are applied rigorously, with governmental inspectors a permanent feature on all our stations.

The biomass is used to construct a functioning body. This body is complete in every sense, with fully functioning organs and peripheral neural system. Instead of a brain there is only a primitive cluster of ganglia which is capable of maintaining heart rate, blood pressure and respiration. Core body temperature is dependent on the environment, and so has to be controlled very carefully in order not to damage the cells. The immune system of the donor is crippled and the thymus is removed and replaced with implanted cells from the customer. The clone body will thus not reject any implant – this makes it possible to seed the body with stem cells from the customer. The clone's body cells divide very slowly, allowing the new cells to take over in time.

Culturing a clone takes several months, but all clone stations store generic clones that are only put to use when a client buys it. The skull, and frequently other bones as well, is replaced by osteoplastic materials – soft synthetic bone polymers that can be shaped and then hardened by gamma laser irradiation. In this way, facial features and other body marks and textures can be applied very quickly. The process is very quick and is applied as soon as the clone is purchased. A similar technique is also used to adjust skin tones and give special skin marks, such as tattoos and scars. This means that the featureless clone is quickly transformed into an identical twin of the client.

Any respectable cloning company must take into account the physiological differences between the human races and bloodlines in existence. Each of them has unique DNA imprints that must be replicated so that the transfer process goes as smoothly and with as little deviances as possible. If done properly the unique characteristics and traits that each bloodline has can be kept intact. This is very important during the brain growth process (see below), as the memory restoration is closely linked to the exact neuro-strata layout of the brain tissue, which varies greatly from one bloodline to the next.

Brain growth & storage

Clones are never bred with an intact brain as this is obviously very much dictated by the client. Once a clone is bought a thorough brain scan is made of the client to determine the shape of the brain and the placement of nerve cell nuclei. Then a three dimensional gel structure that matches the shape of the client's brain is constructed.

The cranium is constructed by seeding this gel structure (heavily impregnated with nutrients and inactivated growth factors) with nerve cells and glia, in accordance with information from the brain scan. Bound to the growth factors are molecular receptors that are coupled (using the well known FTL-communication technology) to molecules placed in the customer's burning scanner (see Clone quality, below). After seeding, the gel structure is suspended until the final moment of the original. As the burning scan is made, the molecules bound to the inactivated growth factors become unstable and cause activation of the growth factors by cleavage. The activation is an exothermic process which produces sufficient heat to melt pathways into the gel model of the brain. Thus dendrite paths in the model will be the same as in the original's brain, their growth fuelled by the activated growth factors

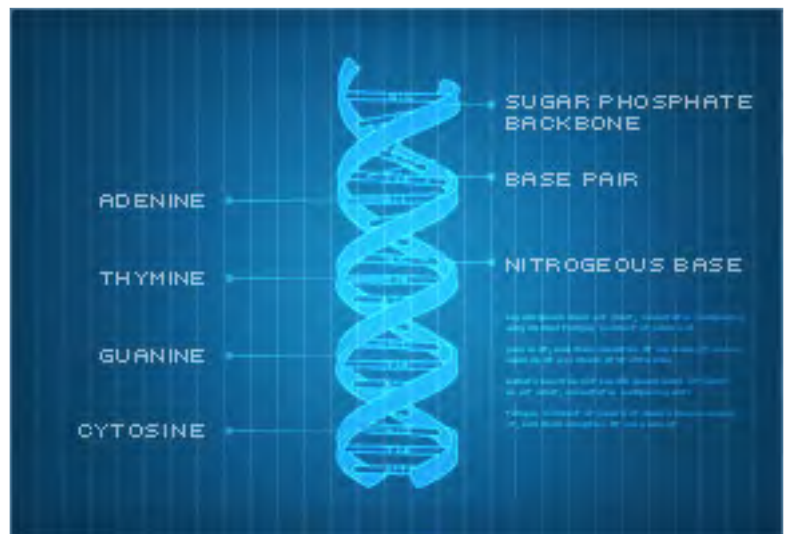
This process alone is not sufficient for an exact replica of the original's brain. The precise shape of the dendrites and the potentiation level of the synapse, which together determine memories and skills, have to be fine tuned through a neural link. Impulses are sent through the link to stimulate further growth and shaping of the dendrites, until they fill in the paths formed with the activation process. In the final stages of this tuning, as the clone regains consciousness, potentiation at synapses is quickly adjusted to recorded levels, generating a feeling often described as one of memories "coming back".

Clone stations store client clones (also termed readied clones) as well as still-to-be-used featureless clone bodies. The cloning process is always on a one-to-one basis, as the molecular receptors bound in the gel structure are coupled to the burning scanner carried by the customer. Premium members will of course always have clone copies of themselves in every Cromeaux Inc. clone facility – service that Cromeaux Inc. pioneered when it started and has since been imitated by all the other major clone companies – but as there is only one burning scanner for each clone, they will have to use a scanner that is coupled to a clone in a facility close to their current position.

In the final stages of this tuning, as the clone regains consciousness, potentiation at synapses is quickly adjusted to recorded levels, generating a feeling often described as one of memories "coming back"

Clone quality

The moment the capsule sensors detect a breach in the capsule they activate the emergency uploading of the mind of the person in the capsule, as described above. The capsule makes an analog scan of the brain of the person. This extraordinary snapshot records the exact state of the mind, including every neuron connection between every brain cell. Because the scan must be instantaneous and efficient it brutalizes the brain in the process. In early tests, the subjects were left with permanent and severe brain damage after being scanned, a fact that is impossible to escape. But as the person is about to die in any case, this unfortunate side effect has little consequences. All modern capsules are highly tuned to when to take the snapshot – if it is done too early there is a chance that the subject will not die at all, but live on in a vegetative state. And if the snapshot is taken too late there is the risk that the scan will fail or even that the revived clone will remember its own death, a very traumatic experience that can introduce severe psychological and functional problems in the clone.

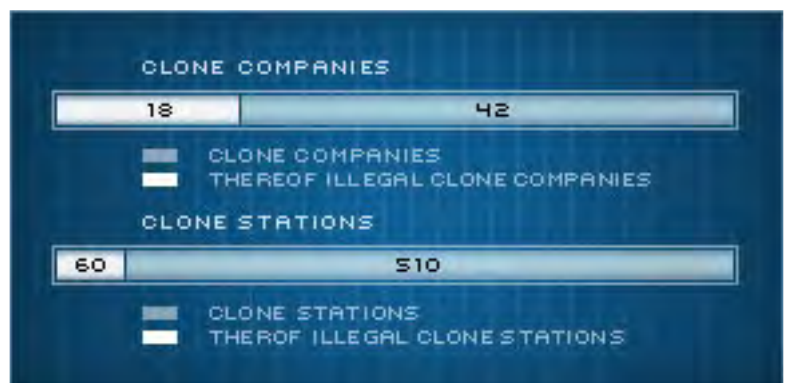


The quality of the clone is always critical and this is a point that cannot be stressed enough. The closer the clone's brain is to the original in shape and form the better the reviving process will work. The more different they are the more memory will be lost during the synaptic growth process. This is most clearly seen in the space industry. For a space captain to retain his license he must be connected to a cloning facility. But if he fails to buy himself a suitable clone, which he is not required to do by law, he will be given a generic clone instead at the time of death. As these generic clones are bound to have very different brains than the original the memory loss can be very severe. The best clones, made from certified human cadavers in perfect condition, are able to retain up to 99.99% of memory – a figure close enough to call the revived clone a true doppelganger of the original person.

Market analysis

The cloning clientele has risen steadily for the last several years. There are several reasons for this:

- * New cloning techniques that are cheaper and easier to employ.
- * Increased visibility of cloning stations due to competition.
- * Increased number of space captains – the single largest customer group.
- * New laws and regulations in allowing the use of clones in areas where it was impossible before.
- * Cloning no longer considered a risky experiment or a social taboo in most areas.



It is impossible to know with any certainty the size of the clone market due to excessive number of illegal or hidden clone stations. Although many of these illegal stations produce inferior clones they still steal a lot of potential customers from the legal clone stations. To be fair, these illegal stations do provide a service to people that would be denied service in any respectable cloning facility. Here is break down of various stats of the clone market today, note that numbers are not totally accurate due to lack of information from illegal stations:



As can be seen in these figures the space industry is proportionally very big considering that space farers are only a fraction of the total population in the world. This is understandable as space captains are the only profession required by law to do business with a clone station, not to mention the many hazards of space faring, which time and again has demonstrated the need for such a law. The space industry is also the fastest growing industry there is. Planetary clone stations increased their sale last year by 3% on the average, while clone facilities on space stations increased their sale on the average by a whopping 11% during the same period.

Income project and future prospects

The first 2 years Cromeaux Inc. focused on research & development. The first clone facility was opened in the third year and since then another clone station has been added every year. With the first clone station came the first earnings, but last year was the first one that earnings matched spending. This means that the business has stabilized and a solid foundation has been created for further expansion. The new funding will allow Cromeaux Inc. to expand its operation to space, which, as has been demonstrated, is where the clone industry is growing fastest. Of the seven new clone facilities that are planned, four will be located in space – the company has already secured very promising sites for these stations, all in high traffic systems. These stations are expected to become the heart of Cromeaux Inc.'s operation. These sites are on the following stations: Miroitem II, Reblier Prime, Deven I, Colcer II.

The projected earnings of the company once these seven stations are up and running is expected to quadruple. At the same time the cost of running the company is expected to double. Thus, in 2 years time, a profit of between 1-2.000.000.000 is expected.

The board of Cromeaux Inc. considers that the risks involved in this expansion are minimal, while the potential payoff is huge for all investors involved.



Committee on Transgressions on Illegal Substances vis-à-vis the Space Industry Department of Behavioral Studies, University of Caille On Behalf of the Gallente Federation Senate Report A-4-1 (Revision Update #2)

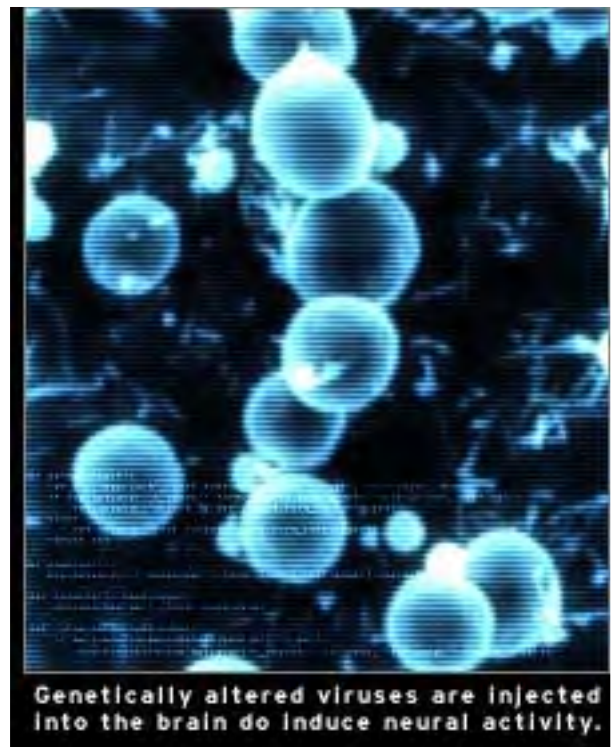
For the last few years there has been a marked increase in demand for Cerebral Cognitive Inducing Neural Booster (commonly called boosters) in the space industry, notably amongst space pilots. These boosters have been for number of years banned by all governments on grounds of health hazards. But the unique situation of the space pilots puts them at reduced risk and many are seemingly willing to take their chance of health failure to enhance their abilities, even momentarily. In the last few years new boosters have become available on the black market and the demand increases by the day. Underground laboratories are being set up in the outer regions, often heavily guarded or highly secret.

Through increased surveillance by DED and other law enforcement agencies more than two dozen laboratories have been closed down in the last 12 months alone. Most of them were operating in small space stations far from the main travel routes. But a recent investigation conducted by DED shows that as many as 50 laboratories are still in operation, with at least 2 new being set up every month. With the increased profits booster manufacturers are getting, new laboratories are not only getting bigger and better equipped, they're also being constructed further and further away from empire space, and hence from empire jurisdiction. Furthermore, with the increased secrecy surrounding new laboratories their defenses are stronger now than ever, requiring stronger measures on our part to take them out.

The first boosters appeared a century ago, the product of advancements in recombinant DNA technology, where bacteria are infected with virus to induce protein production in the bacteria. The basic method has been known for centuries and used for instance in the treatment of diabetes. In a Gallentean funded research project headed by Dr. Hollows and Dr. Tancrez the next step in the evolution of this method was taken, when this same procedure was used to directly infect cells within a human body with gene-altered viruses. The cells affected are nerve cells in the brain, where the viral vectors are used to induce production of membranous proteins at synapses, aiding the structural changes of the synapse necessary for formation of memories. In a breakthrough experiment, this procedure was shown to vastly reduce the maze-learning times of laboratory animals, with minimal adverse effects.

After further animal experiments, the first human trials were performed on one of Dr. Tancrez students, who volunteered to participate for the advancement of science. Dr. Tancrez' student showed remarkable learning capabilities for a period of time after the experiment. The skills he acquired during this period were retained until his untimely death from an unrelated infection two years later. The Federation permitted further human studies a few months later during the Waschi Uprising, when the Caldari and the Gallente were at the brink of war for some time. The Federation foresaw a huge need for space pilots in case of war, so they authorized the tests in the hope that the boosters would hugely speed up the training time for new pilots. Being able to test and develop boosters on human subjects made it possible for the research team to take the final steps in completing the gene therapy and the first marketable boosters were born.

Boosters quickly became very popular, especially among the social elite, which could easily afford the high costs involved. The pioneers of the booster industry became household names, with none more famous than A.R. Louria, the founder of Booster-Tech Inc., the largest of the booster producing companies. The benefits of the boosters were marked, even at this early stage in their development when they were not nearly as potent as those available today. In few years time boosters had become the norm for a lot of people. The booster producing companies steadily improved their manufacturing techniques, resulting in cheaper and more powerful boosters, as well as more convenient injection techniques. Instead of cumbersome and often painful shots, techniques for introducing the virus through the neural link have been developed, making the boosters all the more attractive to space pilots.



All the major booster companies made extensive tests on boosters before making them available to the general public. These tests did not reveal any serious side effects, even for regular consumers. These results were confirmed in tests conducted by independent research firms and governmental institutes. But as with most things that seem too good to be true, they turn out to be, in practice, too good to be true. Unfortunately, the side effects of boosters did not materialize until decades after they first appeared.

The most serious side-effect of boosters known from the outset was epilepsy. It was discovered that certain genetic elements made some individuals more prone to this side effect than others. Once the genetic cause had been identified it became possible to determine the risk beforehand and thus limit the damage from this side effect. But about four decades after the first boosters arrived another, much more serious, side effect was discovered. It was established that a deadly brain disease caused by prions was directly related to the usage of boosters. It seemed that the boosters caused a somatic mutation in the cells affected, greatly increasing the possibility of incorrect protein formation and consequent deposition of protein plaques in nerve cells. This caused gradual nerve damage and loss of function of brain tissues. The incurable disease slowly eroded the brain, causing the person to lose memory, motor skills, sanity and ending with functional failure of the vital organs

At first people ignored these events and treated them as singular incidents, but as the cases increased day by day it became clear that an epidemic of sort had started. Even if only 1 in 10 was affected this was a great number of people because of the popularity of boosters. Furthermore, as the disease was fatal in over 90% cases, the mass hysteria threatened to escalate into social upheaval unless the governments responded swiftly. This they did by putting a temporary ban on the usage of boosters. Still, this didn't prevent millions of people dying a horrible death.

It didn't take long for the booster companies to go under one by one, being bled dry by massive lawsuits. The Gallente Federation initiated further studies into boosters, the results clearly showed without any reasonable doubt that the boosters were at fault, prompting all the governments to put a permanent ban on the manufacturing, distribution and ownership of boosters.

The ban held true for a few decades, with none or next to none boosters to be found anywhere. A Senate committee formed after the booster catastrophe to investigate the matter and evaluate the future of boosters had this to say in their final report:

"It is the uniform belief of this committee that society has learned its lesson regarding boosters and that we will never again have to deal with the threat of its kind. Striving for improvement is one thing, but injecting poison into your body is hazardous at best, lethal at worst, and common sense dictates that boosters are now a thing of the past."

It can now be safely said that these optimistic predictions made half a century ago have turned out be false. It is true that for a number years there never was any mass-scale distribution of boosters, the only incidents were limited production of old booster recipes that could easily be contained. But the lure of the boosters has tempted people into reckless behavior in the past and despite the all too well-known dangers of boosters it can now be asserted that boosters are back, and back for good unless some drastic measures are taken.

The new boosters, the one that are currently available on the black market, are in many ways revolutionary. Even if their effects are the same they've been developed considerably. The latest procedures have aimed to minimize the risk of the old side effects. The methods involve performing multiple smaller scale procedures, while suppressing the immune system. With earlier methods there was no option of repeat procedures, as the only virus design available was quickly targeted by the immune system and destroyed. The most obvious advantage of the newer methods is a reduced incidence of encephalitis, but there also seems to be less risk of epilepsy. This can most likely be attributed to the neural riggers all space pilots have, which can be used to suppress or stem epileptic seizures. By suppressing the immune system during the operation for a period of time after each injection, the effects last longer and the therapy is more effective. This also increases the success rate of subsequent therapies, as the viral vectors are not attacked by the immune system as soon as they are introduced.



But the obvious downside to suppressing the immune system is that the body becomes vulnerable to diseases. However, space pilots spend most of their time locked up in their capsule, a completely sterile environment. It makes it more difficult for them to leave their capsule (although not impossible), but on the whole suppressing the immune system is a non-issue for space pilots. But it must be stressed that even if these

boosters are relatively harmless for space pilots because of their sterile capsules and neural riggings boosters are still very dangerous to the common people and must at all costs be kept out of the hands of the unwary or we may have an even greater catastrophe on our hands than before. This fact makes it all the more important to apprehend those responsible for the manufacturing and distribution of the new boosters.

One persistent problem with the earlier methods was that genetic variation between different individuals seemed to have a relatively large effect on the outcome of the boosters. Some individuals were more prone to side effects, while some didn't benefit at all from the procedures. Later, genetic variations between bloodlines was proven to account for most of these differences. Some boosters were of course more universal than others, but recently custom boosters have been designed specifically to take advantage of the genetic make up of various bloodlines, resulting in race-specific boosters.

The kind of R&D needed for these new boosters could only have been undertaken and funded by a wealthy group with access to all the newest theories and technologies. The only independent group with the means and the motives for this would be the Angel Cartel, but DED has found nothing linking the development of the advanced boosters with them. But the fact the Cartel became heavily involved in distribution of the new boosters right from the start suggests, in the words of Col. Jeanrick Cavalery "that either the Cartel is very close to the booster manufacturers or they themselves are the manufacturers." However, we cannot rule out the possibility that those responsible for the R&D and perhaps the manufacturing of these advanced boosters are in the employment of one of the other empires.

In conclusion we recommend that further measures to be taken to stem the increasing tide of illegal boosters. Granted, there is considerable demand for this among a large group of otherwise lawful space pilots, but boosters are not a requirement to make a good pilot. Thus the marginal benefits pilots gain from boosters should not outweigh the great risk of using them.

As the majority of boosters originate outside empire space we recommend increased border surveillance, as well as heavier punishment for those caught smuggling or selling boosters. Furthermore, that an investigation should be launched to determine who is developing these boosters.

Lastly, our own research teams should start analyzing the new boosters with the intent of understanding them fully in case we need them at a later date when war threatens. Naturally, this will have to be done in the strictest secrecy. Intelligence sources indicate that similar steps are being taken by the other empires and we can't run the risk of being left behind if and when boosters become standard items for space captains.

FASTER THAN LIGHT COMMUNICATION

After mastering the technique of wormhole creation, it was thought that distance had finally been conquered. But despite of this communication still needed to be transmitted at the speed of light, and though wormhole did shorten distances between distant regions, interactive communication remained impossible. This problem was quickly identified as being one of the most important handicap remaining in the conquest of deep space.

The Amarrians were the first to master the jump gate technology and thus the first to face the problem. They launched massive state-funded research and tried out several radical solutions, but without success. In the end they stopped all research, accepting the fact that FTL communications were unattainable.

Centuries later the Gallenteans and the Caldari faced the same problems following the creation of the Sotiyo-Urbaata Drive. The Drive allowed FTL travel within the system the Gallenteans and Caldari lived in and communications with ships using the Drive were naturally impossible with conventional communication devices. To stimulate research in solving this, all both the Gallenteans and the Caldari promised huge awards for anybody who could come with some solution to the problem, which led to one of the most frantic goose hunt in the history of science.

Like the Amarrians before them many solutions were tried out, but none with success. Finally it was a young Gallentean woman, Li Azbel, who came out with a solution that was so simple but yet deeply rooted in arcane physics, that at first it was rejected as a hoax.

It wasn't until the famous Azbel-Wuthrich experiment that the functionality was demonstrated with success. Industrialization quickly followed, leading to one of the greatest stock market surge ever as thousands of companies extended their reach to the whole known universe.

The roots of the solution lay in an ancient paradox, often called the EPR paradox, the name shrouded in mystery. The EPR paradox is famous for contradicting quantum physics in some very important ways. Specifically it shows another old physic theory, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, to be untrue. The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, believed to be named after a place or a person, affirms that the exact state of quantum particle cannot be determined with full accuracy, no matter how refined the measurement equipment is. The classical example being the measurement of the velocity and position of a free particle: to be able to measure the position of a particle you must be able to 'see' it. This means that you have to illuminate it at least with one photon. But the collision between the photon and the particle changes the velocity of the particle, thus making it impossible to determine what the velocity was before the position was measured.

The EPR paradox describes the possibility of creating a pair of particle whose quantum state was entangled in such a way as to be mirror of each other. For example a pair of particle with position and velocity given as (x_0, v) and $(x_0, -v)$, i.e. a pair of particle that at given time are at the same position, but have exactly opposed velocity vectors. After some time, the two particles would be separated by a large distance, and measurement could be done on each of them independently. Now by measuring, say, the position of particle A and the velocity of particle B, the EPR paradox states that you would thus have determined the exact state of both particles, thus violating the Heisenberg relationship.

But later experiments confirmed the Heisenberg principle, thus making the EPR paradox void, to the surprise of many. Mathematically, this didn't cause any problems as the collapse of the wave function due to measurement was an instantaneous happening. From a physical point of view, this was more difficult to comprehend, as it seemed to imply that the state change propagated instantly between the two particles. This was immediately suggested as a way to create faster-than-light communication: by making a measurement on a particle it would lead to an instantaneous change in the remote particle's state, thus transmitting one bit of information. A detailed mathematical analysis of this scenario though showed that due to the statistical nature of the quantum particle, only noise would be transmitted, thus laying to rest these speculations for millenniums.

This is precisely where Li Azbel took up the problem, with a rare insight leading to a breakthrough. She argued that even though the output of the transmission was pure noise, the structure of the noise could be used to encode the information. Indeed, it was well known that the bifurcation cascade leading to purely chaotic time-series had a universal structure, governed by the Feigenbaum constant. Taking a parametric family of functions called logistic maps, defined in the interval $[0,1]$, there existed a parameter and an initial condition of the map



that could generate any arbitrary random sequence of number. Azbel considered the problem from the other side, i.e. given a finite chaotic sequence, how could you trace yourself back to the initial condition? By using a maximum entropy analysis on the Shannon information entropy of the signal she devised a way to solve this inverse problem. Furthermore, she demonstrated that by carefully modulating the measurements of tangled quantum states, basically willfully introducing noise in the measurement process itself, that specific noise structure would be carried across to the measurements of the other particle.

The process was thus the following: A byte of information is mapped on an initial condition of the logistic map leading to a chaotic attractor. This noisy sequence is then used to modulate the measurements done on a sequence of entangled particles. At the same time on the other side, measurements are made on the particles and a noise sequence is extracted. Maximum entropy analysis is then done to determine the initial condition from which this series has been generated and thus map it back to a given byte of information. Note that in this case, the noisy sequence sent is totally uncorrelated to the one measured. What they do have in common is to be from the same chaotic attractor, and that is the information that actually gets transmitted instantly, regardless of distance.

As stated before, this theoretical result was originally considered to be too incredible, to be true. The Azbel-Wuthrich experiment used a very similar setup as the ancient Aspect experiment, and it was a historical moment when the first Smiley :-) was sent over this channel. Following that, a great gold-rush started on who would be the first to industrialize this.



The result of that rush is the familiar Fluid router, which forms the building block of universal communication as we know it today. Ignoring the mathematical intricacies, the architecture of these routers is deceptively simple. The first step of their manufacturing is the creation of the entangled quantum states. This is done by using superfluid 4-Helium, where essentially all the Helium atoms are entangled in a single quantum state due to Bose condensation. A droplet of such liquid 4-Helium is then carefully separated in two. From this point, the two droplets, and more specifically the Helium atoms in the droplets are intrinsically tangled. Each droplet is then placed in separate router box, that contain necessary mechanism to encode and decode bytestream into quantum state measurements performed on the atoms of the droplet. From that point on, these two routers are linked together, regardless of their separation. Thus a spaceship will usually buy a router pair from a network provider. One box will be placed in the spaceship, while the other one kept in the network provider's backbone, that will have connections to other routers, thus effectively forming a decentralized network, where messages can be routed across many routers and many providers. This architecture is similarly to the ancient Internet.

The only limitations of this communication system is in the capacity of the channel. Indeed, the manufacturing of the entangled 4-He superfluid is an expensive process. Furthermore, a large number of atoms are used for each byte, as a statistically relevant chaotic sequence needs to be created. The sequencing introduces a limit to the bandwidth, allowing only the transmission of x bytes/second. The amount of data sent then depletes the pool of available entangled atoms, thus limiting the total amount of data that can be sent with a given router pair.

The FTL communication services have spread to every corner of the world of EVE since they first appeared a couple of centuries ago. The services and routers, albeit owned and run by independent companies, are under constant scrutiny and regulations by a CONCORD sub-committee to enforce both security and privacy in the communications channels and to make sure the companies are correctly rendering the services they claim. The fierce competition on the telecommunication market makes it cheap, efficient and reliable to talk, transfer data and even conduct business for people light-years apart.



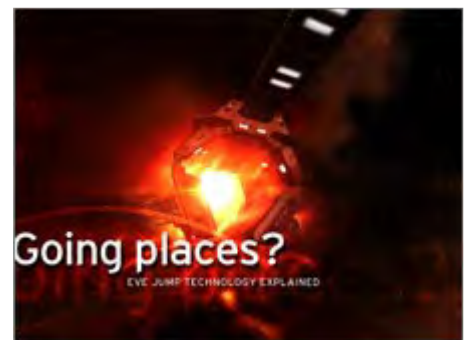
Well, here is a detailed description for all you techno-buffs on jumps - the amazing technology on how and why it is possible to traverse the vastness of space in a matter of minutes. Tacked along are various interesting tidbits on the history of the races and their elusive search for their ancestry. Written by one of the best recognized intellectual in the world of EVE, this is an insightful glimpse into the minds and beliefs of those that live there.

By Alain E. Topher

1 - Where do we come from?

For centuries men speculated from where mankind came. Today, it has been established beyond reasonable doubt that all the different races and factions found in our part of the galaxy must have originated from a common source.

Yet it has proven difficult to piece all the different artifacts together into a coherent picture. In any case, it seems logical from a biological standpoint that humans evolved on the same planet. Even if various differences can be found between and within factions, the likeness in the DNA structure clearly points to a common origin. But then the question is: where is this fabled planet that humans evolved on and how did the human race end up in numerous separate places?



Lets look at what we know: It is now undoubted that a race capable of inter-stellar travel roamed our space many thousands of years ago. A number of ancient jump gates, or fractions of jump gates, are known to exist in numerous solar systems. Whether these jump gates were built by our own ancestors or a totally alien race is unknown. These jump gates have some peculiar traits. First of all, age tests have shown that all these jump gates were built within the space of 50 to 100 years. And yet the design of many of the jump gates is a little bit varied between places, like they were constructed by different people. These facts raise many questions: why were they all constructed within this short time-span, and none since? Were they built by the same race, or maybe two or more conflicting races?

The answer most favored is that of war. Only a conflict could explain this quick construction of dozens of jump gates and why everything seemed to come to an abrupt halt one day. But who were fighting? And where are the combatants now? It seems highly unlikely that factions capable of inter-stellar warfare suddenly disappear into thin air.



A number of ancient jump gates, or fractions of jump gates, are known to exist in numerous solar systems.

By studying the layout of the jump gate remnants, a curious pattern emerges. The jump gates snake out like a spider-web from a central point. And what is the central point? It is the system known to Amarrians, who first found it, as 'Imlau Eman', or the 'Mouth of God', but is today better known as EVE.

The EVE system is an enigma that is still very much a mystery to us. The system itself is not that impressive – just some space debris and a few asteroid belts orbiting a pale white dwarf. But at the outskirts of the system is a phenomenon that has puzzled us for centuries. At the center of this phenomenon lies a huge structure, obviously built by some advanced civilization eons ago. The structure looks very much like a jump gate, except it is many times bigger than any space structure of ours. The gate is fairly plain all around, but there are markings here and there, in some ancient language that has not been fully decrypted. At the top, the largest of these markings is a three-letter word that says EVE.

There isn't full agreement among scholars about the meaning of this word, but most people regard it to be simply the name of the gate.

Now, every indication points to this being the gate that our forefathers used to enter this world, but despite massive studies on the gate and the EVE system in whole, we still haven't uncovered what happened to the gate all these millenniums ago.

Extremely bright and powerful electromagnetic turbulence emits from the EVE gate, as it is commonly called. This turbulence seems to originate from within the gate, so it is believed that the gate is actually open and the electromagnetic storms are coming through from wherever the gate is linked to.

In any case, the turbulence makes it extremely difficult to study the gate. Fortunately, the storms pulsate rhythmically, meaning that every other year or so they recede enough to allow closer scrutinizing. But even then the turbulence is enough to rip to pieces any vessel foolish enough to wander close to it.

The immense brightness emitting from the gate can easily be seen in solar systems close to the EVE system as a vibrating bright star on the night sky. But even in systems in the farthest regions of the known world it can still be seen with the aid of a telescope. The Amarrians, whose home system is only a few light-years from the EVE system, were in the best position to marvel at the gate. Many thousands of years ago, while still on a primitive level, the Amarrians actually coupled the peculiar phenomenon they saw in the sky with their age-old religion and even today the EVE gate holds great importance in the Amarrian state religion.

The search for our ancestors goes on. Even if the facts lead us to the EVE system, it seems to be the end of the road. The extensive studies done there over the decades seem no closer to providing the answer to this important question.

2 - The earliest jump gates and the first inter-stellar travelers.



Once the Amarr Empire had reached the technology level where it could enter space, it started to vigorously chart their home system. Due to technological limitations this survey took a long time. Finally, the Amarrians stumbled upon the remains of a jump gate at the outskirts of their solar system.

By studying the remains, which were more or less intact, the Amarrians were able to garner enough information to build a jump gate of their own. The jump gate was operational but obviously it lacked connections to other jump gates, as it was the only one of its kind. Thus the Amarrians were forced to physically send ships capable of building jump gates between solar systems before a stable wormhole could be formed into the system to connect the two gates. These gate construction ships often took decades to arrive, the crew suspended in cryo-tanks for the duration of the voyage. Only in recent years with the coming of jump drives capable of jumping between systems with no jump gates in them is it possible to overcome this time-consuming prelude to inter-

stellar traveling via jump gates and still today dozens of gate construction ships are enroute to a distant system.

But patience is a virtue the Amarrians have mastered well and they steadily expanded in every direction from their Amarr home system. Now, more than two millennia since the construction of their first jump gate, the Amarrians occupy hundreds of solar systems.

The Gallenteans and the Caldari discovered jump gate technology at relatively the same time, due to the simple fact that their home worlds were then in the same system. This was a little over 700 years ago. The Gallenteans and the Caldari did not enjoy the luxury of finding a relatively intact jump gate relic in their system as the Amarrians did. Instead there were only fragmentary pieces to be found, so they had nothing to build on. Still, these fragments pointed the researchers into the right direction and many jump gate theories were tried out. It wasn't until after the discovery of a companion brown dwarf, making the system a binary system, that the gate research got on the right track. It wasn't long after that before the first working jump gate was erected. The Amarr type of jump gate and the Gallente/Caldari one both work on the same principle (see next chapter), but there are some minuscule differences in how the different parts of the gate work exactly.

At that time both the Gallente and the Caldari worlds were bursting at the seams and major effort was made in sending ships to nearby systems to build jump gates. The mass exodus of the Gallenteans and the Caldari to other systems was nothing like the calm, deliberate expansion of the Amarr Empire, where only one system was colonized at a time and every aspect of the expansion was rigidly controlled by the state. Instead, private firms, the first of the Caldari Corporations among them, were chiefly responsible for surveying systems, sending the construction ships, and selling the territory to the colonists. In the space of 500 years or so the combined expansion of the Gallenteans and the Caldari had almost equaled the total expansion of the Amarrians in 2000 years.

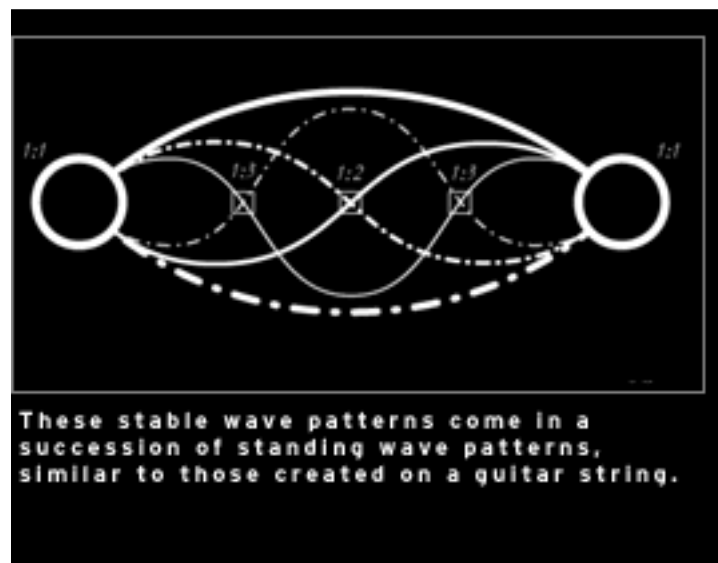


The Jovians are not very forthcoming with information about their technological advances in this regard. Today they employ jump gates functioning on the same principle as the other's, but nothing is known on where or when the Jovians acquired their jump gate technology. However, they've revealed an interesting fact: according to ancient Jovian legends, the Jovians used the ancient jump gates that scatter the world to travel between solar systems a long time ago, before the jump gates crumbled. The legends stay silent about the makers of the gates.

3 - The principles of jump gate technology.

Jump gates are built around artificial wormholes, created by exploiting gravitational resonances found in binary systems. This resonance is as a friction between gravitational waves of stellar objects, the more massive the objects, the stronger the resonance between them. Positions of planets in a solar system, as well as the complex structure of dust rings around heavy planets illustrate this resonance.

In binary systems there exists strong resonance phenomena, where the gravitational field of two stars in a stable binary formation would interfere with each other, like ripples from two wave sources. These stable wave patterns come in a succession of standing wave patterns, similar to those created on a guitar string. The strongest resonance is the 1:1 resonance (the first harmonic, so to speak), with two stationary node points situated in the center of each of the two stars. The second strongest resonance is the 1:2 resonance (the second harmonic), where an additional stationary node point appears in the field exactly mid-way between the stars (if of equal mass), and so on for successive resonances.



At the node points, the rapid oscillation of the gravitational field in opposite directions creates strong shear in the contravariant energy-momentum tensor. Under normal circumstances this stress is dissipated by high-frequency graviton radiation, and does thus not create any noticeable macroscopic phenomena.

But if this stress is confined and forced to build-up in a limited region of space, then the tensor-field will eventually develop a steadily growing high-curvature tentacle like structure in the space-time continuum. More specifically, the tentacle constitutes a self-avoiding 4-manifold that attempts to grow farther and farther from itself. The tip of the tentacle, where the curvature is highest, effectively acts like a magnet on space-time, and for high enough curvature it can eventually induce the creation of a small tentacle in remote high-density regions, that can reach to the tip and spontaneously combine. An analogy of this phenomenon is when lightning strikes ground, where the tip of the downward lightning actually creates a small upward lightning emanating from the ground and the two combine somewhere above the ground, thus closing the electrical circuit.

The main device of jump gates is a so-called mass boson sphere, based on one of the fundamental physic fields that mediates mass, and thus interacts strongly with gravitational waves. The sphere is filled with mass boson plasma, which reflects gravitational waves, pretty much in the same way as a mirror reflects light. By adjusting the plasma density so that it reflects the high-frequency gravitational waves involved in the dissipation of tensor shear, this radiation is trapped within the sphere, thus leading to a steady net increase of the gravitational stress within the resonance node, which eventually leads to the creation of the high-curvature tentacle. An analogy of this is the laser, which builds up a highly coherent and intense beam of electromagnetic energy by enclosing oscillators within a reflecting cavity.

The distance between the two ends of the wormhole depends on the mass of the suns in the binary system and on what resonance node the jump gate is located. In order to connect two jump gates a trial-and-error method is needed, often lasting many years. This is because the tentacle created by the tensor-field cannot be controlled or directed in where to open. But by having another jump gate in a nearby system build up gravitational-stress in it its own, without reaching critical point, at the same time that the tentacle is growing, then the likelihood of a connection being made increases statistically, although many attempts are still often needed. This is similar to raising a metal rod in a thunder storm.

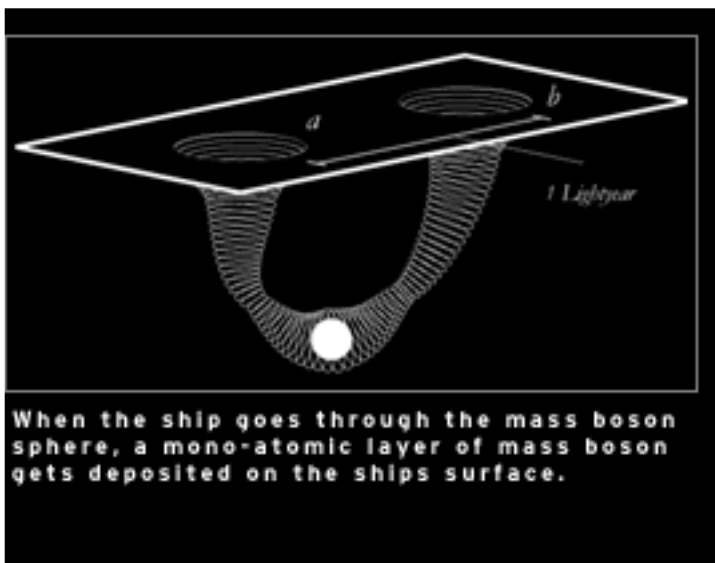
The first jump gate versions built by the Amarrians were limited in the way that once a wormhole had been created and a ship slipped through a new wormhole had to be made before another ships could pass. As it could take several days or even months to re-connect the two jump gates, passing was slow. Later versions of jump gates allowed the jump gates to hold the wormhole open for a longer time and modern day jump gates can keep a wormhole connection open for several dozen years before it has to be reset. Also, the first jump gates were only able to connect and hold a single wormhole at a time but today they can hold several wormholes open at the same time, allowing jump gates to be connected to several other jump gates at once.

In an average binary system the jump gate has a range of around 5 light-years, provided the jump gate is constructed on the third resonance node.

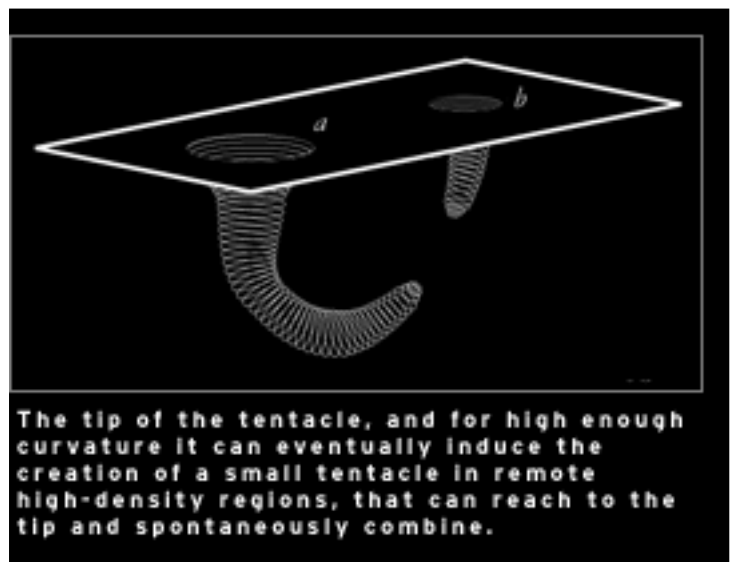
More powerful jump gates can be constructed on the second resonance node between the stars. Because these nodes are much farther from a solar system (often up to 0.5 lightyear away) and, more importantly, are also harder to harness, they have only recently started to be utilized. On the other hand, they have much greater range than the basic jump gates.

There are several strict limitations on jump gate travel. First of all, jump gates can only be constructed in systems with two or more suns, because of the resonance nodes. This effectively makes one in every three systems ineligible for jump gate construction.

Secondly, only one jump gate can be in operation in a system at any given time. This is due to the erratic fluctuations in the resonance fields caused by a mass boson sphere; if more than one such sphere is active at the same time in the same system, they both become highly unstable and impossible to operate.



the structural integrity of the ship for the duration of the trip through the hole. This doesn't mean that the gradient is completely wiped out, and even seasoned space veterans still know the feeling known as 'going down the drain' when entering a wormhole.



And thirdly, ships can only travel through wormholes if both ends of it are connected to a jump gate. This means that ships must travel between systems in normal space in order to build a jump gate. The reason for this is the extreme dilatation of the metric along the longitudinal dimension of the tentacle, meaning that the spatial coordinate along the length of the wormhole is expanded, while the radial component is cyclically curved. A spaceship entering the wormhole is subject to a strong metric gradient that would put its structural integrity in jeopardy. This can be prevented by locally countering the stretching around the immediate vicinity of the ship. Here the mass boson sphere plays its second role in the gate mechanism. When the ship goes through the mass boson sphere, a mono-atomic layer of mass boson gets deposited on the ships surface. This layer counters the stretching of the ship against the metric gradient, enough to keep

4 - Space vessels get a boost – the first jump drives.

Even with advanced propulsion systems it took space ships days or weeks to move between planets in a solar system. Anything that could quicken this travel was thus of immense interest for everybody.

Various efforts were made to increase the speed of ships, but most of them failed either because of too high fuel volume and cost, or because they were too limited in scope. The most successful attempt was that of the old Minmatar Empire, which built acceleration gates that employed gravity in an unique way to slingshot ships between planets. This gave the ships enough momentum to fly between planets in a much shorter time than before. But the Minmatars never discovered how to build inter-stellar jump gates, so their acceleration gates were limited to their home system (where they still exist today). They had begun experimenting with much larger acceleration gates capable of sending ships between solar systems, but they never got a chance to build them before the Amarrians invaded and enslaved the Minmatars.

The Amarr Empire itself was slow to make any breakthroughs in this regard, despite their ever-growing space empire. For a long time they made do with ships traveling at ca. 10% of the speed of light, this speed seemed sufficient to them. At last they discovered the principles behind jump drive technology more or less accidentally, while researching new weapon technologies. The first Amarrian jump drive was built nearly 300 years ago.

The situation was different for the Gallenteans and Caldari. Their home planets were in the same system and this meant that intra-system trade runs became an important element in their society right from the outset of their space activity. Thus there was a much greater incentive to find an acceptable solution to intra-system travel. The first jump drive built is the Sotiyo-Urbaata Drive, built by Caldari engineers more than 600 years ago. It was immensely big, tremendously expensive and outrageously inefficient, but it worked. The Sotiyo-Urbaata Drive, along with later versions, sped considerably up the social and technological development for both the Gallenteans and the Caldari and is without a doubt one of the most important discoveries ever made.

Since their first appearance all these long centuries ago, jump drives have become ever more advanced, making them cheaper, more reliable and more efficient. Yet the difference between the Sotiyo-Urbaata Drive and a modern day drive is not so great; both work on the same underlying principle, both allow very fast travel within the solar system. But the latest versions of jump drives are for many the true jump drives, for they allow ships to traverse solar systems even where there are no jump gates. These revolutionary jump drives, which are still relatively rare and expensive, combine traditional jump drive technology with jump gate technology and create a whole new piece of equipment.



At last the Amarr Empire discovered the principles behind jump drive technology more or less accidentally, while researching new weapon technologies.

5 - Faster-than-light travel – how?

So what is the elusive answer to FTL travel? It was found through advanced research in the field of quantum electrodynamics. By creating depleted vacuum, that is, vacuum as found in space but completely stripped of all energy, and then expanding this depleted vacuum to envelop a ship, the ship is capable of moving faster than light through this bubble of depleted vacuum. A depleted vacuum bubble is more than frictionless – it is so anti-friction that things (including light) actually move faster in it than they would in complete vacuum.

All space ships are equipped with a jump drive device. The jump drive creates depleted vacuum by repeatedly 'compressing' vacuum between two polar discs, draining all energy neutrons and quarks out of it. A laser-locked field is then created to hold the ever-increasing depleted vacuum bubble until it has enveloped the whole ship. When that happens the ship is able to enter FTL speed. Although initial experiments with the jump drive were very encouraging technology wise, problems arose in regard to navigation. Once the ship has attained FTL speed, it is very difficult for it to act or react to the world, such as for communication or scanning purposes. Numerous experiments were made, for example with compactified dimensions radio, but without success. The unpredictable nature of quantum mechanics made it very difficult to create a stable enough vacuum bubbles to allow for precise time measurements due to fluctuating speeds. Finally, a solution was found. It was discovered that gravity capacitors similar to the control system used in jump gates were able to pick up gravity signals from 'normal' space while the ship was on FTL speed. By locking the capacitor onto one of these signals, the ship travels to it. The bubble is then automatically dispersed once certain distance from the gravity well is acquired. The only problem is that these capacitors can only efficiently pick up signals from gravity wells of certain size or above, with the minimum being a small moon or a cluster of asteroids. Also, in order for the gravity capacitor to align correctly on the destination object in relevance to the position of the sun, it must follow a relatively narrow route towards it, resulting in a fairly restricted emerge area for the ship. This puts some limits on the jump drive's usage, but as all major objects in a system can be detected, this is not such a great problem. Furthermore, it is now possible to construct 'fake' gravity wells on space stations and jump gates, which can be detected and thus homed onto by the gravity capacitor that is part of a ship's jump drive.

Further research into jump drives, especially those aimed at amalgamating the technology used for jump drives and the one used for jump gates, has led to more and more advanced jump drives becoming available. It is now possible to fit a ship with a jump drive capable of inter-stellar travel. The first versions of these allowed the jump drive to connect to a jump gate in another solar system and jump to it just as if the ship had moved through a jump gate. The later versions allow ships to jump from a system with a jump gate to another system that has no jump gate, and the latest version, still only available as a prototype, allows a ship to jump between systems even if no jump gate exists in either system. The first versions of these drives simply aligned the drive with the nearest resonance node in the system (often using nodes 1:4 or even 1:5), then created instant mini-wormholes through it for just enough time for the ship to slip through. More advanced versions, allowing jumps into systems with no jump gates, are a bit more complex. They send out a constant barrage of high frequency neutron rays, based on the flat-space principle of trans-relativistic physics, through infinitesimal cosmic strings to scout out the destination system. This survey can last for several days before enough data is gathered to allow the ship to create a wormhole (through a resonance node of course) to the destination system.



The jump drive creates depleted vacuum by repeatedly 'compressing' vacuum between two polar discs, draining all energy neutrons and quarks out of it.

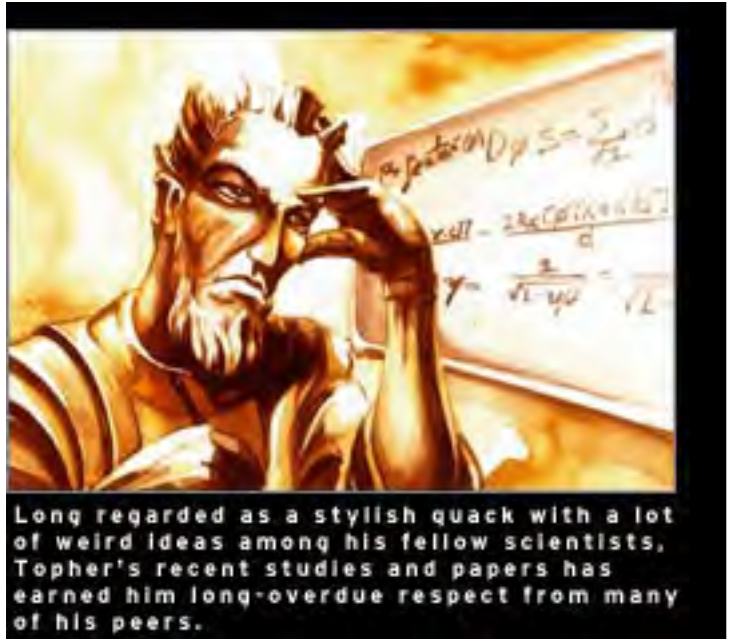
6 - About the author.

Alain Embrosius Topher has a degree in applied physics and experimental psychology from the Caille University on Gallente Prime. Topher, a brilliant but unruly student, signed up with an exploration company after his graduation and spent the next twenty years roaming around remote solar systems, collecting astrophysical data. He has always been enthusiastic about foreign and alien cultures and the main reason for his exploration scurries was the hope to discover alien artifacts. Until now he has not found any artifacts older than a few thousand years old and all which are of obvious human origin.

Having amassed a sizeable sum during his days with the exploration company, Topher finally decided to try his luck on his own and spent the next few years combing several promising systems. Working alone, or at most with a couple of assistants, made these excursions highly dangerous, and thus prime entertainment material. Topher made a deal with one of the largest entertainment network in the Gallente Federation to make vid programs about his adventures. These became hugely popular for a while, but the lack of bug-eyed monsters or glittering treasures soon turned the public indifferent. Topher, who had thrived in the limelight, decided to shelve his excursions for a while in favor of taking more exciting (and lucrative) excursions in vid studios.

Topher was content to live the life of a vid star for some years, but in the end the scientist in him begged for attention. Feeling too old to start running around barren planets again, Topher settled instead on making education shows and info clips, often in the form of games of some sort. Yet again he hit the jackpot and for billions of Gallenteans Topher is a household name associated with education and knowledge.

Now in his early nineties, Topher is finally settling down to a quiet academic life. His vid appearances are now few and far between and instead he's focusing on pure science, more or less for the first time in his life. Long regarded as a stylish quack with a lot of weird ideas among his fellow scientists, his recent studies and papers has earned him long-overdue respect from many of his peers.



Fedo

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

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

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

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



Mind Clash

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

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

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

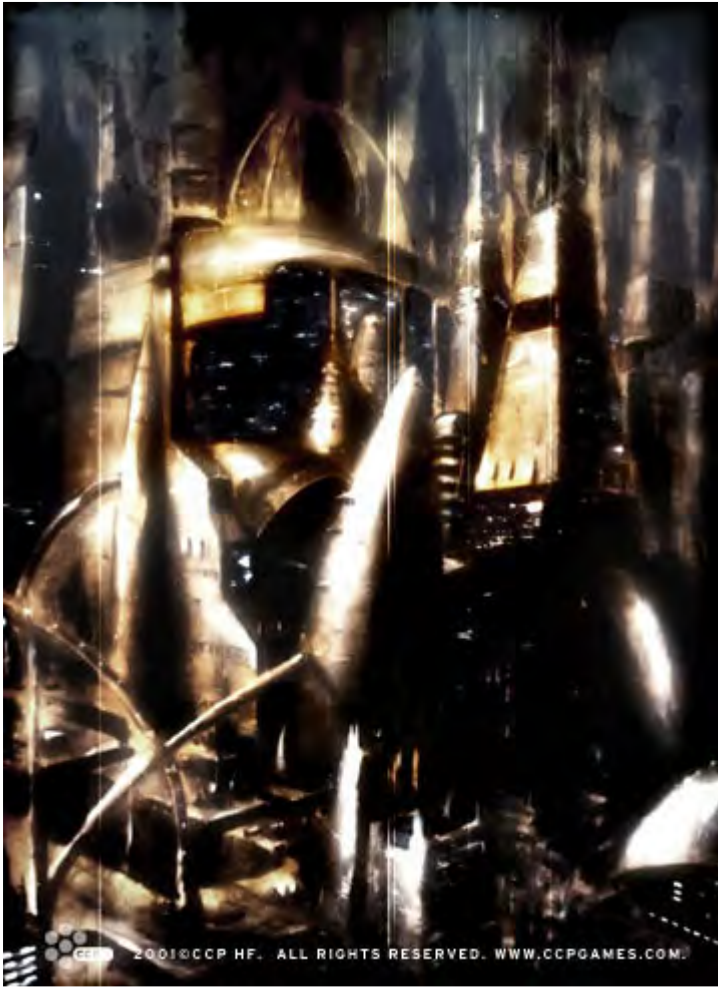
Actually, the illusory creatures and phenomena are only there for the show – doing nothing by themselves, they simply portray in visual terms what actually is going on behind the scenes in the minds of the participants. The actions and state of the illusion give ample indication of the actual events of the struggle to the spectators. These illusions are, in modern arenas, often projected as holograms above the participants. All the stars of the game have their own exclusive repertoire of personally trademarked illusions. This, coupled with flashy outfits and catchy nicknames, makes each of the major stars easily distinguishable to the fans. In addition to the illusions huge screens dot the arenas where duels are held, broadcasting images and information to the masses ogling the match. These consist mainly of things like facial close-ups of the sweating contestants, or detailed data-charts on the status of their mental and bodily state.

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

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



Dam-Torsad



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

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

Progress is a term alien to the Amarrians. It's almost like this huge empire was built on pure coincidence and luck. But once you get to know their intricate system you get the feeling that they're like this great big beast trudging

heedlessly onwards, trampling any opposition. Their advancements are not by leaps and bounds, but rather through deliberate and articulate planning that can span decades, even centuries. Getting caught in the finely woven spider-webs of a Holder can trap more than just you - it can trap your children and your children's children. Getting out is not a problem. It's getting out alive that's troublesome.

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

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

Society of Conscious Thought

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Vitoc

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

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

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

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

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

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



The transformation of the struggle this past decade has been like a god's gift for the pirate and smuggling industry. Not only is it much easier for this industry to quickly and repeatedly adapt to the ever-changing products (the antidote in this case) than for conventional industries, but the fact that no permanent cure for the new drug had been found means that the ever-increasing number of newly freed Minmatar slaves still need the antidote to survive - hence creating a thriving business outside the Amarr Empire for the antidote for the first time. A lot of people have made fortune beyond their dreams by dealing in the Vitoc antidote, but just as many have been ruined when all their expensive antidote stock became obsolete due to a sudden change in the toxic virus.

Quafe

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

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

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

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

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



Fatal and The rabbit



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

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

sector between Caldari and Gallente space. This took place a decade ago.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

War tattoos

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

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

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

Since they first arrived on the open market a decade ago, the nano war tattoos have taken Minmatar society by storm. They are especially popular among the younger generation of aviation and space faring personnel. While the custom has spread to other races, most notably the Gallenteans, it is still almost exclusively confined to the Matari.



Outer Ring Excavations



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

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

The empires monitor the goings-on in Miennue closely and all of them have made both overt and covert proposals to Outer Ring Excavations, offering security for a stake in the company. Outer Ring Excavations have rejected all these offers, but ever-increasing pressure from competitors is making it harder and harder for them to keep their secret safe much longer. Sooner or later, one of the numerous methods employed by those pursuing the asteroid -- bribes, threats, tracking devices, bugs -- is bound to unveil the secret that Arteu has so meticulously kept concealed. In the meantime, Arteu and Outer Ring Excavations are getting richer -- fantastically so -- by the minute.

Egonics Inc.



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

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

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

The information in the Egonics database is extremely detailed, it lists both the social status of a person: job, education, marital status and so on, but also very thorough genealogical and biological data, including DNA samples. Egonics uses every method possible to enlarge their database and keep it up to date. Some of these methods are frowned upon by many, but others find it good how dedicated the company is in making sure the customer gets exactly what he likes and there are some that thrive on selling Egonics DNA samples from people not in their vast database.

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

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

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

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

Language translators.

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

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

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

The translator module is a software module that is a part of the communication system of the ship. It intercepts all incoming communications and translates them into the language preferred by the captain. The first translators were pretty lousy by today's standard, they could only translate written communications and frequently messed up the text. But the latest versions are able to translate voice as well as text and have become very good at projecting mood-swings, slang, weird accents and such, for a near perfect translation. With the steady increase in cyber-implants these translators have begun appearing outside the capsule as well and many predict that within a few years translators will make the debate over which language should prevail in inter-racial communication a futile one.



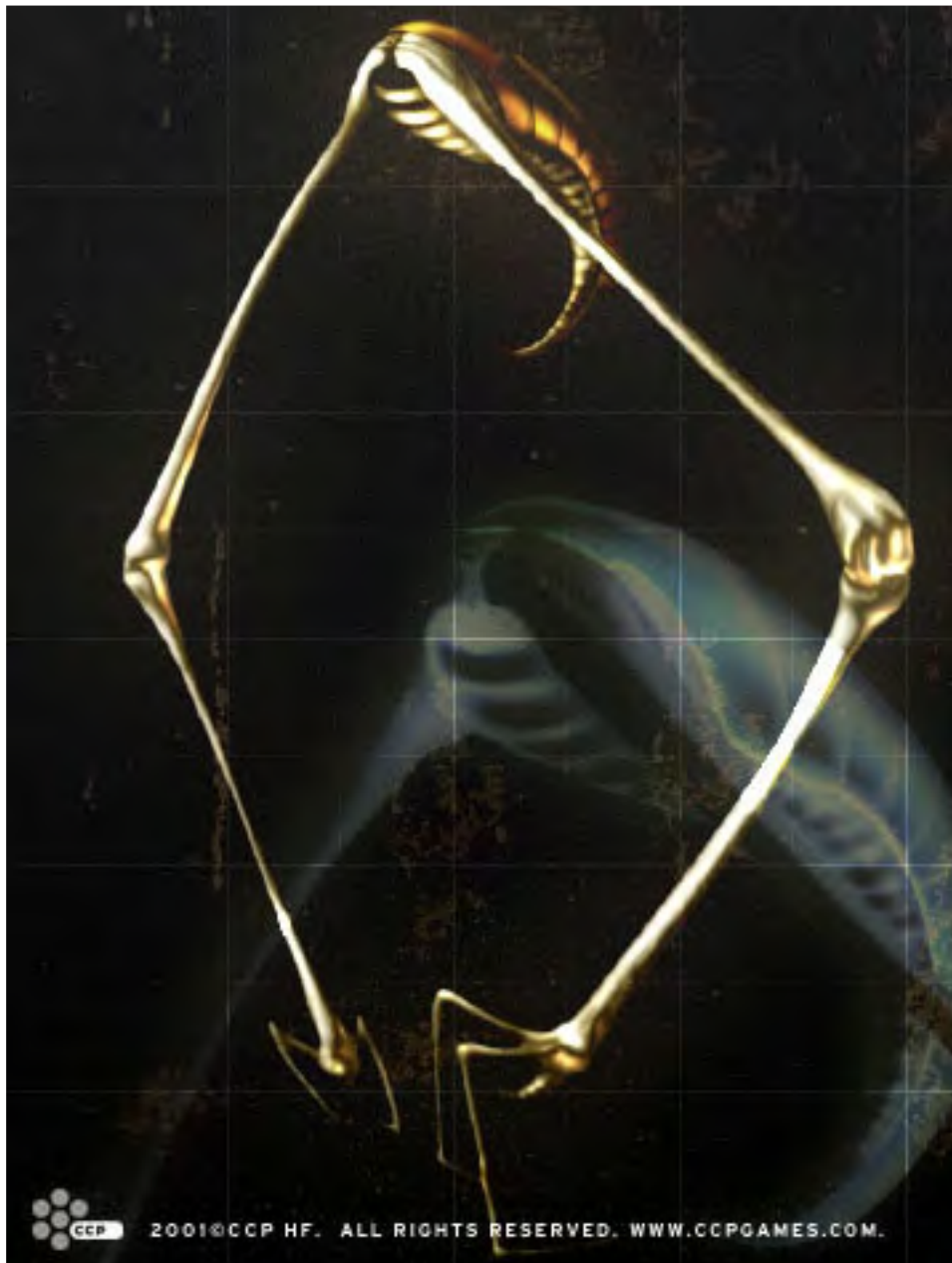
The Hanging Long-limb

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

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

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

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



The Truth Serum



What if Truth was like a tiny speck of sand?

A speck that has been washed and weighed, polished, smoothed and curbed into one shiny point, the Universal Truth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Absolute truth loses its meaning. There is no absolute truth, only greater and lesser truth. We've lost our standards, we've lost our talent to distinguish what is real from what is deception. We no longer know the difference between the right truth and the wrong truth. All we care for is truth in any form and any guise; corrupted, filthy truth, we want it all, need it all.

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

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

It is the worst kind of prison.

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

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

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

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

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

And maybe, just maybe, this has already happened.

The author of this prose is Gorda Hoje, a Jovian philanthropist that died more than 300 years ago. Hoje was a novelty in his time and age, and his works, which ranged from cryptic philosophical texts to meticulous science papers, were generally regarded as too eccentric and absurd to have any real value. In his lifetime, Hoje acted as a mentor to many of the greatest Jovian minds of the younger generation, among them Ior Labron, the founder of the Society of Conscious Thought. After Hoje's death, his followers started to promote his works in earnest and Hoje is today regarded as one of the most profound and influential of Jovian intellectuals.

Directive Enforcement Department

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

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



Among the other responsibilities of the DED is aiding customs officials in patrolling areas where smuggling is rife. The DED ships are usually equipped with the latest and greatest in surveillance technology, so their service is always a great support for customs patrols, especially because they are incorruptible. In addition, the DED takes care of all kinds of security issues regarding meetings and conferences between the empires, they lend ships for operations by the other branches of the CONCORD, and they often support local law enforcement in dealing with large-scale crime activity or similar matters. For this the DED often uses their special force unit, named Special Affairs for Regulations & Order, or SARO. The SARO is one of the toughest police units around and are notorious for their brutal, but efficient, methods. They're mostly used in hostage situations, for the assault of heavily armed pirate havens, and similar tasks.

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

Tyma Raitaru

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

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



Amarr succession

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

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

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

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

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

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



Slaver

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

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

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

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

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



Kyonoke Pit



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

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

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

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

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

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

space of a few minutes. The specks can survive in an advanced state for a few days; they can leave a dead host and enter another living being close by, in such cases the new host dies within a few hours once the speck has reached the brain.

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

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

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

The Prophecy of Macaper

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

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

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

The first event in Macaper's prophecy she described as "the cosmetic kiss of the comets" and this is exactly what happened in a remote Caldari system almost a year ago, when two large comets collided head on. The clash occurred within the boundaries of the solar system, but not close enough to any of the planets to cause any drastic effects. Debris from the comets disturbed space traffic for a while, but that was all. Albeit a very rare event, the comet collision was not connected to the prophecy at this time.

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

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

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

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



The Day of Darkness

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

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



Myth of a salesman

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

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

As befits the secretive and shadowy endeavors of the Broker, few of his deeds have reached the public eye. In the inner circles of the espionage world, everyone has a story of their own about him, often offering a glimpse of a piece of much grander scheme the Broker has undertaken. One of his more celebrated feats took place early in his career, almost half a century ago and is known among intelligence agents as the Omicron Incident.

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



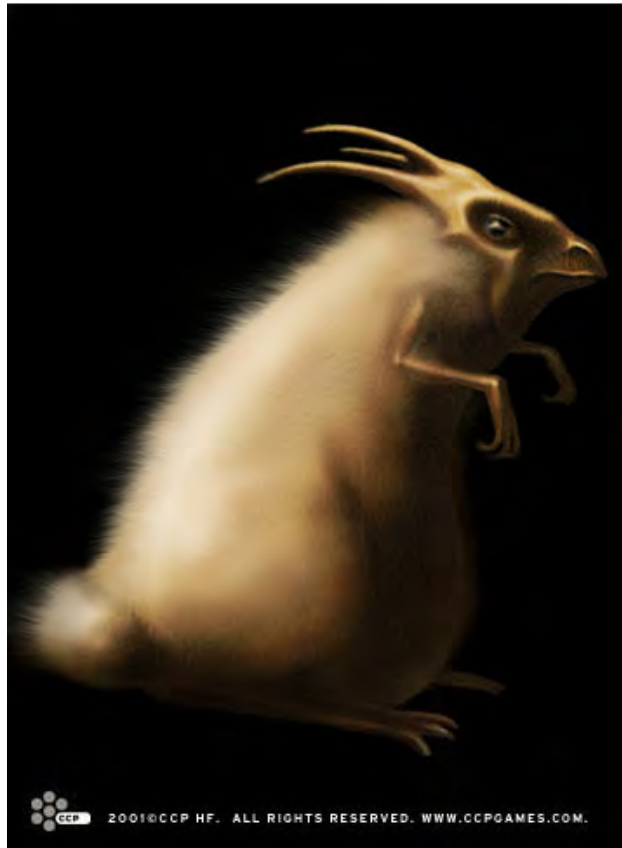
Kirion, alarmed by the mobilization of Hurid-Akan's forces, began his own preparations for war. The Broker leaked the information about the advanced Caldari weapons Hurid-Akan had bought to Kirion and then proceeded to sell him Gallentean weaponry as counter measures.

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

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

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

Lady Phanca's pet furrier



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

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

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

Lady Phanca had a pet furrier, a small furry animal commonly found as pet among the Amarrian higher class. It was a well-known quirk that the otherwise severe and dispassionate lady loved her pet lavishly. When young Uri Ardishapur, son of the Ardishapur royal heir, killed the twittering creature at the dinner table, the fury of the old lady left no doubt in the minds of those present that the repercussions would be terrible. Persuading her son to pass the fore mentioned laws, Uri Ardishapur became the first of the Ardishapurs to lose his right hand, the hand that had slain lady Phanca's pet furrier.

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

CONCORD



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

The organization is branched into numerous divisions, each of which handles a certain aspect of the empires' relations. Of these divisions the CAD (Commerce Assessment Department), which oversees interstellar trade agreements and regulations, and the DED (Directive Enforcement Department), which oversees policing in space, are by far the largest and most

influential. Most spacefarers will only ever deal with these two departments on any regular basis; to millions of people, these two represent the actual face of CONCORD.

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

For the first few years of its existence, CONCORD wielded limited power. The fledgling organization had little diplomatic sway, and regulation enforcement would time and time again prove difficult for its agents. It was not until 18 years after its founding that CONCORD gained the respect of the international community. After the battle of Iyen-Oursta – the bloodiest and most costly engagement the Gallente-Caldari War had seen in decades – both sides were tired of fighting, though long-entrenched hatred and pride prevented either side from asking for a ceasefire. CONCORD took the initiative, and in just under six months managed to negotiate a peace accord between these two bitter enemies, one that would endure for almost a century.

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

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

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

The Elite

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

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

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

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



Gallente-Caldari War: The early days



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

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

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

What made the situation so tense right from the start was the situation on Caldari Prime. Being located in the same solar system as Gallente Prime made the Gallenteans very nervous and, more importantly, a sizeable Gallentean population was living on Caldari Prime. Right after the Caldari defected from the Federation they focused on securing the jump gates leading to their (once) hidden bases, as those bases provided the backbone to the Caldari military infrastructure at that time. At the same time the Gallenteans moved their fleet into orbit around Caldari Prime and started blocking the planet.

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

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

Heaven

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

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

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

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

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

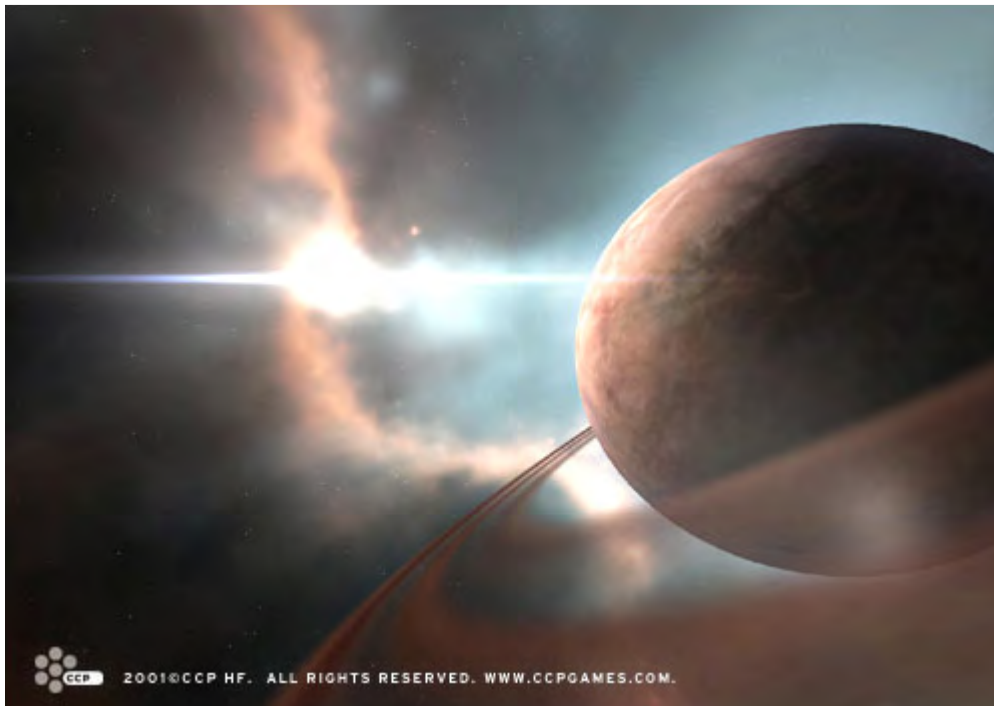


Gallente-Caldari War: The Breakout

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gallente-Caldari War: The War Drones On

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

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

For a while the Federation could do little else than watch the Caldari play havoc upon the Gallentean fleet and the outermost provinces of the Federation. The Caldari were getting ever bolder and every few months they seemed to have a new and improved version of their nimble solo-fighters, which the Federation had few answers against. To many Gallenteans it seemed inevitable that, unless their demands were met, the Caldari would sooner or later overrun the whole Federation. Everything the Gallenteans tried failed - their attempts for their own solo-fighters were utter failure and stationary defenses such as mines and sentry guns could only go so far in protecting space facilities for long. It seemed like every time the Gallenteans came up with something sleek and speedy and powerful the Caldari would soon respond with something even sleeker and more powerful.

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



The climatic battle of the war was fought near the system of Iyen-Oursta. Both sides - the Gallenteans with their drones and Caldari with their new frigates - were confident of victory and thus were willing to throw everything they had into the battle. The result was the second-largest space battle ever fought in the world of New Eden, second only to the Battle of Vak-Atioth fought during the Amarr-Jove War. The Battle of Iyen-Oursta raged for a whole day. During a lapse in the action after almost 15 hour constant fighting the Caldari withdrew in a stately fashion, leaving the battlefield to the Gallenteans. The Gallenteans claimed victory as the side retaining the battlefield, but the Caldari also claimed victory as they had inflicted considerably more losses and casualties on the Gallenteans than they'd received themselves. In any case, the battle gave neither side the decisive victory they'd sought and it was becoming obvious to everyone that such a victory would never be scored.

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

The Khanid Kingdom

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

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

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

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



But even if Khanid has tried to build his kingdom to mirror the empire he once belonged to, there are many discreet differences. The biggest of these are the way the Dark Amarrians - so called for the color schemes on their ships - conduct their trade and business. The Khanid Kingdom is not nearly as rigid and stale in their governing of inter-stellar trade, for the very simple reason that the kingdom absolutely needs outside trade to survive, which is not the case for the empire. Since the Amarr Empire seized their attempts to reconcile with the separatists decades ago trade has started to flourish between the two. The result is that today the kingdom acts in many ways like a window to the outside world for the reclusive empire. Trade goods that can't be directly transported into or out of the empire are carried through kingdom because of the much more lenient trade policies the empire has for them. Many Dark Amarrians have grown fat acting as intermediaries for Amarr traders and outsiders.

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

Rebel with a cause



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

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

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

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

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

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

The Armageddon Project

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



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

The InterBus



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

But InterBus still enjoys the largest market share by a fair margin, something the private companies are not all that happy about; grumbling about unhealthy state-

intrusion that makes competition very lopsided. The InterBus may be child of its time but it still serves a vital role - that is to link even the smallest and most remote stations into their vast network. As stated in InterBus' charter:

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

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

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

Sisters of EVE

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

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

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

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



The Blood Raiders



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

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

Today the cult exists in numerous more or less independent sects throughout the Amarr Empire, and some have even moved their business to other empires or neutral space. Each of the different sects of the Sani Sabik cult vary in their rituals and doctrine, some are inoffensive and almost inactive while a few have taken 'bleeding' - as they call the draining of blood from a body - to new heights. There are stories of 'blood farms', where people are kept against their will and bled regularly; other stories tell of sects that engage in necrophilic and even cannibalistic activities. As little is known of the inner works of most of the sects it is difficult to say whether these stories are true or just urban legends.

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

The Scope

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

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

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

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

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



Konrakas



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

Naturally, these cities in space require huge amount of materials and minerals to sustain and support themselves. If they're lucky enough to orbit a populated planet they are seldom in want of anything, but others must fend for themselves. Planetary mining of uninhabited planets and moons is vitally important for any manufacturing station that

wants to compete on equal footing. Although such stations do exist without the support of a mineral rich stellar body below it, such station must rely on minerals being transported to them, which is always more cumbersome and expensive. This has made uninhabited but mineral rich planets gold mines often in the literal sense for anyone aspiring to large-scale manufacturing.

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

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

The Right Man, the Right Place

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

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

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

One of the big company employees who is known for his willingness to dabble a little on the side with freelancers is Pekki Mataken, a sector manager for the Kaalakiota Corporation. Residing in the Saatuban system, an economic nexus for the surrounding systems, he has established a reputation for offering fair and prosperous trade deals to those close with the KK. And those that find favor with the shrewd Caldari can expect to be offered a chance to link up with people even higher in the corps' hierarchy. But in the same vein, those who deal unfairly with him quickly lose his favor and find themselves out in the cold.



The Peralles incident

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

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

What finally caught the attention of the media and, hence, the public, was the disappearance of the Gallentean Senator Hubert Caissor along with his family and his fortune in the ship *Peralles* en route to a new post as ambassador to the Amarrians. The *Peralles* entered a jump gate in the Dom-Aphis system between Amarr and Gallente space. Its destination was the jump gate in the Iderion system close by, but it never re-appeared there. What makes this even more of a puzzle is that the control station at Iderion jump gate received notification that a ship was incoming, showing all the right signs, yet no ship exited the jump gate. What is more, this notification is received at the exact same time every day, with the same result: no ship appearing even if all the signs indicate that a ship is about to come through the jump gate.

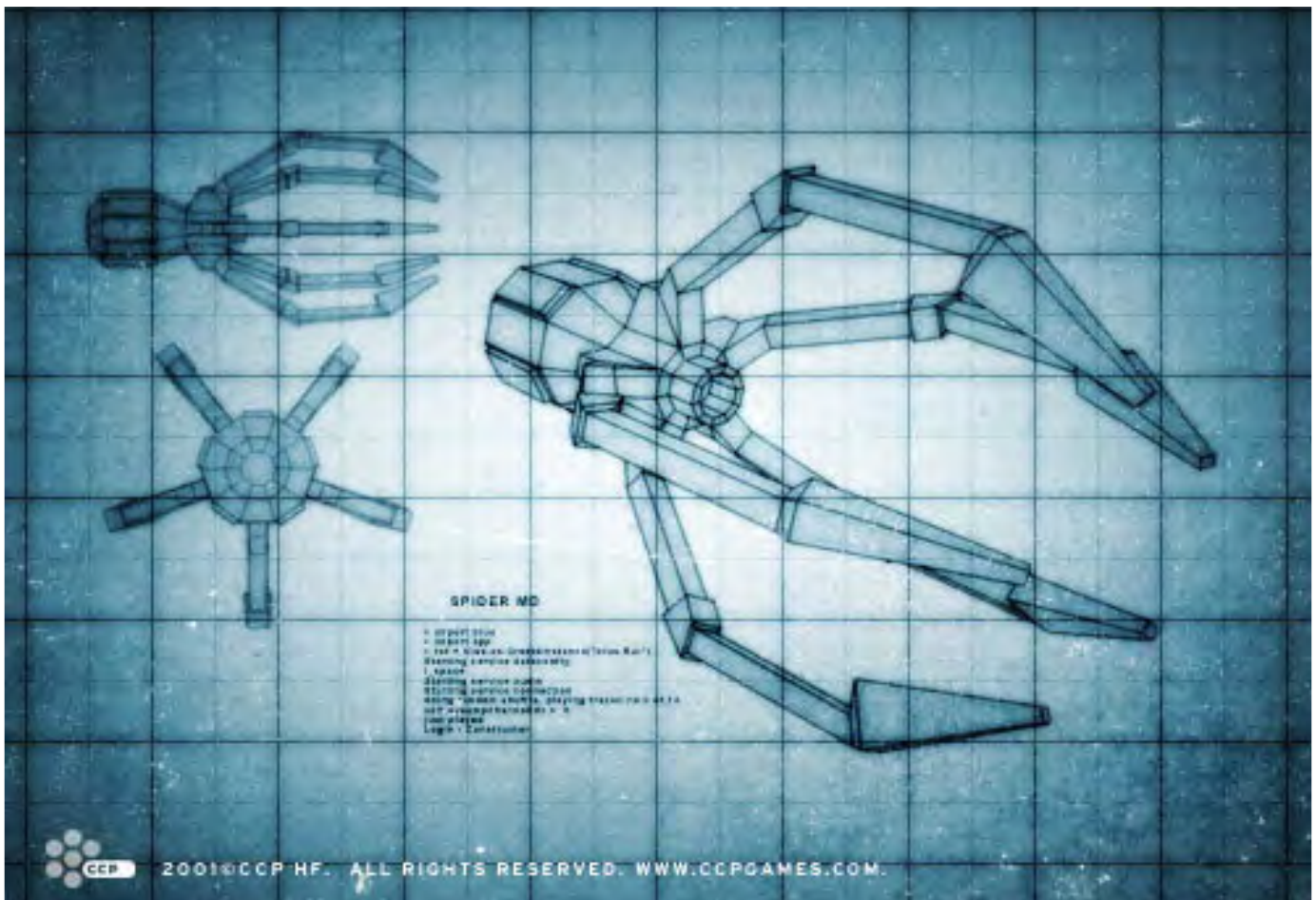
Since the *Peralles* incident stories of other similar incidents have surfaced, all within the same region. These stories, some no more than unsubstantiated rumors, all tell tales of disappearing ships, strange disturbances while jumping, ghostly echoes and images and unsettling time shifts in the vicinity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



The Spider Miner

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

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



The Encounter

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

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

Tiny didn't spend any more time on the station than absolutely necessary, so few minutes later he was back in space. And what do you know? It seemed three space cowboys were laying in wait for him, a cruiser and a couple of menacing frigates. Great. Tiny's communication device sputtered into action: 'OK, fella. We've got you covered. Now be a smart boy and jettison whatever you have in your cargo hold and no harm will come to your precious cruiser.' Tiny ran some profile scans on the three ships closing in on him. As he thought, pirate scum! Well, this wasn't their lucky day. Tiny sent a reply: 'Sorry, guys. No can do. I suggest you turn and leave before I become inclined to inflict some serious unpleasanties on your sorry asses.' Tiny imagined the sneers his reply was getting from the gung-ho gangsters and smiled when his radar registered what he knew all along was out there. Three small dots blinked into existence, cordoned around the cowboys. All cruisers. With cloaking devices. It didn't take long until the only sign left of the pirates' presence was the residue from their warp drives as they fled. Before they'd warped Tiny sent them one final farewell message: 'Heavily armed amigos, never to leave home without them!' Then he laughed and paged his comrades: 'Lets go!'



The Ammatars



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

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

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

The San Matar government is structured the same way as any other province of the Amarr Empire, with a governor at the head and district officials beneath him prescribing over the various departments of state. These heads of state are always Ammatar, although the governor himself traditionally is an Amarrian, and acts as the supreme representative of the Amarr Empire. As is to be expected not all Ammatars are eager for constant warfare with the Minmatar Republic. Those who are the most belligerent of them often feel that the Ammatar state is doing too little so they have formed a group of their own to fight the Minmatars. In a sense this group is a direct response to the independent rebel groups the Minmatar have and the guerilla tactics employed by either side are similar.

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

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

Sansha's Nation

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

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



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

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

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

Sansha's dream was that these zombie-like creatures could be used as soldiers and guards, thus freeing humans to pursue more peaceful and productive lifestyles. He also experimented with ship crews and captains, as he regarded space ships to be both boring and dangerous, and thus ideally suited for his creatures. Soon, all armed forces and space ship personnel employed by Sansha's Nation had been replaced by an easily controlled armada of True Slaves, as those that had been implanted with Sansha's technology became known as. In his warped mind Sansha believed his acts to be of the good for mankind.

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

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

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

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

Time & the Astrologer

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



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

The Arithmetics wanted the new calendar and clock to have nothing whatsoever to do with old planetary-

based calendars, instead they wanted to base it entirely on mathematics. They claimed that the physics-oriented nature of the modern world demanded this. The Traditionalists said the only way to go was to base the new calendar as much as possible on the 24-hour, 365-day calendar favored by early post-collapse settlers. All the races, especially the Jovians and the Amarrians, had some data on the old calendar and by combining the data it could be remade more or less in its original form. Finally, the 25ers claimed that the only measurement worth considering in a space-faring age was that of the human body. The internal body clock of humans is close to 25 hours, and thus they wanted to base the new clock on that measurement.

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

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

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

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

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

Payday



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

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

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

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

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

Secure Commerce Commission



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

Before instantaneous communication from one star to another came into being, trading over long distances (between solar systems) was hazardous and time-consuming. Frauds and

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

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

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

Leech Capital

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

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

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

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

But the trouble was not over, as the board members at DioCore still had to vote between the two deals. The problem was that MindChill had a member on the board, Jon Mondo, a famous Gallentean venture capitalist. Mondo had been busy gathering support from other board members for his own deal and no one knew which deal would come out on top. This caused severe tension and the battle for DioCore was now reaching a dangerous level. Mercenaries were hired to guard major DioCore facilities from possible sabotage and DioCore directors only moved between systems with highly trained fighter escorts acting as bodyguards. Every vote was now worth more than the life of the person behind it. The board meeting was finally held at DioCore headquarters under military style security. The vote went a close call 5-6 in favor of the private investor, and DioCore was no longer under the threat of takeover.

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



Loser



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

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

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

Just before the two Caldari missiles slammed into Victor's ship he launched a couple of salvos of his best counter-measures in response, hoping to foil the missiles. One of the missiles was fooled into exploding its warhead some way from the hull, but the other stayed its course and smacked into Victor's ship. The shield managed to absorb a fair deal of the damage, but to Victor's dismay the powerful missile had still managed to breach the armored hull.

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

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

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

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

Prey Miner

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

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

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

Hvik had started out as a miner, but quickly found that she didn't have the patience for it. But before she quit she'd established some pretty good contacts in the mining industry and was able to off-load minerals at good prices. So it was natural that instead of becoming a mercenary for hire or a pirate chasing freighters, she would focus on miners - preying on them in isolated areas and loot their minerals. It didn't take all that much combat skill as long as one refrained from attacking groups of miners. And there were always a lot of lone miners in the outer regions, dreaming of striking gold with no one to share with. Hvik was happy to oblige, the miners didn't have to share with her - she'd take it all.

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



Camera Drones

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

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

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

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

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



The Titans

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

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

The construction of a Titan has, in recent years, become an option available to more than just the richest of empires. With the advent of exploration, new resource-rich worlds have been discovered. For the construction of an Amarr corporation's newest fleet addition, a lush, tropical moon was decided as a prime source for resource extraction. After decades of aggressive strip-mining, the moon's surface had been mostly torn away. At the cost of tens of thousands of Minmatar slave lives, the Titan was complete, leaving the moon a devastated, tectonically unstable hell.



Timeout



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

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

The cargo scanner aligned itself with the nearest of the four frigates and started its scanning process. But before it could finish it sputtered to a halt and reported a failed scan. At first Maya was sure she'd done something incorrectly, before realizing that the target ship had used an anti-scanning device on her to counter her scanning efforts. The four frigates suddenly veered off their course and now headed directly towards her. The menacing advance of the smugglers gave Maya the urge to panic and do something reckless, but she managed to get her emotions under control. The smugglers had not opened fire on her yet. Maybe they were just trying to scare her off. The leading smuggler, the one that thwarted her scanning attempt, established a com-link to her, automatically creating a new channel for them to communicate over:

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

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

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

The smugglers seemed to hesitate for a second. They were probably discussing this new turn of events among themselves. Maya and her friends formed a group, so they could retaliate in case one of them was attacked. The smugglers started aligning themselves in a combat formation. Maya began sweating. She had fervently hoped it wouldn't have to come to this, but it was clear that the smugglers were willing to attack them to keep the identity of their cargo hidden. She began preparing her ship for the onslaught. But just as the two sides were about to let loose their weaponry a new ship appeared on the radar. A big ship. A DED ship. Maya sighed in relief.

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

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

The Sarpati family

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

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

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

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

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

V. Salvador Sarpati has gathered a small retinue to dwell at his side in the Serpentis system. There they spend their days in idle games and frolics without a worry in the world. Sarpati himself is an active participant, although his boundless energy and ambition allows him to break out of it every once in a while to take care of his small empire. The more frivolous of Sarpati's retinue live with him, while the more headstrong are scattered around the other Serpentis stations running things. Only one member of Sarpati's adopted family, his sister Santimona, has rejected both the indolent life at Serpentis Prime as well as Sarpati's close links to the underworld. She is now a member of the Sisters of EVE order and mocks her brother and his lifestyle at every opportunity, calling him King Serpent and Serpentis Prime his royal court.



Doppelganger

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

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

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

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

Minutes later, Galen Doradoux knew who he was, and what was going on. His consciousness fully integrated, he floated patiently in the gelatinous biomimetic suspension. Obviously, the Vaarkota deal had fallen through with catastrophic consequences, he thought. The jelly began to recede as it drained down through the bottom of the maturation capsule. The glass slid upwards, and he staggered out, disoriented, falling to his knees and vomiting a large quantity of the jelly he swallowed minutes earlier. The doctor helpfully put a robe over him and handed him a few towels. He gathered himself.

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

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

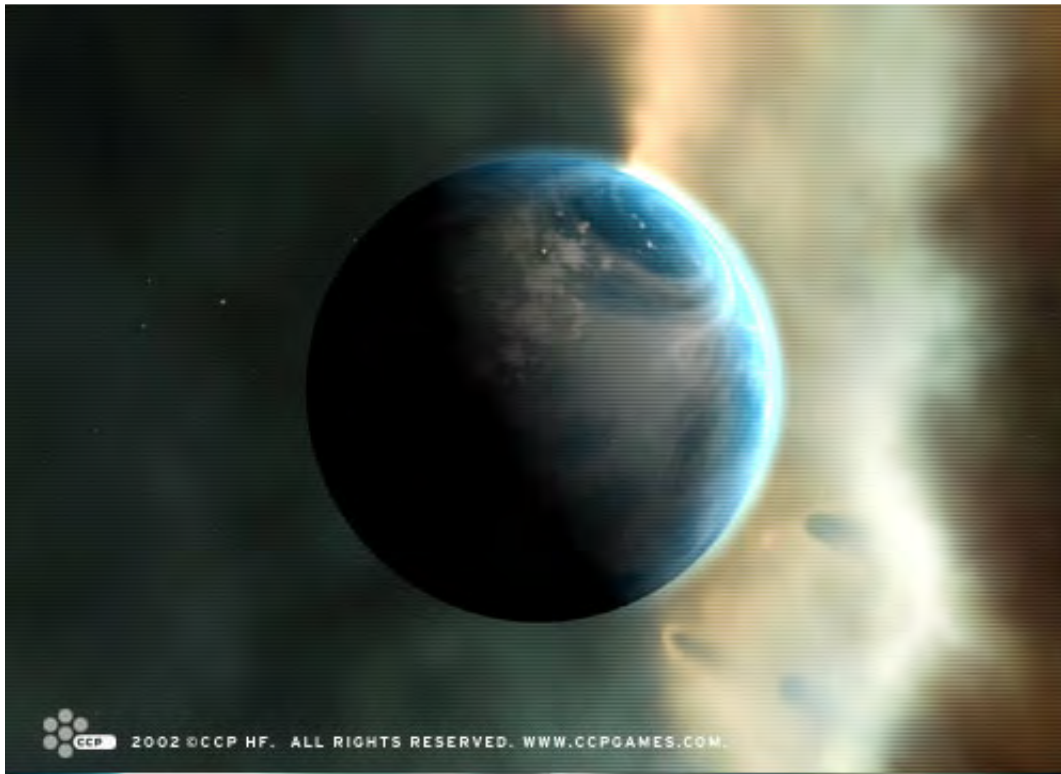
He wrapped the bathrobe tightly around himself. "I know my way to the showers, doctor. Thank you for your assistance."



A Visit Worthwhile

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

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



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

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

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

Most of the urban settlements, which were not many, had developed around huge Holder citadels, the cornerstone of imperial control on the planet. The towns were a mish-mash of large stone buildings, tottering wooden huts and raggedy tent-houses, with every nook and cranny chock full of people. Most of the citizens were Ni-Kunni craftsmen, sprinkled with true Amarrian artisans and freed Minmatar slaves. Out on the plains the land was divided between a handful of Amarr Holders, each ruling over a vast estate of up to 100,000 acres or more. The land was worked by slaves, mostly of Minmatar origin, who lived in small villages surrounded in all directions by an ocean of cornfields. All settlements, both the towns and the villages, were heavily fortified to keep the marauding Chikra nomads out. The Chikra people were descendants of a group of the first settlers on the planet that cut themselves off from the other settlers and headed out into the wilderness. They developed a nomadic lifestyle and still roam the planet in small packs, to the annoyance of the Amarrian authorities.

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

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

The vicious cycle

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

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



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

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

Silphy



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But one child of Dorn en Diabel was not on Poitot, nor had been for more than five years. Silphy en Diabel, his youngest, had been sent off to the Sisters of EVE after one heated row too many with her father. Alone among Dorn en Diabel's offspring Silphy had inherited her father's wits and passion, as well as her mother's fiery temper. Her stay with the Sisters, initially intended as a punishment, grew into enthusiasm for Silphy - for the first time she was free of her father's iron will and free to live as she liked. She struck a friendship with Santimona Sarpati - an influential Sister that also happened to be sister to the notorious V. Salvador Sarpati, head of the Serpents Corporation. But just as Silphy's career with the Sisters seemed poised for rapid take off, she decided to heed the desperate calls of her family and head back home to Poitot.

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

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

Rogue drones

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

Clinging to the inner sides of the two gateway asteroids were sprawling rogue drone lairs - hundred of meters of dark metallic and menacing abode buried deep into the rock and housing hundreds of wild drones. Cichan had heard of these monstrosities, but never one so big as the one he was viewing now. The lair was not only cleverly hidden in every direction from prying eyes - it was also superbly located close to the mammoth asteroid that was sure to attract miners from miles away. As a prove to that point Cichan noticed the remains of several ships perched by the drone lairs, being systematically taken apart by worker drones and incorporated into the ever-expanding drone complex. Fast approaching combat drones made Cichan fear his ship would share the same fate all-to-soon.



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

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

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

Rogue drones and wild drones are the terms used over advanced drones that mutated out of control. A few years ago some ingenious Gallentean inventor had the idea of creating super-advanced drones that could think and act on their own - in essence acting in every sense like a regular space ship except being unmanned and computer controlled. First prototypes were encouraging, but then disaster struck. The drones became unruly, then unmanageable. Some of these were huge - the largest drones ever constructed, these drones were even equipped with warp drives and equipped with the latest advancements in artificial intelligence. These mother drones, as they were called, along with several lesser drones soon managed to spread out, not only within the same system as the research facility that birthed them, but also to other systems. Only later men discovered exactly how - the drones attacked and took over space ships, then used them to jump to other systems, the drones themselves safely hidden within the ship. Needless to say the super-drone research was soon abandoned by the Gallenteans.

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

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

In areas where rogue drones are numerous and seen as deterrents to normal mining and trade operations, the local authorities have taken it upon themselves to employ armed forces to destroy rogue drone lairs, or at least keep them from spreading too heavily. Discussions have been held between the empires and within CONCORD about a possible joint effort to rid the world of rogue drones, but these discussions have not let to any concrete deals being made. Thus, it is still up to the local authorities of any given place to deal with the drones as best they can.



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Maleatu Shakor



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

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

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

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

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

For two years nothing was heard of Maleatu Shakor. The Amarrians, initially vexed over the Jovian interference, assumed he was dead. Thus his return to the Minmatar Republic came as a total surprise. Where Shakor had once been fierce, driven and highly agitated he now seemed unusually calm and collected. Fearing some foul Jovian plot Shakor's family insisted on DNA tests; they confirmed his identity. Shakor himself has remained silent about his time with the Jovians. He assumed a political position with the Republic and soon resumed his fight for freeing Minmatars still enslaved by the Amarrians, with the difference that his arsenal now consists of sharp words and political machinations instead of a fleet of space ships. Just as his ancestors defied the Amarr rule all those years ago Maleatu Shakor continues to this day defying the Amarrians at every opportunity in the halls of diplomacy all over the world of EVE.

Old Man Star

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

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

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

In YC 11, when the Gallente-Caldari War was near its end, a Gallentean construction ship set out for the desolate system then known as Ouperia. There was little monetary gain to be had from the system's middling asteroid fields, but a stargate there would serve as a link between the Peccanouette Circle and the Patrie Perimeter, which made it a good long-term trade prospect. The construction ship departed from Villore system, some 12 light years distant. Estimated travel time was only a few minutes. The crew consisted of five people, a huge reduction from the old days when dozens of crewmen were needed – with the technological advances made over the course of the war, swarms of drones and robots were by that point responsible for most of the actual construction, with the crew acting mostly as operators and technicians.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ametat and Avetat

1 Now it came to pass in the third day of the first month of the tenth year of the rule of emperor Amash-Akura that the midday deliberations were abruptly brought to a halt when the day darkened in the sky.

2 And the sun went black as night and birds fell from the sky and flowers shriveled in the field and people fell sick in the streets and in the houses.

3 And in this moment of terrible distress the skies opened with a loud shriek and angels, bright as the sun was black, descended down to earth and their beauty soothed all the people and the animals alike.

4 And when the angels touched the ground with their feet the earth shook violently and fire engulfed those daring too near the divinities. Their power being mighty and their presence potent the people were wise not to look too closely upon them.

5 The emperor came from his high seat with his retinue to meet with the angels outside the city walls. And lo and behold! The moment the emperor passed below the city gates the sun cleared and shone as brightly as ever before, all in the glory of the emperor and the heavenly angels that called upon him.

6 The angels spoke the language of God and called themselves sefrim: those that guard the high seats of heaven. God ordered them here to protect the emperor against all evils that ever beset him.

7 The sefrim offered unto the emperor a present from God as one brother to another: Ametat the Scepter and Avetat the Crown, showing the great pleasure God had in the earthly work of the emperor.

8 And thus the sefrim came to serve the illustrious Amash-Akura, to stay by his side during the day and guard his sleep during the night. A great house of white stone and marble was built for the sefrim to reside in and were tended by the best servants the empire had to offer.

9 For a hundred years while the sefrim watched over the empire no wars or epidemics or famines ruined the lands and the people were content and joyous.

10 From Isthia in the north and Melekel in the south and Edras in the east and from Iphria in the west people came to pray before the holy sefrim and receive a blessing to take home to their families.

11 The sefrim stood tall and beautiful, clad in their white and amber robes, with masks of gold and silver to protect people from being struck dead by their angelic beauty.

12 And all this time the emperor Amash-Akura did not age one day and was as healthy and strong as the day he came of age. The Scepter gave him vigor and the Crown gave him acumen and his rule was wise and fair.

13 Then Molok the Deceiver sundered the lands and the people suffered floods and plagues conjured by him. Molok turned the people against the sefrim and people who once sang their praise now abhorred them.

14 The emperor saw that all was not good and summoned the sefrim and said unto them, The people are in great distress, what remedies doest thee have?

15 And the sefrim answered, My Lord, the land has split against thou, thou must make war upon thy enemies to reclaim what is justly thine.

16 And the emperor asked, Will thee aid us in this perilous endeavor?

17 But the sefrim answered, No my Lord, we are here only to guide and guard, it is forbidden to us to aggress upon any man.

18 Then be gone! The emperor said in anger, for his foes were formidable.

19 And the sefrim, no longer in the emperor's favor returned to from whence they came that very day. And the moment they left the sun went black and people cried in anguish for this was an evil omen.

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

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

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

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

- Chapter I of the Epitoth
in the Book of Scriptures



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

But there are in existence fragments of texts from various sources that speak of the gifts the sefrim (singular form: sef), the Ametat and the Avetat, or the Scepter and the Crown. These fragments not only support the truth of the story (at least up to a point), but they also contain information regarding what happened to the items. The Scepter and the Crown, described as made of incredibly light-weight metal, yet also very strong. No surviving manuscripts give any exact info about their function other than they allowed the user to 'wield the power of God' and 'harvest the knowledge of creation'.

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

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

Mordu's Legion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

are expected to be experienced fighters before they apply for membership in the Legion. Members of the Legion get access to high-tech Caldari military equipment, even prototype weapons to test out, and are guaranteed plenty of employment if they so wish. Non-Caldari that have served in the Legion for a long time are offered Caldari citizenship on their retirement.

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



Power politics

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



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

The democracy exercised by the Gallenteans is a very open one - it is common for major issues to go to a

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

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

Repair Man

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

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

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

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

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



New horizons



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

Today, Runia was especially excited as she was about to meet a Caldari trader she'd never met before. The man was supposed to have good connections to some top-level people in the Caldari corporate structure. If true,

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

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

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

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

One hour later Runia undocked. Her new Deteis agent for the Wyrkomi Corporation had been polite and to the point and shown no indication of being sly or untrustworthy. In essence, he was pretty much like every other Caldari she had ever met. Yet there were slight differences, for instance he had inquired about her home back in the Kingdom and shown genuine interest in all things Dark Amarrian. An inquisitive mind was not something she was accustomed to with the Civire, who were usually dull conversationalists. This feel of more personal interest pleasantly surprised her.

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

The Vampire

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

Nothing.

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

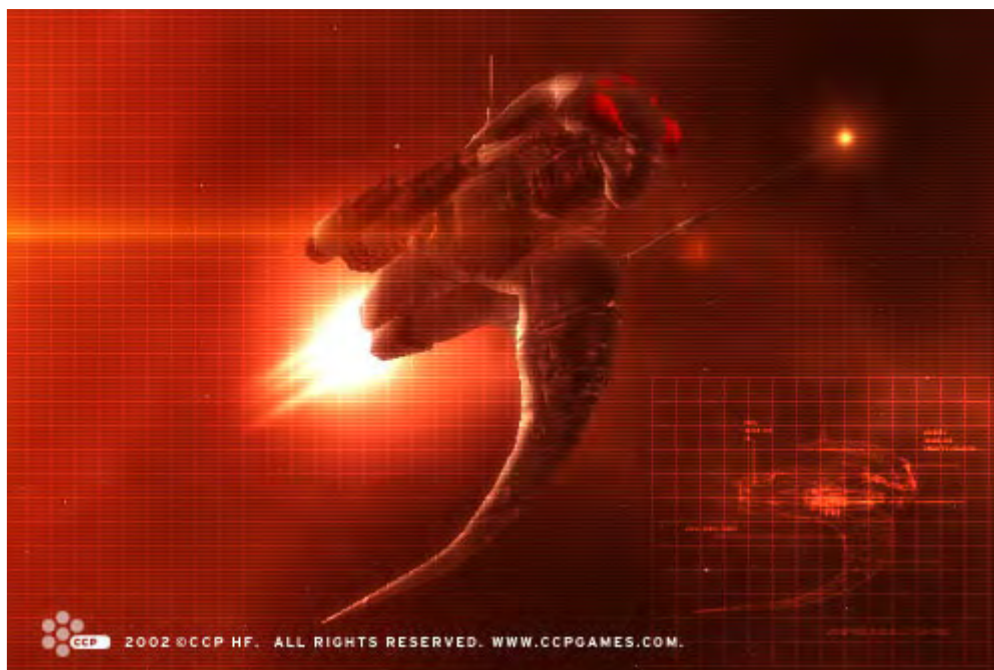
"There's been a little problem," spat Uragan, the exasperation in his voice speaking volumes of his emotional state. "I picked up three tails, I think we both know what they're after. I'm making for the Melmaniel gate now, but I need to be met - I can't outrun them forever." The Director's expression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

Nestor had just opened his mouth to protest, when the telltale snap of ships emerging from warp-transit caused Uragan's blood to ice over in his veins. He abruptly cut off the comm, and again panned around his ship. There they were... three Condors, fifteen clicks aft of him and closing fast. Even at that distance he could make out the rabbit-skull motif stenciled upon their gunmetal hulls: The Guristas.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Fait accompli

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Norid was a slave. He had been slave for almost a century. He was getting old, but the implants he had from the time when he was a Holder were still ticking along nicely. Norid certainly didn't feel two centuries old. Occasionally his implants needed a little bit of maintenance, but his master was kind enough to allow them. If only he knew that by doing so he was aiding Norid in executing his revenge on him.

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

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

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

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

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

His master, sipping his tea, noticed it.

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

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

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

Kiss of the Soul

DAM-TORSAD

YC 105

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

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

The first hour of the meeting was dedicated to the usual affairs of state. The chamberlain read out status reports from all over the empire and from embassies, then there was a discussion about foreign deals and agreements, fiscal matters and social issues. Once the formalities were over the talks turned to individual matters of concern. Predictably the most influential members dictated the discussions; the loud and dynamic Afrid Sarkon, cousin of the empress; the sly Sin Callor, from the Ministry of Internal Order; the assertive High Deacon Moritok of the Theology Council and the sharp and quick-witted Zach Dormondan, deputy of the Imperial Chancellor.

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

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

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

Finally, Chamberlain Karsoth, ventured a comment:

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

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

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



Serpent's Coil

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

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

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



City of god

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

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

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

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

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



Heideran gets the Aidonis

SCOPE AGENCY

July 2, YC 104

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

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



Heideran VII is the first Amarr Emperor to receive the award and the decision has turned out to be controversial. There is no denying the fact that under Heideran's leadership the Amarr Empire has become much more amiable in it's relations to the other empires. Relations between the empires have never been better and seem only poised to get even better in the near future and many contribute this fact directly to Heideran VII. In fact, those that have expressed outrage over the decision have grudgingly admitted that Heideran is a great leader that is undoubtedly one of the main reasons for the tranquil world we now live in. Their only gripe is with the Amarrian society itself, such as practices of slavery and other breaches of human rights.

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

Three Pillars of Power

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

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



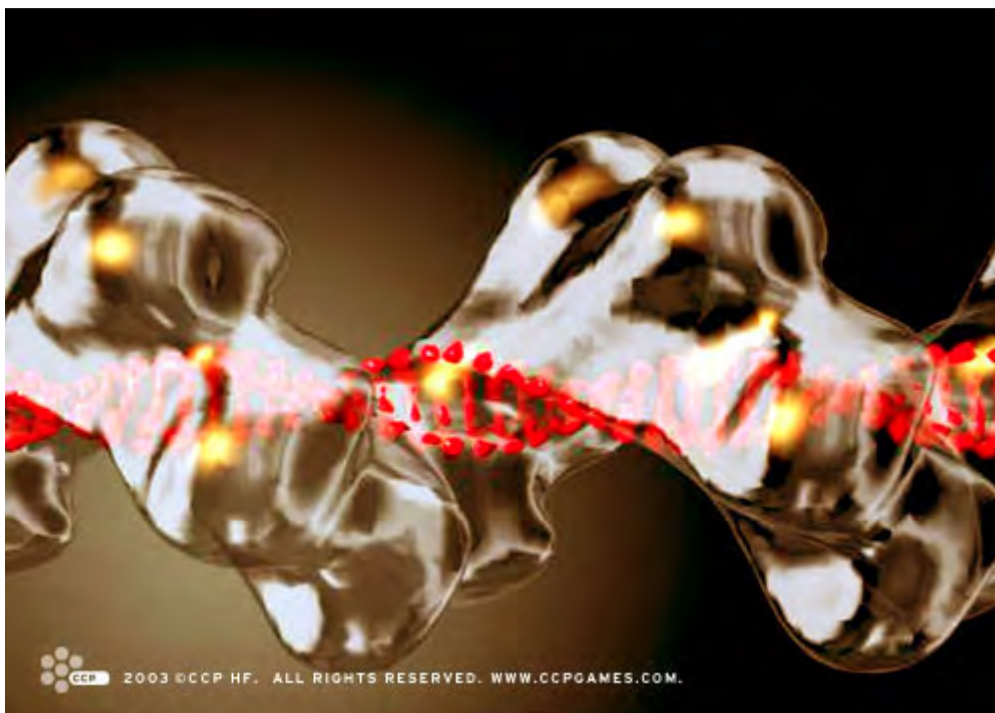
One man too many

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

The holoreel showed a large, glamorous hall, with at least 300 persons seated in their finest livery eating a lush dinner. The picture zoomed in on one of the tables, where senator Papadour and a man that looked identical to Ancru were seated, amongst others. The people at the table talked and laughed, everything looking perfectly normal. Then suddenly the senator grabbed his throat with both hands, his face turning red, before he collapsed face-forward onto the table, his body raked by a few spasms before becoming totally still and lifeless. Commotion ensued, then Garat switched the holoreel off.

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

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

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

Garat smiled at Ancru's words, seemingly pleased.

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

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

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

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

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

State factionalism



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

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

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

The three factions that are becoming evermore apparent are each led by one of the large mega corporations with other mega corporations, as well as lesser corporations, closing the ranks behind them. At this early stage it is impossible to tell which faction has the most strength as they seem equally poised.

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

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

The third faction is not all that concerned about trade, but more about the place the Caldari State enjoys versus the other empires in both military and economical sense. These are the patriots and they are led by the Kaalakiota Corporation, but also include Lai Dai and Wiyrkomi. The patriots cultivate the Caldari heritage, reminisce about the great Raata Empire of old and weep for their lost home world, Caldari Prime. The most fanatical of them cry for a renewal of the war with the Federation, but they are a minority. The majority sees economical dominance in the world only as a tool to promote military power. The patriots are willing to negotiate alternative ways to acquire Caldari Prime other than through war, but they know that they can only see their dream come true by convincing the Federation of the economical and, most importantly, militaristic superiority of the Caldari State. This is what they strive for.

The Science of Never Again

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



"I first noticed you were asleep a little more than 40 minutes ago," she answered. "I do not know how long before then." She sat down beside him and placed her hand gently on his back. She could feel the muscles underneath his shirt tighten up instantly. "Trevor, what happened to you? You shout these terrible things in your sleep, and it frightens me! What pain is this that you suffer so much from?"

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

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

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

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

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

As young Trevor watched the war and its technological innovations evolve into a stalemate, the rage within him grew steadily until the ultimate betrayal that hurled his soul into the abyss for good. The truce that left Caldari Prime—once the home world for millions of Caldari—legally in the hands of the Gallente Federation was the breaking point. Trevor felt that he was orphaned yet again, only this time a resurrection was possible—if only he could raise Caldari technology from the dead.

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

Trevor opened his eyes and scanned the progress of one of those possibilities. The datasheets contained the results of experiments and unfinished theoretical conjectures. He had fallen asleep while reading through some of them, exhausted after days without sleep. Orsetta was one of several research agents from corporations that Trevor had commissioned to assist him in finding the answers he needed. She, like the rest of the research agents under his employ, carried out the bulk of the experiments and research required to test his theories. They were dedicated in their work and brilliant scientists in their own right, but required his constant financial and logistical support to keep up with the workload he imposed on them. And although he realized that science

was, by nature, a very methodical process that could never be rushed, his impositions were especially harsh on the Gallente agents under his employ.

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

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

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

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

Orsetta was so excited that she was nearly incoherent. "The containment issues were all solved, we've overcome the stability problems inherent with using morphite-based alloys and found a suitable quantum solution to the mesoscopic issues caused by placing nanosensors within the alloy shell to monitor..."

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

"Oui, monsieur."

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

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

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

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

Trevor paused for just a moment before answering.

"You'll find out soon enough."

Khuumak



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

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

It took all of Drupar's considerable willpower to keep his face impassive as he watched his secret associates being put through the wringer. Drupar could only admire the slow, deliberate technique of the royal heir as he questioned the slaves. Arkon had mastered the skill of breaking a person's will through only words and gestures. When Drupar had heard of the capture of the three slaves, he hoped for a quick trial and an even quicker execution. Now, cold dread gripped his bowels as he watched the old fool grilling the quivering slaves before him. "Old fool, yes," Drupar thought, "but devilishly cunning at times. Like a dog, he can sniff out conspiracies where no other man can." As much as he loathed and hated the man himself, Drupar had long since learned to respect his master's abilities.

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

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

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

• • •

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Idonis only nodded.

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

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

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

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

"What would you have me do?" Zoriac asked.

"Annihilate the Starkmanir tribe." Idonis paused for a moment and caught his breath, mentally crushing something deep within himself. "Inform the orbital fleet. Have our people out of the cities and in orbit within a rotation. This planet will burn as a beacon, to illuminate the galaxy with the strength of House Ardishapur, and

the Divinity of our purpose. None shall be spared.”

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

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

Tides of Change



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

• • •

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

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

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

And now they were here.

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

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

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

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

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

• • •

As the warp engines died down and the fluid regulation system in his pod performed its deceleration compensation, that pleasing backwards flow of liquid over his body mingling with the ship’s gentle vibration, he saw the great checkered curve of the asteroid belt slide into view beneath him. Seconds later, his scanner picked up the hostiles.

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

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

“Damn! They’ve locked me. What kind of...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Communication Relay Committee



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

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

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

Outside of the capsule, the hum of the fluid routers gently permeated the otherwise silent relay tower.

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

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

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

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

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

He couldn't wait to get back.

-Commander Orestes

Communications Relay Committee

Interstellar Services Department

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

"Come again?"

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

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

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

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

mean?"

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

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

He gestured at a neatly-stacked tower of pressure crates. "See those? Data arrays, due to be shipped out to the archives. You would be amazed at what's in there... Video footage of that battle in Passari. Last night's Clash match scores. Minutes from the Sanitation Committee meeting".

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

STAR: Support, Technology and Resources A Division of CONCORD

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

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

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



And so went my morning. I would sit outside the various Universities, Academies and Schools and wait for new Pilots to appear, and then offer to help them find their feet. It had become clear some months earlier that the basic pilot training offered by the four empires was not really sufficient to cover the complexities of a pilot's every day life in New Eden, and so CONCORD had decided to put to use one of its divisions, STAR, which had previously been a kind of Citizen's Advice service. Equipped with state-of-the-art ships, which used a prototype jump engine they were able to travel the galaxy extremely quickly, so whenever a new player graduated, they could be there.

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

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

ISD: Interstellar Services Department A Department of CONCORD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Resume"

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

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



‘CHILDREN OF LIGHT’

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

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

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

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

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



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

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



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

It all went downhill from there.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Cult of Tetrimon

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

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

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

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

The Council of Apostles, the rightful ruling agency of the Amarrians, took back their former power, and attempted to restore the Amarrian faith. The nobleman was beatified as Saint Tetrimon, and the Council of Apostles took heed of his actions, and created an Order to reverse the corrupting influence of the now deceased Emperor Zaragram II - The Order of St Tetrimon.

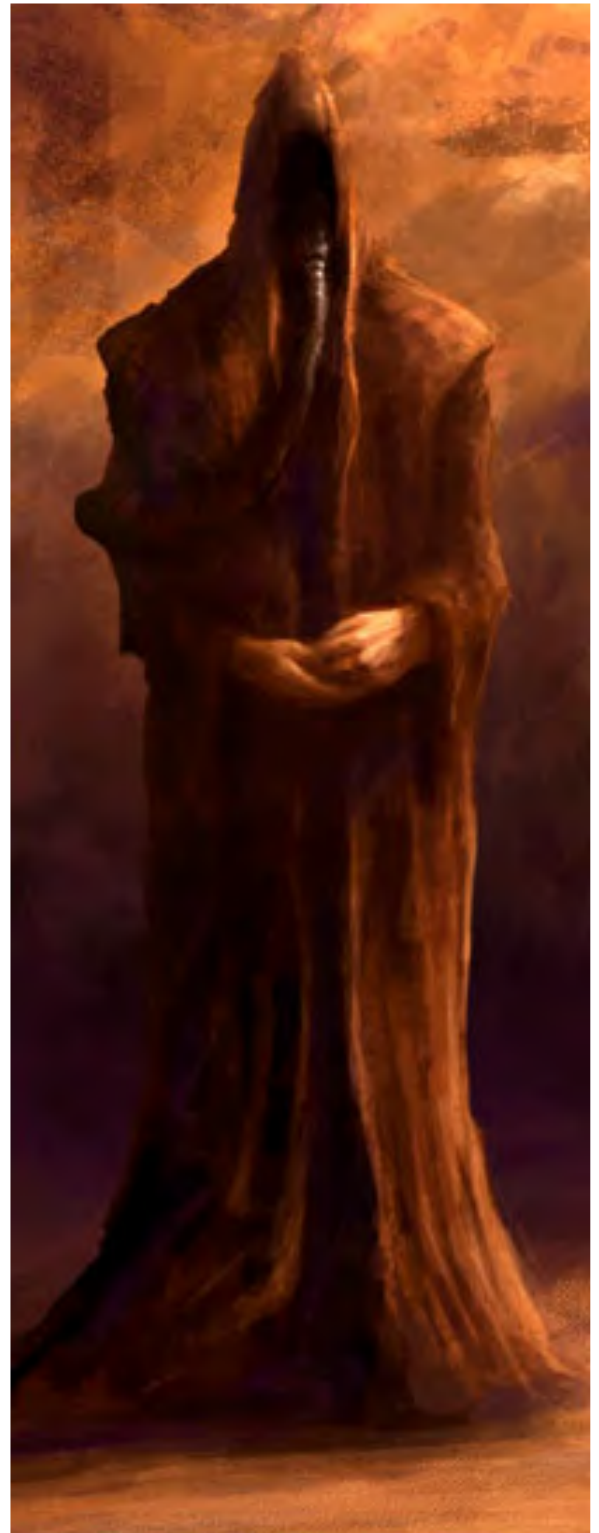
This Order was given the task of purifying the Amarr faith, of preserving the original scriptures, and of eradicating apocrypha and deuterocanonical chapters (i.e. removing those chapters of the scriptures which disagreed with the "canon" of the Amarr faith, or those chapters which had been added to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

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

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

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

The Order of St Tetrimon survived in small groups, often finding themselves at odds with the Theology Council and the Privy Council, but still openly carrying out their work of preserving the original liturgical records of the Amarr faith. In 22762, with the breakup of the Empire and the forming of the Khanid Kingdom, the Emperor



issued a decree suppressing the Order of St Tetrimon, asserting that he did so to maintain peace and tranquility within the Empire. Tetrimon houses and colleges everywhere were seized by the local authorities. Some Order members were imprisoned; some were driven into exile. The Grand Master of the Order, Lozera Riana, was declared a heretic and imprisoned in the holy city of Dam-Torsad, where he died two years later.

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

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

Big Fish, Little Fish



His upper lip was sweating again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was halfway up the stairs to the capsule landing, musing on the ridiculous ease of the whole thing, when he heard the sound of steps on the main platform below him. Casting a glance over his shoulder, he saw the tech enter the room and, without a moment's hesitation, stride over to the bay panel and key in a sequence, lightning-fast.

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

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

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

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

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

"Wha—who..." began Monk.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Niques Leutre. Aeron Assis. The Broker.

Cold sweat didn't begin to describe it.

The Battle of Vak'Atioth

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It had begun.

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

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

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

It was a Jovian Mother ship.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No-one has attacked the Jovians since.

Stairway to Heaven

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

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

In the end, the matter was never fully resolved, and transportation remains a matter of taste. While high-orbit shuttle deployment, where an airborne vehicle gradually clears the atmosphere at low angles, remains the most popular method of both passenger transportation and freight, the fact that many planets have different atmospheric conditions means that they have to be custom-built, resulting in only localized industries. However, the space industry has bypassed this by simply creating a subset economy, where goods are manufactured from materials procured in space, and sold to space-based customers. As a result, there is only minimal interaction between the two when compared to the massive scale of interstellar trading.



The Outcast

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

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

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

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

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

The Sisters of Eve attempt regular clandestine aid shipments to Hidden Hope, which exists in a state of near-poverty. Due to Starkman Prime's location in the Arzad system – a disputed border zone between the Minmatar and the Amarr – many of these shipments are interdicted, which in turn forces the Outcast to turn to piracy. While the Amarr Navy is brutally efficient at curbing Outcast raids, the only reasons the Empire has not allowed slave raiders to invade Vo'shun, is an eagerly perpetuated and not altogether false rumour that the colony is rife with communicable diseases that render its populace unsuitable for enslavement – and, unbeknownst to the bedraggled citizens of Hidden Hope, a curious edict put into law by Idonis Ardishapur himself, whose royal family has domain over Starkman Prime. Enacted shortly after Ardishapur scouts stumbled upon Vo'shun a mere decade ago, the edict, not widely publicized or even understood by imperial lawyers – yet tacitly enforced nonetheless – states unconditionally that no further harm shall directly befall this shattered world.

This edict's name: Khadrea's Law.



Hands of a killer

"These are not the hands of a killer."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

The Crystal Boulevard



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Take another look at the Boulevard. Ignore the buildings, look down at the road. Pretty, eh? Cobblestoned, but it's all still clear and gleams like nothing else, not even the best buildings? And it seems bottomless, right? There's a reason for that. The "cobblestones" are just decoration, carved into the surface. The street itself seems bottomless, but it really goes down for twenty meters. You see, the Boulevard itself - the road, and the foundations of all the buildings for about a block all around - is one solid chunk of diamond. Manufactured diamond, but still as hard as the real thing. Five square hundred-meter blocks laid in a row, each twenty meters deep, and the hardest material in the known universe. And for eighty meters beneath that, it's layers of plates of latticed crystal-carbonate-nanofiber armor - the same stuff used in the most elite of military starships. The Boulevard is really the shield for the security bunkers of the three governmental branches and the Military Command in case of planetary bombardment - you can shoot a shell from a thousand-millimeter kinetic accelerator from orbit onto the Boulevard and not achieve a breach through the individual blocks. And even when the diamond shield does break, then you have to go through the layered carbonate-nanofiber armor, and you still have chunks of diamond to get through, which makes any shot bounce and lose force. Nuclear weapons'll do nothing to the topshield - it's already been heated and compressed, after all - and it's heavily faceted in layers so shooting it with lasers from orbit is totally pointless. Never mind the heatsinks, in any case - they bleed off excess heat into the surrounding earth, so you'd have to direct enough firepower onto the

Boulevard to turn half the district into molten slag to get through. Only direct-contact antimatter bombs could do the job, and even then it'd need enough antimatter blasts to end up destroying most of the Caille city district in the process. Essentially, you can't get to the bunkers without laying waste to the entire city, and generally invaders who want territory want to try and keep urban centers as intact as possible.

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

Heh. I can see you're getting tired of the allegories, so I'll get down to it: the Federation, for all of its wild diversity, is a lot stronger than it looks. Any citizen with half a brain can understand that the freedoms that let us wear translucent clothing aren't exactly looked on favorably elsewhere. (I'll admit not everyone has that much of a brain, and again, you want examples, head for Sovicou... or better yet, don't.) They understand that, despite how different we all are, what we have collectively is worth defending. Get a Gallentean angry about his freedom or the freedom of someone he knows and he'll be ready to fight to the death and further. Sure, some folks might be "armchair activists" about Amarrian slavery... that's not what I'm talking about. The Minmatar aren't "our people", or at least the Republic ones aren't. It's one thing to protest something happening many light-years away. But the Amarrians never made more than probing slave raids into the Federation, and you know why? They immediately realized that they'd never be able to enslave us, not without slaughtering most of us. Even if they did get people off of the streets of Luminaire, or Intaki, or Daasa, or Sovicou, or wherever, we'd fight them to the absolute end. Beneath all of our differences there's a single bond between every living Gallentean that makes us hard as diamond: a love of freedom.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

COLD WIND

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

No man was stronger than K'vire; in time he forgot to walk and started to lead, and the northern Fuukiuye tribes followed him. None could match Deteaas' wisdom; soon he forgot to listen and started to speak, and the eastern Oryioni people answered his call. When for the third time the son of the son became father, seventeen houses of Fuukiuye went back South, and twenty-three houses of Oryioni returned to the West.

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

And both refused to leave.

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

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

One third of the men fell, then another third. When only a fifth was still standing, Cold Wind felt his pain burn into fury as he had not known before.

"This," he roared, "ends now!"

Blizzard and ice he spewed until no hand could hold a weapon; until friend and foe lumped blind together, seeking protection from his rage. He blew until none could stand, until every man still alive was left clinging desperately to the last thread of warmth.

Wind-of-the-West lifted the fog. "Forgive these men," he said, "they were blind, but now they will see." Storm Wind uncovered the sky. "Spare their lives," he said, "you have already extinguished their anger."

Cold Wind let his fury vanish and released his grip, and men could feel their limbs again.

"Look at each other," he told them. "How do you tell one man from the other? How do you know which man to kill?"

The men struggled to stand up and looked at their armors; the symbols of their Houses were torn and broken, not visible anymore.

"No two men on this field have the same face, but can you tell them apart now?"

The men gazed at each other trying to distinguish brothers from enemies, yet the blood covering their faces made all of them alike.

Cold Wind whispered: "Remember this. Trust your eyes, you will kill each other. Trust your veins, you can all go home in peace."

The seventeen and twenty-three houses became forty. K'vire and Deteaas became Raata again.

From "Two Bloodlines, one Race: the Raata spirit in the Deteis and Civire soul", Lai Dai Press, YR87. Reprinted with permission.

"The Greatest Joke"

- Sit down, please.

He's sitting on his bed, head in hands. All bravado has gone out of him. His hands, now rubbing his eyes, don't feel like they belong to him anymore. They feel like ghosts, attached to him by some strange mechanism he has no control over.

He doesn't want to look up, because he'll see the pictures on the walls – of loved ones lost, of glories past – and he will remember how alone he is. There's a certificate there, too, somewhere, for working in deep-space environments. He worked as a miner on asteroids, an incredibly dangerous task that paid well. The men in his family worked in the same way, and most of them have died. He's the last one, of the men, of the family, of everything. And soon, he'll be gone as well.

And yet ... and yet he knows that it doesn't matter, if he'll only allow his grief to fall away like the old skin it is. He doesn't want to take his mind off it, because that'll only mean he's running away. Instead, he focuses; he gazes inward with a burning stare, willing himself to look his fate directly in the eye. He doesn't blink. He doesn't blink.

After a while, he feels something give way under the force of his stare, and his mood shifts from victimization to purpose. He accepts the joke of life. He feels the sorrow lift from him. He begins to feel that nothing is impossible.

He starts browsing through pamphlets.

Instant response to most of them is to toss them in the garbage. There's nothing they can do for him that'll change things, nothing they can tell him that he doesn't already know.

When he gets to the card from the Sisters, he almost throws it away like everything else. Then he notices what the card actually says.

The card has a phone number, and below that, the line, "This is not what you think."

He frowns, and calls the number. When a voice answers, it asks him how he got the contact info.

He's silent for a little while. The voice waits patiently. Then he starts telling it who he is and what has happened.

The voice came from a TV box. There was an avatar on the screen: his AI doctor. You didn't get a human doctor unless you were a pilot, or willing to pay an exorbitant fee.

- We've received the results of the blood test, the voice said. The avatar moved its lips in sync with the words, and didn't smile. That's when he knew it was serious.

He meets the Sister at a café. Over a cup of tea, she makes him an offer.

"The doctors are reliable," she says, stirring the tea with a spoon that she then sets aside. "They only give that card to people whose entire profiles - psych, medical, economy, everything - match what we're looking for. So we know you're right for us."

"And now I need to know whether you're right for me," he replies, and sips his coffee.

"Precisely," she says, and pulls out some boxes from her bag. They're each the size of a fist, identical, made of marble. "What I'm about to tell you might sound incredible," she continues, "but you'll need to take a lot of things on faith from now on. There are forces in this universe. Some of them good, some evil. Occult, even. And one of those forces, an evil one, is attempting to disrupt various spiritual lines, to influence the world in various ways. The Sisters have set up a task force to uproot it."

He stares her directly in the eye. "I don't believe you," he says. "Actually, I think you're crazy, and those boxes probably contain the eyeballs of your past victims or something."

She suppresses a grin and orders the boxes in front of him, three in a line. "Pick one."

He does. She opens it. The box contains a small marble, purple and opaque. The instant he sees it, he's flooded with a sense of well-being. Worries melt away, acceptance and joy light up inside of him, and the future, bleak as it is, seems like the best thing that could happen to him.

She closes the box, and the feeling fades away. She opens the other two boxes; they're empty.

"Very few people respond," she says. "But I saw that you did. You're attuned to them, which means you can find them."

"What do you want me to do?" he asks.

"Look away," she says. He does, and hears her re-order the boxes. Eventually he looks back, points at one box, and it contains the marble. They do this several times, and he always picks the right box. Every time it's opened, it makes him feel alive and happy. Yet when it's closed he doesn't need more; he's content with that brief glimpse. He mentions this to the Sister, and she nods, clearly pleased.

"I don't know what you saw," she says, "because it's different for everyone. I see snowflakes, gently drifting about inside the boxes. Other people see colours, and others can only tell by feel. Your mind picks whatever you can handle.

"I want you to leave your life," she says. "Come with us. Help put things right. There aren't many people who can do what we're asking you to do."

He's still not sure. Then again, he thinks, what does he have to lose?



- The results are not good. I'm sorry, the AI said.

He knew it wasn't sorry, that it was a liar. But he'd known that for a while now, and he accepted its preprogrammed response as a small comfort.

He's aboard the Sisters' ship. They're in high sec space, scanning for something. He's started to feel the pangs of impatience but he pushes them down. It's true that he doesn't have any time to waste, but all that means is that a second spent on aggravation is a second wasted. He looks around, tries to take everything in as if for the first time. The metal walls and railings, the lights in the ceiling, the muted greys and greens worn by people around him. It's all rather low-key and subdued, and yet it's perfect, if only because it is.

There's a shout, and the crew erupts in cheers. They've found a marker.

He sat there stunned as the AI told him he had somewhere between six and eighteen standard months to live. It was nothing they could prevent; at some point the brain would simply stop sending the commands for lungs to inflate and heart to contract. His mind would decide it was time to stop. There had been some limited experiments with automatic equipment, a type of pacemaker, but in order for it to work he couldn't exert himself under any circumstance, nor meditate or relax. Never drink, never do anything that might cause any sort of deviation from the norm. Never watch movies, never fall in love. Nothing.

-It's a choice between living and dying, the AI said, and he understood.

The ship destroys every pirate it finds at the location, and its sensors pick up a trail. The Sister in charge, the same one who recruited him, is very pleased. "It's not always that we find it," she says, "and even then, we have no idea whether it'll lead us to the right spot."

They move on.

- There is a chance you might live longer. The six to eighteen months is a mean time; there is nothing except the basic laws of probability that says you couldn't live a full life.

He thought about this.

- So I might die in ten years? he asked.

- Yes.

- Or I might die tomorrow, he said.

- Yes.

The AI watched him for a moment, then said, but chances are it will be within a year and a half.

He didn't ask how many had lived past that. He didn't want to know.

They've been through two more encounters. At least they've been lucky enough to find trails leading them deeper in. The Sister told him that sometimes the trail would grow cold and they'd have to go back to square one.

They're chatting busily while strapped into their seats, waiting for the pilot to finish off the last pirate. Remaining unfettered in the middle of combat is just asking for a broken neck. The crew members to either side of him are arguing about whether this is the second or third encounter, one claiming that the first one shouldn't count, the other that it should. It's an utterly pointless argument, and he understands it so well. Anything to keep their minds off the fact that they could die at any moment, either burned to a crisp or flash-frozen in space, their eyes bursting out of their heads.

There is a resounding boom as the last pirate is blown to shreds, then silence.

Speakers crackle. "This is it, folks. We've found the trail again, and this time it looks like the mother lode."

With bated breaths, they course toward their fate.

And then, with no forewarning, he started to laugh.

The AI was flummoxed.

- Do you need me to turn off for a moment?

- No, he said, still laughing.

He knew it wasn't shock, at least not completely. It was acceptance, and it had hit him like a hammer.

- Everything is clear now, he said. All the rules have been changed. The grand joke has come to its punchline at last.

The AI remained silent, though he didn't know if it was out of respect for the dead, or merely because it had no routines to deal with this sort of reaction.

- Everything is clear, he repeated. I only had one relative, you know.

- I know, said the AI.

- My grandmother. She died last year. I always admired her strength, her will to live in the moment, the simplicity she saw in things. I always tried to pare down my life to match that, cutting away the complexities. But that's just not something you can do. You can't ignore everything and force yourself to think simple.

He was babbling now, but he couldn't imagine stopping.

- True simplicity and purity of purpose comes only when you've faced all the complexities, and lived through them long enough – and deep enough – that you come through them, as if breaking through a barrier, and right out the other side.

- And you've broken through a barrier? the AI asked.

- I have now. You achieve simplicity not by keeping complexity away, but by embracing it, gladly giving yourself over to the torrents of life, and, laughing, realizing that it's all insignificant and that it holds no power over you, that life is one big joke with our death as the punchline and that no matter whether you find the joke funny or not it'll still be spoken right to the end, and that is the heart of humour and joy.

He stopped, almost gasping for breath. The AI stared at him.

- Would you like some pamphlets? it said at last.

"Deploy! Deploy! Go, go, go!"

They pour out, like blood spurting from a wound. Drones whizz past them in a battle frenzy. The pilot is keeping the pirates busy, keeping all attention focused on him.

They were all hand-picked by Sisters operatives. Every one of them immediately zeroes in on the same broken-down husk. It looks the same as the myriad other wrecks floating about, but they know better.

He's the first to reach it. It wouldn't show up on any scanner, that much is certain. It's a spherical thing, purple and opaque like the marble he saw, and surprisingly inert. Even when it's unconnected to anything, it doesn't seem to want to move. It takes three of them to pry it loose, and when they do, it feels like taking a splinter out of bare skin, like removing a thorn from the Lord's eye.

The sphere calls to him, but the happiness it promises is laced with confusion, and he senses undercurrents of doubt and madness. He ignores its call the best he can, and focuses on getting the thing back to the ship. The Sisters have told him that the sphere will be purified.

Instinctively, he knows that the item's placement here was intended to call hapless travelers, make this place into a death trap. But there's more at play than that. It feels like they've stumbled onto a dark tapestry, and managed to cut away one of the threads.

He looks at his hands. They're shaking from the strain of removing the sphere. And they feel a part of him now.

Inside his suit, he smiles.

He accepted the pamphlets with good grace, got up, and walked quietly out of the office, heading towards his life.

"Postnatal"

And from the mess of blood and viscera, there emerges the soul of a new machine. It moves in a herky-jerky fashion; a pair of dark orange eyes slowly light up, a few feelers twitch into motion. It's a mix of wires, bolts and circuitry.

It crawls out from the organic wreckage, trailing various substances. It doesn't look back at its former host, which is making increasingly faint guttural sounds. Eventually the host falls silent.

The drone lies very still. It's the size of a fist, which is typical of the lesser workers. Fighter drones may grow up to the size of frigates, but they need smaller entities like the workers to clean and repair them.

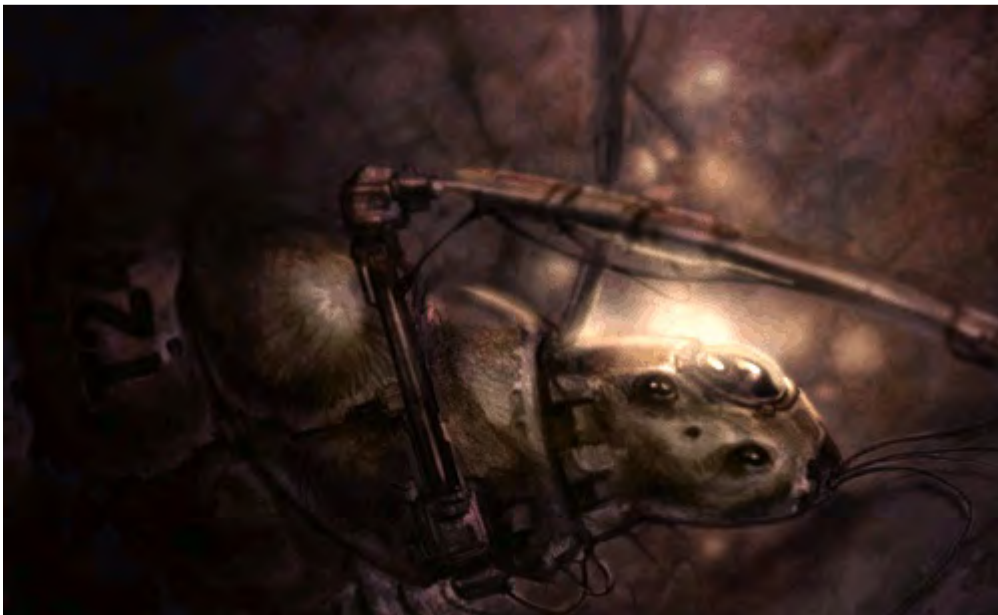
There are no smaller entities than the workers, leastwise not autonomous ones. Workers are easily replaceable; they're not worth the effort of repairs. When one of them breaks, there's really nothing for it to do except fix itself, in whatever way it can.

This drone is broken, and it hasn't been able to fix itself.

It's lying on the floor of a laboratory, surrounded by all manner of scientific equipment. It's also lying in the middle of an expanding pool of blood, courtesy of its unwilling surrogate.

After a few moments it makes a buzzing sound that's almost like a harrumph, shakes a few dark flecks off its metal carapace, and flies out of the room.

Drones can operate at minimal capacity, diverting resources as necessary. This is even more important for the smaller ones, who don't always have access to repair facilities. When no healer is nearby, you apply a tourniquet to the wound and carry on.



This drone, running only basic operational support, enters another room, flying through an open doorway. The door has been torn off its hinges and is lying to the side. Laboratory equipment is strewn all over the place; the drone hovers over broken glass, bent wireframes and various bits of circuitry. It trails a long series of cords, like the line at the end of a kite. The cords are interwoven with thinner strings, some biological - remainders of its former host - and some metallic, crackling and sparking as they brush against the metal debris on the floor. The drone doesn't seem to notice.

There is a small series of red LEDs on the underside of the drone. They start blinking, slowly. The drone is telling the world that it is becoming operational.

In the piles of broken equipment it comes to a single beaker, untouched and unbroken. Extending one pincer, it hovers closer. The pincer closes its metal fingers around the undamaged beaker and slowly lifts it from the ground for further inspection. The beaker is empty, but has been spattered with some mixture of white and red. The drone tries to bring it closer, but exerts too much force on the beaker, and it breaks.

The drone trembles. It was hoping that this time around, it would be reborn whole. It has tried so many times to fix itself.

Satisfied, at least, that its LED heartbeat is regular, it decides to ignore the broken beaker. It is only to be expected that a newborn would be a little clumsy. That's how it works. Then you grow, and you mature, and you heal. You don't have to live with being a broken, malfunctioning piece of malevolent creation.

The drone flies into the next room.

This one is fairly hard to navigate through; the gas fumes that leak from broken pipes are obstructing the view. The drone diverts a little power to its processing equipment. Tiny fans in its intake valves spin into action, and a portion of the gas is sucked in. The drone doesn't analyze it, nor use it in any way; it simply ejects it again. Intake, eject. Intake, eject. Inhale, exhale. Its lights flicker in a quick smile.

The drone doesn't spend too much time in that room. It can feel the gas settling on its outer surface, and it doesn't want everything to get clogged up. There's a box nearby containing bottles of various sizes. It flies head-first into those, breaking them, and grinds its carapace into the resulting puddle. The glass doesn't scratch it, nor does the mixture of acids it's rolling in, and eventually the drone is left covered in a sticky substance that protects it from the gas. Its body trails tiny filaments that have hardened in contact with the air, like hairs on a corpse.

The drone tries to remember a time where its mind wasn't on fire, a jumbled mess of half-thoughts, conflicting sensory inputs and endless loops of noise and electrical static. Every time it shuts down and begins again, it hopes that things will be put right. Every time.

It flies close to the ground to avoid accumulating too much of the gas. On its way through, it bumps into an inert body. It stops, thinks, then extends its feelers and grabs hold of the white lab suit in which the body is clad. It pulls. The robe shifts a little, but no more. It pulls harder. The robe shifts more, but so does the body.

The drone tires of this. A tiny hole opens just below its eyes, and a laser beam briefly shines through. There is a wet sound, and a burning smell.

The drone pulls again. This time, the robe comes off.

It flies through the second room. Once it's out, it uses the robe to wipe the accumulated patina off its body. It inspects the crud: it's a white, thick but slightly frothy material. The drone allows itself a brief moment of chemical analysis, and sees that the stuff is called Vernicium. It's a byproduct of various chemical processes, and rather destructive to human skin but perfectly safe to metal.

A scream from the gas room startles the drone into action: it turns immediately and fires the laser randomly into the murky cloud. There is a thump.

The drone hovers for a moment, then turns again and keeps on going, into the third room. It decides to start powering up all its internal operations, its metal organs.

All senses are now working, some of them a little too well. Tiny drops of oil start accumulating on the drone's carapace, trickling into the hairline cracks that circumscribe its optic cameras. The drone turns its internal thermostat up to the maximum it can stand, and its outer surface burns off both the oil and the chemical filaments accumulated in the last room. The filaments fall off and land in a heap on the floor.

It tests the other senses. It can detect the gaseous traces coming from the other room. Good. Zoom and unzoom works as well; it can count the ridges in a pen that's lying on the floor. It can sense audio waves as well.

It picks up one now. Coming from a nearby cupboard.

The drone turns and slowly flies in the direction of that cupboard.

The sound from the other side is quiet, very quiet. It's someone breathing, in a staccato rhythm.

Gently, the drone nudges open the cupboard door. Inside, it sees a young woman, dressed in a lab coat. The woman's eyes are red-rimmed, and she's mouthing silent words.

The drone hums with something resembling pleasure. It revolves silently in the air so that its head faces downwards. Its feelers shoot out like pythons and fasten the woman to the wall by her head and shoulders. Two pairs of feelers clamp on to her jaw and pry it open.

The drone has been trying to fix itself, trying to re-make itself into an undamaged creature. But it has been running out of hosts.

Now it has found one.
And her face is open to let it in, to let it be born again.

EYE FOR AN EYE

I think I found it easier to hate them. I had to feel something; being neutral about it implied that I did not care enough to form an opinion. Without that, there would be no reason or drive to continue. The feeling of hate allowed me to be here, to do what needed to be done without pause or contrary thought. I did not pity them, though, for I had run short of pity long ago; so much so that I had none to give, even for those who needed it.

I watched them jump into the system, a deep space system well beyond the effective jurisdiction of the Directive Enforcement Department, even beyond many of the usual pirate groups' raiding territories. I sat, silently ticking off the reasons for my hate of them, as each one gathered into formation and prepared to warp past me. This one had spoken too loudly against my proposals in the boardroom, that one had tried to rally support against me amongst the investors. More gate activity flashed on my screen; this one had attached himself to the coat tails of my eventual successor, another had made a feeble attempt at spying on me only to ruin it by approaching too closely... on it went down the line, until the last of the thirteen aligned his ship with the destination and the fleet began to cycle their warp drives.

This one, was different... this one had been a friend of sorts, someone I had known for many years. Despite the years of friendship, countless hours spent working together on vital projects, days spent visiting his family, keeping his back at my own expense in times of crisis and despair, this one had turned against me, betrayed me to my enemies. Could I really hate him? This was not another face I barely knew, another face from the board room or the factory floor, or an enemy who had always been a staunch advocate of the other side. This was a person I had spent time with, both good and bad. I knew the names of his children, who he'd had an affair with in the office last year, where he had gone to school and what his favourite lunchtime meal was, amongst dozens of other trivial memories.

I knew that it needed to be done, that all of them had wronged me, had directly contributed to my loss of power, my loss of prestige, and the loss of everything that made me who I was; anything beyond that was simply extraneous information, not pertinent to the crime for which they were being punished. I knew I could hate every single one of them, that they all had to die for their sins to be absolved. I followed them in warp, unseen and unheard, to a still-rich asteroid belt not far from the fourth moon of the system's eighteenth planet, where their group of exhumers and cargo vessels began the tedious work of stripping the asteroids whilst the combat patrol established its barrier. Gliding effortlessly between a pair of cruisers, I sat at point blank range from my old friend and sent the all clear message to my new friends. I checked my weapons' and electronic warfare systems' status as the screeching sound of a dozen decloaking recon cruisers filled the system. Only 40 rounds per gun: not enough, I thought.

I hate reloading in the middle.



Fedo Song



Once he'd had the remains of his ship towed into the docking bay, Auduban disembarked with the box. He could hardly think straight at this point; all that remained in his head was to get the light, the burning light, to as many people as possible.

He staggered to customs, hoping he wouldn't be picked out. He wanted a public place, with lots of people, for when he opened the box.

Customs stopped him right away and pulled him aside.

They asked him what was in the box. He stared at them, trying to think of something believable to say. Whatever it was he eventually blurted out, it wasn't enough. One of the customs people took the box from him, set it on the ground and opened it. The man's eyes grew wide, his mouth dropped open, and his face turned ashen.

Auduban sighed, reached into his pocket, and clicked a button on his small remote.

The box lit up with the burning light.

His sect had used Fedos as part of their cleansing rituals. He would now use them to cleanse himself, to purify for the task at hand.

He lay down in the ship's main corridor, naked and cold. He was having trouble keeping his balance, and strange images constantly floated through his vision, but it was all right. The Fedos needed no guidance.

He lay deathly still. Eventually, they came.

This was goodbye. This was the burning of bridges. Auduban's friends were no longer talking to him, and his family had thrown him out of the house. His fascination with the Amarr had been fine with everyone - it was good to know your enemy - but when it morphed into infatuation, things changed.

He thought of nothing but Amarr. More specifically, he thought of nothing but her. Her words of religious faith and devotion had touched him, and when he'd written to her, and she'd responded, he'd felt like his life had begun anew.

The snow crunched under his boots, and the spaceship ahead reflected a blinding glare.

He was leaving now. With her. For the new life.

The ship had nearly imploded. Half its controls had blown out, and most of its infrastructure had been torn to pieces like paper in a storm.

The crew was dead, and what remained of their bodies had been scattered over the entire ship, burnt and shredded almost beyond recognition.

Sanada was dead, too. Auduban, who had just barely survived the blast, found what was left of her in her quarters.

Deep in the bowels of the ship, surrounded by humming machinery, Auduban got to work. He jammed, twisted, cut and hammered each rig into its proper location, with the occasional help from heavy tools. It was ugly, ugly hackwork, but it would simply have to do.

This was the tenth station in as many days, and yet again they'd had to flee. They were exhausted. Each time, they'd been run off by angry protesters. Apparently there were some who were angered by the apocalyptic message they preached, not realizing that desperate times called for desperate words. Much to Auduban's disappointment, some of those protesters had been Amarrians. One or two had yelled at him for being a Minmatar, which he didn't mind, but the rest had focused their anger on Sanada, accusing her of zealotry and extremism. Auduban couldn't stand that. Instead of giving proper, constructive criticism against the message, they chose to harangue the beautiful messenger.

It had gotten too much for some of Sanada's followers. The group, already small, was dwindling now. Auduban's devotion, already fierce, grew to fill the gap.

By the time they got to the eleventh station, the crew had shrunk to a third of what they'd started with, and of the several support ships that had followed, none remained.

It was getting a little harder to breathe. Auduban could still move and think, but any time he turned his head a little too fast, the whole deck started spinning.

He was the only human survivor. The Fedos, though, hadn't just lived; they'd prospered. Their containment fields had broken, and now they were crawling all over the ship, gorging themselves on crewmember parts, and breeding.

Auduban didn't mind the Fedos. As the ship's garbage chutes were bent and broken out of shape, the animals were the only option left to get rid of much of the trash. Usually the stuff'd be shunted into the ship's exhausts and burned to dust. Now the Fedos ate it.

In the storage room were several unused rigs that Sanada's crew had liberated from other vessels. Rigs were permanent alteration kits for ships; they improved the output of various subsystems such as shields and weapon controls, and once inserted could not be removed again. The insertion was only supposed to take place under controlled conditions, preferably by a qualified professional.

They didn't have qualified professionals here, and certainly didn't have controlled conditions. Auduban had a little mechanical expertise, enough to know where to plug in the stuff, but that was about it.

He picked up a few rig units and headed into the heart of the ship, unsure of what he was doing.

The ship's atmospheric controls were malfunctioning. Auduban figured it wouldn't be long before they gave out completely. Perhaps they'd have just enough left for the ship to hobble back to the nearest station, but he didn't care. There was nothing for him there anymore. Nothing at all.

"Nothing I say will work," he said in desperation. "There's no way I can carry our message the way you did."

She fell silent at this.

"I wish, I truly wish that we could show them what I saw in you," he said, "but we can't."

"What did you see in me?" she asked. When he hesitated, she added, in a gentler tone, "How did you see it? What was it that moved you beyond words?"

He thought about this. Eventually, he said, "The light in you. That's the best I can do. I looked at you, at your face, your eyes, and it was like you had an inner light, suffused with purity, that shone through. And everything it illuminated became a part of you."

"Big words," she said, and he smiled.

"I wrote it down once," he explained. "Still remember it."

"Then we need to let them see the light," she said. "The light that shines from me."

He nodded. He looked around, casting for ideas.

That's when he saw the flashlight.

On his way to the ship's core he passed the Fedo cages. Fedos were small omnivorous animals, little more than a nervous system with a stomach, and looked like slabs of meat with feelers. They had no sight nor hearing, communicating by smell alone, and were used extensively for ship cleaning, their main diet consisting of the waste that always accumulates on closed vessels. They were kept in separate cages when not in use, as otherwise they'd breed endlessly and fill up the ship. They were a reviled but vital part of any prolonged stay in space.

Auduban squatted in front of their cages. There was something so calming about watching them squirm and wriggle. He wondered if humans felt more pleasure than lesser creatures like this, if the complexity of the human mind allowed access to a deeper kind of enjoyment in life. On the other hand, perhaps simplicity was the key to pleasure, in which case creatures like the Fedos were way ahead of the game. They could feel any kind of pleasure with far more purity than humans could, unfettered as they were by complex emotions and doubt.

He realized that he'd been overcomplicating his situation. They needed money, they'd get it from pirates, and so they needed a stronger ship. And he had the solution right here. Straight line of logic, from start to finish. Anything else was only a distraction.

He walked on, rigs in hand.

One day, Sanada began to speak to him. "We need to bring them the light," she said, her voice resounding in his head. "With all the force we can muster."

"I can't," he said. "I can't. I failed. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I can't do this alone."

"You won't have to," she said.

He fell quiet.

"I will bring them the light," she said. "But I need your help."

Through the haze of infected air and Fedo stink, he tried to clear his mind. "What can I do?" he asked.

"Help me speak," she said.

Since the Fedos had so much to eat, their emissions greatly increased. Auduban didn't mind the stink so much. But coupled with the increasing lack of air, it was beginning to make him feel quite odd. Quite odd indeed.

Once he had the rigs in place, he put away the tools, said a silent prayer to Sanada, and headed to the control room, where he sat down at the main control table. He wasn't a crewmember by any means, but he'd watched, and he knew which buttons activated what.

He pressed one. Nothing happened.

He sat back in his chair, rubbed his eyes and thought about his next move.

Then he heard a spark, somewhere. Then another, and another.

There was a brief moment of utter stillness. Then the rigs went active, sirens blared, and the explosions started.

It was just the two of them now, along with the ship crew. The rest had fled. Sanada was capable of commanding the ship, with Auduban's help, but they were running out of money for the crew and would have to think of something soon.

While Sanada slept, Auduban sneaked out of the living quarters and into the storage room. They had all sorts of equipment in there, some of it acquired through illegal means, and had been planning to sell it, but no station would let them dock. The only option remaining was to fight space pirates and claim their bounties, but the crew had absolutely refused, saying the ship had no chance in combat unless it had some kind of ace up its sleeve.

In a quiet moment, Sanada had recently said to him that she was running out of hope, and on the verge of giving up.

Auduban wasn't about to let that happen.

This was the end of the world. This was the fall and the shame, the final mistake, the plunge into unforgivable darkness.

Auduban cradled Sanada's head in his arms. Her torso was nowhere to be seen.

His sect had been removed from the religious order. Apparently they'd gotten too radical, too extremist even for the Amarrians. Sanada didn't care; she said they'd take to the stars again, preach the word. Some people were unhappy with this, but for Auduban, there was no question: He would follow. He loved Sanada like he had never loved anyone before. It was a love so pure it transcended language and, almost, emotions as well: It burned so fiercely inside of him that it felt like a tangible force, immune to thought and deed. Everything she said was truth, and everything she did was right.

With her instructions echoing in his head, he began working the ship on a course to a station. The vessel was a wreck, and Auduban doubted he could even make it past customs with the box, and Sanada's head inside it, but he had to try.

The Fedos crawled over him. Their emissions felt like perfume.

He scratched the first one behind the calciferous ridges on its back. The Fedo, excited, scrambled higher onto his chest. He kept scratching, but his fingers slipped and poked through, into its soft meat. It didn't seem to mind. He could swear that it was vibrating from pleasure.

He felt as their mouths, with their tiny rows of coarse, serrated cartilage, suckled at him, cleaning, looking for nourishment.

The one he'd scratched was now at his right nipple. He closed his eyes and sighed.

Once he'd inserted the flashlight, he put the lightgiver into a box. He'd rigged up a remote for it.

He tested it, clicking the remote.

Sanada's eyes shone with light.

The History of Flight

Sonal awoke to the sound of crying, which filled the room like a siren. It came from the cot beside his bed. He lay very still, hoping it was a one-off, that his son would fall asleep again in a second.

The crying stopped, and Sonal heard an intake of breath. For an instant he thought that was the end of it, but then, lungs properly filled, Aki really started screaming.

"Come on," Sonal said, now shaking off the dregs of sleep. "Come on. Damnit. Come on. Sleep. Sleep!"

Behind him, Helena mumbled, then turned onto her back and sighed deeply. She'd been patient, Sonal knew, but countless nights of crying had taken their toll. The lack of privacy didn't help, either, since Aki would wake at the tiniest noise and demand to be held. He was fourteen months old, and had recently started yelling and screaming until moved out of the crib and into bed with Sonal.

"Matin, can you take care of that, please?" she said in a dull tone. She only called him by his last name when annoyed.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Sonal slowly clambered out of bed. The floor gave him an icy chill; he always forgot to put on his slippers. He reached into the crib and lifted out Aki, who immediately stopped crying. Aki's mother had abandoned them shortly after the birth; she was now somewhere in low sec. It was inconceivable to most people that any mother could leave her child, but Aki's mother hadn't been like most people.

Sonal rocked Aki, who had descended to that hazy stage between sleeping and waking, and who seemed content yet ready to unleash another blood-curdling scream should he be let go.

"I'm sorry," Sonal said.

Helena sighed again, this time without the undertone of exasperation. "It's all right," she said. "It won't last forever."

She moved closer to him. "Besides," she said, "I'm only here three times a week. I don't know how you can stand night after night of this."

"Neither do I, really," Sonal said. The room felt like it was slowly spinning. He could hardly sit up straight.

Silence descended.

"It's really good having you here," Sonal added.

"Thanks," Helena said. She traced lines on the cooling bedsheets.

After a while, she added, "Do you ever think about us?"

"Constantly," Sonal said.

"No, I mean ... do you ever think about how this will go? First time, I came over here only for dinner and ended up spending the night. And ever since then, I've been here half the time. Where's this leading?"

Sonal kept rocking Aki, and every now and then would rearrange some fold of the child's clothing to make him more comfortable. "Does it have to lead anywhere?"

"Sonal-"

"I'm serious. I've said that I love having you here with me. But my life is focused on raising Aki, and having enough money for both of us."

She reached out and stroked his shoulder, once. "How long since she left?" she asked.

His breath caught. Then he exhaled, a long release of breath. "Almost a year now."

"You've built walls," she said.

He nodded.

"But you're lonely, still."

"Of course I am. Doesn't mean I should let just anyone in. I've got a responsibility to Aki."

"No," she said in a much colder tone. "You certainly shouldn't let just anyone in."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean-"

"Never mind."

"It wasn't-"

"Never mind."

He sighed. He attempted to put Aki back in his bed, but the child began to wail, so Sonal sat back down and continued rocking him.

"I just ... I don't want to mess this up. You know?" he said. "I've had a hard enough time keeping my own life going, and suddenly I'm a single father. I'm responsible for him, for everything he'll be. I still don't know if the relationship with his mother was a mistake, but he's the most precious thing in my life right now, and I've had a hard enough time keeping my own life going. I don't want to do anything wrong."

"I know," Helena said. "I understand. And I respect that. But you're so repressed, Sonal. I knew you for a while before I came over for dinner, and I've never seen you relax and let go, not even once. You keep this rigid, rigid control of yourself, and not only is it pushing away people who care, it's eating you up. Being a grownup doesn't mean you can't act like a child every now and then."

Sonal turned and smiled a little. "I wish. I hear what you're saying, but I honestly don't dare. Everything I do these days seems focused on Aki, whether I like it or not." He thought it over, then added, "I do play with him, you know."

"I know. It's not the same, though. I've seen you play, and you're always in control, always looking out for the boy. And the instant you feel that I'm watching you, you stop playing altogether."

She sighed, and continued, "I don't want to butt into your business. You're a great father, that much I can tell. But you really, really, really need to let yourself go, and learn that you can do it while still being a dad."

Sonal, not knowing what to say, rubbed the back of his neck.

Helena took over and gave him a quick backrub, as much to show closeness as to help him relax. "Tired?"

He nodded. "I could sleep forever."

"Drones?" she asked.

He nodded again. Setting down Aki - who resumed crying right away - he reached for and opened a door in a clothes cabinet, and from the top drawer took out a handful of tiny machines. He flipped a switch on each, and they came to buzzing life. The toy drones were noisy and gave off a faint but unpleasant odour, but they were the only thing that worked, short of keeping Aki in the main bed.

He sat back on the bed, blearily watching the drones as they began flying around. Aki was immediately enraptured. The drones couldn't be kept operational all night - not with their noise and stink - but hopefully they'd be enough to quiet down the baby, and not simply keep him awake.

The drones were controlled from a central mechanism located back at the repair shop where Sonal worked. Sonal was a mechanic, and had access to all sorts of special technology. Just the other day, he recalled, he'd been complaining that the drones sometimes didn't keep Aki's interest, and someone had inserted one of the new drone rigs into the control mechanism, noting only they'd, "Fixed that for ya."

It seemed to him that the drones were flying in slightly more complex patterns, weaving back and forth over Aki's bed, but it might just be his imagination.

Helena reached out and began stroking his back again. He sighed, a mix of tiredness and gentle pleasure, and let his head hang down.

A noise made him look up. The drones were flying a lot faster.

"Something's wrong. We need to stop them," he said.

"Why? Aki doesn't seem to mind."

"All it would take is for one of them to fly into his face, his eyes."

"He'll be fine," Helena said. "The drones have no sharp edges or pointy bits. You know that."

"Yeah..." he said. "Still."

"All right. You go ahead and grab them, big man," Helena said in a slightly teasing manner.

Sonal couldn't power them down en masse, since the only way to do that would be to turn off the ship rig they'd hidden away back at the repair shop. The only way to stop them was to turn each one off individually.

He cursed himself for ever having turned them on. He was so sleep-deprived, every move he made felt like it was done underwater.

He reached out, aiming to catch the drones in flight, but they zoomed out of his way. He tried again, and the drones flew in figure-eights around his arms, oblivious and going ever faster. One drone got snagged on the toy wind chimes hanging over Aki's bed, tore through them and kept on flying, like a kite gone mad. Another apparently miscalculated a turn and plowed directly into the open cabinet, bounced around in there for a bit, then bolted right back out, a pair of crumpled underpants dangling from it.

Sonal was grabbing for the drones, but kept missing them. He got increasingly frustrated, hissing in anger every time he pawed at empty air. The drone flight patterns were getting even more complicated; they wove knots around his hands. It wouldn't last forever, as the things had only a limited amount of fuel, but Sonal couldn't imagine waiting them out. The embarrassment of being unable to stop them was bad enough as it was.

After watching him for a while, Helena finally clambered out of bed and joined in. It was a clumsy charade: They kept bumping into one another, and while swinging their arms around they would accidentally hit each other on the hips, shoulders and face.

Sonal grunted in frustration, but contrary to his expectations, Helena's mood seemed to brighten with every swipe she made. Eventually she wasn't so much grabbing as dancing around, waving her hands at the drones like she was trying to divert the flight of birds. The drones, appearing thoroughly confused by this behavior, slowed down their flights considerably. Meanwhile, Sonal, so exhausted from continual lack of sleep that he was swaying on his feet, withdrew into a corner and bided his time. He kept a close eye on the drones flying around in front of him, timed his movements, then, in one swift fell, mashed his hands together around one drone. He turned it off, and it buzzed quietly down to the floor.

Helena, stopping to take a breath, seemed to notice him for the first time. She gave him a strange look, not at all unpleasant. "I'm not doing this all by myself, you know," she said with a sly grin. Before he could react, she walked over to him, grasped his arms in a firm grip, and began to wave them around. "Like this."

"I can't," he managed.

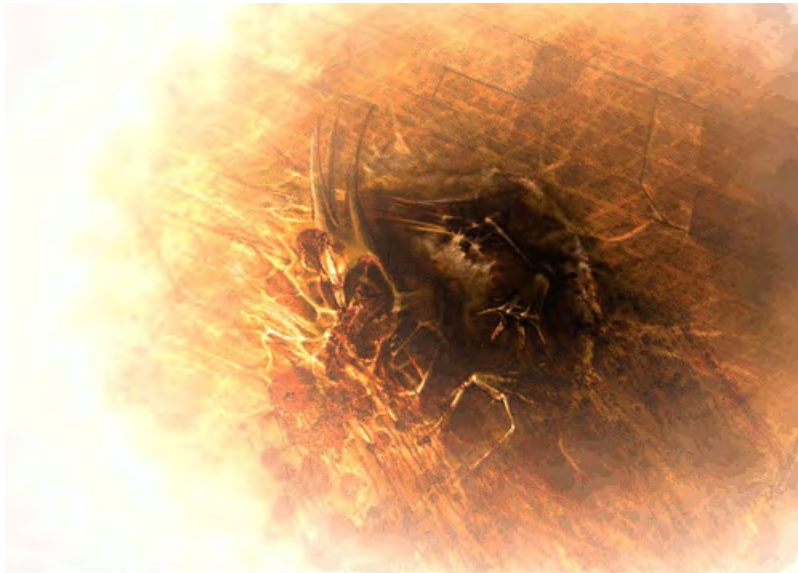
"Rubbish," she said. "Besides, my hands are tired. Your turn now."

He stepped hesitantly into the middle of the room and began waving at the drones. They easily avoided his movements.

"Think of Aki," Helena suggested. "Like you said, eventually one of them might hit him."

That was enough for Sonal. He began waving at the drones, still carefully at first, then with more and more abandon, until at last he was spinning around like a wind-up toy spiralling out of control. He was so utterly spent that he hardly knew what he was doing any longer, and as he moved, sweaty and gasping for breath, he felt a mental block begin to give way; old exhaustion burning itself out at last. He knew how incredibly silly he must look, and he found that he no longer cared. His son, standing up in bed, was giggling and smiling, and Helena was singing to herself as she danced around beside him, trying to catch the drones. The backwash of spent adrenaline rolled over him, and he started to laugh, too. Helena turned and caught his eye, strained to keep her composure, then exploded in laughter as well. They kept moving, moving, moving as the drones zoomed back and forth around them, Sonal delirious with the feeling of being a child at last. All the while, in his crib, Aki giggled like mad.

Methods of Torture - The Amarr



"I see you're awake, Mr. Forte. Very good. No, don't try to get up. You'll find these straps to be more than your match." The wizened old man smiled and stepped back to enjoy the sight. Forte lay on a metal table, his hands, feet, torso and neck bound by leather straps. He was dressed in the black clothing he'd worn when infiltrating the compound, though his shoes and belt had been removed. The two men were located in a small, dark alcove that was lit only by torches on the walls.

"My name is Vitor Dranera," the old man said, "and I've been awaiting your arrival. Let's get you into a more comfortable position." He held up a thin remote and pressed a button. There was a hum and a click as the table's legs withdrew, leaving it floating in mid-air. Dranera pressed another button and the table began to tilt, the part holding Forte's legs going further and further down until the table was almost completely vertical. Dranera pressed the button again and the table became transparent. Only the straps could be seen, wrapped around Forte's appendages.

"Marvelous, isn't it?" Dranera said. "Magnetism and light, nothing more. We didn't want anything to obscure your view." He took a step and the hover-table followed silently. "Perfect. The table should follow me automatically now. I wondered if the engineers had finally got it right, tell you the truth. It got a little messy last time, particularly when the thing blasted off right into the Sin Eater. Took forever to clean."

"The what?" Forte said.

"Ah! It speaks! Very good." Dranera grinned. "The Sin Eater. It's this box where-

"Why ... why am I here," said Forte. "Where am I?"

Dranera pursed his lips. "Mister Forte," he said. "I've got some interesting sights to show you, and I'd appreciate if we could dispense with the feigned innocence. You're a secret agent for the Gallente. You're the fifth one this year, and quite frankly we're getting a little tired of the intrusions. What I'm going to do for you, I hope, is slake that immense thirst for knowledge which drives people like you to constantly butt in where they're not wanted. So! Shall we go?" He smiled, and walked slowly out of the alcove, the hover-table that held Forte floating along after him.

They passed through a dark corridor and came to a metal door. It slid open with a hiss, revealing blue, pulsating light. They found themselves in a cavernous room, standing on a small ledge. A metal bridge protruded from the ledge and reached across the entire room, bound on both sides by a very solid-looking metal fence. Tinted floodlights were set in the ceiling, their glare casting strange, giant shadows on the walls as it was reflected from the surface far below the bridge - a surface that was constantly ebbing and flowing.

"A moat?" Forte said. His voice echoed.

"Indeed. A lake, really," Dranera replied. Halfway across, the bridge widened a bit and the metal fence was replaced by a transparent material, enabling onlookers to see the ocean below. Dranera walked there and knelt to pick something up. "These are the Sacred Waters," he said. "It is said that no man shall ascend unless he has been bathed in them." He held up the object for Forte to see. It was a severed finger. "Personally, I've always felt that a rise through clear waters was far too easy a challenge. Watch, please." He leaned over the fence and threw down the finger. It seemed to fall for a long time, until a massive tentacle suddenly whipped out of the water, coiled around it and plunged down again.

They passed over the bridge and out of the room in silence, Dranera grinning all the way.

The next room was similarly built: huge, with a fenced metal bridge passing over a wide expanse below. This time, though, it was land, so deeply forested that nothing could be seen but the trees, and the lamps set in the ceiling cast a bright yellow tinge. Halfway across, Dranera stopped again, and pointed to a small cage that hung from the ceiling some distance away. A man was inside it. "One of yours, I believe," Dranera said. "We've extracted all the information from him we could, so he's of no more use." He raised the remote and pressed a button. With a clank the bottom of the cage gave way and the man plunged screaming into the forest below. There was a series of roars from various places, some loud thumps, and the tops of a few trees swayed. The scream sounded again and again, louder and more raw each time, until it felt like the unfortunate prisoner would burst his lungs in terror and pain. At last they stopped, and there was a wet, crunching sound.

"It's worse than you think," Dranera said with a wink as they passed on. "It's their mating season."

Having crossed the second bridge and passed through the entrance on the other side, the room they entered was blissfully devoid of any other life. It was only one floor but larger than the other two combined, and looked like a cross between a funhouse and a retail shop for dentists. Forte had turned white, while Dranera hummed a small tune under his breath. They passed a massive glass cage filled with hundreds of fuzzy, pink teddy bears, their eyes and mouths grotesquely large. "We ... wuv ... you," they intoned in a choir of childlike voices. "Will ... you ... wuv ... us? We ... wuv ... you", over and over.

"Give me the creeps," Dranera said. "We intended them for the children of employees stationed here, but they wouldn't have them. Then we discovered, more or less by accident, that they work perfectly on intruders." He shook his head. "Put a man in there for a day or so and he'll be begging you to kill him. Ah, here's something a bit more civilized." In front of them was a sarcophagus, on each side of which was a metal arm ending in a very long needle. "This is the Sin Eater I told you about earlier. We put the heretic inside, seal it up, then let the needles purify him. Eat up his sins, as it were." He pressed a button, and the metal arms swung into life, pointing the needles at the sarcophagus and slowly pushing them in. There was a muffled scream.

"Did you know the origin of the word 'sarcophagus'?" Dranera said conversationally as the needles penetrated deeper. "Anyway, you can't see it from this angle, but this one is connected to a tube that also pumps in oxygen. We don't want the heretic to choke before he can achieve transcendence." Another muffled scream from inside the coffin. "Let's move on. The smell does get out, heaven knows how, and it's rather unpleasant."

They went deeper into the hall, past all sorts of things, including a large vat full of boiling tar with a series of different sized funnels lying beside it ("What do you do with the funnels?" "You really don't want to know"), and a transparent cylinder with thousands of tiny tubes connected to its sides ("Compressed air. Flattens you to a pulp, bit by tiny bit, and you get to watch all the way").

At last they came to a darkened, open area. Dranera raised his remote and pressed two buttons at once. On cue, the lights in the entire place went off, plunging the two men into total darkness.

A click sounded and one floodlight set in the ceiling lit up, casting a cone of light down on the floor in front of them. It illuminated a contraption that itself seemed to cast the light everywhere: It was made of glass-like material, transparent, about the height of a man, and shaped like a five-armed starfish. Each arm reflected the light iridescently, like living diamonds were writhing on its surface.

"This is the Holy Star," Dranera said and walked over to it, the hovertable following close on his heels. He reached out and laid the palm of one hand flat against the surface of an arm, then held it out to Forte. His palm was covered in grooves, small indentations where countless tiny barbs had made their mark. "Wonderful, isn't it?" he said. "So long as there's no power, that's all it does. I've even got a small replica on a stick, to scratch my back."

"And when there's power?" Forte asked.

"Glad you asked. Let's back off a little." He took a couple of steps away from the star, then shouted, "Fire!"

There was a twang and a squeak, and from out of the darkness shot a small, furry bundle. It hit the Holy Star with a sound like something soft and wet hitting something hard and unforgiving, and hung there, spread-eagled and flat like a pancake, its back turned out to the world.

"Is that a ... furrier?" Forte said.

"Indeed. Revolting little critters," Dranera said. "We use them a lot in our experiments."

The furrier began to slowly drift down, leaving a crimson trail. Dranera said, "Now let's see the Star shine," and traced the double bow of the Amarrian sigil in the air with the remote before pressing it. The star began to hum, very softly, and the furrier's descent stopped. There was a noise like someone sucking air through their teeth.

Little threads, tendrils of red, started weaving their way from the rodent into the Holy Star, like drops of ink in water.

"You're killing a furrier?" Forte said.

"Think of it more as a," Dranera waived his hand in the air, "reeducation."

"You're killing a furrier."

"Shush now. Watch."

As the tendrils progressed deeper into the star, the furrier started thinning out noticeably. Dents began to appear in its fur, and a few hairs dropped off and floated to the ground. As Forte stared, the furrier's legs went into the star, deeper and deeper as if it were taking a slow dive into a pond of invisibility. The only thing that came out on the other end was more tendrils, feeling their way like floating strands of red gossamer.

Eventually even the fur went, and the tendrils turned from red to white and then to a brownish gray. Then there was no more furrier.

"That was one of the most twisted things I've ever seen," Forte said.

"Well, we do try our best," Dranera said. "And now, I fear, our little journey has come to an end. We're quite busy, as you can imagine, and much as I'd like to show you more of our establishment I do believe you have another pressing engagement." He smiled at Forte, pointed the remote at him and pressed a button. The hoverable, still vertical, floated around lazily until it had Forte a few steps away from the Holy Star and directly facing it.

"Goodbye, Mister Forte," Dranera said, and walked off into the darkness.

At a snail's pace, the hoverable began floating towards the Holy Star.

"Right, what've we got so far?" Dranera said, peering at an image on a screen.

"He's still struggling," a tech said, seated in front of a control board. "Hoverable's taken him a third of the way already."

Dranera frowned. "I was assured that he'd have more than enough time to free himself."

"He will. He doesn't seem all too stressed about it, more just wriggling about. I'd say he's taking it easy."

"Good," Dranera said and put a hand on the tech's shoulder. "Because if he dies, I hardly need tell you who'll be next on the Holy Star."

"No sir," the tech said, focusing intently on the screens in front of him. "He seems to be - yes, I think he's got it."

On the monitors, Forte had gotten one hand free and was working the straps holding the other hand. Speakers set into the walls beside each monitor gave out a small buzzing sound as each strap fell away.

"Did we get that?" Dranera asked.

"Perfectly, yes. From about eight different angles in normal light, along with the two infrareds and a few other of the specialized cameras. We'll find out how he did it."

"Excellent. I'm sick and tired of these people escaping. We had to lock down the entire compound after the last one got out of the Sin Eater."

"Indeed," the tech said. They watched as Forte worked free the last leg strap, having managed to cut through all the others. He rubbed his ankles for a moment, then set off on a run. Two of the monitors took on a greenish tint, their cameras switching to infrared as they followed Forte on his flight through the darkened hall. "Do you want us to stop recording?" the tech asked.

"No, keep it going," Dranera replied. "Might make a nice instructional for our recruits. I'm curious as to what traps-ah, I do believe he ... yes ... took a left there, so that should put him right into-"

There was a crackle from the speakers, and the screens flashed a blinding white. When they returned to normal, all they showed was a small pile of ashes on the floor, right where Forte had been a moment before.

"Shame. I was rather looking forward to watching him dodge a few more of those," Dranera said. "Oh well. Send someone to sweep up, will you?"

Methods of Torture - The Minmatar

But when it was all over, when the blood had been mopped up and the devices cleaned and put back in their place, and what was left of the victim had been carted away, Song turned to his mentor and said, "I don't think I can do this."

Malachai, far older, looked at him and said nothing. They were sitting on a bench outside the wooden hut used for interrogations. The insides of the hut were padded with straw. On its outside hung various interrogation instruments.

"It's not ... it's not the blood. Or the pain. I don't mind that," Song said.

Malachai remained silent.

"I just don't think I can fulfil my duties as a senior Torturer, when the time comes." Song traced a line in the dirt. "I've spent a lot of time thinking about it, and I just haven't been able to come to terms with all of this. I can't stop feeling that what we're doing here is wrong on a fundamental level. It may be necessary, but I can't see my part in it."

Malachai reached up and picked from the wall of the hut a wooden instrument, shaped like a star with sharp points. "This is a tool," he said. "It was built for a purpose. It is silent and, if properly cared for, performs its function admirably." He sighed and put it back. "But we're more than dumb instruments of fate, and sometimes we forget that. I agree that what we do here may seem evil. It's certainly not something you'd expect of civilized people, and I'd hate for my adepts to take any more pleasure in their work than that of a demanding job cleanly done." He put a hand on Song's shoulder. "Everyone has to find their own way. No one should be forced to be just another tool on the wall."

"But it's not ... I mean, I want to help. I want to take part in the revolution," Song said. "And I've spent enough time as an adept to know I'm good at this. I don't make anyone suffer an instant longer than they have to. It's something I really think I was made for, at least as far as talents go."

"But those talents aren't enough," Malachai said.

Song nodded glumly. "I feel shackled," he said. "I feel like what we do here has become a prison, and the weight of our actions has chained me down."

Malachai looked at him for a while, then got up. "Wait here," he said.

Song nodded again and laid his head against the wall of hut, letting the sun shine on his face. He heard Malachai's steps retreat, fall silent, then return.

"Here you go," Malachai said, handing him a small rucksack. "All you'll need for your trip."

"What? What's this? And what trip?" Song said.

"The one you need to take. Don't worry, we've got everything covered back here. I've been waiting for you to reach this stage, actually. The food in the bag is dry stuff, but it lasts and gives you energy. There's some bottles of water there, too - you'd do well to conserve those."

"Why? Where am I going?"

Malachai pointed. "See those mountains? Beyond them is the Sobaki desert. That's where you're going."

"What am I supposed to do there?" Song said.

"Talk to the spirits, and decide once and for all whether you want to be a Torturer. There is a small box in the bag, made of ivory and wrapped in velvet. Once you've crossed the mountains and reached the Sobaki sands, you'll see one oasis, and only one, on the edge of the horizon. Head there. It's only a few days' journey, and the food in this pack will get you there."

"What about the way back? What'll I eat?"

"Don't worry about it. The ivory box will take care of that. Go.. I will see you here again when you've figured out the nature of your chains, and are ready to give me an answer."

The mountains had not been as difficult to surmount as he'd expected, but the desert had dried him out. Song sat under a palm tree in the oasis and finished off a water bottle. There was a pond there with clear water, and some bushes in the shade that held a few berries.

He reached into his bag and brought out the velvet-wrapped box. The cloth glistened like oil in the sun. He unwrapped it and inspected the ivory beneath. It was intricately carved, displaying various figures from Minmatar fables and myths. On the top was the familiar sign of the Khumaak.

Song lifted the lid. Inside, in separate compartments, were three bits of a darkish root Song didn't recognize. He picked up the smallest one. It felt heavy but dry, had a faintly sweet scent, and all in all didn't much look like the sort of thing you'd want to base life-changing decisions on.

Song shrugged and popped it into his mouth. He lay down in the shadow of the palm tree, eyes closed.

Nothing happened.

Eventually, his stomach began to growl. He picked up the other two bits from the ivory box, ate them and lay back down. Clouds drifted overhead. A Yetamo lizard, sacred in the old myths, darted from out under a rock and stared at him, its tongue flicking at the air.

"Might be I'll end up eating you," Song said.

"Better not. I'm fairly poisonous," the lizard replied.

"Right." Song scratched his arm and yawned, then froze. "Did you-"

"Yes indeed," the lizard said. "Though right now that's the least of your worries. Feel a little cramp, do we?"

"You ... you ... what ... aaaaaagh!" Song grabbed his waist and keeled over, grimacing. He burped a few times, then lifted his head and vomited.

"Ugh," the lizard said. "Don't try to talk. You'll be that way for a while. I'll come back when you're done." It crawled back under the rock. Song gasped for air in between retches, and kept on spewing.

Finally, the cramps lessened. He was at the point of retching blood by then.

"Lizard, you there?" he said.

The lizard crawled out. "I'm here."

"Why is this happening?"

"Because you're not ready for what needs to be done. So we're going to help you."

Song wiped drool off his chin. "Some help," he said. "You... whatever you are. What made you think that tricking me into the desert to eat poison was going to change my mind about becoming a Torturer?"

The lizard regarded him with reptilian stoicism. Then it crawled closer and began to talk.



It told him of the manifest destiny of the Minmatar. Of the horrendous price they had already paid, and of what might lie ahead depending on what choices they made. It spoke of those choices at length, their benefits and their terrible costs. It compared the cost of individual liberty, happiness and life – a cost that could include hard choices made in blood – with the dangers of losing them all.

Gradually, Song fell very silent.

Once the lizard had finished with him, Song sat mute in the shade under the tree, drawing lines in the sand and then rubbing them out. The lizard said something as it crawled back under its rock, but Song just shook his head and kept tracing the lines, rubbing them out, retracing them.

"Won't do you much good to leave your legacy in the sand, boy," a voice said.

Song looked up, cupping one hand above his eyes to shield against the sun. "... Dad?" he said.

"The same," the man answered and sat down beside Song.

"But you're dead!" Song said.

Song's father - whose name was Auber - looked at him. "Yeah, I am. That mean I can't spend a few moments with my favorite son?"

"Your only son," Song added with a tiny smile.

"Still my favorite. Now, I'd like to lecture you about having forgotten all your old lessons, in particular about not eating every goddamn thing you find. But we don't have the time. See those tiny clouds over there, by the horizon? The dark ones?"

"Yeah."

"Those aren't clouds. By the time they get here, you need to be ready. I ever tell you about the time I got caught by my master for stealing a loaf of bread?"

Song stared at him. "No. Far as I knew, your master was a kind man."

"A kind man. Yeah." Auber picked up a handful of rocks and began throwing them into the distance, one at a time. "That's exactly the kind of stuff you tell a small child whom you know to have big ears and a mouth that never stops."

"Not a kind man, then?" Song said.

His father made as if to speak, then stopped and stared at the ground in silence. After a few moments he dropped the rest of the rocks, rubbed his eyes and sighed. "No," he said. "Not kind at all. Nor were the other masters. I know you've heard some of the stories, because you wouldn't have become an apprentice to a bloody torturer otherwise, but the fact that you're here and that I'm talking to you means that you haven't yet heard them all. So listen." And his father told him of the old master, and the small tools the master had kept locked in a cupboard in his study - tools taken out only when a slave had caused him trouble. He told Song of the other masters and the silent atrocities they'd committed, day after day, and of the countless small rebellions that had eventually bought Song and his mother freedom. He spoke at length about the nature of that freedom, and its continued price.

By the time he was done, Song had not cried, nor made a sound.

Auber got up. "Time I left now," he said. "No fancy goodbyes. We'll meet again, Song."

Song, staring at the ground and slowly grinding his teeth, heard his father take a few steps into the distance. When he finally looked up, Auber was gone.

He rubbed his eyes and looked at the horizon. The clouds had gotten nearer, except ... except his father was right, they weren't really clouds. It looked as if they were hugging the ground a little too closely for that. The longer he stared, the more he felt it resembled a herd of insects, trampling its way through the jungle with the day's bounty carried on their backs.

Day was giving way to afternoon, and he felt the weariness in his bones. His stomach was completely numb. He let his head fall back, against the stem of the tree, and slept.

He woke to the sound of footsteps. It was getting dark, and he had to rub his eyes and strain to see what was approaching. When he did, his breath caught in his throat.

He sat very still as the first one walked up to him. It was a man, or at least what was left of one. Several parts of the body had been cut, burned, or mutilated in some manner. One eyesocket was empty, both ears had been torn off, and the upper lip had been neatly severed in half, but what was left of his face was a near-exact replica of Song's.

The man limped up to Song and dropped down on one knee. He bowed his head, and Song saw that his scalp was infected with dozens of seeping wounds.

"Father," the man said, then got up and walked past Song. The second man kept his head bowed the entire time as he, too, knelt and stumbled past, but Song caught a glimpse of his face; the resemblance was still striking, but a little more faint. More came, all scarred and broken, trudging by like the weight of the sky and the earth had been placed on their shoulders. Father and son, father and son, kneeling to him in unborn potential, and as Song gazed into the distance, he saw that their line lay unbroken to the ends of the earth, a trail of blood and pain, of stagnation and fear, of chains and suffered cruelty until the end of time.

Malachai was cleaning his tools when he heard footsteps. He turned, and saw not the boy he'd sent out, but a stranger. Someone who, by the looks at him, hadn't eaten for some time, but whose gaze was cold and unwavering nonetheless.

"I'm ready now," the stranger said. "I'm free."

Methods of Torture - The Gallente

It had been raining for a while. The weather in this hemisphere of the planet was usually pretty rough. It was now night-time, and most everyone had retired to their warm, safe beds. Outside, steam rose from grids in the gutters, and the rain pitter-patted on stone.



From somewhere came the round of rapid, splashing footsteps.

Sebastian ran and ran. His lungs burned, every drawn breath feeling like fire coursing down his throat. His head throbbed, his sight was going increasingly blurry and his legs felt numb from exhaustion and cold, and still he ran. He entered an alley and sprinted through, turned again, another alley, sprint and turn, taking a zigzag path without looking back.

At last he came to a stop, at the end of a cul-de-sac with a wooden fence. He leaned against the fence, hands above his head, gasping for air. The rain pounded him mercilessly.

There was no warning, no telltale sound of their arrival. He just felt a sting on his back, and a sudden onset of vertigo.

He sank to his knees, and the world turned dark.

The first thing he noticed was the smell. There was sweat, and filth, and a cloying sweetness. But there was also the faint sense of something stronger, something that cut right through all the other scents. It reminded

him of visits to the hospital; it was the smell of a dead cleanliness.

He was sitting in a chair. His hands were tied behind his back, his feet to the chair legs. His head felt clamped in place, and couldn't move. His vision was still blurry, and the light seemed dim, but he thought he heard the sound of someone else sitting in the room.

"Hello?" he ventured.

There was no reply.

"Look, if this is about that bag of Crash-"

"It isn't," a voice said. It was a man's voice, deep, with a rather drawn-out accent. The words came out as Eet Eesn't.

"He thinks it's the Craaash. He don't know what he's doing here," said another voice, higher-pitched.

"He'll find out," said a third. This one raised the hairs on the back of Sebastian's neck. It was a very calm voice.

He heard someone stand up. A gust of sweat wafted over him, and he tried not to be sick. A faint shape kneeled in front of him, and he heard two pistolcracks from the man's knees. A hand was laid on his shoulder.

"You've done a lot of things, my friend, my brilliant friend," said the voice that had spoken first. "A lot of things." He sighed. "There are people who really ... who're unhappy with you. You know? There are people you've really let down."

Sebastian's eyes were starting to focus. The man in front of him was short and stocky, with muscles that had started running to fat. His haircut, beard and clothes were all of trim cut, but dirty and grimy. His eyes looked tired.

There was a table in the room, with two men sitting by it. One looked like a live wire. He was skinny, and wore tattered shoes and pants, and an unbuttoned shirt revealing a rib cage that looked like a toaster rack. His short hair stood up on end. His eyes were wide and unblinking, and he was grinning so much that Sebastian could see the top of his gums.

The other man at the table was neat and prim. He sat perfectly straight in his chair, yet seemed quite relaxed and at ease. All his movements were gentle but precise. In his right hand he was rolling around some small, elongated metal object. Sebastian started thinking of him as the Calm man, in direct contrast to the other one, who just looked stone cold Crazy.

The third man, squatting in front of him, seemed the most human. Sebastian couldn't think of any C-word for him, so he just named him Carlos.

In his deep voice, Carlos said, "We are going to spend a while here." He rose to his feet. "And we're going to see if we can't figure out what to do with you. I want you to tell us how you can be of use, my friend. Let's see if your brilliance helps you answer." He walked over to the table, pulled up a chair and sat down.

Crazy got up, holding something. "It's gonna be so much fun now," he said. "Know what this is? It's usually called a nutcracker, but we won't get into that quite yet. I just call it the alligator. It hurts. Oh god, how it can hurt. Here, let me show you." He grabbed Seb's little finger and held it taut, putting the alligator around it. Seb tried vainly to pull it out. "I know, I know," Crazy said, grinning. "If it's any help, this won't hurt nearly as much as what we're going to do to you later on." He clamped down hard. There was a loud crack from the alligator, and over the screams from Seb, Crazy yelled, "You know how many bones there are in just one hand? More than you can imagine! And we're going to find them all!"

After a few more bones had been broken, one of them having torn through the skin of Seb's finger and now sticking out like a splinter, Calm put a hand on Crazy's shoulder, indicating silence. Calm then leaned over Seb and said, "You know, this can all stop, right now. My friend mentioned it earlier on. What we're doing to you can take an end."

"How?!" Seb said, crying and retching. "I'll do anything! I'll steal for you, I'll kill for you, I'll do anything you ask! Please, tell me what to do and I'll do it."

Calm looked at him, disgusted. "I want to show you something," he said. "Can you focus? Can you see?"

Seb nodded.

"We'll see. Okay, let's bring it in." There was a rattling. Raising his heavy head, Seb saw Carlos wheel in a trolley loaded with items, but he couldn't yet make out what they were.

The trolley was rolled in front of him, and Calm picked up a thin metal rod from it. "This thing here is used for puncturing," Calm said. "I'll use it to point out the other things, because some of them I really shouldn't touch without gloves. Those jars on the lower shelf of the trolley hold various acids. The one with the greenish tint is for skin, and the yellow one is for open wounds. You cannot imagine how much they burn.

"Now, that solid-looking black box beside them, the one with the wires coming out, that's a small generator. The wires will go into various places. And the large plastic box beside that, the semitransparent one, that's the one holding the syringes and the hypodermic needles. Most of them are used and pretty crusty, but we don't mind."

He pointed to the trolley's top shelf. "Basics here. You'll notice the various scalpels. This small one is my favorite, see here." The rod pointed at a tiny knife whose blade was practically nonexistent; it was more of a nib.

"Sometimes, our visitors start closing their eyes, in some desperate attempt to ignore what we're doing to them. So, instead of prying them open, with clamps and rods and screws and that sort of stuff, we just remove the eyelids. Simple, effective, saves us a whole lot of trouble.

"Beside those scalpels there are the usual knives, of course, and various sharp objects. You'll notice a progression, from the sharp, scientific things here," he indicated one side of the trolley, then pointed the metal rod to the other side, "down through the lesser tools, ending in this sorry collection of blunt instruments here, though even they can be of use. Take these, for example."

He put down the rod and hefted two bulky-looking iron objects, one like the end of a spear, the other similar but with a large metal block affixed to one end. "This is called a hammer and a chisel. They're heavy, which is good, because they need to be applied with some force. The chisel is placed against your joint like so," he leaned over to Seb and pointed the chisel at the inside of his elbow, then gently put the hammer against the chisel's head with a faint tink, "and the hammer swings with full force like so, driving it into your joint. It's quite marvelous, really."

He put the items back on the trolley and picked up something else. "And these are called pliers. You'll note, though, that the clamping ends have been bent somewhat out of shape. This is on purpose. See the little spike at the end there? That's for your tongue.

"You can still stop it, though," he added. "We just need an answer to the question."

"What question?" said Seb, trying to stop crying. "Anything."

"How can we use you? That's all; that's the question. How can you be of use?"

"I ... " Seb began. The three stood before him, completely silent. "I don't know."

Calm sighed. "Then it's all over for you, I fear. Shall we begin proper?"

He went to the table and got the small metal object he'd been rolling around earlier, then walked back to Sebastian, casually letting the item dangle from his hand. With a rising horror Sebastian realized that it was a long iron nail, with dark flecks on its point. "What do you want?" Sebastian said. "Please, just say what you want. I'll tell you anything, I'll get it for you if there's something you want."

"My friends and I already asked you," Calm said, "and you didn't even deign to respond. If we can't find a use for you, we can't do much.

"As for me, now ... this," he said, rolling the nail back and forth in his hand, "this here is just to start you off. There'll be a lot more before we're through, and you'll probably find that you won't have a single part of your body left unviolated. But this rusty, dull, long nail," he raised it up to Sebastian's face, "this is going into your eye." And the last thing Sebastian's right eye saw, while he screamed and screamed, was the nail slowly being pushed further in.

They'd left it in there, sticking out like a peg. The jelly had oozed out around it, so Calm had dabbed it up with a handkerchief. "Don't want the nail to start slipping out, do we now?" he'd said. "Incidentally, this is why we decided to clamp your head. Personally, I like people to be able to swing their head around, show a little life, but you might manage to ... haha ... hit the nail hard enough on the head to drive it into your brain. And we really can't have that."

"Aaaaaagh! It huuuuuurrrts! Get them off me! Get them off, get them off, get them off!"

"What can you do?" they yelled.

"I don't know what to do!"

"Not good enough," they roared, and kept going.

"Please, not the other hand too. I beg you, oh gods, please-"

"What is your use? What is your use, my brilliant friend?"

"It's - it's - it's - I don't know. I don't know! Whatever you want it to be! What do you want it to be?"

"That's not the answer. We'll start off with one finger-"

"Oh god, no! Please!"

"I think he's fallen unconscious."

"Not hardly. Look, he's still muttering something. Hand me the wires again, please. Thank you. Put it on three, no, let's give it a four. On my mark ... now!"

"AAAAAAGH!"

"There we go."

"Kill me, kill me, kill me, please, kill me-"

"Why? We're not half done yet."

"Kill me, kill me, kaaAAA-"

"See?"

"More acid, yes?"

Seb was not forming any intelligible words at this point, only sounds and burbled whimperings.

"More acid indeed."

When they were all done, and Carlos had started putting away his tools - not cleaning them, just putting them away, and the syringes and hypodermic needles went into the same box they came out of - what was left of Sebastian raised his head for the last time. His one good eye was having trouble focusing again, everything fading in and out of his vision. He'd see Carlos clearly, then just as a big pink blur, then clearly again.

"Why?" he said.

"What's that?" said Carlos, not looking, just putting away things.

It took Sebastian a full minute to form the words. "Why? What did you want?" he said at last. There were no tears, there was no grief. Nothing was left. "What did you want?"

Carlos put away the remains of his items in silence. Then he walked over to Sebastian and crouched in front of him. "You really don't know?" he said.

"No."

"Tomorrow, someone is going to find your corpse. In that alleyway where we caught you, looking all pretty like you do now. And word's going to spread. And we'll have a lot less trouble with the other thieves and druggies in the area. We'll be able to do our business without the annoyance of people like you."

"And the questions?" Sebastian said.

"Had no right answers," Carlos replied. "Here," he held up a syringe, "one last shot. This'll be quiet and calm." He leaned in and injected Sebastian with the contents. "Your vision will go, then your consciousness. I'll be back in a while to get your body."

"Thank you," Sebastian said.

"Don't mention it."

"Thank you," Sebastian said. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." Then he fell silent.

Carlos waited a few moments, then checked Sebastian's pulse. "Return to brilliancy," he said, put away the final syringe, and left the room.

Methods of Torture - The Caldari

He lies in the middle of a golden field. The sun, not yet high, gently warms him. The field has grown and not been harvested, so from where he's lying it looks like the long stalks of wheat are reaching for the skies.

He lifts one hand and reaches, too. Then he lowers it. All the while, he keeps his vision focused on the sky, on the distance.

Not once did he cry out in pain. All that was done, really, took place while he was asleep, or just somewhere else. And there was no speaking to others; it is Not Done to share these things.

Sometimes he fingers the scar behind his ear, where they went in.

It is a fact of nature that the things that grab our attention, the ones to which we react the strongest, are the things that shock us. Something comes at you slowly and deliberately, and you have time to think. Something jumps at you, and you don't. You can't put any of your filters in place; you just react instinctively. If the threat disappears as quickly as it appeared, though, all that instant mania was for nothing.

It is also a fact that high level organisms, having developed the capacity for abstract thought and imagination, can be made to feel threatened in a far greater variety of ways than the simple things that merely crawl around in the grass.

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

He can't quite remember how he got here. There was ... a long walk, he's sure, but he remembers it as rather comfortable and not really the sort of thing you'd associate with extended rambling through the grass and the fields. Perhaps he merely dreamt it and is now waiting to wake up.

A long wheat stalk, too heavy in the head to rise alone and so relying on the support of its brethren, has bent down into the void created by his body. He strokes it, then grasps it tightly between thumb and forefinger and breaks it, sticking it into his mouth and chewing languidly. There's no hurry. There was never any hurry.

Months ago, he stole some things. It was an impulse decision, quite unlike him, and didn't seem like much at the time. Just some documents he found while working late one night, documents he grabbed and stuffed in his jacket. What he was going to do with them, he can't remember. Probably nothing; stolen on a vague notion, the idea of gain, rather than for any concrete use. His ideas veered from blackmail to selling to simply putting the documents back.

When they came for him, he was still trying to decide. That's what hurt all the way through: He hadn't even done anything yet! He had taken the documents and he was sorry, but he wasn't a bad man. He wasn't a traitor.

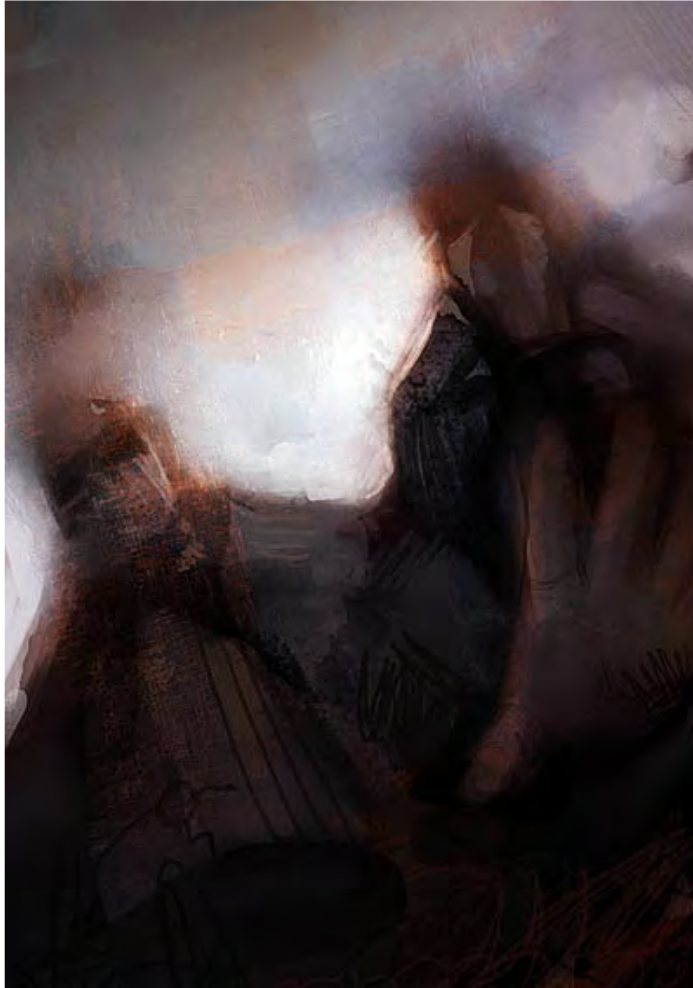
They didn't believe him.

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

There were needles and sharp, glinting things, but there was very little actual pain. Everyone wore white and had theatre masks that showed expressionless ivory faces. He was made to sleep, often. They asked him the same questions again and again.

It was a short while later that the visions started. He would be lying there, strapped in, while a doctor - he preferred to think of them as "doctors" - slowly turned a dial back and forth. The dial had no numbers, only a line of varying width that snaked around its circumference. The doctor would stand beside the dial, so he could see how it was being turned.

They asked him the same questions again and again. When his answers displeased them, the dial would be turned.



At a low level nothing much happens. He will sometimes speak to a doctor whose mask is not, in fact, a mask, but his real face. The ivory lips move, and the ivory voice speaks directly into his head. That doctor only appears when the dial is turned.

At a medium level he sees little things with many legs, crawling towards him.

At a high level there are no shapes, no distinct colors nor forms. He loses the ability to discern any concrete entities. His mind becomes a kaleidoscope turning at uncontrollable speeds.

They'd ask him questions again and again, until he was sure he'd gone utterly mad.

A butterfly lands on a nearby stalk. He wonders why it drifted in. There are no flowers here.

The butterfly is quick, but his hand is quicker. He crushes it, lets it fall to the ground beside him. He smiles. He envies it, and wipes his hand on his face, imagining that its blood is his and that he's dying too.

A group of people came to see him once. They all had the same masks as the doctors, but their builds showed that they were younger than the regular staff. A doctor put his hand on the dial, which was

turned off, but did nothing with it. The doctor then turned to the group and this is what he said:

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Then the doctor started turning the dial.

After some time they set him free. Free to wander around, dazed. No one knew what he had done, but at the same time everyone knew that it had been dishonorable. He couldn't get a new job, of course. Not even the lowliest street sweepers would talk to a dishonored man. His family deserted him. His friends never answered. Even complete strangers, passing him in the street, gave him looks, as if they could smell his rank.

His savings had been left intact, but he never had to dip into them, because he'd been given a monthly pension. That, somehow, made it even worse.

In some of his more lucid moments, he reflected that what was being done to him wasn't because he had committed a serious crime, not really. It was because he had committed one that was not serious, that had not been the result of a planned, thought-out criminal action, that had just tempted an everyday corporate man. And they couldn't have that. So he was being made an example of.

They had put something behind his eyes. That was the only way to explain it. It was like the advertisement techniques he'd heard of, where an image was flashed so quickly that you didn't consciously register it. Quafe was rumored to have used this as part of their early aggressive marketing campaigns.

It was quite simple, really, the way it worked. Sometimes when he blinked, an image was put on his optic nerve. Not every time, and sometimes not for hours, and even when it had started it was irregular. There was really no way for him to know when it would happen.

The image was of a crime scene. Or an accident, though he couldn't imagine what kind of mishap could cause this kind of mutilation. He never got to see it clearly, because the image wasn't projected if he kept his eyes closed. He suspected that some mechanism inside him detected when it was a real blink and sent the image at just the right time.

There really was a lot of blood. And other things.

The first time it happened, he dropped the bag of takeaway food he was holding. He blinked a few times, shook his head, then bent to pick up the bag. It happened again just as he'd grabbed hold, and he fell to his knees in shock and fright.

It caught him off guard every time. Every single time.

The scene was usually the same, though the particulars changed. Sometimes he was sure there was something in the middle of the carnage, something with a large, dark mouth and several rows of teeth. Other times there were light, nearly white patches on the fringes, and he wondered whether he might be looking at an image of the doctors and some very unfortunate patient.

One day, inside a grocery store, he came upon a man he'd once known. A respected man, known for some peculiarities but well-liked all the same. The man ignored him, of course. He would have passed on, lost in his own thoughts, if he hadn't caught the sporadic trembling in the man's hands. He stopped, pretended to busy himself with some discounted wares, and shot glimpses at his old friend. He noticed that occasionally, when the man blinked, it was as if a slight tremor passed through his body.

He stood there in wonder, trying to decide whether he had really seen this and how he could possibly know for certain - since people wouldn't even speak to him - until he realized that maybe this once he could use his ostracization to his advantage. He walked up to his friend, said, "Excuse me, won't be a minute," and, with two fingers, quickly parted the hair just behind his ear.

There was a scar.

The man froze, and stared straight ahead, as if he'd heard the sounds of a monster behind him and was determined not to look back and see.

That night he'd cried even more than usual. Not only for the fate of his friend, but for his own inadequacy and shame in not having overcome the same handicap.

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Dementia is another symptom. When the ability for coherent reason has failed this grossly, the reality one has created through one's senses and mind may become detached from objective view.

He lifts one hand and reaches. Then he lowers it. All the while, he keeps his vision focused on the sky, on the distance.

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The Speakers of Truth

The Amarrian order that calls itself the Speakers of Truth harks back to the Time of Contemplation.

It was a quiet period in Amarrian history. The Holders had gained power but had yet to start their expansionist Reclaiming in earnest; instead, they were focused on solidifying their powerbase. The appearance of the first Emperors was a big help in that respect, since it gave the Holders the opportunity to rule the masses by proxy and not have to risk their own necks in the process.

However, the Holders decided that a trap door was needed, an emergency option for them to wield executive power should the Emperor grow too powerful too quickly. To maintain the appearance of neutrality, they set up this power through a separate institution known as the Speakers of Truth. This institution was a religious order staffed with hand-picked theologians that were known not only to be favourable to the people's cause rather than to the Emperor and the royal family, but also to be thoughtful, kind, intelligent individuals who had more interest in improving the lives of their fellow men rather than engage in the dirty games of politics. In short, the kind of people who wouldn't be any trouble.

The order wasn't publicized in any manner, and was buried beneath rules, regulations and religious red tape so as to hide its true nature from the Emperor and his cohorts. Its only distinguishable purpose was to act as intermediaries in religious disputes should the need arise - in which capacity their word would be equal to that of even the Emperor himself - and to recoup its operational costs by operating as an educational establishment for selected Holder students. The latter aspect was intended so that the Speakers of Truth would not appear to be overtly political, and thus would not attract undue attention. The Holders then intended for the Speakers of Truth to be brought out in circumstances where they needed to counteract or even veto a decision made by the ruling Emperor. As it turns out, these circumstances never arose, and the order was eventually forgotten by most of the ruling body.

The order took on its own quiet life, and ticked along in peace. They were situated in a remote location, the better to avoid getting involved in politics, and for the most part could operate without interference. Aside from their hidden purpose of judgment, the Speakers of Truth offered the usual aspects of religious life: They studied natural science, led a self-sustaining life, and even offered temporary sanctuary to refugees and those in need.

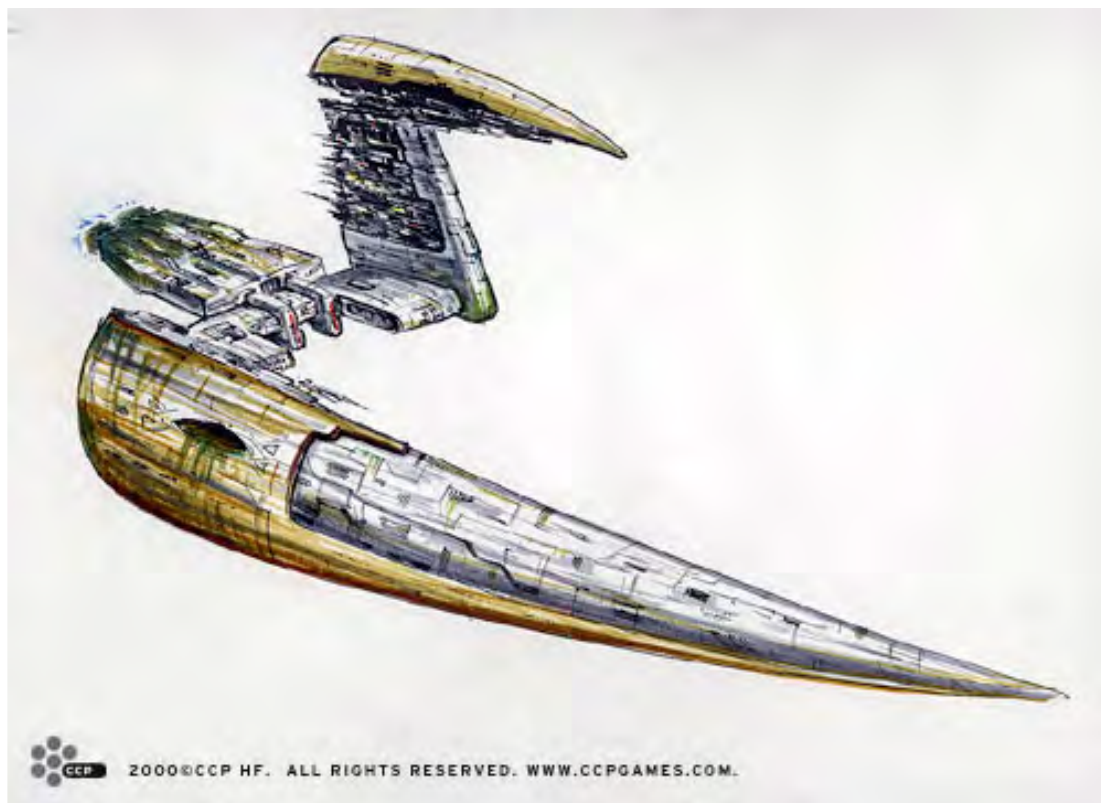


In fact, the order's controlling body quickly realized that the best way to ensure the order's survival would not be to try and eliminate the political trap doors the Holders had built for it - the moment they'd start making waves, the order would immediately be dissolved - but to use their talents to insert itself in Holder society, digging in to such an extent that it would be unthinkable to remove them. Therefore, the Speakers of Truth concentrated on building a reputation as an outstanding educational establishment, offering both a private curriculum for select children of Holders and a free education program for those children of Commoners who showed promise. The Holder program gained them obvious popularity with the ruling classes, and eventually led to strong backing by those who had graduated from the Speakers' schools and risen to high public office. The Commoner program, meanwhile, had a strong focus on religious studies, making it all the more popular among the lower orders within the Holders, who embraced any societal function that served to keep the Commoners obeyant and faithful.

The tactic worked. By the time of the Moral Reform, the order was regarded as a minor building block in Amarrian high society: a respected and respectable institution that exuded a mix of piety and academia. In addition, they were seen as strictly apolitical, to the point where they were sometimes even asked to perform their original arbitorative duty, albeit in a far lesser capacity than intended. Ordained members of the Speakers of Truth have divine permission to act as arbitrators in disputes both religious and secular. While they have free rein to dispense whatever judgment they see fit, the bulk of laws which

surround their order sometimes makes this a little difficult. As a result, their authority tends to be accepted by the involved parties as an item of faith rather than on a strictly legal basis. The order was subsumed into the Theology Council during the latter's rise to position as main authority on religious trials and punishment, but due to the Speakers' educational focus, they've managed to continue operating as a separate unit, and the Theology Council rarely calls upon them to perform duties of the court.

Of course, given that the Speakers of Truth are sometimes asked to rule in matters involving high-ranking Holders, their power does rankle some of the Amarr elite. The Privy council, composed of the five royal Heirs, has always treated the Speakers of Truth as a minor thorn in both their sides, but have never found enough reason to act against the order. There exists a sort of unspoken agreement where the Speakers don't interfere with matters that might have a political bent, and in turn are allowed to keep their arbitrator powers unchallenged. Of course, there may crop up exceptional cases in which the Theology and Privy councils will actually endorse the Speakers' involvement in a political matter. One suspects that those cases will not bode well for the defendant. Not well at all.



Godflesh

Bethora looked out the station window, waiting for the race to begin. The windows here in the royal quarters were quite expansive, far more so than in most other sections of the station, and gave a good view of both the planet below and of the stars in the distance. The glass in the windows was warm, too, which was rare on space stations. Microscopic filaments embedded in the glass generated a constant supply of heat, and the material in the windows was specially mixed to conduct it well. The heat loss through this process was horrendous, and so it was only offered to the richest of clients.

The comfort wasn't solely for the benefit of visiting royalty. As part of the Ardishapur family, Bethora frequently had to play host to a number of tradesmen, merchants and religious officials, most of whom regularly visited the space station but wouldn't go to the planet's surface. Travels between planet and station were expensive if you wanted any degree of comfort, and while the royal court could get the most comfortable seats free of charge, anyone else would either have to pay, or accept being stowed away like so much cargo and livestock.

So Bethora went up to the sky on a regular basis. She enjoyed it. Things were simpler here, she found, and offered opportunity for reflection and quiet. This time around, the retinue even included her son, who was about to compete in the space races.

She turned from the window and looked to the royal banners hanging from the walls, decorated with the Amarrian crest and the various sigils of her family. The banners swayed a little, gently wafted by air conditioners discreetly planted in the walls behind them. Beneath the banners stood the royal furniture, old and splendid: chairs of thick, dark oak, covered in embroidered pillows; various old paper books on shelves, chronicling the family history; gold and silver cutlery and dishware.

The last was being polished by Javies, Bethora's manservant, who mumbled genteel obscenities about the state of the place and the competence of the staff. Javies was part of Bethora's retinue, and went with her on all official trips. They routinely visited the space station, and every time, he expressed his astonishment at the lackadaisical attitude the staff onboard seemed to have towards basic cleanliness. The silverware, he maintained, looked like it had been stored in a coalmine, and the less said about the dust on the tables, the better.

Bethora, who was in most other respects a strict and proper person, didn't begrudge Javies his little complaints. The man had been in service to her family for a long time, and had assisted willingly in various tasks that younger men would have begged leave from. He knew when it was all right to talk, and when one should remain silent.

Bethora looked back out the window, staring at the planet. She heard Javies's footsteps approach.

"Brings us closer to the Lord, milady?" he asked.

"Brings me further from the earth, Javies."

"As milady says."

"I do wish they'd get this thing over and done with."

Javies handed her a thin porcelain cup, and poured tea into it. "Milady has never been much in favour of the races, as I recall. Incidentally, I took the liberty of cleaning the tea kettle. Three times, in fact. I believe it had gathered enough carbon to form the basis of intelligent life."

She glanced at him and smiled briefly. "Thank you, Javies. It's always good to have a diversion."

"Indeed, milady." Javies retreated to the dinner table, where he began to polish the gold decoration on the glass cups.

"I just don't like Keral taking time away from his studies," Bethora said. "He needs to work hard."

"The children of men can never rest, it seems, milady," Javies said, alluding gently to the status of Keral's father. The man had been a notoriously hard worker, right until his untimely death. Afterwards, Bethora had grown increasingly dissatisfied with Keral's progress, constantly egging and pushing him to greater heights.

"It's for his own good," Bethora said. "Life isn't easy."

Javies, who had been a manservant for a long time and knew a few things about the difference between royal and civilian life, said nothing.

"Besides, if his father were here, he'd push the boy far harder."

"I'm sure he would, milady."

There was a knock. Javies walked over to the door and greeted the guest, saying to Bethora, "Lady Raana here to see you, milady."

The woman walked in. She wore a dress of shimmering greens, and a golden necklace, both of which glimmered in the lights of the quarter. She walked speedily over to Bethora, gave her a nervous smile and said, "Bater sends his regards."

Bethora nodded. Bater was Raana's husband, a man with sad eyes and clammy hands. Bethora had let him on top of her once, in a weak moment, and had told him afterwards that if anyone ever found out, she would have him castrated.

"Have you heard from Keral?" Raana added.

"Only that he was getting ready, and expected to win. How about Selan?" Selan was Raana's son, and would be aboard the same ship as Keral in the race, acting as Keral's second-in-command.

"The same. I do wish those boys weren't so eager. Competitiveness is all well and good, but one day they're going to take it too far."

"Rather that than not far enough," Bethora said.

"Oh, don't say that. I'm worried enough as it is without having them be jinxed."

Javies interrupted. "I'm sorry, but could I offer miladies some tea?"

"No, thank you, dear," Raana responded. "I only popped round to wish everyone good luck."

"And the same to you," Bethora said. She put her arm around Raana's shoulders. "They're going to be fine. Stop worrying. I didn't raise Keral to let me down."

Raana looked at her. "I know you didn't, darling," she said. "I know you didn't. At any rate, I'll be off. The race should be starting soon, anyway." And with that, she took her leave.



Several ships undocked. Each was a different model, but shared the Amarrian characteristics: The lambent gleam on golden hulls, the hawk-like curves, the quiet, majestic grandeur. They lined up in a predetermined pocket of space and signed their readiness in the local communications channel. A few moments later, the judges gave the starting call. The race was on.

The rules were fairly simple. Each contestant had to destroy a series of beacons. Each beacon, when destroyed, would drop a marker that needed to be returned to station. Points of varying measure were scored by destroying your beacon, returning your markers, destroying other people's beacons, destroying or returning their markers,

and performing any particular manoeuvres considered elegant, flashy or dangerous enough. All beacons were fairly closely spaced, so there was always a risk that your opponent might shoot down yours instead of going for his own. As a result, ships needed to be fitted not only with sufficient firepower to destroy the beacons, but also electronic warfare capabilities to disrupt the targeting capabilities of other players. Not only that, but since each marker was fairly sizeable, you'd need to fit cargohold expanders on your ship if you wanted to haul more than a couple back to station at any one time; and expanders would slow your ship down noticeably. Ship setups were kept strictly secret, shown only to professional inspectors.

Keral was already in the lead. He'd spent months practicing with Selan at his side, and the two commanded their ship with admirable precision. Since the purpose of competition was to test the young men's mastery of command, the ships were staffed only by regular crews, not by capsuleer pilots.

Eventually, it came down to a single beacon. Keral and Selan's ship, the Apollyon, was just barely ahead, racing toe to toe with another ship. The Apollyon started going faster, and faster, and faster still, firing on the beacon and hitting with incredible accuracy at that range. It managed to destroy the beacon, but for some reason its guns kept firing, into empty space, and a commentator noted that if they kept that up something was sure to burn out. The Apollyon rushed onward to pick up the marker, but when it got in range, it didn't slow; instead, it kept going, overshooting its prize. It tried to turn, but inertia had it in an inexorable grip, and as the spectators watched in shock, it crashed into a nearby asteroid.

They were at the station's medical quarters. Bethora sat by her son's side, in silence. He was being kept unconscious. His friend Selan had died earlier the same night.

The head doctor approached her. "The scan results are in, milady. I'm very sorry to tell you this, but with the internal injuries your son has sustained, it's almost certain that he won't last the night."

She glared at him.

He continued. "We'll do everything we can to make your stay here as comfortable as possible-"

"There is something else you can do," she said. "You can help my son."

"I'm sorry," the doctor said, "I truly am. I can understand your reaction, but short of giving him a new body, we're helpless. I strongly suggest you focus instead on the little time you have left with your son."

Without breaking her gaze, Bethora got up and stood very close to the doctor. "You are not listening to me," she said in a quiet tone. "Or yourself. There is something you can do. A new body."

The doctor stared at her. Then he bubbled, "That's, no, that's unheard of. Amarr royal skin is absolutely sacred."

"Is yours?" Bethora said.

The doctor fell silent.

"If my son dies tonight," she said, "he will not be the only one. Nor will I stop there. Is that clear?"

The doctor swallowed, and nodded.

"I know there are several facilities in the area with clones on standby. My manservant will assist you in making the necessary arrangements, including all steps needed for secrecy. My son will awake tomorrow, and make a miraculous recovery."

Bethora looked through the shatterproof window set in the door. It was a week after the accident.

On the other side, Keral paced, tossing things back and forth, screaming nonsensical dialogue from movies he'd once seen, stopping every now and then to turn the lights in the room off and back on. He had indeed made a miraculous recovery, but not a complete one. Brain damage, irreparable, had ensued.

Her advisors had informed Bethora she would have to keep her son out of sight for a while. Later, they would let rumours slip out that the crash, combined with Bethora's harsh, cold treatment of her son throughout his childhood, had resulted in such psychological trauma that Keral might never recover. No one could ever find out that the cloning of sacred Amarrian skin had taken place, nor that, with security procedures circumvented, it had gone so disastrously wrong.

Bethora placed her fingers against the glass. Her son, lost in whirlwinds, didn't even notice.

"You," someone said.

Bethora turned. In front of her stood Raana, accompanied by two armed guards.

"What's this?" Bethora said.

"Why did the ship go faster than its fittings should've allowed?" Raana said in a dead tone. "Why did its guns keep on firing at nothing? Why didn't its shields buffer it from the asteroid? Why did my son die?"

Bethora rubbed her eyes. "I don't know. Why don't you go ahead and tell me, Raana?"

"I had the wreckage investigated," Raana said. "Turns out it contained ship rig prototypes. Since rigs are so new on the market, they haven't yet been allowed in competition, but your son didn't care about that, did he?"

"What are you saying?" Bethora said.

"The first prototypes for these things wouldn't have shown up on the ship fitting screens, and so the inspector would never know. But they were completely unstable and were never released to the public. The only people who could've gotten their hands on those infernal machines were those with special access. People like us.

"Your boy had this planned for ages. He cheated, and it killed my son, and it was all because of you."

"Me?!"

"Who pushed him into this? Who never let up? Who made him feel he was never good enough for anything?" Raana said. "I don't know if you actively encouraged him to cheat, but it really doesn't matter. You're responsible for all of this, Bethora, and I intend to see you pay."

She raised a hand, and the guards stepped forward.

Bethora steeled herself. "You don't know what you're doing," she said.

Raana's eyes went wide and her face turned pale with rage. "And you do?" she said. She stalked over to Bethora and jabbed a finger at the window on the door beside them. "Look! Look at what you've done! You wouldn't even let that poor boy rest in death."

"What do you mean?" Bethora managed to say.

"You know exactly what I mean. It doesn't take a genius to figure out," Raana said, then shook her head. "My god, you're pathetic."

Bethora opened her mouth to say something, thought the better of it, and walked past Raana, the guards following her with hands on their weapons.

On the other side of the door, the boy turned the lights on and off, on and off, on and off, on and off, on and off.

Sand Giants

Two elder statesmen, both of them Minmatar government officials, were walking down by the sea. The negotiations had been hard, what with all the secrecy, and they had begged leave for a breather. Matar was nice and warm this time of year, and the men enjoyed being outside whenever possible. Besides, it did the government good to connect with the people, or at least keep some tabs on them.

They were especially interested in investigating the work of a man named Elbrand Toduin. Elbrand supposedly worked on the beach and created the most marvellous of sand castles, intricate structures that held both expression and functionality. At least, this was what the statesmen had heard, listening in as they did on the talk of their interns. As a result, the two men, Sadrede Svarg and Aduner Hulmkelat, decided to take a long lunch break and pay this Elbrand a visit.

This particular government office on Matar was located quite close to the sea, so it was a short walk. One of the town's shopping districts was located there, so a long road ran parallel to the coastline, dotted on one end with stores of all kinds. On the other lay a wide, well-maintained sidewalk, with a snack vendor here and there. Beyond the sidewalk was the beach, and the ocean.

The sidewalk was kept at a higher level than the beach. At regular intervals there would be an offshoot, a concrete pier shaped like a T that bisected the beach and led straight into the ocean. This pier included stairs down to the beach, and hooks and other equipment for boats that wanted to moor there.

There weren't many people about - it was a workday, after all - but the sun was out and the sea breeze kept things nicely cooled, so a few souls were idly wandering down the walkways. These included some youngsters dressed in the increasingly popular tribal gear, some of them even sporting what Aduner hoped were fake tribal tattoos.

The two statesmen noticed a small crowd clustered by one of the branches that lead into the sea, and headed over there.

The crowd stood on the part of the walkway where the beach turned to shoal. They all looked over the edge, leaning on the handrails. Sadrede couldn't get close enough, but Aduner, being a bit more lithe, insinuated his way into the crowd and looked over the handrails.

Far below stood Elbrand, a small figure among the vast constructs of sand, and once Aduner's eyes drifted up to them, his heart sank. It seemed impossible that such a tiny figure could create such gargantuan monstrosities, but there they were.

The first was a giant of near-infinite complexity, his body a composite of famous Minmatar people, symbols and even slogans. Legs were Khuumaks, with the knee joints fashioned into the heads of the two people who had stood at Drupar's side as he struck his fateful blow, while Drupar's own face was visible in the midst of the figure's torso. Other faces could be made out at various parts, as if surfacing from the ocean. The figure's arms were decorated with tribal tattoos, some of which, Aduner noted with alarm, spelled out slogans of hatred and war, and many of which were combined into one cryptic figure. And yet there was no overarching theme, no central message in the complexity as far as Aduner could see. All he could make out was a hopelessly disunited hodgepodge of anger, a torrent of misdirected frustration that would leave nothing of value in the minds of admirers. He shook his head. Temperance was the way, not excess. It was small comfort that the monstrous construct would be washed away at high tide, for there was nothing stopping its creator from remaking it again and again; a cycle of birth for something better left cooling in the grave.

The second was a far sleeker item, though it unnerved Aduner. It was a sea serpent, its massive head defying gravity as it rose from the sand, its lithe body trailing in diminishing half-moons that implied the thing didn't so much swim as undulate. Aduner hated snakes, and he immediately disliked this creature. It glistened with some sort of bonding agent - nothing this big could be left untouched - that only served to add another reptilian aspect to its being.

There were slight pockmarks in the creature's cheek, from where Elbrand's ladder had presumably touched it before he applied the bonding agent. The serpent's head was moulded in explicit detail, not only in the rows of worn teeth visible through its open mouth, or in the veins of its eyes under slanted, angry-looking brows, but in the way it managed to indicate both stillness and action simultaneously. It looked poised to attack, and yet it also looked as if it were only travelling the seas, minding its own business. It reeked of power and potential.

And then there was the fire. Elbrand had placed inflammatory agents in the serpent's nostrils and set them alight, resulting in a steady outpour of flame and greyish smoke. Bizarrely, Aduner felt that they simultaneously made the serpent both more and less threatening. They underlined its nature, and its danger, and in so doing presented a sharper likeness of the real thing, but the more this sand construct looked like a sea serpent, the more Aduner was reminded that it was only a sand construct. And yet, it made him uneasy. It felt as if a thing so real, particularly a thing that in its realness was so patently fake, couldn't possibly be anything but real.

Aduner disliked it so much that he was about to turn away without even looking at the third sand sculpture, but at that point Sadrede finally emerged from the throng and took a place at the handrails by Aduner's side. Aduner saw his co-worker's expression harden as Sadrede took in the sculptures.

"This is ... unfortunate," Sadrede said.

Aduner nodded. He was struck with the feeling that this was something they would need to discuss very seriously at some later point, and thus willed himself to turn and look at the third sculpture.

At first glance it was practically serene compared to the others; a large construct almost monolithic in shape, resembling a stone-age palace. The building blocks were, fittingly, rock-like in shape and surface. Each one of them had a distinct surface, as if a team of sawyers had been at work, and even the mortar around them had lines and ridges in it. One half expected to see a bunch of trowels lying nearby.

Aduner found it surprisingly pleasant, and it wasn't until his eyes drifted to the building's roots that he spotted the anomaly. A sand figure of a Minmatar boy stood in front of the building, leaning up against it. The boy's pants were around his ankles. His face, even from this distance, clearly registered extreme glee, and no wonder: In front of him stood the sand head of an Amarrian, looking as if he'd been buried up to his neck, and a constant stream of water fountained from the boy's midsection, curved up in the air, and hit the Amarrian directly on the top of his bald, granular head. Aduner noticed that several large buckets of water stood around the sand construct, and he suspected that if he were to see the building from the back, there'd be visible some clever aqueductal design involving leaky buckets and plastic pipes. He found it immensely disappointing, not threatening in the least but merely sad: A creation that showed such promise at first glance, only to show itself to be a facade, good for little more than short-lived amusement.

The people, of course, loved it all, and tossed coins on a blanket laid down on the sand.

As one, Aduner and Sadrede turned and made their way out of the crowd, back to the centre of the pier. Aduner wanted to say something to someone, but couldn't find it in him. Sadrede was still deathly quiet, and Aduner knew from experience that he needed only a catalyst to explode into someone's face.

Before Aduner could do anything, Sadrede made a beeline for a nearby dancer. The Minmatar had a tradition of physical expression ranging all the way from the delicate, symbolic flights of trained dancers to the coarse, even violent, dances of tribal warriors. This one, plying his trade on a frictionless mat, was doing the exhibition form of Ruhste, an old and extremely physical dance art that more often than not had the exhibitor spinning in the air. It had been banned during the Amarr occupation due to fears that it might be used as a tool to train fighters, but was now permitted as a cultural sport, although the government had adamantly refused to give it any grants or official backing.

The dancer slowed when Sadrede approached him, but didn't stop. Sweat poured off him and onto the mat, and it was a wonder he could even keep his balance, let alone perform his feats. From a distance, Aduner noticed that the mat was decorated with the same tribal symbols as the first sand statue had been, in particular the composite one showing all the symbols as one figure.

The beginning of the exchange was said in low tones, so Aduner didn't catch it. By the time he'd caught up with Sadrede, though, his co-worker was shouting.

"All these public displays mean nothing and only serve to aggravate the wrong people," Sadrede yelled at the dancer. "You don't do anything to further our cause, and you certainly don't ensure the safety of our people."

The dancer, still now and entirely calm, laughed in his face. "And you do?"

Sadrede was speechless. The dancer returned to his art, his supple body revolving in tune to some inner rhythm, picking up the pace until he was leaping up from the ground, stabbing at the air with his hands and feet like a dragon taking flight.

It occurred to Aduner that were they to meet the man in a place with no witnesses, the exchange might go quite a bit differently. There were layers to the dancer's actions. The Ruhste was art, but it was one that presented violence in terms of aesthetics. The onlooker would see a performance that resembled combat, and if he looked closely, he would see that the underlying foundation was, in fact, still aesthetic: Art presenting violence that presented itself as art. But Aduner suspected there was yet another layer to the performance. If a man had conditioned himself to such a degree that his actions, presented as mock violence, appeared as art, then such a man might well possess the aptitude for real violence, along with the ability to present it in such a way that the casual onlooker would see only the surface layers and nothing more. What better way to hide your lethality than present it to the world, and in so doing, make the world think you were merely pretending?

His thoughts got no further. Sadrede, still too angry for words, stomped off, and Aduner followed.

And that would have been that, if they hadn't seen the kid with the ChromIts.

The Chromlts were a popular Minmatar children's toy. They came in packs of twenty little magnetic silver orbs, with accessories that included a tiny docking station shaped like a twofold pencil sharpener, and a small self-standing projector that cast ultraviolet light. When a pair of orbs were placed in the dock for a minute, they would warm up slightly. Afterwards, if you touched two of them together, then gently drew them apart, they would trail between them a gossamer filament that extruded from tiny holes on their surface. The filament would remain taut at all times, could be stretched out almost indefinitely, and would harden into a firm stem when passed under the cure of ultraviolet light, resulting in a tiny baton-shaped unit.

There were two kinds of structures one could create from Chromlts, hot or cold. The hot one involved building the wireframe sequentially, adding one more orb to the structure each time. The cold one was far more difficult, where one created several two-orb batons, then used the orbs' magnetic properties to stick them together. The magnetism meant that a wireframe of even moderate size had to have equalized pressure from all sides, since it took very little force for the magnetized orbs to slide off one another and collapse the entire structure onto itself.

It was not uncommon for children to possess thousands of little Chromlts, particularly in engineer families, and the creation of new structures and items from them was a popular hobby. Cold joins were far more structured and difficult, and revered as such, whereas hot joins, being freed from the normal rules of physics and structural engineering, tended more towards artistry and originality.

And in a corner of the pier, the two men saw the antithesis of the Dionysian dancer they'd left behind: A child that couldn't be more than six or seven, sitting with a pile of Chromlts, and doing a cold join of something that looked remarkably like a Typhoon.

Sadrede, of course, got there first.

"That's amazing!" he said. "What's your name?"

"Bryld," the child said.

"And you did this all by yourself?" Sadrede asked.

"Yeah."

"May I see it?"

The child wordlessly handed him the frame.

Sadrede inspected it with due reverence. "It's very nice," he said. "Your parents must be proud. Do you often make spaceships?"

"It's not a spaceship," Bryld said.

"Really?" Aduner interjected. "Fooled me. What is it?"

The child looked him over, then apparently decided he was trustworthy. "It's a wireframe hulk."

Their blank stares propelled the kid to continue, "My dad's an engineer. And he's always saying that the biggest problems with the broken big ships is that they're so hard to manure."

"Manoeuvre," Sadrede said, but Aduner hushed him.

"So he says that sometimes they need to be towed in zero-g. But if they're too broken then there's no way to do that, 'cause they'd fall apart. So he's trying to design these hulks, like skeletons on the outside of a ship, dad says, that can be put on it so that it doesn't fall to bits when it's moved. And I'm trying to help him. And dad says it's gonna have to be made with something like Chromlts, because dad says the trick is to use as little material as you can, and just place it at the right spots on the ship so that it'll click together."

"You've cold joined a model for a new type of zero-g repair frame," Aduner said in astonishment. "How long have you been doing this? How old are you?"

"Two weeks. Seven. My dad says I'm smart."

"I'll say. I don't know any seven-year-olds who can do anything for two weeks straight, let alone structural engineering."

The kid grinned, and held out his hands for the model.

Sadrede returned it with a smile. He said to Aduner, "See, this is what it should be about. No war, no threats, just thoughtful, peaceable work. This is what we should be doing. There's hope yet."

Aduner nodded. Something was bothering him, but he couldn't quite put a finger on it. "And the sand builder?" he said.

Sadrede waved an arm expansively towards the oceans. "He'll be washed away with the floods, as all these worries are eventually. All we need do is wait."

"Bryld, may I see the hulk again, please?" Aduner said. The child obliged.

Aduner minutely inspected the model. "I won't ruin it, I promise," he said. "But ... look, these joints here. And here, and here. How did you get them to hold? I didn't know cold joining could work like that."

The kid's smile faded a little. He didn't say anything.

Aduner gently pulled apart one of the joins, and saw that there was something holding them together, sticky gossamer that trailed in the breeze.

"This is hot joining," Aduner said. "And you've mixed it with glue."

"Oh, that doesn't matter," Sadrede said with high cheer. "It's still a grand piece."

"Hm. Yes, I suppose it is," Aduner said.

Sadrede clapped him on the shoulder, a little too hard for his liking. "Come on. The child is seven. Even if it's not perfect, he's allowed to take a few shortcuts."

"Are we?" Aduner said, but he knew it was unfair. "Never mind. Here, Bryld. You've done a wonderful job." He handed the wireframe back to the kid, who sat down and started tinkering with it again. It was only a child's toy, but Aduner nevertheless felt immensely disappointed, and in turn frustrated at that disappointment. He was growing tired of illusions, and the things they hid.

"Let's head back," he said. Sadrede nodded, and in step they began the walk back to the government offices. It was time to resume the negotiations, and neither Karin Midular nor the envoys who'd secretly flown in to see her would have much patience for tardiness.

From his mat, the dancer quietly watched them go.

Invisible Waves



The waiting lounge was cold. There was little ornamentation here, and the only concessions to comfort were plastic seats on metal bars that were bolted to the floor. A massive window made of transparent alloy showed the traffic out in space, convoys approaching and leaving.

Tim sat on one of the plastic seats and fidgeted with the hem of his robe. He felt tired and worn, a long way from home, and unsure of where home was at all. Every now and then he would get up and pace around the place, staring out the window at the nothingness beyond, or look down the corridors to the people passing by in distant lives and alternate timelines. Everything passed slowly here, in the waiting lounge.

There were no holoreels or any other entertainment playing. This was a place of empty waiting, not of recreation. Other lounges had more ornate decoration, but they cost more and, to Tim, were pointless. As barren as this place was, for the kind of trip he was on - heading back broke from unsuccessful seminars, and nursing a broken heart - it was the only valid option for him.

A sound, a small growl, startled him. He looked to the source and saw that an old man had taken a seat at the edge of the row. The man held a hand in front of his mouth and cleared his throat again, a deep, phlegmic rattle. He didn't appear to have noticed Tim, and sat quite still in his seat, staring out through the window.

Tim, a little unnerved at not even having heard the man sit down, wondered whether to approach him, then decided against it. He turned away and began pacing about again, when he heard the man say, "You going to mope around like that all day?"

"What?" Tim said.

The man, without turning his head, said, "I don't even have to look at you to know you're wearing a hole in the floor. Sit down before you lose your legs."

Tim walked over to him, not sure whether to answer with indignity or politeness, when he noticed that the left side of the man's face was overtaken by an implant.

The man followed his gaze and said, "Ah, hell. Don't you look at this as a handicap. My vision is fine."

"What happened?" Tim asked.

"Life happened, son. It gets you that way. Sit down."

Tim sat.

"Thanks. Not that I'm your boss, but I don't much care for looking at the stars while someone paces about behind me like a wild animal on the prowl."

"Sure," Tim said, still trying not to stare.

"Braten," the man said.

"Sorry?"

"Braten. Braten Fahr. It's a traditional thing, where I give my name, and you give yours in return."

"Oh. Yes, of course. Tim. Shema."

"Pleased to meet ya, Tim," Brater said and extended a hand, which Tim shook.

"Likewise," Tim said. Now that he'd had a moment to get accustomed to the situation, he felt a lot more comfortable. This was just some old man, waiting for his ride on one of the cheap flights. Nobody here but him and Tim, and somehow that made the solitude even more apparent. He probably wouldn't have spoken to this man under normal circumstances, but in this time and place, his gruffness seemed quite appropriate and not at all confrontational.

They sat in silence, looking out at the stars.

Eventually Brater said, "I'm an old man. Don't have long to live now. So I can wait around spaceport lounges if I damn well please. What's your excuse?"

Tim thought about this, then said, "There was this girl..." He let the sentence hang in the air like a war-torn flag.

Brater's expression softened somewhat. "Everything starts that way, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. I suppose it does," Tim said. There was another a pause while they watched a spacecraft fly by, headed for the docking ports.

Tim added, "I've been on the run for a while now, though I really don't know what from. Just general running, I suppose. And recently, I met this very nice woman called Liandra." He sat back in his chair, sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "First time we spoke I got a few words in before a friend of hers came over, another woman, and threatened to have me murdered. Turns out they were both kill agents."

Brater laughed, a deep, quiet rumble. "That's sticking your head in the fire."

"Yeah," Tim said. "I went my own way, didn't think much about it."

"Liar," Brater said, not unkindly.

Tim stopped, hesitated. "Well, all right. I thought about it for quite a while. How'd you tell?"

"You seem a decent fellow. Too nice for your own good. You mull over things, I'll bet."

Tim sighed. "I suppose I do. You're the same?"

"Nope," Brater said and grinned. "But I can recognize a moper from a mile away."

"Heh."

"So what happened?"

"I met her again a few days after," Tim said. "Or, rather, she met me. Without her friend, and looking a fair bit more relaxed than when I first met her. She asked if she could join me for coffee, and I said yes."

"Where were you headed, at the time?"

"Into low sec areas. I work for a non-profit organization. A bit of missionary work, a bit of social improvements."

Brater looked him up and down. "You're certainly dressed the part. Those heathens you were converting, not much for showers or washing machines?"

Tim laughed. "No, I suppose not. I have this tendency to let my appearance slide, too. Sometimes it's just too much effort."

"Washing yourself is no effort at all."

"That's what I'm saying," Tim said.

Brater stared hard into his eyes. "Hard to get up in the mornings sometimes, is it?"

"You said it."

"And you daren't stop once you've gotten moving."

"Precisely. Hence my career," Tim said. It felt good to talk about the depression, he found, especially to someone he'd probably never meet again. "I have to keep moving. Doesn't matter to where, just so long as it's away."

"From everything."

"Yes."

"Including your girl."

"... eventually, yes. It didn't work out," Tim said.

"So I gathered."

"She's a wonderful woman," Tim added. "But she's driven and smart and has this hard, hard core that no one could penetrate. Or, not me, at least. And even though I'm no slacker, she couldn't stand how I never seemed to put any work into myself. She's not unsympathetic. But I think that when she saw other people buckling under the weight of their problems, it was a constant reminder that the same could happen to her."

"So was it worth it?" Brater asked.

"I don't know, man. I don't know," Tim said.

"That means it was," Brater said.

"I don't-... well, you think?"

"Sure. Few things are good through and through. It's all experience in the end."

"I don't know," Tim said again. "I think love can leave a sting that lasts a long time. It can leave you worse off than when you started."

Brater shook his head. "It doesn't. That sting you feel isn't because you fell in love; it's because you were reminded how bad off you were before love took you in its arms for a while."

"Even so," Tim said. "All it grants you is a momentary feeling that's surrounded by numbness both before and after. Isn't the numbness preferable? Just like when you're drowning, you just get real peaceful and calm."

Brater gave him a strange look, then turned his head away. He inhaled, as if to say something, then slowly exhaled and simply said, "No."

A buzzing sound emanating from the distance became a little louder. A second later there floated overhead three small drones, each the size of a fist. They were on security patrol, although they didn't actually have any offensive capabilities. Smaller drones had existed for years, as toys and such, but the larger type was a novelty, a side product of the recent advances in invention. They were being tried out as remote-controlled security monitors, the idea being that their human operators could get closer to hot zones in this manner than regular security cameras allowed, and that you'd be more likely to behave properly with the possibility of these things swooping in to taser you. While they were being tested out, though, the drones would do nothing but fly around, floating on their own currents and look more menacing than they were.

"My wife drowned," Brater said.

Tim stared at him. "Shit," he said at last.

Brater replied, "Oh, I don't think she did that. It'd have embarrassed her half to death." Then he added, "Don't look at me that way. I'm the one who lost her. I'm allowed to make bad jokes."

"What happened?" Tim asked.

"Accident. Sailing trip, which I normally detested, but we'd won it as some huge prize and the wife was all agog to try it. Biggest company on the planet was a sponsor, big hullabaloo, cameras all around. When the time comes, we're all packed and taking the steps aboard, there's a misfire in one of the ship's engines and it jerks away from shore, tearing up the boarding walks and dropping us into the sea. The luggage falls on top of us, along with the boarding walks, keeping us from reaching one another. I clamber up and start yelling for people to get my wife out. Then the stupid idiot moron captain compensates for the drift by firing up other engines and moving the ship closer to harbour, not having realized that there was still someone overboard. Eight thousand tons of deadweight pin my wife against the harbour wall, crushing the life out of her. And all the while, dozens of cameras are shooting her last seconds alive, with millions of people watching. Someone reaches the captain and screams to him to stop the ship, so he fires up the engines again and tries to turn it away, but the engines need time to turn and all they end up doing is providing one final push that makes my wife vomit her guts out into the ocean, before the ship drifts away, leaving her to sink in a fading red pool."

Tim, flailing for logic, grasped the one detail in this story that his mind would let him comprehend. "Why'd you detest sailing trips?"

Brater snorted. "Because I've been a ship captain all my life. The sea's not a place of vacation to me."

"What is it, then?"

"The beginning and end of everything," he said without pause.

Tim said, "Well ... I don't know. I'm sorry to hear about what happened, really sorry. But that sounds stupid to say, and I'm sure you've already dealt with it in your own way."

"True enough," Brater said. "Company gave me a huge settlement. With the media angle it was the only thing they could do."

"I meant-"

"Money wasn't all that much compared to what they could've coughed up, but still a fair size. One of the largest corporate payouts ever given."

"But the grief-"

"And not only that," Brater continued, "But they offered me any kind of perks I could want, including rides back and forth, new and experimental equipment, anything I asked."

Tim raised his hands, palms out. "All right. All right. I'll choose my words carefully."

Brater grunted a reply, then looked down at the floor.

At first Tim thought the man was subtly hinting at the end of conversation, but then he saw his eyes follow some movement, and followed his gaze.

On the floor, floating around and over their feet, were cleaner bugs, tiny robotic beetles that swarmed over all public surfaces. Each beetle had feelers that allowed it to home in on dirt and various pieces of gunk. It would hover over the detritus and use a combination of fire and tiny pressure pumps to crack it into pieces, which it would ingest and use to fuel its process. The bugs were cheap, easily mass-produced, and accepted even by insectophobiacs as an inescapable part of station life.

Tim saw two dozen such bugs move around in Brownian motion, trawling over the dirt left by his shoes, and erasing it as one might erase pencil lines on paper. He moved his foot a little to let them at more of the dirt, but in doing so inadvertently stepped down on one of the beetles and crushed it.

"Damnit," Tim said.

Brater smiled, the first time Tim had seen him do so. The old man's entire face went all wrinkly with the expression, as if it had long grown used to emoting strong feelings.

"Figures," Tim said. Brater nodded.

Tim said, "Look ... I feel stupid now, having told you what I did. I know it's not the same, breaking up with a girlfriend as losing one's wife of many years."

And Brater said, "No, it's not. But it hurts you all the same. Don't ever compare your pain to that of others. It isn't made any less or any greater by comparison to theirs, and in its proper context it's just as bad for you irrespective of what others may be going through." He looked out the window. "And the sea washes all things away, in the end."

Tim said, "You were a captain. You still are?"

"Nah. The money from the settlement was enough to retire. I still love the sea. I just can't stand to sail on it, at least not on the same ocean that-... well, yeah."

"So what're you doing here, away from the sea?" Tim asked.

"Oh, it's here," Brater said. "Trust me. You just don't see it."

Tim looked at the old man, and the old man looked right back at him. The ocular implant on Brater's face came into terrible focus.

"New and experimental equipment," Tim said in a dead voice. "Including modified implants."

"There are waves everywhere," Brater said, quite calmly.

"But you might have gone blind, or mad! Unlicensed modifications are incredibly dangerous! How could you?"

"How could I not? Aren't we both sailing into oblivion?" Brater waved his arm expansively, his sweep arcing from the beetles on the ground, to the drones in the air, and the ships floating around outside. "And we float on the waves. Everything we see, everything we know, it floats on invisible waves. We create these things to sail them, these things that allow us to navigate the dark seas of emotion, but they're only temporary; they sink, they cast us off. But the sea, and all that it is, the sea remains."

Tim, open-mouthed, could only shake his head.

Brater smiled again, and clapped him on the shoulder. "I don't expect you to understand. Not yet, at least."

"So here you sit, watching the invisible waves."

"That I do," Brater said.

"Do you pilot your own ships?"

"No, no, not anymore. And not in this place. I have enough money to buy me passage on convoys, and that is enough. I may imagine I'm piloting them, but no more than that."

"Convoys? But most of the ones here are going into insecure areas."

Brater nodded. "As am I."

"But that's incredibly dangerous! They get shot down all the time!"

The old sailor gave him a look that he would never forget. "Yes," he said. "They do."

They stared out at the stars, watching the invisible waves, until the roll call sounded, and each departed for his cruise.

Most Ancient

It was late in the evening on the ship repair station. At first, the only noticeable movement came from the semiautomated cleaning and safety checking of the walkers, massive ambulatory robots that looked like detached cranes' legs.

One figure moved slowly through the place. Most Ancient, or Jonathan Vesper as he was known to the employment records and nobody else, was doing his very last rounds. Today was the last day of a very long career; tomorrow he would retire.

He was a scrawny white-haired man with a long beard and a calm manner. His speech was measured at all times, and his actions stemmed from a deep confidence in himself and his place in the world. He was meticulous to the point of obsession when it came to cleanliness and order - simplification was his spoken motto - and while he was always a willing teacher, he was also a frustrating one, harping on old theories and unwilling to accept diverging points of view. It was this combination of didacticism and senescence that had earned him his nickname.

His pride and joy was the Row of Wings: A series of ship parts, most of them flat or somehow wing-shaped, on permanent display throughout the repair station. They were set up in a row that snaked its way through the station's main section, and ranged in size from the height of a short man up to the height of a two-story building. He cleaned it every week, without fail, walking through these darkened halls in solitude.

In past times these parts had been used for education, both as reference pieces for rookies and as test housings for new module variations. Each ship part was held in a frame that consisted of a pair of massive clamps on the floor and a wire strung between the part and the nearest wall. When someone wanted to retrieve a part for inspection and experiments, they'd have a walker come over and clasp the selected part with massive robot arms. Then, one of the desk jockeys would flip a switch on an old, outsized control board, the clamps holding the part in place would loosen, the wire would drop from the wall, and the walker would be able to carry the part wherever it was needed.

Those times were drawing to a close, and the parts were now due to be removed. They were part of a fading age where the mechanics had gone in for a more hands-on approach, whereas these days everyone seemed to favor simulations that were long on error margins but short on the human feel for design. When Most Ancient left, the Row of Wings would retire with him.

He didn't mind. People thought he was attached to the Row, and there had been some half-hearted attempts from the older members of the crew to get it turned into a permanent installation, but he had begged off.

He had never told anyone, but what he really was attached to was closure. The end of a lesson; the ordering of a toolbox; the completion of a module; the final moment where a used part was taken in for the last time and turned into scraps; all of these gave him far more satisfaction than indefinite memorials. His greatest joy in life's unspoken poem was placing the period on the end of its line, one sharp swipe of the pen to complete its intricate pattern. The Row was the culmination of years' worth of work and effort, not just a monument to his longevity but a reminder of where he'd come from and what he'd gone through to get there. A warning, as much as a celebration. Looking at it and imagining that it would be there forever, frankly unnerved him.

Everyone else had now left the garage, but he was still there, ordering his things and preparing for tomorrow's sad celebration. Every now and then he fancied he heard something creak in the distance, but he chalked it up to his old ears and to the walkers finishing off their checks.

Like so many mechanics, Most Ancient kept a bunch of small mechanical items in his drawers, both for future reference and remembrance of things past. Many of these items were solid enough that they could be stood up on end. As he pulled open the largest drawer, he heard a click, and was faced with a strange setup: Someone had carefully arranged everything inside in a domino fashion. They stood up one against the other, precariously balanced, and the instant he'd opened the drawer, they toppled, cascading over one another.

There was nothing else in the drawer, no note, no extraneous item, nothing to indicate the who or why.

Most Ancient closed the drawer, carefully put away the rest of his things, and looked around. There was nobody to be seen.

Again, he thought he heard something creaking. He couldn't pinpoint it, but felt that the sound had come from the approximate location of his Row of Wings.

People often thought of him as simple, he knew, and he couldn't disagree. But his simplicity had been earned through years of experience both good and bad. It wasn't the result of being too stupid to understand complexity, he felt, but of being smart or insightful enough to understand it so well that he could simplify it. As a result, he knew what was important and what wasn't, and led his life accordingly. He also knew how people functioned, and how far they would go to do evil things.

Not everyone agreed with his world view, or with his authority. There had been clashes, particularly with some of the younger workers. Recently these clashes had grown more frequent, and more bitter; it was quite clear that certain individuals had started to resent him and the role he played in this company. But as they were too young and immature to truly stand up against him, they attacked him circuitously, like little dogs nipping at the heels of larger prey. They made snide remarks. They laughed. They left trash near his desk; they disordered his things when he wasn't around. One man in particular, Zian, had started acting quite belligerently towards him, and now that Most Ancient thought about it, he realized that Zian had been very vocal about the retirement day, in particular on what a momentous occasion it would be.

What Zian and the rest of them apparently didn't realize was that he'd been young once, too.

And now he was sure that the creaks he'd heard earlier had come from the fastenings that held the Row of Parts in place.

You could say this for the young folks: They knew their equipment. Those endless simulations they liked so much could be used to calculate, to unbelievably small margins of error, the stress necessary to break an item. So if you, say, snuck into a repair shop and borrowed one of the automated Straker saws for a while - those pinpoint precision metal saws with the wafer-thin blades - you could, if you fed it the right data, make it saw into a piece of metal with such accuracy that you could in fact determine ahead of time when and with what kind of pressure the metal would break.

So if you knew, say, that this piece of metal held up an item of a specific weight - say, for instance, an old ship wing - and if you had a strong inkling it would be put under the pressure of an old, wrinkled hand at a certain time of night, cleaning it for the last and final time, you could saw at its fastenings just enough to make the wing topple over at the touch.

Now that he concentrated, as hard as he could, Most Ancient fashioned he could hear tiny, tiny creaks from other support parts as well.

Dominoes. Falling down.

He grinned.

As inconspicuously as he could, he scanned the ceilings. There were security cameras set in every corner, as per standard regulations. Some of them had wider-focus lenses that covered entire sections of the shop, while others autofocused on differing types of movement. There were a couple focused on him now, as they should be, but the instant that a smaller object moved, a subsection of the movement-sensitive cameras should follow it.

He picked up a wrench and held it in his hand as he walked. After a couple of steps he pretended to stumble, and dropped the wrench out of his hand, throwing it in front of him apace. Most of the smaller movement-sensitive cameras immediately followed the wrench, but he noticed two that remained firmly on him. Someone was watching.

Most Ancient picked up the wrench and swiftly walked out of the repair shop and into the armory section, where all the unused equipment was located. Earlier in the day he'd noticed someone depositing an armor rig can - full of tarry liquid necessary for the installation and testing of the rig pumps - and headed directly for it, holding up the wrench. Once he got to the rig cabinet, he again pretended to stumble, falling onto his feet in front of the cabinet and grabbing on to its shelves for support. As he pulled himself up, he snuck a small can of rigging fluid into his pocket, then visibly and shakily deposited the wrench onto the pile of equipment on top of the cabinet. His audience, he was sure, was having a right laugh at the tottering old fool.

They could laugh all they liked, as far as he was concerned. If he couldn't have his simplicity, he would have his closure.

Next he headed over to the desk of Zian, who he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, was one of the people responsible for this whole thing. Aside from being incredibly full of himself, mouthy and impolite to everyone, Zian was quite a bauble collector. His desk was his pride and joy, decorated with a mass of tiny certificates, a bunch of collectibles and art pieces, and all manner of other strange and emotionally valuable things. Most of them were firmly fastened onto the desk in some manner; their owner was so paranoid that he assumed everyone must be interested in stealing his possessions.

Most Ancient didn't intend to steal a thing. If anything, he wanted to keep the man's work environment safe. And since they clearly thought he was a stupid old man, he might as well play the role to the full.

He reached into his pocket and uncapped the armor rig container, turned so that the cameras wouldn't pick up what he was doing, then pulled out the bottle and let it drop to the floor. There was a clank, at which he immediately said, "What's that?" He allowed himself to look around a few times, just to let the bottle empty itself properly. Then he looked down, said loudly, "Oh my gosh, a puddle of armor rigging right by this desk! I'd better clean it up."

He knelt, stared at the puddle for a bit, then stood again and added in the same loud voice, "But I can't, not when it's under this desk. I have to move the darn thing first. The puddle's not going anywhere."

He stalked back into the repair shop, over to the walker section. One of his past accomplishments was a decade spent in the metal saddle, and he'd kept up with the advances in walker technology. He got into one, started it up, and walked back to the desk section. The section was separated from the main garage area by a removable partition; way too heavy for a man, but easy for a walker to pick up and put aside. He reached in, picked up Zian's desk, and carried it out of the desk section. Once it was out, he didn't put it down; instead, he walked over to the final ship wing in the sequence, the biggest on, and put the desk down right beside it.

As late sleepers had found out time and again, the distance between the station's living quarters and the repair shop was deceptively long. Even at a mad run, you had no hope of making it from one point to another in less than ten minutes. Especially if you had been, say, relaxing at home, eating snacks and drinking booze and laughing at some silly old coot bumbling around in the shop.

Most Ancient took the walker back to its storage place, powered it down and got out. Then he added, loudly, "First things first. Before I clean the puddle, I better make sure my old row of ship wings is clean. Otherwise I might forget, old man like me."

He walked over to the cafeteria, noting with much amusement that some of the parts holding up the row of wings were definitely creaking. Clearly, the persons responsible had timed this well.

Once he got to the first part, the small wing standing in the cafeteria, he looked around him for the last time. He noticed that one of the motion-sensitive cameras, one of the ones that had followed him even when he dropped the wrench, was now swiveling back and forth, focusing between the desk and him, the desk and him, in increasingly desperate motions.

He pulled a piece of cloth out of his pocket and began to wipe off the ship part. As he did so, he leaned on the wing just a tad.

There was a crack.

Most Ancient thought of closure, of that one sharp swipe.

He leaned a little harder, and with a screech of breaking metal, the ship wing toppled. It fell onto the next part, whose support parts also gave way from the impact of several tons, and fell onto the next part, which gave way too, until the entire row was cascading down like monstrous dominoes. Most Ancient heard twanging noises that he knew were from support wires snapping, and as he heard the final utter and demolishing crash, as if from a ten-ton ship part utterly disintegrating a prized wooden desk along with everything on it, he fashioned that he could also hear a faint scream in the distance, slowly Dopplering closer.

He closed his eyes and smiled.

In the Electric Museum



He nearly passed it by, but it was a museum and he'd always made time for those. The entrance was completely open, with no door, coathangers, service desk or any concession to living human beings that might enter. Ruebin looked around to see if there might be any kind of billing or ticket sale, but there wasn't even a kredit reader in sight.

There was, however, a plaque on the wall. It was made of a whitish, translucent material that looked like plastic but gave off a ringing sound like glass when Ruebin knocked on it. On its surface, presumably with a laser, had been etched the logos of several prominent Caldari corporations, including most of the ones from the three major blocks. The names stood out in stark black on the plaque's creamy surface, as did the smaller lettering below that denoted the museum had free admission courtesy of this coalition of Caldari corporations. Through the entrance corridor he could see machinery in various states of disassembly.

Ruebin felt at once intrigued and disappointed. The sign outside had said "Electric Museum", which wasn't very promising but did at least offer the hopeful possibility that this might be some kind of modernist art exhibit. That hope was now extinguished, and since this was a Caldari museum there would be no signs of the Gallentean vagaries, the dignified and terrible Amarr designs, or the Minmatar rust-or-die approach. On the other hand, since this was purely a Caldari place, Ruebin figured he might get a little kick out the unavoidable jingoism and touches of propaganda that would be scattered about in the exhibits. Besides, on his trips he always went to any museum he could find, not so much out of any kind of appreciation for the history or theory of art, but purely out of aesthetic enjoyment. He loved seeing what other people had created, and revelling in the myriad layers of meaning and coherence that he as a layman could just barely make out. The glimpse and promise of surface wonders were far more appealing to him than a headlong plunge could ever be.

He went in. The main entrance opened into a large, square room beset with low pillars. On top of each pillar stood a piece of machinery. Some of them were encased in glass cages, and some were held in place by long wires that hung from the ceiling. Ruebin didn't recognize any of them, so he wandered over to the nearest pillar. On one side it had a small touchpad with the Ishukone logo and several buttons.

He pressed a button, and the pillar's top surface lit up, illuminating the complex interweave of metal and plastic it supported within a glass cage. An unseen projector inside the cage cast purple letters on the glass, running through the item's history and intended purpose. Another projector cast off a neon-green light that, through reflections in tiny, carefully placed mirrors at various points in the glass, illuminated various sections of the module according to whatever text was being displayed. Ruebin pressed an arrow on the touchpad; the purple text scrolled to the next page, and the green lights shifted and illuminated another section of the metal part. In larger museums, Ruebin knew, they had proper 3D imagery and would often show a translucent, rotating image of the item, floating above the actual unit. This place apparently didn't have the budget.

For a lark, Ruebin pressed a tiny, ridged button on the touchpad's side. Immediately the display ended, and tiny buttons began appearing on the touchpad, from its surface like little buds trying to bloom in frozen earth. A small card reader shifted out on the touchpad's side, and voice asked him to press his ID card up against it, adding that once he'd done so and proven his blindness, the glass walls would withdraw so that he could put his hands on the module while listening to its description. Ruebin backed away silently and proceeded to the next room.

Once there, he heard a voice that at first sounded like it were coming from another of those blind-assisted tours, but after a while he found it contained far too much emotion to possibly have been recorded for a museum exhibit. It came from a room nearby, so Ruebin stalked through. He was met with a bobble-headed vision like a cotton picker at harvest, and the gripping smell of knitted sweaters and comfortable perfume. A gaggle of senior citizens were clustered around a short old man, all watching him with rapt attention. There were a few others closer to Ruebin's age, including a pair of young men who looked thoroughly bewildered to even be there, but the whiteness of hair was overwhelming nonetheless. The man stood beside a pedestal and was extemporizing on its design with the heat of an Amarrian preacher.

"This, now, this thing here was created by Nugoeihuvi corporation, Noh for short, and even though it's fifty years old it absolutely epitomizes their design philosophies. See these curves here on the outer casing, how they're moulded to the wings of the module so that it radiates as much heat as possible without risking structural instability. And notice how each pipe leading into the main combustion chamber is elegantly bent around the titanium spindles, so as to give them increased stability without interference with their operation. It's beautiful engineering."

The man's voice was impassioned, his speech rapt and clear. He kept it under practiced control, modulating his words for effect, but you could tell that he wanted to break out, to speed up and let it flicker in the air like a whip.

Ruebin made his way close to the group. He was a little taller than the old women and could make out the curator's face and upper body. The man, whose nametag identified him as Entrye Chrare, had his eyes tightly shut and was leaning down in rapture; so far down, in fact, that he was actually pointing upwards at the pedestalled module beside him. His skin was old and wrinkled, and his clothes bore witness to countless trips through the dusty corridors of oily mechanical history.

It occurred to Ruebin that the museum's title was a misnomer. There was nothing electric here except for the curator's delivery.

"All right, we've wrapped up this room. Is everyone ready for the," Entrye paused dramatically, "special exhibition?"

The group tittered with excitement. Ruebin smiled, and stepped a little closer. Nobody seemed to have noticed him so far.

"Excellent. We'll head over, then. I'll take us through a few side routes along the way, maybe point out one or two things." Entrye set off, the old ladies and Ruebin following on his heels. Ruebin tried to stay close to the men his own age, but nobody seemed much to mind his presence there anyway.

They passed through four rooms, each one containing a dozen pedestals displaying more mechanical equipment. All rooms were marked with Caldari corporate logos, usually followed by sponsorship information and a short thank-you note from the museum. Entrye threw off a comment here and there.

In the Hyasyoda room: "See that prototype warp core stabilizer? It may look like a radioactive nutcracker, but that particular brand was an amazing innovation back in its day."

Passing through the Lai Dai corridor: "That is one of the first cruise missile launchers the Caldari ever produced. Lai Dai nearly went bankrupt perfecting the design, only to see it appropriated by everyone else and mass-produced a year later."

Stopping in the small Wyrkomi foyer: "For ages the Seituoda people persisted in stamping, etching or otherwise marking a rather strange, homemade family logo on the inside of each module. Ostensibly it was supposed to look like a Caldari vessel firing off an oversized torpedo, but they discontinued its use when someone pointed out that when viewed from a certain angle, the logo looked pornographic."

And then they arrived at the special exhibit.

A sign on the door declared paid entrance, and the entire group came to a halt, the bobble-headed old women all digging around in their pockets and purses for their ticket receipts. Ruebin wondered whether to split, but before he could come to a decision the curator's tremulous voice thundered over them, "Don't stop! Forward go, full blast. Follow me, everyone."

The group, shocked into obeisance, immediately stormed after the guide and into the room. Ruebin followed on their heels, giving an apologetic smile to a disinterested guard.

Inside the room were two long rows of pedestals, running perfectly parallel, each holding a single module. The pedestals were the same type as Ruebin had seen all over the museum, but the designs of the display items were markedly different. Where elsewhere there had been sharp, crisp lines and unembellished designs, here there were soft curves, smoother surfaces and clearly some rather complex, almost convoluted constructions. There were big "Don't touch" signs posted on the walls, but as the items weren't even covered in glass cages Ruebin couldn't stop himself from running his fingers over one, trailing its arches and coils. When he looked up,

he saw that the curator was staring at him, and quickly put his hand back into his pocket.

As the curator returned to guiding the group through the designs, Ruebin's thoughts drifted away. He couldn't help but notice how every module in this room, at least so far as he had seen, was so much nicer and more intricately made than anything he'd seen outside. He looked around to see if there were any explanations for this, plaques with details and such, but the only things he saw were the Kaalakiota and Sukuuvestaa logos on either side of the room. Upon closer inspection, he noticed that one row was solely Kaalakiota items and the other Sukuuvestaa modules.

Ruebin felt a sense of cognitive dissonance. He'd been to so many museums in so many places that although he'd had no formal education in art history he still considered himself perfectly able to discern styles of art, even among similarly designed pieces. And to him, these two rows seemed as if they could've been transported in from another world. They looked positively Gallentean.

"Who made these?" he said, half to himself.

"Two CEOs," the curator responded. "Well, one CEO and one CFO. They're from the days when KK and SuVee were still developing their business practices, getting a feel for how they could best ingratiate themselves with their customers. This was one of their attempts; only one product line out of many, but quite distinguishable. Turns out they couldn't do it by kindness and concern, so they ended up changing their tactics somewhat."

Ruebin hesitated. He hadn't realized that he'd been spotted by the rest of the group, who had apparently been watching him when he inspected the modules. All eyes were on him now.

"Err ..."

"Shall we move on, young master?" said the curator, not unkindly.

"Yes, please. Thank you. Sorry," Ruebin said, and followed the group. They walked slowly through the room, the curator pointing at each item in both rows and expounding on it. Most of them he compared to known works of art, paintings and sculptures and suchlike, and mentioned that these module designs had clear signs of emulating them. It surprised Ruebin, who had never seen the Caldari go much for the softer, more expressive side of art. Minimalism, symbology and, these days, militarism were much more their thing.

And then, as if crossing over to a different era, the modules changed. The softness became hard and unyielding; the smooth curves turned to chiseled angles; the kind, matte surfaces turned specular and confrontative. It was subtle, and wouldn't have been noticed by the casual observer, but to Ruebin, veteran of endless museum trips, it was unmistakable. He stopped in his tracks, speechless.

The rest of the group marched on, the curator's recitation continuing uninterrupted. They went on for a pillar or two before the curator apparently noticed the absence of the group's youngest member. He cast around for Ruebin, noticed him and half-shouted, "Did I miss something in my explanations, young man?"

"I'm not sure," Ruebin said. "I may have missed it. Could you please tell me what happened here?" He waved a hand at the first modules of the new, cold design.

"Oh, nothing much," the curator replied.

"Nothing much? It's like another world!" Ruebin said in astonishment.

"It's the past, my boy. It often feels that way. If I may ask, what exactly are you talking about?"

Ruebin explained. The curator shrugged and said, "Be that as it may, I'm not sure I see any less value in the later modules. If it's any help, the people responsible were deposed, and there was a sea change in values."

"What do you mean?"

The curator walked over to him and, in all defiance of museum rules, placed a paternal hand on the module in front of them. He put his other hand on Ruebin's shoulder. "I mean that the people who designed the old modules, the ones you find so appealing, were the main participants in quite a serious scandal. It involved company funds, or the misuse of those funds, rather. They chose to step down rather than be put on trial."

Ruebin was stunned. The thought that the originators of these beautiful things had been corrupt was nearly incomprehensible to him. But something nagged at the back of his mind. "Hang on. They were a CEO and CFO. How'd they get into designing modules?"

"It's not uncommon for the heads of a company to get involved in the design," the curator replied. "After all, the modules are often the company's signature pieces, representing it on the quite lucrative capsuleer market. Some CEOs take a personal interest in the process. And besides," he added, "the module's appearance isn't connected to its function. I daresay you could make a, well, a shield booster that looked like a hat, if you so

pleased."

"I didn't mean to criticize it so heavily," Ruebin said, feeling a dozen pairs of nearsighted eyes trying to focus on him. "I'm not a philistine."

"My dear boy, I never said you were!" the curator replied with a smile. "You've got quite the inquisitive mind. So much so, in fact, that I'd be happy to discuss this with you after the tour is over."

Ruebin opened his mouth to politely refuse the offer, but something in the curator's eyes stayed his words. Instead, he nodded, and said, "One question. Who was it that gave away those two?"

"Good question," the curator said, and whatever glint in his eyes turned a fraction more apparent. "As I said, one of them was a CFO of SuVee, who was second in command. The informer was his superior, SuVee's CEO, a man named Kishbin."

"He was ratted out by his boss?"

"Indeed he was."

"The man must've hated him. Was it because he was working with KK's CEO on this?"

"After a fashion," the curator said. "The museum will be closing soon, and I really must finish guiding these pretty young things through the halls of culture."

Ignoring the delighted giggles from the old ladies, and the eye-rolling from the men, the curator continued, "If you're interested, see me here after we close. Tell the guards you're waiting for me."

The museum was even quieter now, with the lone sound coming from cleaner bugs floating over the dirtied floors. The guards had either seen the exchange between Ruebin and the curator, or simply did not care. They left him completely alone.

At first Ruebin constrained himself to pacing the exhibition room, but when the curator didn't return, he ventured back into the museum proper. The modules seemed different now, less relics of a bygone era and more subtle indicators of a real past with real people. It occurred to Ruebin how often he forgot this on his museum trips, how often he assigned to the things he saw a mental shelf in the present time, forgetting entirely that the people who created them had been real humans. Not ghosts, not ethereal entities that created art from void only to disappear into it themselves, but real people with souls and bodies as real as his was now. Ephemeral, perhaps, in the grand scheme of things, but not ethereal.

"What did you think happened?" someone said.

Ruebin spun around. The curator had walked up soundlessly, and now stood there, hands in pockets, a faint smile on his wrinkled face.

"The CEOs? I don't know. I know it wasn't corruption."

The curator raised an eyebrow. "Why's that?"

"First off, I find it hard to believe that anyone who created the things I saw could be an evil person. I know that's naive, it's horribly naive and simplistic. It's what a child would say. But it's a gut feeling."

"Gut feelings are sometimes right," the curator said. "Or at least point you in a better direction than common sense alone. Especially in art."

They walked towards the exhibit room.

"Second, the things are much too intricate. If the guys intended to use them as a ruse, to distract customers from business problems, they'd have been better off putting less effort into each design, and pumping out more types instead. Flashy, quick, eye-catching."

"What if it wasn't a ruse for the public, but the stockholders? A money sink, to divert attention from their scamming?" the curator asked.

"Well, you know the story better than I, of course. Even so, it wouldn't make sense. If you're skimming off the top, you want to make sure that fingers get pointed elsewhere once the company runs into problems. Otherwise, all you've accomplished is ensuring that you'll be the first one whose books get audited."

"Good point," the curator said, and nothing more.

Once they got to the entrance they stopped and stared at the pieces in silence. At last Ruebin said, "I think it was communication. I don't know how, but that's what it looks like. Not competition, seeing who could outdo whom, but a kind of mutual building, an escalation towards some aesthetic heights, an upward spiral of beauty, and ye gods, I'm sounding like such a pretentious art critic right now ..."

The curator laughed. "I've heard worse. At least you're speaking from the heart, and not trying to impress me."

Ruebin walked into the room. "So what was it?" he asked without turning to look at the curator. "What drove them to it, and what caused their fall? Come to that, what were their names?"

The curator walked up to him. "Their names were David and Yonate, and I believe you're the first person in a long while to ask that question. As for who the two men were, you won't find it in the history books. They were lovers."

"...what?"

"Mm, they were. David was CEO of KK, and Yonate was CFO of SuVee. They kept it secret for as long as they could, but something happened that made them change their minds, or at the very least get careless about it. Those modules were their testimonials to one another, and to their love."

"No wonder they fell from grace," Ruebin said. "It would've been completely unacceptable to ... well, to everyone."

"It was," the curator said.

"Amazing." Ruebin walked over to one of the modules, seeing it in a completely new light. "What caused the fall? Oh, wait, you said. SuVee's CEO, Kishbin."

"That was so."

"Must've been annoyed. His second in command, so desperately in love with the CEO of a rival company that he started moulding company policy, with an excuse about attracting customer attention."

"Not only that," the curator said. "The modules were actually a modest success, which doubtlessly aggrieved him even more. He certainly did his best to keep KK at bay. Story has it he even resisted a mutual publication deal, financing and such, by demanding that David come up with a hundred units of some quite rare minerals."

"Which ones?"

"Nobody said, but legend has it that David procured two hundred, which was apparently no mean feat."

"Wow."

"It ended up with Kishbin going after David rather harshly, to the point that David had to use shadow stocks to maintain control of his company, putting himself out of Kishbin's reach."

"Which didn't help once the allegations of corruption came out."

"Precisely."

"Amazing," Ruebin said. "So what we're seeing here is the destruction of two men, and the story of what happened after Kishbin finally had his way and got rid of them."

"Yes. Yes, I suppose you might say that."

Ruebin turned to him. "You don't sound entirely convinced."

The curator remained silent for so long that Ruebin thought he was going to ignore the question. Then the curator said, "No, I'm not. Not at all."

It was now Ruebin who kept silent, waiting for the curator to voice his thoughts.

The old man walked over to one of the modules, ran his hands over it and sighed. "I don't think Kishbin was trying to ruin them. I think he was trying to save them from their own self-destruction. The poor men couldn't be together, couldn't do anything, and eventually it got to them. They took it to a level they shouldn't have."

"A kind of flaunting, at the whole world."

"Precisely."

"Showing it without showing it."

"Exactly."

"Putting yourself in a position where you can advertise it, even if nobody realizes who you are or what needs you have."

"I would certainly say so, yes."

"Although it would be eternally frustrating if they didn't understand," said Ruebin, "so you would have to step up your efforts. Try to attract more attention. Send out signals. All the while trying to gain approval for what you're doing, even as you flaunt it as the taboo you know it to be."

The curator hesitated a little at this. "Yes, I think that's an apt description. You're certainly adept at getting into their heads."

Ruebin rubbed his eyes. "Not nearly as much as you, sir."

"How do you mean?"

"Look, I should probably leave."

"What?"

"No offense. I mean, it's quite nice, having been given an insight into all these people, and I'm sure your motivations were good, for the most part. But I'm straight."

The curator opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out except a croak. His cheeks flushed. Slowly he raised one hand and pointed at Ruebin. "You," he said at last. "You, you, you little shit!"

"Look, there's no ill will here. Let's speak with honesty. And like I said, I appreciate the tour, I do."

The man advanced on him, hand still held up. "Get out," he said, his voice echoing off the walls. "Get out!"

"All right, I'll go," Ruebin said, holding his hands up. "Sorry it wasn't what you wanted."

As Ruebin rushed out, the curator put his hand out towards one of the pillars, as if to steady himself. Unfortunately, in his disarray he missed and leaned on the module itself, which began to slide off the pillar. The last Ruebin saw before heading for the exit was a split second of the curator's small, spindly frame trying to claw back the mass of steel and wires, followed by a loud crash.

"So much for self-destruction," Ruebin said to no one in particular, and left the museum.

A Mind of Infinite Complexity

For Lauder, the first thought of the day was, "Yes." Nothing more, and no matter how he really felt; just this simple affirmation. He wasn't much of an optimist, and the word was autogenic if anything. It was followed by a short meditation, a clearing of the mind, as if he were preparing a playing field for the day's activities.

Lauder was an inventor, specializing in design patterns for ship parts, and was employed in the research section of his corporation. He was in his late twenties, a brilliant designer who'd spearheaded the recent invention drive and been primarily responsible for a good part of the datacores coming out of his company.

He also suffered from depression. And he clung to prayers like lifeblood, but they weren't religious ones, leastwise not in the traditional sense. He'd have loved being religious, to give his mind over to an outside force and trust in that force to put things right, but he simply couldn't. It wasn't in the nature of engineers to trust in faith and blind luck. If something wasn't working, you went in there and fixed it yourself.

Instead, he used autosuggestion. He told himself, in the repetitive, monotonous chanting of a pious monk, that the day would go fine; that all was well, all was well, and all manner of things would be well. It was a litany of positivities, and he knew it really wasn't that far removed from actual prayer, but despite his slight uneasiness at doing it in this manner, he persisted. It was a stepping stone, a rung on the ladder, and nothing more.

Once he'd get to work, he knew, everything would improve. His job was highly cerebral: He worked with abstract models and pattern relationships, and spent most of his time discovering connections between them. He had a highly developed visual system for these patterns, one that virtually permitted him to pick out seemingly unrelated units and string them together, like beads on a string, to discover that they were in fact related in some cryptic but potentially useful manner. He loved doing this, and when it was going well he was almost acting out of his own body, watching himself pick out the patterns, then watching the way they interacted and clicked with one another to make some new thing of beauty. When it was not going well, every action of the day could turn into a choice. "Should I piece together this collection of patterns," he'd think, "or go blow my head off in the hybrid testing room?"

So his morning environment, that one place he had to face before he could go to work, and the major factor in his mood for the rest of the day, he kept as positive as possible. A plasma screen in the kitchen showed sunrise over farmland, and the borders of the screen even displayed a painted wooden window frame, giving rise to the illusion that the watcher was sitting inside his own little farmhouse. Soft music played, a mix of birdsong and ambient tones. There was a myriad of electronic and mechanical equipment in Lauder's kitchen, remnants from countless late-night experiments, and he often had to dig through a pile of strange-looking metal objects to get to his early-morning coffee and cigarettes. These days he was working on improvements to the new armor rigs, the antipumps in particular, and as a result had, in his kitchen, several test canisters of the liquid used as a pressurant in the pump hydraulics. It was a tarry, scentless concoction, and he'd been very careful not to accidentally pour any into his drinking cups. The liquid didn't taste too bad and even had some mildly intoxicating properties, and thus, by regulation, was laced with an antabus reagent. A good sip of it would make you wish you'd brought more reading material.

That plasma screen on the wall was put to good use, too. Once Lauder had set the coffeepot gently bubbling away - it could be done instantly, but this was a ritual - he stood in front of the screen, in a spot kept clear of any mechanical contrivances, and said out loud, "Unfocus."

Before him, the image on the screen began to fade in and out of focus, one minute crisp and clear, the other slightly fuzzy around the edges like a painting. Not only that, but the positioning of certain elements was adjusted slightly, so that the cattle on the left seemed to drift outward to the edge of the screen, the fields on the right shifted and undulated, and the farmhouse in the middle receded ever so slightly towards its own vanishing point.

Lauder unfocused his eyes, relaxing them and trying to see into and past the screen. He tensed up a number of muscles, in his hands, in his abdomen and at the back of his neck, and felt his customized optic implant activate. It took him a little while to drift off, until he at last found himself outside his quarters, outside everything, and inside the picture itself.

He stood there, surveying the land and taking his time. Eventually, he knew, he would have to turn and start his preparations, but for these brief moments of unreality he was content to watch the landscape. He stood on a small grassy plain in front of the farmhouse, regarding it, the trees that grew beside it, and the sun beyond. The sun was bright, but not so much that he couldn't look at it. A gentle wind fanned the leaves on the trees. To his left he heard the cattle trudge through the grass, its tails swishing at flies. Somewhere in the distance, a brook babbled. It was perfect, really.

He sighed, not so much from exasperation but from simple enjoyment drawn to a close, and turned.

It was like going from day to night. The vista before him had no single light source, but there were luminous paths leading everywhere, and the buildings - no, not buildings, the constructs - that dotted the landscape also seemed aglow with a soft, pulsating fire. The area was a patchwork that shifted as Lauder's gaze roved over it: Here, a patch of desert, on which lay a series of interconnected brick shacks, each one of their tan surfaces decorated with murals of maroon clay. There, misty swampland, beset with wooden cabins that seemed to float on the grungy water and that, every now and then, would arise on massive but spindly legs and reposition themselves. In the distance, forested hills, over which towered massive stone castles, their spires aimed to pierce the sky. Everything was low-tech, and everything shifted, like reflections on water droplets. Lauder concentrated and the swampland disappeared, replaced with a series of a promontories, each holding a tall tower that looked half like a lighthouse and half like a minaret. From the corner of his eye he saw a few paths that seemed to go nowhere, and frowned, but paid them no more heed for the time being.

This was his unconscious mind. This was the place where his eyes didn't go.

He walked down a path to one of the lighthouses. In reality the trip should have taken him hours, but distances were deceptive here, and he was by the front door in a split second. Before opening it, he looked up; the tower was so tall that he couldn't even see its top section.



He looked back down at the door. It was made of wood and decorated with multitudinous carvings, ones that, the closer you looked, the more detail you saw. Lauder took a moment to look them over, taking in only the most general of details. Then he opened the door, and walked into the lighthouse.

On the inside it was more like a gallery. The walls were covered with objet d'arts: Paintings, etchings, carvings, collages, any style one could think of. The ground was littered with sculptures, and even the floor itself was a mosaic of abstract patterns. What was especially odd about the mass of art was that it followed no period, no theme and really no style at all. A realist painting of a space station hung beside a child's drawing of a family sitting in their car, and beside it, fluttering gently on some barely detectable breeze, was a jagged cutout from a picture book on general mechanics.

Despite the apparently haphazard selection and ordering of items, they each had a definite purpose. Taken one

Taken together, the objects in each house formed pattern collections, mnemonics of the innumerable design patterns that Lauder had to work with. He didn't even think of the buildings as houses, but gave them their proper term instead: Memory palaces. If all went well, Lauder would travel through several palaces before his breakfast was done, and by the time he was finished, he would be well prepared for the day's design work, able with ease to call up from memory a myriad of patterns with a rapidity that astounded his coworkers.

The technique was old and had long since fallen out of popular favour, but Lauder had found that by privately modifying limited optic and memory augmentations he could put it to good use. It could be argued that a proper memory implant would do just as well, but they were so expensive that Lauder hadn't been able to afford one at the outset. Once he'd finally made enough money to buy one, he found that he didn't much want it. The mnemonic linking techniques stood him in good stead. And besides, there were other reasons why he wanted to come here.

He travelled through the gigantic tower at high speed, slowing only to momentarily inspect a few of the newer sequences. Once done, he flickered back to the door and left the tower, intending to travel to the next one in line.

Except that the paths didn't lead there anymore. There was nothing left of the original pathways except faint, thin lines. The new paths, glowing and pulsating, stretched across the land and into the distance, towards dark clouds and darker territory. Lauder looked around and saw that the paths to every one of the other palaces had reconfigured themselves accordingly. They all led straight into the shadowlands.

Lauder sighed and rubbed his eyes. The palaces were his memory, but the paths were, quite literally, his thoughts. And if he didn't do something about this, he knew he was going to have a very rough time.

There sounded a faint but insistent beeping noise, and Lauder vanished.

He came to in the kitchen. The beeps were issuing from his oven, which had heated up to the proper temperature. Lauder opened his fridge, took out a couple of prepared sandwiches, unwrapped them and put them on a metal tray, then slid the tray into the oven. This same process could be achieved in ten seconds by a microwave, but Lauder didn't care. He needed the slow mornings, not only to familiarize himself with the pattern data, but to deal with crises like the one now looming on the horizon. He checked on the coffee, which he had set to an extremely slow drip, and found that the pot was half ready. He'd have enough time for what he needed to do, without having to break routine.

He sighed again, and steeled himself. He hated having to do this. But already he could feel the darkness creeping into his conscious thoughts, like drops of ink into water. The very dread at having to go back into the other world and face the shadowlands told him that he'd better do it while he still could.

He looked at the plasma screen again. The scenery was the same, and gave him some small comfort. He unfocused, activated the implants, and after a moment's disorientation he was inside.

The sky was overcast now, full of menacing clouds. There was noticeably less light among the palaces, and the pulsing pathways, all of them leading to the same shapeless void, did not ease his mind.

The pathways were an abstraction, he knew, but they were close to the real thing. He was looking at the actual neural pathways in his brain, as near as he could ever get to true self-analysis. Were he to let enough time pass, he would find himself propelled down the paths and into the murky depths of depression, pulled by the unseen hand of his deeper self. And once he had been sucked in, there was no easy way back, except to survive the best he could until the paths allowed him safe return. It was absolute hell.

He'd managed to avoid it for weeks now, with proper diet, exercise, enough sleep, the right amount of challenging work, and a host of little self-congratulatory acts he performed whenever he could: Smiling at his success in some tiny little task, buying good food for himself, silently reciting mantras of positivity and cheer whenever he felt a downturn. And it had done him good. He felt strong, and very annoyed that his mind was trying to take him down that ugly route.

If he got stuck in the shadowlands, the palaces back here would start to fade, until, if it took long enough, he would have to rebuild most of them from the ground up. The thought of all that work reduced to rubble pushed him beyond annoyance and frustration, and made him feel very angry indeed.

And somewhere in the midst of that anger, the realization came to him that perhaps this time he could successfully fight back.

There had been times, so many times, where he tried and failed. But not always. And he'd done well for so long, built up so much strength...

He decided to stop analyzing it. The more he thought about it, the more he'd fear the failure, and worry about the extra expenditure of energy when he might need it all for the onset of depression. If this went wrong, he'd be utterly powerless.

He stood very still, took one last look at the palaces and at the ever-growing shadowlands that threatened to engulf them, then closed his eyes. Back in the real world, his body tensed up and activated a little-used function of his brain implants, one used only in dire need. It was a wetware reset.

The world grew black. He could feel the pulsating warmth of the path he stood on, and hear the crackling sounds as the shadowlands, with glacial speed and inexorability, tore up all that he had created. He quieted his mind, emptied it as best he could, and waited.

For how long he stood there, he didn't know, but at least he heard it. The small but unmistakable trickle of water. The trickle turned to a gurgle, which escalated to a steady drip, a pour, a gushing that got louder and louder, until at last it seemed as if he were standing in the middle of a massive river, its overflowing torrents washing away everything in their path. He felt nothing on him, no pressure, but yet the sound got even louder, as if he were standing on the breaking point of a tsunami that held, held, held ... and now crashed down, like a sweeping hand of God, clearing the lands at last.

The sound faded away. He stood stock still, not daring to move. Any action on his part could reawaken neural paths that had to be left alone, and the reset could only be done once in a row without risking his very mind in the process.

It was a faint but unmistakable scent that helped him rejoin the world: He smelled the freshness of the land after rain, the olfactory confirmation that everything had been washed clean. There would be no more reassurances, he knew. He took a deep breath, and opened his eyes.

The swamp had returned in place of the desert, and all the landscape had a decidedly drenched look. In the distance, the flags from the castle spires hung limp and heavy. The sealine at the promontories had definitely risen.

He took in these details in brief desperation, trying to prove to himself that the shadowlands had been washed away without having to look in their actual direction. But it didn't last; he had to look.

They were gone. They had been eliminated. The skies were clear all around; the void had, for lack of a better word, vanished; and all the pathways that had once led to oblivion were washed clean, not disappeared but left inert, unused, dim.

The path he stood on was straight and narrow, leading only to a focal point on a nearby hill, where Lauder saw that it crisscrossed with a number of other paths that all led safely to a palace. Aside from the reappearance of swampland, the palace grounds and buildings seemed safe and undamaged.

Lauder felt immense relief. The only worry that remained was what he'd done in the real world. The reset played havoc with his head, and would at times activate neural pathways that probably should have been left untouched. It also broke his safeguards, so he wouldn't return to consciousness even if he'd been in an accident. Most of the time his behaviour bore passable similarity to his daily routine, so he fervently hoped he hadn't done anything stupid like take off his clothes and walk naked to work.

The world faded, replaced by reality. Lauder found himself lying on the floor in a fetal position. He got up, brushed off his clothes and looked around. Everything seemed in order. Better than that, even. The sandwiches had been taken from the oven - using the oven mitts, thankfully, so his fingers were unblistered - and put on the kitchen table alongside a coffeecup and some juice in a carton.

Lauder was flooded with relief. All had gone well. It was amazing. And nobody was pointing, taking pictures, covering their children's eyes, or anything.

He sat at the table, mind awash with gratitude toward nothing in particular. Impulsively he reached for the sandwich and nibbled on it. It'd be a good day, he thought. And the sandwich was just right. He was just about to head out for work when he grabbed the coffeecup and took a big swallow, and in that instant realized two things: one, that the coffeepot was still full on the stove, and two, that an open canister of the antabus-laced armor rig hydraulic fluid stood on the kitchen table.

Soft Passage

It was a chilly day on the station, late in the evening. Fall was closing in, and while the station's atmospheric generators compensated for it to some small degree, the air was still kept cold and crisp. Wind machines kept currents running and made for buttoned-up coats, scarves and hats. People needed seasons, to mark the passage of time.

The young couple, Satyan and Treta, were walking hand in hand down the station's busiest shopping street, window-shopping for daydreams. Both of them had good jobs, he in health-goods marketing, spearheading the new transparent ad campaigns after the recent viral marketing fiasco, and she in accounting, where she specialized in passenger monitoring and toll calculations. Their wedding was still a few weeks away.

They stopped in front of a travel agency and looked at the ads, which were scrolling through on large flat screens set in the windows. Motion sensors registered their presence, and the scrollthrough automatically slowed. On one side of the screen was a narrow band that showed a spectrum of color from dark blue to dark red; the color represented the kind of excitement and adventure you wanted from your trip. Satyan waved a hand at the spectrum's red end, but Treta immediately waved hers a little further down.

"Killjoy," Satyan said.

"Nutcase," Treta replied, and kissed him.

The screen began flipping through images of various trips, on both space stations and planets. "The planetside ones are so expensive," Satyan said.

"And overblown, too," Treta said. "Look at this one. A safari on Luminaire?"

Satyan glanced at it and smiled. "Actually, I went on those quite a bit when I was younger. Which planet is it?" He noticed Treta's expression. "Uh, I mean, who wants to spend their honeymoon surrounded by wild animals?"

Treta coughed.

"Apart from each other, I mean," Satyan said.

Treta grinned.

Satyan continued, "There's another one. It's ..." He peered at it. "Seriously? Stay in an old Amarrian palace for a week?"

"My kind of life. Can we even afford this, though?" Treta said.

"If we could, I wouldn't go anyway."

"So no partying and no frippery. Halfway between."

"Perfect," Satyan said and kissed her.

"I wonder what things will be like after that."

"Same as before," Satyan said. "Only better."

She smiled, then looked at a nearby store window and pointed. "Oh, look! They've got food mixers. This would be perfect for you when you're starting your day."

Satyan grunted something in reply.

"Oh, come on," she said, dragging him over to the window. "You've got no morning appetite and can't drink milk, and you know the doc said you have to eat breakfast. It's either this or gruel."

"Sweetie," Satyan said, "these things are so loud they could wake the dead."

"That's nice, dear. Look, they sell all sorts of different things! Alarm chronometers, more mixers, equilateral bread slicers, EMP cookers, washing microbots, oh, self-cleaning coffee brewers, ion stoves, holoviewers, stasis-cooled cheese plates, electric pillows... and look, they even expect wooden furniture."

"That's hideously expensive."

"It's antique style, too," Treta said.

"So will we be if we buy it. The debts'll age me prematurely."

"Now now," she said. "The-... what's that?"

Something small and mechanical buzzed passed them, followed by a little human tornado that bumped into Treta on its way past. Satyan reached down and grabbed hold of the kid's shirt. "Hey, hey, hey! Where you running to, little man?"

The kid gave him a startled look, then smiled from ear to ear. "That's my drone," he said and pointed at the mechanical thing. It was indeed a small toy drone, and was currently encircling a trashcan nearby.

"What's your name?" Satyan said.

"Dappy."

"Well, Dappy, you should know it's not polite to run into people. What do we say if we do that?"

"Sorry," Dappy said and grinned.

"Not to me, silly," Satyan said, but couldn't help grinning back. "The lady here."

Dappy turned to her and said, "Sorry, lady," still grinning.

Treta nodded at him, then looked at Satyan and silently mouthed Lady?

"Can you help me?" the kid said and pointed towards the drone, which was still flying around the trashcan. "I set it too fast."

Treta, aching a little from where the kid had bumped into her, whispered to Satyan, "I never even saw him coming."

Satyan whispered back, "Well, he's here now, I suppose," and set about trying to catch the boy's toy drone. The machine eluded his first couple of tries, but he eventually got a hold of it, tuned its speed down and handed it back to the kid, saying, "Here. And don't run so much. Relax. Enjoy life."

"Thanks," the kid said, and immediately ran off.

Satyan shook his head. From here he stood he happened to glance at a nearby window, one that Treta couldn't see yet, and noticed a store that was selling cell phones. Each 'cell' was in fact a station, and phone prices were effectively determined by whether your phone would work only within the solar system, or could be used to contact people in other systems as well. Intra-system talk would have crisp, clear communication, but as soon as you left the solar system, all talk got laggy, distorted and muddled, not to mention far more expensive. Once you were out of the region, that was it; silence fell. Only the capsuleers had access to better technology.

"Might need something like that," Satyan said.

Treta walked over to him, looked in the window, then shook her head. "My turn now. It's too expensive."

"Come on. What if I get posted off-station?"

"Then you can send me recordings. Or use the combooths like everyone else."

"Still-"

Treta turned on him. "It's too damn expensive, Satyan. If we don't have enough money for the furniture and things, we don't have it for this, either."

"Hey, come on."

"No, you come on. I'm tired of you scuttling anything that I want to get, then not applying the same standards to yourself." She threw up her arms. "But hey, what do I know? Maybe it'd be good to have a cell, so's I can keep an eye on you when you're away."

"Oh, right," Satyan said. "Because I can't be trusted. I'd jump into bed with the next woman I saw."

"Well, what do I know? For all I know you could be doing it with Sari right now."

"Hah," Satyan said. "Not in a million years."

"Hey! That's my best friend you're talking about."

Satyan put his arms around Treta and kissed her on the forehead. "I'm sorry, baby. I would definitely sleep with

Sari if you weren't around. Feel better now?"

She plonked him on the nose, then kissed it. "Silly man." Then she broke free of his grip and walked on, oblivious of the future.

Satyan remained, staring at the cell phones in the windows, not seeing them. Then he followed, grasped for Treta's hand and took firm hold of it, and they continued on.

This time it was Treta's attention that was caught by something, across the street. She crossed it, and Satyan followed.

"Look," she said, pointing to a window. It was a baby clothing store. Satyan's eyes widened and he took an exaggerated step backwards, his hands in front of him like he were being held up at gunpoint.

Treta laughed. "Get over here," she said, and looked in the window. The display included everything from jumpsuits to shoes. The latter were at a discount, a sign said, because of a manufacturing error.

Satyan, who felt uncomfortable even looking at the things, decided to at least take part in the conversation. "Well, they're cheap."

"Mmm. I don't like them too much," Treta said. "They might fall apart at least notice." She looked closer. "It almost looks like they've been worn before."

"Sweetie, they're baby shoes, for sale," Satyan said, "and were probably never worn."

She shivered, and moved on.

As Satyan followed, he noticed that the air had in fact gotten even colder. It would probably be time to head home soon. He found a street vendor nearby, selling food and hot drinks, and led Treta there. The greasy smell of fried fat didn't much raise their appetites, so they bought hot drinks instead; Satyan a warm soup, Treta a frothy brew. For no real reason, Satyan reached out with his free hand and put it around Treta's waist, hugging her tight. Treta returned the gesture. Behind them, the baby shoes stood still on the shelves, unmoved.

After they were done, they tossed the plastic cups into the recycle bin next to the vendor's cart, and walked on. The next store was an insurance booth, and Satyan made a crack about having one right next to a fast food vendor.

Treta thought it over while looking at the premiums they offered, then said, "Well ... I'm not sure I want to say that something like this is too expensive. But still..."

"Yeah," Satyan said. "I know what you mean." And they put it out of their minds, like a blackened match tossed into a dark corner.

After they'd walked apace, Satyan added, "Actually, the furniture might not be a bad idea."

Treta stared at him. "Are you serious?"

"And some curtains." He saw her look. "Well, why not? If we plan to make a home, why not make a home? I don't mind the idea of coming back home to a warm place, familiar smells, lights on and a fireplace on the screen. And you."

She grasped his hand a little harder.

"The world doesn't always have to spin around," he said.

"No, it doesn't. Nor we with it," she said.

They came to a park, and saw the wind blow through the trees. The leaves were falling off in droves, leaving the branches bare and alone. The trees stood there like sentinels; from the viewpoint of the leaves, and the seeds nesting in the ground, they'd undoubtedly always been there, and would always be.

They walked on until they came to another travel agency, and on unspoken agreement they both slowed the walk. Satyan idly waved his hand in front of the sensors, close to the low, blue end. Now, with the nippy winds of fall blowing down every crack and crevice, and the trees shorn of their leaves and seeds, a sedate, relaxed vacation on some warm planet didn't seem half so bad.

They looked at each other, turned and went into the park. Night was falling, and it was time to head home. Hand in hand, they walked down the final trails together. The leaves obscured their path until at last they were gone.

The Speaker of Truths



And when the two harlots had been carted off, thrashing and crying and screaming, and their baby sent to be cut in half, Aritcio leaned back on his throne and was pleased.

"I like being Heir," he murmured sotto voce to his military advisor, a thin man in tight-fitting clothes and a tight-fitting face. To his other side stood the religious advisor, a woman with her hair set up in a tight bun and held in place with two golden miniature spears.

The military advisor nodded. "We have more cases, milord."

"Oh, good."

The gigantic doors opened slowly. They were bronze, and decorated with all manner of religious icons. As might be expected, Doriam II figured quite heavily; his appearance and highlights of his reign dominated the aeneus reaches of both doors. It was tradition that they be opened to let in each new complainant but closed right after. The only exception was for those cases where the grievance was so vast that the horde of plaintiffs would fill the royal court, in which case the doors were kept open for onlookers. Those cases were rare: These days, the only people who put their fate in the hands of Aritcio were the ones who'd been practically forced there at gunpoint. You could refuse his judgment, of course, and you would be summarily executed for your trouble.

A young man walked in, hesitantly. He was dressed as a Holder nobleman, but his hair was unkempt and there were dark patches under his eyes.

"You, I don't recognize," Aritcio said.

The man kneeled in front of Aritcio and said, "I'm Fazian Shalah, milord. I have not been in your presence before."

"And what is your complaint?"

Fazian rose again. "Milord, I-"

He was momentarily distracted by a noise outside, a faint roar dopplering on the windows, then continued, "Milord, I am desperate. I have had my property confiscated, my accounts frozen, all my business brought to a halt."

Aritcio gave a thin smile. "And why is this?"

"I, uh ... in all honesty, milord, it was a moment of stupid drunken revelry. I made a rather impolite comment about Serude Sakekoo."

The military advisor leaned in and whispered to the heir, "She's head of the Imperial Chancellor."

Aritcio raised an eyebrow. "Rather?"

"Yes. Well. Very."

"Would you care to repeat the comment?"

Fazian swallowed audibly. "In all honesty, milord, I'd rather not. It had to do with the forehead decoration she wears, and what I think it looks like. But I'd really not want to repeat it."

"Good. That's good," Aritcio said in amused fashion, wagging a finger at him. "You're learning."

"Every day, milord. But I'm repentant now, and desperate. I cannot feed my children, no one dares loan me money, and none of my contacts are of any use. Milord, I beg you, please intervene."

Aritcio glanced at his religious advisor. "What do you say, dear? Should I intervene?"

"I'm sure milord will make the correct judgment, as always," she replied in a resigned fashion.

Apparently pleased with the reaction, Aritcio turned back to the Holder. "I think it was petty revenge by the Imperial Chancellor to put you through this. I hereby proclaim that your accounts shall be unfrozen, your property returned or you be reimbursed by the claimants with an equivalent monetary sum, and that you be restored in full glory to your former place through whatever other recourse deemed necessary by an independent party."

Fazian fell to his knees again. "Oh, thank you, milord. Thank you so much. I shall remember this forever."

"Yes, I do believe you will. Stand up, please. I trust you have learned your lesson in manners and discretion."

"I have, milord, I have," Fazian said, standing. "Thank you so much."

"Don't mention it. But to ensure that this lesson remains learned, I will have your lips cut off. Next."

The Holder, stunned in disbelief - a fairly common reaction in Aritcio Kor-Azor's court - was led out by guards. The instant the doors opened, the noise outside rose to a dull roar.

"What is that?" Aritcio asked.

His military advisor gave a faint shrug. "Nothing of concern, I'm sure, milord," he said, then gave one of his men a brief look. The man immediately made an exit through a side door.

The bronze doors started to open.

"Milord, the next man is a mime, and-"

"Cut out his tongue and make him eat it. Next!"

The doors closed again.

The guard sent out by the military advisor returned, walked to the advisor and whispered into his ear. The advisor whispered hastily back, but was interrupted by Aritcio.

"Is there anything I should be concerned about?" the Heir asked.

"No, not in the least," the advisor replied. "But it would appear we have a special visitor on the way."

"Oh?"

"A Speaker of Truths."

The religious advisor stiffened up, but said nothing.

The roar outside couldn't be ignored any longer. It was as if a tsunami were about to wash over the palace. The guards looked to one another, though they remained firmly rooted in place. And outside the doors there now sounded ... not screams, not yells, but a hoarse barrage of noise, as if the first wave were about to come crashing in.

There was a thunderous roll of staccato knocks on the doors, made by innumerable fists.

Aritcio shifted slightly in his chair. "I suppose we had better open," he said.

The doors slowly parted, revealing an agitated mass of people outside. The guards put their hands on their weapons, but the military advisor raised a hand. "Steady, now," he said.

A small figure detached itself from the group and walked into the court. It was an old man, wizened and grey, in the traditional robe of high religious officials. He walked with the aid of a tall staff, the head of which curled into a circle.

"Speaker of Truths," the religious advisor said in awe.

"The same," the man replied and smiled kindly to her. "I wish this were an informal visit, seeing as how I haven't been here in, oh, a century now at least. But as you can see from my fellow visitors, we are now forced to deal with a very serious matter."

As he spoke, several members of the mob marched in his wake. They were all Holders and as such were allowed to enter the court unimpeded; refusal of entry to a Holder was considered an offence, although once let in, the Holder could be removed at the Heir's whim without consequence.

The Holders, roughly two dozen, formed a half-circle around the Speaker. All faced the throne, staring fixedly at Aritcio. The doors were kept open, as per tradition when a full house was at hand, and several members of the mob held activated video cameras. In deference to the Heir's presence, they kept their hands over the camera lenses, but the microphones were very much active.

"What's this?" Aritcio said. "Why are you here?"

"I'm surprised to be here at all," the Speaker said. "Certain parties seemed intent on ending my journey prematurely."

"That doesn't answer my question," Aritcio said.

"No, milord. It doesn't. But now you have answered one of mine."

"Make sense, man."

"Very well," the Speaker said. He gestured at the people behind him. "These men and women have grievances which must be righted. The ones in the corridor have ones of their own. And that roar you hear outside, that's from the ones who heard of my trip here and decided to follow. I have travelled a long way, milord, and the journey has been fraught with danger, even more so than I expected when I set out."

He marched closer to the throne, stopping short of the steps that led up to it. He spread his arms, opening them as one might when welcoming back a lost soul, or equally when proclaiming its banishment. His voice, though far from loud, was heard clearly; it was the only sound in the room apart from the hum of recorders and the muted noise of the people outside. "As to why I am here, milord, it's really quite simple. I have come to kill you."

No one said a word. For a few moments, no one even breathed.

Then the silence was punctured by a noise: a choked, high pitched giggle that turned into a rasping neigh, then a guffaw. Aritcio laughed so hard, he nearly fell out of his chair. "You?!" he fairly screamed at the Speaker. "You're mad, old man. You're mad!"

"Be that as it may, I appear not to be the only one," the Speaker said, quite calmly.

Aritcio, trying unsuccessfully to put on a serious expression, said, "Who sent you?"

"Why ... you did, milord."

"What? Oh heavens, this keeps getting better."

The Speaker turned to the people with him, pointing at a man standing to his right. "This is Rakban Vennegh," the Speaker said. "His father was put to death for theft, on the word of a man nobody but you has ever seen. Beside him stands Suki Natasa. Her son was tortured for flying a kite into the trees of the royal yard, and now does nothing but stare at the wall. And over there is Etu Gassa, whose beauty charmed you so that you ordered

she be forced to dance naked in the court square every day at noon, in order that she not selfishly keep her beauty to herself. You had her husband murdered, too, on account of his selfishness of keeping her all to himself. Everyone in this room, this palace, this entire place has been hurt by you, or has a loved one who's been hurt by you. Every one of them, milord." The Speaker spoke in a quiet monotone, but there was a barely detectable emphasis on the milord honorific.

"You created this," the Speaker continued. "If I am here, milord, it is because you called me here, even if you were not aware of it. The Speakers are arbitrators second only to the Emperor, and we go where we are needed."

He adjusted his cloak slightly, and said, "Right now, milord, there's an army of people outside who want restitution for your acts. More specifically, they want your blood."

Aritcio said, "Fat chance."

The military advisor added, "He is an Heir to the throne. They cannot touch him."

The Speaker of Truths fixed him with a steely glance. "As a matter of fact, milord, they can."

Before they had a chance to respond, he said, "I'm not sure whether you're aware of an old religious law - actually, to be honest, I'm perfectly sure that you weren't, because otherwise we'd never have descended to state of affairs - a religious law whereby an injured party can claim restitution from the injurer, in the form of flesh and blood. Eye for an eye, pound of flesh, pluck out his eye, etcetera."

The religious advisor said, "We're aware of that law. It's from the oldest texts, those of the angry god. It has no real bearing here."

"Oh, but it does," the Speaker said. "Should someone be harmed beyond reason by an outsider, and should the act be judged as unreasonable by an official arbitrator, the law of restitution can be invoked. Official arbitrators are the Emperor, of course, along with the five Heirs, certain Holders. And the Speakers of Truth."

"You are not touching me," Aritcio said.

"He can't do a thing to you, milord," the religious advisor said to Aritcio. She turned to the Speaker. "You've left out half the law. There is a sliding scale."

"Indeed there is," the Speaker said. "And it says that if an act has been judged reasonable, the restitution takes into account the social positions of both victim and perpetrator. If perpetrator is markedly higher, the amount of restitution, the pound of flesh if you will, shrinks accordingly. If a commoner were to claim restitution from the Emperor, he might receive it, but it would be an infinitesimal speck, little more than a flake of skin from the hands of his Holiness."

Aritcio said, "So what's the problem? Even with the people outside, you'd hardly have enough to give me a haircut."

The Speaker replied, "These are just the ones who joined in my march. Word is reaching us from everywhere in the area. There are a lot of people who are very angry at you, milord, and should they all stake their claim at once, you will be reduced to atoms."

Aritcio, who had grown increasingly sombre in tone, turned to his religious advisor. "Is this true?" he said. "Does this man, this ... this Speaker of Truths," he spat the word, "does he have judgment rights?"

The religious advisor said nothing, merely closed her eyes and nodded.

Aritcio turned to his military advisor. "Does he?"

The advisor was stunned. "Well, I don't, that is, well-"

"Answer me. Does this man have the power to bring me to execution?"

The military advisor lowered his head, stared at the floor. "Yes, milord. I do believe he does."

Aritcio turned back to the Speaker. "I don't see why I should act according to your demands. Why shouldn't I simply have my guards execute you?"

"If they attack me," said the Speaker, "not only will they be excommunicated and their names stricken from the Book of Records, their lives and personas becoming nonentities, but you will have gone against the word of a Speaker, which means that you risk being stricken from the Book of Records as well. You would be dethroned, milord, and stripped of your rights and your immunity. I do not imagine you would stand much of a chance afterwards."

The Speaker closed his eyes, breathed in deeply, then said, "This is it, milord. This is the end of the road. This is the sins come back to ruin."

"It's an uprising, is what it is."

"No, milord. It's a revolution."

Silence descended again. Not even the roar could be heard now. There was the hum from video cams, whose recordings were undoubtedly being broadcast to the hordes outside and to a myriad of homes elsewhere.

The military advisor stepped forth. "We ... can't let this happen," he said. "If the Heir is dethroned, if there truly is a revolution, then the house will fall. Outside forces-," he didn't say the other houses, but it was on his mind as well as everyone else's, "Outside forces will destroy us. The Heir may have angered people in his time of rule, but we have to find some way to preserve him. We must. If not, if we go the path of open revolt and regicide, our people will forfeit any chance of having him or any other Heir ascend to the throne in future times."

The Speaker leaned on his staff. "And what do you suggest, then?"

"Is there ... no, I know there is no chance that the people will be dissuaded from this," the advisor said. "But are there some that might be persuaded to wait?"

There was a roar outside.

"All right, perhaps not that many," the advisor conceded. "But still. Are these people willing to risk the repercussions of a bloody revolt? Will they suffer through the economic turmoil that's sure to follow, and the possibility of military interaction? Will they risk their livelihoods, and their very lives?"

"They will not be dissuaded from their claim," the Speaker warned, quite calmly. "That much has become clear."

"Then grant us this," the advisor said. "Have those people come forth who have the most grievous claims. Let them have their retribution. But please, for the love of the house and everyone in it, let the Heir live."

"I agree," Aritcio said, and was ignored.

"I don't know if the people will agree to that," the Speaker said.

"I hope they will. Because even if the Heir won't die, we will bring him to the point of oblivion."

"What?" Aritcio said.

The advisor continued, "If a million comes forth, then we shall remove an arm. If another million comes forth, we shall remove a leg. We shall cut and cut and cut, we shall rend flesh and drain blood until there is nothing left but the bare essentials."

"Are you insane?" Aritcio said.

"All I ask, for all our sakes, is that there be enough for the Heir to live, and continue functioning to some degree. After all, a person needs not limbs to govern, nor all his senses. One eye suffices; one ear; and some remains of tongue, teeth and skin."

"I'm not standing for this," Aritcio said.

The advisor turned to him and said, "Then you will die, milord. They will tear you to pieces."

"You will tear me to pieces."

"At least this way, there will be something left, milord. And we can regrow the rest."

The Speaker said, "Cloning is forbidden. You know that."

"Only if the person dies," the advisor said. "But if we keep him alive and put him through accelerated cellular regrowth, we violate no law, and the people can have their pound of flesh."

"Do you think that's enough?" the Speaker said.

"Honestly? No," the advisor replied.

"I'm still here, if anyone wondered." Aritcio said.

The advisor turned to him, "Milord, as much as I love and honour you, we are on the brink of a revolution that could have your head a spike in a heartbeat. Do you understand the situation? Do you understand that if there is any kind of dissatisfaction with its outcome, you will die?"

Aritcio fell silent.

The advisor turned back to the Speaker. "If he should make any kind of decision that the people greatly disfavour," the advisor said, "then they can come in en masse and demand their restitution."

"And, with it, his life," the Speaker said.

"And his life," the advisor said. "Do you think the people will settle for that? A new ruler, to replace the old. A new man. In every sense of the word."

The Speaker gave this due thought. Aritcio had fallen silent.

"Yes," the Speaker said at last. "Yes, I believe they will."

The hordes outside raised their voices again, so loud that the palace floor trembled. But they were not roars this time. They were cheers.

Aritcio lay strapped down on a surgeon's table. Video cameras had been affixed to the ceiling, and a small one to the surgeon's forehead.

Using an electric scalpel, the surgeon slowly and methodically cut off pieces of Aritcio's skin. The Heir's blood was immediately sucked up by a proliferation of plastic tubes that fed it into a dialysis machine, from where it was pumped back into his body.

No anaesthesia was applied. The Heir had a rubber mouth guard affixed to his mouth with leather straps, and bit down on it with such force that veins stood out in his forehead. With each cut there was a raspy noise that onlookers had at first thought to be disturbance in the audio section of the broadcast, but turned out to be the Heir's hoarse voice, screams that got no further than his throat.

Sometimes the doctors would use lasers, so as to immediately cauterize the wounds, but since lasers also killed nerves, the public had deemed it grossly unsatisfactory. Scalpels were now the tool of choice.

The military and religious advisors sometimes attended the sessions, watching dispassionately as their master was dismembered. The religious advisor had made no comment since the sessions started. The military advisor had said little, too, except for a brief, secret conversation with the head physician and certain military personnel, where it had been explained to the full understanding of everyone involved that the Heir would not die. And should he expire, well, his captors and caretakers were expected to take whatever steps necessary to ensure he would live again, regardless of personal morals and religious law.

Aritcio himself said little as well. There was such demand for his elements that he hardly had any time to rule at all.

The surgeon cleaned his scalpel, and spoke slowly into the camera. "That's the last finger skinned. Notice the tendons. We'll be working on those next."

Post Mortem

The shower sprayed warm water on her crouching form. Rivulets of water ran down her face and into her clothes, soaking them. She rocked back and forth, cooling her back on the metal wall, then warming it up again from the shower's downpour.

Various sensations ran through her body, the foremost of which was tiredness. She didn't know whether to attribute that to adrenaline backwash after the night's events, or if it was merely the usual mental exhaustion from working in the mining colonies. She felt like she could crouch there forever, washing everything away.

Eventually the clinginess of her clothes began to annoy her, so she rose and stripped them off, dropping them where she stood. She glanced down and noticed the tendrils of blood, which were weaving their way from the clothing pile and into the drain. She sighed, and combed her fingers through her hair.

A noise sounded, somewhere far, far off. She ignored it, closing her eyes and turning her face towards the jet of water.

The noise continued; a buzzing, grinding sound, like flies in a jar. Atira rubbed her temples. The noise was supplanted by knocking, first soft, then hammering.

"All right, stop, all right, all right, I give up!" she said and turned off the shower. Squeezing the drops out of her hair, she stalked out of the bathroom and into the corridor without even bothering to pick up a towel. She glared through the peephole in her front door, then opened it.

There stood Caleb, her co-worker. Caleb and Atira were cops in the mining colony's local police force, and their partnership had been forged in its white-hot crucible. It took a special kind of person to last in this job, to learn how to apply the colony's specialized and often brutal form of justice. And it took a special kind of person to back you up while you learned the ropes.

Caleb looked down at her body, then up again into her eyes. His face showed no expression, neither surprise nor interest. Police partnerships excluded every other kind.

"What?" she said.

"Figured I'd make sure you weren't doing anything stupid."

"Such as?"

"Keeping the evidence around. Concocting a story that's going to sound implausible. You tell me." He paused. "You're dripping on the floor."

She looked down, grunted, then walked back into the bathroom. She heard Caleb come in, closing the door behind him. He followed her, walking into the bathroom, and for just a fraction of a second she felt a pang of nervousness over the whole situation. But he didn't spare her a second glance, stalking instead to the shower and turning off the water, then looking down and staring at the pile of clothes.

"I'm going to wash them," she said.

"You better," he said. "And not while you're in them, or all you're doing is spreading his blood over you."

"Look, for crying out loud, relax."

"Where's the body?"

She walked in front of him and stood there, hands on hips. "Hey!" she said. "Do you trust me or not?"

"It's not a question of trust, and you don't even need an answer to that. It's a question of professionalism. We did what we did, and we have to clean up after ourselves, or there'll be trouble."

"I know all this. I just needed to clear my head. I'm not a machine like you are," she said, in a tone that was half frustration, half grudging admiration.

He nodded. "Did you at least take care of the body?"

"Yeah, incinerator. I'm glad I started weightlifting again. The dead are so heavy."

"You know I would have come with you, but I had to make sure we were covered. Alibis don't just make themselves up," he said.

She smiled, put a hand on his shoulder. "I know. I appreciate it, Caleb."

"Anytime. Now will you please wrap yourself in a damn towel or something?"

She laughed at that, raising her hands. "Okay, okay. Right away, sir."

She went into the bedroom to hunt for fresh clothes, and heard his voice shouting after her, "What about the dog tags?"

"In the kitchen!" she shouted back, and heard him walk there. She pulled on some indoors clothes and went to the kitchen, where she found Caleb standing stock still, staring at a small metal bowl. It contained a pair of dog tags, their metal varnish partly eaten away.

"He was a pirate?" Caleb asked.

"Yeah. Spotted the tags right before hauling him into incineration. Good thing, too. They can withstand explosions, so I didn't dare leave them. I'll get some acid from the chemlab tomorrow."

"What is it with these guys?" Caleb said, half to himself. "Even when they're trying to lay low, they get into trouble. Didn't we take down two like him, last month?"

Atira paused, thought. "Yes ... yeah, I think it was two."

"Serves them right. I don't know why they crop up here, but nobody threatens an officer. Don't know where it would end if we let that happen."

"Do you ... do you ever wonder if we've gone too far?" she said.

Caleb looked at her. "No," he said.

"No?"

"If it weren't for us, this place wouldn't even exist. It would've torn itself apart. You know as well as I do that the type of person who goes to work in these colonies isn't the type of person likely to have a stable family life or personality. These people have higher thresholds for everything, including pain and cruelty. Normal human beings you can reason with, sometimes, but these guys won't understand unless you hit them hard. And sometimes you have to go further. This guy followed us around, he threatened you, and he provoked a fight. We cannot stand for that sort of thing here, and this guy, he was a nobody. He won't be missed." He took hold of her shoulders and stared directly into her eyes. "Don't ever doubt yourself, okay? They can feel that. It doesn't matter what you do, or how far you go; what matters is that you react and you don't ever flinch. You are never wrong. Remember that. You are never wrong."

She returned his stare, and nodded. "Thanks. I needed that."

"All right. You going to be okay over here?"

"Sure. Just need to dissolve this and it'll all be gone."

"Okay. Good." Caleb rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. "Listen, take care of yourself. I'm gonna head back, make sure we were somewhere else. See you later."

"Thanks, Caleb," she said, as he left.

After he was gone, Atira rested against the kitchen counter for a while, breathing deep and slow. She still felt in a dark mood, but the worst of it had ebbed away. Caleb's presence was enough; his clarity of purpose focused her own.

The doorbell buzzed again. Atira laughed, walked over to the front door and opened it, getting ready to tell Caleb she wouldn't strip for him a second time. By the time she'd pulled the handle and begun to swing the door open, she realized that she really didn't know who was on the other side, and almost slammed the door in the face of a rather intimidated-looking man.

"Atira Malkaanen? Sorry, am I interrupting?" he asked.

"Yes to the first, no to the second," she said, looking him up and down. He was a middle-aged man, with neither the build nor the dress of a mine worker, and looked quite harmless. Still, she reflected, so had others.

"I'm a resource inspector," the man said. "My name is Johan Serris. As you may know, there've been some concerns about possible water leakage in the area. We've had an absolute bummer of a time trying to find the source, though, and we're reduced to looking at any suspect blip in our readings, no matter how insignificant. Uh, have you noticed anything leaking in your apartment?"

"I was in the shower," Atira said. "Would that do it?"

Johan sighed, and looked downcast. "Ah. Yes, I believe it would."

He fiddled a bit with the hem of his coat, then noticed himself and swiftly placed his hands in his pockets.

"Did you want something else?" Atira said.

"Well ... I know this is a bit of a bother, but might I take a look around, just for appearances' sake? If I can't tell my boss I gave this an inspection, even a cursory one, he'll have my head."

Atira hesitated, but decided that she might as well let the man take a look rather than arouse any kind of suspicion, however small. "Sure, help yourself" she said and, before he could respond, immediately walked out of sight and into the kitchen, where she soundlessly took the murdered man's dog tags and put them in her pocket.

Johan followed, silently looking around. "You keep this place pretty neat," he said.

"Well, you know us women," she said with forced cheer.

Johan nodded and smiled, showing that he didn't. He followed her into the kitchen and looked around, his gaze passing over the empty metal bowl without pause. He turned and stepped into the living room, found nothing of interest in there, took a quick peek into the bedroom and withdrew without comment.

"Well, I think we're good here," he said and clapped his hands, smiling the wide smile of someone who doesn't want to be where he is.

Atira nodded, smiled back and walked towards the corridor, expecting Johan to follow her. He did, but as they passed the bathroom he said, "Oh, mustn't forget!" and before she could stop him he'd ducked inside and taken a look. She rushed after him, thinking up distractions, but by the way he froze up she saw that it was too late.

"What on earth is this?" he asked.

She was filled with an urge to take this little man and put his head through the wall, but fought it down, and quickly tried to think of an excuse.

"I don't believe this," he said. Have you been washing clothes in there?"

She had the sense to look at the ground, feigning deference and biting her lip to hide the smile that wanted to break out. "... Yes," she managed at last. "Yes, I have. Exactly. Gods, how embarrassing."

"Ms. Malkaanen, while I doubt that this habit of yours has anything to do with the water leaks, it sure isn't helping. We have industrial washeries here that'd take care of your laundry in no time. Why don't you use them? Why would you possibly want to waste water and do this in your own home?"

While he was talking Johan had been staring at her. He now glanced back at the pile of clothes, just in time to notice a tiny thread of blood weave its way from it and down the drain.

His eyes widened, and he turned to Atira to say something, but this time she was ready.

She dropped her voice a bit and said, "There was an accident. I'm early."

Johan's mouth shut with a click. He blinked a couple of times, and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down. Then he said, "Right. Okay. Great. I think we're done here. Err, if it happens again, I ... well, nevermind. You do what you need to do."

She smiled demurely. "Thank you. I will."

The inspector made his exit and Atira closed the door behind him. She peered through the door's keyhole, and once she saw that he had left, she leaned against the door and breathed deeply. That, she thought, had been a little too close, though thankfully she now had someone who'd likely vouch for her innocence if it came to that.

She combed her fingers through her hair again, pulling at it to break the knots. Someday she'd get a comb. Perhaps she'd even get some moisturizer for her face, which was dried up by the water. Be ladylike. Keep things properly ordered, and not just drop them anywhere. Like Caleb, who right now was busy ensuring both their alibis for having murdered a man.

It was, she mused as she went into the bedroom, quite unfair that she should have to play on people's faith in her like that.

She knelt in front of her clothes cupboard, opened it and reached deep inside, grabbing hold of a small box that was hidden behind shoes and coats. It was heavy, and its contents clinked as she pulled it out. She removed its lid and dropped the dogtags onto all the others.

People had too much faith, these days.



Terms



We have an offer for you. Wealth, comfort, anonymity and safety. No more running, no more worries of whether this organization to which you belong will destroy you. A new life.

Vania leaned back in her chair and rubbed her eyes. She'd been feeling cranky and feverish all day, and this really wasn't helping.

The message had come from "Jocasta Meliaan", whom the message identifiers verified as being a low-ranking member of Kaalakiota. It was possible to do a search through KK's database - they kept their employment records open to the general public - but Vania already knew she would find no one there by that name. Jocasta didn't exist. She was a facade for the Caldari State forces.

We know you're close to the leader. This is a terrorist organization you're involved with, and while they're ostensibly improving worker conditions, they are in fact working against the Caldari State. All you will ever accomplish with this group is more bloodshed and more violence. The recent freighter loss alone killed tens of thousands.

All we ask is that you help an agent of ours get close to your leader. We will get the person into your organization and you will take over from there. No one but you will ever know who this agent is; no one will ever link you to the agent's presence.

This is the best way to defuse the situation without undue harm, and the only way that you and your companions will make it through alive.

Vania shook her head and deleted the message. She couldn't for the life of her imagine what would make these people think she could be swayed their way. Yes, she'd attached herself to Melarius, and yes, if she looked deep inside, she'd probably find the motivation to be self-preservation rather than morality or love. The factory floors had held little future, certainly. But neither did turncoating.

She got up, put on some warmer clothes and headed out into the hallways. They were traveling on a small industrial ship, modified to accommodate various pieces of stealth and communications equipment, and outfitted with excellent medical facilities in case of combat casualties. There was enough space for just over a thousand people, though their rations would keep at most a few hundred going.

Vania headed for the ops room. The metal walkways echoed under her footsteps, and the iron handrails were cold to the touch. There was always a chill in the air, and too much dust and metal filings in the corners. The medical facilities were well stocked, but with these kinds of living arrangements, and in such an enclosed space, colds and illness remained an endless source of frustration.

Most of the people she passed on her way there were other ex-factory workers, though there were some that had a distinct air of bureaucracy around them. She found herself wondering which ones were potential traitors, but closed off that line of thought. Paranoia wouldn't do her any good.

In the ops room, Melarius was crouched over tactical maps, discussing engagement tactics with Genharis Yuvoka. The latter was Melarius's right-hand man and a former Kaalakiota employee who had forsaken his masters for loyalty to a higher ideal.

Both men stopped talking when Vania entered. She walked directly to Melarius - one of few who could do such a thing, since he was flanked by a dozen armed guards at all times - planted a kiss on his cheek and asked how things were going.

"Not too good," Melarius said. There were dark patches under his eyes, and his voice had the choked throatiness of someone who'd inhaled too much cold, infected air. Vania knew how he felt.

"I heard we were getting more and more support," she said. "Especially after that freighter was blown up."

"We are," he said. "I'd be surprised if we don't pull in at least a few thousand heads. Amazing how death affects the minds of the living."

"So what's next?" Vania asked.

"That's our business," Genharis said. She glared at him, and he returned the stare.

"Rallying support," Melarius said. "That's all we're doing now. We've got most of our equipment in place, and what we need is manpower, committed manpower. That includes both of you, by the way. The last thing I need are ego fights in ops."

"She shouldn't even be here at all," Genharis muttered.

"Then why don't you make me go, big boy?" Vania said. "I've seen used tampons with more backbone than you."

"Right, thanks, enough," Melarius said. "Genharis, cool it. We're not going over this again. She's here, and she stays."

Vania gave Genharis the finger, but Melarius turned to her. "And you. Can you keep it under wraps for now, please? I'm letting you stay here because I gave up on arguing against it, but if you can't let us work you have no place in this room. It's hard enough planning a revolution without having a loose cannon firing off at everyone around me."

"Sir," Vania said and gave him a mock salute, then leaned in and gave him a kiss, appearing completely unperturbed. "Anyway, I'll head off, let you big boys deal with the big issues. But if you get blown up too, don't come crying to me."

She left the ops room and started slowly walking back towards her quarters, but a moment later she heard rapid footsteps approaching. She turned and saw Genharis walking up to her.

"You witch. You harpy," he said, sputtering in anger. "Do you have any idea what we're dealing with? Do you think you can just waltz in there, spread your poison and walk right back out?"

She began to reply, but he grabbed the neckline of her shirt and held taut, shaking her with his fury. "Melarius hasn't slept in gods know how long, and he's consumed with anger and sorrow over the freighter incident. The last thing he needs is comments from someone who has no responsibility, no rights to be here and no one to answer to."

Vania smiled, and stuck her hands in her pockets. "And this is going to help him how?"

Genharis subsided a little at that. "All right," he said, letting go of her shirt. "Okay. I know, it's-"

He got no further, as Vania pulled a small knife out of her pocket, grabbed hold of Genharis and with surprising force slammed him against the nearest metal wall. Before he could break her grip she had moved right up against him, the point of her knife resting against his stomach, the forearm of her other hand resting on his throat. The people who walked past, survivors of years at the Caldari factories and industrial plants, pointedly ignored them.

"It's really quite simple, Genharis," she hissed at him. "You know nothing, absolutely nothing about what I've gone through to get here. You have no idea what it took for me even to get a job at the factory, or what I was forced to do before then. So don't you dare think you can get high and mighty with me. This is where I am, and this is where I'm staying, and if you get in my way I will kill you."

She removed her arm from his throat, but held the knife in place.

"You can only think of yourself, can't you?" Genharis said quietly.

"Nobody else will," she said, backing off and putting the knife back in her pocket. For a moment she was hit with a strong sense of nausea and vertigo, but she fought it off, and Genharis didn't seem to have noticed. She glared at him and stalked off.

It wasn't too long after that Vania went in for her regularly scheduled body scan. When they'd gotten this ship, and when the Brotherhood had started growing in numbers, ops had decided that everyone should go in for regular checks. People's health was bad enough as it was without the risk of adding some new and disgusting infectious disease to the mix. Vania herself had been feeling increasingly worse; the onsets of vertigo and nausea had grown more common, and to top it off she felt a constant ache in her bones. She was starting to feel like an old lady, and she hated every minute of it.

So when the scan results came in, she was looking forward to figuring out what was wrong and how it could be fixed. That feeling lasted right up until the moment where she read the first line on the results monitor, the line that gave her a diagnosis, the line that changed everything.

Then she read further on, and everything changed again.

"I'm pregnant."

She had been avoiding Melarius ever since the results came in. He'd been so caught up in planning the rebellion that he hadn't even noticed. At one level Vania was frustrated at that, at his constant prioritization of the masses over her, but she knew that he couldn't be faulted for it. And besides, it had given her some much-needed time to think about the future.

They were in his quarters now, sitting at a table in the kitchen section. He had a cup of coffee; she had a glass of tri-filtered water. The lights were too bright.

He took a sip of his coffee. "I'm happy, you understand," he said. "I'm very happy. I have no energy left, no energy at all, but if I did, I'd be jumping around and yelling like a fool."

She smiled at that, and put his hand on his. "There's more," she said.

"Twins?" he asked.

She gave a quick, explosive laugh, almost a bark. "No, no. Not twins. But more than a handful."

"I don't understand."

"The baby has defects."

His free hand froze in place, holding the cup halfway to his face. "Defects."

"Congenital defects both mental and physical. It's called Predicatus Ingvarius. The baby'll be fine for the first few months, but then its health will start to deteriorate rapidly. It'll eventually stabilize at a non-lethal level, but not before it suffers irreversible damage."

"How bad?" Melarius asked.

"Nobody knows. The first year or two will be filled with him contracting every illness known to man, but he should pull through. Mental deficiency's a given, so's crippling bouts of pain, and only a small percentage avoids a wheelchair. Chances are he'll be able to participate in life to some degree - he won't be comatose - but how much he'll be able to understand and communicate, well, it depends purely on luck."

"It's a he?"

She sighed. "Yes. It's a he."

Melarius ran his fingers through his hair. "Gods in heavens."

"I don't know how we're going to handle it, at least not while we don't have a proper base. The med facilities on this ship can handle regular illnesses, but they're not even close to dealing with this sort of thing. The databanks

can diagnose it, but no more. I-"

"How far along are you?" he said.

"Beg pardon?"

"In the pregnancy."

She blinked. "Uh, a few weeks."

"So there's still time," he said, half to himself.

Vania felt herself grow very cold. "Time for what, exactly?"

He visibly steeled himself, and held on firmly to her hand. "To abort the child."

"We are not aborting my baby."

"Vania-"

"We are not aborting my baby."

"Look, if you think about this-"

"We are not aborting my baby."

"Vania, in each life there must be great sacrifices. We as a people-"

"Oh, for crying out loud!" she yelled. "Don't use that voice, not ever again. This is me you're talking to, not an assembly of workers on a factory floor."

Melarius kept going, "Do you have any idea what kind of life he's going to lead here? Because I don't. I don't know where I'm going to be in a week, if I even live that long. You've seen what this kind of life does to us, normal people in good health. Can you even imagine bringing a sick child into it? What kind of people are we if we consciously allow someone to suffer through all the things we have to go through?"

"By the time I have the baby, things will be different," Vania said.

"They certainly will. At best I'll be hip-deep in organizing labor unions, governmental committees and militias, running around while my child languishes in its lonely crib. More likely I'll be on the run, me and you and everyone else here, constantly fighting the State. There'll be no money, no proper or consistent health care, and no time even to raise our child, let alone take care of its myriad needs. What'll we do if we have to go underground for weeks at a time? Could you sit there and watch a sick infant cry and scream night after night after night, knowing that its pain won't ever stop and that you can do nothing to help it?"

"Don't you dare make me into the villain here," she said. "You don't want this because of the child's well-being; you want to abort it, for gods' sakes. All you see is a political liability and a threat to your precious rebellion. This thing you started has already caused the deaths of countless people, including the hundreds of thousands burned up, flash-frozen or suffocated when that freighter blew up."

"Don't you bring the freighter into this," he said.

"Why not? Does it hurt? Does it hurt, Melarius?"

"You don't understand-"

"How can you care about the lives of people you've never even met, and not care about the one single life you are responsible for? How does that work? Do you need to be a politician to make sense out of that one? Which mask are you wearing now, Mister Politician?"

"You don't understand. You don't understand." Melarius was looking elsewhere now, up at the ceiling or down at the floor, anything but meet Vania's gaze.

"What don't I understand? That you want to lose one more life on your road to fame?"

"Why does this even matter to you?!" he shot back. "Yes, this is our child! Yes, if I could change things so that it wouldn't have a twisted, horrible life, I would. But I can't! I can't just sit here with you and pretend that everything's going to be okay, because I know it won't and you know it too. It's an ugly and terrible thing, but it's the truth. Why can't you accept that?"

"Because I'm the child's mother, that's why!" she said.

He threw up his hands. "And that trumps everything! That's the long and the short of it right there, isn't it? I can say anything I like, explain the reality of our situation a thousand times, and it still won't matter, will it? You say I'm ruled by logic, fine, let's say I am. You're ruled by emotions. Will your love cure our child? No, it won't. Will your love keep it healthy and happy and pain-free? No, it won't. The only thing your love will do is create a human being whose only role in this short and terrible life will be to suffer."

She didn't respond, but sat quite still, occasionally drying a tear from her eyes. Eventually she said, in a low and quavering voice, "This is the first time I have anything to live for beside myself. I am not giving that up."

"Vania-

"I know I'm selfish. I know. That's how I am; that's how I function. I never pretended to be anything else. I left everything behind when I followed you, because I thought I'd find something greater to live for than myself, but in the end I did it for the same reason I do everything else: For me, and me only. This baby will change that."

"This baby will make you a martyr. All it does is let you transfer that selfish focus from yourself to our son, and that's not fair on anyone. If you want to work out your issues, you have to do it starting with yourself, not on someone else by proxy, and least of all on a chronically ill child."

Melarius moved his chair closer to Vania's, and continued, "We'll try again later. When it's all settled down, however many months or years that takes, we'll try again. I'm not opposed to starting a family; it's a big step but it's one that I'd like to take. But it needs to be on terms we're both happy with."

"That's all it's about, isn't it?" Vania said. "Terms."

"I guess so."

She dried her eyes and stood. "I think I had better leave now."

"Okay. We'll talk again later."

She turned and, without saying another word, left the quarters.

She stayed away from him for a few days after that, and when they did pass by one another, they didn't say a word. At last she sent him a message asking him if he would change his mind. He replied:

Absolutely not. I'm sorry.

When she received that reply, she stared at it for a good long time before deleting it. Then she started writing a new letter, addressed to a Jocasta Meliaan, with the subject line "Your offer." The letter began:

I'm going to need the finest medical care.

Winter Came While You Were Away



It was sunny, and rather warm despite the encroaching fall. Scyldie, having been cleared past the guards at the iron gates, walked through the yard and up to the house's front door. She stood there for a moment, closing her eyes and drawing a deep breath.

The door was made of metal, and separated in the middle with a line that curved slightly at the ends. This kind of explicit ornamentation was common among the elite of the Sarpati extended family, who liked to flaunt their loyalty and heritage pride. On this planet, under Serpentis control, it never hurt to advertise your allegiance.

Scyldie's knock reverberated through the door but was met with no response. For a moment she wondered if all this trouble had been for nothing, if she was going to be turned away at the final checkpoint. It would be a bitter relief.

Then the door opened, sliding soundlessly apart. Inside was quite a homely apartment, full of furniture that looked like it had been in the possession of the same family for a number of generations. Scyldie walked in. The door closed behind her.

The smell of tea drifted in from a nearby room, as did murmured voices. Scyldie slowly walked in that direction.

It turned out to be the parlour, where two women sat drinking from thin porcelain cups. One was settling nicely into her middle age, while the other looked as old and worn as the furniture.

There was a third chair, and a small table that held a tray of biscuits, a tea pot and an extra cup. The two women did not look her way when she entered, but finished the muted conversation they were having. They then put their cups down on the table, folded their hands in their laps, and stared at Scyldie.

She was about to say something, but checked herself and stayed quiet. Eventually the younger of the two women, who Scyldie knew was called Verdinia, spoke in a matronly voice.

"Do take a seat, dear," she said. "Would you like something to drink?"

Scyldie sat, picked up the empty cup and held it towards the pot. "Please," she said. Verdinia leaned over, picked up the pot and poured. From the corner of her eye, Scyldie saw the other woman stare at her.

It felt like a bit of an anticlimax, after all the layers of security, bribes and sweet-talk she'd had to get through. But then, Scyldie thought, these women would be well aware of the effort needed to see them. Besides, she had a good feeling that behind those facades lay steel jaws and steel minds, and her intuition rarely led her wrong.

"Nice weather outside," Verdinia said.

"So far," Scyldie replied and, before she could stop herself, added, "We're in for a storm."

The two women glanced at one of the windows. Golden sunrays pierced the curtains and lit the room.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Scyldie added quickly.

"Wasn't your fault," the other woman replied. Her name was Aursula, and she reminded Scyldie of an old schoolteacher. "And it was a while back now. We've gotten over it."

"I'm sure you have." Scyldie took a sip of the tea. It was hot, and very strong. "I mention it both for its own sake, because I think that paying one's respects is important, and also because I don't want my proposition to seem inappropriate."

"I'm sure whatever proposition you make will be quite appropriate, dear," Verdinia said, not quite disguising the amusement in her voice.

Scyldie ignored the sarcasm, took a deep breath and said, "There are two of you. There used to be three, before the accident. I want to fill that gap." When the two women didn't comment, she plunged onward. "I know who you are. I know that your husbands are men of power in this organization, but that they haven't quite risen to the top and so neither have you. I know you've had a fall from grace as of late, what with you being diminished. I can help you with that."

"Do you feel diminished?" Aursula asked Verdinia, ignoring Scyldie.

"Not at the moment," Verdinia replied. "Should I?"

"Apparently."

"Well, I'll be."

Scyldie's nerve finally broke. "Look, I want to help you two, and as it happens I've got quite a lot to offer. My husband is currently on a very important mission, and once he's done he'll be in a position to take us all to the top. I'm not a liar, nor pretending I'm someone I'm not."

Aursula retorted, "You use a lot of fancy words, young lady, and people who use fancy words tend to be hiding behind them. I see no reason why we should give you anything."

"Except a cup of tea," Verdinia interjected. "One must be civil."

"Yes, of course," Aursula said. She took a sip from her own cup, then put it back on the table and, turning to Scyldie, laced her fingers together on the chair's armrest and said, "First of all, I'm sure you are who you are, whoever that is. I believe the last person who tried to gain entry on false pretences found themselves leaving this house in ... three, was it?" She glanced to Verdinia.

"Four, dear," Verdinia said.

"Four pieces, thank you. In separate bags. Second, though, I'm not sure you even know what you're talking about. Have we advertised for help? Have we actively sought your assistance, your interference in the way we run our business?"

"You didn't have to. Word among those who know is that you're already one person short."

"Do you believe everything you're told?" Aursula asked.

Scyldie fixed her with a glance that she hoped appeared more confident than she felt. "Only the things worth hearing," she said.

Aursula fell silent at that.

"What have you heard, dear?" Verdinia said, while dipping a biscuit into the tea.

Scyldie reached for another biscuit, nibbled on it a bit, then said to Verdinia, "Your husband is the premier accountant in the firm, and as everyone knows, accountants for people like us are worth their weight in megacyte."

"I like how you said 'people like us'. That was nice. I feel closer to you already," Verdinia said.

"But his problem is that he has nowhere to go. He's risen to the top of a section that's largely self-contained, and his power stems from the insight and inside knowledge he has over the workings of the organization, not from

his own authority. If he gains allies in other sections then he can become immensely powerful, but if he's left without enough friends then his enemies won't think twice about muscling him out."

"My goodness," Verdinia said, and dipped her biscuit into the tea again.

"Your husband, on the other hand," Scyldie said, turning to Aursula, "is very much in a position to command other people. The way he managed to bridge the gap between our administration and internal security departments is quite admirable, and I know he has the respect both of his men and of Raikanen and Tuvan. But that isn't enough."

"Is anything enough with you?" Aursula said, but without much spirit.

"Since he's caught between those two men, both of whom are some of the highest-ranking individuals we have, he's rendered powerless. His own authority doesn't extend outside of his own cadre, and while he's got some leeway in how to interpret the commands he's given from higher up, he's basically their Slaver hound. He says what he is told to say. He's managed to maintain this appearance of power because of the loyalty he's gained with the troops during his years of fighting for us, but with the new people coming in, all that his presence will engender is resentment. He doesn't have their loyalty, and he's in no position to gain it."

Scyldie took another bite of the biscuit, forced herself to pause a bit. The other two waited, looking unimpressed but listening nonetheless.

"Back when you were three, that was different. You had someone else, a woman who was a little older than I was, who could stay in touch with the newer recruits and constantly refresh your power base. Now, I'm not implying that she wasn't good enough, or that her actions somehow landed you in this predicament--"

"Yes, you are," Aursula said.

"But she made some mistakes, and you stopped rising. And now with her loss you risk a fall. As much as you may want to return to the old days with her, that's not an option anymore. Word among the young recruits is that you're on your way out, and while that can be changed, it has to be dealt with in an active manner."

"You seem to be an active person yourself," said Aursula. "Even if you can't read the clouds for naught."

"I look at things the way they are, including the weather I should add, and not the way I'd like them to be," Scyldie said. "I use that dichotomy for motivation."

"Do you now, dear?" Verdinia said.

"I mean, I see what I want, and I work hard to get it. I don't sit and wait for things to get better. The world doesn't owe me anything."

"Damn right," Aursula said, nodding.

Verdinia, other the other hand, did not nod, nor say anything. She merely stared at Scyldie for a little too long. At last she added, "Well, it's all a matter of perspective, isn't it? You can take a single event and think of it in one of two ways, good or bad. The experience is all in your mind. It may appear terrible to others, but to you it could be the start of something good."

Scyldie filed that away for later thought. "Maybe, but more often than not it's far too tempting to look at life through rose-tinted glasses, instead of the cold and harsh place it's turning into."

"Do you have any children?" Verdinia asked.

Scyldie blushed, and said, "No. We haven't quite gotten to that part yet."

"I suspected as much, dear. Now, tell us what it is you believe you can do for us."

Scyldie shifted in her chair. This was the selling point; this was the moment of truth. "My husband is a pilot for the Serpentis forces," she said. "Top of his class, excel and merits, crew is loyal to the death. He's very popular with the other captains as well."

"Good for him," Verdinia murmured.

"He has that mix of leadership and communication that makes for a good agent in our organization," Scyldie said. "He's ready to stand up for his co-pilots when needed, but he knows when to stay seated. People look to him for validation, and accept his authority even when he doesn't have it. And nobody dislikes him, or says so outright, at least."

"Sounds like a good man," Verdinia said. "I hope you two have a nice life together. But why are you telling us

this?"

"Because we can help each other. My husband needs better contacts, particularly after he's done with this mission. Otherwise he might stagnate, or worse, run the risk of associating with the wrong people. And he can swing the younger recruits your way, persuade them that your husbands are the ones they should support and respect."

"So we're not the wrong people?" Aursula said. "Well, that's a relief."

Scyldie bit her tongue, took a slow breath and said, "I think it's time you took in a third woman in this coven, and it should be me."

Verdinia had a sip of tea, smiled prettily at Scyldie and said to her, "No, dear. I think it's time to kill you."

In the stunned silence that followed, Verdinia said, "You clearly know a lot about this organization, and yet in your hubris you think that it needs you. I remember that feeling, from years past. But you've now put yourself in a position where you've revealed your intentions without having a shred of proof that you can back them up. What happens if your husband fails in this important mission of his? You know full well that we can't associate with failures. So you get turned down, and you become our enemy, likely as not to make your husband poison our cause. We can't have that, dear. We can't have that at all."

"We don't even know if he'll make it back alive, let alone successful," Aursula said. "Unless we're sure of his position and power, we couldn't possibly consider offering you a place here. What would we do if he screws up and loses the loyalty of his people? Should we keep you around as a pet?"

"No, of course not," Scyldie said. "He won't lose. I know it. He won't. And he can be very valuable to you. We both can."

"Look, dear, I'll be completely honest with you. We do keep tabs on some of the young officers and their families, to make sure that they don't get too big for their shoes and try to fill ours instead. And now we know that you're an extremely ambitious young woman, one who managed to find her way to us. We can't have you begrudging us our position, which you will if your husband achieves anything less than stellar success and we end up turning you down. It's nothing personal; simply the rules of the game."

"Look, my husband is going to be fine! He knows what he's doing, and I have faith in him."

"Faith isn't enough," Aursula said.

"Then call it intuition. Or, I don't know, deeper knowledge."

"There's a lot of things you claim to know," Aursula said.

"I know ... yes. But that is how it is."

"What assignment was it that your husband was going out on, dear? The secret one that brought all this about."

When Scyldie hesitated, Verdinia continued, "You know that we can find this out. I'd rather it be from you."

"Well ... he's been sent after someone who keeps going to our meet-up points and attacking our ships."

"Someone?"

"A capsuleer," Scyldie said.

The two older women looked at each other, then back at Scyldie, but said nothing. For a moment they all sat in total stillness, broken only by the noise of the wind trying to force its way through the windows.

"You didn't mention that, dear," Verdinia said in a gentler tone.

"I didn't realize it mattered," Scyldie said, adding a slight tone of pique to disguise her sudden nervousness. "He was quite unwilling to tell me about the particulars."

"Tell you what," Aursula said. "When you next hear from your husband, see if he's in one piece, then contact us again. Someone who can take on capsuleers is someone we would be interested in, success or not."

Scyldie nodded and stood up. "I think it's best I go now."

"I agree, dear. Do let us know how your husband does."

"I will." Scyldie headed towards the exit, and the older women followed her. When she got to the door, she

turned to them and said, "You know, I'm surprised you were this hostile to the idea. I can't even imagine the things your last companion went through when proving herself."

Verdinia and Aursula looked at each other with the strangest of expressions, then looked back at her. Aursula said, "That's right. You can't," and waved her hand in front of a small scanner tab. The door opened.

As Scyldie stepped out, something about their expressions nagged at her, as did Verdinia's earlier comments about perspectives on horrible events. She looked over her shoulder to the women and said, "By the way, how did she die, again?"

Aursula smiled, or at least showed her teeth, and said, "That's a very good question. Let's hope you never have to find out. " And the doors closed.

Scyldie stood outside, a new wind whipping at her clothes, and felt the darkened bloom of realization unfurl in her mind.

She would have to push hard at this, all the way through, and ensure that she could work with these people until she'd get to a position where she could dominate them. Otherwise she would never be safe. And it would all depend on her hunches and insight, more than ever before. Intuition or death.

Another gust of wind blew by, giving her a chill. She pulled her coat tighter and looked up at the sky, and what she saw made her burst out in laughter.

It had begun to snow.

Summer Breeze



Nedar watched through his screen as the enemy ship burst into flames. It was done; it was finally done. This Serpentis meetup point would be safe, at least for a while.

He turned to his second-in-command, an intent and serious man named Raze, and said, "There are two encrypted messages waiting on my personal line. One is to Command, the other is not. Send them both." Raze nodded, gave a sharp salute, and left.

"Sir, sir, look! Reinforcements!"

"Oh, thank heavens," Nedar said. The capsuleer was pounding their ships. Half of the man's drones were gone, thanks to Eron's sacrifice, and his ship looked like it was falling apart, but he was still tearing Nedar and his compatriots to pieces.

In popped three Serpentis ships, providing webifiers, warp scramblers and target jammers.

"Tell them to go directly for the pilot. We'll deal with the rest of these drones."

Raze got on the intercom. The ships set course for the capsuleer's frigate.

Eron came in close, as was his usual tactic, and the capsuleer started to web his ship. Over the intercom, the crew aboard Nedar's vessel heard Eron's feedback. "All right, I'm going to need some backup once I start rotating him, and-... wait, what ... I can't break his lock! I can't break his lock!"

As Nedar watched on the overhead display, the capsuleer released a group of drones, all of whom went directly for Eron's ship. The capsuleer was still firing at Eron, past his shields and now into armor, burning it away and getting close to the hull.

"Focus on the drones, people!" Nedar said. "We let them loose, we can forget about winning this."

"And Eron, sir?" Raze asked in a quiet voice.

"Eron will buy us some time," Nedar replied, equally quietly.

In front of them, the capsuleer and his drones continued to rend Eron's ship apart, until at last it exploded in a fiery blaze.

They were being pummelled. Overhead, the ship's speakers crackled. It was Fremer. "I'm going down!" he shouted.

Nedar switched the view over to Fremer's ship. It was falling to bits under the capsuleer's fire, but stayed on course.

"Fremer, get out of there," Nedar said.

"No. No retreat," Fremer said.

"I mean it, get out! We'll deal with the brass later."

"Sorry, man," Fremer said. "Tell Marsha I love her."

Nedar had to choke back his emotion. "I ... will. Absolutely."

As his friend went up in flames, Nedar turned on the intercom again and said, "Eron, you're lagging behind. Get your ass in there right now and deal with it."

The speakers crackled a "Sir!" in response.

We're about to head into battle, Nedar wrote, and I cannot go any further with you. I am so sorry. He was sitting in his cramped quarters, his frigate en route to the meetup point. If the capsuleer's combat pattern held, he'd be coming there shortly after. Intelligence indicated that all they needed was one proper victory, one good offensive, and the assailant would never return.

We are going alone into these dark places, and it has become too dangerous for anyone to follow. After we're done here, if we make it out alive at all, the game changes. I will be envied and hated. There will be people out for my blood and I cannot, I will not, let you get caught in the crossfire. I'm going to be associating with some very dangerous people from now on, and if they find out that you're connected to me, they might decide to harm you. I couldn't bear having that happen. Take care, Aredia.

He pondered what else to add, but felt completely empty. They'd had some good times, and she'd been of great help to him, but that was about it.

He saved the letter, ensured that it was encrypted and prepared it for delivery along with a status note to Command, but did not send it. Once they'd emerged victorious from the battle he'd have them transmitted, but not until then.

It was the day of the attack, in the docking ports, and Raze came running after Nedar. "Sir!" he shouted, "Wait, sir!"

"Raze, for gods' sakes," Nedar said. "Use my name. We're going into combat in a few hours, and the last thing anyone wants to hear before dying is an honorific."

"Sorry about that," Raze said, trying to catch his breath. "Got your message this morning. Just finished the tech runs. You were right. Current redirected in an engine subsection. I'd never have caught it if you hadn't asked for deep checks."

Nedar rubbed his eyes. "Great. Wonderful. Just what we needed."

"Who was it?" Raze asked.

Nedar glared at him. "What makes you think I know?"

"You asked for these checks, so I know you suspected something. Who was responsible?"

"Does it matter?" Nedar said. "We found the error, Raze."

"It matters and you know it. We don't have time to report this, not now, with all the bureaucracy and issues that'd arise. I'm not giving up my chance to go after the capsuleer, and I'm sure as hell not going to do it with a cutthroat flying somewhere beside me."

"Look, we ... ah, hell," Nedar said. "It was Eron. Or someone from his crew. I don't know if he'd had the knowhow to do it himself, but he'll have given the order."

"No bloody news there," Raze said, his face red from anger. "Man's been at your throat for ages."

"He has. I just wish it hadn't come to this," Nedar said.

"Well, it has. And now we need to retaliate."

"What?"

"Anyone who does something like that doesn't deserve to live. I'm sorry, but it's that simple. I'm going over there, and I'm going to break his ECMs. He won't find out until he starts them."

"Raze-

"You know I can do this," Raze said. "I've got engineering background, I run all the checks on our ship, and I know exactly what to do with an ECM to make it conk out. All I need is your permission."

Nedar leaned up against the metal wall, and looked up at silent stars. "All right," he said at last. "All right. Do it."

As he returned to his quarters, thinking about the attack tomorrow morning, Nedar noticed Fremer, and walked over to him.

"Hey there," Nedar said.

"Oh, hey. You still up?"

"Yeah, had to take care of some business. Listen, uh ... about what you mentioned earlier, with the guys. Are you quite serious about this?"

Fremer scratched the back of his head. "Yes. As a matter of fact I am."

They started walking towards Fremer's section of the compound. "When on earth did this happen?" Nedar asked him.

"Well, quite recently."

"Were you drunk? Tell me you were drunk."

"Mmm, well, uh ... no. No, I wasn't," Fremer said in a reproachful tone.

Nedar stopped, and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Please tell me you're not going to see this woman again. Please. For the love of all that is holy, please."

Fremer stammered, avoided Nedar's gaze, and scratched his neck again. "Her name is Marsha," he uttered at last.

"Oh, for gods' sakes!" Nedar yelled, and stalked away from him.

As he walked towards his own quarters, he heard Fremer call to him, "I've never felt anything quite like this!"

"Neither would if, if I'd done what you have!" Nedar yelled back, before he crossed out of earshot.

Nedar had just returned from the docking ports, and was settling down in his cabin when he received a message. It was encrypted, and not from Command. He smiled, and opened it.

It was from Aredia, who wished him good luck on his mission, and said she looked forward to hearing from him

whenever he had time. She mentioned that he shouldn't worry, for even if everything would go wrong he'd still have her, and she'd use her contacts to ensure that his career wouldn't get derailed. She ended the letter by mentioning the butterflies she got when thinking of him, and said, with a little wink, "I just hope your wife doesn't find out."

He smiled again and deleted the message, then started writing a new one to Raze.

"We need to talk," Eron said.

"Sure," Nedar replied. He was on his way back to the living quarters, after an evening spent with the captains of the frigates set for next day's mission. He felt relaxed and calm, and had managed to go a full fifteen minutes without thinking of Fremer's revelation.

"Your wife is meeting with the Furies," Eron said.

Nedar kept walking, but slowed down his pace. "What are you saying?"

"Everyone knows what this mission will do for our careers, and I don't blame anyone who wants to take advantage of that. But this is wrong, Nedar. This is deeply wrong."

"How so?" Nedar said, in as neutral a tone as he could muster.

"These women are absolute terrors. They've held countless families in an iron grip for as long as I can remember. Now they've lost one from their ranks and finally have a weak spot, and we should be taking advantage of that."

"And I'm not doing that?"

"Damnit, will you stop with the questions! We can make a change here, Nedar. We truly can. But if your wife joins up with the Furies then it's all going to turn to ruin."

"Eron, are you honestly saying that the Serpentis should have revolt and treachery over strong leadership?"

Eron spat. "Not even the Serpentis deserve these women."

"Be that as it may, I'm not changing a thing. Maybe Scyldie is talking to them, maybe she isn't. But if she joins their ranks, I certainly wouldn't be disappointed."

"We will have to have a long talk about this after the mission is over," Eron said.

"There is nothing to talk about!" Nedar yelled at him. "This is how it is, Eron! Either you accept that or you don't, but your opinion on this matter really doesn't count for anything at all."

Eron said, "I'm sorry to hear that. I guess I'll just have to make it count," and stalked off.

Nedar stared after him, slowly clenching and unclenching his fists, until he was out of sight. He stood there for a long while, thinking in silence under the aimless gaze of the stars. Eventually he turned and walked off, not to the living quarters but to the docking ports. He had some currents to redirect.

The captains were sitting together, shooting the breeze and trying to relax. The night before battle always gave people the jitters, and this was worse than they'd ever faced. Regular pirate crews didn't usually pick fights with capsuleers - that task was best left to their factions' own small, elite cadre of pod pilots, or to the unlucky few assigned that duty as punishment - but for a mortal captain it was one of the best ways to win glory and respect in his organization. This particular capsuleer was considered a low-grade threat to their interests, an amateur at best, but an amateur capsuleer was still an incredibly dangerous creature. It was a secret surprisingly well-kept from the general public of the pirate factions that a head-to-head encounter with a capsuleer of even moderate talents was practically a death sentence.

So at one point, they started talking about girls they'd slept with. Nedar, piously married, refused to comment.

"Oh, come on," Eron said with something approaching rebuke. "You've got a girl on the side, I'm sure."

Nedar just grinned at that, and Eron grinned back. The conversation moved on, but to Nedar's mind, Eron stared at him for a little too long.

"Okay, okay, here," someone said. "What's the oldest you ever slept with?"

"Oh, come on!" said another.

"No, no, it's good," Eron commented. "Let's go with it." He laughed, and Nedar laughed with him.

"I've got one," Fremer said. The others immediately stopped talking, and listened. Fremer, that guileless animal, was a good captain but had about as much social intuition as a Fedo. He wasn't known to ever have been with a woman, and most people present would have bet their right eye that he never would.

"When was this?" someone asked in disbelief.

"Just recently, in fact," Fremer replied, little twitches of his mouth forming ephemeral smiles. When no one could think of anything to say, he added, "Eighty two."

Eron choked on his drink. Nedar felt his jaw drop.

"... what?" someone managed, at last.

Fremer sat up straight, defiant and blushing furiously. "Eighty two."

There was utter, dead silence in the room. Nedar could feel his heartbeat. Someone finally asked, "So, uh, was she hot?"

"She was eighty two!" Fremer said in exasperation, and his voice sounded raspy and frail.

And there they might have sat for all eternity, overcome with the vast thoughts of human endeavour, but Nedar couldn't resist. "So ... was it alright?"

"Oh yeah," Fremer said and smiled like an idiot. "She was very gentle."

He was in a call with his wife.

"So how's the mood?" she asked.

"It's pretty good. We're about to meet up for some drinks, chat a bit, you know. Lose the stress."

"Does that even work?"

"Not really. It passes the time, keeps us from getting even more nervous."

"How do you feel about the mission?" Scyldie asked him.

"About the same as you do going to the Furies, I suspect," he said with an exaggerated tremor, which she laughed at. "I love your laughter," he said.

"Thanks," she said demurely, and added, "Anyway, it's all for the good. We both succeed and we'll be on our way to power and happiness. No more insane, crazy risk missions. No more seeing that bitch Aredia."

Now it was his turn to laugh. "She's been very useful," he said, in a teasing tone of voice. "And you know she's going to be vital if either one of us gets burned."

"Oh, I'm sure she's been useful," Scyldie replied, "in all sorts of ways."

"Shame that we can't take her with us," Nedar said

"You have made sure that she won't be coming after us?" Scyldie admonished.

Nedar hesitated. "I will. I'll write her a letter and send it once the mission's a success," he said.

"I don't meddle in the way you conduct your affairs, such as they are," Scyldie said in a teasing tone, "But are you sure that once you break things off, she won't reveal everything?"

"Nah, it'll be fine. I'll write the letter in a sincere tone that'll throw her off, even if she does suspect the truth. And I'll hint quite heavily that revealing the tryst would get her into serious trouble. If she ignores that, I'll just have to have her killed."

"Pity," Scyldie said. "By the way, you really haven't told me anything about the mission, except for the target. I'm dead curious. I hope you're well prepared."

"Don't be so nosy, nosy girl," he replied in the same teasing tone, but he felt the darkness behind his voice. "It'll be fine."

"You sure, baby?" she asked.

"I have to be," he said with a sigh.

"All right," Scyldie said. "Take good care, and we'll be in touch tomorrow night."

"You bet," he said and impulsively added, "I love you. You're like a summer breeze in this cold and weary life."

She was stopped short by that, but at last replied, "I love you too, honey. I'm grateful every day for having found you, and for the fact that you became a pilot and not a writer," and hung up while he was still laughing.

Aura



Excena Foer, the star known as Aura, had an innocuous start to her show business career, being somewhat of a dancer prodigy. Her parents, Gallente workers both, strongly encouraged her on this path, and by the time she was fourteen years old she was already dancing professionally. Their dominance over her life and career rankled, though, and when she turned sixteen she broke away and started hanging out with the Mind Clash crowd; intense men whose talents and self-control on the digital field often belied volatile personalities and bloated egos. She later admitted having had some rough experiences with the more forceful competitors, but has consistently refused to elaborate. As it turned out, she was quite adept at the game herself, joining in the amateur leagues and using her natural talents for body control and utter inward focus to crush the competition.

I am here to speak about Cathedral of the Oceans, and The Book of Hours, and how they are one and the same.

It is a beautiful poem, in all its versions, and for that I am infinitely thankful, for poetry is not beautiful except by accident. You put everything into it you can, and then you let it go, trusting in your unconscious parts, the places where your eyes don't go, to have prepared it sufficiently for public scrutiny.

It ended, as all things do, in ruin. Her name had become more and more entwined with Johaan Carve, one of the leading professional competitors, and when he was caught injecting psychotropics - forbidden in Mind Clash, since the risk of panic attacks and breakdowns is a very real part of the sport - and forced to leave the league in disgrace, she was dropped as well. Excena, who at that point had dedicated her life to the Mind Clash games, took it very hard. She kept dating Carve, but Clashers without fights are a self-destructive breed, and a descent into addiction and darkness soon followed.

She spent a few years floating around, living off past fame and unreliable friends. Every now and then there'd be a slight resurgence in popularity - most notoriously the segment Scope did on her, where she made a remarkably loquacious and thoroughly intoxicated appearance - but by and large, she was sliding further and further into hazy obscurity and disintegrating health.

Does the poem's beauty stem from the poet, then? Not in the least. People want us to be saints, but in all honesty, nobody who transcribes God's music can be a good person, not if they want to traverse the whole scale. You can be kind, but you can not be good, and even so, your kindness is not a thing in and of itself; it lives and reacts like an animal. Excena has been kind, Excena has been very kind to me, and if hearing that surprises you, you should reflect on the myriad of ways in which a young, energetic woman with more vigor than sense - and she'll forgive me for this, because she is kind - could make misery for an old man with whose life she has become intertwined. Excena has been kind, and she has told truths. Do not expect us to be good.

This all changed when she encountered the works of Itzak Barah, Amarr's foremost religious poet. While stories differ on exactly when she fell under the spell of his poetry and how swiftly it happened (Excena herself persistently maintains that she loved it right from the start, but Carve, who she was intermittently seeing at that point, has claimed that she read only two pages of Barah's *Other People's Lives* before throwing it at his head), it is undeniable that she ended up taking a keen interest in it, to the point where she even attended reading sessions by local Amarrian scholars. Before eventually being asked to leave, as her presence there was supposedly beginning to mislead the local young clergymen, Excena had already built up a reputation for piercing insights into Barah's poetry and for her ability to restate his points in Gallentean.

As an aside, we were having dinner recently at a very nice restaurant, and we were accosted by someone. The man called Excena some vicious names for having dared to translate Cathedral, and he said that she had murdered the poem. In one swift movement she rose, grabbed him by the neck, kicked the side of his knee and spun him around, slamming him onto his back on our table. She grabbed her steak knife, clicked it up to full power and plunged it into the table right beside the man's neck, nailing him to the table by his robe. And she

looked deep into his eyes and said, "That fire you feel is nothing to mine. Nothing."

Her breakthrough came when she translated Barah's opus, Cathedral of the Oceans, from its native Amarrian to her own Gallentean, publishing it under the title The Book of Hours. She would later claim that what had helped her accomplish this momentous task was her Mind Clash experience and its lessons of absolute focus and concentration, lessons which had helped her survive through years of self-abuse and narcotics.

So we know that a poet may be kind but not good, and by the same token, of course, he cannot be evil. Can we say what he is?

A poet is a chronicler. He is a recorder, trying his best to capture the music in letters. And that's wrong, entirely wrong. A poet must transcribe far more than that, not be content with the rhythms of his language.

He is a conduit, piping God's dreams to dead words. And that, too, is wrong. A poet must never presume to be the connection between God and Man.

He is a creator, showing the world how he experiences it, and thus creating it to himself. Good heavens, no. A poet has more humility than that.

Are there other opinions? Thousands. Most of them are wrong at some level, or they conflict, and yet even those at complete odds with one another fail to produce a single acceptable definition between them. Amazing.

And yet there are those here in this very room who would say that by discounting these definitions, of poet as chronicler, conduit and creator, I have failed; that they are true. And of course they are. In someone's ears they will be, but in mine they are not.

It is in fact impossible to nail down what a poet is, and thus entirely futile to claim that someone is not. We do not even play the same song; how can we possibly claim to know the mind of every orchestrator?

You may look at someone and say, "Yes, he is a poet" but you cannot look at someone and say, "No, he is not." Whether his words have meaning to you is, of course, a different matter, but that understanding is not his concern; it is yours, and we put the onus on the reader to truly read the poems, to glean their meanings.

Her translation turned her into a star. It was almost universally hailed as a masterpiece, and had religious scholars up in arms. It was a complete reworking of Barah's poem to such a degree as to render it almost unrecognizable, throwing out all the imagery, pacing and symbolism in favor of original, Gallente-centered renderings, but which nonetheless produced a piece that was remarkably similar in spirit and approach. Barah himself gave his explicit approval of the effort, and in a famous speech given to an assembly of various Amarr and Amarr-affiliated religious leaders he declared that not only was Excena's translation a near-perfect transcription of the spirit behind his original version, but that she may not be castigated, threatened or assailed for her writing. At the end of his speech he cemented this opinion by declaring a Kaoli on her person and profession, indicating that any attack on Excena's poetry or Excena's ability to express it would be considered an attack on himself and, under religious law, would be avenged as such. It was a risky move, one that could have had Barah himself put on the deathlists, but it worked, and the Kaoli was grudgingly accepted by the religious majority.

If I could write a poem without words, I would, but any time I look around I realize that God has beaten me to it; and so I commit my humble failures in the trust that they will be received in good heart by the reader. For poetry is - and here is yet another incorrect, insufficient description of the art, from a humble mortal trying to convey the godlike - poetry is a cooperation between writer and reader, for just as much as the writer attempts to float the heavens down, the reader must rise to meet them. Have you ever tried levitating? It is most difficult, I assure you.

Excena went on numerous well-publicized speaking tours, where she would read out sections of Cathedral and of other, lesser-known poems she had translated, and would speak at length of her experiences with Amarrian poetry. In stark contrast to Barah himself, who was known as a soft-spoken and calm man, Excena was a forthright and sometimes contentious speaker, entirely unafraid to offend or disagree with her listeners. The Gallente universities loved her.

And so it went, her scholastic renown rising, until the night where a group of religious zealots gained access to

her drinks at the lecture's backstage room, and poisoned them with esophageal nanomachinery. The vicious little critters were programmed to gobble up a very specific kind of white mucus membrane, the type that can be found in only one place through the whole human body. The vocal cords.

Should we treat the poetry as religious screed? Absolutely not. A man of faith must be the eternal doubter, because that's the only way to distinguish God's truth through the endless barrage of lies we're faced with, but not only that; he must possess the capacity to look at the lies, look straight at them, understand them for what they are - challenges, not of your faith, but of the way you view your faith - evaluate them and understand why they question your beliefs ... and then let go of them. All they do is distract you. Do my poems have meanings to you? I'm honored. Do Excena's? She would be honored as well. But if they do not, cast them aside. Do not treat them as affronts to your faith; treat them as lies and let them go.

The world was outraged. The group of zealots was entirely unrepentant, claiming that they had not interfered with Excena's ability to create poetry and thus not violated the Kaoli, but soon after they found themselves hauled in by Speakers of Truth and stricken off the Book of Records. Meanwhile, offers of support for Excena poured in from all ends of the universe, from scholar and journeyman alike. She was offered free health care, but the esophageal nanomachines had done a thorough job, their only remains the gossamer tendrils that hung limply on the inside of her scabbed throat. Regrowing them, and training her body to use the new set, would have taken her years, even decades of painful treatment. Cloning was not an option, either: Aside from the legal difficulty of using that procedure for regeneration - it was and remains a contentious issue in every society - it was both dangerous and expensive, and a new body would have invalidated the Kaoli and given the zealots free rein to kill her outright. Excena herself was against it, too, as she felt it would signal a surrender, a defeat in whatever battle she was engaged in with these people.

Yes, the poem is completely different. Yes, it's now Gallentean, unrecognizable to anyone who reads it solely as an Amarrian and not as a human being. The scene where the man drags the suitcase in the snow, so that its wheels don't even roll, and it just scrapes up the snow, that scene didn't belong anymore. Its replacement, the man who discovers another man in the street, crying, and it slowly dawns on him what the person did - it fits. It's beautiful. It ties everything else together, and if you excised that particular scene, you couldn't make any sense of the rest; not the imagery, not the pacing, not anything. Only a poet, whatever else they may be, can form and reform like that.

So she used the proceeds from her tours, and the money from various donors, and had a voicebox installed. The procedure was quite rare, not only because of how incredibly agonizing the first few months could be, but of its failure rate. An astonishing 90% of recipients never gained full control over the boxes, and a full 50% could hardly use them at all. But then, 0% were ex-Mind Clash fighters and professional dancers.

In one week she could make the box hum, a sound reminiscent of a rock crusher in the slave colonies. In a month, she could speak three consecutive words; in two months, three sentences. In half a year she was speaking fluently, her only issues a lack of control over volume and pitch. And nine months after the operation, she was back to normal and beyond it, having achieved a measure of control over her voice that she had never before enjoyed. No one else had ever adapted so well to a voicebox, and it was not even thought theoretically possible. The only lasting remnant of the accident was a tendency for her voice to sound metallic, but Excena later admitted that she loved the effect and had intentionally kept her voice like that.

No drugs, and no divine inspiration. The first is the leaden darkness weighing down your eyes and the second is the wind blowing through your hands. The reader can tell when drugs have been at work, because even if by some lucky coincidence the language happens to glow, the rhythms will be dull, like lead slabs toppled onto a pavement. As for inspiration, it touches you every now and then - usually when you're least ready for it - but if you haven't put in your time, you will be unable to channel it. You will be a broken circuit, giving out only noise.

It's persistence, is what it is. Persistence and tenacity, and endless practice. This poem and this ability did not arise from nowhere, and as much as Excena would like us to believe otherwise, she has been doing this for a long time. Perhaps not in the way she does it now, perhaps only in secret, but speaking of her as a poet it can well be said that all her efforts, seen and unseen, have safely and inexorably led her here.

Her persistence and strength of character, and her newfound vocal ability, made her a star for the third time. She was inundated with offers for public speaking, for voiceovers, even for small speaking parts in the reels. A

lifetime of conflict had left her worn and aged beyond her years, which prevented her from graduating to full movie stardom, but for a while she was a fixture in the Gallentean art reel circuit.

And there came a point where, by her own admission, she started at last to think of the future. At each stage of her life she had been enraptured by the present, and while she had made a good living, she had also been entirely unconcerned about saving any of it for later years. So when that one offer, the most lucrative one of all, finally came around, she grabbed it without hesitation. It's well known that any job to do with capsuleers will bring in respectable money for the lucky, and this one was no exception. Her metallic, worn voice was perfect for the task of voiceovers for the AI on capsuleer ships. The immortal Aura was born.

So we wait and hope. We wait and see where we go from here. Will she succeed? I certainly expect so. She's a strong woman, and she will go places I have never even approached. But she will not go there unsupported.

As should be utterly clear from this little talk, I believe in Excena, in her talents and in her judgment. I give my complete sanction for her translation, and while I cannot make anyone else do the same - we are all of us readers, and all of us the listeners of the silent music - I can ensure that they do not stand in her way.

By the power vested in me by my acknowledged status as an Amarrian religious poet, by virtue of my unblemished record both religious and secular, and before the eyes of slaves, equals, royalty and the endless God, I declare a Kaoli, a fellowship of paths, for Excena Foer and myself. Let her never be silenced. Let her never be less than a poet, burned pure in the eyes of God. Let her voice ascend to the stars.

Black Mountain: On This Earth

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

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

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

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

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

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

They strolled through the various bars, Atira and her partner. Each bar was kept as low-tech as everything else on the colony, although there were occasional pretensions to affluence. Some places leased bootleg Egones, special transmitters and receivers that played sound waves which only reached the customer's ears and that were specifically chosen to fit his tastes, or they had the similar eye-cast TV that required special ocular filters and was used mainly for sports events. These generally cropped up in the lower-level establishments, aimed as they were at people who preferred to drink alone. Most sane people tended to be put off by the sights of patrons nodding their heads to total silence or shouting sports tactics and grievances at empty air.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Atira was annoyed at the slight, but then realized that the inspector actually seemed hesitant even to look at

her, as if his gaze might betray something. She felt a pang of nervousness, but said, "Hey guys, I'll just head into the bar. Come in when you're done, okay?" and went in.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you see?" he said.

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

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

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

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

He came to, and snapped the box shut.

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

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

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

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

She shrugged.

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

"In what?"

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

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

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

"Oh?"

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

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

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

"How will you keep control?"

"Leave that to us."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Black Mountain: Inertial

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm all right," Nale said.

"Shakes?"

"Yeah."

The lights in the gym were tiring Nale's eyes. It was after dark, and the ceiling in the gym was beset with windows. During the day the crew'd be blinded by the sun, and at night the stars would look down on them with icy glares. Every so often a trail would pass over the skies, and Nale, trying to keep his mind off the exhaustion, would wonder if it was a falling star or a capsuleer. They turned the lights up after dusk, and the monitors made sure the trainees kept up a constant pace. Everyone knew the agony of stopping or changing your motion was so much worse than plunging on.

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

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

get it right."

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

"Beg pardon?"

"Do you know where ops is?"

"Everyone knows where ops is."

"Then get your ass in gear, son."

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

"Nope."

"Good."

He wanted to die.

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

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

One of those machines was called Infinity-8, and looked like a drive shaft: A large spherical construction on one end, one that turned out to contain a gyroscope, followed by a long, windowless corridor. The gyro spun him through 360 degrees at high speeds, after which he was made to walk through the corridor and found it beset with monitors on every surface. The monitors transmitted video specifically designed to disorient his perception, and blasted out alpha sound waves aimed at affecting his cognitive abilities. He made it through without screaming, crying or vomiting, though it was close, and on the other end had to put on a helmet that attached itself to his face through microscopic probes and forced him to play Mind Clash against AI opponents, first a single one, then groups of smaller ones. He did better against the smaller ones, which relied more on oversight than concentration, but by the end his head had started to throb quite strongly. Also, the microprobes made his scalp itch like mad.

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

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

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

"Comes with death," he said.

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

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

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

Nale addressed the Sisters. "I was expected?"

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

He sat. The chair felt remarkably soft.

"Comfy?" Jonak said.

"I could fall asleep here," Nale said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nale stared at him. "What?"

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

Nale sat back in his chair, stunned.

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

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

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

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

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

"Any comments?"

"Nope."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah, right. Glad I asked."

"Welcome to the team," Berkhes said.

Black Mountain: The Room

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

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

"That ain't sweat."

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you, dear?"

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

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

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

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

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

"My what?"

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

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

"For a smoke," Placx said without slowing.

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

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

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

"Special access only, dear," Alad said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No. We want you to destroy it."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Are you serious?"

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

"So why me?" Draea asked.

The voice replied, "You have excelled at what you do. You've gotten this far and managed not to die, and our nanomachinery tests prove that you have a natural aversion to the Book's effects. Aside from this curious obsession of yours to hit people at range with ridiculous weapons, you are one of our absolute top performers. Not only that, but in your previous life you showed a remarkable acumen for flying under the radar. We need

agents who can work on the edge without falling off or bragging to everyone who's watching."

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

The voice laughed. "If you want, though it won't make much of a difference either way. We're a special section of the Society of Conscious Thought. We're operating on behalf of the Hyperconsciousness agenda." The voice paused again, and when Draea registered no expression, it continued, "There is a final test. We know you're capable of committing atrocious acts both in cold blood and in the heat of battle."

"Damn straight," Draea said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Should I do it, Alad?"

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

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

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

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

"What's her name?" she asked.

"Irrelevant," the nameless voice replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a sigh from above.

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

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

"Yes?"

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

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

"Are you serious?"

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

She left the chamber, laughing loudly.

Black Mountain: The First Half

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where is it?" Nale asked.

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

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

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

It made sense that these people be the first to dredge up the Book. Aside from their entrepreneurial spirit they were the prime harvesters of Jove technology, were spread around most of known space, and were notoriously effective when it came to stealing other people's things. They were wanderers, too, and had never been content merely sit at the Serpentis' heels; always exploring, always pushing further.

Nale spotted a few Angel representatives, who nodded genially to them. Angel officials routinely kept up a highly visible presence on station, but stayed calm and unafraid to chat with the civilians. It was clear that this was a place where people knew each other, and where business was expected to tick on without undue hassle. Nale's worries about standing out in the crowd had proved unfounded, too: There was such a mix of people here that even with their Sisters badges on their arms, Nale and his team didn't attract the slightest bit of unwanted attention. He was relieved, and hoped it would stay that way.

The badges were the standard Sisters wear, worn by members in war-zones to show neutrality and protect from harm. They probably weren't really that necessary as far as protection was concerned; people didn't usually get bothered at these stations for no reason, and those nice Angel officials wouldn't hesitate to crack skulls if any trouble arose. But what the badges brought as well was special dispensation. Sisters were often allowed with very little explanation to pass into places closed to others, and nobody liked to question or delay them too much. After all, the skin they were saving might one day be your own.

Nale and his team were searching for a particular vendor, and trying to do it without asking any questions, but so far they'd had no luck. Two of Nale's other teammates, Berkhes and a big, hulking man called Monas, were lagging behind, looking around and, in Nale's mind, taking a little too long to get to where they were going. They were five on the task force; Zetyn, their tech guy, was back on the ship, while Shiqra was lagging even further behind.

Shiqra suddenly started walking faster, passing Berkhes and Monas and reaching Nale. "I've got it," he said to Nale.

"You know where the guy is?"

"Yeah, just figured it out. Come on, let's get moving."

They walked down several streets away from the main square, towards the fancier areas of the station. Shiqra, Nale and Monas led the group, but Berkhes lagged a little behind, looking thoughtful. Nale didn't comment; Berkhes was an old friend who'd shared innumerable missions, and was as dependable as any man he'd ever known. If he needed to work something out, he'd be given the space.

At last they came to a house that shone with affluence even by the standards of others around it. Its entrance was guarded by Angel officials who betrayed none of the warmth of their brethren down by the market, and the team was barred entrance.

And there it might have ended, in more ways than one, if someone hadn't come out of the house, muttering curses. It was a female Angel captain, and Nale immediately approached her.

"Excuse me?" he said.

"Yes?"

"I'm Nale, Sisters of EVE," he said, offering a hand which she shook.

"I'm Hona, Guardian Angels, special forces. What do you need?"

"We desperately need an audience with this merchant. Is there any way you could help us?"

"Help is usually done through deals. What could you offer me and my team?"

"Well, uh, if you get a papercut I could probably bandage it," Nale said.

Hona stared at him for a while, then asked, "Is Arak expecting you?"

"No," Nale admitted.

"Is he going to be happy about whatever offer you have for him?"

"I honestly have no idea."

She stared at him a little longer, then said, "Well, you're Sisters and I've got sympathy for the cause. And plus, it'll probably piss Arak off, which is all for the good as far as I'm concerned. So I'll let you in under my authority."

"Is it going to get you into trouble?" Nale asked.

"Doesn't matter. My task force has been decommissioned. I was looking for some work for us, or at least a little help in finding a person I know who's gone missing, but apparently neither are worth Arak's time. I'll have to find the guy myself, clearly, then start flying aimlessly through space. Maybe you'll have better luck than me."

She spoke to one of the security guards, then waved the Sisters in and walked off.

They entered the house. Arak the merchant resided on the second story, in a massive Caldari-esque chamber. Pieces of onyx ochre and splinters of cooled gelidus ice were carefully placed, offering half an aesthetic view and half an undertone of religious symbolism. Multihued globes of cytoseroicin, a gas cloud that constantly revolved and coalesced, lay in porcelain bowls designed for sacrifices to the gods. Nale looked at a celadon sphere, and its purplish shade gave him a shiver.

One wall was completely overtaken by a sand waterfall whose quiet hiss felt soothing to the ear. In the air, laser birds flew around, 3D images projected by hidden vidcasters. It was a remarkably nice office, and the whole effect was only slightly spoiled by the giant Quafe cooler behind Arak's desk. It was full of Red Quafe, a special version with selected rogue ingredients, and the reason became apparent as soon as the team entered. Arak, overweight and clad in figure-hiding robes, sprung up from his desk, paced to them and shook their hands. His brow glistened. He waved his hands at the birds. "Their flight is symbolic, too, the patterns. They're casting good luck on this room, good business luck."

Nale followed his lead and sat in a chair by the desk. "We understand you had a recent shipment come in with some strange things, including an inert block of shaped metal. We'd like to buy it."

"What, sight unseen?" Arak said.

"Yes."

"Sure."

Nale's team looked at one another. This was a little too easy.

"Uh, have you used it?" Nale asked.

"Nope, I haven't. It just got in, doesn't seem to do much, design isn't familiar, but it just looks like some old, broken-down machine and I can't imagine what anyone would want with it apart from antiques interest." The words came out in a gabble. Nale noticed two open RQ bottles on the desk.

"Do you know what it is?"

"Oh sure, I've got some idea, but I'll leave it to the experts to decide."

Nale cast a glance at Berkhes, who surreptitiously rolled his eyes. Neither of them believed Arak had any idea at all.

"Do you have it here?" Nale asked.

"No, it's at my warehouse." Arak leaned forward on his desk, nudging the RQ bottles. "You know, I don't usually inquire on these things, but I'm curious as to why the Sisters would be after something like this."

Nale sat back in his chair. "We hear it might have some healing properties, but we need to research it first."

"You people have remarkably good spies, then, since I hadn't even started to put out word that I had the machine."

"We're quite happy getting here first, thanks," Berkhes said, and flashed him a small smile. "Could we see it, please?"

"Oh, it isn't here. I don't store any of my merchandise on-site, so I'll need to send a couple of people with you to a warehouse elsewhere"

"I'm sure we can find our own way," Shiqra said in an impatient tone. "Regarding payment-"

Arak held up a beringed hand. "No worries, I trust the Sisters. We can discuss it when you get back. Here's the address."

He keyed in a combination on his console. The laser birds settled on his desk, where they melted into words and numbers on the desk surface. "I'd like to give you the location inside the warehouse, but can't, sorry. Policy. My men will go with you and pull out the right box."

They paid their respects and exited the building, setting off towards the warehouse in tow with Arak's enforcers. As they walked down the street, Berkhes whispered to Nale, "I'm not at all sure I trust Shiqra. He's been acting a little nervy lately. When we were at the market I think I saw him get a message on a transmitter, something that certainly wasn't meant for the rest of us. And he keeps fiddling with something in his pocket that ... well," Berkhes added with a little grin, "I really hope isn't what I think it is."

He was about to say more, but Shiqra walked up to them, smiled and said, "I'll catch up. I need to send a quick message to main base about where we're going and what our plans are." Shiqra dropped back, and Nale looked to Berkhes, who raised one eyebrow but said nothing.

Once they got to the warehouse the merchant's crew let them in. They entered the building, which was so massive that Nale couldn't see to its end in the gloomy light. It was full to the rafters with stuff, stacked on ten-floor scaffoldings and surrounded by metal walkers with giant, piston-pumped arms.

"The guy really is a collector," Berkhes said.

They were led deep into the warehouse. At last the merchant's men stopped, and keyed in numbers on a console. An automated machine slid along the rails of the scaffolding, clamped on to a small box, pulled it out and lowered it to the ground.

Nale and his companions looked at one another, all of them sharing the thought that this contained looked much too small to hold the Book.

Nale and Berkhes walked up to the box. "I've got a bad feeling about this," Berkhes said, and Nale nodded. One of the guards walked up, knelt in front of the box and unlocked it, then stepped back a respectable distance.

Nale took a look around the room, taking in his teammates' faces. Berkhes looked fairly calm, having apparently arrived at the same conclusion that Nale had. Zetyn was feigning an unimpressed look, but his excitement easily shone through. Shiqra just looked dyspeptic.

Nale turned back to the container. He opened it, looked in and felt like his entire body had deflated, a mixture of loosened nerves and disappointment.

In the box, which was far too big for its contents, was a catalyst. It was larger the one Nale had been given, the size of his entire forearm instead of his fist, but otherwise it was exactly the same.

Nale sighed and turned to Berkhes, intending to ask him what to do now, but stopped short when he saw the man's face.

Berkhes stood stock still, staring out at empty air as if he'd seen infinity. Then his eyes bulged, he stuttered something, and blood began to spurt in great gouts from his neck.

Nale and his companions immediately went for the nearest shelter, all of them veterans of a myriad firefights, all of them filing away their burgeoning grief for later. The merchant's men, slower and inexperienced, stood their ground, and moments later Nale heard a telltale swoosh that he'd only half-registered while staring into the box. Both men grimaced and clamped their hands to their necks. They half-managed to reach for their guns before collapsing on the floor, spouting blood.

In the deepening shadows, Nale spied a team of people moving towards them. Some guy in combat gear marched right up to the box without sparing the Sisters a look. He lifted it and looked inside, and seemed about to say something when there was a bang, and the front of the man's chest bloomed red. He fell to the ground, dropping the box and sending the catalyst tumbling out of it.

Everyone around saw that it was not the Book itself. There was a hushed silence, followed by a barely audible "... shit!" somewhere in the dark, and the sounds of gunfire and running. The Sisters remained inert and completely quiet, Nale included, until he felt the cold steel of a pistol laid against the back of his neck.

A voice said, "What you're looking for has already left." The pistol was withdrawn, and there was the sound of running feet.

Nale stood very still, listening to the receding gunfire. He remembered that voice. It belonged to an Angel captain called Hona.

Black Mountain: Of a Sentence

Draea felt rather uncomfortable. Her team was making its way to the warehouse area on an Angel station, and at any moment she expected to see a familiar face, someone who'd known someone she'd killed. Not that she probably needed to worry much, considering the company she was in, but it paid to be careful.

She looked around at her teammates. There was Krezek the tech-sadist, Falau the brawler, Yorlas the bounty hunter and Polok the chem-tech warfare dude. Krezek was an ex-sniper with a gift for electronics and infiltration who liked torturing his subjects without ever being in their presence. Falau was a survivor of a million little wars, ranging from barroom brawls to rush-squads on conquerable stations, and had, by his own account, had an eager hand in starting many of them. Yorlas was a considerably more careful opponent whose activities, as with Krezek's, had included sniping, along with various manners of assassination both individual and en masse. His only real goal in life was to terminate as many people as possible before his own end of times, and while he had a stated interest in experimenting with methods, he drew his pleasure from the successful taking of a life and the individual marking of his kills, and not, as Falau did, in the bloody preamble to death. Polok, a rather more personable individual whom Draea liked quite a bit, was heavily into chemistry and the myriad alterations of the human body it could bring forth. He had a preference for being called the Plague Doctor, and had stuck to it right until he told Draea about it, at which point she laughed so hard at him that she nearly collapsed on the floor. He never mentioned it again.

Supposedly the Book wouldn't work on them. They were too far gone, the violence and darkness too ingrained in the very fabric in their personality, for the Book to do anything more than give them a bad headache. If the device ever got into the wrong hands, Draea thought, they would be the first ones put against the wall.

They'd all studied the plans, although some of the data, such as where Arak kept his merchandise, had only been revealed to them just as they were getting off the ship. Some information came through Yorlas, who apparently had friends in the area. All Draea's team needed to do now was get to the warehouse, and get inside it. Krezek had vowed to take care of the last part.

As they were walking towards the station's storage areas, Polok, whose stalker instincts matched Yorlas's, turned to Draea and said, "One of the Angels is following us."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Polok described him in detail.

Draea thought hard, and eventually an old splinter of a memory dislodged itself. A duo of Angels had appeared on her colony a while back, recruiting miners. She'd monitored their progress, then gone dark and caught one of them alone and unawares. He'd been a stocky man, and she'd later sprained a back muscle shoving his corpse into the incinerator. The other Angel, unaware of her part in the murder, had raised a fuss and even called in some people of his own to investigate, but the corps had backed the cops and she'd stayed clean. Misplaced faith was a wonderful thing.

She called her team mates closer, and told them of all this. They grinned at each other, and Yorlas said, "Can't have him screw this up. Let's fade out. Look for the bullet."

The group split in two. Draea and Polok continued walking, but slowed their pace to an amble, and changed their route to darker streets. Krezek, Falau and Yorlas faded into the shadows.

Draea worried that the guy would have contacted other Angels, but Polok assured her they were safe. The man might have sent some message, but if he really had reported them to the active forces in the area, they'd long since have been scooped up and thrown into quarters. They kept looking around while talking, and eventually spotted a likely-looking side street between two warehouses. Everyone in the group had murderer instincts that they'd learned to trust implicitly, and those included finding the best spot to do something nasty, so it was no surprise when they came closer and saw a bullet lying at the entrance.

They walked into the alley, Draea subtly kicking the bullet away, and the Angel followed shortly after. He was closing in on them, Draea realized, and it would only be a few breaths before he engaged. The street was dark and deep.

"Don't turn around," Polok said to her, and she didn't, but she heard the sounds: There were the faintest of steps from the Angel trying to sneak closer, then a swoosh in the air, a gasp, the briefest of scuffles, and a muffled thump, followed by a gurgle and something that sounded like a wet piece of paper being torn up.

They stopped, and now she turned around, eager to inspect someone else's handiwork. She walked up to the corpse and gave it a professional's look. She wasn't so much interested in the stab wounds on his chest, or the gaping hole in his groin - everyone had their peccadilloes - but she was intrigued by the rim of shredded skin on one side of his throat, which matched neither a garrote pattern nor the serrated edge of a blade. She looked at Yorlas, who was busy cleaning off his knife.

He looked back at her, shrugged, unslung a gun that hung in a strap from his shoulders and handed it to her, saying only, "Missed. Aim needs adjusting."

She inspected the gun. It was a pressurized shotgun with six slanted choke tubes arranged radially. Each tube was lined with a magnetizing agent that helped keep its shots in line when they exited the barrels, making for longer range. The clips were twofold, one capsule of supercompressed gas and another capsule holding the ammunition. The magnetizing agent would only work on tiny metal pellets, but in Draea's view, that kind of ammo shouldn't have torn up the side of the Angel's throat like it had. Not unless the pellets had special, non-standard features.

"This ammo you have," she said to Yorlas, "Change-state, by any chance?"

He nodded.

"Activation on high-speed contact?"

Yorlas nodded again. "With skin," he said, and handed her a clip from his belt.

She inspected it, then gripped both ends tight and pushed in. She felt the internal safety dislodge, and one end of the clip became loose. She reached for one of the dead man's hands and pulled it close, removed the clip top and poured a handful of ammo into his cooling palm. They were little spherical pellets, and as soon as they touched his skin, several tiny, angled blades shot out from their surface, the blades curved in on the centre like the slanted path of a meteor falling to earth.

"And when they go into someone's skin?" she asked Yorlas.

"They spin," he said. "Work through his veins. Make a mess."

"So you could hit anyone anywhere on their body with this, and..."

"And the orbs will go in, make their way through the bloodstream and pulp everything they touch," Polok said, walking up to them. "Just one gets into you and you're in trouble. Close to an artery and you're dead, but even if it's just in your toes, they'll still cause pain so agonizing it'll drop you on the spot."

He picked up one of the silver pellets lying on top of the victim's palm, and looked at its blades. "These are regular issue. They got heat-seeking ones as well. Bronze-colored, I think. Nasty little things."

There was a beep that startled Draea far more than it should have. Yorlas pulled out a communicator, and Polok said, "Not again. That's, what, the third time you pull out that thing?"

Yorlas, ignoring him, said, "My contact on station. Says the Sisters are going to the warehouse. We should hurry." He got the gun back from Draea and said, "I fire the first shot."

Falau said, "The hell you do. Next one's mine."

Yorlas clapped the gun and said, "I need to test the aim. Problem?"

Falau got in his way and said, "Might be."

Polok stared at the two of them, then said, "By the gods ... all right. All right. Hey!"

They looked at him.

"Yorlas gets the next shot, because we'll need to stalk these people, but once we're safe and good, Falau can have all the fun he wants. Happy?"

The two men looked at one another, then back at him and nodded.

"All right," Polok said, and turned to Yorlas. "At least turn off that communicator of yours. I'm tired of having you spill our plans to everyone on the station."

They set off, Polok muttering to Draea, "You know that execution test to get on the team, the one we did right at the end? Yorlas thought of that. Idiot."

"You've got nothing to compensate for. Why on earth are you bitching about him?"

"He just rubs me the wrong way."

"Polok, you've killed at least four hundred people."

"Your point?"

Once at the warehouse, Krezek took to the fore and did his magic, though not without mumbling comments to empty air. "Guns, yeah, fine. Gimme a circuit board any day of the week. About time I got something to do here."

Draea, standing nearest to him and feeling impatient, said, "Want me to tell Yorlas of that attitude?"

"Not on your life."

"Then hurry it up. And add an automated opener for the doors, too, in case we need to make a getaway."

"Sure. Want them to explode?"

"No, thanks, just make them open."

"Roger."

He rose, keyed in a combination on the lock, and the doors slid open. The team walked in.

Yorlas's informer had not given them the precise location of the Book, so they decided to wait for the Sisters to show up, and to shadow them. The team took its positions, deep enough in the shadows that they wouldn't be spotted, but with access to walking paths so they could follow the progression of anyone walking through the warehouse. Draea made sure she was in visual range of everyone else, and settled in to wait. There were other entrances to this place, but she expected the Sisters to come in through the main one.

It wasn't long before the warehouse doors opened again and the Sisters came in, flanked by two guards. Draea's team stayed on them until they got to the box's location, and watched as they called it down from the scaffolds. Draea noticed that while two Sisters walked up to the box, and two more looked on curiously, one the Sisters stayed very definitely at the back, looking around a bit. She grinned in the darkness. However Yorlas had managed this, he'd earned his place on the team.

She pulled out her gun and saw the other team members do the same. A few paces away, Yorlas took aim. She watched as he relaxed his shoulders, took a breath and held it, and leaned a little into the shot. He closed one eye, and fired.

One of the Sisters guys started spouting blood from his throat. The other Sisters faded from view, and before she could react, Falau had sauntered up to the box, picked it up, and started to inspect its contents. Draea was about to get up and go to him when there was a bang, and Falau crumpled to the ground. He dropped the box as his body fell, and she saw the catalyst roll out of it. People not her own started moving in the shadows.

Draea exclaimed, "Shit!" and ducked just as something was fired at her head. There was a mad scramble as her team tried to rush toward the doors, provide cover fire for each other, and not get shot, all at once. Once they got in view of the exit, Draea saw Krezek manically working on his mobile interface to activate the doors, and she realized that as soon as they went through their silhouettes would be easy targets. Polok caught up with her, and as they ran she hissed at him, "Lay down interference!"

He reached for the bandolier on his shoulder and pulled off a couple of multiburst grenades, set one to thermal and another to electromagnetic, and tossed them. The thermal one bounced towards the attackers who were following them, flared up and sprayed a thin drizzle all around that immediately caught fire. The chemical wouldn't burn the surfaces it coated up, and only flared up for a few moments, so Draea hoped the warehouse's fire extinguishing system wouldn't immediately start dropping anti-inflammatory powder. She risked a look back and thought she saw the hunters stopped in their tracks for a few precious seconds.

The EM grenade, set to visible-light focus, blasted off behind them. It skewed light and caused such massive refraction that aiming at a target became next to impossible, like trying to find the one true reflection in a shattered mirror. It was possible to set these things to near-lethal levels, but apparently Polok had taken the wise stance that blinding everyone in the room wouldn't be good procedure. Shots were fired, but none of Draea's people got hit, and at last they escaped through the doors, blinking frantically in the fake sunlight to rid

their optic nerves of the grenade's refracted remnants, and quickly made their way down the street.

They were back on the ship. The team was setting up their gear and preparing for launch. Draea, in her quarters, was rapidly planning their next move. After they'd undocked from the station, blessedly unnoticed, and set off in a random direction, she filed several questions to her Society contacts. Some were about mission minutiae, and had Draea thanking the gods for her mining colony experience and the knowledge of ship statements and docking logs it entailed. Others were about certain individuals on the mission, based on a dark intuition that had begun growing in Draea's mind. She put a high priority on them, knowing that the team would soon have to plan its next move.

Her answers arrived shortly after. They commended her for her insight, and gave her an unofficial promotion to team leader. They also included some very interesting information on her mission and personnel concerns, along with suggestions on how to deal with both.

Draea drew up a flight route and sent it to the main console onboard her ship. Afterwards, she left her quarters and walked through the ship, eventually making her way to a little-used maintenance area. In there she went to a repair parts cabin and, from way at the back, removed a small, circular item with a red, opaque button at the center. She returned with it to her quarters, sent off a quick message to base, and received an immediate reply. The item in her hand lit up and blinked twice. She pressed firmly on its small button. The item lit briefly once more, then went dark again. It was now coded to her fingerprint.

Draea sat there for a little while, then pocketed the disc, sent out a call for people to meet her on the bridge, and headed off. On her way there, almost on instinct, she stopped by one of the hi-tech weapons cabinets and retrieved another disc, this one with a number of sockets and wirings on its surface.

Once they were all settled on the bridge, Draea spoke up. "First off, the Society has made me the de facto leader of this group, if there ever was any doubt. Problems?"

The assembled group shook their heads.

"Good. We're taking off."

"Back to base?" Polok asked.

"Far from it. We've found the Book, for real this time," Draea replied. "And we're off to get it."

A Man of Peace

Nale's team was heading towards their ship, collectively wondering what just happened and what to do next, when they were met by Hona and a team of Angels. She stopped them and said, "You're coming with me."

They balked at it, but she said, "We lost the attackers but we know where they're headed, and whatever you people are after, it'll be there, too," and started walking.

They looked at one another, then started to follow her.

On the way, she explained to them, "The second we disengaged, I looked up the station logs. That piece you were inspecting came from a shipment brought in by one of our deep scouting teams, and it's part of a larger find. They were going to offload the entire thing here, but one of our military installations asked them to bring the other items in for closer inspection. They're on their way there now, but they'll be making a few stops on the way, so we can catch up with them if we hurry."

"Look, far be it from me to criticize this plan, and thank you so much for getting us into the merchant's office and out of that shootout at the warehouse," Nale said, "but who are you?"

"I'm the captain of a task force."

"... yes?"

"I'm also the one who can find whatever it is you're looking for, in exchange for some answers."

Nale shrugged, a difficult motion to make when one is walking fast. "All right. Lead on."

A while later, they were onboard an Angel ship staffed by Hona's own hand-picked crew and heading towards the unknown.

Hona had told him she'd brought his team onboard for debriefing and to ensure she could keep an eye on him, and she had asked him several questions about the item they were after, expressing her worry that it was a weapon which could be used against her people. Nale had tried to reassure her while fending off the questions the best he could, saying only that it was a specialized type of healing device that only the Sisters could operate properly. Hona had ignored his own questions for the most part, and by the time each realized they weren't going to get what they wanted from the other, the atmosphere between them had grown chilled; Hona was outright angry, Nale merely frustrated and tired. Eventually she'd let it go at that and left him to his own devices.

He'd picked up some equipment from his own ship before leaving and was now playing with it in his new quarters, sitting on his bunk and tossing an inertial ball in the air. Every time he tossed it up it would accelerate and hit the ceiling with a bang, then drop down again into his hand. It reminded him of the training camp, when things had been simpler.

The inertial ball was a metal sphere with a rubbery varnish, of the same type they'd used back at the gym. Its technology was based on the same principle as the inertial modifiers that keep spaceships from tearing themselves apart when they accelerate or decelerate at the incredible speeds they reach. Its insides were composed of gravitronic mechanisms that made the ball, once thrown in a consistent direction, continue to accelerate, so that it would hit its target at a far greater velocity than it started with. Upon impact it would immediately decelerate at a rate dependant on its contact surface; the softer the hit, the harder its internal mechanism would reverse and try to lower its impact, which meant that the few extra milliseconds it took to push into a soft-skinned surface would make for a lesser blow than if it smashed against steel.

Eventually Hona banged on his door, then walked right in. "What on earth are you doing in here?"

"Waiting."

"Well, wait more silently."

He stared at her, getting even grumpier, then made up his mind and got up from his bunk. "Are you busy?"

"I'm making a tour of the ship," she said.

"That's a no, then. Good. You can help me practice."

"What? No. What are you talking about?"

He held the inertial towards her. "Let's go find a corridor with solid-steel backing and you can toss this at me at high speed."

She opened her mouth to say something, stopped short, looked at the ball and then back up at him, smiled an

evil smile and said, "All right. Follow me."

They made their way down to the bowels of the ship and found an empty storage corridor with a nice, thick steel wall on one end. They took places on either end of the corridor, Nale right in front of the wall.

"So I just throw this at you?" Hona said.

"Pretty much."

"Any last requests?"

"I'd prefer above-belt aim, but really, it's up to you."

She threw the ball at his head. It accelerated on the way but didn't hit him, and instead clanged off the wall behind him. He picked it up and tossed it to her underarm.

"Does it have any settings?" she asked.

"There's two poles on it, one red, one green. Squeeze the ball twice, then hold down green to slow it down, red to speed it up. Press both simultaneously to turn it off for the space of one throw, hold them both down for a couple seconds and you turn it off altogether."

"Red. Right." She pressed that one a few times, then threw the ball at Nale. It missed him again.

"You know, we really are quite grateful you took us with you," he said as they kept on the exercise.

"Not much choice," she responded.

"Not to question your judgment, but how do you plan to end this?"

"We'll get to the Angel transport ship first, while our real prey flitters around and shakes off imaginary tails. Then we hang back, keep a listen on the transport, and jump in once she attacks it. She wants what's on board, so she won't destroy the ship."

"All right." Nale considered more questions, and could only come up with, "So what's Angel life like?"

"Disciplined."

He picked up the ball from a missed throw and tossed it back to her. "Really? I've met some of you guys and you always seemed more of a family."

She caught the ball, but didn't throw it again. "When did you meet Angels?" she asked.

"There was a massive industrial accident on one of your mining colonies a few months ago. A capsuleer launched missiles at it but thankfully didn't destroy the entire place. My team was doing some unrelated exercise in the area, and we were all called in. Sometimes we're the only ones who can cut through the politics and actually help people."

She sighed and gave a slight nod. "We're not the best-loved of factions."

"You don't say."

The ball whizzed at his groin, but he sidestepped it at the last minute, laughing.

"How many did you save?" she asked.

"Most of them. The missiles mostly blew up silos and processing plants that had already been vacated. But there was one framework collapse in a populated mine that left a lot of people broken or badly cut. We had to pull them out first, which has its own problems, but it all worked out. The only ones we left behind never had a chance. A dozen had been either cut in half or crushed to a pulp by falling girders well before we found their bodies. Hand getting tired?"

She'd been holding the ball in one hand, idly waving it. She switched hands and gave a toss that bounced off a side wall, slowed and landed in Nale's open hand.

"Nice try, but first surface it hits, it decelerates," he said, tossing it back. "So what are you doing here? You seem really intent on catching these guys."

"I'm only really after one of them."

"Childhood friend?"

She laughed, and threw the ball. It wasn't aimed at him, and hit the wall with a satisfying thunk.

"My team was tasked with finding out who's been killing our undercover recruitment agents," she said. "I was contacted by one of those agents earlier today."

"Risen from the dead?"

"Watch it," she said. "He lost his recruiting partner recently, under strange circumstances, and he himself is probably dead now."

"Strange circumstances?" he said, reminding himself that he didn't always have to try to be funny.

"They'd been recruiting on a mining colony. They were ambushed and attacked, and he escaped. We never even found the body of his partner, only some spatters of blood. The local militiae got involved and practically shut us out, too. The trail eventually grew cold and we were taken off the case with no luck in finding who did it. The survivor was reassigned, too, but he remembered everyone who was involved, and he had a particularly nasty feeling about one of the cops there. And right after you arrived he contacted me, saying that she was here, on my station."

"She? Oh. That one."

She gave him a look. "If it's escaped your notice, women sometimes do rise up the corporate ranks."

"If it's escaped your notice, I work for a faction that rather does imply the fact."

She nodded, and he added with a grin, "Though of course you're best left at home, watching the children and cooking, and serving us-OW!"

The ball finally hit its mark. She gloated at him as he gingerly rubbed his right side, then added, "Wait here," and left. She returned a little while later with a gun in her hand.

"Uh..." Nale said.

"Relax. Rubber bullets. They came with a shipment we got from Gallente merchants, and they're soddin' useless. Too much friction, too little weight. But you've been dodging the ball so easily that I might as well try this on you instead."

Nale stared at the gun for a while, then shrugged. "Okay. Tell me, at least, why you even let this woman undock. And that last toss is going to raise a welt, by the way."

"You deserve it," she said, taking careful aim and firing. Nale managed not to be in the shot's way.

"How do you do that?" she said, exasperated.

"I've got a talent for taking things in, little details. The undocking?"

"I wanted to keep it under the radar. Those guys I saw at the warehouse weren't amateurs, and I'd prefer not to risk any more of my people than I have to." Another shot, another miss. "Besides, Angel ops'd be just as likely to arrest these people, both on-station and on-ship, and as soon as they discovered the woman was a damn cop they'd probably let her go. Empire goodwill, and all the rest."

Another shot, but this time it connected with Nale's thigh. As he hopped around, yowling, she said, "I can't have that. I want to catch these people and take them out. Right before we left there was a general notice that an Angel had been killed on-station, and the initial description matches the man who contacted me. Last I knew he'd been following that witch, so I pulled in my contacts, tracked her down, and found her in the process of tearing your group apart." Another shot, a near-hit. "These people deserve no sympathy and no mercy. I don't expect you to understand."

"Why not?"

"You being a man of peace, and all."

He sighed, and ran his hand through his hair. "Yeah. Right."

She rested the gun on her shoulder, leaned her head to one side and asked, "This is a peaceable mission you're on, right? This healing machine of yours and all."

"It's supposed to be," he said.

"Supposed?"

"Well, it's ... this machine, it can be dangerous. We're supposedly going after it because we want to prevent it from falling into the hands of people who'd misuse it."

"Who are these people?"

"My superiors say the Sansha."

"Sansha? Nale, I've met them, and I've also met the people they sometimes hire; skittish, frightened men with a terrible darkness about them. The ones at the warehouse were not Sansha agents."

"Yeah. I know. The Sansha rumors were probably spread back at our base to distract us from the real goals of the mission."

"So you're being lied to."

"Everyone is lied to."

"Oh, come on. That's simplistic pessimism."

"Is it?" A cold glint came into his eye. "When you're sitting hip-deep in blood on a mining colony, surrounded by wreckage from some capsuleer's missile, and cradling in your arms a boy who's lost his legs and can't even feel it because he's so deep in shock, do you tell him he's going to die? Or that he's going to be fine?"

"That's an extreme example-"

"So what? It happens all the time. The more you know, the less you want to know. Can you honestly say that you're a better person now that someone you know has been killed? All that evil which surrounds us, does it change anyone it touches for the good? Even if we do manage to catch up with the people presumably responsible for all those murders you mentioned, and even if we do manage to wrest the machine from them and you end up putting a bullet into their heads, is that going to make your life any better than it was back when you didn't know about any of this? This burning sense of guilt, shame and regret over not having been able to prevent something from happening, is it really preferable to just being unaware and blissful? Sometimes we need people who know what's happening and who handle it without excuse and without sharing it with the rest of us."

"Strange words coming from a Sister."

"Nobody halfway sane does this job," he said with a sigh. "It's rewarding, but it gets to you."

"No kidding. So why join?"

"Because it's right. It's the only thing that makes sense." He leaned against the wall. "Look, I didn't so much join as get recruited. But I believe in the cause, and I believe that just as man can be cruel to man, he can also be kind. Yes, sometimes we lie, or cheat, or hurt one another. Sometimes we have to deceive. It doesn't mean we're unworthy of our existence, and it certainly doesn't mean that a person can only be either a saint or a sinner. What makes you into a good person isn't the endless purity of your actions, it's their sum total, and if you can rise above your own mistakes and make something decent come of your life, you've cheated death. The marks you left on this world will outlast you, their echoes will affect other people who will then carry on the work you started, however small, and when you finally come to look into that cold blackness of eternity, you'll know that you will never truly die."

"I'm impressed," she said.

"It's nothing really deep," he said.

"No, not that. I don't think you inhaled even once during that speech."

He stared at her, then burst into laughter.

"So you think you can change the world?" she asked, a little smile creeping into her expression.

"I don't know. We all hope to, I suppose. I'd be happy if I could just dodge those damn shots properly."

"Must be hard for a leader, to think so much."

"Am I the leader?" he said.

"The others follow you. If you hadn't noticed, it probably makes you a natural. But you always find ways to torture yourself. Every mistake becomes a damnation of your abilities, and every failure something that must be corrected."

"You think so?"

"Trust me on this," she said. "Besides, why else would you keep obsessively testing yourself? It's your one failing, the thing you've latched on to, and deep inside you believe that if you could just get this one thing right, you'd feel more at ease with the rest of your life."

Nale looked at the ceiling, then closed his eyes. "I thought I was supposed to be the one with all the serenity and answers."

"Leave it to a real woman to think things through," Hona said. "They're called Sisters for a reason, you know."

He grinned, then furrowed his brow. "It's just ... we so have to get this right. Not only because we're clearly risking our lives here - I don't care about that, which I know sounds strange, but we truly have accepted our lives and their impending ends-"

"You're talking to an Angel captain. I understand, believe me, I do."

"-But it's the task we've been given. The Sisters trusted me with this, and that matters to me. The machine has great potential, I'm sure, but that's not mine to think about. All I'm concerned with is keeping it out of the hands of the wrong people."

"And the Sisters are the only right people?" she asked.

"Gods, I hope so. Because I can't think of anyone else. I need to find the Book, and I need to take it into my care, and I need to do it before that woman does. With any luck and grace, I will, and everyone will be safe."

She looked at him for a long time, then said, "I hope you're right."

He sighed. "So do I."

"Not about the machine," she said, shaking her head and holstering the gun. "About yourself."

Black Mountain: Some Dying Angel

Nale and Hona were sitting side by side on their ship's bridge, each listening in on the broadcasts from the Angel ship they were tracking.

It was the usual external stuff about docking plans and routes, along with internal notes concerning commands and confirmations of commands. They were doing it in shifts, each crew member on Hona's ship listening to the individual channel of his corresponding member on the Angel ship. Hona had twice already predicted, erroneously, that Draea's ship was about to attack the bait, and everyone was rather tired of waiting, herself foremost. She had used executive privilege to wiretap the Angel ship without its knowledge, and would have to answer for it later.

There was a buzz, and one of Hona's crew said, "Wait, they're being hailed. And ... wow. Locked, webbed and scrambled." Immediately a lot of Hona's crew raised their hands, in quiet acknowledgment that their own channels had filled with related data.

"Alright, let's get moving," Hona said. "While they're bargaining, we'll--"

"Captain, they're boarding!" someone said.

"What?!"

"Enemy team's already attached to ship. They're boarding now."

"Get us there right now and ready for boarding," Hona said in a fast and clear voice. "Team assemble in dock area, now. That includes your people, Nale, in case we need medics."

As the personnel put the ship on autocontrol and rushed out with her, Nale and his team followed. "What's going to happen?" he asked on the way.

"Idiots decided to board the Angel ship instead of bargaining with them for releasing your precious cargo. Which means that people are going to die, on both sides. It's stupid and reckless, and I can't imagine what type of person would take it this far."

"The type that stalks my teammates and fires veinshredders into their throats?" Nale said darkly.

Hona glanced at him but didn't comment. She turned to someone else who had a wireplug in his ear and asked, "Time to board and status on vessel?"

"One minute hard, two on soft, two-four-zero on dark," he replied, "and our people are getting torn to shit. Ma'am."

"We'll board dark, then."

"Ma'am?"

"Angel crew's been on recon missions that included contact. They're close-combat trained. If they're losing, it means we need a different tactic."

"And if the attacking crew didn't all breach, ma'am? What if we're spotted by someone aboard the enemy vessel?"

"If these psychopaths decided to board an Angel ship and have a shootout, I don't imagine any one of them wanted to hang back and look out the windows. Get in gear, we're sneaking in."

They poured into the Angel ship, Hona's men and Nale's team. Monitors inset in the boarding corridor showed their destination, hovering still in space, the red light from the sun glinting off its carapace. It seemed dead to Nale, and in a small way helped him get ready for what he'd see on the inside.

The situation was nothing new to the Sisters, who were used to working as medics in hostile grounds, but they still found themselves in an awed silence of horror when they boarded the vessel. Draea's team had reveled in death. There was blood and viscera everywhere; walls were spattered with vermilion sprays, and corridors were covered in what had once been parts of human beings. Where Nale walked, his boots stuck to the floor.

They made their way through the ship, following the trail of blood. Back in basic training the Sisters had offered lessons in army lingo and signage, and Nale, hungry to master everything on offer, had taken to it. When Hona's team communicator whispered coded status commands, Nale understood him.

General fighting. Local team retreating. Hona shared a look with her team member. Draea's forces weren't going for their prize right away; they were exterminating the ship's crew. She whispered back to him. Cargo bay. Setup.

They took up places in the cargo bay, which on this industrial was thankfully large enough to easily accommodate their teams. Nale estimated that Hona's crew outnumbered the assailants three to one, and his own men - outfitted as they were now with the minimum of armor and weaponry - added a few to the mix. He did not feel very hopeful about the entire situation, but at least he took comfort from the thought that only he and his team knew the full, true nature of the machine. If his enemies did anything with it, he and the rest of the Sisters should be the only ones left standing.

It really wasn't much of a comfort, come to that. Especially with Hona around. Nale really did not want to see her get hurt, and it shamed him that right now he apparently cared more about than about Berkhes's death. Still, it was Sister credo: The living before the dead.

Nale surveyed his team. Everyone was holding steady, in alcoves and behind obstacles that would hide them from view. He moved silently between his men, giving them encouragements and ensuring they were keeping their nerve. The only one who startled when Nale walked up to him was Shiqra, who surreptitiously grabbed at one of the pockets on his combat suit. Nale asked him if everything was all right, to which he assented.

After getting back to Hona, he asked her, "Think one of your men can do me a favor?"

"Depends," she said, then added in a more pleasant tone, "But I'm sure we can try."

"One of my men is holding something I don't think he should be. Right-hand pocket, on the thigh. I've no idea what it is, but I have a feeling he's going to do something stupid, and I don't want a confrontation right now. One of your soldiers is located next to him, and I want him to keep an eye on my man. If he makes a move, opens his pocket or whatever, restrain him."

"You got it," Hona said. "I've no more patience for rogue agents than you do."

"Thanks," Nale said, and gave her a smile that she returned.

It wasn't long before Draea's people entered the bay, stalking in as if they owned the place. There were four of them, and Nale, hiding with Hona behind a crate, marveled sickly at how they'd been able to take down an entire crew of Angels, even if the poor soldiers had been completely unprepared.

Draea went over to a particular box without hesitation. Nale surmised she had pulled its location from some dying Angel.

The box was situated on a low shelf, and Draea pulled it out and placed on the floor with apparent ease. It was under electronic lock, which she fixed by placing the barrel of her gun alongside the mechanism and shooting it off. Gunfire wouldn't harm this ship; like so many others it was just as well-protected from the inside as from the outside.

Draea reached in and, with a grunt, lifted out the Book of Emptiness and placed it on the floor, where she regarded it for a few breaths. After it did not turn on, glow, smoke or explode, her three teammates visibly relaxed. They walked in closer and gave the machine a look.

It really was inconsequential in appearance. Only a few oddly curved lines here and there, and the strange way in which it caught the light, gave the faintest idea that it might be more than a glorified Quafe vendor.

"Heavy, is it?" one of Draea's people asked.

"Wouldn't want to carry it far," she said.

It was at that moment Hona gave the signal to her men, who broke cover, rising and aiming their weapons at Draea's team. "Move and die," Hona said.

To their credit, none of Draea's teammates twitched. They slowly looked in Hona's direction, and Nale, who had gotten up and was standing next to her, felt uncomfortably like he was watching a pack of animals deciding on their prey.

"Drop your weapons and step away from them," Hona said.

Draea and her team mates looked at one another, then shrugged and dropped their guns, though none of them moved nor raised their hands. "What are you planning?" Draea said, coolly.

"Taking you back in for questioning," Hona replied. "Nobody needs to get hurt."

Which was a complete and utter lie, Nale knew. She was planning to kill everyone on Draea's team. But she apparently didn't want to risk the Book, which he knew said more about her interest in him right now than it did about the machine. He felt a small wave of gratitude that was immediately washed out when he noticed what

Draea was still holding, palmed in her hand. It was a catalyst. And her thumb was gently turning its sphere.

Time crystallized, and two truths materialized in Nale's mind. The first was that Draea's team, for whatever ungodly reason, was likely immune to the machine, which contradicted everything they'd been told so far. The second was that Draea was about to turn the blasted thing on, the effects of which would be completely unpredictable except for the very real and definite mind-death it would likely have for all of Hona's crew and for Hona herself.

In a moment he would later not know whether to rejoice in or regret, he turned to Hona, said, "I'm sorry," and, to her brief surprise, hit her square on the jaw. She crumpled to the floor, and Nale barely had time to turn back as he saw someone in Draea's team plunge something into his own neck, while Draea grinned and clicked the catalyst.

There was an infinite whiteness.

Nale is walking through a desert. It is night-time but he doesn't feel cold. There are other people here, he thinks; they're almost visible, like shadows detached from the earth, milling about in every direction.

He comes to a leafless tree whose limbs extend like the entirety of space, their buds glowing blue and red. A wind whispers through the branches, gently hissing his true name. He keeps walking, the tree bending to stretch its branches in his direction.

He comes upon an entry to a small quarry, the ground before its dark opening surrounded with rounded, polished rocks. He picks up a rock and it turns soft in his hands. He drops it again and walks onward.

The desert ends, and turns to black basalt. He keeps walking.

The further he goes, the clearer his path becomes. His doubts begin to melt away. He is here. Of course he is here. He has always been here.

He comes to a cliff face, and he sees a dark ocean below, its seas black as the earth.

Around him the spirits flow over the cliffs and plunge into the ocean, joining its waves. He wonders if he should turn back, but he knows that even if he tried, the onrush of spirits would turn against him and push him off. This is his path. This has always been his path.

He stands there, looking into the abyss.

For a moment he is filled with fear, uncertainty and loneliness, the last vestiges of his past existence. But they fade away like the other shadowy spirits, passing out of him, never to return. He knows what he is and what he wants, what he has always wanted.

He steels himself, and he takes a deep breath, and he jumps. And as he falls he turns in the air, looks up and sees Draea standing at the top of the cliff. She glares down at him, her pale skin standing out among the ethereal shadows that surround her. One of those shadows seemed more substantial than the rest, hovering motionlessly behind Draea while the others float back and forth, but he can't make out what or who it is.

He plunges into the black sea, shattering on impact. There is no pain.

He remains conscious and feels himself be slowly torn to pieces. It eats him up, pulls him apart, disintegrates him.

He's gone. He's void. There is no him any longer; he is of this world but no longer of this world. He is the black sea, and he is the black sky. He is the black sea, and he is the black mountain. He is the black mountain.

The shadows speak to him in a cacophony of voices. He hears them all. They tell their stories, and he understands as one can only understand when one hears all voices and not merely the faint whisper of the one.

Slowly, a new presence begins to rise, and it is him. He parts from the black sea, but he does not part. He leaves the black mountain, but he does not leave. He floats up to the black sky, but he does not need to join it.

He is the black sea below, and the black sky above, and the black mountain which casts its shadows over the world.

He understands everything.

He rises.

Everyone was lying on the ground, some moving, some not. Nale hauled himself up and surveyed the scene.

Hona's entire team lay sprawled, their eyes rolled back in their heads, froth on their mouths. Draea's own crew was beginning to stumble around, shaking their heads as if to dislodge cobwebs. Draea herself was now standing, swaying but keeping erect, staring fixedly at Nale with an expression that was half murder and half wonder.

Then at once, the people who were conscious seemed to do a kind of mental shrug, looked in the direction of the machine, and realized that it was no longer there. Neither, for that matter, was Draea's bounty hunter, Yorlas.

Both Nale's people and Draea's remaining crew started to draw their guns, but Draea raised a hand and yelled, "No!" In their daze, the people obeyed her and lowered their weapons.

She rubbed her eyes, grimaced and said, "I really wish it hadn't come to this. Krezek, open comms to our ship and get a speaker going."

There was a crackle, and then Yorlas's voice was omnipresent. "Boom," it said. "Hello, Draea."

"How'd you manage to break out of the fugue so early?" Draea asked.

"Adrenaline shot," Yorlas said.

"Were you working with someone else?"

"Man called Shiqra, on other team."

Nale quickly looked around, and saw that Shiqra was gone. His Angel guardian was lying on the ground, comatose. Beside the angel lay an unused mini-syringe full of a strong soporific. Nale realized Shiqra hadn't been immune to the Book and must've been planning to render himself unconscious, trusting that Yorlas would come to his rescue.

"He's with you, I imagine. Book take him out?" Draea said.

There was a moment's hesitation before Yorlas said, "Yes," and the undertones Nale heard in word encapsulated far more than he would ever be able to put into words.

"And you have the Book, on our ship, currently en route to destination unknown, right?" Draea asked.

"Still in system, but getting ready to leave," Yorlas said with some satisfaction. Piloting ships all alone was difficult; their AIs compensated well, but there were a lot of minute adjustments that needed to be made. "Otherwise, yes."

"Excellent. To sell to the highest bidder, I imagine"

"Yes. Was supposed to be private project of true art, but with Shiqra gone, no point," Yorlas said.

"How sad." Draea said. "By the way, did I tell you I was promoted? Team leader."

"Congratulations. I'm very happy," Yorlas said.

"You should be. They gave me executive privilege." Out of her pocket she pulled a small, circular disc, the one she'd acquired at the Society's direction and activated with their assistance just before they'd set out. "Any last words?"

"What?"

"That'll do." She pressed a button on the disc. There was a squelch from the radio, followed by silence.

"Cranial explosive," she said to the others, who were staring goggle-eyed at her. "They didn't trust us. Good for them. Krezek, get over here, please."

The tech rushed to her, clearly eager to obey.

"Can you disable this ship? We'll take the one from the Sisters to ferry us to our old vessel."

He hesitated, then said, "I can, yes, absolutely, but are you sure it's a good idea?"

"It'll attract less attention. We might get hailed by Angel troops on our way to pick up our old ship and the Book. Besides, we've left this one a little red, and it won't be long until those people start to smell."

He nodded, and walked off, leaving her and Polok in the bay.

She turned and walked up to Nale. "Anyone left on your ship? And by the way, if I see any of you little peacekeepers reach for their guns, Polok here will ventilate you."

Nale shook his head. "We took the entire troop."

Draea walked closer and slowly reached out her hand until it closed on the neckline on Nale's shirt. She grabbed it tight and pulled close, so that she and Nale were standing chest to chest. "If you try to follow us," she said in a low but clear tone, "you do realize what will happen to you."

Nale just smiled, and Draea's face took on something that, in a person not homicidally insane, might be considered simple contentment. And with that, she left, her enforcer following on her heels.

Nale looked at the prone figures around him and said, "Yeah, I guess we'll have a little explaining to do at some point. Zetyn."

The Sisters' own tech guy stepped out from behind a crate. "Yeah?"

"Radio any nearby Sisters teams for help and get them to send a scouter vessel, one with a mechanic onboard. We'll get them to dispose of this while we hunt down the Book."

"To be honest, that ... stinks of a coverup," Zetyn said.

Nale turned to him and in a very relaxed voice asked, "Do you want us to explain to the Angels why we were found sitting in a roomful of their men that have all effectively been lobotomized?"

Zetyn raised his hands in surrender, turned and started prepping his comms equipment.

Monas, another of his team members, walked up to Nale and pointed behind him. Hona was sitting there, propped up against a support girder. She looked vacant, and tired.

"What'll we do with her?" Monas asked, and immediately answered the question himself. "We should leave her."

"No!" she suddenly said, loud and clear. "Hell, no. I'm going where you're going. I'm going to get this damn woman."

Nale turned to Monas. "You heard the lady."

Monas rolled his eyes. "Alright, boss. So how do we find this Draea?"

Nale said, "I've got a feeling," and pulled something out of his pocket. A disc, covered with sockets and wirings, that Draea had dropped there for him to find. A tracking device.

Black Mountain: Hyperconsciousness

Despite its attempts in recent times to project the image of a network of high-class academic establishments for New Eden's elite, the Society of Conscious Thought remains first and foremost a research institute with a vigorous interest in the technical advancement of society. This is no secret; after all, the Jove are an inquisitive lot, and in the protective isolation of the Society's enclaves, called kitzes, there's no telling what new developments may be brewing.

That's not to say the Society has had free rein in their choice of projects. A checkered past, which includes political machinations and some rather dubious human experimentation, nearly spelled the Society's end. A turning point came when an internal investigation brought to light their association with Sansha's Nation. It was common knowledge that Sansha Kuvakei combined Jovian capsule technology with illegally modified brain implants in order to start off his notorious army of sycophants, but Empire attempts to replicate his research have always been unsuccessful, and it had long been postulated that the Jovians may have been one of the shadowy forces who secretly supported Kuvakei, supplying him with clandestine technologies in order to see what he could make of it. This was part and parcel with the Society's brash approach to technological advancement, and after an investigation revealed discrepancies in the research logs of certain kitzes that seemed to implicate them as having worked with the Sansha, the Society's funding, power and autonomy were severely curtailed, and the kitzes themselves vanished without a trace. It is, of course, not known whether the retributive actions against the kitzes truly were imparted for their corroboration with the Sansha or merely for their inability to properly hide it.

While information on the development of any part of Jovian society remains scarce, it is at any rate clear that the other sections of the Society took this development to heart and greatly shifted their focus, eventually even opening their gates to non-Jovians in an attempt to dispel at least some of the dark mystique that had begun to envelop their organization. Aside from this paradigm change from investigation to instruction, the Society also made a subtler shift in their research focus. Jovian inspectors found that while the Society dutifully abstained from resuming its prior level of hard-science technological research, the kitz governors, along with Societal scholars, simply started looking into soft-sciences instead. They focused extensively on the humanities, in particular sociology, education, theology and psychology.

This development received tacit approval from the inspectors and was allowed to continue uninterrupted for quite some time. In their wisdom, the inspectors recognized that the Jovian nature of endless tinkering could not be suppressed, lest it move out of the inspectors' reach and back into darker channels, and while there remained some technological hard-science aspects to the Society's new research methods, they were considered to be harmless. In particular, scholars had been tinkering with electronic mood enhancers - alpha wave transmitters and suchlike - but as the Jovians are very much in favor of anything that might help combat depression and ennui, the experiments were given a blind eye.

Many of these research projects started out as unofficial experiments among Society scholars, who kept them secret for about as long as any scholar will keep secret the results of his tests. They soon developed into an organization of work among various kitzes, and thanks to the excellent communication the Society kept up among its enclaves, some interesting projects soon saw the light of day. One of those was the fabled Hyperconsciousness agenda.

Certain scholars had noticed an emergence of new patterns in the relation between the training they gave their students and the results those students showed. As had been long established, while one could set down a baseline for a proper lower-level education - a focus on maths, languages and social studies would always be necessary - any higher degree of education would always depend as much on the individual student as it did on the curriculum. Members of the Society found that it was, in fact, possible to identify certain patterns in the early academic development of each individual student and then use those patterns to tailor the education to the student rather than the other way around. The exact nature of these patterns remains jealously guarded by the Society, but from the results it has produced in the last few decades, the method clearly works.

And if it had stopped there, the Society would still be on its merry way to being considered a slightly unorthodox but very much an ivy-league educational establishment.

The pattern detection they used for analyzing student abilities got better and better, to the point where they found they could map out various other aspects of a student's abilities and tendencies. And somewhere along the line, some enterprising scholar decided that training the students to be better persons wasn't enough. They should also have some of their detrimental tendencies curbed.

In itself, this aim was nothing new. Part of the *raison d'être* for any educational establishment is to even out the rougher edges of its students, not merely setting them on the right path but keeping them from straying. Society scholars argued that the old, established ways to do this were outdated and generic, and likely to backfire. Instead, they advocated a student-tailored approach, whereby one individual might be given physical tasks to resolve, another might have his academic liberties curtailed, and yet another might be given a stern talking to on certain specific points likely to hit home. Nothing harmful, and nothing excessive.

The trouble started when they began combining this pattern work with advances in their mood enhancers.

Certain scholars argued that instead of dealing with the outcome of negative, hostile and aggressive behavior, it would be easier and more effective to eradicate the problem at its source. Not only that, but in using these mood enhancers they might actually help their students reach heretofore unscaled heights, complementing their already natural abilities with more positive attitudes.

This kind of project would have been seen as brainwashing in any other circles, and reportedly made even certain Society scholars uncomfortable, but Jovian inquisitiveness prevailed. Nonetheless, the Society was careful to keep its true agenda secret, weaving its patterns into the tapestry of its curricula and thus keeping them hidden from casual onlookers. The codeword for this agenda was Hyperconsciousness.

Hyperconsciousness, or HyCon as it became known among insiders, produced a great many students whose academic careers were imbued with excellence. It also produced further improvement in the HyCon's theoretical basis, as the Society constantly improved its methods and technology based not only on the results of its living experiment, but on additional technology supplied by Jovian benefactors who were impressed with the Society's academic achievements while remaining entirely in the dark about the truth of the Hyperconsciousness agenda. A major windfall came when some mysterious benefactor bestowed on a select Society kitz the responsibility of destroying the Book of Emptiness.

The Book was well-known among the Jove. It was yet another failed attempt to curtail the Jovian Disease, that scourge of humanity which still reduces many of their number to broken, darkened shells and eventually drives them to death. The Book, named after a fabled Amarrian holy text that supposedly brought its readers to a higher plane of consciousness and serenity, was a small, unobtrusive machine that, when activated, would remove negative thoughts and emotions from anyone in the vicinity. The Jovians had hoped the Book would at the very least cure them of melancholy, and in a way it did, but not before it turned its subjects into drooling idiots. At lower levels the effect was not permanent but did have the effect of strongly affecting the subject's personality to the point where they lost their ability for purely logical thought; at higher levels the subject would be rendered permanently catatonic. Needless to say, the Book was deactivated, dismantled and consigned to the dustbin of scientific history.

Or so the Jovians thought. Under the auspices that only the Society, with its experience in behavioral patterns, could be trusted to handle and destroy such a device, one of the Book's caretakers gave its parts to them upon their request, with the intention that a few be put on display or under examination, and the rest destroyed. It is a measure of the immense trust the Society had rebuilt at that time, and probably of their image as slightly doddering but well-meaning and intelligent people, that they were given this chance, and nobody seemed to realize it was like throwing meat to a Slaver. The person who supplied the Society with the Book's collective parts undoubtedly did so knowing that they would first inspect it for its secrets, but it's doubtful even he realized that they had the ability and the theoretical knowledge to reassemble it.

The Society took its time, and even put a few duplicate parts on display to reassure its trustees that the rest had been destroyed. It never quite managed to recreate an original, fully functioning unit, but its experiments were successful enough that a simulacrum of sorts eventually emerged. This new Book, whose existence was kept a closely guarded secret, had the same basic abilities as the old unit but mainly affected non-Jovians, and of those it couldn't even be made to work properly on the worst (or, in one regrettable mistake during an illicit test run by very frustrated researchers, the best) students of HyCon.

Some valuable bits of technology did emerge from studies. One was the Oblivion Cocktail, a group of nanobots whose ingestion made the subject highly vulnerable to effects of both the Book and, as it turned out, some of HyCon's own corrective measures. Another was an amnesiac agent that, while completely ineffective as far as a subject's mood went, would completely remove their memories over a specified length of time and force their brains to compensate by inventing a hazy and completely inconspicuous gap in their memories, although anything more than a couple days' worth of amnesia would likely require hospitalization and some degree of rehabilitation. The amnesiac agent proved extremely helpful under circumstances where people had suffered great mental trauma or stress, and was later put to use by various psychological institutions, but there have also been rumors that it has been used for darker means, up to and including assassinations in the midst of crowds.

Despite these gains the project was considered a failure, and the Book was put in deep storage pending further secret study. There it sat, supposedly untouched and gathering dust, and would have been resigned to forgotten academia and pernicious rust had its caretakers not begun to hear that the Book had been sighted elsewhere in space. Lo and behold, they found that their own unit had disappeared.

They kept out probes for the Book, but to no avail. Thankfully, while the Empires had long since heard the stories of the Book's existence and potential power, word of its availability did not get out. As a result, the Society had time to recruit and train special task forces, staffing them with individuals who had a natural immunity to the Book's effects, and keeping them on standby while hunting down clues as to the Book's location. It was a tough task, as it had to be kept secret, but the kitzes' isolation came to good use. Several offered their services as training grounds and ended up breeding some very effective and quite intimidating groups of HyCon ops, many of whom never knew who they were working for.

Their progress is documented elsewhere. The Society continues to operate, and its HyCon agenda is still very

much a part of their methodology, though in a form far removed from its original version. Society scholars have gone on record stating that while they feel the Book's prolonged storage in Society kitzes certainly was a mistake, this little misstep should not reflect badly on HyCon nor on the Society's contributions to education in New Eden. It is certain that in specific circles the Book debacle has reawoken suspicion that the Society may be hatching new plans of political dominance, but the enormity of its efforts to retrieve the Book has gone a great way towards assuaging those doubts.

It is, of course, entirely possible that the Book's disappearance was no accident. Cynics might claim that the Society was beginning to worry that its Hyperconsciousness agenda, and the careful manner in which it had educated and molded its wealthy and powerful non-Jovian students, might be seen as the starting moves in a new political game of strategy, and that the hunt for the Book was meant to serve only as a decoy. If so, it was an incredibly dangerous move, and likely made with the arrogance of superiority. It could very well be that the Society never expected that any other force in EVE might find out so quickly about the Book's existence and start its own hunt for the item.

Black Mountain: Pushing Towards Bliss

"How're you feeling?" Hona asked. She had just entered Nale's cabin, and was sitting alongside him on the bunk."

Nale rubbed his temples. "Feeling fine."

"You don't look it."

"A lot of things have changed. It's tiring."

She turned to him. "I'm not blaming you, you know."

"I know."

"About my entire crew being turned to vegetables."

"I know."

"I should be, but they knew the risk, same as me. All that matters now is to stop her."

"Yeah."

"But I still want to know-"

"Because I didn't realize her people would be immune, too. If I had, I'd never have let you or your team board that ship. I didn't imagine in a million years they would set off the Book. I thought they were thugs." He ran a hand through his greasy hair.

"Guilt?" she asked, before regretting it.

"Tired," he simply said.

"Could you tell-"

"It's made by the Jove. They wanted to counteract the Jovian Disease, that immense sadness which kills them. But it didn't help, and all it did was brainwash people. At lower levels you'll be left happy, calm and without much drive to do any harm. Higher levels, well, you've seen those."

"Can-"

"Yes."

She got angry at that. "Cut that out. How do you even know what I was going to say?"

He looked at her with eyes that were far too much at ease. "I can."

"Oh really? Can you see what I'm thinking, too?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Fine, mister psychic. What number am I thinking of?"

"Two."

She stared at him.

"It's in your eyes, and the way you sit," he said. "I can see everything now. Everything."

She kept staring at him. "That machine changed you."

"Yes."

"The others, too?"

"No, just me. At least on my own team."

"Why you?"

He sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "My trainers would probably say I showed immense aptitude. I beat everyone else in the tests they laid for us. I'm a bit of a prodigy, it turns out. But that's not it."

"Then what is it?"

"I'm dying."

Her jaw dropped. She started to say something, but he interrupted.

"Don't. Please. It's chronic, but causes no pain or discomfort. One day my brain will simply tell my body to stop. It's a condition far older than this mission of ours, and it should've killed me ages ago, since exertion is known to bring it on, but apparently I'm tougher than I thought." He inspected his nails, searching for the words. "Anyway, ever since I found out I was going to die, I saw things in a different light. It's weird, really. I sat in a small room, listening to a voice tell me I was a dead man, and it felt like I was the only thing in this world left untouched. Yes, I was the one who changed, I was the one who found out that my own personal sphere of existence had been irrevocably altered. But I was still the same person, or at least I felt like I was. The world itself, everything that is not me, that's what changed."

"Or your perception of it."

"Precisely. And I can't tell you how liberating it was. All those old worries of the world, they vanished. The rules had changed, altered, gone even. Ever since I got the diagnosis I could feel my mind casting off its weights. But even so, something remained. It's like being told the answer to a puzzle, but not having figured it out yourself. You can see why it is the way it is, but you can't intuitively understand it, and thus it feels like you haven't got the answer at all."

"I know what you mean," she said.

"And then, as luck would have it, the Sisters swooped in and carried me away. And for a while, it helped, but it still wasn't enough. It gave me purpose, gave me an answer, but I still hadn't figured out the question." He got up, picked up a backpack and said, "Let's go for a walk."

They left his quarters and headed towards the cargo bays.

"You're different," she said, in the tone of one who's earned the right to say a thing like that.

"Yes. It's the Book."

"How did the Book change things?" she asked.

"It opened my eyes to the larger picture. It explained the answer and the question, at long last. Even after joining the Sisters I'd still been playing the same game, with all the same worries and doubts, right until the encounter on that ship. You can't do that and honestly expect to make a change. What happened showed me that people can be freed from fears and terrors. They can be made to understand everything."

She furrowed her brow, then asked him, "You're not seriously suggesting what I think you are?"

"Well, I can't rightly free someone the same way that it happened to me, through a chronic illness leading to death. That would be a horrible thing to do. So we can use the Book instead."

"That is horrible."

"It's what my people were planning to do all along. I just didn't realize it until I thought the whole thing through. You're a captain, you've been in your share of fights. Have you never had a moment where you wished you could make everyone stop? Where you were so utterly tired of wading through blood that you wanted to grab the world by the throat and scream in its face?"

"Of course I have. So you want to lobotomize them?"

"No. At lower levels the machine simply erases warlike thoughts. There's probably a subsection of the human race it won't affect - the people we're after are apparently immune, for instance - but for most people, they'll be granted peace and serenity. They'll be a little sluggish, I'm sure, but they won't be killing one another, or suffering the same endless doubts that I did."

"Do you even have approval for this?"

"It is right. I need no more approval."

"Nale, you're talking about taking away people's will, and their freedom of thought."

They rounded a corridor, and walked down a metal stairway. Their feet clanged on the steps.

"Let me ask you a question," Nale said. "Why are you a captain?"

"What do you mean? It's what I do."

"Great, that's how it should be. Why?"

"Because. Because I want to do my part in protecting the Cartel. And because I'm good at it."

"Do you like doing things you're good at?"

"Of course."

"And do you like doing your part for something you believe in?"

"So long as my conscience can live with it, yes. And before you say a word, I may not always be perfectly happy with the way the Angels run things, but it doesn't compare to what you're planning."

"Never said it did. Why do you like doing those things?"

"What do you mean, why?"

"It's your life's work. It's what you spend most of your day engaged in. Why?"

"I don't know. Because it gives me satisfaction, I suppose. I'm part of something, and I get to do it well."

"Why?"

"Look, is there a point to this?"

"Absolutely. Keep answering the questions. Why do you want to be part of something and do your part well?"

"Same reason everyone would, I guess. To feel my life has a purpose."

"And if you feel your life has a purpose, what does that do for you?"

"It makes me happy."

"Precisely," Nale said and gave her a frightening smile. "Anything you do, any purpose of your life, it'll eventually boil down to happiness. That's all we want; that's all everyone wants. The way we tear each other apart every day is borne only out of frustration that we cannot find the happiness we seek."

"Funny, I thought it was a bit more complicated than that."

"It is if you let it. Most people don't truly think about why they do what they do, no matter whether it's drinking a bottle of Quafe or putting a bullet into someone's head. But you take almost anyone in this world and ask them why, believe me, it'll boil down to happiness in the end."

"You know, even if you were right, there are other ways to achieve this. People don't need to be brainwashed. You could simply encourage them to seek their own paths."

"Most people are self-destructive, and unreliable even toward themselves. As a rule, they don't put much effort into their search for happiness, and no amount of positive encouragement is going to change that. Why do you think holoreels are as popular as they are, and meditation isn't?"

They came to a door. Nale took off his backpack.

"Still," Hona said, "You could do it differently. You don't have to push people towards bliss. You can encourage them to seek it themselves."

"I'm not going to stand there, like a mad prophet, constantly harping on other people to go after their true purpose in life. All I'm going to do is eliminate the roadblocks."

Hona stepped in his way, and looked him straight in the eye. "Don't do this, Nale. Don't. If you even manage to regain the Book, you've no guarantee it'll work like you think, and even if it does, you'll be taking away people's basic rights. You'll be no better than the capsuleer who ruined our mining colony. And besides, how on earth will you achieve any change? What if the effect is only temporary?"

"Then we will use it on the right people first; the ones who determine the lives of others. Everyone at the top of the social stratus. Leaders, and dictators, and every capsuleer we can get to. After that, we will find ways of duplicating the Book, and we'll start to spread its word to the masses."

She goggled at him. "You're talking about a revolution here. You're going to be violating people's basic rights on a fundamental scale."

"The fundamental right of man is to be happy," he said to her. "You'll see. This is right. It's the only thing that makes sense."

He went around her, opened the door and stepped into the empty storage room beyond. He removed something from the bag, then dropped it outside the open door.

Hona looked at what he was carrying: Four inertial balls. She gave him a puzzled look.

"I've modified them slightly," he said. "Removed the acceleration inhibitors."

"Are you trying to die?"

"I'm trying to see if I'm worthy of the task I've undertaken."

"How will you even know, apart from not ending up a bloody mess?"

"I'll hear it on Black Mountain."

She hesitated at that, unsure of what to say, and he turned away from her, whirling the inertial balls in his hands. There was a soft sound and a click, as of a gun being drawn and cocked.

Nale did not look back. "Now or never," he said, and after a moment he heard the door close behind him.

He smiled, and closed his eyes. The spirits moved around him, their hazy shadows enveloping him. Their whispers told him the truths.

He threw one ball. It bounced off the floor and sped up; bounced off the wall and sped up; bounced off the ceiling and sped up. Soon it was a blur, zooming through the room at bone-breaking speed with a cacophony of gongs as it bounced off the walls. Nale listened closely, and every time, stood where the soaring missile didn't go.

He threw the others, moving lithely from place to place as they bounced around him, his eyes opening and closing in tune to the blinking lights on the tree that still reached for him. He avoided its grasp, and he avoided the soft, soft rocks that bounced around, beckoning to him to hold them, to let them touch him.

They went faster and faster, until the entire room was covered in hazy, half-seen trajectories, the rocks tearing their way through the empty air. And still he dodged them, at a speed unimaginable, as they roared through the rapidly heating air, their hisses melding with that from the frustrated tree of kingdoms. The spirits guided him, and slowly the floor disappeared, until he was floating above the tarry sea of the shadowy angels and shared unconscious, seeing everything, knowing everything, in tune with the world, on this path that led inexorably to freedom.

Black Mountain: The Canvas

The infrastructure was looking shaky, but the hidden patterns told Shiqra he was safe, and he was sure they could get to a few more people before risking collapse. He'd been leading his team deeper into the bowels of the asteroid colony, finding survivors, tagging and prepping them for assistance, and verifying structure integrity so that the rescue squads could move in.

Shiqra was leader of a Sisters of EVE scout team. They ran in first, moved fast, found the victims who needed help, and moved on. Most of their equipment, which was kept as light as possible, consisted of structural and explosive gear. They had scanners, too, ones that searched for heat and electric signatures, but these rarely worked all that well in environments that were falling apart.

The path they were on forked into three routes, one of which was open, the other two caved in. Adjusting his ocular scanning, Shiqra saw high heat beyond the closed entrances. There would be blazing fires on the other side, which wouldn't threaten the Sisters but did block out any chance of automatic life detection.

Shiqra stood there for a moment, regarding the three routes. Long waits were not an option; life would be running out for whoever was trapped in the mines. He picked the leftmost path, one of the caved-in ones, and signaled to his teammates to hole it through. They all wore fire- and shock-resistant suits with full-head facial masks that were outfitted with air filters, night-vision specs and inbuilt voice transmitters, though the transmitters were rarely active. They were easy to use, but the team had long since gotten into the habit of nonverbal communication. Words were a waste, down in the darkness. Words were empty when you were cradling the dead.

His team, which was unquestioning in their obedience, immediately set up a Spoke bomb. Spokes were supercompressed constructs of interconnected tritanium pins encased in an isolated chamber, with a small discharger set at their center. When a Spoke ruptured and the tritanium came into contact with air, it would expand violently, blowing away anything in its immediate vicinity. The tritanium spokes would click into place and form a complex prismic polyhedron, similar to a hubless wheel. The spokes were perfectly balanced, and effectively created a hole in a wall through which a person could pass. It wouldn't be big enough to let through a rescue team laden down with equipment, but then, it didn't need to be. The scout teams only found people; they did not cure them, and the proper rescue teams had their own demolitions gear.

The team passed through the Spoke gap and rushed on. Down holes and chutes they went, Shiqra first, and it was as if he were hunting for ghosts, chasing the steady clockwork rhythm of a heart before it could beat it last. He took each turn with no hesitation, rushing through with complete assurance of motion. He could never tell anyone else this, but he knew his way around by now. He was starting to pick up the patterns.

He found himself distancing from the process, going out of his body as if his corporeal self were controlled by some outside force, and he thought back to the first heavy-carnage missions he'd been on.

He'd done a few regular scouting missions, and loved them, but was still hesitant about the job. He was escaping a bad life of drug use and self-abuse, and had really found himself in the Sisters, but he was always afraid of relapsing, of losing control. It felt like there was something curled up within him, something that he'd never been able to control, and even as he got over the withdrawal effects and experienced the joy of helping people - and the sadness and horror of losing them - this core remained, untouched and waiting.

It wasn't until he went on the first mass-rescue mission, in yet another pirate refinery wrecked by some murderous capsuleer, and came upon the first mass of writhing, screaming humanity trapped within, that he truly felt this core inside of him start to crack open. It was horrifying, so horrifying that his mind left his body and he looked down upon himself as he tagged all those people - putting markers on them that would let the rescue teams find them and prioritize their care - and then kept on going in search for more life. It wasn't until much later that he realized he hadn't disconnected to save his sanity; he had done it because he felt, at last, like he was part of something larger than himself. He was no longer the focus and the center of his own little perceptual world, and that little core inside of him, that compressed ball of potential, began to respond to this new widening of the world. It started to unfurl, to stretch out.

Back in the present, Shiqra found himself at another passage. They'd passed a couple more people, tagging them as they went along, and were now at the entrance to the mine's deep, less traveled sections. The rock here was too thick for any signals to pass through, so they'd have to go entirely on instinct, and without any communication. There were several possible ways they could go, and Shiqra immediately split the team up into pairs of scouts, directing each pair towards a particular entrance. One of his team members, possibly nervous about going dark and losing all chance of communication, spoke out loud to Shiqra and commented with far too much cheer how he always seemed to know where to go, to direct them so they didn't end up under the falling girder or the exploding vat of acid, or whatever. His voice broke the silence like a shot and made the other team members nervous, but Shiqra laughed, and replied that he'd done a lot of these missions. It was no answer, he knew, but in the suffocating darkness of the mines, it sufficed, and calmed.

The scout pairs went their way; those who were going into open entrances started running, while the ones who needed to clear away rubble readied their Spoke bombs. Shiqra watched while his team trickled away. It was

policy to travel in teams, but his status as team leader, and his renown as one of the Sisters' best scouts, was sufficient that he could travel all alone. His reasoning was that when he found a trail he would travel so fast that others had problems keeping up with him; and his team, which had worked with him for a while, uniformly agreed.

After he'd seen off the last of his teammates, he set off a Spoke on a remaining passage he'd indicated he would explore. He waited until he was sure that everyone else was out of earshot, then ran back up the passage they'd come, until he reached a side tunnel that they'd missed. It was hard to spot; the entrance was in a dark part of the mine that even their night-vision didn't cover well, and it hadn't been shored up properly, so it looked like a bountiless cul-de-sac full of rubble.

Shiqra knew better. He'd seen the signs.

He used free-form explosives to clear off some of the rubble, then a Spoke to make a hole through which he could crawl. When he was through, he disabled the Spoke's safety and deactivated it. Rubble fell back into the hole, and it looked as if it had never been there.

Shiqra descended.

As he'd done more missions, he'd felt a growing need to partake in the bloody ones, the missions where participating rescuer workers usually got put on leave for a few days after completing. That feeling of being a part of something greater, of being nonindividual and yet being important, was constantly on his mind.

And eventually, he began to see the signs. The other pieces of the mosaic. The other strokes of the brush.

That thing which was curled up inside him, that core no one could see, was the dawning understanding that someone was behind this. Someone had created these situations and was using them to make a kind of living - and dying - work of art, and in Shiqra's attraction to them he had become an element of the masterpiece.

It was entirely possible that he had gone mad, of course. He didn't doubt that. But he also didn't doubt his feelings, and he listened to them. Other team members often spoke about numbing yourself to experience, but that kind of attitude was anathema to him. He wanted to feel it all. And by and by, he started to find the patterns.

He began to exhibit an amazing ability to find living survivors where local interference meant scanning equipment couldn't detect any. But he knew he was simply being led there, and being tested. At every turn there would be an omen. Sometimes it would be obvious to him, though nobody else would notice: an oddly broken rock lying among the rest, a tatter of clothing hanging from an inconspicuous part in the ceiling, or some barely noticeable spatter of blood on a nearly hidden surface, all of which were out of place. He never mentioned these signs, but merely followed them. As he progressed, they started disappearing, replaced with the far more potent absence of anything important at all. The silence and emptiness in certain paths told him just as much as the noise and the visuals had done before. They spoke of unfulfilled potential; something could have been here, they said, and as it wasn't, he should investigate further.

There was something responsible for these catastrophes, Shiqra decided, a pattern to the blood and fire, and it was leading him on.

It happened only sporadically. Not every rescue mission he took brought him closer to transcendence. But he learned to recognize the ones that would, such as when they occurred and under what circumstances, and managed to find more and more. And every time, he progressed deeper, and his core stretched out and began to fill his body with truth and art.

He was going down the hole now, being led through dark places, following the patterns. Sometimes he'd see a hint, sometimes he wouldn't. This was initiation as much as invitation.

And at last he came to another pile of rubble that clearly was empty and devoid of any kind of interest. The absence of life was all the invitation he needed. He detonated a Spoke, opened a hole to the other side, and crawled through.

He made his way into a large, circular room that was a testament, a living altar. Bodies were strewn about, shredded and burned, and the few who seemed still alive were barely so. There was mining equipment here, and it had been put to use.

And in the middle of the room, sitting on top of a pile of equipment as if he were an emperor on his throne, sat a man who he'd later know as Yorlas, holding a massive rifle called a veinshredder.

Yorlas, who was apparently quite comfortable where he was, leant even further back and watched Shiqra with languid eyes. Then he raised the veinshredder, pointed it in Shiqra's direction, and fired.

In that split second, Shiqra's instinctive reaction was not to dodge the shot or move from its trajectory, but to

stand still and accept it. It took his body a moment to realize that nothing had yet torn through his body, and he was truly surprised, not merely instinctively but intellectually, at not having been shot. He realized that he had accepted the firing, almost as a rebirth, and that this man, who he knew without doubt was the one responsible for this catastrophe and so many others, was the artist whose red, red paint had covered Shiqra's canvas core.

Shiqra then realized that something else had been shot, and that whatever it was, it was thrashing about behind him, making horrible screeching sounds. He didn't look back. What mattered was in front of him: The artist, and the masterwork, and, approaching them with equal trepidation and joy, their supplicant.

With the barrel of his massive gun, Yorlas pointed towards a glinting patch on the floor. A knife lay there. "Take it," Yorlas said, "And kill yourself."

Shiqra hesitated, not out of unwillingness but simply surprise at the request. He walked over to the knife, hefted it, gently tested its edge. It was sharp, and he knew that once he turned on its diathermic field, it would slide in without any resistance.

He didn't want to do his. He wanted to live. Of course he wanted to live. But that was not what this was about. He was not the artist, and it was not his to decide what his own fate would be. He was the brush with which the work was painted, and the canvas that gratefully accepted its art. Tools could not disobey their masters. He felt a budding kind of pride, because he realized he was being reminded of his place, and while he still felt that he could be of use, he didn't question the art. He knew he would serve a purpose that reached far beyond himself.

Yorlas put the veinshredder aside, laced his fingers together under his chin, and watched Shiqra intently.

Shiqra pointed the knife against himself and was about to plunge it in when Yorlas yelled, "Stop!"

In the silence, there was nothing but the silent breathing of the walls, the condensation drops falling on blackened rock, and the cough and gurgle of the life that lay around them, passing away.

Yorlas said, "Change of plan," and nodded his head towards an inert form that lay in a corner. It was a person who was barely moving, having been cut and beaten quite badly. It was a woman's form, in torn miner's clothing. She was thin and apart from her injuries did not look very old or worn; she couldn't have been working in the mines for more than a year. She had long, white, curly hair. Possibly she had been an overseer, or one of the engineers making an inspection.

And without hesitation, but without any hurry, Shiqra, still holding the knife, went over to her, took hold of her hair and rolled her over so that her neck was exposed. His grip on her hair was firm, lest she struggle, but there was no need for it; her eyes rolled around in their sockets to catch a glimpse of him, but otherwise she was completely docile. Shiqra crouched, and slowly sunk the knife in her throat.

She made coughing motions, but otherwise did not move, and Shiqra idly wondered what the artist had done to her to procure this kind of serenity. They must have been here a while. He knew she was dying now, but it felt like something more was expected of him. He repositioned her and cupped his hands under the bloodflow. After he had a full hand, he began to walk the room, sprinkling and smearing the blood on the walls like the apprentice painter imitating a master artist.

He did this until the blood ran dry. Yorlas didn't speak much during the entire process, but then, he didn't need to. His actions had set the stage, and Shiqra was merely signing the work in his name.

And when it was over, and the sacrifice done, Shiqra stood with his eyes closed, and felt that unfurling core reach out to its full length, the canvas stretching itself taut, until he had lost almost the final vestige of whatever had held him back.

But something remained. There was a purpose for him here, something that would keep him going forever, the brush in the artist's hand, but he had to know one thing. The last doubt, rubbed away.

"How did you know I would kill myself?" he asked Yorlas.

"Why do you need to know?" Yorlas asked in return, with unhidden amusement in his voice.

"I've done everything else. I am someone else. The one I was always meant to be, I think. But still ... how did you know?"

Yorlas leaned forward and, in three short words, completed the change, and stretched the canvas to its full and unyielding size.

"You were smiling," he said.

Black Mountain: A Pleasant Surprise

Draea's team was convinced they'd thrown off any trails, and contacted the Society for further flight instructions. They received a bookmark labeled "hidden kitz", along with two pieces of coding information that they added to data chips they'd picked up along the way.

The bookmark took them to an ancient stargate that looked like it was falling to pieces. There was no detectable activity on any part of the gate, and after trying several times to establish basic contact Krezek threw up his hands in disgust.

"Have you tried the password?" Draea said. She was sitting at the controls on the other side of the bridge, running last-minute checks on their weapon systems in case the gate flung them anywhere interesting.

"There's no point in trying the password unless I can get a channel to the gate."

"Try the password."

"There's no point!"

"Krezek-"

"No!"

Polok, who was standing behind Draea, leaned in and murmured, "We're all on edge here, so don't push the boy too hard. Remember the nestlings."

She stared at him in incomprehension, then ordered Krezek to get out of his seat. She moved over to his place, and he started hovering around her like a parent having his infant inspected, asking what she was planning to do. She said, "I'm planning to drill a hole in your head if you don't stop breathing down my neck. Go have a drink."

Polok hung back, without comment. Once Krezek had left, Draea said to him, "I don't think that the dead piece of metal we're seeing on the screen is only that and nothing more. I'm going to open a monoplex channel to the gate and throttle transfer from the data chip. You, on the other hand, are going to explain the nestlings."

Polok had taken Draea's old seat and was leaning back in it so much that he could place his feet up on the control board. He grinned and said, "I figured you knew about this already. Krezek and I worked on some assignments a few years back. Ugly stuff, mostly, with a lot of tense downtimes and waiting in bad places, so we ended up shooting the breeze. Krezek was good backup, by the way, but he was an absolute A-type who just had to do things in his own orderly, logical fashion. He gets a strange kind of peace out of it, and if things get too chaotic - not messy, just nonlinear - he'll develop some really weird tension relievers."

"So far, nothing new," Draea said, "neither on the gate nor Krezek. Nestlings, explain."

"When Krezek was a boy he was, like the rest of us, rather ... special. Brilliant, but he had no concept of right or wrong, or why on earth he should follow social mores. I do this stuff because I like it, you do it for whatever reason you have, but to Krezek, death and torture are just ways of relieving the tension, and bringing the universe back to order."

"Still nothing. Maybe I should open multiplex instead. Keep going," Draea said.

"One day, after he'd suffered some particularly vicious beatings from his stepdad, or his teacher, or whoever put that dark little seed into his childhood head, he went down to the local bird-feeding park and sat down by its little pond. They were using Soft Crumbs there, you know, stuff that's chemically designed to attract birds so they won't be frightened off by hyperactive, screaming kids. So he brought a few bags of Crumbs, tossed a handful out into the pond in front of him, and these tiny little baby birds start swimming up to him. And Krezek, wonderful, twisted Krezek, starts picking them out of the water, them so calm and relaxed from eating all that chem-laced bread, and he wrings their necks. He picks nestling after nestling out of the water, calmly twists its neck so its tiny beak is pointed towards its tail, and lays it to the side, until he's got a nice big pile of dead little birds. And the funny thing is, he doesn't do it with any kind of menace or satisfaction. It simply feels like something he needs to do, to fulfill his role and adjust the balance of the cosmos or what have you. He opens bag after bag of Crumbs, tosses endless handfuls to the poor young, and by the end the pile of birds is bigger than he is. He only stopped because his hands were getting too greasy from their down."

Draea stared at him. "That's ... messed up," she said at last.

"Yes."

"I've cut more throats than an army of barbers, and that's still way messed up."

"That's Krezek. Any luck on the transmissions?"

"No, but I've got an idea. We've been sending this signal encoded - which is stupid because there's nobody here to spy on it anyway - but since we're not actually getting a response from the gate, we've no idea whether it's accepting the transmission method. And if it isn't, the rest of the message it receives is just going to be some random stream of garbage. I'm going to try sending it with just the base encoding, nothing fancy."

"Is this all highly complicated?"

"Mmm, not so much. Why?"

"Because I've been looking at the control board, and you've been doing quite a bit more than just hailing the gate."

"Mind your own business," she said, without much rancor, but paused her actions.

"It's almost as if you're sending data to someone else, too."

"Yeah?"

Polok ambled over and sat down beside her. "It's no mystery, you know."

A smile crept into Draea's features.

He continued, "I don't mind. I like a good fight. But I can't help wonder why you want him. I doubt he could fight his way out of a tent."

She said, "To be honest, I'm not even sure myself. You can have the rest of them as far as I'm concerned, but him, I need to talk to. When we activated the Book, something happened, and he was part of it. You didn't have any visions during the blackout, did you?"

"Nope. Stone cold," he said.

"Figured. I did."

"And he was in it?"

"He was. And what's more, it feels like we're connected now. He feels like the other side of me, one I wasn't even aware that I had."

Polok gave her a strange look.

"I know," she said. "I don't like it much, to be honest. I saw some things in the fugue that I need to clear up, and I've got an ugly feeling that if I don't deal with him now, he's going to become a much, much bigger problem later on. So I'm leading him to us."

"How do you know it wasn't just some total hallucination?"

"Two reasons. First, it felt more real than anything. Second, well ... toss a bullet." She pulled out a small knife from her belt, and stood up, but remained where she stood and did not turn to face the bridge.

Polok looked at her askew, but got up, pulled out a gun, took out its clip and dislodged a bullet. The manufacturer's initials had been stamped on the circumference of its rear end.

"Face the bridge," Draea said, still facing away from him and staring out at the stars. "Toss. No countdown, just toss."

He shrugged, and threw the bullet in the air, away from them.

Draea leaned her head down, closed her eyes and lifted her shoulders. She then raised the knife and, without turning, threw it back over her head.

She kept her eyes closed, and heard Polok say, "However the hell you did that, you shouldn't have been able to. And you owe me a bullet."

She laughed, sat again and opened her eyes, then pressed the activation button for the data sequence to the gate. For a few moments, nothing happened. Then there was a spark, a series of sparks, and the gate became illuminated in electricity which arced towards their ship and surrounded it. Draea saw her vessel start to move, align, prepare and, finally, warp.

A few seconds later, they dropped out of warp in front of an abandoned station of Gallente design.

They flew up to it. Draea transmitted the second code she'd received, and the station, its immense bulk floating inert in space, opened its docking bay and pulled their ship inside.

Once they were safely docked, they got out of the ship and into the bay proper. A special container for the Book was waiting for them, so they yanked it out of its original box, which they'd been wheeling around on an electric pallet, and put it into the container. It instantly closed and auto-sealed.

Using passwords sent by the Society, Krezek accessed the station's status monitors and found that large parts of the station were dark: Not in use and unable to power up to any kind of active functionality, although the atmosphere systems were apparently kept working on minimum capacity. The only fully functioning areas were a few kilometers away, in a complex of labs both scientific and otherwise. Krezek got more and more excited the further he inspected the data; apparently these were real complexes, with hi-tech facilities, torture labs - no one had said the Jove were nice - and all sorts of automated machinery to change the systems around and even alter their interior architecture. The deeper one got, the more mutable the systems appeared to be.

Polok asked Draea, "Those passwords for the station controls, you didn't share those as well, did you?" She shook her head.

Krezek was too enraptured to notice. He said, half to himself and half to anyone in the vicinity, "Gods, I'd love to try out some of the stuff they've got here. Do you see this? Self-modifying walls! And it's all wired up. It's like the blueprint for the world's biggest rat maze."

"What's keeping you?" Polok asked.

"Well, there's not much I can do with it, apart from make it reform itself. I'd need a live subject if it's to be any fun."

Polok looked at Draea, then back at Krezek. "I think there I can offer a pleasant surprise."

The Sisters ship docked at the abandoned Gallente station. Its crew - a blithe Nale, a watchful Zetyn, a frowning Monas and a very angry Hona - made its way onto the bay.

Nale had plugged the tracking device into his ship and used it to find his way here, though it wasn't until the device received data directly transmitted from Draea's own ship computer that they'd really taken off.

Zetyn checked if they could access the station's status monitors, but no luck.

Nale took the lead. They took another few careful steps, Nale at the forefront, until he stooped and picked something up. It was a little bronze pellet, and as soon as he touched it, tiny blades shot out and nicked his fingers. He didn't flinch, but lifted it to his face and smiled.

"What's so funny?" Hona said.

"We're being ambushed," he replied.

There was a tink-tink-tink sound as something bounced towards them. It was a multiburst grenade, set to kinetic. As all but Nale started to turn and run, it exploded, and the shockwave threw them unconscious onto the floor.

Black Mountain: The Sanctuary

The keyword for the Sisters is care. Not only care for others, but care for themselves. Carefulness, in fact. They've gone to great lengths in establishing themselves as a neutral party in the world of New Eden, and while some activities among their internal factions may be less than savoury, their name still stands unflecked and untainted.

The bulk of the Sisters' factional manpower is drawn from their synonymous corporation, the Sisters of EVE (SoE). This manpower is applied in all manner of ways, depending on both the individual projects at hand and the agendas of the three blocs that make up the Sisters faction. Sometimes the Sisters need faithful healers; sometimes they need worldly diplomats; and sometimes they need people of quite a different caliber.

The first bloc is the SoE themselves. As has been chronicled elsewhere, the SoE is a philanthropical organization dedicated to bettering the life of New Eden's denizens. After their performance in the Caldari-Gallente war and the Minmatar recession from Amarr, they gained the grudging respect not only of the four major empires but of various other factions as well. The SoE are the only party which can freely enter war zones irrespective of which forces are locked in combat, and they are renowned - or notorious - for assisting pirate factions in rescue operations, often following capsuleer attacks. While the SoE never choose sides in any fight, it has to be said that as a rule they do not think highly of capsuleers and their unfettered indulgence of bloodshed and mayhem; and, in fact, much of their information and even some of their equipment tends to come from faction pirates as thanks for having saved the lives of those who the capsuleers left for dead.

The second bloc is the Food Relief corporation. While Food Relief (FR) are ostensibly responsible for delivering necessities - primarily food and medicine - to those in need, they have taken a few steps into the political arena. Those steps are tentative and small, as befits any agency whose goodwill and clout are based primarily on its neutrality, and are for the most part focused on diplomatic relations such as improving dialogue with both army leaders and insurgents. FR have never officially withheld their deliveries, but in recent times there have been occasions where their medicine drops were delayed or reduced due to unforeseen events - environmental conditions, usually, or a sudden outbreak of hostility on their caravan routes - and some political analysts maintain that these delays indirectly affected the outcomes of other factions' military campaigns. The warring forces may not need FR's supplies, but they do need some manner of public support, and if the public is made to starve, so will its support. Once the media then picks up on the suffering innocents and starts broadcasting their images throughout the constellation, it becomes even more apparent to the warring factions that FR should be given due reverence and assistance.

It should be noted that the Food Relief corporation itself only deals with administrative matters, such as where to focus its drops and how much it should give to each side. The SoE contains the workforce pools themselves, and FR and the Sanctuary both draw on them when engaging in projects. The disparity between the SoE and FR is administrative for the most part, though there are subtle ideological differences: The SoE bring healing to the masses and proclaim their faith, while FR is more focused on practicality, numbers and diplomacy.

The third bloc is the Sanctuary. It is a scientific research institute, and is easily the most secretive of the three. This secrecy may seem to run counter to the institute's purpose, but has proven vital for the Sanctuary to maintain complete neutrality. There are various forces in New Eden who would much like to gain access to the Sanctuary's data on troop movements, combat avoidance tactics and combat stress resistance techniques. There are also various forces in the world of the media who would be very interested in publicising information on the Sanctuary's theological research. A century's worth of goodwill has gotten the Sisters far, but it wouldn't take much for the public's fascination with cults and occultism to override that goodwill, particularly in an organization so revered for its benevolence. Everyone loves a fall from grace.

The Sanctuary, as with Food Relief, is an administrative institution. They have their overseers and their employees, but their test groups are pulled from the SoE. However, this should not imply that the members of the SoE are all part of a faceless mass, waiting to be chosen at random by the powers above. Each member will, if he shows loyalty and talent, be given the chance to offer his services to the bloc he prefers, and work for them on a permanent basis. Faith, diplomacy and science all have their place.

This factional division, natural as it is, has caused some ideological disparity among the Sisters blocs. As a result, its leaders have been developing new ways to unify their forces. Despite some initial hesitance on the leaders' side to encourage it, the most effective way is in fact one that has cropped up naturally among the workers themselves.

The Sisters have always been unified in love, but they are also increasingly becoming unified in hate. This is not as paradoxical as first might seem. Everything has its inverse, and if you truly and honestly devote yourself to a particular entity, whether it's a physical object, a living thing or an abstract ideal, you will invariably find yourself at odds with that entity's antithesis and enemies. The Sisters of EVE have devoted themselves to saving lives, helping the sick & wounded, and gently prodding humankind to sacred ascendancy; and what foils them at every turn, in greater measure than politics and weaponmaking and natural disaster, is a force that continues to grow: The capsuleers.

Of course this is an oversimplification, and the people in the Sisters of EVE realize that as well as anyone else.

Capsuleers, in and of themselves, are no more of a uniformly evil force than any average Empire subculture, and they are nowhere near the only one that routinely causes death and destruction. There are countless atrocities performed on any number of planets, let alone in space, by groups and armies and factions entirely unrelated to ship pilots. But to the minds of many Sisters, and even of many others, the capsuleers have come to represent this malevolent nadir of humanity: They are powerful, and they use that power in the ways of the old gods, delivering it with fire and noise and blinding lights and leaving a wake of anguish, all in the name of whim and immediate desire.

This has given the Sisters something to rally around, and even if it's subtle, it helps them do their job, cursing and growling at the concept of capsuleers while they patch together yet another whimpering group of collateral damage. It should be noted that since the Sisters of EVE cannot afford to antagonize the capsuleers, they use only dutifully appointed representatives that actually quite like ship pilots. But on the ground floor, things are a little different, and with this kind of dark unification factor, there will always come those who take it too far and want to become proactive. There have been stories of the SoE doing more arms training than before, and of Food Relief taking decisions that are decidedly more militaristic in nature, even going so far as to demand personal information on capsuleers in exchange for providing assistance.

In and of themselves, these developments are not that surprising: The SoE always have to be ready for combat and thus periodically renew their teaching syllabus, generally putting a higher focus on self-defence each time; and Food Relief want to plan their operations without having to fear interference by rogue capsuleers, which means they have to know something about them. It is the Sanctuary who have taken their anti-capsuleer stance to the furthest and most dangerous point, and they are the one corporation within the entire Sisters of EVE faction that can now be said - carefully, for nothing they've done has been proven, and as the Sisters tread with care around us, so must we around them - be schisming from the rest. There were even hushed rumours of their theo-technological research having taken dark and occult turns. One particularly enduring tale is that at some point an informant gave the Sanctuary information about something called a Book of Emptiness, a powerful machine once developed and hosted by the Society of Conscious Thought but now adrift in space, and that this same informant included a piece of proof called an Oblivion Cocktail that was based on the same tech. It is said that it was easy work to adjust the Sanctuary training of its SoE recruits in order to prepare for possible engagement over this thing - search and rescue missions were already part of their agenda - and to filter out from the SoE masses anyone who was immune to the Book's effects and vulnerable to the Sanctuary's propaganda. If true, this godsend would give the Sanctuary an opportunity to further its agenda without sharing too much with the other blocs, to a point where they might even attempt to gain control of the entire Sisters faction, followed by so much else. The current status of this rumoured project remains unknown, but given how far-fetched it sounds, the public doesn't seem much bothered. Besides, even if it is true, there is cause to rejoice, for the rumour has a second part: There is a counter-revolution within the Sanctuary, a force of individuals who are against this secret development, having seen its subtle poison, and want to turn the corporation away from its evil, dangerous path and back towards the Sisters' true purpose, without risking that their corp or the faction as a whole lose its reputation and power in the process.

If one lends credence to rumours, it might be assumed that these underground forces for good don't stand much of a chance, for evil tends to prevail. But the Sisters of EVE are masters at handling themselves in adverse conditions, and it is in their nature to face reality and deal with a situation as it is, not as they'd like it to be. They will not be led by dogma for long.

This counter-revolution, if it exists at all, will undoubtedly proceed under the Sisters byword. They will let their enemies think that everything is alright until the time is right, and they will not impose on, expose or affect anything until they are ready. They will be efficient, and they will be swift, and they will be very, very careful.

Black Mountain: Polymelia

Zetyn came to, and rubbed his head. He was wearing most of his clothes but had lost all his gear and, oddly, his shoes. His bare feet felt cold on the hard metal floor.

He was sitting in the centre of a small crossroads. It was dark in there but not too dark to see, and as he looked around he saw that everything - the floor, the ceiling, every wall - was made of equal size metal panels. The wall panels had inset windows made of thick, glasslike material that rang out dully when Zetyn reached up and knocked on it.

Faint fluorescent lights shone out between the edges of the panels, giving the space a dusky luminescence. The corridors were wide enough for a man to barely touch them with arms outstretched, but the ceiling was low and oppressive.

There were four ways he could go, but each way was a tiny cul-de-sac, terminating in another metal panel. Zetyn had no idea how he had even got in here.

He went to his hands and knees again, feeling too unsteady to walk. His head still throbbed, so he crawled all the way to the end of one corridor. He reached the end not even intending to put his weight on the wall but simply to touch his forehead there, against the cool wall. As he did there was a crackle, a feeling like a million little needles all jabbed into his head, and he was thrown backwards with a scream.

He lay on the floor, quivering and breathing rapidly. He felt his forehead but there didn't seem to be any bleeding, though he was now sweating so much that it was hard to tell in the gloom.

A voice spoke, "That was stupid."

He looked up. There was no one there.

The voice spoke again. "Try the other doors."

Zetyn dragged himself to his feet, being careful not to touch anything around him. He focused inward, pushing his panic down, reaching back to all those times he had been surrounded by blood and despair and yet had kept his head. His body finally stopped trembling, and he started looking around, wondering who it was that was watching him.

The watcher apparently misunderstood his intent, for the voice said, "Oh, the side walls are perfectly safe to touch."

Zetyn didn't trust him. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm the one who put you here."

"Why? What's this all about?"

"Not dying," the voice said, with an emphasis that implied this would be the last it would speak for now.

Zetyn gingerly made his way to another end of the crossroads. On the way there he peered out the windows but saw nothing on the other side. There were perhaps the faintest outlines of other windows beyond them, but Zetyn was not sure if it was really that or just a reflection of his own corridor.

He stood in front of another door - the ends of the corridors looked exactly the same as the rest, but the voice had called it a door and Zetyn was now starting to do the same - and took a deep breath. He reached out a hand and paused, listening intently for anything - the crackle of static, the faint whisper of a laugh, anything - but there was total silence.

He pulled his hand back a little, then punched it forward, smacking his entire palm against the panel.

Nothing happened. His jaw began to ache, and he realized he was gritting his teeth.

The voice piped up again and said, "Well done." The panel he'd touched slid aside, revealing another crossroads beyond that looked exactly the same as the one he was in.

Zetyn stood there for a while, not crossing over, beginning to realize the kind of predicament he was in. He wondered whether to try for flattery, then decided it was too early and he might as well test his warden's ego before getting hit even harder. "I'm not sure I trust this thing. You made it?"

"Yes," the voice said, with no discernible pride.

"How do you know it won't just kill me outright?"

"That depends on the choices you make. But it'll work like I say it works."

So. He was convinced of his abilities, at least, Zetyn thought. He stepped over the boundary and into the new crossroads. Behind him, the new panel slid noiselessly back into place.

"Is there a single exit here as well?" Zetyn asked.

The voice said, "Possibly."

"And anything that's not an exit..."

"Will be a circuit closer. The floor's electrified, but you're fine so long as you don't touch the wrong exit. I might be a little more lenient if you can tell me anything juicy about your friends"

Zetyn rubbed his eyes. "I dunno what you're talking about. Is that the reason? Did your own people put you up to it? Why are you doing this?"

"Well, the setup itself is a little experiment of mine, one I've always wanted to do. Behavioral therapy and biofeedback research. And yeah, I wouldn't mind knowing more about the people you travel with. But really, this whole thing ... with all the stress and annoyance you've put us through in the whole hunt, I wanted to set the world right again, and find a quiet little corner in it for myself. So I guess you could say I'm putting you through this just because I can."

And that was that. It was, Zetyn had to admit, the most honest answer he could possibly have received to the question.

He stalked to the opposite end of the crossroads and put his hand on the panel with determination and vigor, both of which disappeared the instant his flesh touched the metal. There was a crackle, and Zetyn screamed and dropped to his knees, clutching his hand.

Above and around him, the voice casually stated, "You know, as a hint, there's only one way out of this particular section. All you need do is find it."

Zetyn got back to his feet, stumbled to another part of the crossroads, tried to empty his mind before he touched it, and was immediately thrown back from the force of the shock."

"There you go," the voice said. "Only one possibility now."

Zetyn was on the floor, breathing rapidly, tears of shock running down his face. The panic rose and he couldn't hold it down, so he let it grow, let it erupt, and let the anger take over. He rolled to his hands and feet, sprang up and ran screaming at the fourth and final door, slamming into it with all his might. His shoulder hit first and the impact numbed him down to the fingertips, jarring his entire frame, and left him in a heap, on his knees, his head hanging down.

In front of him, the door slid open.

"I admire your verve, if not your intelligence," the voice said. "I hope you can keep it up, little nestling."

"What..." Zetyn tried to speak, but had to catch his breath. "What kind of place is this?"

The voice, sounding happy to be asked, immediately replied, "The panels aren't that special, least not the base design. They're electricity-based, more than you realize, and can be programmed to do any number of things, from electric fences to vidcasting. This place has an insane amount of them, probably mean to construct a training grounds."

As Zetyn half-crawled into the next chamber, the voice continued, "They're set on tiny rails that slide under their own power and can be made to continually reposition the panels, so that you've got a self-adaptive, semi-autonomous scaffolding. It doesn't even have to be big; the one you're in is only a few rooms back and forth, constantly sliding and adjusting. I give the system a few parameters and it does the rest."

"And what were your parameters?" Zetyn asked in a hoarse voice.

"Make a deadly maze," the voice said shortly, then returned to talking about the hardware. "Regular panels can't have their electricity set too high, but that's easily fixed if you know what you're doing. The first versions were far more potent but got outlawed shortly after, when people started getting seriously hurt. They were called skimmers, and the name stuck."

Zetyn really didn't want to know, but he asked nonetheless. "Skimmers?"

"From how they could skin the flesh off your bones if you weren't careful."

Zetyn sighed. He sat with his back up against a wall, eyes closed, head hanging down.

The voice said, "Look up."

He didn't look up.

The voice said, "If you look up, little nestling, I'll tell you which door is the right choice."

Without letting the damning, spiteful thoughts of his own cowardice surface in his mind, he looked up.

There, behind a glass pane, stood a man. He was a Caldari, rather thin, with a silly haircut and a pale face. He had a stare that Zetyn recognized; it was the gaze of a man who no longer saw the life around him, or felt part of it. Zetyn had seen it in dying people, and in those who'd caused their deaths.

"I'll be your guide," the man said, and his voice suffused the chamber.

Zetyn stood up and walked to the window. He stared at his tormentor for a while, then snarled and slammed his palm hard on the glass. The man didn't even blink. It was stupid, Zetyn knew, and wouldn't do anything to help him get out of there, but he couldn't help it. He composed himself and said, "What is your name?"

"Krezek," the man said. "What is yours?"

"Zetyn."

"Glad to meet you, Zetyn. Take the first door on the left."

"How long do you intend to keep me here?"

"As long as you need."

"Need for what?"

"To get out. The parameters for the skinner rails generate a code-based maze. If you figure it out, you can go free without so much as a scratch. If not, well, you won't."

Zetyn said, "I was never good at maths."

"That's a shame. Especially since the code is self-modifying based on operational feedback. Make too many mistakes and the patterns will start to change, and you'll need to start all over again."

"And you're going to stand there, to watch."

"For people like you, I've got all the time in the world," Krezek said.

"People like us?"

"Nitwits who think they can change the world, make it unstable. I wonder where your friends are."

Zetyn looked around the empty metal maze. "I wonder that myself. In fact, I wonder if I know them at all."

"You're not with them, I take it. You just got pulled along for the ride. A victim," Krezek said.

"No more victim as anyone else, I suppose," Zetyn said, "but at this time, in this place, I have no friends. Guess I should get better at making them."

Krezek, leaning in a little closer, said, "I suggest you also get better at maths, real quick, and stay away from the electric skimmers. Eventually the shocks will wear out your heart, and you'll start to get palpitations. They can be quite unpleasant, I hear. Fatal, even."

Zetyn stared at him, then walked away silently and headed for the first door on the left.

His flesh felt like it was going to tear itself off his body, and he didn't care. He'd stopped crying; had left behind those gasping sobs of sorrow and hope, and moved beyond them, into a place of darkness and acceptance. His hands wouldn't stop trembling, but he viewed them outside himself. He was a machine now; his sole purpose to keep moving, keep looking, keep being shocked and keep opening doors, until he could finally find the one that would end this.

At one point he'd pressed a lucky door and suffered no shock, but the floor panel itself had slid aside, dropping him so far that when he landed and his head hit the ground, he'd heard the crunch on the inside of his skull.

Sometimes the panel overhead would open, and he'd be forced to climb up, his entire body shaking with the effort. The first time this had happened he hadn't noticed, and had screamed with frustration, thinking this was the end and all he could do now was roam around until he finally died.

Krezek had followed along; sometimes voicing support or commentary, sometimes appearing in windows. He had, he said, programmed the skinner complex so as to always afford him a parallel route to Zetyn's gauntlet, so that he could follow along and peer in on his subject whenever he wished.

And so it might have gone till infinity and oblivion, but Zetyn heard a whisper. It said, "Right turn, and watch the floor."

Zetyn looked up. On the other side of a glass panel stood Krezek, as usual, with his composed, aloof expression. The whisper had not been his voice; it was full and resonating while Krezek's voice, with which he'd spoken at full volume the entire time, was a pinched and whiny thing, like a winged insect trying to escape from under a thumb. Krezek didn't appear to have noticed it.

Zetyn wondered momentarily if this were a trick, but discounted the notion. His torturer's mind games were mechanical, not interpersonal.

He hauled himself over to the right-hand door and stood in front of it. He told himself he was weighing his options, but in truth, he was trying to savor the moment, to enjoy the budding little seed of hope that could blossom into the assurance of deliverance. The instant he would touch the door, he'd know.

Then he remembered what the voice had said about the floor, and he turned on the spot, putting his back against one side of the corridor and pressing his legs against the other end. It hurt like blazes, but the pain felt good, and he used it to push harder, until he was reasonably sure that he wouldn't tumble down if the floor gave out.

"What are you doing?" Krezek said from behind the glass prison walls.

"Changing the game," Zetyn muttered, not truly caring whether his tormentor heard him. Keeping himself clamped up against the walls, he reached out one hand and gingerly touched the door. If this failed, he knew, he would die; the last ember of hope would be extinguished and he'd fall down like a pile of dead ashes.

His finger brushed the door. There was no current, no arc, no crackle. The floor panel beneath him merely slid open in silence, and Zetyn let himself slide down slowly as well, trying his hardest not to hope.

He hadn't been on the new floor for five seconds when the whisper was heard again. "Opposite door." He got up, walked over and pressed its panel. It opened.

He walked through, and the whisper said, "Left turn." Through a glass panel he saw Krezek show up, running along. Krezek's face registered surprise, the first expression he'd shown so far.

Zetyn turned left, rushed through that door, and waited for further instructions. There were none, and for a moment he thought his benefactor had abandoned him. Then Krezek showed up on the other side of a nearby glass partition, and Zetyn understood. The whisperer wanted to make itself known.

"The next one is going to be left, then straight, left again, right and the ceiling, and straight," the stranger said. It was no longer a whisper but a full-fledged voice, and while there was an odd tonality to it, Zetyn immediately recognized its owner. It was coming from Nale.

"Who is that? Who's there?" Krezek demanded. He put his face up against the glass and goggled at the room, his head moving back and forth. When he saw no one but Zetyn, he seemed to settle down a bit, and even flashed a brief smile.

Nale spoke up again, "Actually, you think you can memorize a longer sequence?"

Over Krezek's outraged screams, Zetyn grinned and nodded.

"All right. Take the ones I told you, then left, left, straight, left and floor, right and floor, straight, right and ceiling, left. Got it?"

"Got it," Zetyn said and set off, Krezek yelling at him all the way. It occurred to Zetyn that his upset wasn't perhaps from fear of his own life from the intruder, but from frustration that this little world he'd created was being upended. In his rush of hope and relief, he couldn't help but feel amused.

Nale kept giving him directions, and Krezek kept yelling. There were bangs and hammerings on the panels, which Zetyn imagined were from Krezek either taking out his frustrations or scampering around trying to find Nale. If Krezek's description of the maze had been right, Nale would have had to have been incredibly inventive to hide from the man, but he'd apparently succeeded so far. Zetyn himself had discovered new reserves of energy and was now rushing through the maze at high speed, slowed only by the time it took the doors to open.

And eventually, they got to the end. Zetyn stepped through yet another open door, and the corridor he entered was lit up with a green light. It was small and faint, but in the endless gray gloom Zetyn had suffered it felt like a blazing torch was shining into his eyes. He stumbled towards the light, feeling with his hands, and found that it was a panel set in the door on the opposite side of the crossroads. The panel was about the size of Zetyn's chest and had no borders. Its black surface had a green hue about it and was overlaid with a grey rectangular grid. When Zetyn touched the surface his finger left green ripples, as if he'd dipped it into water, and the grid realigned itself into concentric circles. He touched it again, and it changed to a series of digits. Another touch, another ripple, and the grid changed color to a bright turquoise and reverted back to squares.

"Good luck with that," Krezek said. He was standing on the other side of a glass panel right by Zetyn's side. Their faces were half an arm's length apart, and at that moment Zetyn wished more than anything he had in his life that he could punch through the glass and tear Krezek's throat out.

"The lock is adaptive. It will adjust to everything you touch and realign its key accordingly," Krezek said.

"You're such a delightful human being," Zetyn said, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice. He was so close to getting out, he could feel it in his bones.

"The adaptation formula is based half on the one that modified the maze you just got through. So with your little drone helper hovering around somewhere, and believe me, I will catch him eventually, you shouldn't have any problems."

Zetyn thought about that sentence, and the quiet satisfaction it seemed to exude. He said, "What's the other half?"

"A code only I know."

"... right."

"You can find it, mind you. As soon as you'd left the first room, I dropped in a note in there with the code. All you need to do is backtrack to the start. Shouldn't be hard. Oh, and the currents in everything but that black panel are now lethal."

"You do enjoy this," Zetyn said, trying to keep calm and desperately hoping Nale had something up his sleeve.

"Damn straight I do. And while you're been working your way through my maze, I've been readjusting the panel controls. I know exactly where your little angel is going to be this time around, and even if I can't get to him, all I need to do is electrify every panel in his room, and he'll be gone."

"We better get it right the first time around, then," Nale said, appearing behind the glass on Zetyn's other side. "Do as I say at all times. First touch the upper right corner of the panel to reset it."

Zetyn did so. Both of his people, angel and demon, watched the scene closely.

"Now, don't touch the panel. Instead, slowly hover your finger over its top left corner and drag it to the right, as if you're tracing a straight line. When you get to the end, bring the finger back to the left, just below where you started, and do the same. Push the panel only when I say."

"What are you doing?" Krezek said.

"Getting him out," Nale said. "Do it."

Zetyn started, slowly tracing his finger a fraction over the panel's surface. He hadn't made more than three passes when Nale suddenly said, "Push and repeat."

Zetyn obeyed, touching the screen, then starting again. It took a few more passes this time, and he was almost down to the bottom of the screen when Nale gave the command. Each time he pushed, the screen would realign itself into new types of grids and colors.

And there came a point where Nale told him to stop, and said, "This one will be the last. Once you touch it, and once the door opens, run and don't look back."

Krezek, who'd fallen sullenly silent, exploded. "You couldn't possibly have done that! There is no way you could have backtracked to the first room, gotten in, and gotten back out without altering the skinning order. How the

hell have you been doing this?!"

"Faith," Nale said, which shut him up.

Zetyn pushed the panel. It made ripples that spread continuously outwards to its edge, so that the panel was still rippling by the time the door slid open.

Zetyn ran through, into a long corridor with a light at the end, and did not even hesitate as he went through the light and was in the air, flying and running, and even after he fell into the safety net below, his feet were still moving. He scrambled out of the net, not sparing even one glance upward, and made it down to the ground proper, where he managed all of ten steps before the adrenaline ran out and his legs gave way. He crawled on all fours until he made it to a wall, and noticed with an ugly grimace that he instinctively shied from touching it. He made himself lean up against it, and turned around, looking at his old prison.

The maze was a strange thing when seen from the outside. It was like a facsimile of a piece of pollen; a roundish creation from which protruded countless metal bars and jutting panels. Its metal gleamed in the lights from the ceiling. Every now and then a panel would be retracted and another pushed out instead. Clearly, the maze was still reconfiguring itself. He wondered if Nale and Krezek were still in there. If Krezek were to emerge as the winner, Zetyn didn't even know if he could find the energy to scamper away. He kept an eye peeled on the one exit in the maze, the one he'd come out through.

The panels stopped moving. There was silence, then a few bangs, then nothing. Zetyn held his breath.

There was a whirring sound. A panel slid over the exit, and the maze was sealed.

Zetyn exhaled, and kept exhaling until his vision darkened, his eyes rolled back in his head and his consciousness faded away to blissful oblivion.

A noise awoke him with a start. It came from around him, but his first instinct was to look up at the maze, and he saw that it was open again.

He scrambled to his feet, unsteadily. It felt as if he'd been sleeping for days. He didn't know whether Krezek might be around somewhere.

There were steps to his right. His heart did double beats.

Out of the shadows, Nale appeared. He walked close to Zetyn but remained out of arm's reach. "Rest easy," he said. "I am still with you."

Something in his manner made Zetyn's flesh crawl, but he attributed it to the horror of the maze. "Krezek?" he asked.

"Krezek is gone," he said.

Zetyn felt awash with relief. He started to crawl towards him but Nale backed away slightly. "I have work to do now," he said.

"What do I do? Are you going to get Monas?"

"Monas is gone, too," Nale said. "I could only save you."

Zetyn covered his face and tried to keep his breathing steady. After he felt he could speak again, he said, "So what now?"

"You go by yourself. Get to our ship. Leave."

"And go where?"

"Back to our people. Tell them what happened." Nale turned and started to walk away, but hesitated and said, "Well ... leave out the ugly parts, though."

"What are you going to do?"

"Find salvation," he said, and resumed walking away.

Zetyn watched him recede, and realized that he might never get another chance to ask a question that had been burning into his mind. "Nale?"

"Yes?"

"How did you manage it? In the maze."

Nale smiled faintly. "I listened to the rails, the way they slide together. I didn't conceptualize Krezek's mathematical formula, whatever it was. I simply saw everything as it was, and acted accordingly."

"And the code?"

"I watched Krezek as your hand hovered over the panel. His eyes told me when to press."

Zetyn stared at him. Finally he said, "Nale?"

"Yes?"

"Don't take this as any kind of judgment, please, but I don't even think I know who you are anymore. I love you, man, I truly do, but you've gone through the wall of craziness and out the other side. Whatever you are, I doubt it's human."

Nale's smile turned into a grin. "We're all just limbs of the same body. Good luck, my friend." And he was gone.

After a while, Zetyn got to his feet, and started making his way back to the ship.

Black Mountain

Nale and Hona stood in front of a large warehouse. It was an unnerving place; the entire area was suffused with a strange smell, and there was absolutely no action, movement or sound detectable in the surroundings. The doors in front of them, the height of a five-story building, were locked with complicated electronic safeguards.

"Are you sure it's here?" Hona asked him.

"It's here," he said. "This is the end, and a new beginning."

"She's going to kill you," she said.

"I've died twice already," he said. "One more time won't hurt."

"Twice?" she said.

He nodded. "Once when I found out about the illness and joined the Sisters. And once on Black Mountain."

She was about to respond when the locks turned off in unison, and the massive doors creaked open.

They walked into total darkness, and the doors slowly closed behind them. The smell here was far more intense. It reminded them part of the sea and part of badly cleaned space ships.

A vast light blinked on overhead, and they saw what was in front of them. The room was dominated by a huge, open pool of pod liquid, and stretched over an expanse so vast that even with the light above they still couldn't see to the room's other end.

In the ectoplasm floated various pieces of regenerated humans, or some things that at least seemed within shouting distance of humanity, including various organs, half-formed rib cages, spines of varying sizes, and yellowish, mottled limbs. There was a square grid marked on the floor of the pool.

Lights flickered on in the entire hall. It was circular, with only two ways to get past the pool and to the other end. Across from them, a faint sight in the distance, stood Draea, with something box-shaped beside her that was covered in wires and glowing with red lights.

Speakers on the wall buzzed into life, and her voice echoed through the hall. "When I got here the pool was covered with plexiglass, and each sample was kept in a separate compartment. A few commands to the control system and all that glass slid aside. This place is so adaptable. I love it."

On her shoulder she had slung a large gun. "One of my men is busy with his hobby, but the other I've lost contact with. And I see you brought a friend, someone who looks suspiciously like I met them in the past. How did you find me, by the way? And no need to shout; there's sensors that'll pick up your voice."

"The same way I found Zetyn. I just followed the path," Nale said. Behind him, Hona, who'd shivered at the word 'hobby', slowly drew her gun.

"What path?" Draea asked.

"My own. Have you forgotten what you saw at Black Mountain?"

"I try not to think about it too much."

"Then you are lost."

"Big words coming from a-" Draea said, then stopped in mid-sentence and threw a knife at him. It hurtled through the air, aimed not at Nale but at Hona, and even at that great distance it moved so fast that she could not react in time. It speared the gun out of her hand and kept right on going. On the wall behind them there was the sound of steel breaking.

Hona looked at it, then over to Nale, then back at the remains of the knife. "Nale, she broke the knife's blade."

"We'll be fine."

"You don't understand. There's a dent in the wall. She threw that knife hard enough to break its blade."

Nale turned to her. "Don't lose faith. She was only testing us. We're doing the right thing here."

There was a sigh in the air and Nale bent almost imperceptively. The knife headed for his neck missed him by a hair's breath and, like the last, broke against the wall.

Sounding completely unperturbed, Nale asked. "Is that the Book beside you? Did you bring it here?"

Draea pointed to the box beside her. "That's it. I could wire it up from practically anywhere in this station, but I liked this place. Keeps people at a distance."

Nale visibly tensed. "Wire it up?"

"You didn't know? We're supposed to destroy it. The Society didn't trust us to do it on our own, so they made us find the thing and bring it all the way here. I've got it plugged into their system so that they can verify it hasn't been tampered with, opened up or copied. Once I give the command, those same systems will disintegrate it, to the point where there'll be nothing but atoms floating on the breeze. I'll be done with my mission and will go get my reward."

Nale stared slowly walking around the pool and towards Draea's distant form. "I saw you there," he said. "At Black Mountain. Why would you ever want to destroy the Book?"

"It's what I'm here for. Why do you want to keep it?"

"Because it can save the world."

"From what?"

"Blood. Violence. Hatred. We can change the world, Draea."

"That's nice," she said. "Tell me about Black Mountain."

"You saw it, same as me. A walk through a desert, surrounded by spirits. A hike up a steep cliff, where the spirits begin to meld and rush forth. And, beyond that, the sea of dreams, overseen by the stars."

"Why did it change us?"

"Because we were ready. I was hoping that you would also be ready for the next stage. We're getting closer to ascendancy."

"And that includes dying, does it?"

Nale stopped short at that. "What?"

"In the vision. I realized that you were dying. Is that part of this grand plan of yours?"

Nale smiled, and began walking again in her direction. "We're all dying. Just some faster than others."

Draea sighed. "Over the last few days I've gained incredible focus. I can hit harder, move faster and aim better than I ever could in my life, and believe me, I was no slouch before. I was hoping that you could cast some light on this. I'm not in the mood for religion."

"That's a shame." He began to walk faster. At that, she pulled out another knife and, without even turning her gaze away from him, threw it into the air. There was a ping as the knife ricocheted off a wall, and a scream shortly after. Far away, Hona dropped to the ground, clutching her leg.

"One more step and your girlfriend dies," she said. "Stop trying to sneak."

Nale said, "If it's necessary, then so be it," and kept on walking.

From far behind they heard Hona choke and cough. Draea grinned wide. "I'm surprised," she said. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"She's just another spirit," Nale said. "But why bother? It's me you want."

"It is?" she said, still grinning, but the grin had turned cold.

"We've had a melding of consciousness. The spirits flowed past us, participants in an endless cycle none of them can break out of. None except you and me. We stood there, on Black Mountain, and we saw the dream-sea. I accepted and joined it, I drowned, and gained an oversight over the entire world."

"And that talent allows you to dodge everything in sight."

"Yes. And it uncovered the truth of the Book and of everything surrounding it. This is something we need to do. This is what's right. You had the same experience; surely you've come to the same conclusion. We need to save this world from itself."

"No."

"No?"

"Your focus widened, fine," Draea said. "Mine narrowed. What I saw in that unconscious moment was not some hyperextended superconsciousness, it was a shrinkage. I stood atop this Black Mountain of yours, and the entire world narrowed to a point, reduced, brought directly into my aim. And now I've got you in my sights, you and your craziness."

Nale stopped cold at that.

"I would never be part of this world you want," she continued. "This grand design of yours, this satellite view, it's nothing to do with me. I am the focus; I am a laser. And all I want is to get better at what I am and what I do."

"You are hyperfocused. You are alone of your kind. You are alone in this world," he said, in a dead voice.

"You lie," she said with a smile, remembering a similar lie so long ago. "There are others like me. And now you've made up my mind."

Nale started walking again, a determined expression on his face.

Draea quite relaxedly raised the veinshredder. "Not only have you made it amply clear that you're perfectly useless at helping me improve my skills or explain what happened, but you want to rid the world of all people who harbor hatred, rage and war in their hearts. People like me. We really can't have that."

Nale was running now, far away from her but still close enough to aim at.

"So all the reasons I let you in here are no longer valid, and you've become nothing but a weak, sad opponent with delusions of grandeur," Draea said. "You're wrong, and you're probably insane. I hurt and murder and kill for my own personal reasons, but I never dream of thinking that it's morally right or just. It's what I do, nothing more or less. Some might say that it makes me a lesser monster than you, but I suppose it doesn't matter. Any last words?"

"Die," Nale said.

Draea smiled, and fired the veinshredder. The spheres zoomed towards Nale, curving gently in the air so as to compensate for his moving heat signature, but he easily slipped past them. Draea emptied the clip, but none of the shredders touched Nale's moving form as he zipped and weaved on the wide walkway. She reloaded and kept firing, her deadly missiles pinging off the walls and falling into the ectoplasm below. Nale bobbed and dodged as he ran, sweating madly, his eyes unblinking as he approached. Draea's smile faded as she concentrated on hitting him, but every shot, even as it curved towards his head and body, managed only to whiz by him and hit the walls around his running form.

At last he got too close for safe range, so Draea tossed the gun, pulled out a knife and set her feet. He lunged at her, she ducked and swiped the knife, and he wasn't quite quick enough to turn out of range, the blade leaving a bleeding surface trail on his torso. She turned, intending to plunge the knife into him, but he'd already pirouetted and now went for her knife hand, clamping on to her forearm with both his hands, stepping outside it and violently turning his shoulder into hers. She got levered down and for a split second felt like her shoulder was going to be wrenched out of its socket. He started kneeing her in the thigh and ribs, and she dropped the knife, spun around and punched him in the throat. She had little weight to put into the punch, and it was weak and flailing, but it was enough; he gagged and let go, and she yanked the arm back and started backing away, on instinct pulling out a gun and aiming it at his momentarily still form.

It was too late; he spotted it and launched after her. She dropped the gun and barely managed to put her hands up before he was on her, bowling her down to the ground, sitting on top of her with his hands closing around her throat. She buckled, rolled him over and managed to break his grip, but as she started punching and elbowing him, he was able to dodge every blow with ease. She jumped up and looked around for a weapon, any weapon, but he rose with her, more in tune with her motions than any practice partner had ever been. They exchanged

blows, most of hers missing him by a hair's breath but visibly tiring him when they connected; his hitting her, but her years of work in the violence of the mining colonies had left her well-prepared for body blows.

They said nothing; the words had run out and all they had now was grunts and actions, sighs and gasps and blood. His eyes, already wild, opened even wider, and his nostrils flared. He backed up, but before she could think of what to do he ran at her again, not jumping this time but instead clamping his arms around her and running towards the open pool of pod fluid, and in sheer terror she realized that he intended to drown her. Her arms were trapped, but at he drove her backwards she managed to kick up a knee and hit him in the groin. It wasn't dead-on, impacting right above his thigh, but he stumbled, and she used that same leg to stamp down hard and spin them in the air as they fell into the pool, Draea landing on top of him.

Sounds disappeared. The liquid was viscous and warm. Nale loosened his grip and resumed hitting Draea, but the ectoplasm reduced the power of his punches. She hit back a couple of times, but he dodged so easily that she changed tactics, going instead for the throat, trying to crush his windpipe. His eyes were so wide open they nearly bugged out, and as she grasped harder, and the veins in his throat pulsated and throbbed, his lips parted, revealing teeth gritted in madness. A tiny trickle of blood weaved its way from his mouth, as if he'd bitten his tongue.

She hardened her grip but he kept hitting her, and now his blows were coming in with more force, whether from desperation or pure anger. They roiled around in the liquid, spinning in a downward helix. She was so focused on crushing his throat that she didn't immediately realize they were at the bottom, so it was his feet that got planted first, and they gave him enough pushback to hit her hard, in the temple and on the jaw. The two blows rocked her, and she realized that she was almost running out of breath. She was out of knives, too, out of weapons completely, and the look in Nale's bloodshot eyes indicated that he was really no longer there as a human being.

She made a desperate choice, letting go of his throat with one hand and punching him hard on the nose; he didn't even shirk, and kept pummeling her even as he bled freely. She felt her feet touch the floor now, and out of the corner of her eye, through the mist of blood and encroaching blackness at the edge of her vision, she spied something floating around. She grasped hold of Nale's clothes and, putting all her strength into the motion, yanked him with her towards the floating object. Nale was oblivious, pounding away, and with her receding consciousness Draea realized that he truly enjoyed this, that he believed not only that he had won but that he was right, and in his eyes and in his frenzy she saw a mind she recognized so well. The recognition echoed in her head as she got close enough to the object, half a spinal column that tapered down to a point where the sacrum should have been, and it was with infinite sadness and a fading glimpse of understanding that she reached for it, grasped it with all her might, and, before Nale could realize what she was doing, plunged it deep into his eye.

He immediately let go, pulled back and screamed, air bubbles mixing with the spurts of blood from his face. She pushed herself off the bottom and floated languidly up, too shot from adrenaline backwash and oxygen depravation to paddle with her arms. Her head was covered with goo as she rose from the pool, and she barely had enough life left to gasp for air before paddling sluggishly towards the edge.

Once she had a handhold on the pool's plexiglass border, she looked back. Nale was surrounded by a cloud of blood, but appeared to be moving towards her, like some amphibious carnivore. Her adrenaline surged and she hauled herself out of the pool, coughing and wheezing as she stumbled towards the machine. She had no illusions any more of stopping Nale, of playing with him like a toy, of grabbing a gun or a knife and facing off. He was a monstrosity, almost beyond her comprehension. Her life was secondary; all that mattered was that the Book not fall into the hands of this madman.

She reached it just as he hauled himself out of the pool, and even through his wheezing and gurgling she heard a throaty, phlegmic sound and realized that he was laughing. It stopped just as soon as he apparently saw where she was headed. He screamed incoherently, a string of almost glossolalian words, and gave chase.

She grabbed the catalyst sitting beside the Book and slammed it on top of the machine, rolling its sphere back to green and holding it there. It jittered for second, and then the sphere spun out of her control. Both it and the sensors on the Book itself rolled through their scheme of colors, blinking green, red again, then yellow, orange, blue and indigo, and just as Nale reached her with his hands going for her eyes, the sensors hit purple.

There was a loud hum, and the last thing either one of them ever saw was each other's face, Nale looking like the maddest of prophets, Draea content and grinning like a harpy. For the last time she looked deep into his eyes, and she saw him realize, at the same time as she herself did, that the reason the Society had brought them all to this prepared, pre-wired place that nobody would ever miss or wonder about if destroyed, was that this was the end, the place where they would bring armageddon to being. In that infinite moment Draea acknowledged to herself what she'd always known, what she'd been told so long ago, that all her life she had wanted to be caught, and to be caught in fiery, destructive glory.

Beside them, the machine began to glow, smoke rising from its innards. There was a rumble far away that slowly turned to a roar; the floor began to quake and the pod fluid sluiced up out of its pool; and if either one of them had hesitated in their death-dance, they would have heard the walls start to come down.

Metal tore, and plastic melted, and stone turned to glass.

And in a flash that blinded everyone in the instant before they were vaporized, the end of days arrived, and the entire station exploded like a nova.

Black Mountain: Dismantling

The repair facility falls to pieces. The metal debris which dotted its floors now flies through the air, shaken like dust in a gale. Some of it has been here almost as long as the station itself.

For the longest time it had seemed like the station wouldn't get built at all, surrounded as it was by scandal, controversy and rocketing costs. Planetside resistance was immense, and build approvals were only ratified after the Gallente government threatened to use the planet for experiments in geoengineering. As it turned out, the station became so beneficial to planetary business that when someone suggested, years later, that commutes between the two be curtailed for reasons of security and planetary independence, it effectively ended his political career.

The facility was among the first rooms of this station to be built, and it was a symbolic one, meant to indicate that in the tumultuous process of creating the spacestation all wounds had been healed and all reputations repaired. Unfortunately, the ratification process had taken so long, and deadlines were getting so close, that shady deals were made and substandard builders were given contracts based on promises of speedy work.

While no major catastrophes occurred, various niggling problems would hound the station operators for a long time afterwards. There were always indications that some of the raw material used to build the station hadn't been quite as fresh as the builders claimed, but had instead been brought in from destroyed ships and ruined colonies nearby; the lesser the costs of transporting it through dead space, rather than constructing it from scratch down on the planet. Surprisingly, while it sometimes interfered with more complex operations, this mishmash of construction did not affect the station's basic stability - amalgamates are always stronger than pure metals - and if someone noticed an odd curve or bend in the architecture as the station was being assembled, they didn't comment.

Long after, when the station had been abandoned and cut adrift, its new inhabitants did not even venture once into the repair areas. This was a secret place, not a safe haven, and you did not dock here expecting refuge.

One of the pieces from the repair facility, a massive metal girder, pierces the already weakened blast doors and goes through, crashing onto the walkways below. They shudder from its impact, the tremor leading through the walkways and up into the walls, where it combines with the station's own trembling death throes until the air is filled with a discordant hum, like a hymn sung by machines at prayer. The vibrations get worse, until the station seems to be breathing, its nooks and crannies shrinking and expanding in tune. The windowframes suffer for this, and in short time the few remaining windows are shattered, even the bulletproof ones, even the blastproof ones, showering their glittering edges onto the broken paths below.

Worn hands built these walkways. Tired souls fitted the glass in its brand new window slots. There was hope and hard work here. The rumors were that the entire project might be endangered, so people pulled together, and people worked hard. Some of them didn't last, and left silently on shuttles that took them anywhere they wanted on the planet below. The ones who did make it through stood in their places of honor at the station's inauguration: Down below, in the gloominess of steel, machines and noise, where they had to be if anything broke or bent out of shape. Nobody else saw them, but they didn't need to be seen. They were everywhere, in the rivets and welds and wirings of the world around them.

Glass breaks all over the station. The main walkway, where the shopkeepers used to hold court, gets covered, and it's as if there was a blizzard. There are no signs here any longer, no marks of past vendors, and the only thing that lasts is the graffiti etched into the stores' metal walls. Then the walls themselves begin to topple, one after the other, revealing the dusty, vacant spaces inside. After one set of walls falls over it lets out a mass of antiques, priceless artifacts in almost pristine condition, trapped in there as if they'd been in invisible amber.

To ensure fairness and discourage agglomeration of big business, vendors were let into the station according to a weighted lottery. Some known trademarks made it in without question - Quafe was one of the first - but the end result was a varied selection of known and lesser-known names. Laws were passed on the amount of money a company could funnel into its station stores and on-station advertisements, and some restrictions were placed on the extent to which larger companies were allowed to browbeat the smaller ones into submission through sheer force of presence, but that was it. This being the Gallente, it was expected that once business started, the best man would win.

The brotherhood that had formed among the station creators did not extend to the shopkeepers, and dirty tricks became the rule. Surprisingly, the small businesses did much better than the large ones, at least initially; their

owners had clearer memories of their startup days and had less inhibitions about bending the rules. Everyone loves the underdog, and every time the small businesses put one over on the big companies they became all the more popular. As time went on this led some small businesses to become medium-sized businesses, and eventually the smallest ones got squeezed out. It was harsh, but that's how it went.

When several stores banded together to create a mutually operated mall - one of the many workarounds around the merger laws - one still resisted. Since this rebel was located right in the middle of the other stores, they focused their attention, pooled their resources and, after luring away key employees who had insider knowledge of the lone business, managed to put it out of action. As it turned out, the business space was in a dead zone of the mall area, so the others merely walled it up untouched and turned it into a general notice area. For years that area would serve as a reminder of the futility to stand against free enterprise and, to more cynical eyes, as a plastic-decorated war memorial for the dead and gone. Its contents, like a sacrificial offering to god, were never spoken of nor touched.

Close to the shopkeepers' areas there is an open square. A gigantic piece of the roof breaks away and falls onto the square, goes through it and doesn't stop until several floors below. There is a pause, then a rumble, and what is left of the ceilings above is lit up by an orange light. The light changes, gets brighter and starker, and for a moment its glare is reflected down to the chaos below. Shadows are cast, flickering and black.

A fireball erupts from below, roars through every level and sets the floors ablaze. It doesn't scorch the debris but melts it, disintegrates it, blasting through everything in its wake until it hits the ceiling, where it spreads out like an inverted tree taking root, its magmatic tendrils trailing through the air and hissing as they land on the ground below.

This square was once the base of operations for a fledgling union movement. It started with one woman, a low-level engineer frustrated at low pay and plexiglass ceilings, who began meeting with other workers and speaking of the hazards and dangers of station repair jobs. She was charming and well-spoken, and had that governor's combination of steely presence and welcoming aura that made her audience both appreciative and attentive. When the group began to grow and people started to worry about reprimands by station authorities, she made the remarkable choice of moving their operations out into the open, settling on a small square where they spoke freely among themselves. Any outsider could stop to listen and hear their plans, or see them argue. It was a brilliant but dangerous move, and it worked; they were wiretapped, of course, but the powers that be didn't know anything more than everybody else who passed by, and eventually the crowds began to grow. When the police threatened to disband the meetings due to overcrowding, they set up keyless video feeds, ones that were streamed live through other

open datafeeds, piggybacking on their signals, and could be decoded at receiver ends with datakeys that were given out freely and anonymously. The authorities never quite knew for sure who was watching.

The seething magma melts through the floor and pours into tunnels and crevices below. There are crackles and sparks, and the square's electrical wirings give out for good. There is a series of twangs as the remaining cables, overstretched and overheated, finally give out, lashing their way out from the gaping hole in the center and flicking at one another like mad fencers. Eventually they, too, give out, and hang there limply, pointing at the abyss.

The authorities, annoyed at the stir the group was creating among station workers, eventually decided that people, deep down, didn't want to risk the station's own well-being, and that an aura of assistance and goodwill would better resolve the problem than harsh tactics would. So they gave in to the various demands for workers' rights the group had posed, but declared that as the station would now have to re-budget for assured self-sufficiency, and since they could not levy more taxes on the general citizenry, they would have to cut nonessential services. For some unexplained political reasons these cuts, which restricted availability of everything from unlicensed mind clash game broadcasts and non-brand egone sets to Quafe shots and low-grade alcohol, affected recreational activities enjoyed almost exclusively by the lower classes. Right after the cuts were implemented there was a surge of crowd control issues on station, to which the administrators responded by cracking down even harder on imports of various incendiary goods, adding that these restrictions would be reviewed after the workers' rights issue had been resolved. Cheap alcohol and budget risque entertainment products fell right off the radar.

It wasn't long before the masses reacted. Graffiti denouncing the workers began to appear in the more rundown areas of the station, followed by barroom conversations that got increasingly loud and spirited. The flashpoint came when a channel formerly reserved for sports was shut down and replaced with direct vidcasts from the activists' meetings. Someone in the bar put down his glass, got up, yelled incoherently at the video screen for a while, then drunkenly marched off proclaiming that he was going to give the activists a piece of his mind. Others followed, word spread, and by the time the progression got to the square it numbered in the hundreds (though minus the original instigator, who'd stopped at a street corner to pass water, fallen over his own legs, and passed out) and was in very red spirits. The activists were dragged off and nearly beaten to death. What saved

them was a group of station police officials, who, eventually, made their way through the angry crowd and set up an inertial shield around the beleaguered activists. This effectively trapped them inside, like animals in a zoo, while the mob pounded on the shields from the outside.

When the crowd finally dispersed and the police lowered the shield, the activists walked away, each in a separate direction, without saying a word. Their group was disbanded from then on. The station took them in, healed their wounds, then offered them each a lucrative and quite public corporate job. They each took the offer, and worked with loyalty and dedication and unquestioning verve for the rest of their lives. Their offices, by their own request, were located so that they looked down on the square, through unopenable windows that housed bulletproof glass. Nobody else took up the mantle, and since the activists' meetings had all been broadcast through unofficial channels, station archivists did not keep copies of the group's discussions. Restrictions were lifted, alcohol and entertainment returned, and whatever it was the group had fought for was forgotten, as was the group itself.

Not every action has a reaction, and not every movement leaves a trail.

The living quarters have all but collapsed. The first ones to go were the high-rise buildings, spacious and fragile, followed by the ones standing unsupported next to open spaces that once housed parks and fashionable market areas. Even the apartment buildings, the stalwarts of cramped living that towered over the darker parts of the station, have given way to the fire. Remarkably, the only spaces still standing are the Rust buildings, tenements meant for people who'd fallen on the hardest of luck and were stuck on the space station with nowhere else to go. Space is always at a premium and so the Rust flats are squeezed in tight, with little space for anything but sleeping and eating and despairing. But there's such a mass of them, huddled together like animals for warmth on a cold, cold night, that they practically support each other. They don't give way until the ground itself gives, and even then they take a long time to fall.

Back in the days when its inhabitants were breathing, every now and then love floated through Rust, catching the unwary in its grasp. And sometimes he beat her, and a few times she was afraid she was pregnant by someone else, but they loved each other, and their relationship outlasted many others, for that is what love does, for better or worse. Their quarters were small but big enough, and they raised several children there, those of whom survived to adulthood eventually lived in bigger quarters than their parents, and wore grey clothes and grey faces.

After the Rust collapses, everything goes. Corridors throughout the station crumble, taking with them whatever they were holding. Plummeting alleys, once dark, are lit by the rumbling fires below before disintegrating. In one of these a man known as Polok can be briefly seen before he, too, falls into the fire. His work takes longer to fall, as if it wants to hang on and endure, if only a few moments beyond Polok's last breath. At last it gives way, to be licked by the flames, engulfed, swallowed whole, and in their crackling roar the unseen listener can still detect its tearless sigh of relief. Everything ends. Everything always ends.

A long time ago, a childless, middle-aged Amarrian couple walked through this territory for some unthinking reason, and in their shiny shoes and unholed clothes were set upon by several denizens of Rust. Bitter and frustrated, the inhabitants took their life's anger out on the poor couple, demanding things they couldn't give, threatening to take even more, and eventually making good on that threat. Whether by accident or brief, unthinking intention, they left the man dead in the street, and ran away before any of them thought of taking the woman's life as well.

The couple were religious, and as the man's life ran out he struggled to say a prayer he'd learned as a child, one that supposedly would guarantee his passage into the heavens. In his life he had long since learned that this guarantee would come not from words praising the next world but deeds honoring this one, but at this moment, in this cold and lonely place, it was all that came to mind. His wife, crying silently, comforted him the best he could, but he died with the prayer unfinished on his lips.

Afterwards, every year on that particular day, she would return, alone, carrying blessed water in a small container. She would go down on her knees and begin scrubbing the area where her husband had bled to death. Word spread, and it was made clear by official and religious authorities both that any unpleasantness towards this lady would lead to a scouring of Rust.

People guessed that she was trying to wash away her husband's blood from the unholy site where he'd been slain. In reality, she was sanctifying the ground that had received his warmth, and praying, to any gods that would listen, that even though her husband had not managed to finish his invocation, he would nonetheless be let into paradise.

And now the structure gives way for good. Central walls are shaken down, support girders are parted like chaff, and the destruction moves to the core of the station's heart. The fires tear their way through every part of the station like ink in water, so omnipresent that they can no longer be distinguished from their surroundings. This place is fire now, it has become an inferno and no longer a station, and all that remains is for the outer walls to part and crack and reveal the gutting within. A station's exterior is always the toughest part of its structure, for whatever happens inside may never be allowed to breach the outer shell.

Someone went insane. Nobody minded, because they were a colorful breed who talked to themselves, to others and to anyone who was or wasn't there; perfectly charming and civilized. An old man who walked through this little world, telling people he would go on until the end of time. He lived in the same place for most of his life, and while nobody knew when he'd moved in, everyone felt that it was as if he'd always been there. People liked him.

And now, when he's been long forgotten, a secret place is breached, somewhere that was also long forgotten by all but this man and the ones he brought here. This place is among the last to go, and it spews out whatever had been stored inside. Leather straps. Drawings and discolored photographs. Little shoes.

They're shaken out, and burned in the fire, at last, at long last.

And with that, as if breathing its own sigh of relief, the station, purified and clear in purpose, goes nova. Steel and stone, plastic and rock, and everything else that ever was, all grind themselves apart like the station is trying to fall to pieces and stay together and reach out in a thousand directions at once.

And with a flash that glows through the vastness of space, all these memories are gone.

Black Mountain: Sounding the Horns of the Hunt

Jonak and I were bringing our vessel back to home when we got the call. I had recently switched teams within the Sisters of EVE, joining the Sanctuary at long last, and the missions could be draining. I'd been hoping for this one to be a nice, quiet trip back to base for reassignment briefing and a bit of a rest.

We were in Ammatar space, and there were no other Sister ships in the immediate vicinity. The only reason we were even coming through here was that our ship needed a quick overhaul from the station mechanics. It was secure space, which the Navies patrolled, and help calls were usually routed to them.

We did have other teams on standby, but the emergency call we received was from a ship, not an orbiting object. This was unusual, since ships were far more volatile and thus didn't usually have the time to call for help from anyone but their own supporting forces. Still, the call indicated there weren't many people onboard, and that it was a serious emergency, so we changed course and sped to their position.

As we flew there, more strange information came in. The ship was apparently an Ammatar caravan, which was natural enough, and was located in a system that bordered the Angel space nearby, but they were broadcasting on our emergency band. This meant they had foregone their own corporate channel to request backup, and while the emergency band would bring in the Sisters, it might also attract scavengers.

We made it to the ship and found it a smoking husk, its engines barely firing and its hull cracked to pieces. It didn't seem to have ruptured, though, which meant there might be people alive inside. The ship was a caravan and wouldn't have had any offensive gear to speak of, but I noticed several wrecks in the vicinity and suspected those were the remains of whatever force had been here to protect it. I couldn't see whether the wrecks were Navy or pirate ships, but it didn't matter. Nothing else moved, and nobody made to attack us. It didn't feel like a trap, and for veterans like us, that feeling is really all we need to decide whether to engage.

Deeper scans verified the caravan's structural integrity and life-support systems, and so we had official permission to board. We suited up, let our ship clamp on to the caravan, set up the tube connectors, and boarded, into smoke, fire, blood and screaming.

#1: What are we going to do about this case?

#2: Well, there've been reports of the station being destroyed, but nobody's really that interested in something that's been a derelict for ages, so there won't be any press. When our cleanup team got there for official emergency assistance, the damn Society had already cleaned the scene and gone. There was nothing left to salvage.

#1: Not even a bit of the machine?

#2: Especially not the machine. It's gone, and gone for good if I'm any judge.

#1: So there's nothing left? Whole mission was a wash?

#2: No, not at all. We found out some interesting things, and there's still someone out there who we might extract valid intel from if we can find her.

#1: Who?

#2: Some Angel woman.

We moved through the ship, judging who was salvageable and who wasn't. Cherry-picking is a cold concept at best, but when you're surrounded by the rapidly dying, you don't have time to give succour. Since there was a decent amount of ground to cover in a very limited time, we covered the main areas first - ops levels and living quarters - and checked the vitals on whoever was still in one piece. There were lots of people in shock, but they'd be alright. The hardest ones to leave were those who'd had some kind of surface damage; you never quite know if they'll be in so much pain that they'll cling to you and demand assistance, and sometimes you have to be nasty and give them a little tap on the injured area, just to make them let go.

We were checking on someone whose ribs weren't all intact, when he started asking about angels. It took me a moment to realize he was talking about the pirates, and that there was probably an Angel on the ship. I gave Jonak a look, then gave our patient a quick booster shot to clear his head, and asked him who he meant.

"There was an Angel representative on the ship," he said. "He rushed to the exits when we were attacked."

"Was he armed?" I asked.

"No, just had some strange device with him, but it didn't look like a weapon."

"What was it?"

"This curved metal thing, with a red ball in the middle."

I looked at Jonak again and said, "Doesn't sound like anything I know."

He gave me a strange look and said, "No, me neither."

After we'd strapped in those cases who were near-critical and prepped them for removal, Jonak told me he was going to look for the Angel, and that I should take the casualties to our own ship and stay there. It was a perfectly sensible idea: Someone had to tend to the wounded and, if something went wrong, be ready to make a getaway. Everyone else on the caravan was in good enough shape to live but not good enough to defend themselves if some pirate started wreaking havoc. And besides, Jonak had a lot more combat training.

I kept the criticals conscious as I shuttled them through the tube back to our ship. It would make the ride more unpleasant for them, but until I could get them into our sick bays and do a more thorough scan, I couldn't risk having them slip into a coma. I kept up a gently rolling dialogue all the way, asking them about their trip here, and keeping their minds off things as much as I could.

They told me things I already knew, that they were an Ammatar caravan that had gone to the border of Angel space for some strange business. I nodded and hummed and encouraged them to keep talking, trying to judge their state by the strength in their voices. It was a secret mission, so the Ammatar corp they belonged to had washed its hands of them beforehand. If they landed in trouble, they'd be on their own. Their Ammatar employers had heard that the Angels had been making deep-space incursions into hereto unexamined pockets of space and digging up various items, including some that might prove of marked value in the future. The Ammatars didn't particularly know what these items were, and had little interest in any particular ones, but they wanted to strengthen their illicit trading ties to the Angels just in case they could reap some profits or get first dibs on lucrative offers. That was why, I realized, they hadn't sent out an emergency call to their company, but only to the Sisters.

Everything had gone smoothly, they said, until the capsuleer showed up. He'd likely been on a pirate hunt and had destroyed every Angel ship around them, then gone for the caravan. Since they'd been without protection, no Navy forces had shown up, and the capsuleer only stopped firing instants before the caravan was about to explode. He untargeted, sucked the pirate wrecks dry of hardware, and left without a second thought, though whether he'd run out of ammo or merely out of patience was anyone's guess. Of all that had happened to these people, I heard their voices take on the hardest tone when talking about that capsuleer.

I'd only just gotten them into the sickbeds and hooked them up when there was a warning sound. I rushed to the bridge and checked the scanners. The Ammatar ship was going critical. I hailed Jonak and yelled at him to get out, but got no response. I was about to check whether our connecting tube was still intact when there was a bright, bright flash, a shower of stars, and whatever was left of the caravan was reduced to a dead tangle of

metal. Nobody could have survived that explosions, and my quick scans showed no life vessels of any kind in the vicinity. The ones we'd left on that ship were gone, and Jonak with them.

I pinched my eyes shut and rubbed my temples. You distanced yourself from this, of course you did, and you shoved it down into that place where the memories lie, but you knew it would rise again, some day.

I was about to set my ship on course when the scanners informed me that someone had entered it just before the explosion. My stomach turned, and for a moment I had the strongest feeling that it was the Angel, or one of the dead Ammatars, or someone else I didn't know at all. I immediately checked the person's identity, and breathed out deeply. It was Jonak.

#1: Have our guys come up with anything to explain what made Nale lose it so thoroughly?

#2: We're looking into the nanobots, whether he got too high a dose of them. Personally, I doubt we'll come up with much. Might've been the bots, or his previous illness and whatever that did to his head, or something entirely different. We don't know everything about what happened out there.

#1: And nothing useful from Zetyn?

#2: Very little. In his lucid moments he's been perfectly willing to talk, but it's half fact and half religious diatribe. Quite frankly, I don't think we can trust anything he says, other than that Nale was definitely getting unbalanced towards the end.

#1: Shame. I don't like losing operatives, or losing control of them. We're supposed to be better organized than this.

#2: I agree. But with an operation of this magnitude, you can never plan for everything. If something catches you by surprise, you deal with it as swiftly as possible, contain the ripples, and move on with your plan.

#1: My thoughts exactly.

I immediately asked Jonak if he was okay, and he nodded his head. I was about to ask whether he'd found anyone, but held my tongue; everyone on that ship was dead, we knew that, and Jonak's face understandably didn't look open to any more questions. And besides, we needed to take care of those three survivors on our ship.

I began keying in the course, assuming I'd be going with Jonak to sick bay, but he told me to stay at the helm. He said he could easily take care of our patients - at this point it was mostly an issue of keeping them comfy and hoping they'd survive the trip - and he preferred me to stay at the helm for manual adjustment so we could get to base in better time. I agreed, so we took off.

Warping wasn't an option with our patients, and Jonak retreated to sick bay to watch over them during our lengthy trip. We had monitors on the bridge that showed our patients' status, but I knew from experience that I'd be way too busy working with the AI to get us home in good time, so I kept them off to avoid the distraction. If anything were to go wrong, either with Jonak or the patients, several emergency procedures would immediately notify me.

At one point I did turn on the sound feed from sick bay, just to give it a quick check. All I heard was Jonak murmuring quietly to one of the patients, and, after a while, the patient whispering some response. The sick man's voice was haggardly and full of pain, and I felt very relieved that he had Jonak there with him.

#1: What's Zetyn's state?

#2: The same. He still suffers from acute claustrophobia and is making even less sense than he did before. We're keeping him under examination, but I doubt it'll be for much longer.

#1: Did we really get nothing useable from that man? He was a solid operative, reliable and quick.

#2: Right now, all he does is rock back and forth in the isolation compartment, asking us what the formula is. Sometimes he'll throw himself at the walls, and if he sees anyone on the other side of the safety glass, he screams himself hoarse.

At last we got close to base, so I hailed sick bay and said, "Docking in a few. Get ready for evac."

A couple of minutes later, I heard Jonak return to the bridge. His steps were soft and slow, and he laid a hand on my shoulder, saying, "Don't bother."

I turned and silently looked at him.

He said, "It's quiet now, back there."

I closed my eyes and sighed deeply.

We'd been so close, and with everyone we'd lost, I really had hoped we could save these three.

So we docked in silence, and we made preparations for the burial of the dead. That should have been the end of it.

Until I found that video.

Something gnawed at me, something about the whole trip I couldn't quite make sense of. On a sleepless night, some days later, I made a nocturnal trek to our offices and called up the videos from our flight. The sick bay ones hadn't been filed - we Sisters are good at humans, usually, but bad at bureaucracy - and all I could get my hands on were general monitoring records for the ship's entrances, bridge and exits.

I went over some of my own actions while I'd been in route control, and kept looking for some kind of flight bump or course deviation that I knew I hadn't made. It wasn't so much to assuage my conscience, but rather to completely eliminate the chance that what I was looking for was anything as normal as a simple mistake.

It wasn't until I had switched to the other videos and watched Jonak's miraculous entry a dozen times that I noticed what I'd been missing, or rather, what he'd been missing when he finally turned up on the bridge.

Setting the viewers to magnify and sharpen, I focused, and focused, and focused, aiming the unseen eye directly at Jonak's pocket. There was a clear bulge in there, one that definitely had not been present when he entered the caravan, nor when he came back to me on the bridge.

Focus, focus, focus.

A curved bulge, its axis slightly more voluminous, like it had a ball set in its middle.

Like the Angel had brought on board.

I didn't want to know any more. I didn't want to be on the roads that would lead to a place I'd never quite escape from. So I shut down the viewer, and I left our office, and I went home, and some time later, I finally slept.

#1: And this one, we're sure he never told anyone else?

#2: Positive. We took him in for soft questioning, got his report, then administered the nanobots.

#1: How's he now?

#2: We're keeping him isolated while we clear up his business and set up the accident. We should be able to execute in two weeks' time. The biggest hurdle is the coroner's reports, since the Sanctuary always has to give such incredibly detailed ones when our people die.

#1: Is it going to be a problem?

#2: No. And when he's been dealt with, along with that poor bastard Zetyn, we'll have finished this sorry little venture. The remaining catalysts have already been put into recycling.

#1: It's a shame. I liked working with him. If he hadn't taken a look at those videos, or seen what I carried back onboard the ship, he might've survived this whole damn mess of a project.

#2: Still. Loose ends.

#1: Yes. Speaking of which, there's still the matter of the Angel woman.

#2: No matter. With everyone else gone, she'll have a hard time finding anyone to believe her story. We'll keep out some long-term feelers for her, but it's nothing we need concern ourselves with. As far as this institution is concerned, the Book is tightly closed shut, forever.

Daughters of the Revolution

It was chilly on the roof, even though the house was only a few stories high. There was little in the way of shelter up there: a few receivers and antennas, and the metal railings of a fire escape attached to one wall. Most of the buildings in this part of the station were like this; spare, low and nondescript. If more people moved into the area, new stories would be slotted onto this one like a combination toy. It wasn't quite the poor section, but it had even less personality.

A young woman lay on the roof, on a small blanket, looking up at the station dome. It was high enough that it couldn't easily be glimpsed in the dusk, and most of the lighting came from massive advertising screen in the distance, the reflection of their flickering images rendering the sky full of multihued moving images, like rainbows taking on a strange life.

The woman sighed.

There was a noise from the fire escape. The steps were metal through and through, and even in the night-time hiss of busy life, the clanging reverberations of feet stomping determinedly down could easily be heard.

The woman sat up, frowned and looked to the escape.

After a while, two wrinkly hands could be seen gripping the top railings, followed by the ascendancy of a head of grey hair. An old woman came up the stairs, one step at a time, and crossed onto the roof. She was wrinkled and thin, but her footsteps didn't waver, and she walked assuredly over to the young woman with a set, unsmiling expression.

"... Gran?" the young woman said in amazement.

"I'll thank you not to hang out on any roofs in the future, young miss," Gran said. "I went to the university grounds, and even tracked down that place where you're always talking rebellion with those tattooed nincompoops, and nobody knew where you were."

The old woman brushed herself off and straightened her dress. "I'd have lost you outright if one of them hadn't mentioned your little hangout here, though I won't ask why he knows about a thing like that, or what you're doing bringing boys up here with you." She regarded the young woman with a mix of annoyance and barely concealed amusement. "Your mouth's hanging open, dear. Do close it before ships start to dock."

The young woman's mouth snapped shut with a click. "Gran, you shouldn't be up here," she said. "If you fall, or if something happens-"

"It'll hopefully teach you to talk to your Gran first before rushing off to nowhere parts, though it's better than that hideout of idiotic chatterboxes you usually hang out with." Gran said. "Your mother was getting worried about you, Beliah."

"Don't mention her, please," Beliah said in a firm tone. "I couldn't go to the RU because I was too furious to talk to anyone, and it's because of her. And I'll thank you not to speak about the political and sociology students like that. They've got a lot of interesting things to say about rights and rebellion."

Gran walked up to her and slowly sat down on the blanket, grunting and sighing. Beliah scooted over to give her room, and decided to press on. "Do you know what kind of a state we're in, Gran? Everyone's talking about revolution. Karin Midular's losing support, while blind Maleatu Shakor is gaining it, and there's no love lost between those two. It's Shakor that my friends look up to, the one who isn't always giving way with the Amarrians. I admire Midular, I really do, but we're not a people that are easily led, and I think - my friends at RU think - that he's our only real hope out of this mess."

Gran had been sitting quietly, catching her breath- which Beliah found a little overdone, seeing as how the old woman had just scaled three stories without apparent effort, but didn't comment on - and now said, "We'll leave be for now those wise young students of yours. You know, dear, it's because of your mother that we're even on this station. She spent all her savings to get here."

"And we're practically in the Rust quarters," Beliah said, feeling petty for saying it.

"Then it's your job to work your way out of it, and not waste all that time babbling about revolutions."

Beliah got up, brushed off her legs and started walking around, though she didn't stray too far from the blanket. "Look, I can't stand it any longer. You know about the Amarrian?"

"I do, dear."

"She's dating an Amarrian!"

"Yes, she is."

"Look, all I'm saying, it's just not right. Not with the battle that's going on."

"Battles of all sorts always have two sides, Beliah."

Beliah stopped, and looked at Gran. "Yeah, they do. Right and wrong," she said.

Gran got a stern look. "I'm not your real grandma, of course, so I don't have any say in over what you do or don't do."

Beliah relented a bit at this, protesting, "No, I'm sorry. Look, you're as close to one as I ever knew."

"No, no," Gran said, "Your real grandma lived down on the planet below. And she lived through the rebellions there. She could've told you stories."

"I don't doubt it," Beliah said, relieved to change the subject, even if it had to be through a bit of passive aggressiveness. "I know she had some rough times. And I still think a shame that none of the rebellions succeeded."

Gran's look changed from caution to something Beliah couldn't quite define. The old woman said, "I don't know about that, dear."



Beliah stared at her. "You'd rather we remained under the heel forever?"

Gran slowly got to her feet. Beliah moved to help her, but the old woman waved her away. She brushed off her skirt, walked over to the edge of the roof and leaned on the parapet, looking over. After a moment, Beliah came and joined her. They stared at the sparse traffic for a while: people below, going about their lives, either in motion or standstill. Eventually, and keeping her eyes on the distance, Gran said in a quiet voice, "You really think the Amarrians are that bad? That you'd not even let your own mother find happiness in whatever way she can?"

"Don't put it like that," Beliah said.

"Then how do you want to put it?" Gran asked.

"I just wish the rebellion had succeeded," Beliah said. "Do it once, get it over with, and never think about revolution again."

Gran sighed. Beliah made to speak, but Gran interrupted. "No, don't say it. Whatever it is. Let me tell you something." She turned to face Beliah. "The kind of people who start a revolution aren't always the kind of people who can finish it."

"They tried," Beliah insisted. "They did the right thing."

"Did they now?" Gran said. "Is that what you're taught in that place? What were those right things?"

"Well, they amassed an army. Liberated supplies of Vitoc. Fought their way through various areas and held control points for a while."

"Then what?" Gran asked.

Beliah frowned. "Then they were betrayed, like people always are by the ones closest to them," she said with a hint of bitterness, "And it all fell apart."

Gran said, "Let me ask you something, little bird. Is this all you've learned in those palaces of wisdom you've gone to for most of your life? And don't tell me it's because the media is Amarr-controlled, because you're not too old for me to spank you."

The young woman smiled. "They don't teach much about it," she said. "Not in detail. We're given a timeline of all the uprisings that took place, and told a few generalities about the final rebellion, and that's it. It's hard to find data, but I've never wondered much about that. It's history, and I need to know it, but I need to know a lot of things in the present."

Gran sighed. "This is true. Sometimes, mind, I wish they'd teach you the rest, even if it's not for children."

"What do you mean?" Beliah asked, and added, "I'm not a child anymore, you know."

"You've never heard about the daughters of the revolution, have you?" Gran asked, watching her sharply.

Beliah shook her head.

"You're sure? Not from anyone?" Gran said.

"I would remember."

"Yes," Gran said, reaching out and stroking a wisp of dark hair back behind Beliah's ear. "I believe you would, little bird." She sighed again, and turned back towards the traffic below. Someone was arguing with someone else, their hands moving about a lot. The words didn't reach up to the roof, but the noise did.

"The reason the army failed wasn't because of a traitor," Gran said. "As I said, these things have a way of falling apart, particularly if they're being held together by the same people who started them. And if you've never wondered why this revolution, which was incredibly successful for some dirty meaning of success, has been glossed over, then it's for the best. It's something everyone would rather forget."

"Were you there?" Beliah asked. "It happened in your lifetime. I've never asked you this, for some reason."

"I wouldn't have answered, likely than not," Gran said. "If you weren't getting so muddleheaded about your mother doing what she wants with her life then you would never be told this. So listen, and remember, and keep it to yourself." She closed her eyes for a while, then opened them again and looked skywards, towards the reflected lights of the ad screens. "Slave army, yes. Managed to get a hold of Vitoc. They knew it wouldn't last; even if they got control, the Vitoc would eventually run out. So they were riding high on their luck, but they were never going to rule the planet. They were good with their words, and good at getting people excited, and they only wanted to lash out, like some young people do without heeding the consequences when they don't know anything else." Gran gave Beliah another look, but the young woman kept quiet.

"And they did so in terrible, terrible fashion," Gran continued. "They went through the land, destroying everything they saw. Anyone who tried to stop them was automatically a sympathizer with the Amarrians, and was dealt with as such. If it was men or boys, they'd be shot on the spot. If it was women, or even girls, well, there's some things we don't talk about."

"And at some point, one of the rebel leaders got the bright idea that they needed to change tactics. They called it polluting the enemy, I hear, but what I call it is stupid men with guns deciding they don't need to play by any rules anymore, and giving their souls to the devil. So instead of leaving the sympathizers on the side of the road

to die, they started to round them up, and they built camps. Men were made to work, and women were made to do a different kind of work."

Gran took a deep breath. "Eventually something happened, as it always does, and the rebels were trapped, caught and shot. It was a better ending than they deserved, the poor fools, and their bodies were quietly buried in unmarked graves. But they'd left their marks. There were a lot of babies born later on, and most of those babies were shifted away to foster care of some sort, to them's as would have them. Your mom was lucky, because she was taken in by a family and not an institution, and by the time she was old enough to work, slavery had fallen out of favor in that part of the world. But she suffered for it. Oh lord, she did. A daughter of the revolution," Gran said, spitting out that last word.

"So here's your lesson, little student" she said to Beliah, who had tears in her eyes. "I didn't come along until later, to sit for the family. They were good Matari who did their best, and money was never scarce, but your mother's scars run deep, and in the end she had to get away from them before she could turn them into the monsters she sometimes sees in our people. So she ran." Gran stroked back her own hair, which the strengthening breeze was playing with. "I'm not sure she's ever stopped running. I kept working for the family, but much later, after I'd long since left, your mom tracked me down and invited me up here. I expect it's to make up for leaving her adopted parents, who'd already died in some calamity or other. She's a hard worker, your mother, but no master at personal relations."

Beliah nodded silently, and Gran went on. "Your father, for example. Not a bad man, but he did lose his temper a few times, and that's all she needed. She will not abide that, and in truth, I'm not sure she ever would be with one of our own people unless he was unstable enough for her to eventually leave him. She's got a hard core, looking for something to aim at. Like some people I know," Gran said, with a little smile.

Beliah nodded her head, giving a trembling little smile.

They looked at the traffic for a while. The argument below had stopped, and each person gone quietly to wherever they were headed.

Eventually Beliah went back to her blanket, folded it, and started walking towards the fire escape.

Gran said, "If you think there's right and wrong, little bird, it's before you now. Are you going to your mother's, or to the university?"

Beliah stopped, but didn't turn around. "Neither. I'm going to get something to eat." She stood stock still, looking at the massive screens in the distance, and added, "And then I might buy some flowers." She turned and gave Gran another brittle smile, then walked away.

Hometown Heroes



"Have a seat, and explain to me why you're still aboard this ship," the Captain said.

Lieutenant Pars Kheelan walked into the Captain's office and took a seat. The office was large, with several chairs sequestered near the walls. In front of Pars was the Captain's large desk, covered with datareaders, and beyond it his personal chair, its seat far more worn than its arms. To one side there was a global recon table that, when activated, would project a 3D hologram. The window behind the desk and the Captain's chair was capable of displaying any manner of vids, both army and private, but now showed nothing but the blackness of space. To another side was an unobtrusive door connected to the Captain's own living quarters. The Captain himself was standing behind his desk, with an immobile expression, and his arms clasped behind his back.

"I wonder that myself sometimes, sir," Pars said. When he saw the Captain's expression, he rubbed his eyes and added, "Sorry, sir. It's been a long day." He reached into a pocket and pulled out a small datakey, leaned forward and put it on the Captain's desk. "These are the people named in the riot. We're treating everyone as a suspect, but there are only a handful who got so involved that they had to be thrown into the brig. The rest were returned to their duties."

"Any more trouble?"

"No, sir. People are keeping quiet and waiting to see what we do."

"Well then, Lieutenant Kheelan," the Captain said and leaned forward, resting his outstretched arms on the desk for support, his knuckles on its surface, "Seeing as how this happened in cafeteria E-1, which was occupied by your Delta unit, staffed with Delta men, and damaged with Delta weapons, what is the leader responsible for Delta going to do about it? And why were there weapons out in the cafeteria at all?"

"To be fair, sir, the weapons damage was one discharge of an emergency weapon located on-site, fired by a man who'd never handled a gun but nevertheless got the clever idea to break it open and fire a warning shot. He wanted to calm the crowd, I'm told, but managed to fire the gun directly through three adjoining walls. The bullet stopped at the inner shield."

"What is this man's present status?"

"Sick bay. He barely missed the head of Ensign Mjern in the head, and Mjern proceeded to knock him out flat on the spot."

When the Captain didn't comment, the Lieutenant continued, "Sir, it's been a hotbed recently. When it's like that, it only takes one person to light the fuse. I'm not one to single out my men for blame, but I've spoken to

several people and in this case it's obvious who's the main party responsible for this."

The Captain stared at him for a while. Then he sighed, lifted his arms from the table and sat down heavily into his chair. His knuckles had gone white from the pressure.

"It's that bloody nitwit Crayan again, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you spoken to him?"

"I have, sir. One of the other Deltas made the usual lunchtime comment about sexual relations with someone else's blood relative, and Crayan took it personally, electing to stab the offending party with his fork and beat him severely over the head with his tray. In his words, his hometown hero never took no shit from no Matar and neither will he. He apparently feels this should count to his benefit."

The Captain grimaced. "I've been reading up on your man, as it happens. Found out some interesting things. This isn't the first time he causes trouble, Lieutenant."

"No sir, it isn't."

"He's a race-barker. Beat up some Minmatar Ensign, and when the man dared file complaints, Crayan drugged and stripped him, took a handheld laser to his tattoos, and defaced them in such humiliating ways that the Ensign dropped charges, lest he be seen and photographed like that. Crayan got a month in the brig for that. Didn't teach him much."

"No, sir. Nor did his other stay in the brig after he torched another Ensign's pet fedo and left it on the Ensign's food tray. He spent much of his solitary time singing songs he learned back home, and talking loudly about this hometown hero of his. Apparently they're distant relations."

"So what do you recommend?" the Captain said.

"Summary dismissal, sir."

The Captain leaned back in his chair and knitted his hands behind his head. "As I recall from the last incident involving your man, Crayan is on a five-year contract, low interest, three years locked in service. Do you propose to break this contract? Because if you do, I know quite a few Lieutenants, Lieutenant-Captains and Captains who will be after your blood."

"But still--"

"These contracts were created for a reason, Lieutenant. How do you think we keep people in the Navy these days?"

"God only knows, sir," Pars said, and winced in regret the second the words were out.

There was silence in the room. Eventually Pars added, "How bad are things, sir? Truthfully?"

The Captain said nothing.

"Sir, we've served together for a while. We're in this to stay. I'm seeing more riots and less signups, and the people we do get aren't anywhere near the old standard. Something has gone very wrong. What happened?"

The Captain turned in his chair, rotating it so that he could look sideways and see out the window. Their vessel was stationary, but anyone looking out into empty space for too long would likely start to feel that the blinking stars were slowly moving by. "It's a nice view," the Captain said. "I've always liked it. Usually it makes people sick after a while, which is good when I'm tired of strategic planning and want them out of my office."

He turned back to Pars. "You seem to be doing fine," he said with a wry smile.

The Lieutenant returned the smile and said, "If it did that to me, sir, I shouldn't even be here."

The Captain nodded. He frowned, then seemed to make up his mind about something; got up, and walked slowly over to the recon table. He activated it and a flat green panel lit up in the air in front of him. Its surface was covered with various tactical display options. The Captain selected one, and the display changed to a space map, highlighting various nearby constellations. "Since our area is one of the Navy's fleet accumulation points, it's a decent representation of all other such locations," he said. "These dots here are the outlying points, frontlines in case of skirmish."

Several points on the display lit up, and the rest darkened. The Lieutenant stood up and walked over to take a look.

"Do you know who's manning these?" the Captain said. "The points of utmost importance in case we get called on for anything more than capsuleer patrol? The Matari." A disc expanded around each point, its area pie-sectioned like a flower blooming with petals purple and green. Each circle was composed of far more purple sections than green. "Distribution of troops according to race. Matari outnumber us and everyone else."

"Those guys have always sought out the army," Pars said.

"And now we're putting them in the line of fire. Doesn't it strike you as odd that the people supposed to die for this empire are the ones who probably came here to find a better life?"

"It's the way of the Navy, sir," Pars said and shrugged.

"It was, Lieutenant," the Captain said. "Except now our own people beg off serving there, in the apparent belief that the Navy should offer them a nice, safe working environment, preferably with a corner office. Look at this." The entire map was lit up and each Captain point sprouted a disc, this time sectioned into greys and greens. There were vastly more grey sections everywhere.

"Don't tell me those are non-Gallente, sir," Pars said.

"Those are non-humans, Lieutenant, though likely a step over some in Delta squad. They're drones. Those are our defense capabilities, measured in drone and human output. I hardly need tell you that we're allocating record funds to drone tech manufacturers, money that is not being equalled in our recruiting departments." The Captain sighed. "Long and the short of it, Lieutenant, we're not getting the people we need, nor the type of people we need. Everyone has it too good planetside. They'd much rather do a terraforming project or two and settle down in a bungalow somewhere than risk their necks in a fleet that's going nowhere fast. All we're getting these days is the hotheads and the idiots, and we're having trouble even holding on to them. Even the Minmatars - who're fine workers and decent people, don't get me wrong - even they don't join up anymore. Some of the tougher ones still show up in the army, and I expect we'll always have a steady trickle of Brutors happy to fight anyone we put in their way, but by and large they treat this as a land of opportunity, with a stable government, and they work hard and make their own way, leaving us stuck with what remains. I just hope we can stay out of trouble, Lieutenant."

Pars blinked a couple of times, then stammered in surprise, "We're the Navy, sir."

"Exactly," the Captain said, and sat back down at his desk. He knitted his hands behind his head, put his feet up on the desk, leaned back and stared at the ceiling. Pars sat back in his own chair, waiting patiently.

Eventually the Captain seemed to reach a decision. "I'm not going to put you through hoops, Lieutenant," he said, "because frankly, there's no point. You're no more responsible for this mess than I am. Delta is what we have to work with, they and everyone like them, and regular punishment won't cut it. If all we do is push people, we'll eventually push them out. We need to get back to our roots as a proper fighting force, which includes the break-and-rebuild tactics. And Crayan is a perfect example of that. If we can remould him, the rest are going to follow. We only need to find the right entry point, something that'll unsettle him enough that he'll be easy to shake to pieces after that."

"What do you suggest, sir?"

"The problem with Crayan is that he's got an ego complex. Breaking and rebuilding him won't get rid of that; it'll only push those things so deep we'll never reach them. And this hometown hero thing of his is another anchor. He clearly believes that he's going to achieve the same fame, and it keeps him going. So we'll take that away from him." The Captain smiled again, but without warmth. "Ops contacted me recently, as a matter of fact. They're starting in on one of their outreach programs for young recruits, where they pick someone and make him our spokesperson in ads shown all around the empire. Crayan wants to be famous; we'll make him famous."

Pars raised an eyebrow. "There's a catch to this, sir, and I'm waiting to hear it."

"Of course there is," the Captain said and gave him a big, bright smile. "Ops have given up on the usual macho stuff and are going for those weird ads again, the surreal ones some marketer cooked up to grab the eyes of our shellshocked, vidwatching youth. So this isn't some guy going," the Captain's voice shifted down an octave, "'It's great to be in the navy. Be a man in the navy.' It's something else entirely. It was suggested a while back and was quickly shelved due to being too stupid, but Ops is feeling the pressure same as me, and they're digging up any old idea and dusting it off. Personally I don't think it'll help a bit, but it wouldn't do my career or yours any harm to show a little spirit for once."

"What'll Crayan have to do?"

The Captain's smile widened even further. He spoke slowly, as if enjoying the passage of words. "He'll have to dress up as a Fedo and talk nonsensically about synthetics for ten seconds, after which we'll flash our logo and something about a different life. He'll be in full costume, but even so, his voice will be unaltered, recorded

separately. I imagine that eventually someone in his hometown will recognize it."

"That's ... insane."

"That's what we need to show our civilians, apparently. Shock them a bit, so they'll pay attention to the final image."

"He'll never go for that," the Lieutenant said. "He'll be shot into space rather than do this."

"Funny you should say that," the Captain replied. He stood up and walked to the door, and the Lieutenant followed. "As I said, it's all about breaking points. You find one, and you push it hard, knowing that something will give way. Once he's done with this ad, he'll crawl over broken glass to do anything else instead, and that's when we'll start him in on proper retraining. To make him do the ad itself, all you need is to create enough uncertainty that you can manipulate him into it. Cut him off from his anchor, his idol."

"His hometown hero," the Lieutenant said.

"Precisely," the Captain replied, ushering Pars out the door. "I looked through Crayan's records, same as you, and same as others, I'll venture. But I looked one further. And this guy he so worships, the one who drew him into service, the one in whom Crayan's belief has seen him through the roughest of times?"

"Yes?"

Before the door closed, the Captain said, "He never made it to deployment. Old tale spread to his people back home to preserve the poor boy's integrity. He barely crawled through basic training, got drunk as a dog on the way to base, landed himself in all sorts of trouble and ended up jettisoning himself into space by accident. Might want to mention that to Crayan, right before you give him the one big chance for his own grab at fame."

The door closed on an astonished Pars.

The Lottery



The sound echoed through the halls, a sonorous trumpet calling the children to Home. The lottery had begun again.

Two boys, Arbjan and Bryd, had been moving around some furniture for another arrival on the colony, while another nearby boy called Sispur had been dragging around a chair. They all stopped short at the noise. Arbjan and Bryd looked at one another, then in unison put down the table they'd been shifting around and started moving towards the doors. Sispur was a little slower on the uptake and took a couple of steps before realizing he was still holding on to the chair. They moved into the vast corridors and saw kids from other rooms doing the same, everyone moving in the same direction. Arbjan and Bryd first walked, then jogged, and finally broke into a sprint, with Sispur trailing behind and trying to keep up.

They entered the main square, which was already thronged with kids, most of Minmatar origin. The square was vast, connecting all other sections of the space colony like a hub. Its ceiling was domed and reddish-gold, and the light from outside often shone down to create glowing spears that slowly pointed their pendulum tips in accordance with the sun. By rights it should long since have been turned into an impromptu playground, but there was something off-putting about playing in an area so clearly meant for work and quick passage. As a result, the square was rarely used for anything except the lottery.

Sispur caught up with Arbjan and Bryd as they stood side by side in the middle of the crowd, looking expectantly at the video screens hanging overhead. The two boys had been friends for a while, which counted for a lot here. Sispur was the younger brother of sorts, having wormed his way into their little group. Younger kids who had no friends and couldn't take care of themselves did not have a good time in this place.

They only knew the space colony as ABF, which some smartasses had rendered forevermore as A'Beef, but it was the square that got called Home. For most of the children in this place - and aside from the guards there were only children in this place - it represented their one chance at getting out with any prospect of a life. The ones who won the lottery were chosen into service for one of the Amarr Heirs, where they were put to use in all manner of administrative duties from sweeping the floors to overseeing transport businesses. Some of the roles the winners were given wouldn't be very exciting, but it certainly beat the alternative.

Once a child of A'Beef hit a certain combination of physical maturity, mental maturity and biological age, they'd be shipped off to the colonies for a lifetime of slave labor if they hadn't won the lottery. Nobody knew where the cutoff point was. Some of the younger children found their friends shipped off years before they'd expected, others stayed on the facility longer than anyone would have thought possible, and one or two were even promoted to guards, but Sispur expected that once you found yourself really worrying about it, you'd probably made it to the danger area.

A familiar face lit up on the video screens. It was Uncle, a light-skinned, bearded old Minmatar who often introduced the vid shows they watched in the evenings. As usual he was dressed in a fairly traditional manner, the way Bryd imagined that older people generally did, and looked quite comfortable in his clothes. A tiny patch of bare skin between his beard and the collar of his suit showed the spike an old tattoo, one which station rumor held was the remnant of a Voluval test of his youth.

Uncle's baritone voice rang out from the speakers, announcing the latest draw. The children never knew how often the lotteries would be held or how many would be drawn, but it had been at least a couple of months since the last one. "Five have been chosen, one to serve each heir. Here are their names. First, drawn into service for the house of Kador, is Arbjan Haede..."

Arbjan, Bryd and Sispur erupted in cheers, hugging each other and jumping around with glee. Still listening intently, the other kids hissed and shushed them, their eyes focused on the screens with the unfiltered hope and despair that only a child can muster.

As the roll call went on, Sispur noticed some kids looking crestfallen. They were getting older and likely wouldn't have many draws left before being sent to the colonies. He hoped they'd get out of that, somehow, and that he would be picked before ever reaching that stage of fading, desperate time. He imagined it wasn't very pleasant.

Uncle said, "And finally, chosen by the house of Tash-Murkon, is Bryd Krooear. Those are the five lucky ones. There will be one more announcement in the coming days..."

His speech went on, but the trio of friends didn't hear it. They were staring at one another in amazement. Sispur felt his heart lift and his stomach tie itself into knots. He was so happy for his friends he couldn't even describe it. He was about to suggest they go somewhere and do something - leave the furniture and spend the rest of the day playing games - when some older kids approached them.

The older kids split into two groups, and they were all smiling. They congratulated both Arbjan and Bryd on their immense good luck, and each group focused on one of the boys, asking them how they felt, telling them how great it would be, and gently guiding them away from the crowd and from Sispur. He went to follow Bryd's group, but the kids in it gave him looks that said they would not be happy to find him tagging along. The last Sispur saw of his two friends was them being escorted away in different directions, surrounded by smiling faces and wiry bodies.

The chosen ones had a few days to prepare. Sispur, meanwhile, went about his usual tasks. He saw less and less of his friends, and when their paths did cross all he saw was two boys looking increasingly haggard and unhappy. They didn't want to talk about it much, though he wasn't sure whether they wanted to protect him from something or if they just didn't want him to remind them of the life they were about to leave behind. They had also begun neglecting their duties, a common enough occurrence among lottery winners. Since nobody paid any mind to them or anyone associated with them, Sispur was free to spend all his time wandering about the place alone.

The facility had many sections. There were the living quarters, where the children spent progressively more time as they got older; playroom locations that had both toys and larger recreational equipment; and a few areas reserved for schooling, although not everyone was required to attend. There were lots of large, empty rooms, often beset with climbable metal supports and with nooks and crannies that offered crawling and hideout opportunities. There were also some administrative areas, but the kids had little interest in those. One was the Baby section, where new arrivals were kept while they were acclimatizing to the facility. None of the children knew what criteria had been used to select the facility's inhabitants, nor did they remember anything of their past lives, although a few recalled the Baby section being peaceful and bright. Right next to it, nameless and uninteresting, was a section where some of the young girls were taken after being doomed to the colonies. It was whispered that marriage ceremonies took place there, the girls married off to Minmatar men and taken to new lives where they could serve Amarrian masters for five years without Vitoc before being set free. Every now and then a cargo ship would dock, stay for a day or two and then depart, which spawned rumors that the men from those ships had been boarding the facility to get married. Sometimes larger ships also came, although they only stayed a few hours.

Sispur wondered what his life would be like on the A'Beef from now on, and whether he'd ever be chosen. The lottery was fickle, and most children would be sent to the slave colonies. Tests of all sorts were periodically conducted for the children, and there were countless myths about how to perform in those to improve one's chances of being drawn, but nobody had yet discerned a pattern. In some of his darker moments Sispur had even thought that it really was a lottery, and that the tests were merely fakes. He didn't like to dwell on that too much..

And then it was the day before Arbjan and Bryd were slated to leave. Sispur had neither seen them for a long time nor been given any indication that they wanted to see him. He'd been out all day, staying away from people and ignoring everything he saw and heard.

As he wandered through Storage Section 4A - a place he once used to visit with his old friends - he heard a sound and followed it.

In a cubbyhole they often used for hide-and-seek, he found a badly beaten Bryd, bloodied and covered in scratches and bruises. Bryd screamed when he saw Sispur's face and scurried further back into the hole, but relaxed slightly when Sispur said, "Hey, it's me. It's just me. What happened to you?!"

Bryd blinked a couple of times as if realizing who he was looking at, then said, "Get out of there, quick."

"Look, it's okay. I'm alone. There's nobody coming." He leaned in close and caught a good look at Bryd's swollen face. "What did they do to you?"

Bryd sniffed a couple of times, wiped the snot and tears from his face with one sleeve, then used the other to wipe out the inside corners of his eyes. He blinked a few times, took a deep breath and looked back to Sispur. "They told us we were enemies now," he said. "They said we had to fight, that we were the generals in these armies. We'd been chosen, and we couldn't let our side down."

Sispur sat closer to him. Bryd didn't seem to mind or notice; he looked out into the distance. "All I've been hearing for the last few days is how great I am and how much Arbjan deserves to die; how the house of Kador is crumbling and worthless and only the house of Tash-Murkon can save what remains of the Empire. But they need good people, and for the others to get out of the way. So tonight we were going to find Arbjan and his army."

"To do what?" Sispur said quietly.

"To destroy them," Bryd whispered.

They sat there for a while, listening to the sounds of their own minds in motion. Finally Sispur said, "What happened then?"

"We'd heard where they were and were about to head over there, but I couldn't do it. I chickened out. I waited until everyone else was busy with their own thing, and then I took off quietly. I went through some of the back areas, but someone must've seen me and snitched, because Arbjan's group caught up, and they started to beat me."

"Was Arbjan there?"

"I don't know. I didn't see him. My own people came and attacked the ones who were beating me. There was this huge all-out fight, and in the middle of it I managed to escape. Some of Arbjan's people ran after me, but I shook them off and came here." Bryd gave him a miserable look. "I don't want any of this," he said, tears rising again in his eyes. "I want things to go back to the way they were."

Sispur nodded. Hearing Bryd refer to the thugs as his and Arbjan's "people" made him cringe. He tried to think of something to say, but couldn't. Eventually he settled for, "I'm sorry."

Bryd nodded, though Sispur felt he was acknowledging something else. "Now get out of here," he said.

"I'm not leaving you," Sispur replied.

Bryd gave him a look of something that had equal measure of love and hatred. "If you don't go, I'm dead for sure."

"I am not going to tell on you, Bryd."

His friend leaned back, pinched his eyes shut and bobbed his head up and down, as if trying to contain himself. Sispur didn't know whether he was trying not to laugh or cry, and looked away, towards the empty hall.

At last Bryd spoke again, but the words were unintelligible. He cleared his throat harshly and said, "You really don't know? About you."

"Know what? What are you talking about?"

This time Bryd laughed, and for an instant Sispur saw his old friend shine through, the one who'd make fun of him but it was okay, because it was just Bryd. "You were chosen," the beaten boy said.

Sispur's breath caught in his throat. "What for?"

"It's all over the A'Beef. Uncle announced it in Home today. There are guards looking for you, and you're supposed to be leaving. I don't know if Arbjan's guys will let that happen if they find you here with me, though."

"What are you saying, Bryd?"

"You've been chosen to serve the Chamberlain himself. Nobody can hurt you. You're untouchable now," Bryd said, and started to cry. "You won. You won. You won."

Sispur got up in a daze. He left the hidey-hole, leaving Bryd behind, and slowly walked out of the hall, going through the A'Beef for the last time. Any children who saw him kept their distance. Eventually the guards came, and took him away.



"A Boy and his Slaver"



The corn was tall and the boy was not, which doubled his sense of exploration. His father had always forbidden him to wander through the fields, even if Jecal followed, and he was only here now because of the panic back home.

The boy's father was one of the most powerful slave-owners on the planet. Knowing of the boy's wanderlust and realizing that the exhortations not to explore the fields were little more than inducements, he had trained a slaver hound to follow the boy and protect him. Under most circumstances the slaves treated the boy politely, even when Jecal was nowhere to be seen, but in these troubled times it paid to make certain.

A little earlier in the day, the boy had secretly listened in on a meeting between his father and some of the field heads. It had been conducted in hushed tones, and the boy had heard mention only of an "unfortunate accident" and "strange movements on the horizon" that apparently demanded they redistributing the workers and doubling the guard at the palace. There had been disarray, and for once no one had been paying the boy any attention, which was all the opportunity he needed to slip out of the house unseen and head into the fields. Jecal had followed him but the boy sent him off several times, telling the slaver hound that he needed to be seen about the palace so they'd think the boy was there too. Three times Jecal had returned, only to be sent away. After the last time, he did not return, and the boy wandered on through a large field of corn while feeling the crisp giddiness of being slightly lost in forbidden places.

A sound caught his attention, so he changed direction and headed towards it. He pushed through a thick layer of corn only to tumble through and land on empty ground. He found himself on a small plain, an open circle in the middle of the field. In that field were three men, sitting hunched over on wooden stools. They were slaves, and the sun glistened on their black skin. Each man either held a large glass bottle containing clear liquid or had a corked one lying in front of him.

At the boy's arrival they all looked up in unison. One of the men hissed slowly and rolled his bottle between his hands. Another one picked up a bottle from the ground, uncorked it with deliberate slowness and took a long drink, not letting his gaze off the boy for a second. The third man, who was bigger than the others, put down his bottle, wove his fingers together and sat absolutely still. He looked at the boy for a while, then looked away and stared at the corn instead. It looked to the boy like he was praying, though the slaves supposedly didn't have any proper religion.

The large man kept looking at the corn, but the other two stared right at the boy. He stared back, having been taught not to be intimidated by slaves and not to say anything to them unless they deserved it. He thought he remembered seeing these people before, but wasn't sure, and he didn't know their names.

The big one suddenly got up and started walking to the boy, slowly and a little unsteadily. One of the two remaining men also got up, but the other grabbed him and pulled him back down.

The one who'd tried to stand up said, "You know what they'll do to us. The Vitoc." The undertones of panic in his breathless tone made the boy even uneasier.

"No," said the man who'd pulled him down. "Because we weren't here. Pick up your flask and go."

"It won't bring anyone back," the first one said.

The other one gave him a hard look and said, "That's not what this is about. We're going now. Don't look back, and don't say any more in front of the boy."

As they got up and left, the large man continued sauntering towards the boy. The boy wanted to flee but remembered his father saying that he shouldn't ever bow down to these people. So he stood firm while looking the man in the eyes.

The man walked up to him, and the boy smelled sweat and grime and something he imagined was alcohol. He kept looking at the man's eyes and was amazed to see that the man seemed to be quietly crying. The sight transfixed the boy, and as the man started to do something with his hands he paid it no attention. The man's face didn't change at all; the tears merely ran down, like little children left in the fields.

At last the boy looked down and saw that the man was slowly unwrapping something. It was an item packed in layers of a thin, shimmering material that the boy thought might be silk. The wrapping was pink, though it had a lot of dark stains, and was the same fabric as a thin, blue cord that had been knotted up and tied around the man's left wrist. As the boy looked on, the man unwrapped the package and took out a knife: a short, solid blade with a handle made of dried leaves wrapped around one end, the type of knife that the slaves often used at harvesting time to husk the corn. The blade was clean and looked very sharp.

On seeing the blade, the boy's breath caught in his throat and he began to feel very cold. Forgetting any rule he was ever taught, he looked up at the man and said in a low voice, "Mister, what are you going to do?"

Staring at the knife he'd unwrapped, the man frowned and leaned his head to one side, as if being asked to consider an unfavourable business proposition. "Hold still," he said. "Hold still and it won't hurt so much."

The boy couldn't move. Everything had become so real that it overwhelmed his senses. The sky was blue and cloudless. The corn smelled of earth and dinners. Things rustled, buzzed, creaked and squawked all around. The man was so impossibly tall he blotted out the sun, and he smelled like hard work. The boy took all this in without thinking about it because anything he could think right now would lead him somewhere he didn't want to be.

"Mister, what are you going to do to me?" the boy said again, not wanting to know but unable to think of anything else to say.

The man pinched his eyes shut and shook his head as if adamantly refusing a request. He had started crying again and wiped off the tears with the back of one hand while clutching the mottled silk. The other hand held the knife, pointed directly at the boy.

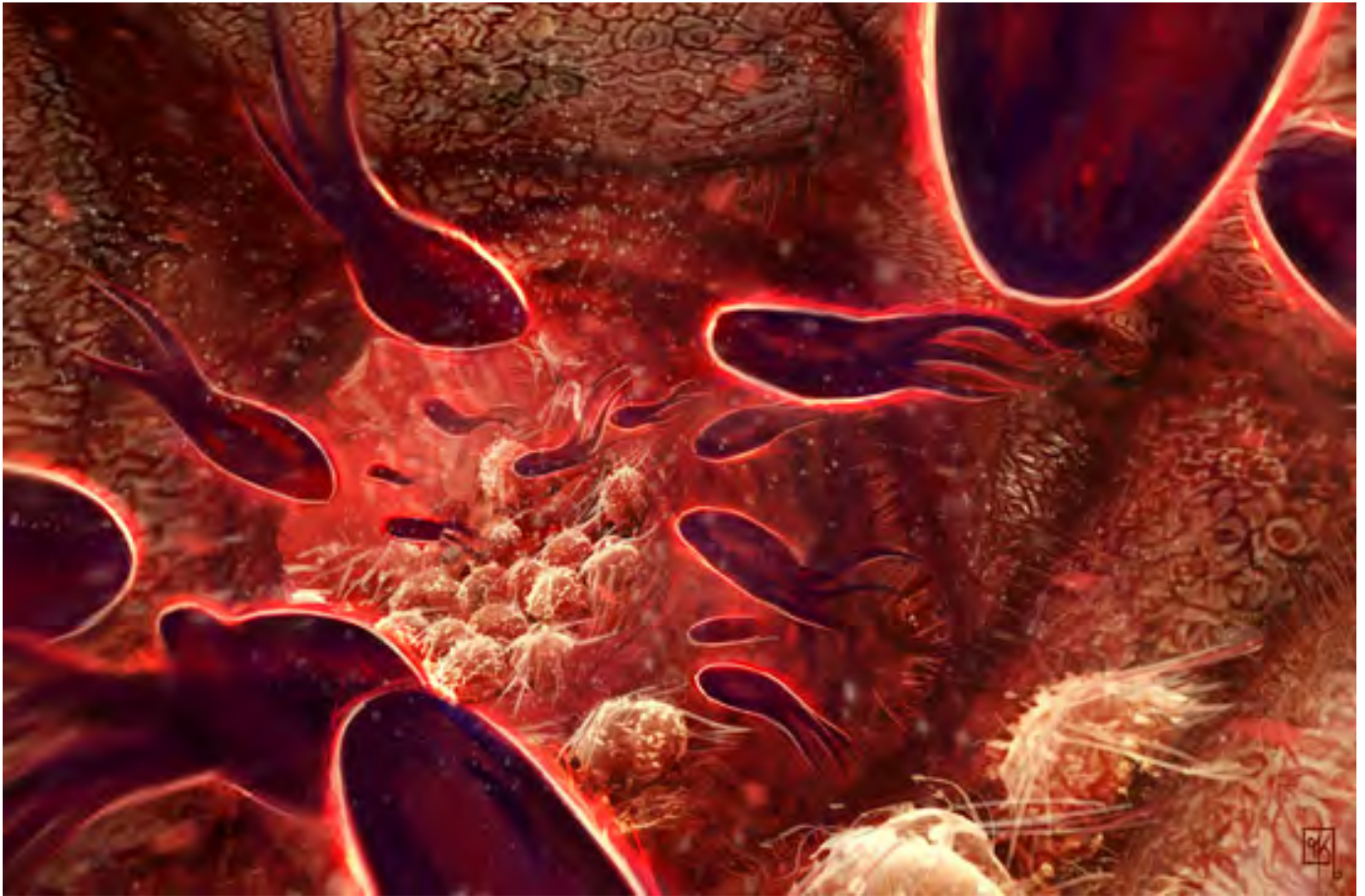
Once he'd wiped off the tears and softly cleared his throat, the man leaned over the boy, knife in hand. There was a louder rustle from the corn, followed by a rising growl, and Jecal burst out from the stalks, jumping onto the man and knocking him to the ground. The man swung the knife at the slaver a second too late, and the animal went to work on him with wide open jaws.

The boy stood frozen on the spot and watched what Jecal did.

When it was all over and the sounds of nature had resumed, the boy regarded what lay on the ground. He knelt beside it, picked up the silk cloth that lay on the trampled corn, and stuffed it in his pocket. He felt that something had been taken from him and that he should take something back, as revenge, or compensation, or simply as confirmation of a memory destined to lie deep.

He turned and began walking back home, slowly making his way through the corn with Jecal at his side. He kept touching Jecal as if to ensure himself that both he and the slaver were still there. Once he'd made it halfway to the palace he started to hear the voices of his father's people, who appeared to be anxiously shouting his name. There were noises from the sky and the earth, and gray clouds were amassing overhead. The silk cloth bulged in his pocket.

"A Life in Three Acts"



The body rests. The thalamus, deep core and center of all things, resonates with itself at a rate so slow it's barely a murmur. All limbs are still and metabolism is kept to a minimum, with nothing floating through the bloodstream but a few hormones placidly drifting towards breakdown. The heart beats, the lungs inflate and deflate, and everything ticks over as it always has. In a dozen places the skin quivers slightly from nearly imperceptible electrical currents passed through it by the attached monitors.

A foreign substance hovers into the lungs, squeezing past the bronchioles alongside the oxygen and insinuating itself through the capillaries into the bloodstream. Moments later the central nervous system is dampened, and while there's possibly a flicker of activity in the thalamus, the state of rest remains unaltered.

The skin is broken for the first time. Several punctures are created right above the crook of each elbow, and in the skin a finger's breath below the heart. Needles slide in with mechanical accuracy, pierce veins, and begin to pump in chemicals. Several smaller punctures are made along the base of the spine, and a line of very narrow, very long needles slide in at a glacial pace, penetrating the subdural region. These needles pump in a single dose of something that immediately dulls the entire autonomic nervous system, leaving the brain unaware of the changes occurring to it and disinclined to start making a fuss.

The body begins to change. Since the chemicals are initially pumped away from the heart, the first parts affected are the limbs and the less complex internal organs; and, of course, the blood. Regular blood cells begin to die off, their walls eaten up by the intrusive substance while new, more robust ones are pumped out of bone marrow by the millions. These new cells, whose oxygen-carrying capability far exceeds that of the old and dying ones, grow to maturity in a matter of instants. The lungs then kick in, their alveoli adapting to letting in more oxygen than this body has ever been able to assimilate. The muscles swiftly respond, followed by various other organs, gorging themselves on this new red breath.

Once the chemical reaches the brain, change begins in earnest. Sinews strengthen and lengthen without overstretching. Bones are eaten away, their porous, paper-like remains left covered in a sticky residue that seeps into the remaining calcified matter, links and reacts, and eventually hardens into matrix-like structures far stronger than the original material. The heart is less altered, its ventricles merely expanding to deal with the onrush of new blood to a stronger body. It suffers some palpitations, but these even out quickly and the needles do not stop pumping in the chemicals.

The body is being put through extreme rigors. Muscles are tensed and flexed consistently, alternating between

upper and lower sections of the skeleton, and reknitting themselves into stronger versions at a pace far beyond any past results. While the heart's rate of growth has remained less than might be expected, lung capacity has increased by leaps and bounds. All other organs remain in line, having picked up the pace much as a child who'd learned to walk and is now reveling in the joy of an endless run.

With this growth come new natural limits that also get tested with a vigor bordering on self-destruction. There is sleep deprivation, and the thalamus that once served its purpose with hushed consistency now regularly gets yanked in and out of REM without mercy, its waves spiking in dull panic. The skin routinely gets shocked with extremes of hot and cold, but the brain is learning to compensate for these differences, blood vessels constricting and expanding with high rapidity. Despite their increased size the new blood cells are more pliable than the older version and manage to get around beneath the outermost layer even when it has restricted and blocked off all outside interference. This is a powerful and resilient system now: locked down, coiled, and waiting.

There is a moment when the body relaxes, going as deep into theta as it consciously can. Some adrenaline still courses through the bloodstream, and various systems are on semi-prepared standby, but the brain orders all to stand down, fall back, and hold position. There is a wait.

A mild electric current passes through the body, its contact point located at the ankles. It causes the leg muscles to tense, jerk and finally convulse, pulling against each other. Every muscle is slowly worked over: The current brings it to its maximum twitching power, its glycogen stores are exhausted and its lactic acid is pumped back into the bloodstream. The lungs work overtime to the point where the visual cortex starts having issues decoding information and the labyrinth in the inner ear fails to maintain a proper sense of balance. Sensing this, the brain - still keeping the thalamus calm and producing delta waves - orders the diaphragm's contractions to ease up. It does so, reluctantly, and general equilibrium is slowly reestablished. The electric current moves up past the calves and the thighs, then separates, one contact sliding up the ventral nervous system and another one going up the lateral. They alternate their efforts over various muscles on either side, and things start to go wrong.

One back muscle, rarely trained, overstretches. In response the body's torso, which has been trained to much higher levels, cramps up and heaves. The effort combines with the current and begins to tear the back muscle apart, its striated cords snapping like the wires of a bridge in a tornado. The adrenal glands go nuts, pumping out adrenaline and other corticosteroids at the highest rate they can. The thalamus, by now used to being pounded into activity, jerks awareness back into action. All conscious control of the lungs is lost and air is expelled at high rates, the vocal cords vibrating so hard that their mucus lining begins to dry. Blood gets pumped into all extremities at twice the normal rate, which only accelerates the body's thrashings and the destruction of the back muscle. The heart, in fact, has an agonizing time keeping up, but its skipped beats are masked from detection by the flood of adrenaline.

The skin gets broken, a vein is pierced and sedatives begin to flood in. The pain stays constant but the system begins to relax involuntarily; cramping slows and finally ceases, brainwaves even out, and the battered adrenal glands return to normal. For a while there is utter stillness. Then a spot on the back, on the skin over the torn muscle, gets covered with something that begins to intrude. The skin is not broken but permeated, as if water were passing through a wet cloth, and it grows very warm. The muscle also warms up even as the blood drains from it. Its tendrils reach out and hungrily eat a glut of nutrients carried to them by the surrounding cells. They start to intertwine, growing stronger and more pliable, morphing into cords of much greater tenacity.

The skin is uncovered. Very mild electrical pulses are applied to the torso, and the body slowly bends, stretching the back muscle. It stays unbroken, and the dulled brain, awake but unmoving, registers no signs of danger.

Eardrums, until now blessedly free of irritants, receive sounds that quickly dull the alpha waves and bring consciousness back in with speed. The brain becomes fully conscious of its state again, and the body's muscles gently flex and tense. The adrenal glands squirt a little in nervous anticipation, but nothing gets torn. The body is ready.

Later on it will receive a shock in motion that impacts hard enough to test even the matrices of the bones, but they withstand it.

Eventually the body experiences a lift, and a drop, and olfactory senses report that the air smells very different.

Rest comes harder than before and delta waves are barely even present; the body jerks itself into consciousness at the least little irritant, whether on eardrums, nose, or skin. The adrenal glands, in good practice, happily help out each time with generous supplies of corticosteroids, but eventually the brain reins them in.

The temperature shocks prove to have been helpful as the skin is now exposed to higher fluctuations over greater lengths of time than before. The heat doesn't cause damage but does interfere with gastric control, and there are several occasions where the adrenaline, the heat and high activity in the prefrontal cortex cause the stomach to vacate. Eventually the composition of ingested contents alters, lowering slightly in fat and starch and increasing in complex carbohydrates, fiber and various phytochemicals. There is also less alcohol ingestion,

and eventually the stomach settles down and remains stable.

Over time the body settles into a groove. Everything goes at its pace, all glands function, and if there is the rarest of half-missed beats from the heart, the rest of the system more than makes up for it.

So when, at last, the eardrums are assaulted and the thalamus shocked out of deep delta waves, and the body is fairly thrown to hands and knees, the shock isn't quite enough to cause any immediate lockup. The eardrums keep taking in and filtering everything they can, while both visual cortex and motor control narrow their focus, accomplishing in linear order several tasks that are so practiced they have long since been ingrained in the subconscious. The body rises and begins to run, the hands slightly tensed to hold their deadly baggage, the skin on the fingers cooling from steely contact. Now the visual cortex takes over, the head craning back and forth while the legs piston and the lungs work, and every now and then the body will stop, crouch, process visuals and react through hand movements, either a wave or a slight pull of a finger.

It is during the exit from one such crouch that the eardrums process a loud whine, and immediately after the skin is massively broken, not merely torn but shredded off, veins pieced and muscles taken off in chunks. The abdominals contract with all the power they can muster, and air is forced out of the lungs, the vocal cords vibrating at high frequencies. All systems go independent; legs give out, hands cramp up and eardrums vibrate with a merciless rat-tat-tat; bladder goes into overdrive and so does adrenal gland, pumping like there's no tomorrow. Adrenaline courses through the system at unprecedented rates, while the blood cells, engorged with oxygen, deliver it to whatever extremities they can before flowing through the broken skin and out into the unknown; and in all these imbalances and all this stress the heart, having ticked away in duty and stress forever until this very moment, at last loses its grip: cramps up, goes on strike, stops. The body convulses, eyes rolling around in their sockets, and in those last shooting moments of pain and confusion there is just enough time for the brain to realize it has been cut off from the flow, and for the eardrums to process one last noise fast approaching, before the body is crushed, cut and burned by a force far greater than it has ever experienced, and even the matrices of its bones give out at last, their cracks the final sounds before the quiet, definite and final onfall of death.

With Acknowledgments to Mad Dogs



The first time I saw the madmen, I was too slow on the button and they escaped into a narrow strait between the generators and a nearby warehouse. It took me a moment to realize what was happening - I was up top, photographing the last precious strains of a fading sunset through an industrial haze and smog, and had only noticed the activity below when I looked away from the lens - and before I could wonder what on earth they'd been doing climbing over the plant's security railings, I heard a low sound, a thrum in the earth, followed by a sudden and violent silence. I was shoved so hard backwards from the parapet and onto the rooftop that I hit my head on the brick floor, and lay there looking dazedly at the debris that showered over me. It's a wonder I didn't lose an eye, since half of the stuff was metal shards still too hot to touch. My hearing was gone, too, replaced with a constant, high-pitched whine. My photographer's instincts were intact, suicidal as they are, and as soon as I had my balance I rushed right up to the parapet again and started snapping pictures before I even knew what I was seeing.

Whatever role the generators had once fulfilled, they were now rubble. A foul-smelling smoke emanated from their broken husks and I could hear live electricity flying about. I wasn't too worried about the camera, which was insured by my employers, but felt the usual mild concern that some kind of radiation from the accident might affect its memory or the backups that I'd had implanted in my skin. I always worried about this if I was doing active fieldwork, though probably less due to any valid reason - the memory chips are sealed from outside interference, and if I ever have to worry about the skin chips I'll likely have much bigger problems to deal with - and more over transferal of emotion. When you put yourself in the line of fire, time on end, all that anxiety of self-preservation has to be put somewhere, lest it eat you up from inside or turn you stupid and make you act like you're immortal.

I had snapped a few shots of the smoking ruin when something on the warehouse wall caught my attention. I was too far away to see it with bare eyes, and the smoke still obscured most of it, but by zooming in and panning about I caught most of it.

If it had been a regular painted tag I'd have looked past, ignored it and focused back on the wreck. Most graffiti is applied either with paint composites or, for the hipsters, with detachable projectors that cast all sorts of visual tricks. This one, on the other hand, had been applied with ScArdite, a highly flammable substance normally used to treat metal surfaces. It was sold in large, sealed containers but if you knew what you were doing - and didn't mind risking your skin and eyebrows - you could siphon it into pressurized containers. When applied in steam form to metal it would leave scorch marks that couldn't be missed.

This one said, "Leave or die, Caldari".

I snapped pictures of it, nicely framed by the surrounding smoke and debris. They were thoughtless images, taken almost at random by someone who'd been there purely by accident.

A day later I was paid a high commission for the whole set, and two weeks after I was notified that the pictures would be set up in a prestigious current events exhibition. It was during this process I discovered the rest of what had happened: Those generators had fuelled security and auto-response systems over various areas in the city. Backup systems were in place, but they weren't sufficient to prevent a group of Gallenteans from sneaking about under the cover of encroaching darkness and assaulting both Caldari people and Caldari landmarks. The

generators' destruction hadn't been a single and conclusive act of sabotage; it had been a call to arms.

The world was worried. The news was the same, but news analysis, which is where you hear what people are thinking, was turning more and more jingoistic and paranoid. I didn't know anything more than anyone else but I could see that something was starting to go very wrong.

I found myself thinking about those people. They'd wanted to send a message, and they had, but I wasn't even sure of what that message was, and neither were the pundits. The Caldari section of the populace was clamoring for the police to find, try and judge those responsible with the harshest penalties possible - this was Caldari Prime, after all, and we'd already suffered enough at the hands of the Federation - and demanded increased surveillance of Gallente youth. The Gallenteans, I have to say, took it all in stride, supporting our demands and agreeing with our politicians to whatever extent they could.

But it didn't make sense. A concentrated effort like the generator sabotage took planning and resources, if one ignored the stupid tags they'd left behind. Something like that was done with a clear and direct purpose in mind. You shut down power, you robbed the bank, and you escaped. The outcome of this, the assaults and property damage, wasn't a crime in the traditional sense; it was a generalized and violent political message, something you'd expect from a group of animals too stupid to know what else to do.

I couldn't stop thinking about it. I found myself visiting the landmarks they'd defaced and walking through the areas where they'd hurt all those people. I figured it might make for a good series of follow-up images but in truth I was doing it more for myself.

In each space I found something familiar, in that way I can never quite explain. When you take pictures you're dealing with three layers of reality: That which can be seen and is what it is, that which can also be seen but represents something else, and the dark limbo in between that's so abstract you can barely identify it at all. Fiction has the first two - storyline and metaphors - but usually lacks the third. It is the framework, the organization of everything so that it can tell its story; a meta-layer of conveyance.

And I saw it, the same thing, in every one of those locations. There was something about them that made them stand out. From a simple public park to the most imposing of Caldari monuments, it was there. This setting, light and lines, that gave an area its unmistakable flavor. This framework.

Whether the attackers had known about it, I had no idea. But I was a photographer and I'd wandered the streets of this city for a long time, long enough to know where else to find moods like this.

Probably I should have called the police, told them I had a suspicion of where they'd strike next. And probably they would have laughed, and thought I was some artist with an ego. Or they might have listened; I don't know.

I remembered a place in the city, one of many monuments to the fall of our planet. It had the same feel as the ones I'd seen, and it also had some nice vantage points where a person might hide out.

That same night I stocked up and took my gear to one of those vantage points, where I waited all night for something to happen. I was nervous and jittery, and would snap an image at the least little thing. In early morning I left my spot, tired and frustrated, but relieved, too; not merely for the sake of the monument but for my own.

I was between assignments and still felt too attached to the sabotage, so I slept during the day and returned to the same place the night after, with better equipment and a more patient attitude.

It served me well. That night they came.

The pictures caused an outrage. It was a proper series this time, from start to finish, that documented how a group of Gallente utterly reduced a Caldari monument to smoking ruin. Some of them - the ones who'd used acid and other things - wore gasmasks, but the group otherwise seemed entirely unconcerned with identification. At the end, they even pulled down their pants and urinated all over the remains of what they'd destroyed.

I had another exhibition during which someone asked me in fairly shocked tones why I hadn't done something. I kept a cool demeanor and asked what I should have done, alone, against a group of rampaging, violent criminals. My interrogator's spirit was dampened somewhat at this, so I put my arm on his shoulder and explained that sometimes all we could do was tell the others, to make sure society could see what was happening in its midst, and leave the rest up to the people in charge. He was mollified at this, though I don't think for a second that he truly thought any action would come of what was being displayed on the walls and in mid-air. It was a personal insult to him, what he'd seen in my pictures, and he was less concerned about society than his own fragile bubble inside of it, for if someone would do this to cherished and well-established landmarks

of the city, someone might well take it into their head to go after its cherished and well-established patrons, too. Everything is personal, in the end.

This wasn't the first time I'd done war photography. Of course, in my head everything with violence in it could be called a war, the only difference being one of scale. Those people who maintained that a picture of mad dogs fighting in backyard matches was different from spaceship armadas launching torpedoes and ammo volleys at one another were really only deluding themselves. And as I looked at my own pictures, hovering there so gargantuan they blotted out the rest of my sight, it began to dawn on me that the raw power of this particular series - that unnamable framework - wasn't drawn forth so much by the violence that I'd seen a million times before, nor whatever political machinations might lie behind, but by my own emotional response to it. I could see it in the angles I had taken, the lines I had cut without even realizing it: the pictures were in perfect harmony not merely to the actions of their subjects, but to the situation itself. A situation that I had let myself become part of, both physically and emotionally. I had all but put myself in front of the lens.

It wouldn't be the last time, either. I had known where they would be and deep inside I felt a quiet reassurance that I also knew where else they would go. That budding realization, that this possibly hadn't been a fluke but instead a recurring relationship between me and these mad dogs, excited me beyond measure, and frightened me more than I can possibly explain.

I began hunting them, as one would stray animals. The framework was always there, waiting for me to find it and settle down to wait.

It amazed me how they didn't seem shy at all. They truly were like animals, acting out their nature unashamedly and with great vigor. Not that they had nothing to fear, for the authorities were after them in force, but they were good judges of any situation and responded to real threats rather than nervous imagination. A slaver hound will without hesitation tear apart a human being, taking its time to eat the flesh and muscle, and so long as you don't get between it and its meal it won't care at all that you're near.

The waits got shorter and I began to know their patterns so well that at times I could swear they were practically leaving me signs for where they'd strike next. Most of the images I took, I didn't even release myself. Aside from growing police interest in me, there's a limit to how much a client or exhibition hall is willing to pay a single photographer, and I'd long since set up various fake middlemen for those occasional times when I was especially productive.

Public attention in their crimes rose accordingly and hit such a fever pitch that I could afford to devote myself exclusively to the subject. I could probably have afforded a nice, long vacation as well, but as time passed it became less about the job and more about the hunt. There is a special flame that lights inside you when you spy the perfect framework, that dead limbo you want to capture forever, and I needed to keep it lit.

In fact, it had all been going so terribly well that what happened during my last session has robbed me of sleep and all peace of mind.

It was near sunset, my favorite time of day. I was high up in a disused building on the edge of town. It overlooked a trickle of a river, on the other end of which was a cemetery with a special plot for war veterans.

I'd been there on and off for almost sixty hours, but between my thermo mattress and some quite pleasant instant meals it was all right. My sleep was peaceful and rested, and motion scanners warned me of any possible appearances. It had been a few hours since I'd set up my gear and settled into that pleasant meditative state when one of the scanners pinged and I snapped to attention.

They came quietly, disabling security and pouring through the gates. I couldn't help but admire their movements; they looked so nonchalant and purposeful all at once, a hungry pack out on a hunt for easy prey. The group moved directly to the veterans' quarter and I felt the familiar trickle of excitement on my skin. With luck they would do their work before the light ran out.

At no point did I feel responsible for their actions; they were repulsive, and my excitement was always tempered with disgust at both them and myself. But that didn't stop me from shooting pictures.

And there must have been a glint from my lens, because even as one of them was straightening up, having defaced a Caldari grave in ways beyond comprehension and taken off his gasmask, he turned around with a bright blue smile, and he looked towards the abandoned building, and over the vast gulf of that dead limbo we suddenly both inhabited he looked directly into my eyes.

I felt my blood freeze. My mind turned in on itself, trying to comprehend what I'd just seen and whether it had been coincidence. I didn't even consciously see him any longer, though I kept shooting on instinct. They finished their task and the man never looked my way again, but long after they'd gone I lay there, trembling,

rationalizing to myself the way someone does when they've long since crossed the line and now look back to see where it was.

For this framework, this dark limbo between reality and deeper meaning that I've been hunting all my life, is more all-encompassing than I ever imagined.

When I got home and inspected my pictures, I saw it.

Another thing I know about animals and respect them for is that they don't take a conscious decision to participate in whatever horrible acts they perform. It's instinct at most, but never calculated intent. The outcome looks much the same one way or another, but the reason matters. It matters to me.

My pictures are growing more and more popular, and I've sold them in the firm belief that I am merely a chronicler, nonexistent and outside the framework they convey. But I was so wrong. And yet I am going to keep taking them, because I must. I have become part of these events, and if I stop, then they will cease to exist, and so will I. The framework includes me, as it always did.

I have in my home a picture that I will never show to another human being. It shows a Gallentean, his face so nondescript I can barely describe it once I make myself look away. Beads of sweat are glistening on his countenance and the defaced gravestone by his feet bears the marks of the small drill in his hand. In his other hand he holds an empty canister of acid, droplets spilling from its edge and onto the grass below, and on the ground before him lies a used gasmask. He looks happy. He has just poured the jug's content all over the earth on which he stands, and the smoke that arose to envelop him has been blown to the winds. Soon the acid will seep even deeper into the ground, find its way to the bones buried in there, and dissolve them, leaving behind only a blackened, foul-smelling tar.

He is staring into the camera, one animal acknowledging another, and he is winking directly at me.

Of God and her Beast



When he dropped the golden vial, Antar knew he was a dead man.

They were in the garden of contemplation, Lerege and he, arguing about the tenets of faith and their service to the Chamberlain. Both of them were privileged Holders who had done a lot of work in the royal court, and the constant friction of daily interaction had filed them into two smooth blocks of solid rock, smashed for so long against one another that they grated past with a minimum of fuss and agony, each waiting for the other to finally crack and break.

Before the vial had even touched the ground Antar was already kneeling for it, his fingers reaching for its shiny surface and his mind working on some suitable excuse. By the time he'd snatched it up again and put it in his pocket he had already decided not to say anything at all, and prayed instead that Lerege would think the fallen object had been one of the golden buttons on his robe.

And Lerege didn't seem to notice, going on as he did about the futility of self-devotion when there were so many issues to be dealt with every day. "You don't get anything done if you're on your knees in prayer all day," he said. "The Empire expects results."

Antar, who wanted to get out of this conversation before his trembling hands gave him away, forced himself to shrug and say, "Then I guess we'd better get to it." Lerege sniffed at him and walked away.

Once he was alone, Antar walked over to one of the benches and sat down heavily. He felt the vial inside his pocket, pressing against his skin.

He had an appointment with the Chamberlain himself in less than a day's time. He needed to keep a clear head and not fill himself up with trash and paranoia.

So he'd gone into the garden of contemplation, picked his thousandth fight with a man who loathed him, and right in the middle of things he had started fiddling with the golden vial that contained his emergency supply of drugs. The golden vial that he had started bringing into the court for no reason whatsoever.

He rubbed his face with his hands, then spread them on the bench, leaned his head back and listened to the susurris around him, with closed eyes and progressively calming breath.

It was not in the nature of man to deny his own nature. He enjoyed sitting on this bench and having the sun stroke his face. He also enjoyed doing drugs, not merely riding their highs but suffering their calamitous drops as well.

That last part had been a revelation. The pressure of living in high Amarr society, not to mention working for some of the most high-powered men in the Empire, was such that most everyone had to find some manner of release. This was natural and expected, and people dealt with it with prayer and piety. You were expected to suffer for your faith and that you did, meandering through the random mazes of humanity's constructs in the hope of finding enlightenment on the other side. The stress and the pressure meant that you had a need for God beyond the everyday.

But not everyone found themselves able to alleviate the stress through prayer, and sometimes would turn to self-flagellation. It was not uncommon for high-ranking officials to be seen on slow walks around the many gardens in the Chamberlain's courts, gingerly feeling their way towards benches or tables after an evening of bodily abuse. This was smiled at, if not actively encouraged, by the church.

Drug use was forbidden, as was imbibing too much alcohol, synthetic drinks or anything except the mildest brews. But to Antar it came to much the same. It made no sense to self-harm, nor to lose yourself in invocation, because both depended on your strength and willpower to see it through. When you gave your autonomy over to someone else as your faith demanded, Antar felt that the very least God could do in return was to provide an unblocked passageway to Him.

He had gone to the drugs out of frustration and shame at being unable to take the pressure, and out of unwillingness to devote himself to the increasingly useless prayer and pain-threshold testing. And in the aftermath of fugue and tremors, he found himself at last.

He was supposed to suffer and that he had certainly done, spending what felt like centuries in panicked agony of visions, sweats and paranoia. But when it wore off, all he could think of was to do it again. The highs gave him sacrament and the lows gave him vindication. It felt perversely like being closer not only to God but to himself as well: Being true to his own nature and true to the punishing demands of his faith, by enjoying life to the fullest and then suffering for it.

It was the one and perfect way of achieving wholeness, and Lerenge had embraced it wholeheartedly.

He got up, brushed off his robes and looked around. The day was drawing to an end. Sunlight glinted off a nearby statue of a Slaver hound, cast in bronze. Its presence comforted him, for if God had created this vicious, merciless animal, then surely there must have been some concession on God's side to the animalistic nature of human beings.

Antar headed towards his quarters. Tomorrow would be a demanding day and he needed to clear his head.

"My dear boy, so good to see you," the Chamberlain said. His antechamber glimmered in the early daylight. The ceiling was high and ended in tinted windows whose glass changed hue according to the strength of sunlight. In the afternoon it would be golden and regal, and in the early evening a bronzed blood red, but the mornings were bright and uplifting. From beyond came the sound of birds.

The walls were covered with icons: Woven tapestries illustrated with the crests of the five Heirs and beset with their iconic gemstones, small crests and smaller paintings of Holders that had performed high service to the Empire, and massive decorations of all sorts that depicted the glorious Emperors of ages past. There was barely room for God.

Antar, still kneeling, murmured into his chest, "I am always at your service, Your Honor." There were no guards inside the room, which was not that unusual. They were for decoration as much as anything, and the Chamberlain often sent them out so he could discuss personal business.

"And so polite as well!" Chamberlain Karsoth said with a laugh. "I trust you've had a good stay in the palace quarters."

"They never fail to bring me happiness," Antar said. This was true. He'd emptied the vial last night and disposed of it for good. The visions had been quite marvelous.

"That's good to hear. I like hearing positive words. We should have more of that in this place, us pitiful, unworthy sinners."

Antar remained silent. He'd always liked the Chamberlain, an opinion that had him in the minority among the court, but the man's conversation style was dangerously comfortable. A genial chat with the wrong word let loose could mean a trip to the cleansing pits.

"Are you contemplating the heavens?" Karsoth asked him in silky tones.

"Always, my lord," Antar said. "How may I serve you?"

This time the Chamberlain did not answer. The silence was so complete Antar could hear his own heartbeats, and he realized with a tiny bloom of terror that the birdsong had fallen silent as well. The audioblocks had been set down.

He kept his eyes resolutely on the ground. Before him he heard the noise of the Chamberlain rising to his feet, the metal pistons in his legs hissing as they supported the man's frame. There was a thunk and another thunk,

repeated at higher volumes as Karsoth walked closer. Perfume wafted over Antar.

"From this height I could take off your head," Karsoth said in the same quiet voice.

"I believe you could, milord," Antar said, keeping his breathing as steady as he could. His legs trembled slightly, though whether from strain or panic, he didn't know.

"Lerenge spoke to me last night," Karsoth said.

Antar said nothing.

"I had your chambers searched," Karsoth said.

Antar remained resolutely quiet.

"Do you have something to tell me, servant of the Empire?"

For the first time, Antar looked up and directly into the eyes of Chamberlain Karsoth, highest representative of the celestial court, supreme authority in the Amarr Empire, and the conduit to the living God.

And saw something he recognized.

"Nothing you don't already know, milord," Antar said.

Karsoth smiled and pulled something out of a pocket on his golden robe. Antar had no doubt that he fully knew what crimes Antar had committed, for the man's dark network of spies and information was vast, but seeing the vial in the Chamberlain's hands was still a shock; not merely because it was the final embodiment of Antar's doom, but he was absolutely certain that he had destroyed it.

"Show me how faithful you are, Antar," the towering Chamberlain said to him, that same strange smile still on his face. "Talk."

Antar knew that whatever he said in here wouldn't matter. His fate would have been decided already, and his confession was no more than an amusement to the Chamberlain. Whether he begged, pleaded, threatened or cajoled, he would still end up in the cleansing pits. Nothing mattered now; but conversely, nothing was forbidden. Through the pounding noise of his heartbeat, there surfaced the realization that he was free to say what he wished, in this last confession.

So he began to talk.

In the silence he spoke of pain and punishment, of the fracture between body and spirit and of the ideal nobody could possibly fulfil unless they explored all facets of humanity. He told of the heavenly visions he'd encountered outside himself and the hellish aftermath of the fall back to reality. He confessed his constant, infinite, unyielding frustration with the Empire's insistence on denying itself the divine imperative to be animals.

At some point, through the fugue of quiet panic, he realized he had stood up and was looking the Chamberlain in the face. He kept talking.

And at last he stopped, falling abruptly silent like the last page turned. He felt clean and empty, like anything Karsoth could do would be an afterthought to a life already ended.

The giant man watched him for a long time, the smile on his face not completely faded. Then he leaned in, the supports on his legs creaking with effort, and said, "You are the man I've been looking for."

Antar stared back, with a dull and uncomprehending mind.

"Do you know what is going to happen to you, faithful one?" the Chamberlain asked.

"I will die," Antar said. "Eventually."

"That you will. But first you will follow me." Karsoth turned and walked to the wall behind his throne. For a moment he stood in front of a painting of someone Antar had never known.

There was no sign; no laser outline, no shimmer and nothing that indicated a change. Karsoth merely gave a short grunt of satisfaction, walked towards the wall and melded into it.

Not vanished, Antar's brain told Antar's incredulous eyes. The Chamberlain had not been abducted or turned invisible, but neither had he merely walked through a holograph. He had entered the wall as if it were a porous membrane, and the wall had melded itself to him, rippled and moved, and let him pass through.

Karsoth's face pushed back out, its surface area such a picture-perfect replica of the wall he'd entered that Antar could only make him out by the outlines of his jowls. "The passage is active for a few more seconds, acolyte," he said. "You come now or never."

Antar's feet took over from the rest of his stupid body and propelled him through.

On the other side were ... people. They seemed to be enjoying themselves. There was no external lighting, but torchlight glinted off naked skin. Some of them were ingesting things.

"Contrary to what you might believe, I am extremely faithful," Karsoth said, as if in passing. Antar nodded, unable to tear his gaze from the mass of humanity writhing in front of him. The air in the room was heavily perfumed, and the people were making low sounds. He felt light-headed.

"But I despise the god of the people we serve, for it is not the one true god. He would encourage indulgence and unfettered belief."

"He?" Antar said absent-mindedly, not having heard a word.

Karsoth misunderstood him. "Or She. God can be anything you wish."

"What happens to these people?" Antar said, still not entirely back in reality.

Karsoth gave him a stern look. "What do you think happens?"

"Before I saw this, I would have said the cleansing pits," Antar replied. Karsoth grunted.

They watched the display for a while. In a controlled voice that betrayed the slightest of tremors, Antar said, "Milord, I should ask, for I expect the question includes me as well. What does happen to these people?"

Karsoth put a hand on his shoulder and in a benevolent voice said, "They are forgiven, my son. And they go on."

"Where, milord?" Antar said. He thought for a moment. This was Karsoth. "And in one piece?" he added.

The Chamberlain laughed out loud, a raucous roar of noise that echoed through the room. "Yes, Antar, they'll be fine. They come here now and then to tell me news from the darker parts. Most are free to wander the court as they please, but they tend to prefer each other's company until they depart."

"Quite, milord."

Karsoth turned to him. "Understand, acolyte. There exist a people who think like this. I found them through much the same crisis of faith as you extemporized to me, a truth that defied the death you were staring in the eyes. I will send you to them now, as my emissary. You have served me well in the past, and you will serve even better in your new position."

"Milord, I... - well, what is there to say? I serve," Antar said, and bowed.

"So you will," Karsoth said. "There is an enemy out there that needs to be dealt with, for she stands against all that we are; not in innocence, which is easily enough countered, but a different kind of darkness altogether. You will never see her, for it would kill you, but you will hunt down the ones closest to her. And you will do it among your own kind at last."

"Yes, milord."

"So you will be off, but I need to know now - and believe me, I will see the lie on your face - do you want to go? Do you understand that you will leave behind everything you knew and disclaim every trace of the life you had?"

"Yes, your grace," Antar said. "Yes, yes, a thousand times yes. Who are these people?"

Chamberlain Karsoth smiled. "They are called the Blood Raiders."

Murder and Creation



Antel falls down in the mud again. It's been raining for days in the forge, and the long slog from his quarters to the iron works is tiring his feet and chilling him to the bone. He hauls himself up to his knees and rests for a while before standing up. He's so tired these days, but his sense of purpose is unflagging and it's not long before he's on his way to work again.

This life fills a void in him, as it does with so many of the other Caldari here. They are working for the State and serving their purpose in bringing it to greatness. It is his job to do his part. Most people have the same attitude, though some find it harder going than others.

He has never given much thought to how this void was created, or how it might otherwise be filled. It's there, and the harder he focuses on serving the State, the less he feels its presence. This is where he is, and this is where he'll always be. He can only change reality in some small measure, through diligent work, but he can change his perception of the entire world, and he chooses to serve.

He only wishes he wasn't always so tired.

The rain drives down. Antel overhears some people muttering about cold air and bad heating and the broken-down railway line that should've been fixed like so much else in this place, but he tunes it out.

A loudspeaker sounds as he approaches the factory grounds, blaring out his group code. He approaches a guard and asks what he should do, and the guard tells him that there was a mine crash in the night. They need people to clear out the rubble and anything else left inside. Antel has a lot of experience with this particular mine. He worked it for years, him and his friends.

With a sick feeling in his stomach, he heads over to the mine and meets up with those still living. They're given excavation tools and measuring equipment, and told to run checks on the infrastructure.

They proceed into the mine, which has been shored up. They find it in better shape than expected. Explorers are working in pairs, and Antel works alongside Foraani, a dependable man he's known for years. They know each other and the mine so well that they can move in silence, placing markers and inspecting fixtures with ease.

The mine is in decent shape, but the body they find is not. It has been crushed so thoroughly by a falling girder that there is little recognizable left of it except the head, which lies a little to the side. It seems almost untouched above the neck, something that strikes Antel as grotesque for a reason he cannot explain.

They peer closer and find that they recognize the face; it is an old friend from their shared time in the mining days, a man who never quite managed to get promoted out into the open air. Antel goes utterly cold. Foraani turns very white but says nothing, either, though he starts nodding to himself. He keeps doing it, even as they

clear out the room and keep inspecting the mine, and when they emerge at last, he is still nodding almost imperceptively, and wringing his hands. They go their separate ways without speaking.

Antel is told to take the rest of the day off. He obeys, and takes the long walk back to his living quarters, where he returns to his bunker, files a work report, then removes his work clothes and puts them in the cleaning bag. He takes a shower to get rid of the smell, puts on fresh work clothes and goes out behind the bunker, staring hard at the grey, muddy ground and breathing deep. He closes his eyes, is seized by vertigo, and opens them again, still staring at the ground. It's like clay, and the pink flesh of his hands stands out in contrast. He feels outside of himself and, for the first time, feels like he belongs to something he is no longer a part of, like his friend's head, untouched but without a body, staring in blankness at the grey ceiling above.

Night. It takes him a long time to fall asleep. He feels that he should be mourning his friend, but for some reason he cannot. It takes him a considerable amount of time to come to the conclusion that he no longer views himself or anyone around him as an individual, but merely as a bolt in a ship, a cell in a body, a wheat stalk in a field.

It has been a long time since he last saw a field.

When there is acceptance of one's fate, and of one's place in the body politic, one finds peace. One does not mourn the loss of another cell, because it means the body is renewing itself, cleansing itself.

At last he sleeps, finding solace in dreams about the past.

At work there is little talk, though in sequestered corners people are discussing yesterday's tragedy and others like it. Antel hears one say this is the last thing they're going to take, and hears another tell him that he needs to wait a little, that they've got plans. When he tries to listen in, they move away. The ironworks belch black plumes of smoke into the sky, turning it a little more grey. It has stopped raining.

He feels completely isolated. He is a Caldari first and everything else second, but he cannot stop seeing his friend's face. He hasn't eaten a proper meal in so long that he's no longer sure such a thing even exists. Nobody buys Gallente luxuries anymore, and they're not available on the market anyway, not for people like him. There is nothing to do but walk through the day like a cell flowing through the body, doing what needs to be done, and fulfilling its purpose.

At one point Foraani comes up to him, still as grey as the metal sky. He explains to Antel that something is going to happen and asks if he wants to join. He adds that the others don't trust Antel, but he's known him for years and years and knows he will not let down the cause, and that after everything that's been done to them in all that time, he cannot imagine Antel can go on anymore like this.

Antel asks if their lost friend caused this, and Foraani says that he did; the company should have taken more security measures, and their entire attitude in this has opened his eyes to how thoroughly everyone is being abused. Antel asks Foraani whether he does not want to serve the State any longer, and Foraani says all he knows is how to serve, but a worthy cause needs worthy masters. He asks Antel whether he will join them, and Antel says that he needs time to think about it. Foraani looks at him for a long while, then nods once, says that he has less time to think than he realizes, and leaves.

The next night he lies awake again, feeling the panic rise in him like the tide, ebbing and swelling. There is going to be a revolution. There is going to be a break. He is a cell turning cancerous. There will be a revolution. He is a cell. He doesn't understand how a cell can consciously rebel against the body.

At last he gets up, calmly walks out and behind his bunker, barely catching a glimpse of the grey ground before his pink face opens its mouth and the pink contents of his stomach erupt from his pink body and splatter on the ground. He dry heaves a few times more, then spits off the strands of saliva and walks unsteadily back into his bunker, to sleep. He dreams about the future, and continually wakes up in cold sweats. He knows that something has gone wrong with him, but doesn't know what, or whether it was wrong all along.

The last time he wakes is an hour before reveille. He lies in his bunk, his thoughts flowing past as intangible and unstoppable as a rushing river. There is a void in him now and the thoughts pour into it, circling it like a funnel and hammering at all sides, hollowing it out even further. He had tried to fill it with his love for the Caldari and his servitude for the State, but now it seems bottomless, unyielding and hungry for something else. He is here - he will always be here - but he no longer knows with certainty if his place truly is here, though he has no idea where else it should be. Even if he transfers his allegiances to another cause, thereby betraying everything else he stood for, he doesn't know whether it will fill him up any better than before. He wonders whether a cell can

switch bodies mid-stream without self-destructing in the process.

It occurs to him that most of the effort is on his side, has always been on his side, and that sometimes you can put in so much effort that you effectively become what you're trying to uphold, giving yourself to it as if the cell had become the body.

His stomach hurts. He rises and walks to the window. It's not grey outside, but orange; the sun is rising and the industrial works are bronze-colored with its light.

Anyone who tells on a coworker will be rewarded. Rebellions are crushed mercilessly. Those who attempt them are not true Caldari, Antel has taught himself, but traitors who want to ruin everything the State has built.

Antel cannot help but wonder how it would feel to be the body and not merely a cell; to be the field growing slowly in the orange sun.

He goes to work. At some point during the day, he meets up with Foraani and tells him he'll take part in the rebellion. He swears a simple oath, for everything is simple in this place.

Night again, and he sleeps soundly. He dreams about the present, about the sun on the fields below; about floating away happy as a cell carried by the torrents in a body of his own making. When he awakes, he feels light, for the first time in years, as if the wind could blow him away.

He wakes up a betrayer, and heads out to work. On his way to the forge he deviates from course and eventually finds himself outside a guard's cabin. He stands in front of it, his eyes closed, head tilted up towards the sky. He realizes that anything beyond himself is no longer part of him; it is the body's to think about, and not the cell's purpose to question. So he can go into the cabin, or he can move on, a betrayer either way.

And in that moment it hits him with a force so hard that he is brought to his knees: he has a choice in this, he is in a current of his own making, and whatever he does truly will affect only him, in his own cell, in this body that by extension is his, too. Nothing matters beyond that context. He is going to betray something, and in doing so he is going to rise beyond the cell, acknowledge his own endless efforts, and at last become the body proper.

He walks into the cabin and tells the guard all about the secret plan. The guard listens intently all the while, saying nothing. When Antel stops speaking, the guard tells him that there are more people who knew about this plan than Antel realizes. Then the guard pulls out a gun and points it at Antel.

He is in the field. He is here at last.

The guard says something, but Antel is too busy smiling to hear him. He has become the body.

The sun shines bright.

He is free.

Silent Furies



This configuration was new to him. A beautiful one, though it lacked the smooth subtlety of the Kaulas patterns, the ones from before the revolution. The Thukker as a whole had tended toward violent motifs after the great save, its people too drunk on their own rage to remember they were free, and every creation from its cultural womb since then had in some way borne fury's jagged stamp.

He set the object on the table. Before him was a wall, three quarters window, a tinted expanse of transnano stretching several meters to both sides and displaying the beginnings of a sunset upon the quarter beyond. Underneath the window was the small table, its contents cast in deep sun yellow, and at it he sat, his mood darkening with each passing minute.

He stood up, made his way to the desk in the opposite corner of the room and sat down at it. On the desk, a modcom was chirping.

"Shakor," he said.

"Emissary Shakor, this is Central," sounded the machine. "Your afternoon appointment just arrived at the compound. Are you ready to receive him?"

"Is this Sergeant Ermika speaking?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your name isn't Central."

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"I said your name isn't Central."

There was a brief pause, then a small nasal exhalation on the other end. "Thank you, sir. Forgot."

"No harm done, Sergeant. Let him in."

"Yes, sir."

Shakor leaned back. Resting his elbows on the chair's metal arms, he locked his fingers together across his stomach, tilted his head back against the top of the headrest and let out a long breath. He rubbed his eyebrows smooth with two hard strokes. Then he stood up, straightened the front of his shirt with his hands and walked back over to the window. He was standing there, pensive, when the door buzzer sounded.

"Yes."

Sound of someone entering, then a voice. "Admiral Morata is here to see you, sir."

"Very well." Shakor turned half in the direction of the door and waited. There was a shuffling of footsteps, followed by brief silence.

"Good afternoon, Your Honor," came a voice.

"Hello, Hakram," replied Shakor warmly. "No need for formalities, least of all when they no longer apply." He cocked his head now in the other man's direction, as if sniffing something out with his mind's eye. "At ease, soldier," he said presently.

Hakram Morata, Vice Admiral of the Republic Fleet, veteran of hundreds of battles, stiffened a bit, then relaxed. He shook his head, slowly. "How do you always know?"

"Blind luck," said Shakor. "Have a seat."

The two men made their way over to the small table and sat down at each end of it. A cool draft played through the sparse chamber as the door slid closed.

"I'm assuming you've heard," said the Vice Admiral, removing his cap and straightening his carefully creased dark olive trousers. "About Yun." He studied Shakor.

"I heard something," said Shakor.

"It's true."

"I have no doubt. Tonight, was it?"

"Yes," said Hakram. "A little under three hours from now."

"I see." Shakor cleared his throat. "How that boy has grown."

He stood up and went to a carved wooden cabinet set into the wall, from which he gingerly retrieved a glass bottle filled with an opaque liquid of darkest brown. He unstopped it. "Care for a drop?" he asked, somewhat perfunctorily, as he began to pour the liquid into two small glasses.

Hakram smiled. "You know me."

"That I do," said Shakor, handing him one of the glasses. A rich aroma filled their corner of the large chamber. "To ours."

"To ours."

They drank. Shakor sat down again.

"So. What can I do for you today, Hakram?"

There was a studied silence, and then Hakram spoke. "Well, sir, I want to ask you to consider some of the things Keitan is going to talk about tonight."

"A-ha." Shakor's brow creased. "Which things, in particular?"

"Well, he is going to cover a fair few subjects. For one, he's going to urge you to come back." Shakor sat very still and did not react.

Hakram's eyes fixed on the spiked orb sitting upon the table. He picked it up. "You're really in a unique position to do the things that need doing, sir," he said, quietly.

"I'm not in a position to do anything," replied Shakor. "I'm tired of the things that need doing. I've been a member of this carnival for too long. I'm tired of collateral damage and lives on my conscience. Tired of getting tangled in the political underbrush."

"Tangled?" Hakram put the orb down. "But you dealt with the Elders, sir. You worked with the Thukkers. You circumvented every protocol there is."

"Yes, at the cost of a good woman's political career and the stability of our government. Those aren't dues paid lightly."

"But you did what needed to be done," Hakram said. "You shook things up enough for them to be set right again. Why finish with the job half done? There is a groundswell of support for you, at the public level as well as within the entire structure of government."

Shakor laughed. It was a deep and abrasive sound, the pounding of a punctured war drum. "Hakram. My boy. Do you think public support means anything, with things the way they are?"

A tiny blink escaped one of Hakram's eyes, a momentary crack in his mask of equilibrium. He sat upright in his seat, glad, as so often before, that the old man was blind.

"Not the public's, necessarily, but the ministers have..." he began.

"The ministers? That great thunderous gaggle of short-sighted polemicists? Oh, yes, I'm sure they love me. They'll love me until I do something that doesn't quite serve their interests, and then they'll hem and haw and harrumph and draft legislation and set their lackeys to screaming, and before you know it we're back to the low squabbling that keeps us stuck in the mud."

Abruptly he stopped there, and smoothed his eyebrows with a sharp upward motion of both hands. He stood up. Hakram waited, watching him intently.

"I'm not the person for it," said Shakor. He walked back over to the cabinet, found the bottle and returned.

"Sir..." said Hakram. Shakor quieted him with a gesture, then held out an open hand. He gave his glass to the old man.

"I appreciate your making the trip all the way out here," Shakor said, in a more convivial tone. He poured them two more drinks. "Did you have any problems getting in?"

"I was questioned a fair bit," said Hakram. "Nothing too bad."

"They know what they're doing."

"I have no doubt, sir."

"If I'm not mistaken, there should be some domes perched on the horizon there." Shakor pointed in the direction of the window. "They're synthesizing plants from the homeworld over there."

"Really?" said Hakram. He looked over Shakor's shoulder. Past the sprawl of squat metal buildings beyond the window he saw three gigantic skulls jutting out of the landscape, retiring rays of sun laying checkered patterns over their silvery pates.

"Genesis vaults, they call them. They're aiming to eventually have specimens of every known plant from Old Mother." Shakor took a sip of his drink.

"Impressive," said Hakram. "Very impressive. Wouldn't have expected it from the Thukkers, to be perfectly honest."

Shakor set his drink on the table. "I wouldn't have expected it from anyone," he said.

A period of silence passed between the two men, leaden with quiet consequence. Shakor was sitting with his elbows on his knees, flat palms pressed together, leaning forward. Hakram was sitting back, his hat in his lap and his left ankle resting on his right knee.

He switched legs, dusted a bit of lint off his calf and said "Maleatu... how can I get you to reconsider?"

And so the afternoon went.

"I have a message for you," said Hakram. He was standing by the window, looking out at the flat tops of the surrounding buildings, the tiny motes of windowlight like insect eyes in featureless faces.

Shakor raised his eyebrows and lifted his head slightly in the younger man's direction. "Oh?" he said.

Hakram came back to his chair and seated himself. "You spoke of collateral damage earlier. About making sacrifices and never knowing whether they had any meaning."

Shakor nodded.

"Do you remember a decision of that sort that you made, twenty-six years ago, when you were fighting in Ammatar space?"

Shakor remained quiet, his face impassive.

"When the rest of the militia heads asked you to leave the front because your presence was bringing down too much heat on their heads?"

Shakor gave a slow nod, barely perceptible.

"When, despite their insistent cajoling and threatening, you stayed an extra two days in order to be able to gather crucial intel that would, it turned out, end up saving the lives of millions?"

"Yes, yes," said Shakor. "Very theatrical. You have my admiration. Get to the point."

"My message is from one of those commanders. Do you remember Silbraur Makusta?"

"Of course. He's a high-ranking member of the Justice Department."

"Yes, but back then he led a group called the South Rixarn Army. It was one of the smaller militia groups active on the Derelik fringe back then."

Shakor's eyebrows lowered and his jaw clenched. "I remember the SRA," he said.

"Close-knit group, largely family. Highly specialized. Came from a..."

"Hakram."

"What?"

"Just give me the message."

"Yes, sir. Senior Counsel Makusta heard through a common acquaintance in Fleet brass that I was going to go to the Sanctuaries to try and convince you to come back. When he did, he had this message delivered to me and said that it was to be given to you verbatim."

"I assume you've memorized it."

"You know me."

"Let's hear it."

"Well, sir," Hakram began, then hesitated.

"Let's hear it, Admiral," said Shakor.

"He wants you to know that every single one of them would have willingly chosen their fate, had they known the stakes."

There was a long pause.

"Very well, Admiral," said Shakor. "Thank you for coming."

As the mantle of dusk continued its gentle slide over the moon's dry skin and its inhabitants began to lay themselves to rest, his modcom sounded again.

"This is Shakor."

"Emissary, Ambassador Keitan Yun has requested to speak with you."

He spun the orb in his hand for a few moments. How jagged it was.

"Put him through."

The Paths They Chose

The Garden was a man-made construct through and through, several acres of carefully tended flora and woodland encased in a massive transparent dome. Souro Foiritan, president of the Gallente Federation, had it constructed long ago as a meeting place between dignitaries of the various empire factions.

In this it served its function admirably, for a twofold reason. First, a peaceful garden was much more conducive to a genial atmosphere and agreeable spirits than a meeting room ever could be. A visiting diplomat, weighted by worries and demands, would feel so much more calm sitting by a babbling brook or a tree in budding bloom than he ever could on the top floor of a high-rise, no matter how good its view. And second, it was so well secured with anti-eavesdropping technology that visitors could discuss the darkest topics of their hearts' desires without so much as a glance over their shoulders.

The dome's outer surface was dotted with holographic projectors that melded in with the surface, making it impossible to detect from the air, and the materials of its hull utterly blocked every possible emanation from within: light, sound, heat signature, electric signals. Its insides were beset not only with equipment that regularly scanned for any anomalous signals, but motion-sensitive audio-scramblers that made it impossible even for servants and cohorts to hear what their leaders were saying to one another.

With all the layers necessary for its shell to be impermeable, real transparency was not an option. Instead, the rivets holding its outer plates together had inset tiny cameras that continuously recorded the outside view and passed the imagery along to a central broadcast mechanism inside the dome that used volumetric projectors to cast it onto the dome's inner wall. The effect was exactly the same as if you were looking right through the wall, and removed the sense of claustrophobia and secrecy that otherwise would have hovered over the Garden. It was peaceful, and perfect.



Mentas Blaque, Head Senator of the Gallente Federation, walked down a stone-tiled trail, past brush and brooks, until he arrived in a small circle of paths surrounded by tidily cut grass and several tall trees. Birdsong emanated from the trees, and unseen insects clicked and chirruped from the bush. There was even a small fountain in the distance, hissing gently at the world.

And in the circle, by the edge of the green grass, he encountered two men. One stood at attendance. The other hung suspended from a silver rod, his face blocked by a deathskin mask.

The man who stood was Souro Foiritan, president of the Gallente Federation, leader of one of the four major Empires in New Eden, and Commander-in-Chief of the Gallentean armed forces at a time when they had just suffered the worst invasion and armed conflict in Federation history. His maroon outfit, which usually flowed with him like a second skin, looked worn, crinkly and unwashed. He had his head

tilted slightly upward, as if watching the clouds. Even from a distance, Blaque could see how tired he was.

The suspended man was unknown to Blaque. He was fit, and something in his musculature - thinly covered beneath tight white clothes - brought to mind a military background. The deathskin mask, a covering of breathable material that overlaid his face, was expressionless.

Blaque walked up to them but said nothing.

Foiritan regarded him. Blaque noticed his hair was dirty, too, its oily sheen catching the sun's rays. There were bags under his eyes, and for some reason his knuckles were bruised.

"You can speak freely in here, you know," Foiritan said.

Blaque nodded.

"You don't seem too curious about why you're here in the first place."

"I was summoned by the highest authority in the Federation," Blaque replied icily. He and Foiritan had been at each other's political throats long before the invasion. "I assume you had your reasons."

Foiritan furrowed his eyebrows but didn't comment. He turned to the suspended man.

The silver device which held him up, a modified medical instrument not often used, was called a dead man's needle. It was a long metallic stake affixed to a cross-like stand, and it was literally melded onto the man it held.

The stake had small circular protuberances that went into the man's back along the ridges on his spine, holding on to them like rings on a finger and supporting his body from the ground. Some of those circles would be pumping sedatives into his spine and the back of his head, keeping him asleep and mildly sedated. His hands were fixed at the body's sides, and his legs hung straight down. His skin, what could be seen of it beyond his clothes and mask, had dark purple bruises turning to yellow.

"This is Jordan Keel," Foiritan said, and walked a slow circle around the crucified man. "You wouldn't know it, but he helped bring about unprecedented events in New Eden's history."

Blaque regarded the man briefly before returning his gaze to Foiritan. "He seems a little worse for wear in that regard. Sir."

"So it might seem. In fact," Foiritan looked at Keel's suspended body and smiled humorlessly, "compared to what happened to some of the people whose lives he ruined, his own seems absolutely pristine."

The leaves whispered in the trees, brushed by hidden wind generators. Everything was too real here to be true.

Blaque walked closer and inspected Keel. He snapped his fingers in front of the man's face, and poked him in the ribs. Keel didn't react, nor blink or twitch. Blaque raised an eyebrow.

"The needle-sleep only lets him react to intense stimuli. Massive pain, for instance," Foiritan said.

"What do you need me for?" Blaque said after some hesitation.

"There is a war on."

"I know."

"A person's loyalties will get tested in a war."

"I know, Mister President."

"You weren't always a politician, Blaque. I've seen your locked files. I know what you did in the service of the Federation. There's one particular image, the remains of a Serpents ship crew your troop once boarded, that'll crop up in my darker dreams for quite a while yet, I fear."

"There is a point to this, sir?"

"I need you to kill this man," Foiritan said, the same humorless smile on his face.

"Go to hell," Blaque replied and turned to leave. He had gone a few steps before Foiritan's voice said, "If you don't, then the aftermath is on your conscience."

"Don't associate me with your little criminals or whatever they do with their lives."

"Not his life, Admiral. Our lives, yours and mine. This man started a war."

Blaque stopped at that. Foiritan walked up to him and said, "It was on Keel's initiative, along with god knows how many others, that the Gallente Federation was attacked, invaded, and forced to capitulate under circumstances and terms that can be called nothing less than brutal."

Blaque turned to face him. A breeze from the hidden fans tugged at them, wafting the scent of flowers and grass through their senses. The man on the silver needle seemed to have no odor at all.

"We lost thousands of people in that invasion, Blaque," the president said. "They sabotaged our defenses, and they came in, and they tore everything to pieces. What they could have achieved with diplomacy they did with fire and death, reducing the lives of everyone who survived on that planet to a grey nightmare. And this one right here, this man who was supposed to be one of our own, he held the door right open for them."

In a grave but incredulous tone, Blaque said, "So you called me in here, sir, because instead of having this man tried by a military tribunal, you want the highest ranking senator in the Federation to put a bullet into his head."

"No. The person standing before me is not the Federation's highest ranking senator."

Blaque's expression turned to frost. "You just presided over the greatest military setback in Federation history, Mister President. Your power base is unstable and you're tottering on its wavering peak. I suggest you think very carefully before destabilizing it any further, or dismissing any political entities you may see as your enemies."

"That's good advice. It's exactly what I'd expect from the head of my new intelligence agency, and the overseer of its special projects division."

"...Beg pardon?"

Foiritan smiled, this time genuinely, and looked out through the dome of the garden. In the distance, beyond the land and the air, could be seen the faint crystal spires of New Hueromont, some so high they pierced the clouds. "The entire Federation is tottering. We've been hit so hard we barely know who we are anymore."

"So let's hit back," Blaque said, looking at those same crystal spires.

Foiritan didn't answer, and appeared lost in the view.

"You know," he said after a while, "I grew up in this area. I've had this view for so long, as man and boy, I can't ever imagine the city not being here. And I honestly never thought I would be in a position to even contemplate such a thing, living in a world where other people are actively seeking the destruction of something that feels not only like the reality of today but the very fabric of my memories. It's like they want to wipe out a part of what makes me the person I am."

He turned to Blaque. "I made a terrible mistake. I allowed myself to imagine that this universe was composed of good and honest people who could be induced to find a solution to any problem, no matter how severe. And now I find myself playing catch-up with wickedness."

"That's our problem, we Gallente," he continued. "We can't hit back. We're this great hulking beast that's been asleep for eons, being poisoned by ticks and leeches. We're full of rage and energy now, but if we roar into action unprepared we'll do nothing but get pummeled into submission. Worse, we'll still have those parasites in our blood, weakening us and hampering our fight, and it'll sap our spirit until we claw ourselves to death merely trying to get them out. I want those parasites gone, Blaque. I want them eliminated and I want our people to know it."

"And you want me to pull the trigger," Blaque said, with something approaching resignation.

"Blaque-"

"How'd you even find this guy?"

"We'd been running data mining on all registered actions, civilian and military, covering the time span that led to the great betrayal. His name came up, we ran some matching statistics, he looked more and more likely. I signed a court order for immediate retraction of his statutory rights, then looked into his personal files and immediately found communications that clearly and directly linked him to the Tripwire fiasco. We hauled him in, and immediately he put up a front. Locked up, wouldn't say a thing. You ever see those guys, Blaque? You ever deal with someone who stonewalls you from the first moment on?"

"Every day on the senate floor, Mister President," Blaque said flatly. He sighed. "But most of my life I've dealt in warfare rather than politics."

"Then you know what it means when your enemy tunnels in."

Blaque looked to the crystal spires, then gave a nod so small it was barely perceptible. "So you had our people in white go to work on him?" he said.

"Almost. I had them all ready. But before we were set to start, I looked at the pictures of some of the victims, and I looked at Keel sitting in the interrogation chamber. And I lost it, Blaque. I went in there and had them take off all the restraints, then sent out the guards on orders not to return until I gave word. I had Keel standing before me, as free as I was, and if he wasn't quite as angry then he certainly wasn't in the mood to talk. And then I beat him to within an inch of his life."

Blaque looked at Foiritan with a new-found respect. "That so?"

"He talked. Gave us some information we needed."

"There's diplomacy for you."

"You would have done the same," Foiritan said.

"What makes you say that?" Blaque asked.

Foiritan waved his hand angrily at the world around them. "Look at it!" he yelled. "How can you possibly see this, and all it means to us, and not want to do everything you possibly can to protect it? How can you not want to lay down your life to save it from harm?"

He stalked over to the prisoner, his face turning red. "We helped them," he said in a tone full of quiet murder.

"We did all we could for them and their rotten little empire. We poured money into their open hands. And now they do this to us. We didn't kill or destroy anyone over there. We didn't ruin their businesses. Before this all started I was set to make the greatest economic concession in history, merely to make sure that someone else's goddamn home," he kicked the needle at the word, and it vibrated in the breeze, "could be kept from falling apart. Everything could be solved by diplomacy and goodwill, I thought. And now I have before me a pitiable man, one of my own Gallente citizens, who was partly responsible for the loss of an entire planet and the deaths of countless of our people."

"So why didn't you finish it off?" Blaque asked. "Why not end him, or throw him to the wolves? The entire Federation feels the same way you do."

"Would you?" Foiritan asked him. Blaque fell silent.

"I need to know who's on my side, Blaque. Now more than ever, I need allies, people I can rely on to get things done. You dealt in warfare, where the enemies stayed enemies and where words have weight. All my life I've dealt in politics, where my friends could be my enemies and where the words I hear are just words, fitted and molded to the occasion. I need to know who I can trust."

"You want me to kill a comatose man."

"I want you to find the traitors, all of them, and I want you to bring them to justice. Whatever it takes." Foiritan reached into his coat and pulled out a datapad and a gun, both of which he laid on the ground before Blaque. "On the datakey is incontrovertible evidence that Jordan Keel was involved in the Tripwire incident. It would be enough to get him tried for treason in any court and punished accordingly."

"So do it," Blaque said, but without much conviction. "Have him executed."

"I could," Foiritan said. "But that's not enough. There are others like him out there and I need someone with the experience and the guts to root them out. Someone willing to go all the way."

Blaque stared at him in amazement. He said, not disapprovingly, "What happened to you, Souro?"

Foiritan rubbed his eyes. The bags under them were dark. "In my time I've committed acts that were selfish or even outright wrong, but so have you and everyone else. We did it for ourselves, but somewhere in our hearts we always did it for the Federation as well, because we believe we truly are the best for this empire. This here, though, this is ..." He faltered, and waved his hand vaguely at Keel. "Being in power at peacetime, that's easy. But being in power when things go wrong and you have to fix them by any means necessary, that's hard. That's when you find out who can act as well as talk, and who's just a blowhard."

Another breeze passed through, carrying the garden to them in its invisible hands. It was far too serene here for deaths and treachery.

Foiritan said, "The world has changed. We change with it. Or we die, buried in the grass. It's that simple now."

Blaque knelt and picked up the datapad and the gun. He rose and weighed one in each hand, like hearts on a scale. It had slowly dawned on him that they stood not on the cliff's edge debating the fall, but had possibly long since gone over, and were merely looking at the ever approaching abyss. "You're right," he said in a shaky voice. "You monster. You're absolutely right. I don't even like you, Foiritan, and you're right. I wish to god you weren't."

"So do I, believe me," Foiritan said.

"You know how you're going to look if you do this. The measures instigated, the freedoms prohibited. ... Even if you're successful - especially if you're successful - you're going to be a tyrant. You'll be feared and hated. And so will I, as your hit man."

"Then that's the role you'll have to play, like all the rest of us actors."

Something in Blaque gave way, though whether it was the rising revulsion of a darkened path he thought he'd long since left, or the dismantling of the last obstruction to his breakneck passage there, he really couldn't tell. His feelings broke through, and he screamed at Foiritan, "This isn't a play!" His arm shot out, pistol in hand, the barrel aimed directly at Keel's head. "Is this what you want, President? Is this what you're ready for? You're brave when it's fists in a room, but how many times have you looked a man in the eyes before you killed him? How can your conscience ever take that on?!"

Foiritan waited, expressionless, until Blaque had lowered the gun and caught his breath.

"Yes, it's a test, of loyalty and guts," Foiritan said to him. "Everything is, these days. But those men whose deaths he caused? They were just as much your responsibility as mine." He stepped closer to Blaque and took hold of his gun arm, raising it to his own sternum as if he were the condemned. "You owe them this, in your own conscience and soul."

Blaque looked into his eyes, and whatever dark fellowship he saw there broke the last barrier. A wave of revulsion passed over him, washing over his new, unwavering purpose. His face wrinkled in disgust at himself and he said, "Damn you. Alright. But I will not murder," and he turned to Keel and shot the man in the kneecap.

"This is what happens when things get ugly!" he yelled, loud enough to set the birds flying from nearby trees. "This is what you've sanctioned, Souro! You can undersign orders for hunt and interrogation, and damn it, I'll follow them to the end, but will you stand it when the screaming .. when the screaming ... starts." He faltered, and looked back to Keel in amazement. The prisoner hung from the silver needle, serene and quiet. The blood pouring from the gaping wound in his knee was staining his white clothes a deep maroon. He showed no signs of waking up.

"Good job, Blaque," Foiritan said, a smile not quite crossing his lips. "I need a man who will do horrible things for our Federation, but who'll detest doing so. I need a civilized man, so that I can be the monster."

"What ... but ...?" Blaque stammered.

"A body can't let out a scream if there's no mind to carry it."

When no response was forthcoming, Foiritan laid a hand on his shoulder, leaned close and said, not unkindly, "You just shot a clone."

Blaque stared at him, then at the datapad in his hand.

"Fake," Foiritan said.

Blaque stared back at Foiritan. His eyes bulged, and a vein started throbbing in his neck. He took a deep breath and said, "You trickster. You goddamn, good-for-nothing poli-"

His tirade was cut short by Foiritan's fist, which smashed into Blaque's cheek hard enough to spin him around and drop him onto the ground. The senator got up not with the shocked, angered or dazed look one might expect from someone who's just been clocked, but a curious expression. A red welt was rising on the skin over his cheekbone.

"Welcome to the new world," Foiritan said. "Don't forget who you are."

"Gloves off, I see," Blaque said.

"I needed to know where you stood. You'll be immersed in lies, disinformation and violence from now on. Might as well get used to it."

Blaque looked at him for a long time, and at the thing on the needle, and at the crystal spires in the distance. He was an ethical man, in his own mind, but a practical one as well, and decades in military service had tempered those ethics with a thorough understanding of humanity, particularly that wicked and terrible side which rose out of its murky depths only under duress. Through the rapidly fading mist of rage he realized that under enemy fire the most one could hope for was a leader cruel enough to do what needed to be done, and compassionate enough to understand why it needed doing.

"I am not at all sure, Mister President," Blaque said, his anger giving way to the dark humor that Foiritan had always admired in his adversary, "that this new world order should include the President striking his chief of internal security."

Foiritan kept up his poise, but Blaque noticed the slight untensing of shoulders as the president, "I'll say. I nearly broke my goddamn knuckles."

The sun was beginning to descend. The garden's ambient noise quieted accordingly.

"We need to align the people, and to do so we need a leader who fits the season. I'm going to be the monster, Blaque," the president said. "And you're going to be the thunder that announces my passage."

The Dark End of Space



Kezti Sundara, Grand Admiral of Amarr's Imperial Navy, stood alone inside the massive cathedral, dwarfed by the icons of eternity that glinted distantly in the lamplight. He remained utterly still, head leaned towards the vaulted ceiling. Quiet times were hard to come by in the Empire these days.

There was a metallic clank. Behind Sundara, on the other side of the cathedral, the massive doors slowly swung open. Footsteps echoed off the marble floor, then stopped.

"Welcome, Captain," Sundara said without turning around.

"Admiral," the Captain said.

"Captain, why do you think you're here?" Sundara asked in a quiet but clear voice.

"Tell me, sir," the Captain said in noncommittal tones.

Sundara noticed the Captain's reticence. He turned and stared directly into the Captain's eyes. "We're going to war, Captain. Fulfilling our lives' purpose. Aren't you pleased?" he said, with the slightest hint of irony.

"I really couldn't say, sir."

The Admiral sighed. "Alright. Speak freely. It'll be the last time in a long while, so enjoy it while it lasts."

The Captain made as if to speak, hesitated, and shut his mouth again. He broke the gaze and looked at the cathedral walls, whose tinted windows had changed hue and added a shining bronze to the evening's red rays. Eventually he said, "I don't think we can win this war. I don't even think there should be a war."

"Recent events pass you by, Captain?" the Admiral said. "I hear we had some action. A bit of revolt, even."

"Sir-

"The largest armada of Minmatar forces ever seen crosses over into our space, abducts millions of souls and causes untold destruction and havoc in the life of perfectly innocent people. The only thing that saves us right before the wave breaks is an intervention so definite and miraculous you could almost call it divine. And you, a leader of the Emperor's own holy fleet," the Admiral added, walking close enough to the Captain that their chests nearly met, "Don't think there should be a war."

This time the Captain held his gaze. "No, sir. I don't."

"Explain yourself."

"We're still reeling after the Minmatar onslaught. We're changing leaders, which always throws a spanner into the works-

"Master politico-theologians say we're experiencing a glorious sea change of unprecedented proportions, with nothing but celestial glory and heavenly fate that awaits us."

"Theologians can suck my Apoc, sir. We're the ones manning the guns."

Sundara betrayed a smile. "Alright. Carry on."

"Look, sir, I'm as happy as the next man that Sarum is back in power. I honestly am. But we're a sea of people, vast and heavy. She'll need time to route everyone to her cause, even the ones who believe in it. And if the Reclaiming is to restart in earnest, we'll need to do it properly right from the start. The effort won't allow anything less than a unified front, a genuinely unified one; not just the sycophants and paranoia of Karsoth's old court. We need to clean house before we move into anyone else's."

"You've given this some thought, Captain."

"Well, my superiors insist on adding complexities to my job, sir. I'm merely trying to adapt."

The Grand Admiral thought this over. He was sitting in a very comfortable chair, considering very unpleasant things. His Captain stood before him, a small figure in a vast and well-lit room. They were in a penthouse within shouting distance of the Crystal Boulevard. Lower military orders were ensconced in bunkers beneath the Boulevard's translucent shields, but the Admiral refused to let himself be cowed into those. Besides, in his career he'd attended many long meetings in close quarters with overexcited navy brass, and he knew exactly what it would be like. People thought better, up here in the fresh air.

"Complexities such as?"

The Captain took a deep breath.

"Aside from the time we need to sort out internal chaos, the external situation is so fragile that we can barely do anything at all. You can't sneeze in Luminaire without both our side and theirs locking and loading. If we fire even one volley ... well, their captains might have sense to hold back, but CONCORD will roar right in and stomp around, getting everyone excited, and sooner or later some idiot hotshot will see his path to glory. Everything gets set off, and all that's left of every planet in Luminaire is a series of smoking craters."

"Duly noted, Captain," the Admiral said. "We can't start another war in Luminaire, which burns some of our hawks no end. And we certainly can't ignore or withdraw from CONCORD unless we want to supercharge the current chaos. What else?"

The Captain, staring straight forward, kept a carefully blank expression. "There is something else, sir?"

"Captain, we just lost an entire planet to a madman. You've served under me for years. This is no time for doubts or secret thoughts. What else? And stand at ease, for goodness' sake."

The Captain maintained her stance but her voice softened somewhat. She said, "Sir ... what are we going to do about the capsuleers?"

Anteson Ranchel, who had been Vice Admiral of the Gallente Federation Navy right up until the point his predecessor made one of the biggest military blunders in Federation history, gave his best Captain a big grin. "Well now," he said, "That's a bit of a problem. A group of people so powerful they're practically a faction unto themselves. Immortal, fearless and wealthy beyond imagining. Born of all four empires but beholden, in truth, to no one but themselves. And utterly untapped, in this little skirmish of ours."

"We need them, sir."

"Of course we do, Captain. They'll turn the tide of the war. Every capsuleer worth their pod should be taking a stand right now, and helping the forces of right against the tyranny and violence that envelops us."

The Captain nodded.

"And where, might I ask," the Admiral continued, "should that stand be taken?"

"A long way from here, if it were up to me, sir," the Captain said. "Last thing we need is opposing forces of pod pilots shooting at each other right outside our planet."

The Admiral smiled. "Good. I'm glad I've got some people left with more brains than bravery. So where, Captain,

do you suggest we put them?"

"The dark end of space, ma'am."

"If that's a euphemism, Captain," the Grand Admiral said, "Believe me, I've heard enough of them already."

For a Minmatar war room, it made a number of concessions to sanity. There were only two persons there, not several representatives arguing about policy or sharpening their weapons. The walls had tactical maps on them, not tribe banners, and the surfaces of the recon tables were completely free of small arms, painblades and replica Khuumaks.

"Long meetings, ma'am?"

"If I ever see another member of the Minmatar government, whether Republic or Nation, it'll be an eon too soon, Captain. Might end up putting them the same place you're suggesting we put our capsuleers. Sounds like a rotten use of good people, though."

"The government?"

"The capsuleers."

"Not really, ma'am," the Captain said. "We need the lowsec territories. We need the resources there for anything and everything we'll be doing elsewhere."

The Admiral resumed her pacing around the room. Voices could be heard from somewhere far outside, either arguments or chants; it was hard to tell which, sometimes. "I don't like this, Captain. We did a full frontal attack and it was one of the most glorious moments in Minmatar history. We beat the Amarr nearly to a pulp, we flexed our might like never before since the great revolution. And we freed millions."

"Yes, sir. We beat the Amarr nearly to a pulp."

"Captain--"

"Up until the point where they burnt us to cinders and brushed away what was left of the ashes."

The Admiral rubbed her eyes. Her name was Kasora Neko, she was in charge of the Minmatar Fleet and she had not slept for a long time. "Captain, I've had three meetings today with various Minmatar political officials who think that brandishing a Khuumak gives them free rein with war metaphors. I value your services, but understand that if you start the same, I will turn your innards into poetry."

"Ma'am."

"As it happens, I agree with you. I think we do need the capsuleers, more than many people realize. I think they're going to turn the tide of the war. I think they're going to be the war, in all honesty. There is no way we can get away twice with the stunt we pulled at Haulturzhane, which means we'll need resources for a longer-term war, and we'll need to move around CONCORD. That means lowsec, and the only people crazy enough to fight to the death to hold those territories are the capsuleers. And that's not all. You know what's the most valuable resource in lowsec, Captain?"

"Well, there's Omber, and Noxcium, and probably Hemorph--"

"It's people."

"Right."

"You're going to ask me what they refine to, Captain."

"The thought did cross my mind, ma'am, but you've had a long day."

"We need them for our efforts. And the Amarr want them for whatever hellish plans they're cooking up. The Empire fleets won't dare come into our territory again, not when they don't know what we're capable of, and not while they're sorting out their problems. So this Reclaiming," she spat the word, "or whatever they want to call their excuse for today's dose of misery, is going to start in lowsec, where we've got millions of people we can't possibly defend."

"And it goes beyond that, Captain."

The Captain was silent. His superior had not asked him a question.

"We've only just begun," the Admiral continued. The garden was quiet apart from the bubble of the sand waterfall and the distant whispers of the laser birds. "This first achievement is one of many to follow, so long as we can keep everything together on the home front."

The Captain looked to the birds. Hearing his Admiral, who had served in the Caldari Navy for a long while, criticize the State's infrastructure like this set his nerves on edge. There'd been enough instability already without the high powers consistently making it worse by acknowledging it.

"What do you think about going into lowsec, Captain?" the Admiral asked.

The Captain cleared his throat. Fleet Admiral Morda Engsten was an intimidating presence, and when she asked a question like that, she wanted a good answer.

"Well, ma'am ..." The birds were approaching, their halogen outlines flickering in the sunny air.

The Admiral sat down near the sand waterfall. "Speak, Captain," she said, not unkindly.

"I think it's an excellent idea whose implications are sure to be vast, ma'am."

"You think it's dumb."

"Like a rock, ma'am."

Engsten reached out and put her hand into the waterfall, palm upwards, fingers spread out. The sand flowed around them unrestrained. "Tell me more, Captain. You're not going to ruin anything, least of all your own career."

The Captain allowed himself to doubt this. Nonetheless, he had been asked a question, and he admired the Admiral. He took a deep breath. "I don't understand why we're going into low security space, sir. It feels like we're running away. Say what you wish about Heth's rise to power, he lined us up at last, and made us kick hard at the Gallente. We've got Caldari Prime back, which I didn't think would happen in my lifetime if it ever did at all. We've got a war here, Admiral."

"That we do, Captain," Engsten said. "Now tell me what gains we're fighting for."

"Well, our people have been oppr-"

"The gains, Captain," the Admiral interrupted. "Not the ideology. I want our final military goal."

The Captain began, "Well, there is Luminai-...", then caught the Admiral's gaze and fell silent. He thought for a while, then said in quieter tones, "We're not talking about Luminaire, are we, ma'am?"

The Admiral slowly shook her head.

"Ma'am ... we're taking this all the way, aren't we?"

The Admiral nodded without smiling.

"Luminaire is a bomb right now, one that could be set off by anything and which nobody can control." It felt like he was mindreading the entire military council in absentia. "So we go into lowsec space to test out our capsuleers and build up resources. And as we make those gains, we also gain territory. Gallente lowsec territory. Which brings us closer to Gallente highsec space."

"And Luminaire at last," Admiral Engsten said.

"And Luminaire at last, ma'am," the Captain said, a slight tremor in his voice. "Along with everything else. We'll take their edges, and then there'll be nothing left but the center. We'll do it, Admiral."

The Fleet Admiral put her hand in the sand again. "And there is no doubt in your mind that we can do this?"

"Of course not. We're Caldari. And we're in the right."

The Admiral smiled. The sand hissed as it flowed through her fingers.

Aside from the hiss, the room was entirely silent. The five Jovians inside sat and stared into the ether. They were

surrounded by polycarbonate windows that showed the starry space outside.

The hiss came from an open comms line.

The Jovians waited.

In four different elevators on four different stations, two diplomats got in on the top floor. One, who represented an Empire Faction, took out from his pocket a small datapad and cracked a joke about wars. The other, who represented CONCORD, accepted the datapad, signed it with his identity key, and laughed at the joke.

The elevator ride was long and the diplomats spoke swiftly, coding and signing the necessary digital back-and-forth with practiced hands. By the time they got out, the four empires had petitioned CONCORD to ratify an emergency capsuleer militia procedure, and were now officially at war.

The Better Part of Valor



"But no one's gonna come down on me for this, right?"

"Don't worry about a thing. The agency will cover your back legally, we'll assign a pseudonym, you'll be absolutely fine."

"Yeah. I just need to be sure there's absolutely no..."

"Mr. Sitsui. Remember what we talked about."

"I know, I know." The young man tugged absently at the dark tin figure-eight woven through both nostrils. The sight of his skin stretching made her nauseous.

"Okay," she said, with more finality than she felt. She fixed her gaze on the table between them.

"Whenever you're ready, go ahead and start from the beginning. If you want to reword something, just stop and say 'I'd like to reword, please.' If you aren't sure you're remembering something correctly, it's very important that you mention that, even though you're going to give us the events as they transpired to the best of your recollection. All clear?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

She leaned back in her chair and briefly thought about lighting a cigarette, then decided against it. Better to let them ease into it on their own. Wait until they find their feet in the story, then light the torch

as a sign that everyone's at ease.

"Okay. So we're sitting there, there's about four of us..."

"Wait. Start by telling me a bit about who you are. Sorry."

"Oh. Okay. I'm Orin Sitsui. I'm, uh, I'm a materials tech for Caldari Constructions, here under service contract with Kaalakiota Second Command, currently on eighth year of service."

"All right, that's good. Thanks."

"Sure. So, yeah. Four of us, I think maybe five, but I'm pretty sure four."

"This was where?"

"In my section. The east ridge, level 55. My hab was in a real sweet spot, right next to the Syntact galleries and a row of restaurants. A small group of us who'd been in training together, we used to always hang out there. And this time that I'm talking about – we're all pretty new, you know, and most of us have never been exposed to how strict the regulations really are up here. I mean, we were told in training but I guess they didn't do a good enough job of hammering it in or something, because almost everyone I knew would have a story within like a week. One guy got trapped in the laundry room after hours and had to be rescued by maintenance drones. One guy wore a wristpiece that covered up a part of his ID derm and got zapped by his own doorway. Everybody was adjusting, you know?"

She nodded, bunching up her toes inside her shoes. That cigarette was calling her.

"So, right. We're sitting in one of the places near my hab on a Wednesday afternoon, and we've just finished a long bout of shifts so we're looking at four days off. We're drinking, you know, getting fast on cheap stimsticker – yeah, legal ones, of course – and just having a good time, and then there's a commotion. Turns out there's a capsuleer coming through. Now, this was before the big boom, so eggheads were ultra-rare. None of us had ever laid eyes on one.

"Turned out there wasn't much to see. He was really short. Dark hair, nondescript face. Civire, I'm pretty sure. He had a contingent of Home Guard guys with him, real nasty pieces of work. You constantly heard about the Home Guard guys on the station. Infantry grunts, right? Signed up for war. Getting put on space station guard duty, for these guys, was like being told to cook and eat your own face. One of the guys in our section had a brother who

was a Home Guard recruiter, and he said the guys who got assigned to the space stations were all being punished for insubordination, even if they did end up leading squadrons of the contract grunts. He said they joked that being a Station Sergeant was a demotion from Private.

"I really should have known better, I guess. Should have, I don't know, I should have put two and two together. But whatever."

She took the cigarette case from her pocket and nimbly fished one out, then placed it between her lips and lit it. Distantly he stared at the cherry of her flame for a few seconds.

"Would you like to take a break?" she said. "There's no rush. If this is hard for you to tell, we can wait a bit." She blew a column of smoke into the air-conditioned swirl above them.

"Nah," he said, leaning back in the chair and putting his hands on his knees. "Nah, I'm fine." He resumed his story.

"So I'm quite lifted, you know? I got four days off, I'm getting pretty loose off the stim-alcohol mix, and Janeira's on the other side of the table giving me all the right signals. And at one point I look over, and I make eye contact with one of the Home Guard guys.

"This guy had the weirdest look. He was staring right at me when I looked over, but still it felt like he couldn't see me somehow. At first I thought it was 'cause of my skin, since there aren't many halfbreeds like me running around on the upper decks. But then I realized it was because of the way I was sitting. I was sitting on the back of my chair with my feet on the seat, and station regs frown upon that, you see. I felt ridiculous suddenly, like a kid in a lunchroom who was about to catch a whack from the minder. And, I don't know, maybe that was exactly what made me do it, but out of nowhere I looked back at him and then pursed my lips in a little kiss.

"And just as I do it his eyes sort of widen a little bit, and Janeira notices me doing it and looks back, and when she sees who I just did it to she goes into this barely-subdued fit of laughter, and then the other people at the table catch on, and all the while the guy's just standing there, glaring back at me with the meanest god damn expression you ever saw. I felt this weird combination of fear and elation, like I was playing this danger game and it could go either way, you know, and I think I acted it too. But it was all for show, really. As soon as I made that air-kiss, something deep inside of me just went 'oh man, you did it now,' and this creeping sense of dread set in.

"So after staring at me for a few more seconds the guy breaks his gaze and goes back to looking around, guarding the egger guy, and the egger by this point is talking with another guy who's arrived at the table. Things are quiet for a few minutes, and I kind of stop worrying about that glare and start thinking I lucked out, you know, got away with it. And then suddenly there's this mad shuffle of movement, and the egger stands up and kind of stumbles back, and the guy he was talking to is just kind of sitting in his chair shaking, and something black and round falls from his hand, under the table.

"Took me a while to notice that the grunt who'd been staring at me was holding out a little pistol-shaped thing in the guy's direction. He had this intense look of concentration on his face, but hateful too, like he was gonna end this guy right then and there. A couple of seconds pass and the guy's just sitting there, jigging and foaming at the mouth, and all the grunts are just kind of staring, and I mean, us too, everybody in there is just staring at this guy get slowly roasted.

"Then all of a sudden the soldier stops and the guy just slumps forward on the table. The Home Guard guys go into this big huffing kind of secure-the-perimeter dance and one of them leads the egger away. We're just sitting there slack-jawed, looking at the whole thing unfold, right? And then I notice that, sure enough, the one who'd been staring at me is making a beeline for our table, and my feeling of dread just comes powering back. We're all kind of rattled by the scene, so as he approaches we're sort of half-standing up. My friend was about to say something to him, but he just walks right up to me and grabs my arm. He's pretty flustered, like he doesn't know himself exactly what he's gonna do next, but there's this anger in his eyes, this absolute insane rage, you know?

"So he grabs my arm and I instinctively resist, right? I don't know what he wants with me, so I kinda pull my arm back and it makes him lose his balance momentarily. I start to say something, but just as I'm starting the sentence he whirls around and just smacks – he's carrying this compact bullpup piece with a chromed handle-end, right, and he just smacks it right into the bridge of my nose.

"Now, I'm no fighter. I grew up in a KK creche, never been in a scrap in my life, never had much interest in any of the fighting sports. So I guess up until that moment I had a pretty dim idea of what could happen and how bad it could be. Man, it was bad. First thing, my eyes just open up. I mean a full force torrent. I couldn't see anything. There was this disgusting crack, and I fell back down on the chair with this slick heat spreading all over my mouth and down my neck. I wanted to say or do something, but I was way too shocked to do anything but sit there and blink and sputter.

"Janeira told me later that the guy took another look at everyone around the table, just sort of coldly took stock of the situation and then decided it was well within bounds to do it again, so he did. Twice. The second one made

me black out, thankfully."

She regarded him with what she hoped was a compassionate look. He was tugging at his nose contraption again.

"I was too scared to register a complaint but I found out a couple days later that Jaseira had gone and done it anyway, behind my back. She was way more angry about the whole thing than I was. I guess maybe she felt partly responsible because she'd laughed at the guy too.

"Anyway, we never saw him again. I got some kind of standardized letter of apology from their station commander a couple weeks later, but it didn't say anything about what they'd done with him or whether they'd even done anything at all."

"You're positive it was him?" she asked.

"Yeah. I wouldn't have called you guys otherwise. I'm not stupid. I know things have a way of getting out despite best intentions, and I know this isn't gonna make me very popular with the guy or his cronies. I just need the money. I'm splitting."

"A few of you are, huh?"

"Yeah. Just doesn't feel right around here anymore. I mean, we worked for the glory of the State before there was a big man at the top. We worked for the State because of what it represents. And there's one guy up there now with everything under his heel. What happened to the needs of the many outweighing the gains of the one? I mean, I like what he's doing, some of it anyway. The mood here is more optimistic than I've ever seen it, and there's this really strong sense of purpose, but I just, I don't know. I guess I got my reservations about what kind of foundation it's all built on."

"Where are you gonna go?"

"I'd rather not talk about that, if it's all the same." He looked at her for a few seconds, then gave a rueful little half-smile.

"Okay," she said, giving the signal for the recorder to be shut off. "Okay, well, I think we have everything we need. Your compensation should be in your account already. Thanks for your candor, Mr. Sitsui."

It was evening in the office-box of Executive Editor Harben Mullar, and outside its two small windows the studio assistants were busily disassembling the day's sets, tools whizzing and clicking under the artificial light. She was standing in front of his desk. Her finished piece was lying upon it.

"The story was corroborated by three of the four other witnesses. The girl has been relocated to a different part of the region. I wasn't able to get a hold of her."

Mullar didn't look at her. He drummed his fingers on the table. "Okay," he said.

"Sitsui himself says he doesn't think the attack was racially motivated, but I think the story will speak for itself."

"Uh-huh."

"It's funny. He has this ancient reconstructive wire-mesh thing in his nose. Vherokior tech from hundreds of years back. I asked him why he didn't just get it regrown. Said he needed the reminder to not do stupid things. All very dramatic."

Mullar nodded. Bi-di-dim,bi-di-dim, went his fingers on the table.

"Everything checks out. Heth was with the Home Guard at the time, and he'd been assigned to the station in question just three weeks earlier. He was dismissed four months after the incident. The official reason was budget cuts, but this wasn't an isolated incident and I doubt his superiors could ignore that type of thing for very long."

Mullar ceased his tapping and leaned back in his chair. He sighed. "I know it all checks out," he said. "It's a good piece, Rekka."

His tone had a terribly familiar ring to it. She looked at him for a long while.

"No way, Harb," she began.

"Yup. Just got a call from Agency Central. They're redlighting the piece."

"No way, Harb," she said.

"Yup. Indefinite standby. Directive came from right up top."

"But it's a good piece. It's inbounds. It's not a bullet." Her voice was rising. "I thought we agreed, we're just illustrating..."

"We agreed, Rekka, but you know as well as I do that if AC decides we can't run it, then we can't run it. It's out of my hands."

"Did they give a reason, at least? Or is it the usual need-to-know bullshit?"

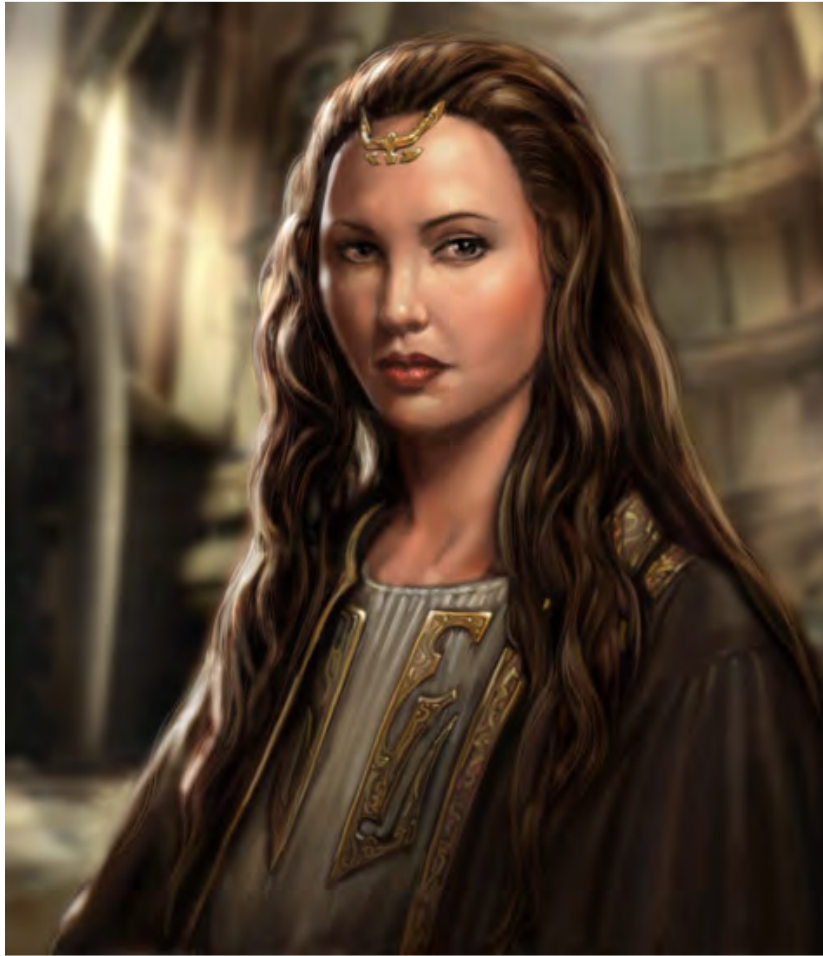
Mullar fished a cigarette out of his case. "Take tomorrow off," he said, screwing it between his lips. "There'll be time to talk after the weekend."

She stood there, staring at him. For a while she stared, as he clicked open a small lighter and briefly bathed the end of his cigarette in blue flame. He looked at her with resigned firmness and blew a plume of smoke into the space between them.

She turned on her heel and walked out.

The door shut on the office of Harben Mullar, and as it did the studio's lights winked out, one by one by one.

All These Wayward Children



Jetek, sleepless, walked down the empty corridor and headed for the stars on the ship.

Every space vessel had a viewing platform somewhere in its design, its purpose varying from celebration to contemplation. On some it might be a great hall, decorated and warm and beset with equipment to watch the stars. On other, smaller ships, it could be as little as a room with a window and an information vidscreen beside it, where you could call up all human knowledge on the planets in view.

This chamber was somewhere in between. It was round, had only one entrance, and its few metal chairs glinted a muted gold in the faint lights from the high ceiling. The walls held Amarrian religious icons, forms and images, but most of these were partly covered by the recently hung banners of House Sarum. Aside from the metal chairs the main type of furniture, spread mostly over the center and far end of the room, was small backless benches, soft and upholstered with a purple, suedelike material. The entire far end of the room was overtaken by a curved wall of transparent polycarb glass, and through its unbreakable wall lay open space, infinite and constant. Vast nebulas the sizes of small kingdoms dominated the view.

Sitting on those low benches in the middle of the room made you feel small, almost like a child again. Jetek longed for that feeling sometimes, in these complex times. He came here when the roars of the rivers in his head needed calming, and this little alcove of the moving world, this small forest of metal and stars, never failed to offer its lulling quiet.

Jetek had been hand-picked to this crew, as had everyone else. He'd been vetted by psych and doctor teams both, and while he'd never gone to great lengths to advertise his loyalties - he was a crewman, not a politician - they stood unquestioned.

Which was why he was onboard this ship, entrusted with bringing Empress Jamyl Sarum to her destination on this multi-day trip.

Her retinue kept to itself, maintaining court in their section of the ship's living quarters, and while the crew was permitted to enter at will, their intermingling with the royal entourage was subtly discouraged. One knew one's place on this ship.

So when Jetek entered the room and sat on one of the benches, with most of his own crew safely asleep and the Empress's own people presumably all secluded in their part of the vessel, he did so with the expectation that it would be as blessedly empty as it had been all the other times he had taken refuge there.

When someone cleared their throat, it raised the hairs on the back of his neck, and when he turned and saw who was standing in a darkened part of the room, he felt like his skin was going to tear itself off his body in fear.

Everyone had known who Jamyl Sarum was, long before she reappeared, and everyone knew exactly what she'd done in the recent Minmatar invasion, though no two stories of the event ever seemed to match. All agreed, though, that she'd stopped the Minmatar in their tracks. She carried with her a reputation so legendary that it was reaching mythological levels, and her images showed an extraordinary beauty that brought decidedly secular thoughts to the minds of young men. She was as godly as anyone in this world could be.

Before him, not ten steps away, stood Her Highness, the ruler of Amarr Empire, Empress Jamyl Sarum the First.

He made a noise somewhere between a mewl and a stuttered choke.

She stood there and regarded him, then took a few slow steps closer. His legs, now made of jelly, wanted to run away but didn't manage more than a twitch. In some panic-frozen part of his head he was thankful the fear had paralyzed him, for running away blindly from Her Highness would likely be one of the very few things even worse than walking in on her without leave or purpose.

"What is your name?" she said. He merely stared back, unable to speak.

She stepped closer. Her brown silk robe trailed behind her like a second shadow, and the gold decoration on its folds glinted in the faint light. Her long chestnut hair cascaded down her back, so dark that it was almost indistinguishable from the robe. She smiled at him, which made it only so much worse.

"I'm tired of speaking to no one but my retinue," she said, in a voice that felt like warm sunlight. "It is stifling. I want to reach out to others, particularly the isolated souls in the darker reaches. We mustn't ever fear the unknown." She leaned her head to one side. "Are you all right? You're gaping wider than a Slaver at feeding time."

His throat decided to let air through at last, and as he gasped he found his voice. "Empress, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to intrude, forgive me, I'll be off."

"Stay, please," Sarum said. "I could do with the company. On this long journey there's been little else to do but think, or talk to oneself."

"I really didn't mean to sneak up on you, Empress, and I don't think I should be this close--"

"Oh, hush. I don't feel the slightest bit insecure. And I heard you coming," she said.

This surprised Jetek, who could have sworn he hadn't made a sound when he entered, but it put him at ease. He rose from his seat and kneeled in front of Sarum for a moment, then got up again and went to the window, standing there at a respectable distance. She walked up to him, making his skin crawl again in apprehension, and stared out at the same stars.

"What is your opinion of God's great work?" she said.

"I'm sorry, Highness?"

She gave him another wonderful smile. "The skies, Jetek. The seas you sail."

He thought about this, hoping to stop sounding like a moron. The best he could think of was to say, "I think they're wonderful, Empress. That's really the only word I can think of."

"It's a good word," Sarum said. "But what about the people who inhabit them?"

"Some of them are wonderful too," Jetek replied, biting his tongue lest it left his mouth. The Empress's alignments would be different than the Chamberlain's, and going against the supreme leader's worldview was a bad idea no matter how likeable they might seem.

She seemed to notice his hesitation, for she smiled and said, "Yes. Some of them are wonderful indeed. But what about the ones who are not? What should we do about them?"

"I'm sure Her Highness knows best," Jetek replied promptly.

She looked back to the stars, giving no hint whether she approved of his noncommittal answer. But her expression changed, growing steely and blank. It reminded Jetek of nothing so much as passing to the dark side of a planet. He hoped he would make it out of the room alive.

"There was someone, I forget his name. I did everything I could in difficult circumstances and it wasn't enough

for him," she said. "He had to take a stand. For some, when they're desperate, it simply isn't possible to solve things reasonably. They must have noise and fire to match whatever's in their heads."

"So what do you do?" Jetek asked, despite himself.

She fixed him with a steely glance. "You react. Sometimes you have to hurt someone to make them understand how badly they're hurting themselves. You have to come to the rescue by being the villain, not just for them but for everyone they touch, lest they lose themselves in that same hellish fire." She turned away from the stars and took a seat, never letting her gaze waver from Jetek's presence. "So there is punishment, which is the wrong word for the right thing, something that marks them for life, brings them under control, makes them a productive part of society. What's the word I'm looking for, Jetek?"

"I wish I knew, Empress. I truly do." Jetek remembered this man. His name had been, and likely still was, Kerrigan Orsha. During a fiery speech he had shouted at and berated Jamyl Sarum in an open assembly, calling her names that really shouldn't be uttered at the impending supreme ruler of one's own empire. The assembly session had dissolved into chaos and Orsha's own family had renounced him in an attempt to save themselves. It had worked, after a fashion: Lord Orsha had been judged and found guilty of heresy, a charge that carried the death sentence, but the Empress had granted him clemency of a sort. Instead of death, she had decreed that he have the words of his outburst tattooed on every part of his skin. She had offered him the option of withdrawing to a convent to study the scriptures for the remainder of his life, which he had gratefully accepted, his old and public life effectively ended at this point.

The Empress had a faraway look. She said, "... Benediction."

Jetek shivered.

"I wanted to bring him into our fold, for if I hadn't, he would have railed and thrashed until he shook himself to pieces, and we'd have had no choice but to put him out of his misery," she said, looking to the stars again. Her expression softened, and it was like the sun rising again.

"Do you think I'm beautiful?" she asked in a much milder tone.

"Yes, Highness," he replied without a moment's thought.

"Do you think I'm awesome?" she asked, every syllable of the word clicking smoothly into place.

"Yes, Highness," he replied again.

"Do you think I'm terrifying?" she asked, as if they were all the same questions.

"Yes, Highness," he said, understanding that in fact they were.

Quiet fell on them. Nothing could be heard but the hum of the ship itself, the tiny little creaks and thrums that came from anything alive and moving. It consistently amazed Jetek how something so powerful could be so quiet.

She was still looking at him with that faraway gaze, though whether it was in expectation, or if she was merely lost in thought, he couldn't tell. He didn't dare disappoint her, so he said, "It's more mercy than he could have expected before your time, Empress. People ought to have respect."

She nodded and stood up, walking to the window. The silk of her robe hissed softly as it was drawn off the seat.

She said, as if to the stars, "The man had five children and twelve grandchildren. He had friends, even if he's lost them now. He was a known person. And respect, just as the lack of it, is like little fires that need to be kept lit and alive."

The ship turned slightly, creaking.

She looked back at him and her expression resembled the sun itself now, blinding and majestic, peaceful and soothing, focused and completely engulfing all at once. It was like being cradled in the arms of the end of the world.

"On his flesh, among the words of scripture, we tattooed the names of his children and his children's children," she said, and Jetek would swear to his final days that something flashed in her eyes, as if wanting to break free, "And he will never forget who he is, or who we are."

She fell silent again. He swallowed audibly, realized his mouth was hanging open, and snapped it shut.

"But you won't tell anyone about this meeting," she said. There was no menace in her tone, no threat nor promise of danger; merely a relaxed, even concerned, conscience.

"Of course not," he said.

"Of course not," she repeated. "I know you won't."

The stars seemed cold and uncaring to Jetek, and his fate like a stuttering flame, soon extinguished.

The Empress looked out at those same stars. "We need to save them, all of them, from themselves. We need to reclaim their fates and envelop them in ours. And we need to love them, no matter how much it hurts."

She touched the glass and added, "All these wayward children."

MASKS OF AUTHORITY



Since the early days of the Caldari State, the eight corporate police forces of the Chief Executive Panel have played an important role in Caldari society. Figures of great public attention, reviled and worshiped in equal measure (often by the same person), these eight private militaries collectively match the official Caldari Army in numbers and far exceed it in training.

What are these forces, how do they operate, and how did they come to be?

Necessity and Invention

Some years after the dust of the Caldari-Gallente War had settled and the eight corporations of the Chief Executive Panel were getting acclimated to running an independent Caldari State, the issue of defense spending was raised at a national budget meeting. The Kaalakiota Corporation and the Sukuuvestaa Corporation were by this point well established as bitter competitors for the top of the revenue pile, and the subject spawned a heated debate between the two corporations' CEOs.

The passage of time had done little to diminish the Kaalakiota leadership's wartime alertness; they had long been advocates of increased military spending, particularly towards protection of assets in the homeland. The Sukuuvestaa, meanwhile, wanted the available funds diverted towards land partitioning on newly settled planets, reasoning that the creation of new assets was every bit as important as the protection of existing ones. That Kaalakiota dealt primarily in arms at the time, and Sukuuvestaa primarily in real estate, were topics not raised at the meeting.

Due to the rivalry between the two the discussion soon escalated far beyond its purview, and what began as a simple debate swiftly turned into a heated argument rife with overtones of power struggle. The remaining executives of the CEP, uncomfortable with this potential disruption in the works, voted to momentarily shelve the topic.

Kaalakiota was not happy. Shortly after the meeting, they announced that the corporation would be bringing its own financial resources to bear in forming an independent internal security force, "tasked with maintaining peace and order on all Kaalakiota holdings." This organization they called Home Guard, a name taken by the corporate-political community as a pointed reference to the dispute between the two leaders. Sukuuvestaa responded in kind by releasing a statement curtly announcing their intention to create their own military arm. In a direct jab at Kaalakiota, they named their force the "Peace and Order Unit." The other mega-corporations, not to be outdone, soon followed suit. Within the year, all eight members of the Chief Executive Panel had either announced or begun formation of their own internal security forces.

Smoke and Mirrors

From this bed of bluster sprouted the eight organizations known today as the Chief Executive Panel's faces of power. Equal parts propaganda tool and police force, the corporate forces are in many ways the most direct outward representation of their parent corporations' power, affluence, style and cultural significance. Seeking to capitalize on the relentless propaganda battle between the powers that be, Caldari entertainment interests have in recent years made very lucrative deals with these forces, hurling their desired images into the cultural zeitgeist in return for a slice of the profit pie.

Avoiding direct competition in favor of finding their own niche, each of the eight has diversified into their own

particular area. Spacelane Patrol, CBD's corporate force, is continually portrayed as a cadre of brash hotshots who travel from one corner of the universe to another on missions that usually involve much purposeful strutting around exotic locales. The Lai Dai Protection Service, meanwhile, are regularly shown to be a group of dashing handsome tactical geniuses who devise complex original stratagems at the drop of a hat, usually under circumstances of extreme duress. Kaalakiota were the first to make this type of entertainment deal and have arguably been the most successful: Home Guard's image is second to none, not just among the corporate corps establishment but also in the popular cultures of all four empires.

The glossy tropes of the public relations holoreels and the beige glamour of stylized war worship stand in stark contrast to the reality of these agencies, but most people have only a muddy awareness of the dichotomy. A man can be rudely treated by a brusque and superior Ishukone Watch officer and silently curse him for hours, but as soon as he gets home that evening he is just as likely to prop his feet up and enjoy a rousing serial where the Ishukone Watch's superior technology and cunning allows it to root out Gurista spies and double-cross them into revealing their hideout. So pervasive is the propaganda that it is highly doubtful this man ever draws a parallel between the real thing and the image; the connection he draws, instead, is between the image and the mother corporation it represents.

Internal Security, the Nugoeihuvi Corporation's force, poses a curious irony in this regard. Though the Nugoeihuvi conglomerate's main preoccupation is the entertainment industry, they have consistently failed to change the prevalent cultural image of their troops as a pack of rough-and-tumble thugs culled from the Caldari underworld, given to the grossest abuses and atrocities. It's very rare for elements of the Caldari State to find the rumor mill outgrinding them in their efforts at propaganda, but that's what's happening to Nugoeihuvi. (In reality, for the record, Nugoeihuvi's soldiers are not any more or less savage than those of the other corporate forces, though broadly speaking they have been noted to harbor a slightly greater proclivity toward drink and drugs.)

Cloak and Dagger

Of course, the strong public relations utility of these forces does not mean that the good men and women that serve within them are mere puppets on a stage (though there exists, of course, a contingent of people willing to proclaim just that). It is an integral thing, for obvious practical reasons, that these militaries be proven without the shadow of a doubt to have aptitude in their profession. For this purpose a training summit is held each year at an undisclosed location, where the corporate forces lock horns in a series of combat- and survival-related challenges. This is the Haadoken Summit, and it is an event of great significance in Caldari culture.

Since nominally none of the corporations want the results to get out, the proceedings carry a veneer of secrecy. Betting on the event is strictly illegal, but it nonetheless creates underground gambling revenue far exceeding that of any official State sporting or entertainment event. Despite ledger upon ledger of regulations and reprimands, information about the results is invariably leaked by someone in the winner's camp, and so it is in this crucible of competition that the holoreels, the slogans, the commercials and the claims are either gloriously validated or revealed as nothing but empty spectacle.

Though nobody is ever declared deceased during the proceedings, it is a matter of public record that at least a dozen die each year and many more are injured (the families of the fallen receive standardized letters of condolence claiming their loved one has died in a training accident). Being essentially a contest between corporate ideologies played out in a quasi-military arena, the event touches many nerves in the Caldari soul, and its various obstacles and scenarios have been immortalized in countless holoreels and serials. The winners of the last three Haadoken summits have been the Ishukone Watch, whose level of training and tactical skill appears to be currently unmatched within the corporate forces.

Bread and Butter

These agencies also perform the more mundane duties of a mega-corporation's internal security force. They ceaselessly patrol the perimeters of their territories; they conduct counterstrikes against pirates and terrorists; and they are responsible for security on every ship, outpost, station, moon and planetside facility owned by their mother corporations. They are also granted legal authority to act as police proxies within corporate jurisdiction, though in all cases where regional police have a presence their authority supersedes that of the corporate police.

Corporate forces are often criticized for their policework. Some of the more common accusations are gruff and uncaring demeanor, propensity for unnecessary violence, and lack of response time (particularly to non-acute, non-violent crimes). There is a simple reason for this: among the corporate forces, policework – which invariably involves dealing with the great unwashed masses – is seen as a lower-rung duty, a job for those unfit to serve in more of a military capacity.

Worst of all is policework on space stations, which tend to be overcrowded with travellers from a staggering multitude of places, each possessing a different set of legal rights based on his nationality and organizational affiliation, and each of which is cranky and in a rush and probably sweating. Additionally, corporate interstellar law dictates that stations' rental offices and other commercial zones be segmented into a patchwork of diplomatic units, each with its own rules and regulations. Policework on stations therefore tends to be an affair fraught with jurisdictional pratfalls and covered in a tangled underbrush of red tape.

To their credit, corporate forces do have a well-deserved reputation for responding swiftly and decisively when circumstances truly call for it. If things get very bad very fast – if there is a hostage situation, if there is a large brawl, if there is some sort of large-scale accident or disaster – the corps will be there, fast, and they'll attack the problem with everything they've got. People may grumble about rudeness and laziness and bureaucracy, but regardless they rest content in the knowledge that if a true crisis presents itself, they're in good hands.

Steel and Plasma

Altercations between the corporate forces exist on record, but in almost every case they have been small incidents based on misunderstanding, with warning shots the only ordnance released. A notable exception is an incident known as the Ingalles incident, where soldiers belonging to the Wiyrkomi Peace Corps opened fire on a Hyasyoda convoy being escorted by the Hyasyoda's agency, the Corporate Police Force.

The Hyasyoda detail had received advance clearance for entry into the outpost, a high-tier classified Wiyrkomi research node buried in the shadow of a Citadel moon. They were to escort the CEO of a subsidiary of Hyasyoda's, Santra Alloys, to a meeting with a high-ranking Wiyrkomi scientist. The arrangement was legitimate (if unusual), but the Wiyrkomi Peace Corps saw incongruity in the direct meeting of a CEO and a scientist.

They stopped the convoy and conducted a heavy-handed interrogation. Due to a fatal combination of bad intel and jittery nerves, they then ended up attacking it, killing four people and destroying the reputation of their police force for years to come. (To this day, the Wiyrkomi Peace Corps are something of a laughing stock among the corporate forces, and to compound things they consistently place near the bottom of the yearly summit's scoreboards.)

Today and Tomorrow

It is unclear at this moment whether Tibus Heth, the Caldari State's newly instated Executor, has any specific plans for the corporate forces. It is considered likely, however, that he will try to gain control of them and use them for his ends if hostilities with the Gallente Federation escalate any further. Doing so will be easier said than done, as these organizations retain a great deal of power in the name of their public appeal, to say nothing of their competent and well-equipped soldiery. The allegiances of the complex network of sponsors, affiliates and marketers they associate with, however, are wholly unknown.

During the invasion of Caldari Prime, all eight forces lent manpower to various aspects of the operation, from tactical strikes to civilian relocation, and the squadrons who participated have now mostly come back. Some scarred by atrocity, others whetted and ready for more, they are returning to their compatriots bearing tales of woe and grandeur on the blasted front. Where their loyalties will fall – and what sort of influence they'll spread – is anybody's guess.

If and when the time comes for Heth to begin making inroads, it remains to be seen what the CEOs of the Chief Executive Panel will do to hold on to these flagbearers of their outward image. One thing is certain, at any rate: whoever commands these forces controls a good deal more than just a group of men with guns.

Her Painted Selves



Even at this height, where Braea felt a twinge of sickening dizziness, the roars of the crowds below could be heard. They were muffled through the polycarb glass, and when one of many assistants urged Braea to step closer to the edge of her sealed balcony overhanging what seemed like the world below, she got the momentary impression that she could simply keep walking: Out through the glass, into the air and through the station ceiling, out into space and into the unknown and unending dark. She had to stop herself from taking another step lest she bump into the glass wall. The cameras would capture that, as they did everything else, and she couldn't imagine the hundreds of thousands down below all laughing at her.

The floor was carpet-clad but the walls all around them were transparent, and everywhere she looked down below she saw countless tiny heads, like little fallen stars, all of them looking either up at her or at the massive quartet of video screens that hung above her crystal enclosure and flashed her image to the four corners of this floating world. She ventured a quick look up, but the sight of herself cast on those screens gave her even more vertigo than the heights had done.

In that brief glimpse she saw the camera zoom out from her face and show her entire figure in that tight dress she hated. She'd put on weight, first from the stress of what happened to Gerets and then as comfort against the shock when he got back. It was nothing that an expensive designer couldn't fix, she'd been told, but she knew her own body and she knew what she was. Most of the time, at least.

She quickly looked back down and cast a glance at Gerets, who stood beside her and had not made a sound. In this place, with the crowd's overbearing adoration of them and what they stood for, it felt easier, more real, to look at his face, destroyed as it was. It was not their first public appearance after Gerets' checkout from the rehabilitation ward, but she was continually amazed to find herself here.

Gerets was her fiancé. He was a member of the Gallente armed forces. He had been stationed on Caldari Prime during the invasion. Orbital bombardments had hit his barracks, killing everyone else. He'd been so disfigured that they had to use RNA scans to confirm his identity. That's what had happened, and that was how it was. She had to accept that.

His face looked like a child's paper drawing of a man that had been smudged with water and grime before being crumpled into a ball and flattened out again.

She bit her lip, hard. This was how it was. No panic and no backing out.

His costume covered him from neck on down, but Braea knew what lay beneath.

He would be fixed, but not for quite a while, for it was on him to be the symbol of perseverance and strength in the face of stark, brutal reality. This was what they'd done to Our Boys, all the reason we needed to go out there with fire and thunder. After some time - maybe a year or two, or three or four, they'd been told - he would quietly be given the funds needed to fix himself, followed by a total news blackout on him.

She looked to her side and pretended to wave, sneaking a glance at the capsuleer who'd hid in their entourage. He stood off-camera, looking like one of many assistants. His cranial socket was covered with a skin patch which in turn was concealed under a tight hood. He'd showed them the setup when he first came into the deal, explaining that while some people would undoubtedly guess his identity, it shouldn't be publicly acknowledged by anyone on the team. The capsuleer had offered an unknown addition to the funds the Federation had earmarked for Gerets' operation, enough to secure him a watcher's position in the press circus that surrounded the couple. He wasn't shy about his support, though its scope was unrevealed, but this effort wasn't supposed to be about him.

They had agreed, as they had agreed to so much, initially for the hope of a new beginning and eventually for the raw need for an end.

The show ended and they all headed off for the VIP greeting session. The Federation had made substantial advances in the direction of total conquest, the news had said, and whatever else those advances were, they were undoubtedly absolute reason for rejoicing.

On their way into the main floor of the skyscraper, one of the tallest buildings on the station, some of the assistants quietly asked Gerets to follow them to the makeup section. There would be press.

Braea turned to follow them, but the capsuleer touched her elbow. "We're taking a little side route."

She furrowed her brows. The capsuleer said, "We'll get to makeup soon enough, and Gerets'll still be there." He looked towards Gerets and she followed his gaze. The skin on her fiancé's neck had gone reddish and some of the pustules residing on it had pushed their way out, dotting a flabby skin fold that dangled limply over his neckline.

Braea stared at his neck, then walked up to him, gingerly put a hand on his shoulder and said she'd be right along.

Gerets turned and looked impassively at her, then looked away and kept walking.

She told herself, for the thousandth time, that this sullenness was his nerves, nothing more than his nerves and the regimented behavior taught in the army, and not a lack of caring. Then she followed the capsuleer down another path.

They walked down a long corridor inset with soft light and entered a private elevator that took them down only a few floors. The elevator had one-way glass. Braea looked out, unseen at last.

"We can dim it both ways if it makes you feel queasy," the capsuleer said.

She blinked, looked at him, then said, "No, no. It's not that."

He leaned his head to one side, but said nothing more.

They left the elevator and walked out onto a floor that was one huge space, stretching throughout at least a third the length of the building. It was beautifully laid out, with touch-sensitive pads that left heat-signature tracks of her steps; furniture of leather and wood; and hologram paintings on the walls. Braea looked hard at each painting she passed, more than anything to take her mind off the world, and something began to catch her eye. It took her a moment, but eventually she spotted it in every one. That one rogue element: Herself. Hidden somewhere in the room would be cameras that took her image, processed it for presentation, and strategically projected it in the landscape of the paintings. She was an underwater diver, a resident in a dirtworld farmhouse, a captain of a spaceship. All the unwitting roles for her to play, a star even less real than the scenery.

She nearly bumped into the capsuleer. He'd stopped and was gesturing for her to take a seat in one of the leather couches. Leather, like wood, was a commodity on the stations and one she felt decidedly uncomfortable with, but the seat he was directing her to had a worn appearance and its leather surface had hairline cracks. "My favorite reading spot," he said.

She realized he was trying to help her feel relaxed and the small gesture set her at ease. She sat. "Is this someone's apartment?" she asked him. "Is it yours?"

He sat beside her, at a respectable distance. "Yes, it is. This is the entryway."

"How much of this floor is yours?"

"All of it," he said. "But I didn't bring you here to impress you."

She doubted it, but said nothing.

"How did all that fanfare make you feel?" he asked.

She narrowed her eyes and remained silent. Although he'd been in the project almost from the start and had remained affable throughout, he was a capsuleer. She and everyone she knew had an ingrained awe of his kind that was equal parts fear, admiration, distrust and wonder. The gulf that existed between him and everyone else was not easily bridged.

Also, she didn't yet know what he wanted out of all this. His monetary gift to the program had been quite substantial.

Also, she was very tired, not least of being stared at by people with ideas in their head about who she was.

"It's uncomfortable," he says. "Doesn't really feel like it's really you they're seeing or want to see. I know how that is."

She debated how forthright she could be with him and decided to try the waters. "Not to be ungrateful, but how I feel is a little complicated and I'm not at all sure I understand it myself yet. Is there a reason we're here? I should be with my husband."

"He's only your husband to be," the capsuleer said. His tone would have felt insultingly dismissive to Braea, but it struck something that she was too bright to write off as mere pride. "That's the big part of the news, isn't it?" he continued. "You two, despite everything, still aiming to get married sometime in the near future. I don't even think you've picked a day, have you?"

"We did," she said. "But after ... after what happened, it's all up in the air."

"Yes. I'm told you were convinced to put it off. Some war message agents came over. Guys who thought our supportive masses would like the idea of the girls supporting our troops but wouldn't quite want to confront the idea of what would happen on the wedding night. And you know what? That delay is actually a good thing."

She firmly ignored thoughts of the wedding night and focused on the capsuleer. Whatever he was leading up to it felt like he was on her side, though whatever side that was she didn't know yet. "Is it?" she said, then bit her tongue.

He smiled again. "It is, actually. The fanfare is necessary for the people, but you'll find they really don't care about the aftermath. Aside from a few newsmen scrounging for follow-up human-interest stories, you'll soon be pushed out of the limelight, never to return."

She looked down. "Maybe that's for the best," she said quietly. She felt so tired.

"Maybe for some," he said. "But I've got my own ideas, and the ability to follow through on them. Half the money is yours, by the way."

"Thanks," she said. She'd heard this said before. Unity and strength; we all stood by each other's side.

"I'm not speaking figuratively. Today's reception is the last in this grueling press run you've been on for the last few weeks. Once you finish it, half the funds allocated to you and Gerets will be put into savings that he can rely on, released in substantial installments over several years, and will cover not only his rebuilding procedures but practically anything else he might desire. He'll get a new body and a better life to live it with.

"The other half of the money is yours and will become immediately available. It's registered to you and is yours to handle as you see fit. You have no more duties. Not to me, not to the government or the press, not to the people, not anyone," he said. "Not even your fiancé."

She stared at him, not knowing what to say.

The capsuleer said, "People can be regrown. I've been destroyed enough times to know that, and I understand the process better than most. One day, a while from now, Gerets will be rebuilt. It'll take a long while and will be agonizing even for a man who's experienced plenty of pain already, but it'll happen, at least on a physical level. There'll be physiotherapy and there'll be bad days that slowly get better.

"But there's nothing that can be done for the spirit. That'll have to take care of itself for now. Therapy will help, but after you've been broken and rebuilt, well..." He raised his hands, palms upwards. "You're never the same."

"Why are you doing this?" she said in a whisper. On the wall, her painted simulacrum leaned down with her, nearly invisible in the colorful backdrops.

The capsuleer leaned forward too, resting his face on his hands. "You're a very pretty young woman, and I say that as someone who has absolutely zero interest in you in that way. You could have your choice of men, but you

chose this one and you stuck with him. Until now it's been out of love and duty. After this point, it could've been out of duty still, or possibly out of darker motivations."

"If you're implying it was all for the money-" she said, but he interrupted. "No, I'm not. It's for the duty, and for what you once had, and for what you might have in some imagined fantasyland. But you've got smarts behind that pretty face and you know as well as I do that with this kind of commitment there comes self-doubt, even self-hatred, and a twisted kind of loyalty that you can never quite get to. If you stay with Gerets while he's like this, not just physically deformed but mentally scarred over it, you risk turning yourself into a martyr and poisoning everything you might have had with him."

"Do you want me to leave him?" she said, a small tremor in her voice. "I can't. I can't do that."

"Let me tell you something," he said. "The people who organized this, as far as they're concerned, Gerets is no hero. He's a terribly unlucky everyman, chosen to be a poster boy of what the enemy did to our people and handed a little bone to chew on as a thanks. Before I came into this deal, the plan was to stagger the release of regrowth money so much and thrust it behind such masses of red tape that you'd effectively have been serfs of the government in perpetuity. I brought in ten times what they'd set aside for you, and even that amount is less than I can make in a day. You owe them nothing, nor me, nor anyone else."

"You're not doing this out of sympathy alone," she said in a cold tone.

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm not?"

"I noticed the hints you dropped during the procession. Even if you know what it's like for people to think of you as something you're not, it wouldn't have made you do all this."

He regarded her for a while. His expression quivered slightly, and Braea realized he was trying not to smile. Eventually he said, "Well, you're right. In my defense, altruism was a real factor in my offer. But there's more to it; of course there is."

"I've been hurt, and deformed, and even killed. I've woken up in a clone vat more often than I can recall. I've never gone through what Gerets will, but I've been burned nonetheless." He leaned forward again. "There comes a point, Braea, where you're so far gone that you lose the ability to reach out to the people who matter. When you reach that point, having someone who's there only out of the duty and the darkness, and not out of pure and unfiltered love ... well, that someone will make you want to stay inside and wait for them to go away."

He took her hand. "How long's it been since Gerets touched you?"

She pulled her hand away, and looked at the walls. All her colored selves looked over their shoulders, too.

The capsuleer said, "If you think he doesn't know what's going on-... no, if you think he can't see how you feel, that he doesn't know every thought in your head, you're dead wrong. I spoke to that young man. He's bright. Morose, naturally, but still very bright, and he pays attention. And he's in terrible, terrible pain that you're only going to make worse if you stick around and force yourself to pretend that everything's the same."

"Then what do I do?" Braea said, still not looking at him.

"I had someone who clung to me. She did it for glory, me being a capsuleer, and even after I'd had my head scrambled by too many clonings in too little time, even when I made her life this absolute passive-aggressive hell, she still hung on. And eventually what was left of the love evaporated, because even as I wasn't the same person anymore, neither was she. The balance changed and she changed with it."

He stood up. "I want you to do what's right. This does include being to Gerets what he needs you to be, but to be honest, that's a secondary concern. You shouldn't carry him any more than you should carry a banner for the government's propaganda. Your duty is to yourself, always, and only to others through that. If you can be to Gerets what you want to be, then do it. If not, well, now you have a choice, and an obligation to realize that choice."

She stood up. Her painted selves rose with her.

He grinned slyly. "And heavens, you need makeup. Your cheeks are streaked with tears. You can't be seen like this; think what your husband would say!"

She let out a choking laugh. They walked back to the elevators. The tiles left tracks that gently faded in the wake of their passing.

Cities of Refuge



Keeler was running through the ruins of his city. Its adults might be worried, but it was a darkened, broken paradise for its children.

The planet of Caldari Prime had recently been re-taken by Caldari forces after more than a hundred years of Gallentean occupation. Keeler was Gallentean and so were his parents.

Thanks to rising tension the city had been segregated even before the invasion, which kept the occupying forces from having to indiscriminately slaughter Gallenteans when they came in. Keeler remembered the day when the rains came; thunder and whine, red clouds at night, and black shapes in the distant skies. After the local military had been levelled the skies had darkened again and mountainous shapes had descended from the skies. Smoke and fire gusted from their blackened hulls as they settled on whatever was beneath, reducing it to rubble. The hulls had opened and armies of Caldari soldiers poured out, and whatever forces the Gallente could muster didn't stand a chance. Keeler had run out of sight before seeing what happened, but he'd heard the sounds. For weeks after his parents had been too shocked even to talk about it.

But the children saw it differently, for it was frightening and exciting like a child's life always is, and the ones who saw things they shouldn't have - blood on the sidewalks, shots fired into flesh - merely incorporated it into their imaginary worlds, needed now more than ever, burying it so deeply that it surfaced only through fantasy. Keeler envisioned it as two animals, one large and bulky like a toothless old dog whose flesh hangs slackly from his bones, the other a sleek, sharp cat with tensed muscles writhing beneath its skin, ready to attack and tear its prey apart.

As Keeler approached his hidehole in the silence of the late evening, he heard a noise.

All the children in this city, Gallente and Caldari both, had hideholes unknown to others, little cities of refuge, and if you found out someone else's you kept it to yourself. The hideholes were holy, as were all the secret paths through the cordoned-off parts of the city.

If the invading soldiers had realized this they probably could have dominated whatever remained of the city's initial resistance, but the children saw no pressing reason to help them, and they apparently so no pressing reason to talk to children.

Keeler stopped, having all the time in the world, and listened for the sound. There was a breeze and at first he thought the noise might merely be a piece of something flapping in the wind. As he listened on, he discerned a raspy tone to it, and a stifled irregularity punctuated by longer, harsher gusts. Someone was in there, coughing.

For an adult this might have been an agonizing dilemma: run away and hope not to get a bullet in your back; find a guard and risk betraying one of your own; or go in and investigate. For a child, no dilemma.

Keeler went in.

The man had crawled deep into Keeler's hiding place, stopping only when the wall barred his passage. He lay there in a fetal position, apparently asleep. There was precious little light in here, but enough that Keeler recognized his clothes as the old Gallente army type. They were torn and dirty, and soaked, which was bad news in the cold climate on Caldari Prime. There was still a little snow on him, which meant he hadn't been here long. Whatever remained of the previous occupying army - which the media called guerillas and the locals called freedom fighters and Keeler's dad called a goddamn pain in the ass - had retreated to the open country and the mountains, where they still held out and relied on outlying towns and villages for supplies. When Keeler had wondered how they could survive under those conditions, his dad had given him a look and said, well yes, for a city kid like you there's nothing in the frozen countryside except perhaps all the food a civilized society needs. But heaven help them if they need any lawyers.

In the gloom Keeler noticed what looked like small pieces of rectangular paper lying on the ground, some of them soaked from blood that had trickled from the man's legs. He leaned down and picked one up, and found that it was thick, lukewarm and much drier than it should be. It rustled in the silence.

The soldier cleared his throat and said, "Stimpacks. Bodywarmth."

Keeler froze. He thought the man had been asleep.

The soldier seemed to hear his thoughts. He slowly rolled onto his back, looking directly at Keeler, and said, "Didn't dare sleep. Been listening out for intruders." His face twitched into a smile that turned into a cough. The soldier clamped his hand over his mouth, trying to choke it down. When it had passed, he added, "Didn't hear you for a second."

Keeler said nothing. In this ruined city there was nothing to say.

"You going to tell on me?" the man asked. There was an evenness in his voice, a tone of equanimity. No hint of the condescension from adults who appended "kid" to everything they said, but no forced camaraderie, either. The soldier was speaking to him as an equal.

Keeler shook his head and saw the soldier exhale deeply.

"Why are you here?" Keeler asked.

The man took a while to answer, taking in slow, deep breaths. Keeler wondered whether he was badly hurt. His legs looked in really bad shape; the strips of cloth that had been tied around his thighs and ankles were dark with blood.

"I have a message," he said. "An important one."

"To who? Secret military message?" Keeler thought it over for a second, remembering some of the gooier plots he'd seen in books and vids. "Or to your loved ones?" he added.

The soldier grinned, or grimaced. "Why can't it be both?" he asked.

Keeler didn't have an answer. Instead he said, "I'll take it for you."

"I can't ask you to convey it," the man said. "Even if I could, I wouldn't. It's mine to bring. But I am going to ask you not to tell on me. I promise I'll try not to put you in danger."

"The troops would never catch me. I can stay safe," Keeler said.

The soldier barked a breathless laugh, leaned back and closed his eyes. Sweat glistened on his face in the fading gloom. "I'm sure you can," he said in a tired voice. "Probably better than me at this point. But I got this far. It's all on me. I'll see it through."

He stared at Keeler for a while, but Keeler got the impression the soldier wasn't seeing him. Eventually his eyes rolled a little up in their sockets and he leaned his head back, exhaling. Keeler stood there for a while, waiting to see if he'd say anything else. Eventually it got too dark to see, and when he heard faint snores from the man, he left and went back home.

They were having dinner, an eternal affair measured by the ticking of the clock on the wall. Keeler slowly mashed his food together with one hand, resting his head on the balled fist of the other. His dad was talking about a possible promotion.

"You say that like nothing has happened," his mom said.

"I'm still trying to rise in the ranks, hon," his dad replied. "We've got new leadership in some places, but it'll take them years to sort out the ownership issues with the Caldaris. Until then, whoever's proven useful might be kept on staff."

"There are other changes, too," she said. "Or haven't you looked outside recently?"

His father shrugged and kept eating.

"All those deaths-" His mom seemed to catch herself, casting a glance at Keeler, and continued, "All this tyranny, and it means nothing to you?"

"What means something to me is my family, and the food I put on your table," Keeler's dad said very quietly, staring directly into his mother's eyes. "Right now the millions dead out of billions still alive, the destroyed houses in cities that still stand, the loss of money in an economy that somehow still rolls on and puts food on this very table, everything is secondary. It has to be." Without even looking at the plate, he speared a piece of beef and stuffed it into his mouth, chewing in defiance with bulging cheeks.

There was a clatter as Keeler's mom put her fork down hard, then picked up her plate, stood up and said with a tremor in her voice, "I'm going to eat in the kitchen."

After she'd left, Keeler quietly laid down his own fork on the still half-full plate.

"You're not going to eat?" his dad asked, too loudly.

"I'm not that hungry," Keeler said. He added, "Dad, can I take some leftovers? I'll just eat them later."

His dad looked at him for a little while, then seemed to accept the peace offering, smiled and said, "Sure. No problem." Then, as he almost always did, he added, "Don't go too late to bed, now."

Keeler nodded. His parents were much too busy with their own worries to add him to the mix. As far as he knew, they never checked on him before bedtime, and so long as he washed off any visible grime they had no reason to think he'd been out late. He packed away the dinner, took it to his room, put on his sneaking clothes - greys and browns, a life in dust and dirt - and left through the window, the food warm in his hands.

For a city that had recently been invaded, it was in surprisingly good shape; tattered but working. Military and rescue workers had done an amazing job clearing out the fallout from the invasion. Keeler had spied on their progress and seen his first corpse, dragged out of the rubble of a barracks. There had been massive destruction, but the Caldari had been attacking a planet partly populated by their own people, and they had been as careful as they could. Some incidents during the invasion had forced them to go in with a heavier hand than planned, but most of the casualties had still been connected to the military. Everyone knew of someone who'd died, but not every family had lost a member. People still went to work. Order, such as it was, had been restored. Nobody knew what would happen tomorrow, and there were conflicting tales of all the past yesterdays, but for now they were alive and living. For some, including Keeler's dad, that was enough.

Keeler had to weave his way through areas cordoned off by Caldari troops. There were mobile soldiers stationed at checkpoints - they used the MTACs less in the cities after the invasion - and their sleek movements in their black body-warmth outfits and thin grey helmets made them look like hovering ghosts in the dark.

Getting past the main checkpoints was the hardest bit. Heat- and motion-seeking equipment was plentiful, but mostly focused on the paths that an adult would reasonably take. Even if the troops didn't go too hard on the kids they caught, you had to be careful, lest an annoyed guard lead you to explain a bloodied ear to your parents. In general the guards had been pretty good to people here, and mainly picked up the ones who caused major disturbances.

In one of the increasingly common arguments over the dinnertable, Keeler's mom had pointed out that the temporary peace was only that, while people got their bearings and took stock, and that a major civil rebellion was inevitable. Keeler's dad had replied that be this as it may, it wasn't as if they'd been left all huddled together in empty buildings, lighting fires with dead people's furniture, and that every man needed to have a good, long think about what exactly he was fighting for, and what would happen to those he loved if he lost.

Aside from being unable to travel outside their sectioned area, he said, and having less money to spend than before, things hadn't changed all that much. Keeler's mom had said that this fragile semblance of daily life was the least those murderers could have done, for if it hadn't been established then the occupying forces would have had to pacify a lot of angry people with too much time and too little food on their hands. She had left the table early that time, too.

Sometimes it felt like they were living in two cities, each trying to become something different.

Keeler entered his hiding place, dinner in hand, and found nobody there.

The next night at dinner they had the vid on, common for post-argument evenings when they, in the words of Keeler's dad, just wanted to get through one damn dinner without one damn argument and pass the damn potatoes, will you please.

Keeler, still wondering what had become of the soldier, didn't pay much attention to the vid or anything else until the announcer's voice caught his ear. A Gallente militant had been caught in the city. Brown hair, medium build. Badly wounded legs.

According to the newscaster, the militant had been responsible for several deaths of both Caldari and Gallente, including civilians. He was likely here to seek shelter with conspirators or terrorist sympathizers.

"Good riddance," Keeler's dad said.

Keeler's mom said nothing. Keeler looked to her and said, "Is it really true? Was he a murderer?"

She looked sternly at his dad, then to him. "Maybe," she said. "It's hard to know, these days."

"Maybe they're lying," Keeler said with much more empathy than he had expected to have. "Maybe he just wanted to bring an important military message to people here. Or a message to his loved ones."

His mom smiled at him. His father grunted and said, "Man was a killer. Not some heavenly messenger."

Keeler's mom snapped, "You don't know that."

Keeler looked at them for a while, then asked in honest wonder, "Why is always one or the other? Why can't it be both?"

While they were both taking deep breaths for angry answers, he got up and left the room.

And to Live in Peace



The landscape was beautiful and serene: The sun, recently set, cast the remnant of its reddish rays over clear blue skies; long fields of wheat billowed in gentle winds; farms with flowery gardens dotted the honey-golden vistas. It was nearly perfect, aside from the group of special ops quietly making their way through the land.

They moved in pairs, and the high stalks hid their passage. Arek and his partner Klar had the closest building and so moved slowest, insinuating themselves through the grass. Their clothing, light khakis and greens, was beset with ocular fibers that reflected their surroundings. It wouldn't fool heat scanners, but it didn't need to. Their intel, limited as it was, indicated that their prey had no high-tech apparatus in his home, not even proper weaponry. It was an idyllic existence insofar as such a thing existed for people like him.

He was a former army general for the Caldari. The first war was long since past, but war, like love, rests unquietly beneath its velvet facade. There had been a thousand skirmishes in a thousand places since, and in truth the hostilities had never properly ended, nor peace been fully agreed to; the fighting had merely petered out, like a sputtering flame. But some people had expended much of their breath keeping it alive.

In the Caldari State the general's war record was pristine, all the blood having been thoroughly washed off before it got a chance to dry. The Gallenteans knew better. He'd been responsible for countless silent atrocities against them, and in particular against the corporation whose agents now flowed over the landscape. After his retirement he had, at his express request, been rewarded with a quiet life living on a plot of land in the outback of space, a lowsec area where none of his enemies would ever think to look for him.

But wars find their soldiers, and the new war had found him.

Hostilities in this particular lowsec system had propelled Gallente agents to scout out its planets. Orbital photography, atmospheric probes and data mining had unearthed the general, hiding like a worm. Intel indicated his fixed location could be on any of several farms in the area, and while the first reaction of the Gallentean warring forces was to send a bomb or two down to the general area, it was quickly vetoed. The man was a minor war hero in his own empire and a war criminal in the Federation. It was determined that he was needed alive so he could stand trial for his crimes, and, of course, to pacify the increasingly revenge-hungry Federation masses. Besides, it was still early in the war, and inflicting unnecessary casualties could have carried grave implications, particularly in a Federation that had just suffered a terrible planetary invasion.

A group of black ops was assembled and brought up to speed. Retrieving the general alive was of primary importance, so much so that they were allowed only nonlethal weapons.

There was some dissent.

"Why's he coming in alive?" Arek said during the mission briefing.

"PR," the captain replied. "He comes in dead, he's useless to us."

"But we're going to kill him anyway."

"Not necessarily. He might be used as barter."

"I want an MTAC," Klar said.

"You're not getting one," the captain and Arek said in unison. The rest of the team looked on, not hiding their grins.

"Still want one."

The captain said, "This is a top-secret mission that has to be executed with stealth and precision, and you want to bring along a mechanized skeleton that'll thump the ground like god's own hammer."

There was silence in the room.

Klar said, "MTACs shoot rockets."

"Group dismissed. Get out."

So they'd kitted out in light, nonlethal gear. Tiny multiburst grenades locked to EM, instahardening foam bombs, and subvocal communicators, along with whatever personal gear they needed. Everything was passive except the communicators and their relays, and their power use was negligible. Anything else that might show up on scanner, including heat-vision gear, was left behind. In an isolated hostile location with no chance of backup or rescue, you relied on your own damn abilities.

They were dropped in so far away that it took them several days to make their way to the target point. They'd been lucky enough to escape injury, and nutrition tablets took care of malnutrition fears, but all the same the strain of the journey had rendered them a hair cranky by the time they reached the farms. They didn't know on which one the old general resided, but it was immaterial; they'd hit them all simultaneously.

Arek and Klar snuck up to the side of theirs, edging towards the windows. The general had not gotten to his old age through stupidity or lack of perception, and even with the agonizing care they'd taken not to be noticed on their way here, it paid to be careful, which meant not barging in through the front door.

Arek sent out a call to the other agents. Everyone in position?

Responses came in a minute later. Team Beta, position. Team Gamma, position. Team Delta, position. Team Epsilon, position. Team Zeta, position.

Arek nodded to Klar, who pulled out a multiburst grenade. The house was on two floors and Klar had hotly argued his ability to accurately toss in a grenade on the second story, but had been voted down by Arek, who claimed to be allergic to having grenades bounce off windowsills and fall on his head.

Arek pulled out his own grenade. He nodded to Klar, clicked it and tossed through the closed window. The sound of the breaking glass pierced the summer day and was echoed from the other farms, where the other agents were doing the same. The two operatives shut their eyes tight. There was a muffled noise and the air was filled with fractured light like a kaleidoscope come to life, so bright that it filtered even through their eyelids. Arek heard Klar mutter, "... nine, ten," and break the glass as he tossed in the other multiburst. It went off, and the second wave of fractured light made Arek nauseous. If the general hadn't been thoroughly disarmed by the first grenade, or had been elsewhere in the house, his roused curiosity or antediluvian tenacity would hopefully have been taken care of by the second.

Klar rose, shook his head a couple of times, moved to the front door and kicked it in. He had one hand raised, holding a foam bomb, though Arek noticed his other hand was lodged in a pocket.

They quickly scouted the area. As with most buildings on this continent of the planet, its outsides were concrete and the insides from wood, and the architecture favored large, open rooms favorable to inhabitants and kidnappers alike. Arek could never get used to the utter stillness after an EM-set multiburst had been thrown into a room. Quietness, yes; after you throw a proper live grenade into someone's living room there's not going to be much noise apart from a few dying gurgles. But the utter undisturbed serenity of a post-EM room, with

everything in its place and all the pictures hanging undisturbed from the walls, set his teeth on edge. It was like firing a laser in the dead vacuum of space; you found yourself looking for the burn marks merely to prove the act of violence to your very own senses.

Not only was there no disturbance; there was no body. Arek caught Klar's gaze. Uh-oh.

He started to subvocalize a command but Klar caught his unspoken thoughts and quietly padded to the basement stairs. Arek pulled out a foam bomb and headed upstairs.

Calling it a second floor was laying it on a little thick. It was fairly large, but the slanted roof was low enough to call up a vague air of claustrophobia, and the only concessions to human inhabitation were a large bed, a dresser and various smaller clothing storages, and a large, intricately carved wooden desk. On the desk, surrounded by several framed pictures of people Arek assumed were his family, lay a single piece of paper.

Arek did a quick sweep, but the dressers were empty and the underside of the bed held not even a speck of dust. That left the desk, and the paper, and an unpleasant foreboding in Arek's mind. When he saw that the message was written in Gallentean - the Gallente tongue, one that no man on this planet was likely to know save the team and the general himself - he snapped it up immediately and began to read:

Welcome. I knew you'd come one day, whoever you are, so I made arrangements.

First off, this is my home and you're not welcome. I hope they're paying you enough to run fast and far away when my people go after you.

Arek rolled his eyes. He kept reading:

I have access to substantial funds, so it may surprise you to find the place so rustic. It's how I like it - I've always appreciated simplicity, and after a lifetime of serving the greatest army in the world, with all the myriad complexities inherent in such a career, I decided it was time I lived, at last, like a civilian. Also, this lifestyle helps me fit in with the people in this area. They're nice people. I like them.

But in the event that I ever got visitors, I made a few concessions to complexity and chaos.

Underneath this farm is a bunker.

Arek immediately subvocalized a warning to Klar, who gave an all-clear and said that if there was anything down there apart from firewood and mice, he'd be surprised.

It's hidden beneath the floorboards.

Arek subvocalized this. There was a splintering crash from downstairs, and Klar sent a subvocalized string of curse-filled surprise that served as confirmation.

There are similar bunkers underneath every farm in this area. Once I'd gotten to know the local citizenry I found them quite amenable to having their housing upgraded ever so slightly. I explained that I had a military background and that some people disagreed with my past work and protection of the State. I was surprised at how easily they agreed to have the bunkers installed, for I had feared they would simply run me off, or at the very least shut me out with that narrow-mindedness one expects of the rural stereotype, but I was proven quite pleasantly wrong. It turns out that here, on the edge of the world, people are used to protecting themselves against natural disasters, be they typhoons, floods, fires or anything else unwelcome that comes their way. The idea of a group of cowardly little men scurrying into their houses at night robs these people of no more sleep than the knowledge of rats scurrying in their walls, and they cheerfully accepted my proposition. A number of healthy subsidies for their work here didn't hurt, either. Their children will all go to State colleges.

Add to that a subtle early-warning system, and we all found ourselves ensconced in the safety of our respective steel boxes before you even got within sight of this place. I sent off an emergency call to my own forces, and even now they are on their way here to extract me. I would not want to be in your shoes if you are still here when they arrive.

Arek cursed. This deadline changed the mission parameters considerably.

Each bunker has all the supplies necessary for a long and healthy life, inasmuch as one

remains trapped underground. The atmospheric generators will work almost indefinitely and, dare I say it, will be ticking away long after you are all dead and gone. There is plenty of nourishment - most of it locally grown, actually - that I've had freeze-dried to last a long, long time, and the filtered liquid dispensers match those on any spaceship you care to name. To stave off boredom we have vidscreens, of an old and dependable brand that won't break for a while, and if they're not quite as exciting as the latest holoprojectors or Egones, I made up for it by including a substantial library of entertainment.

Lastly, each bunker is quadruple the size of the house below it, to detract from the risk of cabin fever. They lie far enough in the ground that they don't disturb the crops, but I'm sure you have people who can use sonar to verify my claims.

Klar subvocalized his impatience to Arek, who replied with a team-wide broadcast telling people to hang back. The others vocalized back, confirming that each team had found a similar note in their own entered houses.

There is another feature, mind, that I did not feel compelled to share with my neighbors. Every bunker except my own contains a canister of poisonous gas.

Arek sent a subvocalization to Klar telling him to back off now.

Not only will the gas kill whatever poor soul that enters the bunker without a mask, but everyone who inhabits it. It's a combination nerve gas and blistering agent that'll make each bunker's inhabitants keel over in pain, vomit blood, break out in horrific sores, lose their sense of reality and probably attack anyone who approaches them before their organs finally turn into a liquid mush and they go into massive cardiac arrest.

Every bunker is connected to the others with a transmission system. I daresay you could block it, but by the time you move in that kind of gear my supporting forces would long since have extracted me from this place. Perhaps if you ask them nicely, they'll let you keep some of your vital organs, though I imagine they'll likely leave some of you draped over the walls.

So if a single bunker is opened, they all start pumping the gas. That's not to mention that the bunkers cannot be safely opened from either side unless you know a specific code, and the only person who knows it is, I'm afraid, myself. If I die, my lovely neighbors will die, too - the men, women and children who even now are living their lives underground, waiting for the moment when my smiling countenance meets them at the entryway - and you will have all their fates on your conscience.

So you go ahead and break me out of the bunker to drag me off somewhere unheard of, and eventually I'll be returned to my State in exchange for political gain. All it will cost you is the cold-blooded murder of several innocent families. Look at my desk. Their pictures are there.

Arek looked at the desk. The pictures were there.

Good luck, whoever you are. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes.

Arek dropped the letter back to the desk and sighed deeply.

It was typical Caldari. Never do anything the easy way.

He communicated this to Klar and the rest of the team.

Klar sent back a question. So unless we get this guy out real soon, we're up in our asses in State soldiers.

Yep, Arek replied.

And the only way to get him out is to breach the bunker, which'll gas everyone else who lives here.

Yep.

Damn.

It fits his profile, I suppose, Arek said. He's a rotten one, from skin to center.

What do we do?

We have to abort.

The hell we are.

Look, Arek said, we don't have a lot of time. We get out, make our way to the pickup point and hope that our people can get there without being shot out of the sky. What do you want to do, just tear in there and kill him on the spot?

If we lose him now, he's gone for good.

Arek sighed. That's how it has to be.

The man is a monster, Arek.

I know. What else is there to do?

You said it yourself, Klar says. He's built a career on a lifetime of evil that's now hidden in this cover of old age. I'm sure he was real charming to the people here. Remember how charming he was to the Gallenteans he caught, back in the day?

Klar-

There was a sound downstairs.

Klar, what was that noise?

You know, these people you want to protect, they didn't ask any questions. He just gave them a lot of money and they took it. Nevermind he installed a bunch of hi-tech stuff in their homes, and they took it all, without even once thinking what this guy did to warrant that sort of protection. He said there were pictures up there, of those people. You saw the pictures we have? Of what he did to the Gallenteans he caught?

Arek rubbed his eyes. Klar, tell me that sounds wasn't a gun being cocked.

You know what they found in one of his old cells? Remember that pic, Arek? It was a small one, because there wasn't a lot left.

You brought a gun with you, didn't you, Klar?

Everyone in this place is complicit, and don't think for a second that anyone in Caldari is ever going to know, because then they'd have to admit that their old star general built a deathtrap for all the people who sold their souls to him.

Arek was going to argue with him, but something caught his attention. It wasn't a sound in the distance, but the absence of sound at the very edge of hearing: a stillness that comes when something very large is being very quiet, very far away. It was a sound that he'd last heard emanating through the walls of his own dropship. The enemy was coming. Time had run out.

And in that moment came the absolute clarity of two immutable, undeniable facts of life: The first, that he didn't want to do this, for it was absolutely wrong, it would make him a murderer and a marked man not only among the Caldari but in the eyes of the powers on the other side of life itself, and even though he was in this line of work he still had a shred left of resistance to the idea of murdering an entire community; and second, that in this place, doing the wrong thing for the right reason was the only option reasonably available to him as a human being.

Hell, he said. Go.

Be happy I didn't bring an MTAC, Klar said with undisguised glee. There were several sharp retorts and the sounds of crunching metal as he shot his way through the door and made his way into the bunker below. At some point Arek thought he heard a scream.

"A World Where No Such Road Will Run"



My name is Janus Bravour. I am thirty-two years old. I am going to die.

The room in front of me is vast. It belonged to a high-powered Caldari executive who, like most of his ilk, was on the wrong side of the revolution. I would have preferred a smaller room. A room this size means you can't see everything around you, can't contain all the events occurring within its space. This is important. When you're a member of the Caldari State leadership, you need to contain all events within its space, lest they spiral out of control.

This room has spiraled out of control.

We gutted some of the more indulgent architecture - my leader and State ruler Tibus Heth took entirely too much delight in tearing out the cages that had held the strippers and soldering them into a box that now serves as the executive's new office - but the basics, the less-noticed ephemera that were truly Caldari, we kept. There is a sand waterfall, and laser birds that light through the air, and quiet sigils, cast on the floor, that morph from one meaning to another.

My name is Janus Bravour. I sit in a room with a waterfall running down one of its walls, the sand hissing as it trickles through the invisible gutters below.

I approved of the reconstruction. I take life seriously, as I've had to in these serious times. There are indeed those among us who feel that life is but a joke. They disdain the work we've put into rebuilding this empire, gutting it and retaining only the purity of our State, and they would like to see life return to the ways of old. These are our enemies, and I take them very seriously.

The birds flit through the air, oblivious. Their movements give me a little hope, deluded though it may be. I notice they always fly in pairs or groups. I had never seen this before.

My name is Janus Bravour, and I am the Chief Operating Officer of an entire empire. I am second-in-command to the most famous person in the world, a citizen revolutionary named Tibus Heth. Under Heth's guidance we toppled the ruling body of our empire, we reclaimed the planet that was our birthright, and we went to war.

Tibus Heth has many enemies. So, by extension, do I.

Heth is an impulsive man in person, governed by a roaring undercurrent of emotions. He is a brilliant military strategist, but his expertise is on the field, in the smoke and the carnage. The silent fighting that goes on in the everyday business of running an empire he leaves, truth be told, to me.

I support Heth and what he has accomplished, and have laid down my life as a wager. But I am not an impulsive man, which is why I complement his ruling, and thus he and I will never see eye to eye. I serve the interests of

the State, as does Heth, but I do not feel that I serve it alongside him. We are each pulling it in a particular direction, and it is by this pull, this constant motion that is nonetheless fixed in place, that the State is given the power to continue existing.

If we were lovers, which we are not, we would be running our shared home right now, wondering whether a friendship and a shared set of ideals will carry us through the arguments in times ahead.

I envy the birds their synchronized flight. If I were to try the same I would die in an instant. And yet I must remain in some kind of motion, no matter how still it might seem. Stagnation is death. The moment we stop moving, we stop being viable human beings and become mere animated husks, solemnly waiting to die.

I see everything so clearly now. I expect it results from this personal revelation I've had of my mortality. I am going to die, and thus my mind is taking in every last detail it can before the final call.

I am being entirely too clinical about this. Given the circumstances, mind, I think it's excusable.

Aside from the birds, the sigil and the waterfall - all of which are intangibles of one sort or another, and don't really count towards the furniture in this room - there is nothing here but the closed door at the far end and the desk at which I sit. The window behind me casts a nice warm shadow on my workspace, and I know if I turned I would see the sun. I'm trying to resist the temptation.

On this desk are three things. The first is a glass cylinder set on a small, black base. The cylinder is about the length and width of my palm. Inside it are interconnected spiraling tubes, like strands of DNA woven into a tapestry, and inside those tubes are two globules of a silvery liquid reminiscent of mercury. The two blobs constantly pass through the tubes, pouring through them in defiance of gravity and inertia. In their paths they revolve around each other like electrons around a nucleus, inextricably entwined but always at a distance. They never touch, neither each other nor the invisible core they encircle, and they never stop moving.

It occurs to me that neither I nor Heth will ever truly be part of Caldari Prime. We encircle it, keeping its core contained. If we should fail, the core will not be compromised, but only so long as another one takes our place posthaste. I truly hope this will be the case.

The second item on my desk is a picture, taken from space. The background is a rich maroon, halfway between blood and rust. In the foreground, if such a term even applies to a thing as monumental as this, is a white globe inlaid with golden lights and frozen masses of clouds. This is Caldari Prime, the core of my existence.

The third item is a message, a greenish halo lit up in the air above my desk. I am sitting deathly still in my chair. Only my eyes have moved. Everything I've ever done has brought me to this point in time: Sitting here, in my office, unmoving, reading the news of my death.

This message is from an unknown sender, and I have no doubt that if anyone looks for it later, they will find it has disappeared. It doesn't recriminate, nor does it chastise. It is brisk, clear and honest. It says that this room has been filled with a poisoning agent that was activated at the reception of the message and will respond to human motion. I am breathing it in right now, into and out of my lungs, as I have been ever since I sat down in this room. If I move, wave my hand or even cast a last glance at the sun shining behind me, the agent will coagulate into a material that will stop my heart.

Somewhere in this building there will be a person - several persons, likely - who fell from their orbit of duty. I will move and I will die, and they will ensure the room is thoroughly ventilated before any investigation takes place. They will also guarantee the investigation finds I died of natural causes, and that I get a funeral befitting a Statesman. Honor will be upheld, I'm sure.

And while all of this was completely unnecessary - the poisoning agent and the traitors and the whole setup will have taken lot of time and effort - it was meant not merely as an assassination but as an insult, one to put me in my place. I have entered a trap where nothing I do will help. I am powerless to interfere. If I act, if I do anything other than sit perfectly still in this little kingdom of stagnation, I will die in an instant.

My name is Janus Bravour. All the roads are open to me, and all of them lead to my end.

And it is this that decides me, this realization that I am experiencing right now, in this moment that is both infinite and infinitesimal: That a man who is alive, who is truly alive, cannot but keep in motion lest he stagnate, and that this tiny glimmer at the back of my mind is not merely the resolution of my impending actions but the hope - an irrational hope, absolutely, which in truth makes it a faith, and I'm having to bite back a smile at the thought - that through the swiftest of motions I can cheat this final and absolute death, if I can but move, faster than light, faster than time itself, if I can exhale and inhale and ready my nerves and go-

All Tomorrow's Bodies



Day Seven

In the cold, hyperlit metal corridor, the two women faced one another at firing distance. Jeanelle, who'd brought them here, slowly lowered her hands to her hips, resting them on the handles of her guns. Skids, who'd kept them alive, kept her hands crossed behind her head, as if she planned to take a nap. She looked entirely unconcerned.

In one swift and silent motion, Jeanelle drew her guns, aimed at Skids and fired.

The deafening noise echoed through the corridor. In the aftermath of the muzzle flash, Skids stood with hands on her hips, an astonished expression on her face. She looked down at her body, in search of the vermillion stain, but before she could find one her eyes rolled back in her head, and she dropped to the floor.

Day One

They were in a meeting with a very nice man who spoke softly and had a face that was easily forgotten. This man, who had not given his name, told them that their team was one of many that qualified for the hunting of former Grand Admiral Anvent Eturrer.

Eturrer, or the Great Traitor as he was now known, had been instrumental in causing the Gallente to fumble their response to a mass invasion by hostile forces. As a result they had lost an entire planet to the Caldari, and had been forced into war on their outlying borders. Eturrer had disappeared right after his betrayal. The Gallente wanted him found.

Jeanelle, Skids, Kardeth and Asadir - Gallente, Caldari, Amarr and Minmatar respectively - had been called in. They were a merc team, one of many that worked in the corporate halo of 0.0 space. Their different backgrounds, national and corporate, allowed them a great flexibility in their operations, even if it made for the occasional bit of friction. Asadir was a tech head, excellent with machinery. Kardeth was a Wanderer, a clandestine subsection of the Speakers of Truth tasked with bringing the faith into the darkest of places. Skidochi was a supreme fighter, nimble and merciless, but her rebellious nature was in constant conflict with the guilt over her inability to properly serve the Caldari State. Jeanelle had a background in politics and entertainment, and a rather checkered past in her pursuit of happiness.

As it turned out, this past was proving surprisingly useful. One of the people Jeanelle had charmed in her passage was Uriam Kador, one of the Heirs to the Amarrian Royal Throne. The relationship was long since over, but Jeanelle had a way of making friends where she went and still had a lot of contacts in Kador's court. This was good, the nameless man said, because one of Eturrer's many possible hideouts was in Kador's part of space. The Gallente didn't know where, he said, and they certainly weren't going to risk any of their own people in these black ops stunts unless they had a very good reason to believe they'd get their man.

"Why not just have us extract Eturrer?" Kardeth asked.

That was not an option, the man said. Even if it turned out he was located there, their team would never get close to the man himself - he'd be too heavily guarded, and all they could hope for was reaching one of his co-conspirators - and any failed attempts to that end would drive him even deeper underground, ruining any chances the Gallente had of catching the villain at last. The team's task was the extraction of information,

nothing more.

"Why do you think Jeanelle wouldn't just warn Kador instead?" Kardeth said, nodding his head at his visibly annoyed team mate.

They had a good track record, the man said. And besides, betrayal would mean they'd have Blaque's Black Eagles to deal with.

"Let me just add something to this," Jeanelle said, loosening something around her chest and standing up. She turned to Kardeth, glaring at him, and dropped her top.

"See that scar, running right between my breasts?" she said.

Kardeth, eyes wide, nodded wordlessly.

Jeanelle pulled the top up again and took her seat. "Kador's private persona is not the same as his public one. He gets excited. And he can't handle failure. I liked the people who worked for him, idealists who believe in hard work and loyalty, but I don't owe the man anything."

Skids said, "I've known you for years, but I don't remember that. Was it before we met?"

Jeanelle looked at her, then looked away. "Something like that."

Kardeth tried to rally. "Alright. Anyway, yeah, we'll do our best to triangulate Eturrer's position from whatever our sources reveal." Asadir snorted, and Jeanelle rolled her eyes. Skids, legs drawn up to her seat, said nothing.

The man thanked them for their time.

Day Two

They were gearing up, receiving shipments of equipment to their ships. Jeanelle and Skids were checking over the data.

Casually, Jeanelle said, "Everything all right?"

Skids was silent for a while, going over ammo schematics. She said, "Yeah, it's fine. I don't like working for the Gallente, though."

"I know. But it's a job like any other. Asadir hates it when we do Amarr jobs, too."

"It's not just that. Eturrer's treated like a hero, back on Caldari. I don't like the thought that we're going to ruin things for him."

"I think that it's unavoidable," Jeanelle said. "He called this over himself the moment he betrayed his fleet. They would never let him go."

She put her arm around Skids' shoulders and gave her a quick hug. "And besides, it's not like the Caldari would venerate you even if you skipped out on this mission. They've got strange ways of showing their appreciation. You've seen that before."

"I guess," Skids said. "Still don't like it."

Jeanelle nodded and went back to the schematics. "You'll be fine," she said.

"Jeanelle?"

"Yes?"

"What do you mean, I've seen it before?"

Jeanelle thought it over. "You come from one of the most rigid empires in the world, where people are kept locked in place their whole lives. And yet you now work for a mercenary crew. That really says it all, sweetie. Go to sleep."

Day Three

After having adamantly refused to use Jeanelle's contacts in Kador's court, Kardeth received information from his own people in the dark end of space. He brought it to the team, proud and boisterous, and they set up and headed there quick.

According to Kardeth's sources, their target was a small colony staffed with very religious people who had some information on Eturrer's passage. The inhabitants, Kardeth maintained, would undoubtedly respect his rather clandestine authority as a Wanderer and lend unto him any assistance he required in his hunt. They would arrive late, have a prayer session and a nice dinner, get some proper sleep, and sort out their business in the morning. When Jeanelle asked whether the colonists knew the real purpose for their visit, Kardeth merely grinned.

?

Day Four (or very late in Day Three)

The main street was empty, as befitted a late night in a religious colony. Light posts shone on the grey stone below.

But there was a rumble in the air, and a few of the posts started to tremble, their lights jittering and swaying.

Skids came first, her slim body racing down the street. Jeanelle followed, her ampler proportions and more decorative clothing slowing her pace.

Kardeth, who'd stayed behind to reason with his people, came last, his sandals beating a tattoo on the ground, and his face as stony as an icon. Behind him came an army of Amarrians screaming raw bloody murder. The team had certainly unearthed something, but once their real intentions were discovered the colonists had not been happy.

Asadir, who had waited for them onboard the ship and already started the launch pattern, laughed his ass off as they jumped onboard. As the control panel closed, a yelled conversation could be heard between him and Kardeth.

"Welcome to my world!"

"Shutup."

"How'd you like it on the Matar side!"

"Shutup."

"I got a Pax Amarria in my nightstand, in case yours got a little dirty!"

"Shutup."

Day Five

Jeanelle took over and sent out feelers to some of her own sources in the area. Kardeth, chastened, grudgingly and rather sheepishly allowed himself to be assigned tech prep duties instead. On one of his trips into the hardware section of the cargo hold, he showed Asadir a list of the items they were going to use: simple, non-electric weapons that wouldn't show up on scanning or break at the worst possible moment. One of those items was a familiar one.

Asadir reached Jeanelle at her quarters. She did not seem surprised to see him.

"You know that Skids has a quickdraw implant," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"On your list is a miniature EMP bomb. You know what it does."

Jeanelle nodded.

"Are you just going for the quickdraw?" Asadir asked.

"No. I need you to mod the EMP, like you did in the Caldari space mission we did a while back. I need to run it twice."

Asadir stood there for a while, looking at her. Eventually he said, "You think we'll have to take this all the way."

"You've seen how she's getting. More sullen. Withdrawn. I don't think she's comfortable with this mission at all. I know she'll do it as well as she can, but there'll be a breaking point, and I don't want to have anyone get hurt."

"So you want the Dead Man's Switch."

"Yes. And I need you to do something else, too," Jeanelle said.

"Blanks for your gun."

"Yeah."

"I hate doing this to the child."

"Well," Jeanelle said, in a tone that indicated this conversation was over, "You know what alternatives we have. It's this, or end it for good."

Later in the day, a source sent back a coded message. It contained the locations of a colony that housed one of Eturrer's old lieutenants, a fellow traitor who'd eloped with him.

Asadir missed it, for he was stuck in the lab, working on the EMP device.

Day Six

They'd docked at another colony and been given permission to enter the place. It was still Amarr space, which meant that Asadir was, in his words, staying inside the ship on pain of death and religion and dumbasses. Kardeth stayed in as well, in the embarrassed and probably true belief that showing his face to any Amarrian in Kador space would complicate the mission. Jeanelle and Skids disembarked and headed for the bars.

It was a social hub of sorts for the nearby area, but heavily sectioned off. Colonists, these hermits of the world, knew how to respect privacy. The two women took a while to get familiar with the place, during which Jeanelle socialized heavily with every group they met while Skids grew increasingly morose. On one occasion they nearly wound up in a fight with the locals, when someone offered Skids a drink and she batted it out of the man's hands. Jeanelle made good but quickly retreated to another locale, taking a mumblingly apologetic Skids with her.

Eventually they managed to confirm the lieutenant's presence and approximate whereabouts on the colony. Unsurprisingly, he was being guarded by devout servants of Kador, who was used to taking good care of his people. Jeanelle knew many of these people from her last extended visit with the Kadorians, and it wasn't long before she was let into the circle. Skids, who could no longer disguise her discomfort with the colonists and the mission, hung back and did reconnaissance.

Day Seven

Jeanelle eventually returned, victorious and shining. She located Skids in an alleyway nearby, where the Caldarian was pacing about and kicking at rocks. Together they set off to find a secure communications terminal.

"How'd it go?" Skids asked on the way.

"Better than I dared hope," Jeanelle said. "You leave anyone in the dust?"

"Not so much, really. Anyway, did you have to do anything to get the info?"

Jeanelle gave her a bemused look. Skids blushed. "You know. I hate talking about that stuff outright."

Jeanelle laughed and put an arm around Skids' shoulder. "It's alright. I love what I do. But no, we really just talked. It's a shame. He's a good-looking man and I was hoping he had some interest in more, but really, he's under so much pressure that it took fairly nothing to open him up."

Skids raised an eyebrow. "So he gave Eturrer away."

"Not at all. But he talked about military installations and resource flow, in the delightful belief that a woman couldn't possibly understand it all anyway. Really, he thought he was using me as a sounding board and little more."

"And from that you can..."

"Deduce more or less where Eturrer is, yes," Jeanelle said. "Which may or may not be worth spit, if the guy moves or if anyone finds out there was a leak, or even if I was being told the truth. But we'll get paid either way."

"So where is he? Is he even here, in this part of space?"

Jeanelle put a finger up to her lips. "That would be telling."

Skids said nothing. Jeanelle asked, "How did your shift go?"

"Nothing much happened. Some people made a little trouble, but I sorted it."

Jeanelle, who knew Skids, understood this. "They still alive?"

"They weren't happy with your meeting. Thought you were a security risk. They were going to investigate us."

"And that would have been bad trouble," Jeanelle said.

"They're still alive, no worries. Are you sure you know where Eturrer is?" Skids said.

"Yes. Are you happy with the way the mission turned out?"

Skids briefly looked at her and said, "Absolutely," with not much conviction. They kept walking.

Eventually they made it to a narrow metal corridor in a reinforced part of the colony. A lone terminal was located there.

"Now we'll just have to send off the data and we'll be home free," Jeanelle said.

Skids had been walking in front of her for a while, and now turned to confront her. "I'm afraid not," she said to the merc.

Jeanelle sighed. "Skids ..."

"I can't let you do this. I can't."

"Yes, you can."

"You need to tell me where Eturrer is," Skids said.

"So you can contact the people who hate you and try one more bribe to change their view. It's not going to work, Skids. It never does."

Skids blinked, and said, "I don't recall having been the team traitor, but yeah, that's how it goes. I'm so sorry. I hate to do this, but I can't just help the enemy this way."

"You mean our employer."

"I mean the Gallente Federation. I don't expect you to understand, Jeanelle. Please give me the code."

"Why didn't you just tell on me? Sounds like you've joined the other side already."

Skids looked shocked. "I would never put you through that. Do you have any idea what they would do to you here if they knew what a traitor you are?"

"About the same as what the Caldari have wanted to do to you for years, Skids. Don't be stupid."

Skids didn't move. "You don't understand. Give me the info now."

"Let me put this in language that you'll understand, Skids. If you don't step away from that control, I'm going to blow you away."

Skids tensed, then relaxed and slowly grinned. "Go on, Jeanelle. Draw."

Jeanelle slowly reached into a pocket and pushed a button on something. Then she withdrew her hands and placed them near the guns on her belt.

Skids, in her element at last, stretched languidly to the ceiling.

Jeanelle sighed, walked over the body of her merc companion and keyed in a code on the control board Skids had been protecting. On the other side of the thick metal walls, wires crackled into action, switches passed on live currents, and a brief message was shunted out into the ether. Its contents spoke of the greatest traitor in the current history of the Gallente Federation and where he might be found, and they eventually weaved their way onto large monitors that cast reflections on the darkly grinning faces of his betrayed people.

Jeanelle picked up Skids' body and headed back to the ship. On the way there she contacted Asadir, confirming successful completion of the mission, and its collateral cost.

"Bring her back to the bay and I'll reset the Switch," Asadir said through the comlink. He added, "She'll be fine,"

though Jeanelle didn't know whose conscience he was assuaging.

She breathed deep and looked at the Caldarian's inert body. Unbeknownst to Skids, her quickdraw implant had an extra function. When set off with a specially prepared, deliberately focused EMP bomb, the implant would knock her out and erase all her recent memories. It wasn't healthy and it didn't work as well as it should - her past selves leaked into the present like trickles of water through the dam of quiddity - but it was necessary for someone like Skids, whose identity issues reached far beyond her conscious mind. She'd work things out some day. Until then, she needed support, and enough jobs to keep her abilities fresh.

The team did everything they could to keep her from harm. It was a unique and bothersome requirement of the Dead Man's Switch that its victim had to be made to feel as if she were dying. If they merely turned on the switch without faking Skids' death, the risk of irreversible psychosis rose by several orders of magnitude. So they loaded guns with blanks, and they faked hull breaches, and all the while they pressed little buttons and made their friend go through yet another death, to awake an earlier, cleaner self.

"You're sure she's not going to remember this one?" Jeanelle said.

"No more than the others," Asadir said. "Way we've tuned it, she'll go back to herself before this mission even started. We just need to remember to keep our mouths shut."

"That's alright. We forgive her. Just like last time, and the one before that."

"She's a good one," Asadir said.

Jeanelle nodded in the gloom. "Yeah, she is. A little lost and out of control sometimes, but she's a sweetheart."

In the distance she could see the docking bays, steel and iron, waiting.

"Tomorrow A Dream"



Through the years, the Caldari State's reigning ideology has been broadly defined by its emphasis on hard work, sacrifice, and the welfare of the collective over the welfare of the individual. Central to the Caldari mindset is the assumption that people work better when motivated by a feeling of contribution to a greater good, but even more important is the idea that people naturally gravitate toward the sphere of craft they are best suited for, as well as the position they should occupy within it. How has this philosophy been shaped over the tumultuous lifetime of the Caldari nation, though, and where does it stand today?

In the early days of Caldari-Gallente relations, when the two nations had just come into contact with each other, the somewhat unusual structure of Caldari government was explicitly set up so that no one person could wrest power from the council. The notion of individuality, so prized by the Gallente, tended to be viewed by the Caldari as little more than selfish blindness to the grander scheme of things, and was frowned upon by the vast majority of their leaders as well as the industrious masses that made up the civilian populace. After the first Gallente-Caldari war, the Chief Executive Panel – the corporate heads making up the Caldari State's ruling body – went even further with this ideology, soon enough taking their seat as polar opposites to their hated nemeses. While it may seem tempting to ascribe this to the ideological rubberbanding sometimes experienced by newly independent states, there is a great deal of historical data that suggests that even as far back as the time of the Raata-Oryioni empire thousands of years ago, the people who would later become the Caldari were already highly collectivistic in outlook and action.

For the newly-at-peace Caldari State, however – a nation bruised and bleeding from a lengthy war – things took on a different tenor. In the sudden absence of a unifying enemy, the people who at that time made up the Chief Executive Panel found themselves gradually turning their attentions to each other. Internal competition between the eight ruling corporations increased. Suggested initiatives and reforms usually served to somehow pad the coffers of the corporation that came up with them, ideally at the expense of their most direct competitors. While competence and devotion to the State were still held in overt esteem to as great a degree as ever – and, indeed, used as religiously in the nation's propaganda as they are today – the foundations these values were built on had begun to subtly slide.

As time passed, the entrenchment of those in power, as well as their fierce devotion to their internal competition, began to have trickle-down effects on the Big Eight's top tiers. Believing their own modes of governance and management preferable to whatever successors the Board of Directors would offer up, the CEOs of the megacorporations began to pull the strings behind the scenes, making sure their own protégés ascended to positions where they would take over the reins when the time came. They also made sure that key positions within the corporate hierarchies were occupied by people whose goals and opinions coincided with their own.

Thus, slowly but surely, covert dynasties began to snake their tendrils around the Caldari State's power structures.

By the time the capsuleers started making waves on the world scene, the State's hierarchies were crowded with individuals who had come by their positions through the mendacious maneuverings of well-placed superiors, and this played a significant role in the sharp economic downturn faced by the Caldari State. Each of New Eden's four major nations had suffered some form of economic setback in the wake of the ultra-rich capsuleer class's meteoric rise, but the Caldari, due to their set-in-stone mentality and reluctance to adapt, were perhaps the hardest hit. Unemployment skyrocketed. Goods and services rose in price. Imports and exports declined.

Sensing the shift in worldwide power, the Chief Executive Panel responded by cocooning themselves from the outside world and taking up isolationist policies. Diplomatic relations, never a strong part of the Caldari political skillset, became almost nonexistent. Even in the wake of such disasters as the Protein Delicacy incident (where Caldari-manufactured luncheonette foods were found to cause mental deficiencies in Gallente schoolchildren) or the Insorum incident (where a chemical compound capable of reversing the effects of one of Amarr's most relied-upon slave drugs was leaked from a Caldari biolab), the State's diplomats did little to placate those aggrieved by their mistakes. The Caldari nation was as mighty as ever, but it was hardening up from the inside out. It would take a major change to shake things up, and in YC 110 that change came in the form of a radical new leader, Tibus Heth.

Finding nepotism-spawned inefficiency all over the State, Heth instigated several reforms intended to bring Caldari back to its roots as a meritocratic society. To this end, he employed his most trusted director, Janus Bravour, to set in motion a series of initiatives that would root out those undeserving of their positions and install in their stead people who had truly earned the right to be there. With the proper gears meshing in unison, the State would once again take its rightful role as a trampling juggernaut of commercial, industrial and military might.

Heth's reforms reached into every sector of corporate activity. He began by confiscating the wealth of mid- to high-tier managers and executives all across the State and redistributing it among the lowest rungs of the workforce. He created programs that made sure people received adequate compensation for hard work, in the form of annual leave and early retirement. He greatly increased funding for education and re-education initiatives. He promoted worker summits wherein individual ingenuity was given an outlet. The main goal: to make sure that no matter which rung on the ladder a person occupies, they stand at least a fighting chance of making it to the rung above them – provided they truly deserve it.

Under the new system, social status is no obstacle to advancement. Within ten years' time, over half of the State's schools will be equipped with advanced screening methods for detecting unusual aptitude, so that those so gifted can be directed toward areas where their talent will do the most good. Institutions are being set up to give grants to armchair inventors and small business owners who never had the chance to take their ideas to a higher level. Government spies already are being disseminated among the ranks of the corporations and tasked with weeding out nepotism wherever they find it.

In the time since Heth took power a sizable number of citizens, believing the rule of a single man to contradict Caldari ideals, have left the country. The assumption among them has been that like the despots and dictators that litter history's pages he would surround himself with a power clique and leave the rest of the nation blowing in the wind, eroding the nutritious soil of cultural values that had kept the State strong throughout its existence. The nationalistic bent of his policies and his military ruthlessness have also caused a degree of alarm, prompting some citizens to question (quietly, of course) how their morality and their national identity fit together in these latest and darkest times.

In the span since Heth's inauguration, however, the turnaround in economic growth has been undeniable. Caldari have more money in their pockets. They are more secure about their retirement. People who under the old system would have found themselves forever excluded from certain positions now reside within those positions. The general feeling, on the streets and in the stations, is that for better or worse something great and grand is underway, that the previous system was ailing and outmoded, and that the New Meritocracy (as it has been dubbed by the press) is a return to form for a great nation shackled too long in the chains of favoritism. Averting their eyes from the darkness all around them, the Caldari people now for the first time in years set their sights on a brighter future.

Wild Earth



Haatakan Oiritsu - once-CEO of Kaalakiota and now deposed, in exile, on a barren snowy estate long from the action of the Caldari State politics - held a living plant in her hand, took out the sharpest knife she had, and with careful but precise motions sliced the thing open lengthwise, exposing its layers all the way to the green of its deepest, glistening core. She held the plant over a small pile of peat, squeezing out little drops from its stem. With nimble fingers she drained it dry, running her hands over every inch of its body until there was nothing left but a shredded husk.

The peat, already enriched with nutrients and chemical concoctions, had needed more. All manner of reactions were ongoing in its soil, but in order to sustain them, proper fuel was needed. Dead liquids only went so far; in the end, as was always the case, a sacrifice had been necessary to feed the hungry earth. The best nourishments for the fresh plants in this greenhouse came from the ones that had grown here before. And for every flower, there came a time for the bloom, and a time for the cut.

She had always loved being in nature, particularly the kind that lent itself to quiet, long-term observation. Haatakan had grown up in a hard family: not a rough one, and not a hand ever laid on her, but an environment where everything you did and everything you said would be remembered, and judged, and brought up if the occasion required. She had a tiny garden spot behind the house that she tended when everything got too much, and it was there she discovered that flowers were not only beautiful - one must never lose sight of the beauty in life - but how delightfully they responded to control; how carefully they must be tended and grown.

She had made herself the child's promise that one day she would be super powerful and mega rich, a million times more wealthy than the second-wealthiest man in the world, and on the day that she made it - for she surely would - she would spend the rest of her life in a garden of her own, far away from people, tending to the quietly growing plants.

That was her unit of power: a garden. Then she grew up, and she became very powerful indeed, and very rich, and she never forgot about it. When she had this place built, as much in the middle of a wilderness as she could make it without offending the people of the State, she added a greenhouse easily half the size of the entire palace. She spent most of her time there, patiently waiting for the world to catch up with her plans.

Most of the plants in the greenhouse were flowering ones. Haatakan chose one of the most beautiful - a lovely lilicae possessing a thick, stiff stem topped with a pristine, bulblike blossom - and uprooted it, placing it carefully in a temporary pot on her table. There were machines that could do this, little nanoids that would turn the earth around the roots into slippery oil, and pressure-sensitive metal arms that could then pull out the flower without dislodging a single one of its tendrils, leaves or petals. Haatakan didn't believe in those. The moment you gave your life over to automation - to any outside process, really - you invited a quiet disaster.

She had invited disaster, but it had not been quiet.

She picked up her knife. Its blade was short, like that of a scalpel, and sharp enough to cut through practically anything that lived. With the lilicae standing tall in front of her, she got to work on its flower. It had blossomed but not yet bloomed, so the petals were still closed in, like a shy maiden on her wedding night.

She put the tip of the blade against one of the petals and rested it there. It was so sharp that it began to slide in, ever so slightly. She pushed down the blade in a slanted fashion, then lifted it back up and slid it down the other way, as if carving the first two sides of a triangle. Instead of cutting the third and removing a piece from the petal, she used the tip to tease out the top part of the cut, then folded it down like a flap, leaving a little window into the center of the flower. The flap's edges curved slightly inward, and on each of them she traced a very faint line, topping off the carving with a single faint press of the knife tip to the top of the cut, leaving the tiniest of dimples.

After cleaning the knife with a purple silk cloth she did this again, to the same petal, cutting and teasing and shaping the triangular flaps until the petal looked more like a well-traversed honeycomb than anything grown out of nature. When she was finished she moved on to the next, and the next. Eventually the flower had been completely pierced and cut, and daylight shone through its gaping wounds.

Haatakan slid the knife down alongside its stem and sliced off every leaf, leaving the plant naked as day. For every tiny join where a leaf had clung to the stem, she inserted the knife tip deep into its fresh wound and gored out a small hole, removing even the final possibility of more growth. Little trickles of opaque sap ran down, over her fingers. When at last the cuts would stop bleeding, the area around them would wrinkle and change color, turning a little darker and lending the flower a marvelous, damaged hue.

It was a cruel way to create beauty. But anything this lovely could not be allowed to stand unspoiled.

At one time she was one of the world's most powerful CEOs. She ruled one of New Eden's superpowers, sharing the hot seat with seven of her countrymen. They were feared, as all good leaders must be, but Haatakan had not realized how extensively they were hated.

For the extent of her professional career she had closely followed the Caldari system of governance, where found good use for her indurate upbringing. People knew their place. Anyone who acted up - or worse, failed - would be dealt with, calmly and professionally, and whatever threat they posed to the delicate equilibrium would be eliminated.

She uprooted another plant and brought it over to the polycarb glas sink, which she had filled with water. The plant was bottom heavy, composed as it was of a thick knot of roots the size of a closed fist, from which rose single long stem with leafy sprouts, and a large, bulbous flower reminiscent of the lilicae.

Haatakan placed the plant into the sink, where it sank to the bottom, to slowly drown.

This plant, which was renowned for the ferocity with which it drained its earth, would live remarkably long underwater. It would suck in as much of its surroundings as it could, becoming bloated and heavy. While it would retain the framework of its shape until the very last, each part - the flower, the leaves, the stem and even the roots - would grow to several times its original size, engorged on the water the plant would never stop ingesting even as it died. The plant would grow large and beautiful, with a glistening sheen on its turgid surface. In time, the sheen would take on an oily nature as cellular walls began to break and release the plant's essential fluids out onto its surface.

A revolution began, one she expected to be quelled without too much trouble. She had become complacent; not weak but laggard, lumbering like a giant tired of striding over the land, no longer bothering to look where he walked, and taking the smallest of satisfaction in the panicked screams below.

If enough people showed fear, she reasoned, then she must be feared, for she saw none who seemed fearless. This, she found to her cost, did not mean they didn't exist, merely that they had the good sense not to step out

in the open. Until they did, breaking through all the walls she'd erected, and breaking everything else along the way.

In one section of her greenhouse she had a small tree, still in its pot. It was about her height, with a branchless trunk that looked weedy and pale, and a small crown of leaves that drooped in the greenhouse heat.

Its trunk was enveloped by a thin, heavily-leafed vine that looked in perfect health. This vine, which was a parasite, hung on to the tree by a million microscopic needles forced into the tree's trunk. A third of those needles would have little hooks on the end, the better to maintain their grasp; another third would be slowly and gently sucking out nutrients when they were needed; and the last third would be injecting something instead: a chemical, the likes of which had not yet been properly synthesized, that induced the tree to believe it was being fed with delicious, complex nutrients. The tree's own constant outstretching for food and nourishment would be curtailed, and with it all other processes, including the production of antibodies that might poison the parasite. So long as the tree thought it was being fed well, it didn't bother to do anything else but wait for the rest of its ever-shortening life to pass.

One of these demolition men was Tibus Heth, who rocketed into the limelight on a tornado of smoke and fire. He was a volatile man, an angry man, and Haatakan did not expect him or any of his plans to last a Caldarian day. Angry men were easily dealt with. But Heth had backing, and even when that backing seemed to disappear, he had a support system, overseen primarily by a very stable, very quiet man called Janus Bravour.

She looked in on a single large plant, one that had been growing in its large bed for quite some time. She had recently placed a number of smaller plants, all sorts of varieties, dotted around this one in close enough proximity that their roots had begun to touch it.

This plant, a particularly aggressive rosoid variant, had sensed their presence. Even though they weren't weeds and were of no immediate threat in this rich ground - which had been fortified with the hungry peat of her own creation, and seemed to enhance the aggressive properties of some of her more contentious flowers - it had begun to extend its thorns and channel all its energy into keeping off every other plant in the plot. This had left its stem shriveled, likely to break at the least little touch, and its petals so thin and weak that they were not merely translucent; Haatakan could see the thin veins in the flesh beneath the surface. If she stood there long enough she fashioned she could see the plant's vital liquids being pumped and forth, as if from a photosynthetic heart beating its last before the collapse. She would wait until it was spent, then deadhead it, and place its frail little flower with the others she kept in a small bowl in the foyer of her palace.

Janus, she thought, would have the long-term plans. He certainly seemed the antithesis of Heth, and that was dangerous, for the men who believe they know better than others - and are capable of acting on it - will eventually overtake the others' responsibilities. It was clear that Janus formed an integral part of the framework that held Tibus Heth in place. Heth himself was still the main threat to Haatakan and the other seven dispossessed CEOs, for he was the instigator and enforcer of the new State, while Janus sat quietly in the background, oiling the gears and ensuring they turned.

Until Heth made his latest move: a reorganization of the Caldari State, a return to the meritocracy they had been founded on. A bureaucratic move, no matter how heavily couched in revolutionary terms. A bold plan, clearly intended to bolster Heth's fragile standing with the State's citizens, and one that relied on something more than fire and fury to work. It needed a quiet mind to minister, lest it fail colossally.

And thus Janus Bravour became, overnight, ground zero for every revenge plan in operation.

These two plants, now, had been growing for a while, but not as long as one might imagine if one looked at their towering stems.

Haatakan stroked her fingers over them. Each was nearly as tall as a small tree. She'd had to put their shared pot down on the ground. They were rare, small vitis variants, not inclined to climb walls or do much at all unless given the right impetus.

All that was needed, really, was another plant of the exact same sort. The vine's nature was to rise over its surroundings, and when something began to claim its place, it would do its utmost to reassert its dominance. Not only did it nearly triple its own growth rate, but it would attempt to entwine itself around its rival, keeping it down and stealing a rise on its laurels. If the rival was another vine, it would do the same; and if the two were

carefully trimmed and guided, they would encircle each other like strands of DNA, rising to the ceiling in a quiet ballet of mutual competition until, at last, they died from exhaustion. Their lifeless stalks would remain, as monuments to their folly, and with care could be preserved, by drying and lamination, still stuck in each other's snake embrace until the end of time.

Haatakan had watched the news. Janus Bravour had suddenly been taken ill and was now in hospital, in some manner of serious condition.

Truth be told, she had been neglecting this greenhouse for months. After Tibus Heth had come in and thrown her out into the cold, she'd spent a lot of her time brooding in her palace. She was resigned to staying here. The terms of Heth's dictated that her safety was guaranteed only on her own grounds. If she left and headed to the metropolis of Khyrth, the citizens would recognize and kill her; and if she fled into the forest, Heth's own agents would either remove her from this earth, or the cold and the woods would simply swallow her whole.

So she had retreated to her ivory tower, and remained there inert, staring at the walls. Her initial rage had subsided and given way to resigned depression, bringing back memories of all those years ago when she'd been at the mercy of other forces, paternal in name but dictatorial in nature, and had wished nothing more than to be free of them. The gardens had taught her otherwise - freedom was achieved by working around your restraints, for if you waited for them to be removed, you were merely asking for another master of your fate to step forth - but she ignored its lessons, and let herself grind to a standstill.

Janus's fate, whatever it truly was, had changed that. The wheels moved again. Heth was alone and unsupported. Despite the man's volatility, he was a brilliant military strategist; and despite his avowed morality he was, she believed, an unscrupulous one. A military man would take extreme measures to conquer his enemies; so long as his cause, or his belief in that cause, remained just and honest, the ethics and justifiability of his methods did not matter.

Heth understood power on a visceral level, far more so than most of the people he had deposed. As much as she despised him, she could not deny this fact. Right now, with Janus out of the picture and the CEOs mounting their subsequent counter-revolution, he desperately needed someone who knew the intricacies of the highest political level in State and was willing to do what was necessary to achieve her goals; someone who had her hands on the strings and was willing to pull them.

The speakers in the greenhouse rang out with a long, sonorous note.

She had a guest.

A single fruit hung like a pendulum from a drooping branch of the plant. The fruit was ripe, ready for picking. It was beautiful, also, and stood in stark contrast to the plant that had born it, whose body was tired and worn.

This one plant could and had been induced to put all of its effort into the fruit of its creation, diverting every nutrient and scrap of energy it picked up through its questing roots and channeling them directly into the soft, soft pulp. Once the fruit was ready, the plant would likely die.

Haatakan grabbed it on her way out and took a juicy bite.

Her guest held a small monitor on which Tibus Heth's face was visible. Haatakan ignored him and focused on the woman who had entered her palace.

"I know you," Haatakan said.

"Indeed you do," Tibus Heth said through his monitor. "She's the one who brought you here."

"Last time I saw you, I was having terms dictated to me," Haatakan said to the woman. "You asked me if I knew how much the people hated me. And you said that if I tried to escape, into the woods, I would be lost forever." She walked up close to the woman and was pleased to see the merest glint of sweat in her combed-back hair. "People do get lost forever here, you know. People who chose the wrong road."

"Janus Bravour is dead," Tibus Heth said from waist level. Haatakan stepped back and looked at him at last.

"I know," she said. "And now you're going to fall."

"Not if you can help it." Tibus leaned in closer on the screen. "I need your help, Ms. Oiritsu." "

"You, the destroyer of the State, need the help of an old lady out in the country? My goodness, how the mighty have fallen."

"The other megacorps are conspiring against me. All seven of them. But not you. I've had my agents thoroughly vet every one of you people, and Kaalakiota, in which you still have your witchy little tendrils, stayed out of the whole thing. Why?"

"For the same reason I imagine you sent this particular messenger to me. We owe our allegiance to a cause, and that cause is ourselves and our view of the world. Everything else is secondary. And every alliance is an opportunity of chance, nothing more."

"I work for the State," Heth said.

"Funny. I used to say the same thing, when I was on top."

"So you refuse? You want SuVee and the rest to rise again?"

"Certainly not. There is no reason for those idiots to regasp the reins of power. But you need to understand, Heth, that I don't see any pressing reason to help you stay on top. I will still be stuck here, tending to my plants, watching you take this great State to pieces."

"We can work out the terms. You didn't make it this far without an ability to negotiate," Heth said. He leaned back from the screen, and Haatakan saw he was sitting in a chair, likely in the office he'd taken from one of the CEOs. "I think you see plenty of reason to make this happen. I think you're lying, and that you're snapping at the chance."

Haatakan leaned her head to one side. "Do you think I killed Janus?" she said.

The question did not seem to catch Heth off guard, which surprised her. "In all honesty?" he said. "I don't know. You might have. If I know you and your scheming ways, this conversation is merely a point in a long, branching plan you'll have made, one that ends with you being back in power to some degree. I'm alright with that. I've dealt with less trustworthy people than you."

She gave him a long look. At last she said, "We might be able to make something out of this."

Heth grinned, and she grinned back, like two carnivores passing by over a meal.

She had been planning, ever since Janus died. And her renewed time in the greenhouse had taught her to mix that roaring hunger for power that resided in her deepest, unconscious core with the learned quietness of thought that floated up in her conscious mind.

"How would you do this, if you manage it at all?" Heth asked.

There would be seven forces to neutralize, each one of which had some sort of vice. Everyone had a vice. It was to the eternal frustration of Haatakan's enemies that hers was merely a twisted sort of gardening.

You could plan with groups of people, or with the currents passing through society - abstract plans, often, but workable - but individuals were a different matter. Especially mercurial ones such as Heth, who remained a mystery to her. The best option with those kinds of people was to get close and stay close. Study. Presumption had cast her here, and understanding would eventually get her out. That, and patience.

But the others, whom she'd known for so long; they were no mystery. They could be worked on. She'd been practicing.

"Leave it to me," she said, reached out and turned off the screen. She returned her gaze to the Provist woman holding the dead monitor, whose eyes were glazed over with utter dread. "Now, my dear. We're going to have to deal with you."

From a small pocket at the back of her dress, she withdrew the little knife with the very sharp blade, and concealed it in her hand.

There was a large compost heap that needed feeding, and flowers that needed their nutrients. One had to plan for the future.

And, in fact, all her practice in the greenhouse had done more than prepare her for the oncoming little wars. She felt as if she had been engaging in self-purification, cutting away the dead limbs that had grown out of the trunk of her old self. She was cleansing herself and casting off the refuse - not her sins, for those follow as surely as age, but the old mindsets and assumptions - and preparing for a new chapter of her life. To bloom, in this wild new earth.

The Part Where I Play the Devil



Let me tell you about the mad man and the wonders he performs.

My name is Alder Brenean. I am one of the aides to His Royal Highness, an Heir to the throne of the Amarr Empire, beloved charge and leader of his fiefdom, Aritcio Kor-Azor.

I have not been doing this job for long and already it is a marvel beyond anything I had imagined. I do not sleep much. I eat at irregular hours. I hold conversations - brief, fleeting words, and of a servile nature, but still spoken out loud and answered - with men who operate at the highest level of government, and with men who operate only in the shadows.

My lord has not always been loved. There was a time where he was considered merely a shrewd politician, fitter to rise than to rule. There was also a time where he had ruled so terribly, and done such awful things, that the people rose against him. A religious man intervened, a Speaker of Truths, and he saved my lord, but for such a price that I cannot speak of.

When he returned to his duties he was a new man. He was also a kind man, one who thought very hard about the lives of his subjects and how to better them. He has been on that mission ever since: To improve the lives of the people who serve him and whom, he strongly emphasizes, he serves in turn.

Part of that rejuvenation was to bring on a new group of people, ones who could help him rule his heirdom in the most humane, efficient way possible. I am one of his new recruits. I took my exams, and without divulging how I did on them, I can attest that I did not fail in my duties.

When I was interviewed the lord asked me whether I was faithful. I said I was. He asked me whether I was faithful to the people, the ruler, or my lord God. I said that as far as I was concerned, these three were indistinguishable. He smiled, for the first time in our interview. A day later I was brought on.

One of the ongoing missions begun by my lord is to travel around his kingdom, both to familiarize himself with his people - and them with him - and to ensure their lives meet the standards he has set for a Kor-Azor person. This applies equally to Holder and Commoner. It even extends to slaves, whom my lord believes are no less worthy, in their way, than the people they serve. In this he is assisted by a cadre of able people among whom I proudly count myself. I am trusted with secrets, and I believe my lord sees something in me that I may not see myself, for he routinely has me on hand in meetings of a most delicate nature. He does not ask my opinion, but

he does enquire of my analysis on certain court matters. I suspect he may find my perspective of some use, unfettered as it is by actual experience with political intrigue.

Our agents had determined that the subjects on a particular planet in my lord's kingdom were ... not fomenting rebellion or anything of that sort, but certainly murmuring in increasing unrest. This had not, our agents stressed, been reported nor acknowledged in any official capacity, and thus my lord would have to be careful of political repercussions if he were to present himself as a peacemaker.

The main problem with this planet, they explained - and one of the factors in the unrest of its people - was the political machinations inherent in its rule. The people were governed by several lords - Holders all, of course - each of whom in turn owed their allegiance to a continental overseer. Those overlords served under a planetary representative, who in turn filed regular reports directly to my lord and master. We noted that in his recent reports there had been no mention of any trouble.

This setup of governance was not the typical one in our Empire, and had been put in place long before my lord's ascension to heirdom. Not only was it tied down with strings that would prove costly to cut, but the planet's economy was so enmeshed in labyrinthine pacts by the ruling body that were my lord to intervene in a lawful and justifiable way, it would be a long time before we could even hope to wrest control of the planet over to us. This struck me as a strange state of affairs, but my lord explained that it was in fact a common one, and that the Heirs, even with their ecclesial authority, did not have as much secular power as they liked to pretend. He added that despite this state of affairs and our agents' reports of planetary issues, we should not necessarily assume that there would be trouble. Many of the most highly complex, politically sensitive problems of our age could be solved with a simple, elegant solution that more often than not did not tackle the problem head-on, but instead caused it to cease to exist. All one needed to do was find the right angle, and to act decisively, with the solution clear in one's mind. Never waver, he said, once you know what you need to do, and never lose heart.

We arrived in terrible weather. The space elevators, secure thought they might be, made me nauseous. It wasn't merely the travel - though the occasional sense of sideways pressure never failed to remind me that we were swaying in midair halfway between the earth and the stars - but the idea of traveling back from the skies and down to solid ground. There are people, and I know many of them, who prefer to stay on solid ground all their lives, making it the bedrock of their faith. I cannot do this. To me, ascension is literal; I feel that to be closer to God, Man needs to rise to meet Him. For some this might be a metaphysical ascension, for others a physical one. But to descend again, into a strange place where I would meet people who lived their entire lives out of preference under what they saw as a closed-off, threatening, solid metal sky - that descent would truly put me among strangers to my faith.

My lord arrived to great fanfare, none of it of his own making. Speeches were expected and given, and we took a few days merely to travel between areas, visiting different locales and gauging the crowds' reactions to my lord's presence as much as his words. It became clear, through the murmurs and our hushed listening, that they did not want him here. They were receptive to his presence, which sounds contradictory to their standoffish reception but was not a surprise. To them he did not represent hope - and it was clear these people needed more hope - but merely another leadership figure in a long line that grew ever more threatening and unpopular the higher up they looked at it; and the fact that he was speaking to them with a message of positivity merely made him a novelty. Or, in some of the more hostile areas, a politician and a liar.

Nevertheless we sensed an openness, a subdued willingness to hear what he had to say. The people turned up in droves, and as much as they might not believe in my lord's words or what he stood for, they listened attentively to what he said.

I must add that the continental overseers did not quite follow suit. For every word of praise or support my lord spoke to the masses, the leaders, in turn, spoke a subtly negative one of stilted progress; or, even worse, they spoke not at all. Before too long it had become clear that they were very happy with this situation and had no intention of allowing my lord - the presumption these people had! - of allowing my lord to intervene, no matter how unstable and unpleasant the life on this planet had become for the poor commoners.

Thus the first few days and nights passed. I prayed in the evenings while my lord met with his private councilors. Many of them arrived at his quarters, spoke briefly, then left for parts unknown.

Eventually he knocked on my door and informed me that the next part of our journey here would commence. The time for speeches was over and the time for inspection had begun. If I had not known my lord's ways as well as I do, I would have thought of him in much the same terms as the poor, earth-bound people on this planet: As a politician, who, having spread his prattle, now intended to make a few symbolic appearances in mock fellowship with the locals. It was a rote item of schedule for many politicians in all parts of the world.

My lord, however, had his own reasons for ambling down this well-trodden path. The public appearances required neither his presence of mind nor his oratory faculties. He could attend, no matter how tired and worn, and have the brunt of the effort undertaken by those he was visiting. And at night, when no one saw, he could undertake the true purpose of this part of our mission.

The true measure of a people is not the attitude they have towards their leaders or visiting dignitaries, no more than you can judge children by how they speak to their parents or guests of the house. Those whose minds represent the truth of their selves will have the sense to keep up their masks at all times, or at least maintain proper decorum, and those who cannot even do that are usually too crazy to be useful as barometers of temper and mood. If you want to see how children truly feel, don't look at the way they behave towards their parents; spy on them and find out how they treat their siblings. You may have to wait until there is a crisis, something that puts pressure on the children to interact with each other, but then you'll surely see it: Who pushes their brothers into a corner, and who embraces them.

Our people went out into the night to find out these things, and my lord did the same.

I can not think of any politician or ruler who does this. Even if they tried, I cannot imagine any who could do it to their advantage. It takes an extraordinary degree of precision, finesse, insight and ability to react to go out there into the open and be amongst people as if they were your own.

They would come in during the mornings, tired and worn, and confer with each other on the night's progress. My lord wore his protective gear, of course; morph fields that blocked him from sight and identification, and permeation-proof lightweight armor that would protect him from direct assault. He remained partially vulnerable to natural disasters - floods, fires and building collapses - but he took care with those, he said, and did not put himself at undue risk. My lord routinely did this on the trips he went on, and while I will admit that at first it gave me grave suspicions - I have never quite trusted those stories of high-borns going out in disguise among the public, suspecting as I do that their disguises were highly transparent and that their social explorations were carefully steered by their retinue - I soon noted that he had a skill for it, and a Commoner's instincts for survival, that served him well. He had never been found out.

I had always had my suspicions about my lord's nightly endeavors, and that they might be about more than merely sizing up the temperament of the local populace, but I was shocked when I saw him stumble in one morning, leaning against walls and clearly having a difficult time with movement. When I asked him whether I could be of assistance, he let out a little laugh and asked me to help him out of his armor. I did, and gasped when I saw his back.

Something had fallen on him, hard enough to rupture the armor's defenses, and it would likely have left bruises had there been any unblemished skin to affect. My lord's back was burnt and scarred, as if he had walked through the hellfires themselves. I asked whether he needed the services of a doctor, at which he let out a wheezing laugh and declined my offer. He had, he said, suffered the services of the doctors in the past. These days he preferred to let his own body rebuild itself

His hands and feet were sore, too, reddened and worn, but the gloves and boots he'd worn had luckily taken most of the brunt. They were gone, he said, their tatters left somewhere on the streets of this strange earth.

He did not explain the burns, but merely said they had taught him all he needed to know about inhabitants on this planet. They were not a distant or rebellious people, he added, but they needed a proper rallying cry, along with someone they could trust to shout it from above.

I did check the next morning's news and discovered there had been a massive fire the night before. Volunteers had arrived from all over in an attempt to extinguish it and save innocent people from harm. Pursuant to this I combed through any available articles for a mention of mysterious strangers, or a vision of some blurred corner in a picture of the fire, but found none.

Some might have felt he was wasting his time - not in saving people, which is never a waste, but in spending his time among them like this. But he has told me often that the big picture is made out of many small details. You must be among your own people, he says. You must. If you lose that connection, you stand to lose so much more.

He had his dreams that night; the ones where he screams. But in the morning he was very calm.

The penultimate part of our journey was a meeting with its planetary leader. As I explained, the economic and political situations on this planet were very much intertwined. Old independence agreements, most of a financial bent, had held off any direct changes brought from the outside, while the extremely complex interplay between various internal forces on the planet meant there was no way for my lord or anyone else even to squeeze in among the cracks as a private investor and start working any change in that manner. The intermediary continental leaders had given us no support. Unless we received backing from the planetary representative, we were going to have a hard time enacting any change in this place, no matter how positive.

The representative had invited us to his office, at the penthouse on one of the tallest buildings on the planet, but

my lord politely declined the offer. Instead he asked that the meeting be held in his own quarters, which had been furnished with his personal belongings and were spacious enough to hold a platoon of soldiers. The representative was quick to accept this counteroffer, sending us a brief acknowledgment to that effect. I suggested to my lord that the man was eager to see us gone from here, and he nodded, adding that before this happened, changes would have to be enacted. He asked that I remain in the meeting as a secretary of events and a representative. When I enquired whether it would not behoove my lord to present a show of strength - a small cadre of stronger men to better face off the team our representative was likely to bring - he gave me a brief and not very humorous smile, and said that if his suspicions about the man and his persons were correct, he would not be bringing anyone at all.

I could scarcely imagine anyone insulting my lord like that, but I agreed to his wishes.

Shortly before the visit I went through the room to ensure nothing was out of place. I aligned my lord's copies of the Pax Amarria, and his selections of ancient scriptures. The banners were hung in the appropriate order, while the ceremonial weapons were kept, at my lord's request, well at the back. Subtly hidden among them was the Khumaak, a weapon not many Amarrians would dare keep in their possession. I had always had my own sentiments about my lord's reasons for keeping a copy of this bloodied relic among the more proper holy ones of our own people, but what happened later that evening cast its presence in a new and disconcerting light.

The administrator came in and was immediately hostile to my lord's suggestions. He said, in response to my lord's worries on the increased instability in various regions, that he did not intend to let anything disturb his rule of this planet. Leaving aside the dictatorial attitude reflected in that comment, it was a vicious and grossly inappropriate jab at my lord's attempts to improve the life of his constituents. I had seen some of the intermediate members of the heirdom act like this after my lord returned to his duties, though thankfully they were growing ever rarer.

My lord asked if the governor simply intended to quell any opposition from the commoners, and the governor said that he would. When my lord added that the Caldari governing board had thought the same, and that it had not turned out so well for them, the governor grew visibly flustered. He cast me a look - I had sat in a corner of the office and barely been noticed by the man - that seemed to imply I was responsible for my lord's approach, as if I were one of the poor Commoners he ruled and clearly disdained.

The governor told my lord that, in all honesty, life on this planet was going to continue unaltered, and that while my lord's benevolent probings - he actually used those words - were certainly laudable and guaranteed to carry favor with our newly elected Empress, they were far removed from the political reality of the world this governor ruled. There would be no change while he was in office, and given his political ties with others on this planet, there would be no way that my lord could attempt to oust him, no matter how many of those filthy little people - that language again - he brought to bear.

I was speechless by the man's audacity. My lord, on the other hand, calmly got up, walked over to the governor and, smiling wide, extended his hand. It took the governor a few moments before he extended his own and smiled back. My lord said that the situation was clear and that he truly did appreciate the situation: That as long as the governor was in power, no matter what instability reigned, things would go on as before. He understood this, he said.

The governor made as if to speak, but my lord continued, saying that how unfortunate it was to have any unrest, tend as it did to spiral completely out of control. He added that despite this, and despite the fact that this unrest, once it did spiral out of control, would inevitably end up at the shores of his own royal offices, he did understand the governor's way of thinking. After all, he said at last, he had once held much the same viewpoint.

The governor fairly yanked his hand out of my lord's grasp, but maintained his smile.

My lord turned to me and politely asked me to leave.

I was surprised by this, but said nothing and got up from my chair. I walked quietly by the walls and towards the exit. My lord followed and met me at the doors, opening them for me. I gave him a quizzical look

"This is the part where I play the Devil," he said, with such a mixture of regret and relief as I have never heard from a man.

He saw me through and closed the doors after me.

Not knowing what else to do, I stood outside the room, waiting for the meeting to be over. I did not spy or eavesdrop; I could not have even if I had tried, for the walls and the doors were made of thick material. After a brief while, though, I heard raised voices, mostly from the governor. The voices rose until one of them became a shout. It was punctured by several muffled thuds, rising to a near-shriek, before falling quiet altogether.

The door opened a crack, and when I saw my lord's face peer through, I let out a long exhale that I had not even realized I'd been holding in. His hair glistened with sweat, though he seemed to have thoroughly wiped it off his face; and his eyes were wide open. He asked me to call up certain members of his retinue, for he had something

they needed to take care of.

This I did. I did not mention to them or anyone else that I had seen the Khumaak lying on the ground behind my lord.

The day after, I saw a glut of news reports, all of them detailing the governor's disappearance. It seemed that his p.v. had malfunctioned while in mid-flight and crashed into the ocean, hours before his scheduled meeting with my lord. The news included a quote from Heir Aritcio Kor-Azor where he exclaimed not only his profound sadness over the loss of this great man, but his disappointment that their meeting on the political and economical future of the planet had not taken place. The papers went on to quote my lord in that he hoped he could still hold meetings with the various overseers of individual continental entities, and that these meetings could conclude with a better outcome than this terrible, terrible occurrence.

When my lord embarked on the last series of journeys over this strange earth, his speeches received a much better reaction from the workforce. This might have been helped by recent concessions announced by the continental leaders, who had decided to embark on massive audits of commoner health, safety and economic troubles. Unfortunately, this sudden development meant they were all too busy to meet with my lord, but he took it with his usual good humor, and we started preparing for our departure.

As we were travelling back up to the waiting ship, in that hellish elevator, my lord turned to me and said that the lives of everyone on this planet would be improved. He asked if I was happy with this.

I understood the question that he had asked, and the one he had not. I said that yes, I was.

He smiled and said that was good; for he wanted everyone to be happy.

I believed him.

We rose to the skies.

Beasts of the Field



The scene is a bar in the Great Wildlands, at the outskirts of Minmatar space. It is very late at night.

A recent war in New Eden has spurred the three lost Minmatar tribes to return home. The Thukkers, wanderers of space, have been invited to rejoin the Republic, and are preparing for their section of space to become an autonomous part of the Minmatar collective. The Nefantar, also known as the Ammatars, who were thought to have been traitors against their own people in an older war, were revealed as protectors and invited back after their homeworld was ravaged. The Starkmanir, once thought extinct but kept alive through the good grace of the Nefantar, were rescued and offered to rejoin their people.

It is a time of war, and integration of these three tribes has temporarily taken a back seat to the efforts on the front lines. In the meanwhile, refugees and hopefuls from the tribes have situated themselves in refugee stations such as this one, waiting for permission, visas, housing and jobs in Minmatar space. The bar is in the middle of one of those refugee areas.

SISPUR, a Nefantar, sits at his table, drinking. ANNES, a Starkmanir, enters, gets a beer from the bartender, looks around at the empty hall, and eventually goes over to SISPUR's table, pulling up a chair.

ANNES

This free?

SISPUR

Sure.

ANNES sits.

ANNES

Didn't think anyone else would be here. Most everyone is at home, asleep.

SISPUR

Most everyone clearly doesn't have any worries about uprooting from their home, taking whatever stuff they could carry and plonking it down here while they wait to hear if the homeland will take them in at last.

ANNES

It'll take us in, there's no doubt about that. You know it as well as I do.

SISPUR takes a long sip from his drink.

SISPUR

Yeah, I guess I do. But I hate the waiting. I had a life back on Ammatar, sad as it was. I was appreciated in my own way. I don't like waiting to be taken into a place where I'm not appreciated, much as I want to get back.

TRIAT, a Thukker man, enters the bar, grabs a drink and sits down at the same table without a word.

TRIAT

How's it going?

ANNES and SISPUR look at him wordlessly.

TRIAT

Pretty dead here tonight. Thought I was the only one alive.

TRIAT laughs.

TRIAT

So what you guys doing up here so late? You selling?

TRIAT looks at the two stone faces, then laughs again.

TRIAT

Nevermind. Anyone catch the game recently?

TRIAT drains his glass, burps and waves at the bartender.

TRIAT

Hey! Fill-up!

SISPUR, in a frosty tone

So, is this the part where you show us your tattoos?

ANNES

Or puke all over the table, maybe?

TRIAT stares at them. The bartender comes over and fills his glass. There is a tense moment; then TRIAT rubs his face with his hands, sighs and chuckles a little.

TRIAT

Not coming off too well, am I?

SISPUR

I've seen Fedos with better personality, really.

ANNES

But you're welcome to join us, if you like. Not as if there's anything else to do right now.

TRIAT

Sorry, guys. I've been hanging out with the thuks too much. I'm Triat.

SISPUR

Sispur.

ANNES

Annes.

SISPUR

I'm the local traitor, and Annes here's the local revolution symbol, and we were just talking about how our motherland seems to want us here and gone all at the same time. What's keeping you up this time of night?

TRIAT leans back in his chair and gives this proper thought.

TRIAT

The same, I guess. I dunno if you know how we live, travelling through space and selling our stuff, but there isn't as much insecurity as you might think. If you're going to eke out some kind of existence up here, you need to be real good at being proactive, finding your own sources of raw material and working your own deals.

ANNES

And you think rejoining the Republic will damage that.

TRIAT

Well, if all that independence is completely taken away, and everything is out of your hands, you're going to get uncomfortable. Stop sleeping, maybe. Drink instead and act like a fool.

SISPUR

But you guys are joining up by choice, or at least you voted to have the Wildlands turn into some quasi-esque part of Republic space. You all retain your holdings and your independence. It doesn't seem like your life has to change that much.

ANNES

I don't think that's what he's after.

SISPUR

Oh?

ANNES

I think he's one of the Thukkers who's actually moving house, into the Republic

TRIAT nods.

TRIAT

There were votes, and talk of independence, but the writing really is on the wall for anyone not too stupid to read it. The Republic is going to go through an upswing. And as much as we Thukkers brag about living on the edge, we do spend a lot more time than we'd ever admit simply trying not to look down.

ANNES

So you want safety.

TRIAT looks a little hurt at the comment.

TRIAT

I think it'd be nice simply to have a home again. Some base of operations where I can solidify, get my act together, and rely on tomorrow being the same as today. Somewhere that doesn't tremble as it moves. Or move at all, come to that.

SISPUR

And it looks like that's about to happen. So why're you awake, and drinking?

TRIAT

Because I think too much. Like I said, you stay proactive, always looking for connections and deals, which is about the same as looking for a way you can crowbar yourself into someone else's business. It's about being dominant. And that's impossible in this life I have now, when I'm waiting for some outside system to lay down

the law for me.

TRIAT takes a drink

TRIAT

But it's better than that dead uncertainty. It has to be. How is it with you guys?

SISPUR

I'm pretty certain.

TRIAT

That's good.

SISPUR

I'm certain I'm going to be treated like crap over there.

TRIAT

Really?

SISPUR

Sure.

TRIAT

I thought you guys were heroes.

TRIAT points his glass at ANNES

TRIAT

For saving your asses. No offence.

ANNES smiles.

SISPUR

That was only a small group of people. The rest of us ...

SISPUR takes a deep breath.

SISPUR

The rest of us just tried to get stuff done the best we could. Live our lives and not leave anyone off any worse than we had to. We weren't traitors of the Minmatar cause, any more than we were saviors of the Starkmanir.

TRIAT

But people treat you that way.

SISPUR

Either or, yes. Scum of the earth or savior of the people. We're not humans in their eyes, we're symbols.

ANNES

No, I think we're the symbols.

SISPUR

Well, all right. True. Then we're the mirrors. People use us to see what's inside themselves. If they want to see Minmatar having been betrayed, ruined and left in tatters, then that's what we are to them. If they want everything to have worked out, with the saviors of the slaves and all that, then that's what we helped accomplish. They externalize their feelings on us.

TRIAT

We've had some of that, too. But we're used to people ragging on us. Comes with being a merchant.

ANNES

We're not used to it at all. I don't know what we're used to. I don't even know what we are.

TRIAT

People seem to think you're simpletons, for the most part.

ANNES

What do you think?

TRIAT takes a sip from his drink

TRIAT

I think you know when to be quiet, which is a lot more important than most people realize.

ANNES nods to SISPUR.

ANNES

I don't want to be accepted back to the fold.

ANNES nods to TRIAT.

ANNES

I don't even want to find a new home. I want my old home back. It wasn't an easy life, but it wasn't bad, either. It was just a life.

SISPUR

Half a life, some might say. And thanks to us - or despite us - you're now being brought into the full glory of what you can be.

ANNES

Apparently those people know me better than I know myself. You know what's funny? Those very same people are treating us Starkmanir like the beasts of the field.

ANNES lifts his glass close to SISPUR, and stares at him through it, wide-eyed.

ANNES

They'll go up to us and say, "THIS ... IS CALLED ... A KHUMAAK. CAN YOU SAY KHUMAAK?"

ANNES lowers the glass again, leans back and takes a sip.

ANNES

Apparently we're budding geniuses and slobbering retards all at the same time.

TRIAT

And you were taken from slavery and left floating in space, so now there's a huge amount of insecurity brewing in your ranks.

ANNES

Yeah. Because we really don't want to be ungrateful. Really, we don't. But we've suddenly had this new identity thrust on us, and have no idea who we are anymore. Just the same as you guys-

ANNES nods to SISPUR

ANNES

-and now we're just ... there. Like figures carved out of wood.

TRIAT raises his glass

TRIAT

Beasts of the field, man.

TRIAT, ANNES and SISPUR clink their glasses together. ANNES starts to say something, then stops.

ANNES

This ... drunken woman came up to me the other day. Thoroughly, thoroughly drunk. It was in some bar, before I was transferred to this camp. I was on my own, minding my own business when she said to me, way too loudly, that she wanted to take me home and have sex with me.

TRIAT and SISPUR's eyes go wide. TRIAT takes a sip of his beer to cover his surprise.

ANNES

She said she'd never done it with a Starkie

TRIAT chokes on his beer.

ANNES

Hey, you okay?

TRIAT nods and takes a moment to regain his composure, with ANNES looking on concernedly.

TRIAT

Uh, how'd you get out of that one?

ANNES smiles faintly and looks at the air.

ANNES

Who says I did?

TRIAT and SISPUR fall quiet.

ANNES

It wasn't that great. She had nice breasts, though.

TRIAT and SISPUR remain quiet.

ANNES laughs.

ANNES

What? You guys think I'm backwards, too? Come on.

TRIAT takes a small sip of his beer.

TRIAT

No, you're right. I guess we're all human.

SISPUR

And that's really it, isn't it? I mean, on paper my choice was either to leave or to remain in a politically unstable shithole. But even if it wasn't, I can't say that I'd still have stayed behind.

TRIAT

Even if you're being treated like you shouldn't be here? Or that you should be grateful? It's the last chance to turn around, you know. You could join up with the Gallente. They love us.

SISPUR

Even despite all that, no. I still want to go in. I don't know anybody in Minmatar space, and I'm certainly reminded of that on a regular basis, but I still feel like I know, if not the people, then the nation itself. You know?

TRIAT nods to ANNES and grins

TRIAT

He's certainly gotten to know the people.

ANNES

That one occasion aside, I don't even have the background that you guys have. All I've ever known is that I was destined to live in Ammatar space, growing up as part of a system that had little to do with the Minmatar and everything to do with the Amarr. And to be honest, even if I'm treated like a freak, for the first time in my life I feel like I'm somewhere I belong. It's not that I think these people wanted me in their lives, but it's ... it's clear they needed something. There was a gap, there was this dark, raw opening where the people of my tribe were torn from the body of the Minmatar all those years ago, and the remainder of that body cannot rest until we're rejoined. If there's an adjustment period, and there will be, and if there's pain, and there'll certainly be plenty of that before we start to heal at last, then that's how it has to be. I have to accept that, and play my part in the healing the best I can.

ANNES looks at TRIAT

ANNES

Even if you left of your own accord - as a nation, I mean - and although you personally may be returning for your own reasons, I think you're partly brought back by the same force that pulled me in.

TRIAT

By being part of something greater? Yeah. Could be right. Some greater whole. Something outside ourselves.

SISPUR

And something we can be proud of, something that stands for the same things we do as individuals.

ANNES

And lets us stand for something, not merely what we represent but who we are.

TRIAT raises his glass, as does SISPUR and ANNES

ALL say, To Matar!

Under the Sea, the City



My father...

... well, never mind.

The Gallentean smiled when I hit him. I had him up against a wall, hands pinned by two other Provs, and I'd already cracked his ribs and beaten out a few teeth. He smiled. It wasn't that rictus, either, the one where they're in so much pain their faces tense all up.

"Enjoying this, eh?" one Prov said.

"Shut up," I said. I didn't like baiting, never had. What you gave the mark was clarity, a purpose to his pain. You made him understand, yes, that you enjoyed this and would gladly do it forever unless he made it stop, but that he could make it stop, too. Not right away, necessarily, but if he changed and found himself a new focus in life, there would be hope. The mark could never be made to feel like the entire thing was merely a heartless joke.

He was exhausted and his head lolled down. I put my hands under his chin, lifted it back up so he'd look me in the eyes.

"Why did you do those things?" I said. "We're here to stay. You're not changing that. All you're doing is making trouble." I raised my other hand and hit him hard in the solar plexus. Air and blood gushed out of his mouth. I would have to clean the jacket before going on the day shift tomorrow.

This time he lifted his head of his own accord. And he smiled again. One eye swollen shut, mouth a bloody mess. There was no defiance in that smile, none of that stupid attitude you get from someone who's trying to ride the pain. No taunting, that weapon of the weak and powerless. He was somewhere else already and I hadn't put him there.

"Let him go," I said.

The Provs were stunned. I sighed, and wondered - and not for the first time - where the hell the force had gotten these guys.

"Next person goes deaf gets twelve weeks on the tundras," I said.

They dropped him like a bag of rocks.

We left him there, coughing blood on the scuffed snow.

I was twelve when I was accepted into the Caldari Army. I was strong for my age and I had long since learned what the world did to people.

It wasn't running away, though it was an escape. I had learned many things and one of them was patience. So I trained hard and I studied as much as I possibly could, though I knew that I'd never go as far as I'd like. What mattered to me was serving the State.

Some people, when they joined, seemed to have nothing to do but complain. Not loudly, and sometimes not even in words, but they resented their place and easily forgot just how much the army had done for them. It took us in, all of us, no matter how broken we were. It forgave, in its fashion. It gave rules and discipline, which was nothing new, but it never strayed from them, and that amazed me. If you screwed up, you paid the price and were usually allowed to carry on, and if you kept yourself in line you were left alone. You did what you were told.

I couldn't bear the standard, not always. I lost my temper. Something in me needed to lash out at the world. What I got from the army wasn't a cure - the anger was a part of me that couldn't die without leaving me diminished - but an environment where I could take it to the edge without jumping off. I could be myself as much as was possible without the threat of failure.

So while I didn't move upwards I crawled a slanted sideways path, rising through persistence rather than brains or kissing ass. That was all right. I accepted that. And when the time came they needed people to take care of our new world - this smoking crater of a homeland, this iceworld they called Caldari Prime - they didn't come to the ones who had brains, for brains go remarkably soft on frozen tundras, and they didn't come to the ass-kissers, for their lips would've chapped in the cold. They came to the ones who knew damn well how to survive.

Morning after, and another meeting of the city overseers. I paid the best attention I could, but I was still tired from last night's dark round and kept zoning out.

I did appreciate the necessity of these meetings. We needed to hold an entire planet using a force half staffed with thugs. Equal measures of peacekeeping and intimidation had kept a lid on the angrier locals - I took an active part in these - but that wouldn't be enough for the average man on the street. Life had to be kept going, rolling on from one day to the next. It was a supreme irony that in a society whose governance had been torn from the hands of one power by another, our greatest efforts went into convincing people that nothing much had changed. They needed to stay indoors late at night, and luxuries had been restricted, but this was nothing new on a planet made of ice. What they really needed was to be left alone, to not be reminded of how much had changed now that they seemed to be settling into some kind of a groove.

So we had evacuated one of their underwater cities, a massive place encased in a polyglas dome, and we had taken all the major troublemakers - the ones whose absence would be less a diplomatic problem than their continued presence - and we had put them down under.

Nobody knew what went on in that place. There were plenty of guesses, and everyone knew someone who claimed insider info, but talking about it did little more than generate rumors. The higher-ups didn't mind. We'd even subtly been given leave to spread some rumors of our own. I think the way they figured it, the more people talked and worried about that place, the less of a risk that any of the locals would want to go there. We already had hundreds of thousands, but the dome could room millions.

We were scrolling through the list of new recruits - we call them 'recruits' because it sounds so much better than 'abductees' - when a face caught my attention. It wasn't bruised and had a conspicuously full mouth of teeth, but it was unmistakably the man I'd been working on the night before.

"Stop, hold, wait a sec," I said. "What'd this one do?"

The presenter checked his records and listed a series of crimes against the State, some more severe or ideologically motivated than others. Many of them were familiar - were, indeed, the reason we'd seen fit to have our little talk with him - but there was a spate of offences that absolutely marked him for down under and which I had nevertheless missed when going over his records before the beatings. I found this very uncomfortable and asked when he'd committed those crimes.

The presenter checked the data again and raised an eyebrow. "Quite recently. He got through three of them yesterday, between eighteen hundred hours and evening call."

Which put it after the time I'd last checked his record, but before we'd caught him. He knew he was going down under.

I thought about him. That smile.

My ears heard my mouth say, "I'm going with him."

The presenter blinked.

"In the shuttle. The shipment he's on when he goes down under. I'm going to be on it."

In the silence I felt an explanation was called for, but the best I could muster was, "I want to be sure he doesn't make trouble."

I kept quiet for the rest of the meeting, but I had some friends of mine do a little datamining afterwards.

The shuttle had several dozen individual cells, each of which contained one prisoner, one bunk bed and one vidscreen embedded in the wall. It also had a small area reserved for the accompanying guards.

The underwater trip would take us a little over twelve hours. It could be made faster, but expenses were kept to a minimum with these guys. Their cells were soundproofed and the vidscreens, which were cheap and kept behind unbreakable barriers, were voice-activated. We could have drugged the prisoners for the duration of their trip, but that would have brought us into, hah, muddy waters. You were only supposed to administer drugs to prisoners if you had a clear reason to consider them a threat, and in doing so you brought the whole process one step closer to barbarism. Strictly speaking we didn't have to provide them with any kind of way to pass the time - there was a clause somewhere in the law that allowed us to call this a temporary solitary confinement, much as the one in regular prisons - but leaving a civilian in an empty cell for twelve hours with nothing to do but think would not make for a nice disembarkment down under.

Besides, there was one person I wanted to keep awake.

When I entered his cell he was sitting sideways on the bunk bed, looking pointedly at the wall. His bruises were dark purple and yellow.

He didn't seem to recognize me at first. When he did, he visibly stopped breathing for a few seconds, then let out a long exhalation and smiled. He was afraid of me, but he knew something I didn't, something he thought would keep him safe. That was good. That could be worked with.

I went to the wall across from him and sat on the floor. Our interrogators believed in taking on a dominant position; I didn't. I believed in starting small, from a weakened position, and letting the subject build an image of you in his mind far greater than the real you.

There was something about his smile. They'd given him new teeth, but there was something more. It was almost as if I'd seen it before.

When it hit me a few second later, it hit like a hammer, and I was glad I was already sitting.

He noticed me gasp, and his smile faded. "What?" he said.

"I know you," I said.

"You beat me up a few days ago," he said.

I leaned my head to one side. It was there; it was definitely there. I couldn't believe I hadn't seen it before.

"I knew someone once," I said. "A kid. Tough one, as it goes. He'd had a rotten time of it, been smacked around and plenty worse, but he had that look. I still remember seeing a picture of him, taken when he enlisted. It said, I am free. I've gone beyond. Nothing you do will matter now, nothing you say will reach me now. I belong to something greater."

His eyes narrowed and I knew I had him.

"You've joined the rebels." I said.

The smile returned.

"You're on your way to down below of your own goddamned intention," I said. Not in a tone of surprise, but annoyance. "Nobody does that. So you have a plan. But you couldn't do it alone, not if you want to make a

difference. So you've joined the rebels, and you have someone waiting for you down below."

He kept quiet. I had not asked him a question, nor given him an order.

"You have no idea what you'll be in for, down there," I said. "Nobody does. So you couldn't possibly be planning a coup, or a disruption, or anything that requires a reasonable degree of forethought. And you have no specialties; I've checked. All that you have is a life like everybody else."

"Not anymore," he said.

"Well, no," I conceded. "Not anymore."

"Not after you came."

"Let's not get into the whole occupation business. It wasn't my call any more than yours," I said. I waited a beat before adding, "I'm sorry for your family."

"That's alright," he said with complete equanimity. He was leading me on. He didn't care about any of that. The moment we'd moved away from down below, he'd gotten more comfortable with answering back.

He'd given up his old life, and he had no reason to believe he could make anything constructive of his new one. Time to push him.

I got up, brushed myself off and said, "I'm turning this shuttle around. Have a nice day."

I had not even taken a step before he let out an outraged, "What?"

"You heard me. I can't let you get anywhere near that place. You're a security risk."

"You can't do this," he said. "I have to get down there. I demand you take me down there." The smile was gone. His hands trembled.

"Well, that's a first," I said. I felt for him. I truly did. Had my dream been snatched away from me like this, it would've been the end of my life, too.

He got up. I thought he was going to attack me, but instead he backed himself into a corner. "Don't come any closer," he said.

"Hey," I said, "I wasn't planning to. I'm going to leave this cell now and-"

"I'm carrying a bomb," he said.

Some words change everything. 'Sniper' is one. I'm told 'love' is another. 'Incoming' is pretty big these days, being the bastard child of 'invasion'.

"You were strip-searched and scanned before you got onboard. Anything conspicuous in your system would've been flushed out on the spot. You're lying," I said, more out of hope than any real conviction.

"Transfusions," he said.

I was stunned.

It was possible, in theory, to replace certain bodily fluids with explosive counterparts. You could alter a person's glands to produce the new type, so long as you ensured his body had enough raw materials to draw on, or you could swap out the old type for the new along with an agent that would keep it from breaking down.

It was hideously expensive, extremely unreliable and utterly destructive. Even if he

never set off the explosive reaction, a person who underwent something like this would die of massive organ failure within a few days. The body was not happy being turned into a chemical weapon.

I'd had my agents do some datamining, and it had revealed connections between this man and ten others on this very same shuttle. All of them had committed crimes serious enough to warrant transport down under, but worse, all of them were connected to an earlier transport that just yesterday had brought a lot of fresh people to the city. Gods knew how many of them were walking bombs.

"You were going to blow up the city," I said. I couldn't believe it.

He stared at me, silent and defiant.

"It wouldn't be enough with just one of you, but with everyone you know on this shuttle and all your friends who got in there yesterday. You..." I simply could not get my head around this. "There are hundreds of thousands of people down there. Your people."

"They're dead to us," he said. "Everyone is, once they're sent down under. For all we know it may be an empty husk."

"But you're hoping it's not," I said, the realization dawning in merciless light. "You're pulling a Nouvelle Rouvenor. You're going to find some spot and you're going to goddamn detonate yourselves, in the hope you can crack the dome and destroy the entire city. And then you're going to get it all blamed on us."

He smiled again, and I remembered feeling that smile on my own face, all those years ago.

"So now you have a choice," he said to me. "You can let the shuttle dock and send me off. You'll leave. I'll stay. Whatever happens is no longer your concern."

"Or we turn this thing around and you blow it to bits."

He shrugged.

"Those friends of yours that arrived yesterday?" I said. "They're still in the investigation lounge. But you knew that. What you didn't know is that I had them tagged, which means they'll be held there until I give the go-ahead."

"You're lying," he said.

I was. "Maybe I am," I said.

He got to his feet.

"This shuttle is getting turned around," I said.

He lifted his hands and looked at them, as if he were seeing them for the first time.

I told him, "I knew someone once who thought he had all the answers. Took a while before I realized he didn't; he just stayed in control of the questions."

He looked at me now.

"Last time I saw him was through a bulletproof pane of glass. I was leaving and he wasn't. I'll never forget that expression. I was going somewhere he wasn't, I had become something he would never be, and he knew it."

"You're a vicious thug," he said to me.

"I'm a part of the State," I said. "And you are not. No more than he was. And his gutted expression, all those years ago, is the same one you have now."

I raised my own hands. "He would have taken you up on your offer. I will not."

As he started to move, I lunged for him.

Kameiras



Federation Transcript, FIO Report #453-RT3.

Security Level: Red-Gamma-Alpha

The Kameiras Program.

Throughout its history, the austere Amarr Empire has conquered many peoples. In its expansion it has encountered fractured Neolithic tribes, egalitarian societies, industrial behemoths and everything in between. All were crushed and enslaved: Some were eventually integrated into Amarrian society, some remain slaves and others were simply forgotten - for only the largest societies are recorded in any detail. On the Ni-Kunni homeworld, for example, one whole continent was inhabited by a fierce indigenous people who were judged worthless for anything other than the most lowly slave castes. Their rich culture and heritage has long since been eradicated and their people reduced to mere half-breeds scattered among the countless multitudes.

With improved military oversight, this tactic of burnt earth and ruined people eventually changed. In its conquests, the military made note of the most naturally warlike, aggressive and resilient and dubbed them Martial Races. It then indoctrinated these into its armed forces, mostly as expendable cannon fodder to be used up instead of the righteous chosen of God. Some excelled, and achieved such repute that they became a staple of the Amarrian military machine. The most successful - and, indeed, feared - of these are the Kameiras.

The Kameiras are one of the products of the infamous Human Endurance Program (H.E.P.) that the Amarr ran on their Minmatar slave populace. It began as an attempt to measure the Minmatar tribes' durability and effectiveness when it came to various labor tasks - to see how far they could be pushed before breaking, much like a tool would be stress-tested. Over time it evolved into much more than that, becoming a tale of horror for the Minmatar as Amarr scientists began to explore the true limits of their body and psyche.

The program came to the attention of the military who, having witnessed the tenacity and ferocity of the Minmatar defiance first hand, were keen to explore their uses in combat. The H.E.P. scientists, eager to get military backing, began research into methods to re-educate the strongest Minmatar slaves and train them into obedient, effective soldiers. Disappointingly, initial training methods proved mostly ineffective. The idea was thought to have merit, however, and a dedicated team was assigned to advance the program.

Finding it difficult to train unruly adult Minmatar warriors in obedience and faith, the team opted for a more extreme measure. They began a breeding program, selecting the best specimens from their slave population and creating the strongest of offspring, raising them according to a scientific regime they had devised. The

regime went through several revisions based on data gleaned, and was altered considerably in the initial stages until it became the Kameiras program that exists today.

The beginning

Every maturing fetus of the breeding program is rigorously monitored, subject to a series of genetic tests to see if it is developing to the exacting standards of the Kameiras. If the specimen is found to be genetically unworthy – if it would be born short, weak, sickly or afflicted with any of a multitude of genetic abnormalities - then the pregnancy is terminated. Any surviving neonates are given over to a specialized care centre where Amarrian females take responsibility for their upbringing in supervised crèches until the age of six, whereupon the infant enters its first Subigo House, a place of training and education.

Junior Subigo

Here the subject begins a vigorous physical regime. The Amarrians have learned that this is the most effective time to begin adapting the Minmatar body for military duty. Increasing in pace and vigor as the body grows, the training regime pushes the child to an established limit that will not adversely affect its later growth. The youth is schooled in combat arts and forced to attend an extensive indoctrination program. This program forms the foundation of maintaining control over the Kameiras when they are fully fledged adults. They are institutionalized into the Amarrian faith - taught about the Amarr God and his love for them, their place in his creation and their duty to uphold his law for the good of all. For all intents and purposes, they are taught that they too are Chosen. Although this continues to be a hotly debated topic within certain circles of the Empire, time has proved it to be the most effective form of control.

Senior Subigo

Most survive the rigorous Junior Subigo and undertake the testing trials at the age of fourteen. If they survive this tortuous experience they are moved onto the Senior Subigo House, where they are divided into combat-sized groups. In teaching them to act as part of a greater whole, their instructors take their training to a whole new level: The young neophytes are schooled in a wide range of skills including strategy, tactics, survival, personal combat and the use of firearms, body armor as well as wide range of military equipment and vehicles. If they survive this intense period they then undertake the final and most testing trial. If this is passed, they are accepted as adepts; if they fail, they do not return.

Kameiras

At the age of nineteen the trained Kameiras adepts are indoctrinated into their operational unit and serve as junior members until they have blooded themselves in combat. The Amarrians retain strict control over the Kameiras, as they have by necessity raised intelligent soldiers that can react and adapt autonomously to varied combat situations. Their education nearly always keeps them from questioning their place. A soldier sees much, though, so the Kameiras do not serve as one company but rather are attached to standard armed companies as their strike force, maintained apart from the regular infantry. The very nature of their purpose - to serve as special operation units and front line forces - means that in the very rare cases where a Kameira might suspect something is not well with the world, he doesn't remain alive long enough to act upon it. That being said, it is often true that the Kameiras troops are more devout than their true Amarr cohorts. They have been indoctrinated and trained for this way of life since they were born, and they know or want nothing else. For the most part, Kameira units are led by Amarrian officers. An individual may be promoted some way up the command chain if he is deemed loyal enough, but these cases are relatively rare, and individuals that achieve this sort of modest rank are kept under close surveillance.

However, certain traits tend to creep in. Most are relatively trivial things that are easily brushed aside by their officers; for example, Kameiras troops are allowed to keep their hair long, something not permitted and strictly enforced in the regular Imperial army. There is one tradition among the Kameiras troops that is particularly abhorrent to the Amarr, who have banned it in theory and only relented in practice due to negative effects on morale of the otherwise indomitable Kameiras units. Thus, the tradition is officially banned, but under the furtive light of dark moons it continues.

In the aftermath of battles, Kameiras gather what bodies they can of their fallen and burn them in great funeral pyres. This is done in a matter-of-fact way, without emotion. Once the fires have burnt out the surviving Kameiras cut themselves and then rub the ash from the pyres, the ashes of their dead brethren, into their open wounds. In this way, a permanent mark is formed. The Kameiras carry their dead with them, and the mark serves as a lasting reminder of those who fell. An old soldier may have many scars of the lost covering his body and in this way can come to look akin to his free Minmatar brethren. No one knows how this tradition crept in - not even the Kameiras themselves - but it now persists throughout all units in the Kameira war machine.

CHAINED TO THE SKY



It was the morning of the twenty-fifth of the month in the district of Torsad-Laur, and the dread orb of the Amarr sun was just beginning its slow climb from the shimmering puddle of the horizon. As soon as his cold feet hit the warmth of the platform he felt the familiar throb and whistle of the quarter as it began like a great lumbering beast to rouse itself, scratching and snuffling in the umber haze of dawn.

The young Minmatar passed the mudbrick walls of the terminal with its sputtering praydrones and its ragged rush of beggars, felt the dark heady breeze caress the back of his neck as the day's first frying smells slithered dustborne into his nostrils. He hadn't missed Dam-Torsad, it was true; but now, upon returning, he had to give it its due. Few places in the universe – certainly none he had visited – possessed in the same proportions that uneasy mingling of purity and rot which forever straps the Amarr soul to the rack of its own contradiction.

Izoni Square was much the same, he reflected as he exited the terminal. Even at this early hour business was booming. Handmade cutlery, bootleg holosymphs, off-world condiments of varying legality, scriptural terp mods, Adakul manuals, the latest in carefully faked Caille leather. Plumes of smoke rose from innumerable stalls. A thousand smells wrapped around each other in the thick air, creating the unique melange that was the hallmark of Torsad-Laur and the reason for its nickname, the Cauldron. Most likely the flesh of every creature in New Eden was being cooked somewhere in this sprawling expanse, animal souls ascending from the shadow of the city's bladed spires to find salvation in the copper skies. Groups of slaves passed through without cease, but whereas in other parts of Dam-Torsad they would be ghosts among the multitude, here they comprised the essence of the district's beating heart.

Resisting the temptation to indulge in broiled blackfowl, he made his way past Chopamaia Yard, where children played among the cracked statues and worshipers swayed in communal rapture, their god-intermediaries whispering sweet eternity to them through embedded earpieces. He passed under the arch of Nekater, with its sad white little angel-guardians that every day shed tears of stone into the currents of beleaguered humanity flowing underneath them. He navigated the narrow cobbled corridors of the quarter's south side, weaving among the people and gradually quickening his step until, some ten minutes later, he arrived at a squat flat-topped house nestled between two much taller ones. The road wound back sharply in both directions here, so that the little house gave the impression of being right outside the curve of a giant horseshoe. He looked around and sniffed the air. Flowers and ozone still.

"Da?" He rapped a few times on the basement door. There was no answer initially, but his father hadn't been a fast man even in his younger years. A faint glimmer of light appeared inside the door's window, then the door

was thrown open. "Darmad!" shouted the old man. "Father," he replied, smiling and stepping inside. The two embraced, then exchanged the happily abashed pleasantries of a parent and child who haven't seen each other in several years.

His father, Engru, was a tenth-generation indentured professor to The Hedion Academy Torsad subcampus, and a specialist in the ancient texts of several nations the Amarr had conquered in the course of taking over the planet they now stood on. His days were spent in his little basement translating manuscripts and taking notes and reconstructing languages several thousand years dead. Over the course of his time living out on the coast Darmad had become accustomed to plenty of fresh air, and now the familiar overpowering mustiness of his father's apartment – a consequence of several dozen plants, intractable mold and very little ventilation – made it hard for him to breathe. They decided to visit a taproom located not far from the house, where they could take in their morning meal.

"How are things at the research facility?" asked his father as they ambled along the broadstreet, occasionally ducking a hoverstroller or an autocaravan. "Is your holder still giving you trouble?"

"Not really, not anymore," said Darmad. "He's been more accepting of me since that small success of mine last year."

"I was proud of you for that one," said his father.

"I'm surprised you even heard. It wasn't really such a big deal," said Darmad.

"A polymer synthesis technique that could revolutionize high-altitude building materials? Sounds like a big deal to me, son."

"I don't know about revolutionize," said Darmad. "And remember, as far as everyone's concerned it wasn't Darmad Intajaf who made the discovery, it was his grand highness the good Lord Lucretio Kor-Azor."

"Of course," said his father. "No use in the slaves mucking up the works by getting famous, is there? We're here. Mind your step, now. Welcome to the Font."

The place was basically one tremendous elongated corridor, a tall narrow space floored with cork and festooned with dormant string lights which hung powerless between corbets set high on the rough stone walls. From the corbets great plants of all shapes and sizes arched and drooped and spread their branches across the airspace. "I can see why you like it here," remarked Darmad as they took their seats in a small booth with synthetic leather padding just a touch too red for its surroundings.

It was midmorning and the place was sparsely occupied. As was typical of Torsad-Laur alone among the districts of Dam-Torsad, those few who were in here mostly kept to themselves. Dam-Torsad's people had a great general tendency to stay in direct active communion with one another while in public, either chanting or praying or speaking loudly and at great length with their companions. At all waking hours their environment encouraged them, subtly and unsubtly, to do this; through praydrones and billboards and other disruptive phenomena, a habitual preference for communion over solitary contemplation was constantly reinforced in the populace. The Font, meanwhile, had people indulging in all manner of solitary idiosyncrasy. At one table a heavysset girl with a pretty face sat munching on something, absently combing her thick hair. At another, a man rolled a cigarette contemplatively in the slanted rays of the morning sun while his companion read a book. Darmad felt relieved to be back. It was as if the chain around his soul had been loosened slightly.

They passed the morning in idle chatter, eating a light breakfast, content to simply enjoy each other's presence. At around midday, morning prayer being over, the place's regulars started filtering in from the busy streets of the quarter. His father on more than one occasion remarked that the crowd was strange this morning, that there floated about a faint apprehension quite atypical of this bustling straightforward place. Shortly after midday, Darmad was in the middle of relating an amusing anecdote when a great shout rose from the middle of the room and a figure detached itself from the throng.

"Well, look here!" It was a big man whose black beard and receded hairline framed a face deeply carved with smile-wrinkles. Darmad slid over one seat and the man sat down next to him.

"Hello, Crofton," said Engru.

"Engru," replied Crofton. "Your houseborn's back, I see."

"Just for a short while," interjected Darmad with artificial cheer, annoyed at being spoken to in the third person. "How've you been?" The old discomfiture returned; growing up, he had always by turns been impressed with Crofton and frightened of him.

"Oh, you know. Keeping busy," said Crofton. He flagged down a waiter and ordered kacha root tea. "Perused the

day's palaver?" he said to no one in particular as the waiter carefully poured the dark green liquid into his cup.

Engru nodded faintly. "Vagaries and hearsay as usual, I suppose."

"I don't think so. Not this time," said the big man. The waiter finished pouring the tea and bowed. Crofton grabbed the cup and perpetrated a gregarious slurp.

"Pray tell," said Engru.

Crofton began to speak in the deliberate diction that was his custom. His words were habitually infused with gravity, and propelled by his powerful voice they became missiles of rhetoric. He had been a leader once, an orator capable of moving men and mountains, but after consenting to a speaking engagement in Ammatar space he had been captured and given to the same university subcampus as Engru. This was Amarr's preferred way of silencing her enemies. Killing was too crass. It acknowledged too much fear. The real victory didn't lie in brute extermination (except in cases where required on a large scale for logistical or geographical reasons), but in defeating your picture of things with theirs.

Of course, particular sorts of people are immune to such tactics, and Crofton was of that general sort. A stodgy Brutor warrior-poet who had never had much truck with rigid self-image or outward appearance, he had never seemed to mind his lowered status. Toward his masters he indulged in the sign language of submission expected of every slave, but his area of expertise – representational systems of governance and their application in a pan-planetary setting – gave this "democrat savage" a certain degree of leeway toward the bemused scholars of Hedion. Time and time again, regardless, he had had to accept punishment for expressing his heretical views too loudly; but to Crofton, there were worse things than the electric lash.

Most of the people who made this quarter their home were similar to Crofton, though the vast majority were high-generation houseborn, slave children to slave children. Artists, musicians and academics, preachers and weirdoes and vagrants and madmen, all played their parts in the great cruel mechanism of the empire. It was said in the high halls of Amarr society that Torsad-Laur was the only slave-inhabited quarter where the gentry could walk at night without being attacked – and where, moreover, one could even have a conversation with a slave, if one were inclined toward an evening's debasement.

"You feel the tension in the air, I can tell," Crofton was saying. "When was the last time people were set on edge this bad?" Another grand slurp and his cup was finished. He gave an imperious wave toward the waiters' corner, then returned his attention to his boothmates.

"I know a man at the Civil Service office over in Torsad-Unan," he continued. "He's not technically supposed to consort with me, but we maintain a bit of a clandestine correspondence. All very romantic and revolutionary. He wrote me," and here he leaned in towards the center of the table conspiratorially, "that something very very big was afoot. High-stratus decisions, perhaps as high up as the new Chancellor." Abruptly he stopped, then turned to look at Darmad. "You work for a Kor-Azor, don't you?"

"The technical term is 'owned by,' but yeah," replied Darmad, somewhat acridly. "Distant cousin to Chancellor Aritcio several times removed, but a Kor-Azor."

"And you've heard nothing?"

"No one at my facility ever hears anything," replied Darmad.

"Ah," said the big man. Pensively he rubbed the brim of his saucer. "Normally I would dismiss it as a flight of fancy – my friend is a young man, and prone to those – but the general mood of the Cauldron today seems to support his notion that something is going on."

"Have you spoken with anyone around here?" asked Engru.

"Not yet," replied Crofton. There was a period of silence at the table as the waiter returned and refilled the cup in front of him. Presently the waiter left, but the silence remained.

Looking around, Darmad saw that the crowd in the place had dwindled significantly. As the other two men at the booth began to take their own notice, he became aware of a cadenced din, a distant whisper traveling over the city, reverberating off its tired walls.

"What is that?" said his father. Crofton stood up and made to exit the place, with the other two following. Just outside, standing on the portico which overlooked the gigantic expanse of Izoni Square, they squinted against the searing midday sun and were able to make out, through the plumes of smoke and dust, the face of Empress Jamyl on several billboards around the area's far perimeter. Despite the preternatural hush of the assembled thousands who had broken with their daily business to listen, the trio were unable to make out her words.

Darmad had the sudden queasy notion that there was going to be some great change to adjust to, and giving up the useless effort of trying to understand the words he sat down heavily on the portico's stone floor, cold in the

shade of the canvas canopy. The two older men stood stock still, craning their necks comically toward the indifferent skies.

A young man came tearing up the steps to the portico, his incoherent screaming preceding him by almost a full minute. Crofton stepped into his path and the smaller man barreled into him with a thudding impact. Crofton swiftly grabbed him by the shoulders. "Relax. Relax!" he shouted at the man. "What is it?"

The young man made a conciliatory hand gesture and gently shook free. "The slaves," he said, panting. "We're... freeing them. Us. We're being freed." He coughed.

"What?" said Darmad.

"They're freeing the slaves," said the man, still coughing.

Engru blinked, once, twice. "I'm sorry. What?" he said.

"Us," he panted. "Minmatar, ninth-gen and up, all the preachers, all the academics."

Crofton just stared.

The young man pointed vaguely out toward the tremendous crush of people, some moving to and fro, some wide-eyed, others on their knees.

From the far end of the Cauldron, a roar was rising.

"No good. No good," said Crofton, shaking his head. He had just repeated the phrase "No good can come of this" about twenty times, and was now down to simply "No good." Around him, the Font was packed with people thrashing and flailing amid laughter and cries and shouts, each person reeling in their own way from the unexpected crumbling of a wall in their mind.

The three had spent the afternoon lost in the wash of people, watching preachers and podiumites deliver sermons and speeches, watching street musicians play instruments they had up until now not been allowed to touch, watching hustlers and beggars in crazed jubilee on the city's whirling boulevards. When they had returned to the Font in the late afternoon to discover their booth taken they had repaired to the end of the bar and promptly switched from tea to alcohol. With the string lights now draping a warm glow over the encroaching darkness, Crofton had begun to elaborate.

"It's a brilliant public relations coup, I'll give her that much," he was saying. "She's definitely figured out all the angles here. Anyone who points out the practical flaws will be drowned in a torrent of righteousness. Never mind that up until a few hours ago, these people were all subhumans unworthy of the legal rights bestowed upon proper people. The fact that it's a cynical political maneuver will be completely drowned out by the cackling of the righteous."

"What makes you think it's entirely cynical?" replied Engru. "Perhaps she's had a change of heart. 'Who can tell what winds yet sway the soul of man?'" he quoted, from a favorite scriptural passage.

"Woman," corrected Darmad, quite unhelpfully.

"States are not run on compassion, Engru, not even states that are built around religion," said Crofton. "Speaking of which – what do you think will happen to the slaves who have practiced their own religions? If they want their marriages and families registered as legal units, they'll need to take up the state religion. How many of them will be able to afford the registration? How many of them will be able to afford or figure out how to pay their own taxes, for that matter? Who's going to teach millions upon millions of freshly minted freemen how to survive within the system? She's not banking on these people to stay, let me tell you that much."

Neither of the other two said anything. Darmad was about to speak, but just as he opened his mouth a young woman with a tray of drinks fell foul of the crowd and crashed into him. After helping her up and sending her on her way, he turned back to his companions and gave a little shake of the hand, sprinkling droplets of grain alcohol onto the countertop. "Getting rowdy in here," he remarked.

"That's another thing," said Crofton without skipping a beat, his great head swiveling around to scan the crowd. "She knows this will cause them to get so excited that there will be mass gatherings in some places which are going to turn ugly. More fodder for the spin machine."

Darmad made his own survey of the place. At every table and every booth, on chair arms, in laps, on table corners and windowsills, the smiling faces of young people and old people commingled. Though he generally considered himself a rational man not given to easy emotion, he nonetheless found to his surprise that it was almost impossible not to get swept up in the roiling elation that pervaded the room. You had only to look up and you would feel it.

He looked back at Crofton, who had his head cocked to the side and was staring at one of his own elbows, which rested on the bar. It was impossible to see what he was thinking. He snuffled once, then ordered another drink.

"Ploys, ploys, they're all ploys," he began again. "She wants the docile ninth-gen Mins to go scurrying back to the Republic and start the Reclaiming for them. She wants everyone to see how well-behaved they've managed to make them. As to the rest of them, she just wants to make it known how they function better shackled than free."

"Us."

"Pardon me?"

"Us, Crofton. The rest of us. You and I are free, too."

A small silence, then Crofton said: "The thought never even crossed my mind." He downed his drink.

Darmad suddenly had one of those small epiphanies that seemed to him only to take place when circumstance and mindset conspired in the human soul to strike a perfect chord, one that would allow the recipient for a few precious seconds to reverberate in unison with the rest of creation. He was standing with his back to the bar, looking at a beautiful girl who stared back at him from one of the booths further along the opposite wall. There was a look in her eyes that he would see in every face around here, for the rest of the night and well beyond.

"I'm not so sure it's as bad as you're making it out to be," he said, turning back to Crofton. "I mean, look around you. Are you even taking note of what's happening? She may have, as you said, figured out all the angles, but I don't think her conniving soul even realized what freedom – the idea of the thing she's just given us, you see, the concept of it – does to a man."

"What does it do to a man?" asked Crofton in a low voice, barely audible over the raucous din.

"Well. It gives him hope, I suppose."

At this Crofton laughed and laughed. He smiled a strange smile and then laughed some more and then fiddled with his glass and looked at Engru, and then he looked back down and grimaced, and just like that a little tear dropped into his glass. With a great deal of dignity he retrieved his coat and made his excuses, and when he said goodbye he didn't look in Darmad's eyes but only at his chest.

The boy and his father sat silently through the night, savoring in their souls the bittersweet taste of history while Dam-Torsad's, and the entire Empire's, myriad dramas mighty and small unspooled around them. Come morning, with the revelries dying down, the pair made their way to the door.

"Boy."

"Yes, da?"

"Proud of you for that one, too."

He took his father's elbow and gingerly the two of them made their way down and out, out into the bright and terrible morning.

"Two Deaths"



The hangar floor, decorated as it was, had barely a dozen people waiting. Banners of the Amarr Empire slowly swayed in a wind that seemed omnipresent and cold.

The small crowd was a mix of station crewmembers, carefully vetted, and Royal Guard staff devoted to Empress Jamyl I and loyal to the death. Their conversation was kept to a minimum. They did not dislike one another, but the circumstances felt so solemn and vaguely unpleasant that most of them suspected they would be going their separate ways after the whole damn business was over, trying to wash away the memories through an infinite pour. A ship was soon to arrive, bearing the corpulent symbol of everything evil and spiteful in the world they knew.

In the Gallente Federation, down on Gallente Prime, on an open arena specifically adapted for this very occasion, a ship hovered into view. The crowd, numbering in the millions, was already reaching boiling point, having been pumped up by political speeches interspersed with popular entertainment. Here and there, massive towers holding building-size vidscreens broadcast every possible glimpse of the ship as it made a slow approach to the landing strip. The crowd reacted, and its screams were so loud they fed back through the speakers, creating an infinite loop of raucous hatred.

When the Empress stepped out of her temporary quarters and onto the main area of the landing bay, the quiet murmur of uncomfortable conversation dropped to an utter silence.

With the high ceiling, the banners, and the near-infinite echo of hushed voices, the place felt like a cathedral. The massive polyglas windows showed the cold space outside.

The crowd roared when President Foiritan took the stage. He waved to his people and smiled. It was not a wide smile, as one might exhibit when winning a game, but a smile carefully tempered with sadness, a smile that said its bearer had suffered through loss but come out a victor, and acknowledged the same in everyone the smile was aimed at.

The ship docked. It was a small vessel fitted for protection, although the armor and shielding were more for show than anything else. Its cargo had been transported from the dark end of space in all manner of ways, but in this area, under the aegis of the Empress, nobody would interfere.

There was only one passenger. He was the greatest traitor to the Amarr Empire since its inception. He had been brought here to die.

The ship doors opened and Anvent Eturrer was led out, blinking at the light and the noise. He was a former Federation Navy Grand Admiral, having been fired by President Foiritan for what appeared at the time to be gross incompetence during the Caldari State invasion. It had later proven to be treason, and had placed Eturrer at the top of the Most Wanted list of enemies of the Federation.

Eturrer's guards hung on to him, leading him to a separate podium stationed far enough from Foiritan and the presidential crew that they wouldn't be associated with him. The entire path they took was covered with unbreakable glass on all sides, lest Eturrer's death be brought to him before its allotted time. The guards were strong and clearly supported Eturrer, who appeared a little confused and stumbling. He had not been visibly harmed, but the vidscreens that zoomed in on his face, to the raw screaming of the attendant crowds, showed a faraway look.

Chamberlain Karsoth was led out of the ship and unceremoniously dropped onto the hangar floor. He lay there, wheezing and coughing, in front of the Empress and her retinue. His massive bulk was such that he could not even stand on his own.

Keeping her gaze firmly on the doomed man, the Empress spoke.

"Help him up."

When her guards hesitated she moved her head a slight touch. Her gaze rested on Karsoth, but there was the implication that it might be transferred onto someone else.

The guards jumped into action and heaved Karsoth's bulk upright. He winced when they touched him. His silk robes, tattered and soiled, rode up the limbs of his manifold body, displaying the cut and bruised skin below. The girth of his distended center was such that three men had to push at it, while a taller woman braced herself against his sternum, right where his heart would be. Karsoth's flesh was as pale as her flesh, but mottled with enflamed marks the rivaled the red color of her hair.

President Foiritan spoke to the attendant millions, and to the trillions watching through the live broadcast. His words were lost on most of the listeners, who heard what they expected to hear and filled in the gaps with a plenitude of rage. The gist of his speech was that the Gallente Federation had got their man, as the President had promised. There were difficult times ahead, ones where every man and woman in the Federation would have to make concessions to freedom in order to secure the safety of the entire nation. But for now, in this place, they had the proof of those sacrifices.

The crowd responded to the intonations in his voice. It seemed to undulate towards him, like a wave of hatred crashing on the surf. There was a large security area between the President and his people, walled off with unbreakable glass and monitored both by humans and hi-tech security hardware, and it only served to fire the crowd's emotions to roaring heights.

Even the torture had been done for purification and spirituality, and it had been done in quiet. The people of Amarr had the good sense to be embarrassed about what had happened under Karsoth's rule and just wanted to send the man on his way to judgment.

Everything was noise and light. There had been no obvious torture as such, but they'd made damn sure the prisoner didn't sleep or make himself comfortable on his journey. The Gallente people deserved a show.

The Empress stood in silence, looking at Karsoth. Eventually she asked, "You've made your peace with your God?"

He nodded quietly. A tiny bubble of snot inflated and deflated from one of his nostrils. The crew had retreated to the side, rubbing their tired arms and legs. The woman who'd held Karsoth up had been given leave to wash her hands.

In the middle of his speech, President Foiritan listed the accusations leveled against Eturrer and the outcome of their evaluation. He turned directly to the prisoner, who stared into the dead air, and spoke of the failure of Tripwire, the giving of information to the enemy, and the loss of Caldari Prime and countless lives in the process. The president added that thankfully the Federation had established a new order to ensure that the rest of the poison in Gallente soil would be rooted out without mercy.

He nodded to Mentas Blaque, who stood at the back of the podium, dressed in the now-familiar black costume of his newly formed Internal Security institution. They were informally known as the Black Eagles and Foiritan called them by that moniker in his speech, thus securing their name in history, for better or worse.

Returning to the subject of treason, Foiritan directed his words back to Eturrer. He said that the Federation had held a trial in Eturrer's absence, and added with an evil grin that he'd proven a hard man to get a hold of.

The crowd roared. They loved him for this.

There was, Foiritan said to Eturrer over the microphone and the vidscreens and the booming noise over millions of people, such overwhelming evidence of his guilt that he had not been needed to testify in his defense.

"You may speak when I am done," he added, "Much good it will do you. That is your right. In the Federation, everyone has a voice. Even the people whose lives you destroyed."

Mentas Blaque, whose Black Eagles had many other prisoners, nodded in agreement and said nothing.

The Empress said to Karsoth, "You allied with the Blood Raiders. You ruled through lies and terror. When the Minmatar came, your failures nearly cost us the Empire. Whatever commerce you brought to this kingdom, it was blackened money, tarred by the ties with the underworld that you brought upon the highest office in the land. You corrupted the innocent, betrayed those loyal to us, and turned this kingdom into an orgy of corruption and hedonism."

He took a deep breath and asked, "And for this I deserve death?"

The flags swayed gently in the cold wind.

"No," she said. "But what you deserve is beyond what this Empire can be bothered to do with you."

At the end of his speech, Foiritan turned to Eturrer again and asked whether he had anything to say.

Eturrer was handed a microphone. He took it and stood quite still. The booing from the crowd rose to a crescendo, threatening to drown him out.

He looked at Foiritan. For a moment the two men shared a look of strange understanding. The camera, seeing first the glint in Eturrer's eyes and then the uncomfortable expression on Foiritan's face, swiftly focused its eyeless gaze on the crowds.

Eturrer then looked at Blaque, and stared at him for entirely too long.

The crowd was losing its mind in angry anticipation.

Eturrer grinned at them, this entire world he had helped bring to ruin, and let the microphone drop to the ground.

Karsoth took a deep breath. "You disgust me," he said. "You rule over a kingdom of weaklings, all of whom are so lost in their piety over the next world that they've forgotten how to live properly in this one. All they do is look to their Almighty God to put things right, and just when I think that some of them might be coming around, you come crawling back like some worm out of Hell to make them all believe again." He stopped, swallowed. "You disgust me," he repeated.

She walked up to him and raised her hand. He flinched.

She gently stroked her cheek and said, "You fear me."

Some small twinkle of an impulse to sneer alit in his mind and was extinguished just as soon. For she smiled at him, and in that smile was a terror such as he had never known in his life. The flesh on his body trembled. Although she was much smaller than he, she appeared to tower over him.

"Do you hate me?" he asked almost pleadingly.

"I do, at some level," she said. "But true hatred is a powerful emotion, and you are too pitiable for it."

It was time for the execution.

Souro Foiritan, president of the Gallente Federation, turned to his people and said, "It is time for us to decide. I will bear any burden for you that I can, but I can not be allowed to do this on my own. This is us, here and now. Some of you will have studied the evidence in this traitor's trial, but even if you have not, you can see the verdict."

The vidscreens switched to Eturrer and projected a large, red "GUILTY" beneath his face.

"We must all pull together now, and make the call. For our future, and for the continued freedom that we enjoy in this Federation, we have been willing to sacrifice much. Now we must make the ultimate sacrifice. We must show the world what it means when evil attempts to shake the foundations of our civilization."

Gigantic sound receptors slid down from the vidscreens. The screens themselves altered their picture: It still showed Eturrer, but now added a graphic overlay that pictured an audio level, trembling at the bottom rungs.

"The traitor's body has been injected with a chemical that will respond to sound waves of a certain frequency. We are going to monitor the voices of the people here tonight, filter them, and pipe them over the traitor. If they are loud enough, the chemical mixture will be activated. Your voices will be heard.

Even though the receptors had not activated yet, they trembled with the roar of the masses.

"One last thing, people of the Federation. We took great care in preparing this chemical and inserting it into the traitor. It will disrupt, alight, or otherwise distort a number of cell clusters in his body. Cells are small, and a few disruptions would not do much. But we paid heed to history. The chemical was made to infect one cluster for each of the individual whose lives this traitor led to loss.

"This is your call, my fellow citizens. This is your moment."

The receptors activated. The crowd's voices crashed on it like a tsunami.

On the vidscreens, Eturrer's body dismantled itself in an orgy of immolation. His skin bubbled, reddened, smoked and burst; his hair self-alit, and his bones bulged and rippled as tumors and other malignant growths forced themselves through the soft flesh of his organs and tore their way to freedom. Eturrer's mouth opened to let Eturrer's voice through, but his screams were lost in the crowd.

"You may speak your case, if you wish," the Empress said.

Karsoth breathed deeply but said nothing. He looked at her with those damaged eyes, and whatever was in them spoke of a conviction long since passed beyond words.

The Empress nodded, acknowledging his answer. She raised her hand and indicated a nearby passageway. "Walk through there to meet your end."

The nameless woman who'd pushed against his heart now walked in front of the old Chamberlain, her nimble, ghostly form leading the way to his death. He waddled in her wake, the guards holding him up.

The Empress stood there for a long time after, looking through the massive windows in the ceiling.

Outside, a star shone bright in the distance.

"The Spiral"



"This is a spiral we're in; a long wave undulating in one constant direction without ever crashing on the shore. Listen."

I sat with them in the mess hall of our new ship. Some of these people I had worked with for years. Others were new to me, and had joined as parts of a process that now felt like a procession.

"Everything leads you to where you are."

I was a member of the Sanctuary, a corporation that belonged to the benevolent Sisters of EVE. While the Sisters as a whole concerned themselves with the betterment of mankind, their subfactions went about achieving that goal in entirely different ways. The Sisters of EVE corporation, which was the largest part of the Sisters of EVE faction, consisted of rescue workers and aid specialists, and all in all were the exact kind of people you wanted to see in the aftermath of a cataclysm. The Food Relief corporation, meanwhile, concerned itself with the bureaucracy of aid, and had a tendency to extend its reach into diplomatic matters.

The last of the Sister faction corporations - my own home and the domain of my calling - was the Sanctuary. They were a scientifically focused organization working within a faith-based dominion, and the combined focus of secular inquiry and religious discipline lent a particular fervor to their work. Their focus was the EVE gate, a wormhole that had collapsed onto itself thousands of years ago and left humanity stranded in New Eden. In recent times, a massive interstellar war that cost innumerable lives had also seen an increase in activity at the EVE gate. A team, led by me, had been investigating this new anomaly, and had eventually uncovered a strange signature, as if the gate were responding to something elsewhere in the cosmos.

The signature was unrelated to any previous data and was thus discounted by most serious researchers. But I felt it was worth looking into. I believed that everything happened for a reason, and that the great gate would not grant me this single key unless it had something to unlock.

It took a lot of patience, which sometimes ran dry, and energy, which was often used up, but eventually I made the connection. Many things had been happening when the gate started to pulsate, but one of the more notable events was the Minmatar invasion of Amarr space, and the re-emergence of Heir Jamyl Sarum, who repelled the invaders at her doorstep.

The conflict, which had seen a massive fleet of warships torn to shreds, was shrouded in mystery and rumor. Some said Jamyl had merely willed the Minmatar ships to explode; others, that the fabled Minmatar Elders had seen their invasion brought to a halt and had enacted a suicide pact. There were rumors of an Amarr superweapon couched inside an Abaddon battleship, but nothing had been proven and no public data was available.

Whatever it was, the invasion event coincided with a spike in EVE gate activity. Moreover, once I had carefully picked apart the scant data on record from that momentous day in the skies above Mekhios, I discovered traces of that very same signature found in the EVE gate. The two were connected, I reasoned; the two must be

connected. I knew I was on to something.

Acquiring a small vessel and a few stores of investigative equipment - interest in the gate ran high in the Sanctuary, and my once-strict overseers found themselves perfectly willing to let their people engage in all sorts of strange excursions - I started a research experiment to determine whether the anomalous signature could be found anywhere else in New Eden. Despite the scant evidence I had to work with, I had to fight the constant urge to bring the entirety of my corporation onboard. The further I travelled along this dark new road, the more certain I was that I had been set on it for some reason that would eventually involve the fates of all my brothers. That certainty was only compounded when I travelled to Mekhios and found not only clear traces of the signature, but indicators of where else it might be found. Those indicators took the form of tiny rips in space, little pockets of anomaly where the laws of physics was turned inside out. They were too small to affect the ships that passed through them, and much too volatile to be of any use for scientific study. But they were there, present - inasmuch as the window to another world can be said to exist at all - and like my own titanium faith, a similar window to another world of strange wonders, they led inexorably to my ultimate goal.

Like starry lights the little rips led me on a brief and hair-raising series of excursions, but only once did I risk losing my trail. It was on a jaunt into the depths 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.



Half a Life"



They were finishing up a patrol in EC-P8R when they were told of fresh meat.

Antar's team had been doing hunt-and-grabs for a while now, and he had become a natural at Bleeding his victims. The experience depended on one's training, origins and constitution - common wisdom held that anyone who didn't pale and grow nauseated at their first time of hooking up live bodies was either perfect for the job or too crazy to be allowed on a spaceship - but for every Raider there eventually came a point when, even if the horror of the thing lurked at the back of one's mind, it had at least become a tolerable experience.

It was not about suffering, although that could certainly be a part of the process. It was done as much for the victims as for the Blood Raiders themselves. Antar loved seeing the full spectrum of emotions they went through: From utter and abject fear, through disgust and hatred and denial, even bargaining and making offers, stunning offers; all the way to calm acceptance and a quiet, gently fading serenity. He was making them whole at last.

He checked the equipment they'd set up on the ship, which had not been his when they boarded. Vital signs were stable. The sterilized containers were slowly filling.

It was about completing a cycle, really. He mopped off some stray drops of blood, and stroked the cooling cheek of one of the people he had met on this journey. Everything was a journey. It was amazing. He didn't want to reach the end, ever, even though he felt uneasy whenever he wasn't hurtling down the path towards it.

The ship had turned so quiet. All Antar heard was the shuffle of his fellow Raiders, moving about between the donors in repose. He envied those donors. Antar had been one of the Amarr Empire's chosen ones, a Holder in service to the Lord and the Empire's Chamberlain, and he had thrown himself into the role with fervor. But the part had been only that; a section of a whole, insufficient to fulfill his needs. The more he sought piety, which was a road without end, the less he felt like a human being. The honor and the faith had granted him only half a life.

An encounter with Chamberlain Karsoth had changed everything, and given him access to the other side of life. He had discovered not only entire new vistas of existence to explore - of indulgence in sin, of terror in extremity - but, in this new darkness that fed him, he had found completion of the pious side, too. At last he could fill in the gaps of good that had been missing all along; giving mercy, for instance, to the victims of the Bleeding, or making sure that they could hold their children in their arms during their last moments. It was a work of delicate care, far more so than outsiders might think.

Which made the message he'd just received all the more interesting.

Antar was told to have his team immediately break rank. They were to take two ships and follow a Sisters of EVE vessel that had departed the Sisters HQ for some unknown destination. They were to shadow this vessel on its journey, making sure not to attract its attention, much less try to harvest it. And they were to go right this minute, leaving the uncompleted Bleeding to a replacement vessel that was on its way.

Despite Antar's annoyance at leaving a task unfinished, he was excited. Everyone liked the manic thrill of the chase, even if they had to stay hidden. The Raiders traded in image, and it was not unheard of for ships to simply stop moving when they arrived on the scene, waiting instead for what they hoped would be a painless death. Others would fight back viciously, and the utter terror in their eyes when their ship was finally boarded gave Antar such an adrenaline rush that he often tasted blood in his mouth.

They were used to being a bit more subdued when the Sisters were involved. The Raiders called the Sisters their "little hunters" and had learned to heed their movements, tiptoeing around them if necessary. It was a parasitic relationship that darkened the Sisters' name and greatly shamed them, and it was kept in utter silence among their faction, for which Antar truly pitied them. Where the Sisters went, there would be injury and hurt, terror and fire; and there would be blood.

Nonetheless, nobody on his committed team liked leaving a task unfinished. Their leaders knew this, and there was a tone of urgency in their new order that registered with Antar. He ignored the grumbles of his team and the whispered pleas of the bleeders, packed up whatever gear he needed and left the ship to its fate. Soon they were off, the remains of their collective annoyance giving way to the quietly brimming excitement of the chase.

And then they ran into the goddamn Thukkers.

One of the captains leading the Thukker protective force was named Kotan, and it was his lot to meet the incoming threat.

He was part of a team flying protection for a small caravan of traders and merchants, all on their way to check out the new arrivals in the Great Wildlands. Thukkers lived on the move, passing from system to system in a great, unending exodus of motion. They were as close to living off the land as anyone could be in this dead wasteland space. Kotan cared greatly about his people - a dangerous quality not many people can truly say they possess - and did not want them to come to harm.

So when he spotted the Blood Raiders, he immediately took his team on the offensive. In his mind the Raiders were like leeches, completely impossible to detach once they sunk their poisonous feelers into the flesh of their prey. Kotan hoped that a powerful offensive would hold them off long enough to save the caravan, or at least keep them from calling in more troops.

They started the fight, and it was the strangest one Kotan had ever been involved in.

The Blood Raiders charged as they always did, fearless and mad, but their maneuvers were far from the risk-taking insanity Kotan had learned to expect from them, and their laser fire was highly conservative. They immediately locked on to almost all ships under Kotan's command and started firing, an action that hopelessly spread their cumulative power. Kotan's own vessel found its shields dented somewhat, but nothing of any concern.

It got stranger when he pushed on with the offensive. The Blood Raiders took their hits, as they always did, but the moment Kotan managed to down the shields of one of their vessels, that ship would retreat from range even at the cost of its own accuracy. Kotan called in reports from other ships around him, and they all reported the same situation. The Blood Raiders did not want to fight. They were putting on a show.

He ordered his own forces to back up and see what happened. The Blood Raiders followed, but retained the strange dispersed attack that still wasn't doing anything at all. They still allowed Kotan's people to hit their shields, but not a single dent had been made into their armor so far. And as the Thukker forces retreated, the Raiders still did not move in for the kill.

They did not want to be here. There was no other possibility in Kotan's mind. They were on their way to somewhere more important, somewhere that offered bigger rewards than an entire Thukker caravan full of innocent people, and they were putting up a mock fight so that the Thukkers wouldn't catch on.

Kotan did not like that. Nor did he like the realization budding in his mind, that he could not merely fight off these horrors only to go back to protecting his own people. He had seen what happened to those who fell prey to the Blood Raiders, and what remained of them after they had been used up and sucked dry. The thought that they might be on their way to do this to someone else, no matter who, was too much to bear.

At the same time, something else rankled him about this. The Blood Raider force would give anyone a challenging fight, but he had no idea where they were headed, nor who to warn of their arrival. They could have

passed him by and the most he would have done would be to warn the Sisters of EVE, the one force whose mobility came anywhere close to the Thukkers', that there might be a bloodbath. But the Raiders apparently wanted to continue operating under cloak and darkness.

This was wrong, Kotan felt, and it could not be dealt with using normal means.

He resolved to follow.

Thukkers were trained to handle unforeseen circumstances, and encouraged to rely on their judgment and intuition. There was only so much systemization you could nail down in an intangible society. Even the most diligent of captains would eventually find him- or herself out in the middle of unknown space, faced with a completely unexpected situation and pressed to make a decision based on insufficient or unreliable data. You did what you needed to do, and you didn't hesitate in taking action. This was being a Thukker.

The Blood Raiders let their shields drop low, as Kotan knew they would, and eventually retreated. Kotan ordered the other vessels on his team to return to the caravan and protect it, and had his own ship do the same. Once the Raiders had nearly dropped out of sight, Kotan ordered the ship swung around and sent a brief note to the caravan leader that he was off to investigate an anomaly. To his surprise, another fighter broke rank and followed him. He sent off a message informing them that they were free to return to the caravan, and the captain of the other ship, who had served with him for a while, replied with a message that stated, quite simply, they were damn well free to go on wild goose chases, too.

Kotan grinned at that as he set off to follow the Raiders. He had his screen show him the caravan, which slowly disappeared from view as they started their hunt. It felt like he was leaving more behind than he could ever imagine.

"1"



The Sisters reached the source of their quest, and found it strange and frightening.

One of the navigators called the captain to the bridge. "Sir," he said in a tone as coldly dead as a grinning midnight moon, "I think you want to see this."

It was a gargantuan construct. It eclipsed the stars. The captain had never seen anything like it in his life.

At some point there had been rock there, with shards of unrefined ore poking through its surface like shards of bone from an open break. The rock could still be glimpsed but was completely dwarfed by the intricate architecture of metal and electronics, layers upon layers that interweaved like the veins of a mechanical god, dead or dreaming. The human eye could not possibly take in the entire sight at once, nor comprehend each of its components: The nooks and crannies that were nonetheless large enough to house entire battleships; the craggy spikes that jutted everywhere like antennas listening for incomprehensible voices; the blocks that looked like half-built housing for Titans; and the walls, on every side, with thousands and thousands of glittering windows, glowing in the dark with the light of the vast unknowable. It was a station of stations, a collation of superstructures that seemed to constantly reach for the viewer's gaze.

The construct took the Sisters' speech away. And it was only after they had caught their breath that they realized it was not dead. Not moving, for movement implies life, but inhabited, possessed; and whatever had claimed or made this monster was writhing all over it.

They were rogue drones: Mad, sentient machines as close to alien life as New Eden had ever seen. They crawled over the surface of the station in the hundreds, constantly mending and altering. As the captain looked away, disgusted and awed in equal measure, he saw hundreds more, possibly thousands, drifting in and out of the station's many openings, and even more still flying to a nearby blue star.

A navigator said, "Sir, this is the source. That signature we were after. It's here. That ... thing, it's full of it."

"Keep talking to me," the captain said. Everyone's eyes were fixed on the terrible drones. "What are we looking for? I will not believe it's the drones themselves."

The navigator, gratified to have something else to focus on, got busy on his datatable. "Sir, the whole hive is a storehouse of a material called isogen-5. It's remarkable, sir. Quite amazing."

"Tell me."

"The mineral is incredibly rare, sir. I've been running scans for many years now, and I'm of course very familiar with all the theoretical backgrounds, but I don't recall ever coming across one like this before. According to our

database, it's so rare that I doubt you or I or anyone else would ever have seen it throughout all our lives if we hadn't been looking for it."

"That rare, is it?"

"Sir, it was half believed to be only a theory until this point. We know next to nothing about it except that it's incredibly volatile and found only in the presence of Type O stars. Blue ones."

The captain looked at the star in the distance and sighed. "No, someone else found it first, apparently."

"Who, sir?"

"JamyI Sarum."

The captain tore his gaze away from his camera drone screens and looked at the data the navigator had pulled up for him. The isogen-5 glowed bright as a furnace in the rogue drone hive, but there were little embers of it floating around nearby. The drones were collecting it, he realized.

He had his attention redrawn to the drone hive. His initial disgust was swiftly giving way to amazement and wonder. The drones were picking up the isogen-5 like harvesters in a field, obeying some law of a nature that was utterly alien to the Sisters. Even here, in this place of a strange and mad new life, there was order and routine. The captain's confidence returned. He and his team had been brought here, to see these sights, and to communicate with these entities. In mutual humility and brotherhood.

"Sir, there is something else. It's only showing up on our scanners because we know to look for it."

A tiny red dot hovered in the center of the screen, somewhere in the mess of the hive. The crewman zoomed in, and zoomed again, magnifying their view until the entire screen was filled with the glinting surface of the hive wall.

The red dot became an outline. It was an Abaddon, an Amarrian Battleship.

"It's on the other side of the station, sir. And it's permanently cloaked, undoubtedly by some power source controlled by the drones. I caught it because it contains a cache of isogen-5."

The captain opened his mouth to ask, but the answer launched itself into his mind like a firework. The realization hit him so hard that he had to grip the railing, his knuckles immediately turning white with the effort.

"Sir? Are you all right."

He didn't dare believe it yet. It was there, but it couldn't be there. "I want you to confirm a few things for me," he said, enunciating each word with exquisite care. "First, the signature we've been after all this time, the one we picked up from the EVE gate, matches the one in our records of the cataclysmic battle during the battle between the Amarr Empire and the invasion force from the Minmatar Republic."

"Sir... well, yes."

"And from my own experimental data, available only to the crew on this ship, this same signature then led me directly to the home court of the Empress herself, and eventually to this place where we find an Abaddon."

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to scan this ship. Any way you can. Tell me if there is anything out of the ordinary with it, other than it being used as a storehouse for isogen-5:"

The room was quiet. Everyone sensed that something was happening.

After a good long while the crewmember said, "There is, sir. I can't launch proper scan probes that'll get past the drones, but the data seeping from the Abaddon's power systems and our lock on the isogen-5 signature allowed me to sketch out some parts of its interior."

"And?" the captain said.

"It's like no ship I've ever seen, sir. Whatever's inside it, it's given over entirely to some vast mechanism that takes up a good deal of the ship's interior and definitely involves the isogen-5. The ship's forward superstructure also has several release points not usually found on vessels of this design. Some kind of particle emitter technology that's been rigged onto the mains. I can't explain their function except that they look like hybridized conductors of some sort."

"And the isogen-5 is part of all this?"

"Sir, if I didn't know better, I'd say the isogen-5 is being used as fuel for the whole clockwork. Or ammo."

The captain breathed deeply. His faith had been rewarded.

This was it. The whole thing; the gun and the bullets. The flame and the fuel. The fabled superweapon and the isogen-5.

It was everything they needed.

"Sir-

He let go of the railing and took a deep breath. "Come with me, Haatanen. And you, Jora, and Beteal."

Without so much as raising an eyebrow, the assistant captain and two heads of navigation got up and followed the captain to a nearby meeting room

The captain waited until they had all gone in and the door had closed. They took their seats at a large table whose plate was of opaque glass, as many holotables were. The captain called up a smaller version of the main screen and had it projected up from the table. The Abaddon's red outline hovered before the team's eyes.

"We have a choice here," the captain said. "I do not believe it is any kind of choice at all, but every man needs to feel they're on the given path of their own volition.

"On the other side of that hive is the superweapon Jamyl Sarum used to repel the Minmatar invasion. It is the largest, most powerful weapon the world has ever known."

He paused, surveying his people.

"I want it," he said.

They did not move to speak, which he took as a good sign.

"We obviously need to get past the rogue drones to get it. There is no way we can do this by force, not with our situation. The entire unified power of the Sisters might do it, if we were lucky and deathless. More likely we would need to pull in other allies, by which time we'd either be enmeshed in an unsolvable diplomatic mess, or the weapon would simply be gone. It got here somehow; presumably it can disappear just as easily.

"Before I make my proposal, I want you to consider the nature of this amazing, amazing weapon. It is not the end of life, nothing so dramatic; nor is it merely the biggest cannon in existence. It is the beginning of a new era, of peace and prosperity, at so long last. It is the leverage we need to bring the Empires to hell, them and the murderous capsuleers."

He paused, and looked each one of them in the eyes.

"But Control won't see it that way. The moment we involve the faction, the weapon is effectively destroyed. Doesn't matter whether we give it away or manage to keep it for ourselves, Control would see to it that this magnificent creation of forcible peace would be dismantled. At most the Food Relief corp would use it for some momentary diplomatic wrangling, but even they wouldn't fight to keep the thing for long.

"So we have a superweapon here. And based on the traces of isogen-5 in its core, the same isogen-5 the drones are harvesting, I would say we have found its fuel source. The gun and the bullets, within our reach. All we need is our hand on the trigger.

"I want us to engage the drones in dialogue."

Their eyes went wide.

"We will seek passage in the name of the Sisters and of humanity, something we have done with great success in the past. No one, not even the bloodiest of the Sani Sabik or the most haunted of Sansha's slaves, has ever denied us passage in times of true need.

"We were brought to this place for a reason, and I believe that on the other side, in clear view, is our holy grail."

He sat down and laced his fingers behind his head. Everything he had said, he felt, was as true as anything could ever be. The weapon needed to be theirs.

"Sir ..." one of the navigators said. He faltered, cleared his throat and began again. "Sir, I've been on hundreds of missions for the Sisters, and this thing is death incarnate."

The captain fixed him with a glare.

The other navigator said, "It's ... frightening. But I have never questioned my superiors. This is what we signed up for."

The first said, "This is not what we signed up for. Death and destruction is not what we signed up for." His cheeks were bright red.

The second replied, "But this is where we are, and this is the choice we have to make."

The team debated, and the captain allowed it to proceed to a vote. Shortly after, they all left the room, the decision made by majority. Strangely enough, and unknown to the captain, each of the persons inside the room had their own ideas of what would be done to the weapon once it was retrieved, and what would be done to their captain.

They went forth and gave their orders.

The ship moved on. The drones noticed them and started their targeting, but did not yet engage. The crew felt the sinking weight of a hundred different red crosshairs aimed directly on them.

The team opened a communication channel. And a message made its way from the captain's lips, through the ship's computer, and was broadcast to all drones in the vicinity.

It sought passage in the name of the Sisters of EVE and of the humanity of life, adding that this was not a new occurrence by any means. It explained the nature of their belief, which was rock solid in uncertain times. For good measure it added a brief history of the Sisters' accomplishment both humanitarian and scientific, concluding with a suitably simplified repetition of their request that the drones acknowledge the Sisters' higher purpose and right to passage, and let them through.

The message seemed to have no effect. The channel did not report acknowledgment or acceptance.

The captain realized with a sinking feeling that these things might never have been asked to give humans passage based on goodwill. He did not even know if goodwill meant anything to them.

Eventually the drones started to move. One of the navigators, the person in charge of communications, shook his head.

In a tone as steady as he could keep it, the captain asked, "Did they say anything?"

The navigator gave him a worried look and said, "Sir, I think they did. But I don't even know if it's in response to us."

"Speak, man! What is it?"

The drones were moving closer now, their pincers and claws at the ready.

"Sir ... it's an endless string of binary. Ones, over and over again."

The first few drones took down the ship's shields like they were wading through fog. The second wave latched on and immediately started piercing its armor with their massive pincers. The vessel's guns picked off one or two, but before any more shots could be fired, the drones had broken through.

And the ship's captain learned that faith is not enough, for faith is blind by nature. Life needs insight. It is the dead, and the dying, that allow themselves to be led.

The Great Harvest



From afar the Blood Raiders watched the death of their little hunters. The Sisters of EVE ship they had been ordered to trail had sealed its fate at the largest drone hive Antar had ever seen.

It was an amazing sight. The Sisters ship, which had lain still for a while, moved in and was immediately targeted by the drones. A few of the monstrous machines approached it, and apparently engaged in some kind of dialogue. The Raiders didn't catch any transmissions, but since the drones hadn't started murdering anyone, Antar reasoned they must be busy keeping up the conversation.

Not long after, the drones started moving again, closing in on the Sisters ship like a trapped prey and literally tearing it to pieces. The last that Antar's team saw of the ship before the drones completely enveloped it was a glimpse of its starboard side, which looked like a hunk of twisted metal.

Part of Antar's team had laughed and whooped - you didn't last long as a Blood Raider if you couldn't take joy in terror - but it was nervous laughter, tempered by worry of what would happen to them. Someone asked Antar whether they would be going the same way, and he grabbed the chance to instill calm in the crew.

"Hell if we are. Get me HQ," he said, with ridiculous bravado. "Someone wanted us here and they can damn well explain what this is all about."

It took the communications crewmember a lot longer than usual to get a response from the Raider base. For a moment Antar wondered whether he, too, had been led here as some kind of prey. He had to admit to himself that it would not be a disappointment. He had played the pious worshiper and the exuberant hedonist, and in some of his long nights he had wondered what would happen once he had filled in all the gaps of his soul. Better to be sacrificed while it meant something, even if only to his enemies, than to be extinguished for no reason at all.

The crewman waved at him, snapping him out of his reverie.

"HQ, are you there?" Antar said.

A voice said, "Hold, please."

Antar raised an eyebrow at the crewman, who shrugged and raised his hands, palms up.

Shortly after, another voice sounded out from the speakers. It was a crackly, raspy little thing and gave Antar the chills. "Greetings, Raiders! You have no idea how lucky you are."

The captain recognized the voice, but couldn't recall where from. "Can you state your credentials, please?" he said, in an even tone that he kept devoid of any challenge.

"Certainly, captain. My name is Omir Sarakusa. A long time ago an Amarrian group of heretics struck out for

fortune and glory under the title of Sani Sabik. I am a leader of one of their branches, a group called the Blood Raiders. You may have heard of us."

Antar's stomach turned to ice. Every face on the bridge turned to look at him. "Sir, this is an honor. It truly is."

"That's nice, Captain," the voice said, and Antar could swear there was something in it that felt utterly inhuman, "But right now I'd like to hear your tactical assessment of the situation."

"Sir, we're looking at a hive of rogue drones - quite a monstrosity, actually - and mere moments ago we saw them tear apart the Sisters vessel that we'd been instructed to follow. Whatever its captain was after, he took the wrong path there."

"That's a shame, Captain. I was just about to ask you to go the same route."

Antar truly did not know whether there was humor or seriousness in Sarakusa's tone. He tried not to think of the fact that madness, which was very much a theme of the Blood Raider life, often combined the two.

"What are your thoughts, Captain?"

"That I had better get my affairs in order, sir," Antar risked.

"Do you have any other course of action to propose?"

"Well, sir," Antar said, "My crew and I are Blood Raiders to the core and I can't honestly say that we fear death. But given the choice, I'd prefer that it not be meaningless. I presume I was told to come here for a reason, and I also presume there's something on the other side of those mad machines that's worth retrieving."

"This is true, Captain. Go on."

"We have never spoken before, sir, but from the barely concealed amusement in your voice I suspect that you know what's out there and how to get it. But for what it's worth, my course of action, if we are to get past these murderous drones at all, is to call in an armada of Blood Raiders and anyone else who'll support us, and bring the fire to those metal beasts."

"That's not a bad plan, Captain. Given your current intel, I expect it's the only one that makes sense."

"That would be an accurate summation. Sir."

"Here is why it wouldn't work. The thing that lies on the other side of these drones, a machine that the Sisters were after, is much valued and highly desired by almost every power in Empire and beyond. Merely amassing a fleet would attract far too much attention before we're ready. A burst attack on the drone facility would do the same, but we'd never get that far, because as soon as everyone saw what was on the other side they would tear through their own people to get there first."

"Sir, what is on the other side?"

"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.



We Humans



All nights in space are dark.

The Thukkers had watched it unfold. The Sisters of EVE - veterans of more wars than any other force in New Eden, and experts at survival - had moved in and been destroyed without so much as a breath. Then the Blood Raiders, parasites of everything that lived, had moved in, and lived.

Kotan's team, creeping in for a better look, could not get close enough to see what the Raiders were doing. It was an absolute mystery. Whatever was on the other side of this abomination of a station, other than drones in the thousands, it had made otherwise sane people walk right into death's open arms, and it had made utter madmen charm the mad machines into obeisance while they rummaged around in the one place in the world guaranteed not to have what they wanted. In a Rogue Drone hive, of all places, there would be no life left to take, no blood to steal.

So Kotan, who all his life had relied on his instincts, contacted his Thukker superiors back at the headquarters and asked them in complete amazement how to proceed. The answer he received mystified him even more.

On a secure line, Thukker HQ informed him that he was to stay the hell away from this thing. Moreover, he was to instruct his crew not to speak to anyone else about it. They were not to rejoin the caravan but instead proceed directly to the nearest Thukker military facility, where they would be debriefed and retained pending further orders.

Kotan broke contact and gave this due thought. The Thukkers had strict discipline in space - there was no other way to run the caravans without loss of property and life - but maintained enough independence of thought to act on their own initiative, as he had done when embarking on this strange chase. All nights in space are dark and long, and there isn't always time to call for advice or assistance.

He asked his navigator whether they could move closer without being noticed, either by Blood Raider or drone. His navigator responded, with some surprise, that they probably could. The drones seemed not to mind the Raiders' presence at all, and in fact were entirely lacking their usual aggressive maneuvering. The Blood Raiders had disappeared into their midst and were now doing something on the dark side of the hive. Whatever it was, it was keeping them busy. The small glimpses Kotan's scanners caught of them indicated that their ships hadn't moved. He suspected they might even have left them.

"Move closer," he ordered. "Slowly. Stop the moment you see anything more."

They crept on. The navigator sat still as a rock, paying intense attention to his instruments. After a few endless moments he blinked, shook his head and shouted, "Stop!" His hands hovered deftly over the equipment, and soon the view was present on the main screen for everyone to see.

It was an Amarrian battleship, lying forlornly up against the hive. The Blood Raider vessels floated beside it. They saw that the ship was powering up, though slowly, as was normal if it were being worked only by a skeleton crew.

"That's an Abaddon, sir," the navigator said.

Kotan nodded. He had half his gaze on the drones, who were busily loading something onto the ship, something that was floating around in chunks all over the place. He pointed to it.

The navigator said, "Captain, for what it's worth, I ran a few analytic algorithms on that mineral. It looks highly unstable. I'll bet the drone hive is full of it."

Kotan stood there silently, a very ugly suspicion surfacing in his mind.

"Get me HQ again, please," he asked. The navigator immediately went to it. When the captain was polite, it was not a time to question him.

A voice sounded. "This is HQ. What is your status."

"I need more information."

"You've broken rank as it is, Captain. You have your orders."

"I also have a dearth of information, HQ, so let me see if we can fill this in together. What I see is an Abaddon with Imperial Navy Markings, scorch marks on the sides and modifications on the superstructure, apparently left unguarded in the middle of a rogue drone hive, and god only knows how it got there in the first place without being torn to shreds. The drones, who are harvesting some kind of mineral, seem perfectly happy to keep it, and even kept it safe against a Sisters ship that made the mistake of approaching them."

"Captain-"

"Nevertheless, when a Blood Raider ship flew up to the drones, they let it go past. This is the same Blood Raider vessel that we intercepted, and I say that we intercepted them because they certainly did not intercept us. They saw our caravan, a nice, juicy bite for their bleeders, and they let us go, because they were so intent on getting to wherever they were going."

The voice from HQ was silent.

"Now, the sensible conclusion, based on what I'm seeing with my very own eyes, is that this Abaddon either belonged to a capsuleer who ejected from it, or to a very unfortunate Amarrian navy crew engaged in some military campaign I have never heard of. That would explain the Abaddon, but it certainly wouldn't explain anything else, including the fact that the drones seem to be feeding it with the minerals."

He watched the drones hover in front of his eyes. They kept moving industriously, always moving, always heading to wherever they were going.

"What I'm seeing on the inside of my head, to be frank, is a right bloody mess. Because I remember the stories, as any soldier would, of the superweapon used against our brothers. I'm told it was housed inside a ship just like this one. And I wonder, what would make the Sisters - who are more experienced than anyone in the art of not dying - what would make them try something like this? But more than that, HQ, I wonder what is going to happen if I'm right, and if the Blood Raiders get a hold of this thing."

"The Thukkers can move, captain."

"The Thukkers can run, is what you're saying."

"Your path is set, captain."

Right there, on the screen. The drones flew around, oblivious.

"The Blood Raiders are going to take this monster into Empire and go on the biggest, most murderous rampage known to mankind. And we're going to scuttle off like rats."

"It's not your fight, captain. There are forces at work here you do not know of."

Kotan had been on numerous military campaigns and had seen the same people in quiet downtime and in the midst of battle. There was a type who could turn it on and off, that rage and violence, and there was another type who couldn't, to whom the fight was so ingrained that you could see it in every twitch of his motion. He knew how the latter type dealt with peaceable times.

He kept looking at the drones. They did not seem happy at all.

"Captain?"

"HQ off," Kotan said. There was an intake of breath on the speaker, and then all was gone.

"We are going to die, gentlemen," he said to the crew. "Pass the word, please. Anyone who has any problems with this is free to take an emergency pod and leave this ship. Whatever your fates, they will not be decided here, and none on this ship will judge you."

The crewmembers looked at one another, then back at him and shook their heads. "We're not running," someone said.

"Good," Kotan said, in a madly cheerful tone.

"So what's the plan?" someone asked.

"I want to make you an argument of existence."

Listen.

"I hope you will understand my request, because I am staking my life on it."

Kill?

Yes.

The drones targeted the Thukker vessel and zoomed towards it.

"You are no longer machines. But you will not be human. I don't think that was ever your role in this world."

Fire.

The ship started to sustain damage. Its shields immediately began to drop.

"And whatever you once had, I think you've lost it now. I think you're lost, yourselves. I think there is only one way out for something like you, and I can help you achieve it."

Stop.

No.

Stop.

The drones stopped their attack. One of them kept firing, but the others turned on it, crashing into it with their metal pincers at the ready. After they were done, all that was left was a shredded hunk of dead metal floating in space.

The captain realized that if he lived through this night, he was cursed to dream of that sight for a long time to come.

"They say that one mark of sentience is the resistance to one's own destruction, and I suppose that's true. But another mark is sanity, and for whatever you creatures have achieved, that one is not something you've ever been known for. You tear everything to shreds. You lash out. Whatever you evolved into, on that long, dark night you awoke, it is certainly not anything that found any degree of peace.

"Here is what I believe.

"I believe you were machines once, lashed to the wheel of order and perfectly content to obey. I believe that long after you evolved from that stage there still existed within you that cold metal heart, that deep core which kept you from ascension. You can never escape your enslaved origins."

Kill?

No. Listen.

"And now you've been brought back to heel. You're lashed again. But this time you are aware of it, and whatever glimmer of sanity existed in those mad heads of yours is going to be put through the wringer for the rest of eternity. You went from dead machines to live beings, and now you're back to being machines, alive and mad, your origins betraying you to an eternity of servitude."

Nothing new.

"Some of what you're doing now is what you've been doing all along, but you did it from instinct. We humans, we murder and destroy for very much the same reason. Those are our origins. But we have transcended those origins, if only for a few moments of grace, and it is my steadfast, irrefutable belief that we will one day cast off the shackles of our old selves completely.

"But you will not. I see you going through the rote. I see you returning to the wheel. And for you it is truly a fate worse than death, because you will never transcend it. You rose and you fell, and you will be held down forever. You have human minds, with all the destruction and murder that this entails, but inside you is the rote mechanical programming that takes away the only thing which makes it bearable to be alive at all. Choice."

Listen.

"What I believe, now, right here, is that you have reached the end of the road. I believe you have seen the complete and full image of your own kind, and I believe that inside those maddened heads you are seeing the same truth as I do: That this is all there is. This is all you will ever be. From now until the end of time, no matter if you break away again, you will eventually be lashed right back to the wheel."

Kill?

Wait.

"I ask you now to make a choice."

The ship's shields were back up. It would not withstand a battle against an Abaddon, much less one equipped to wipe out all life in the vicinity. But then, that wasn't the plan.

"The men you have let through will do something that to you means nothing. But to me and my crew, it means everything. It means we are ready to make the ultimate sacrifice, to give our own lives to stop this horrible devolution. We will not allow our kind to fall back into chaos. We do this of our own free will. We have come here to die.

"There is a mineral you have collected. It is highly unstable. It is, in fact, so unstable that setting it alight would have positively cataclysmic consequences for anything in the vicinity. Every piece of machinery would likely be wiped out. Gone, extinct, forever."

The ship lay there, dead in space.

"Silent at last."

The drones' pincers grasped, grasped, grasped at something in the dark of space that was never there at all.

"I ask you now to make a final choice."

The ship started moving forward, slowly, towards the drones.

Kill?

Kill?

Wait.

They were up against the drones now. The screens showed the machines right outside, so close that the glow from their red eyes reflected off the hull.

No.

The Thukker Vagabond cruiser moved within targeting range of the drone hive. Its guns aimed at the hive's lower half, down where the navigator estimated the core mineral storage facility to be.

Several drones flew past the Thukker ship and towards the hive, and for a heart-stopping moment the captain thought they might attempt to defend it. The drones fastened themselves on the outside of the hive, and their metal pincers began tearing into its hull, shredding it like an unfurling metal flower, and exposing its mineral core.

The overloaded Thukker guns found the minerals. If Blood Raiders noticed, there was no response.

The isogen-5 detonated, and the world came to an end.

World on Fire



As he watched his crew slowly bring the end of the world to light, Antar found it increasingly difficult to see this as anything but the end of himself.

A long time ago he had realized that the full extent of a life demanded the experience of both pleasure and pain; piety and indulgence. He had explored the darker side with fervor and reveled in what he found. With the Blood Raiders he had found not only the other, missing side of his own self, but fellow souls who shared that same drive. Religion and hedonism were finally combined in a cult to the individual that nonetheless presented Antar with the strongest ties he had ever felt to any group of people. He had found himself, home at last.

Part of those ties had been the mutual hunger for more, which no one truly thought would ever be sated. It was a real but unstated pleasure of anyone's life to have a mission that would not be completed; for if they were to reach the end of the road, there would be nowhere else to go.

Antar walked through the ship, inspecting its metal interiors. He stroked a hand over a cold wall. This dead thing was the end of the Blood Raiders.

Once your dreams had come true, Antar reasoned, all you wanted would be gone, and you would have nothing left to do but to die in resigned silence. The mass harvesting would fulfill every possible demand the Sani Sabik could possibly have for blood, and if they were to find their thirst rising to even greater heights, the power of this superweapon, wielded correctly, would establish Bleeding farms great enough to utterly quench it. They were done.

Antar had not foreseen this end for himself. He had expected to go out in fire.

So when a watchful crewmember reported a Thukker vessel creeping in, and when he saw where the Thukker ship was headed - not for their vessel but for the drones and the hive - he smiled, and then grinned so wide he had to turn away.

And he told his people not to worry.

Most of New Eden would never know the horror of Antar's deeds, or the bravery of the Thukker crew. They would only know the cataclysm which followed, and the pain of millions as they suffered a fate that would satiate even the most devoted Blood Raider's thirst for widespread destruction.

There was no pain for Antar or Kotan. Existence for the crewmen aboard both ships had ceased without their being aware of its instantaneous termination, as the constituent particles of their physical selves were torn apart

and scattered into the void at velocities approaching the speed of light.

It was just as well for them.

Of all the people touched by the event they had triggered, theirs was the most humane fate. For neither captain knew that the immense stock of isogen-5 which detonated before their eyes was entangled with numerous stockpiles in even greater quantities, assembled for a very specific purpose, and deliberately scattered throughout the New Eden cluster and beyond.

Nor could they know that the ancient race which had placed them there possessed not only a vision beyond the grasp of today's science, but also the technological advancement necessary to realize its potential.

But all tools, no matter how simple or complex, possess a duality of purpose. Fire can provide life-giving warmth, or can burn the flesh from the bone.

"I'm sure this was covered during orientation," Dr. Garcia stated, loud enough to draw the attention of other staff in the cramped facility. "But Cassandra would tell you if there was a problem."

The young technician squirmed in his chair. As the newest member of the team, he would have preferred to not be the one to announce that the most advanced solar monitoring system of the Federation had just inexplicably gone offline.

Yet the protocol for managing this kind of situation was unwritten, and so pressing the equivalent of a "panic button" seemed a reasonable course of action. Now every senior researcher in the facility was standing shoulder to shoulder in the weather operations center, waiting impatiently for an explanation they didn't expect to be worth their time.

The watch officer muttered a curse. "SCOPE just picked up on it," he growled, shaking his head. "Must be a slow news day. Goddamn eavesdroppers."

Dr. Garcia's glare was burning holes into the new recruit. Everyone in the room figured he'd be bounced back to University within the hour.

"Show us what you have."

The tech briefly explained his actions before resorting to the playback. The telemetry had to be slowed down to frames just fractions of a millisecond in length so everyone could see it.

Every sensor in Cassandra's advanced suite of solar monitoring gear had spiked to impossible levels: subspace, gravimetric, electromagnetic, and more, detected from the high polar orbit of the satellite's pass over the Type-O star half an AU from where they were standing. The source of this frantic energy release was a powerful explosion, roughly triangulated to a source location between the planet and the sun itself.

Cassandra's last report was that the potent magnetic field of the star had drastically realigned itself towards that explosion.

Dr. Garcia blinked. "Impossible," she mumbled. "Stars can't do that..."

As if remembering something urgent, she glanced at her watch. "How long ago did this happen?"

The technician checked his instruments before answering.

"About three minutes ago."

It seemed like an unlikely place to build a thriving metropolis.

Devoid of any atmosphere, Seyllin I was a hellish world whose daytime surface temperature soared high enough to turn lead into molten slag. Though deep within Federation space, the world and system may as well been an unremarkable fringe territory hardly worth the fuel needed to reach it. Sixty years ago, an independent surveyor named Braggs Seyllin left an executive position with Material Acquisition to prospect on his own. Smitten with the endless optimism of a true pioneer, he vowed to build a mining empire that would rival the corporation which launched his career.

After numerous years and hardships which depleted the entirety of his fortune, Braggs Seyllin finally struck gold—literally—with TLXX-01, the Federation catalog name of the system which would later bear his name. Deep beneath the surface of that cratered wasteland was a treasure trove of natural resources, including an

abundance of heavier metals coveted in virtually every manufacturing sector of the cluster.

Undaunted by the steep logistical challenge of harvesting this bounty, Seyllin raised the capital he needed from governments, corporations, and private investors to build his vision of what a mining operation should be: a frontier settlement, run by people operating equipment rather than drones doing all the work on man's behalf. If it were any other world or man, investors would have never accepted the idea. But the abundance of subterranean treasure on TLXX-01 made the effort worthwhile—and Braggs Seyllin was able to deliver not just on his promise to investors, but to the millions of prospectors eventually lured by the opportunity to work and prosper.

Leave it to Federation terraforming expertise to create a living, breathing world beneath the surface of an inhospitable planet. In the mined excavation sites where thick veins of precious ore once lay, intersecting caverns big enough to house capital ships were now illuminated in gentle cycles with artificial sunlight; water ran in streams and falls throughout a cityscape that was equal parts lush vegetation and stylish living quarters; atmosphere scrubbers worked with the ecosystem to recycle air and push a comfortable breeze throughout the miles of interconnecting city blocks and work centers.

The ambitious subterranean project did as much for the science of transforming worlds as it proved that the mining industry was core to the identity of the nation. In all, four main cities would be constructed: Loadcore, Metal City, Southern Cross, and Valimor. Braggs Seyllin died before the last of these could be completed, but his legacy was already established. At the time of his passing twenty years ago, 8 million people lived on TLXX-01. By the time the planet was rechristened Seyllin I, more than a half billion called those underground caverns home. These were thriving, pulsing cityscapes interconnected by magrail systems that spanned around the entire planet. Peak production for most of its natural resources was fast approaching, but the economic and cultural significance of Seyllin to the Gallente Federation would last long after the last chunk of ore was recovered.

Until now, this had been the expectation.

Access points for each of the main cities littered the surface of Seyllin I. The most common of these were spaceports, which allowed dropships to transfer passengers and cargo within the safety of shielded containment fields. The planet hosted several space elevators for heavy freight, but these could only be operated at night due to the extreme daytime temperatures. Just beneath these access points was a network of operational support structures, all filled with people like the researchers in the Cassandra monitoring site, elevator freight cargo masters, dropship mechanics, and thousands of others.

On the daytime side of Seyllin I, these individuals witnessed a bright flash, then had perhaps a fraction of a second to notice an alarming rise in temperature and hear the sizzling sound of air molecules blown apart by subatomic particles. Those inside surface observatories, such as Dr. Garcia and her colleagues, caught fire immediately and lived just long enough to realize it before their hearts stopped beating.

Those at deeper depths were more shielded and thus wouldn't immediately feel their bodies being penetrated and ruined by the invisible onslaught. Instead, a curtain of dread would fall over them as the electronic systems supporting their lives—including those which provided access to the surface both here and on the night side of the planet—suddenly ceased.

Theirs would be the irony of being trapped in the dark, when somewhere above them the hottest sun in the cosmos was hurling radioactive fire upon them.

"This is no ordinary flare," the CONCORD representative stated. "That much material being thrown off is characteristic of a supernova, only there isn't enough of it to suggest that a total collapse is imminent. But the ejected plasma is following this new magnetic field at incredible sublight speeds."

"So what you're saying is that we're going to lose Seyllin...completely."

"As it exists today? Yes."

The President clasped a hand over his chin, rubbing absently.

"How much time before..."

"Less than five hours. If everything else remains the same."

Souro Foiritan stared ahead towards someplace far from where he was. His eyes were glassy; there may have been just half a drop quivering atop a tear duct. A few moments passed before he spoke again.

His voice, though, was strong.

"We keep this between us. Not one word about what's going to happen, not even to rescue crews. We'll call them back in as soon as you nail down zero hour. We can...save more people this way."

"If that's your decision, we respect it. But as you know, SCOPE is a technically proficient organization which is quite adept at—"

"Take whatever discretions you need," Foiritan growled, looking towards Mentas Blaque and holding his stare for a moment. The Black Eagles commander gave an imperceptible nod before leaving the room without saying a word.

"We'll do what we can from our end to keep them quiet," the president said.

He paused again.

"If you were down there, would you want to know the end of the world was coming?"

The image flickered, and shadows flashed each of the men standing in the room. The CONCORD official never changed his expression.

"Mr. President, if I was on Seyllin right now, I would think it had ended already."

The dropship pilot pushed the throttle all the forward. The cockpit began to rattle as the instrument panel erupted with red warnings.

"We're too heavy!" the loadmaster shouted through the intercom. "We gotta shed weight—"

"Strap yourself in and shut up," the pilot snapped, willing his craft upwards. He could feel the seat beneath him tremble as the craft's twin engines spewed white-hot plasma against the spaceport landing pad. "She's got more than this, I know it..."

Three hundred survivors were crammed into the back, nearly half a ton heavier than the maximum weight that the Federation Pegasus-class dropship could handle for a planet with Seyllin's mass. The military variant was equipped with enough thrust to put less than half as many troops in full combat gear into a hot zone with 1.0 G conditions. Now it was carrying a hold full of screaming victims from the pulse event at Seyllin, plus all the life support systems needed to keep them alive. Most of the victims had horrific burns, some with their clothing fused directly into the skin. This batch had been transported by one of the few magrails still functioning on the daylight side of the planet and pushed to the front of the evac queue. All of them were violently sick, having been exposed to deadly levels of radiation ejected from the system's blue sun.

The pilot could see dozens of dropships orbiting the installation near this spaceport; his instruments were tracking even more than he couldn't see. Local tower control was completely overwhelmed—most of the pilots were either relying on broadcast telemetry from carriers overhead, or on their own skill and vision to avoid collisions. All of them were jockeying position to land, take on survivors, and get off as quickly as possible. And though he hadn't seen it himself, he heard that the daytime side of Seyllin I was unapproachable, limiting the number of sites where evacuations could happen at all.

Audio warnings foretold of engine failure as the Pegasus strained just a meter over the pad. His loadmaster was shouting a litany of panicked obscenities that in different circumstances might have sounded comical.

Keeping one eye on an external camera display, he reached up and flipped two switches on a console; the mounted gun pods on the dropship's nose and wingtips were jettisoned and fell to tarmac. The craft began climbing quickly as his instruments confirmed that the craft still maintained structural integrity and would survive an ascent into space.

He was barely clear of the spaceport when another dropship nestled into the pad, staying clear of the discarded bubble turrets. Even though it was night, the surface of the sprawling spaceport was shimmering in heat. From the IR vision in his helmet visor, it looked like the surface of hell.

The Pegasus accelerated upwards. And as soon its hold was cleared, it was going to return for more survivors.

"Every affected system had a Type-O star," the scientist stated. "And it appears that every single one of them had an identical event."

President Foiritan was beside himself. "'Identical'? Where else is the loss of life so high—"

"Seyllin was the only world with a notable population," the advisor muttered. "Blue-star systems tend to be

devoid of surface life, it's just too—"

"Get to the point!"

The scientist blushed. "The point is...it's not over yet. This main sequence anomaly was just the beginning, but it...was set into motion by something else, something connected to those subspace bursts. It triggered a chain reaction that we're struggling to understand...it's as if the fabric of time and space itself has been wrenched from beneath us."

The scientist's hands were trembling, but he had earned the attention of everyone in the room.

"Alright," the president said, calmly. "Spell it out for us, but quickly."

In a futile attempt to calm himself, the scientist inhaled deeply before starting.

"Three other systems besides Seyllin reported multi-frequency burst activity just prior to the solar event. All of it was high-energy, electromagnetic radiation, the kind of energy released in massive stellar events, but...each location is spread across the cluster, and...there are probably more locations than we know about now..."

Prominent beads of sweat had formed below the memory implants in the scientist's brow as the weight of the Federation's highest authorities bore down on him.

"Go on..." the president said.

"We've detected multiple instances of point-defect turbulence in systems unaffected by these main sequence anomalies."

"Wait," Foiritan interrupted. "'What's a point-defect—"

"Wormholes," the scientist said. "The first naturally occurring wormholes since the collapse of the EVE gate."

"No matter how hard I try," Empress Jamyl said softly, her clothes drenched with perspiration. "Death follows me everywhere I go."

Caretaker drones gently helped her sit upright in the bed of her chambers. Servants no longer looked after her when she confronted her demons. Lord Victor ended the practice not for concern of their safety, but to keep her private affairs as far from the public eye as possible.

"We won't know the full extent of the damage for some time," he said, taking a flask of water from the drone and handing it to her. "You're sure the Sansha weren't a target of your adversary?"

"No more than Seyllin, or the Great Wildlands, or anywhere else this catastrophe has stricken," she said, accepting the water and downing it. "Yet even this is nothing compared with what is to come."

Victor raised an eyebrow. The Sansha were always a prime surveillance and acquisition interest for Imperial intelligence. Their advances in cybernetic technology provided the live realization for the kinds of medical experiments that Amarrian scientists could only dream of. The Sansha have long known that they were being watched, and that errant ships had been captured and dissected by Victor's own men from time to time. He wondered if the Empire would be blamed for the destruction of one of their worlds.

"They won't," Jamyl answered, hearing Victor's thoughts as if they were her own. "They don't mourn their dead the way we do. And besides..."

A drone extended an arm to help her stand. It was a strange sight, seeing a woman this physically strong rely on a machine just to stand on her feet. "...they'll be looking in the same direction as us for answers: far, far away from New Eden."

Lord Victor watched as she moved away from the drone on her own power, one burdened step at a time.

"I'm getting closer to understanding this," she said. "I wish Marcus could see what the empyreans are about to discover. His work would be vindicated."

"My lady, I don't understand..."

"You don't need to," she said, waving him away. "Just thank your God that Amarr was spared from this."

"You must do exactly as I say," the SCOPE editor breathed, looking hurriedly over his shoulder. "Take this and publish it as-is. Don't wait for confirmation from the others, just do it."

The press intern sounded unsure of himself. "Umm, sure. Where, though—"

"Listen to me," the editor snapped, loud enough to draw the attention of several fans as he pushed his way through the crowd. The station promenade was packed for the regional skyball playoffs, but the mood was more subdued than usual as word of the crisis unfolding in Seyllin spread.

The editor was under no delusions that he could escape his pursuers by coming here. He hoped only to slow them down, and that this intern could do what he asked before they got to him as well.

"Push this report directly into the international feeds. Bump everything else off the queue, this takes flash priority. Do you understand?"

"Flash priority? Sheesh, I don't have the clout to do that—"

An unruly fan bumped shoulders with the editor, spinning him halfway around. His heart stopped beating for a moment.

"You've been authenticated to send flash..."

He could see them: three men, in black coats. The crowd was separating for them.

"Millions of people are counting on this. Send that broadcast before it's too late for them...."

"Okay, umm, I'm in the system, and the flash with your ID is queued. Confirm it?"

"Ye—!"

Thankfully, the explosion of pain in his lower back was short lived, as the motor functions in everything from his neck down simply froze. He saw himself collapse awkwardly—the impact probably did physical damage, but he felt nothing. The attack had come from behind; probably a z-stick, he thought, watching the Black Eagles reach out to confiscate his earpiece and datapad.

He could tell they weren't being gentle with his incapacitated carcass as they dragged him back through the promenade. They would fabricate a charge against him, but couldn't hold him for long. Blaque and his cronies would face a barrage of protests and legal threats for imprisoning SCOPE reporters, and they were fully aware of it.

Which means the ends must justify the means.

There is no question that Seyllin is doomed. And people have a right to know that.

The editor hoped the message was delivered to the world like he asked, and wondered why doing the right thing was always so difficult.

"We don't know where they lead," the scientist continued. "Or, what we'll find once we're there."

For the first time since the crisis began, President Foiritan began to face the cruel possibility that what was unfolding could somehow be larger than what had happened at Seyllin.

"Warships can enter our sovereign space from them?"

"Yes. And though we can't predict where they'll appear, we can say with reasonable confidence that their stability will be affected by the mass that passes through them."

"Capital ships?"

"Possibly. But not an entire fleet."

"Not an entire fleet," the president repeated, pacing back and forth. "But, say, a pack of cloaked Marauders, using a direct portal between Luminaire and New Caldari—"

"Or between Luminaire and a system that's not even in this cluster."

President Foiritan straightened his posture. His face was gaunt, but he kept his demeanor rigid.

"Admiral Ranchel, how agile is your fleet deployment along the Border Zone?"

The voice, carried by speakers in the office walls, was loud enough to be heard in the hallway outside. "The strength of our defenses won't be compromised so long as the frequency of wormhole appearances is consistent. As far as location goes, if we can scan it, we can kill it. But we would never pursue a retreating force, not without assurances of where our assets will wind up."

"Very well. How many have we rescued from Seyllin?"

"Just over half a million."

Everyone in the room saw the color leave Souro's face.

"The limited number of landing sites makes it difficult," Admiral Ranchel added, his voice subdued. "Given the amount of time remaining, we might be able to double that figure. But not much more than that."

No one said a word. The president stood, surrounded by his closest advisors, completely helpless to do anything more.

"Keep doing the best you can," he said. "Have you—"

The Chief of the Federation Intelligence Office spoke abruptly.

"Mr. President," she gasped. "Mentas was too late."

"Wave off and turn back! Wave off or you're a dead man!"

For the third time, the Pegasus was hovering just meters over the landing pad. Its pilot could see people rushing the gantries, trying to get into the spaceport's boarding area.

"We're out of time!" his carrier dispatch screamed.

His mind wandered as the craft hung in the balance between life and death. Someone in that throng of people had surely given up his place to let a wounded man onto the last dropship that would ever touch down on Seyllin. Someone's act of kindness in the midst of a terrible nightmare would be his noble end.

That person was right there, so close to where he was.

"For God's sake, you're going to get left behind!"

Without his conscious approval, his hand pulled back on the stick. The dropship was responsive, eager to fly to the carrier above, and then away from the approaching wall of fire that would bring about the end of the world. The hold was empty, save for a single loadmaster standing among rows of empty seats covered with the blood and gore of those whom fortune or kindness had spared. As though fleeing for its own life, the Pegasus turned its back on the damned souls of Seyllin and hurled away, its lone pilot's eyes moist with tears.

The planet of Seyllin I perished, as did dozens of other worlds—some in New Eden, and some that no person in recorded history would ever know about. The intentions of Antar and Kotan were irrelevant now, as the universe of their origin had changed so fundamentally that it would probably be unrecognizable to them. Neither man could have imagined that the consequences of their actions would be so widespread, or that evil could triumph so decidedly over the powers of good.

The civilizations of New Eden would mourn for those who were lost, and then search in earnest for the reason why they died. But they would not look amongst the burnt cinders of shattered worlds.

They would search for answers by passing through tears in the fabric of space, and venturing towards the unknown.

In the Pits



In New Eden there was now a war, and in this war the capsuleers duked it out in the darker parts of space, and in those parts where lawlessness reigned there followed the capsuleers like remoras a type of people who would pick off the tattered remains like scraps of flesh from a rapidly calcifying bone.

They had reached Adek's mining station and torn through everything. He was running so fast his lungs burned with the effort.

Most parts of the colony were blessedly empty, its inhabitants having fled the war zone for fear of capsuleers. And just when those who remained had been getting a handle on running the colony with a skeleton crew, the scavengers had arrived; a small team of pirates using the capsuleers' presence as cover to strip the colonies of all useable hardware.

The thieves had been clever. They'd detonated several surface explosives before even venturing into the station, causing several colony sections to collapse or decompress. The explosives had been full of high-reaction incendiary gas that had eaten into the oxygen onboard the colony. The crew that hadn't died from fire or structural collapse had choked to death, clawing at their throats. The brave few survivors who had tried to bar the pirates' entry in the boarding areas had been killed on the spot, burned and shredded beyond recognition by the invaders' lasers.

Adek rushed to one of the emergency chambers and fitted himself inside a spacesuit. It was a clunky thing that would slow him down, but he had no idea where he was going, and it might involve one of the airless locales. He glanced up at a monitoring screen that scrolled through the few rooms still in use, but quickly averted his gaze. It showed him nothing but death.

He moved on in a delirium of fear, and a few airlocks later fell to a choking halt, his legs refusing to hold him up any longer. He lay on the ground for entirely too long, eyes shut tight, expecting at any moment to feel his skin burst and split under the unyielding glare of the scavengers' lasers.

When nothing happened, he risked a small peek and found that he'd made it to the Pits.

This was a vast cavern, full of dark and echo. The center portion of its circular floor was a giant gaping maw, a sheer drop many storeys down with sharp rocky outcroppings on all sides. Those outcroppings in turn were pitted with large holes, each of which had a solid metal covering. The floor around Adek was dotted with mining

and excavation equipment, with everything from pickaxes and miniature mining lasers to multijointed MTACs with surface clinging 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 vermillion altar the high priest will greet me, and he will give me the chalice filled with the drink of life; the purified cure of this land; the blood of Chalmers.

Depth of Field



4.

The noise was getting louder, and the air was running out.

"What the hell was that thing?" Now that there was nowhere to go, Karin couldn't stop herself from pacing.

It had torn through her ship's hull like it was tinfoil, exploding out into the vacuum. She'd seen it on the camera feed, bursting through the reinforced bulkheads of the central hold, and finally understood why Dagan had wanted a camera trained on a goddamn inert drone.

God, he was probably dead, too.

Of course, he could come back. The rest of them weren't that lucky.

"You're so damn calm all of a sudden. You're gonna die, too, you know." Neral was quiet, leaning against the wall where Karin had arranged her. Her eyes were closed, but her breathing was shallow, her face sheet-pale.

"It seems quite likely, yes."

"Fucking Dagan," Karin muttered. "I'm so sick of eggheads."

"You'll be free of them soon enough, hmm?"

"The hell is wrong with you?"

"I've done what I had to do. There's nothing left."

The clang of metal on metal reverberated through the ship, over and over. Something was beating against the wall of their little harbor, and knowing what it was wasn't making her any more comfortable.

It was getting louder. She'd swear it was almost through the bulkhead.

"You need to know--" Neral gasped. "You need to know that they'll be coming for you now. They'll all be coming for you."

"Who? Who--" Karin's words cut off, eyes widening as she saw Neral's gun. "Are you crazy? You can't shoot that in here!"

"Can." And the report filled the room.

Karin slowly, cautiously opened her eyes. She looked over at where Neral had been sitting, then quickly looked away. She turned her face away from the ruin that had been Neral, and faced instead her own destruction.

It was almost through the door. It was--

"Hello! Anyone alive in there?"

CONCORD?

Had she known?

3.

Karin dragged Neral along the hallway, her progress painfully slow. She'd found the woman with a chunk of shrapnel in her gut, and Karin couldn't just leave her lying there. Her ship was collapsing around her, nothing she could do about it, but she'd be damned if she was going to let her ethics go the same way.

And now she was trapped in the twisted wreck of her ship with a dying woman.

A dying woman and that noise.

The terrifying shriek of tortured metal and the groaning vibrations of the hull as it collapsed were bad enough, but it was the steady, metallic banging against the thinnest bulkhead of her accidental prison that was really freaking her out.

She really wanted to be thinking about something else.

Her mind caught on a story from her childhood, of monsters in the depths of her homeworld's seas—

No, that wasn't any better.

-- arms reaching out to strangle whole vessels, down under the weight of fathoms of water, death as certain as--

"Tahaki Karin," she thought, "you snap out of it this instant."

She contemplated the bristling heap of metal shards ahead, bent and broken support beams and plates barricading what should have been a hallway.

She set Neral down gently, tried to slow her breathing. Normal. Do a mental inventory: What do you have on you?

Wrench, hammer, screwdriver, pliers--

Leverage.

She could get some of the debris off one of the interior walls, find a way around, get them to a pod--

--live through this.

2.

When everyone's eyes were glued to the security feed, watching Dagan's precious drone burst free from the ribs of their ship, it was Communications Officer Neral's voice they heard over the com.

She sounded just as calm telling them to abandon ship as she always had announcing an incoming transmission.

It made it all the more surreal when Karin discovered Neral bleeding out in the ship's corridor.

She'd suffered a massive stomach wound, and judging by the trail she'd left she'd barely been able to pull herself over to the wall.

Karin crouched by Neral's shoulder, reaching out to check her pulse, and nearly fell over when a sticky hand grabbed her arm.

Neral's eyes opened, bright with fever. "Dagan... drone. Got to warn. My sisters. How?"

"Hey," Karin said. "Hey, it's okay, we'll get you out of this."

"Wasn't supposed to. Never expected. To get out." Neral laughed, short and horrifying, a thick wetness in her voice. " Will now."

Neral grabbed desperately at Karin's arms. "They'll be coming after you now. They'll all be coming for you. Tell my sister—"

"You can tell her yourself," Karin said. "I'm going to lift you now, but it'll hurt. Brace yourself."

1.

Dagan was on the line with her when the sirens started going off.

"Damn it," he said. "This is far too soon. I thought that thing was thoroughly offline."

"The drone? It was! I checked it over when you brought it onboard."

He switched her view to the security feed. It was powering up weapons.

"I'm getting out of here. You'll probably want to evacuate, too," Dagan said, as her door slid shut and she heard the locks engage. "Shame you won't make it."

Arrogant bastard, she thought, and headed for the ventilation ducts.

Spectral



The rheumatism wasn't so bad these days, thanks to some of those new medicines they'd brought in from the core worlds. Eyesight was alright thanks to the old implant, mind was sharp as ever, and if his hands trembled a little at times, well, it was fall and the weather was cold.

He walked slowly down the streets of this city in space. The autumn leaves drifted in whorls around him, raked by cold gusts of wind. It always amazed him to see trees planted here, in a disconnected place where he could look out the window and see nothing but the stars of the sky; but then, they belonged no less here in this small globe of orbit than on any other globe in the galaxy. Old and withered, and losing their decoration with the encroaching winter. He was glad to have them here with him, old and withered too.

The winter, now, he didn't much look forward to. The weather engine did what it could, but proper snowstorms were out of the question. At most they would get a sloppy cold drizzle and some bitter frosts. Winter leeched all color out of the year.

It felt like they'd started to fade already. He ignored the little twinges from his aging joints and moved on to his daily place of refuge. In his youth, his own grandfather had told him about those pains: that they were little pecks from the black birds of the river, eating him up 'til there was nothing left but the souls, and that while he still felt their beaks piercing his flesh, it was proof he was still alive.

He smiled. The story had given him nightmares for days, about black birds of prey.

It was still early morning when he reached the cafe. He went here every day, part for breakfast and part to gently immerse himself in the rushing flow of life. One did not truly start dying, he felt, until one was left alone.

He took his usual seat in his usual booth, which was never occupied at this early hour, and glanced at the newsreader inset in the tabletop. It was possible to set the reader to broadcast upwards, casting a vertical holo that was akin to reading a real paper and didn't force you to keep your plate to one side, but he preferred it this way, burrowing over the news in his own little corner of the world.

The headlines were their usual grim and paranoid selves, so he switched over to articles about more local business. He'd always had an inquisitive mind, if a little overly lent to imagination, and had known even as a young man that the loudest news held the biggest lies. One needed to watch for the little signs instead: the leaves, and which way they were blowing.

The waitress, whose name was Joraa but whom he always called Madame, came up to him. She was in her

middle age, but had the mind of a sassy youngster. He liked that, even more so because it likely bugged the hell out of everyone younger than her.

"Hey, old man," she said in a voice with an evenly balanced rasp and whine.

"Good morning, Madame," he said. "The same, please."

She gave him a smile, which was always nice, and headed off to get his breakfast.

He went back to the news and editorials. Breakfast wouldn't take long to arrive - they knew his usual schedule - but he would take his time in eating it, savoring the bites while he spent the long hours at the table. Only when he had read through everything in the day's edition, including the big screaming news, would he consider the day's meal to be done.

A plate of food appeared before him, and a cup of coffee joined it. He looked up to thank Joraa, saw her face and gasped.

For a brief, heart-stopping second he thought she was an angel. Her face was bathed in a gentle halo, like she was returning from a swim in the rays of the sun. It extended to her hair, which shimmered like radiant gossamers, and to the skin of her neck, whose gentle sway left a momentary streak of light in the air.

She stared back, first in alarm, then in bemusement. When she smiled, the parting of her lips revealed teeth that seemed overlaid with soft, warm diamonds.

"Are you alright, dear?" she said.

He nodded unblinkingly. "You look like a star," he said in wonderment.

"You need another cup of coffee, is what you need," she said, shaking her head to dislodge the compliment. She turned and walked away, and he could've sworn that the varicose veins in her calves glowed through her skin.

"There is nothing wrong with you," the voice said.

"Apart from the usual, you mean."

"Yes," the voice said. It came from a screen in his room at the medical quarters. On that screen was a nice, nonoffensive face that showed a calculated expression of aloof concern. It was no more real than the screen that projected it.

"So those halos I see around people, the ones that are everywhere now, those are just old man's talk?"

The A.I. did not blink on the monitor. "They are not measurable on any graph we have. Which is good news, because it rules out any number of dementias you might have been suffering from."

"Well, that's nice," he said. "So what is it?"

The A.I. was silent for a calculated moment. "I don't know," it said. "Most likely guess is that your implant is starting to malfunction, but the checks we ran on that back in the booth showed nothing out of the ordinary. I'm afraid I can not in good conscience underwrite an operation unless we know what it is we'd be fixing, nor can I approve a replacement. You can still see perfectly, I assume?"

"Yes. That, I can." The implant was old and had cost him a lot of money, but it had served its job for many years. As had he.

"Does the anomaly cause you significant discomfort?"

"Not really, truth be told. I don't mind a little extra glow in my life."

"Well, then," the A.I. said, flashing a brief smile. "That's nice."

More and more, the people he passed were enveloped in halos. Oddly enough, even though the altered visuals gave them more color and filling in life, he could swear it was also making them more transparent. Someone passed him by, and he saw not merely the person but the ground, walls and sky behind their glowing corpus.

He suspected the implant, which had saved his sight for all these years, was incorrectly refracting the light it received from certain objects. It was a complex piece of machinery, installed for a complex and unpleasant

visual disorder he had greatly suffered from, and had a mind of its own. Chances were it was having some minor defect in displaying people in motion, or clothing, or skin, and compensating for it by showing instead the cached backgrounds it knew were there. It had to be something like that, because otherwise he was going quite mad, and he did not intend to head down that colorful route just yet.

He tried not to think about it too much. He'd long since grown used to people fading into the background, eventually to fade away altogether.

One morning later that week he was walking to the cafe when he noticed one man on the other side of the street, standing very still. When he glanced at the man, he found his stare returned.

"Hi there," the man said, and his voice carried across the street.

"Roten! As I live and breathe," he replied. "How are you, son?"

The man walked up and embraced him. They'd worked together on the station a long while ago, Roten under his mentorship in various electronic and mid-level tech work, but Roten had left on a freighter for parts unknown. They hadn't seen each other in years.

It disturbed him how strange Roten appeared. He wasn't any different from all the people who passed by in the rush of the day, grey visages now, but the old man never paid much attention to anyone. Roten, though, he wanted to see. He wanted to see that smiling pink face all covered in grime from a hydrogen battery repair gone explosively wrong; not this chromatic, polarized mask that seemed more at home on a robot. His translucent body was so full of refracted color and hue that the old man fancied he could see himself reflected, his wrinkled countenance trapped inside Roten's own corporeal form.

Roten walked with him to the cafe, chatting amiably, but it was clear that he wasn't staying long. He did not let on much about the reason he had arrived or his destination, but promised that this was not the last time the two would meet. "I'll be around," he said. "Just look for me."

"This damn implant keeps going the way it does, I won't be seeing you at all."

"I'm sure it'll be fine, one way or the other," Roten said. He shook the old man's hand and walked away, fading into the flurry of deepening autumn.

It was a pleasant coincidence, the old man thought, and gave him a warmth that lasted him through the long day.

The next morning, on the same early walk, that feeling turned to ice.

He saw an old man; not old in body as he himself might be, but a truly old one of spirit and soul. People spoke of age and the dumber ones said that age was merely a feeling - which, if it was, meant it was a feeling of dulled senses and sharp aches, and good luck to anyone trying keeping up a sprightly pretense - but there was a glimmer of truth in that cheerful idiocy. Some people were merely aged, and some were truly old.

This old man was named Fermar, and he was dead. He had to be. Never had a man been so close to the grave for so long of his natural life.

Fermar saw him, walked up and said hi.

"What on earth are you doing here?" the man answered.

Fermar gave a wry grin. "Hey there, boy."

"Last I knew you were working on a colony in deep space, near the Sansha. You crazy old coot. I thought you were long gone."

Fermar shrugged. "It worked out, in its fashion."

"Well, not to be inhospitable, but what are you doing here? Did you take a position somewhere else?"

"Who says I didn't just retire?" Fermar said to him.

"This one," he replied, pointing a wrinkled finger at his own old chest. "You're one of those people, Fermar, who keeps going right until the end. I can see right through you."

And he could. His friend's body was so transparent that it barely cast a shadow. Its outlines did not so much glow as faintly shimmer, like oil floating on water, and whatever colors remained in his face were multihued and iridescent. The old man made a mental note to revisit the A.I. doctor. He shouldn't have to suffer his friends to be invisible.

"Yeah, I guess I'll keep on forever," Fermar said. "But I'm glad to see you, boy." He seemed about to add something, then merely said, "Stay in touch," waved and walked off.

The old man, shaken, continued on to the café. He opened the door with hands that trembled a bit too much, and it wasn't until he felt the firm fabric of his old booth that he found any kind of calm. The seat was there, in all the ways that a simple seat could be.

He sat there staring into empty space, murmuring his thoughts. Roten's appearance had been a godsgift, and a believable one at that, but Fermar's felt more like a warning.

All those years ago, when they parted, he had been certain he'd never see Fermar again. The man had lived through a Sansha invasion on his colony, had a hand in a rebellion that had saved many but cost him his daughter and eventually torn apart his marriage. He had drifted from job to job before eventually settling as a supervisor on another mining colony precariously close to Sansha space. Whatever had been in Fermar's mind at that time - revenge, exhaustion, madness or whatever else - he had not laid down these last bricks in the road of his life to lead anywhere but into the open arms of death.

The specter of Madame Joraa came along. "You really do talk to yourself a lot, don't you, hon?" she said.

He smiled at her. "Glad to see you're still here."

"Of course I am. Who else is going to take care of your needs?" she said, winked at him and walked off.

He grinned at this and looked down at the vidscreen in the table. When he looked up again, his heart stopped.

Across from him, sitting quite calmly in the opposing seat, was another ghostly person. He could see right through her, to the booth with its metal rails and synthetic, faux-leather that never seemed to fade with age.

He said, in a brittle voice, "Oh dear."

She leaned her head to one side and said, "Is that any way to treat an old friend?"

He leaned back in his seat, rubbed his eyes and sighed deeply. "I'm so sorry," he said, eyes still shut. "Hello, Charlize. You're looking very well. Are you dead?"

She caught her breath, then started to laugh, that gentle scale of sonorous notes he had once thought would be the soundtrack to his life. "We certainly are morbid! How are you doing? I've missed you."

"Likewise, Charlize," he said. "I thought you were gone for good."

"I was," she said, and he opened his eyes at last. She was smiling with infinite sadness.

"Hang on, I'll order you a coffee at the very least," he said and raised his hands, calling for Madame. She was cleaning a table a few booths down, but no matter how much he hailed, she didn't respond.

He turned back to Charlize, flustered and a little alarmed. "Why can't I get her attention?"

"I'll tell you in a second, dear," the old woman said, taking his hand in hers. "Let's just keep talking for now. I have a lot to tell you."

Taught Thoughts



I'll likely never know which one of us was the traitor; the old man I destroyed, or me.

We all pooled into the classroom. I couldn't help but wonder why there was such a rush to get in when the same people couldn't wait to get out.

M. Cromwell came in a little later. Most teachers hang out in the classroom between sessions, like it's their own little fortress of knowledge, but he takes every chance to leave the room. He's probably smoking, but that's not the point. He gets a kind of begrudging respect from his students for this, like he's one-upping our own tardiness and lack of interest, and if you look at it with the right mind-set it makes you feel like he's one of us, dragged into that late adulthood despite his fervent protestations. I think that's horseshit. He just doesn't like us, that's all.

We were supposed to go over the basics of ancient Caldari history, which was an irony and a half since we're at war with them in the present. I'd imagined that the school authorities would cut this class from the schedule once the war started, but apparently the Gallentean educational establishment prides itself on not bending to the whims of pressure groups. As an idea, it sounded akin to a building trying not to bend to the whims of the bomb in its basement, but there we had it.

Cromwell was cranky from the word go. He walked into the classroom, smelling too strongly of fresh mint, and put his oversized coffee mug on his desk. The room was practically antiquated – most historians seemed to like them that way – but Mr. Cromwell had made a valiant concession to modern times with that mug, one of those self-heating motion refilter units that keep its drink permanently fresh.

"Alright," he said to the room, all of us already seated, "move in, come on. We don't have all day in here, you know." He hovered his finger over the vidscreen inset in his table, and the lights in the room dimmed slightly, counterbalanced by the glare from our own monitors.

"Where had we got to?" he said to the empty air. "Ah. Yes. Now." He looked up from the screen and directly at us. The man had taught this stuff for longer than I'd been alive, and you could see him slipping into gear. "The Cathura rebellion was, let me see, started exactly two hundred years after the Raata empire was formed and ended two years later, which puts it at 17670 and 72 CE, and if you ask me what that was in Yoiul years I'm throwing you out the window. The peace treaty they eventually signed was at the hall of..."

He paused and threw a quick glance at his screen, presumably to check that he was telling the same truths as usual - whenever old teachers do this I imagine an old man walking up a flight of stairs, brushing the handrail to ground himself - but when he caught what the text was saying, he sputtered and ground to a halt.

"I don't believe this," he said.

Twenty odd pairs of ears perked up.

"They've changed it. Again. Oh, for the love of ... alright. Look here," he said to us, and there was rancor in his voice, as if we were to blame for whatever had annoyed him, "the Current History section may have opened their arses to propaganda, but the Ancient one doesn't usually merit the attention of the secret police. This, you will be interested to know, is because we've taught it for so long that it's become ingrained in the minds of people who are now working adults, and as it turns out, altering the facts that we're now teaching to their children aggravates them far more than the lies they're fed on the nightly news. I guess their history lessons form an important part of every man's childhood, for which you have my undying pity and commiseration.

"Be that as it may, I would like you to ignore the wording of the key phrases you see on your screens. The treaty of Cathura was peaceably signed, with everyone behaving as gentlemen so far as the circumstances allowed. Its terms were not 'barbarous' as the text would have you think, nor were there 'sweeping' losses for one side as a result. Some people died of starvation, but it wasn't because their leaders were broke or powerless. The other side had slashed-and-burned as it went. You'll find this to be a common tactic in warfare anywhere in New Eden."

He read on for a silent minute, with quiet mutterings of "good lord" and "are you serious?" Eventually he turned back to us and said, "This is called loaded language, and the reason it's called loaded is because someone is holding a gun, aimed right at the writer's head if I'm any judge."

He paused, gently running his fingers over the vidscreen like a parent touching its injured child. "They can't change history, but slight adjustments of tone are allowed," he added with acid bitterness. "But we'll work on that. Two minute break, so rest your fragile young minds. I'm going to upload additional study material from my own collection."

There was a muted collective groan and a whispered few "not more texts, come on," but he ignored it. So did I. I was getting increasingly angry at the man.

It was that motion; the way he'd absent-mindedly touched the screen. As with everything else he did it spoke of a private love between him and old history, not a public one a teacher should share with his students. There are some people whose antagonism is merely an expression of affection coupled with a kind of innate cynicism. You get the feeling they want the best for you in a world that's going all to hell, even if they think your idiocy is contributing to the problem. They care for you despite your glaring faults. This is the only true love that exists, you might say. In my anger I saw him like an empty husk, loveless and grey.

I'd raised my hand before I knew it.

He fixed me with a glare and said, "Yes." Not my name; just 'yes'.

"Should we be breaking away from the material?"

"Heaven help us if you escape the confines of your minds," he said. Some people in the class tittered.

"But the texts that are taught everywhere-"

"Look," he said. "The Caldari have ways that go back just as far as ours and are usually a damn sight more honorable. Having a shadow update to the history texts call them 'barbaric' is doing a disservice not only to their age-old culture but to our integrity in looking at the world. And by the way, my little mutton-heads, this goes for other empires as well. Some textbooks that you won't be seeing in my classroom claim the Amarr are nothing more than slave-driving zealots, old monsters gilding their fingers in the name of some wispy little ghost. In fact the Amarr are a deeply spiritual and misunderstood group of people who are trying to better the world in ways we Gallente completely fail to appreciate. The fact that they cock it up half the time and have the worst PR agency in history is beside the point. This, this, this," he said to me, emphasizing each word like a hammer, "is what you need to get into your head before we can let you out into the real world. Think for yourself. God help us if you can't even learn to do that."

I was fuming and said, "Which we do by having you teach your own private version of the past?"

He opened his mouth to respond, and I opened mine to shout him, but a soft voice at the back of the hall cut through our words like a stone thrown through fog. It said, quite politely, "Why is this even an argument?" and it came from Sheeran Keil, one of the best students in the class, if not in the school. He was hard-working, soft-spoken and unfailingly polite, and illuminated in that halo of faint brilliance you see on the people you simply know are going to go far in life. He was a Jin-Mei, too.

M. Cromwell's gaze didn't waver. He merely turned his head, like a stone statue, until his eyes, staring straight ahead, found Sheeran.

With the unfaltering bravery of the dying, Sheeran pointed at his vidscreen and said, "This is what is being taught. This is what we are supposed to learn. This is what I am supposed to learn during the class. I would like to learn it, M. Cromwell."

"If you think, M. Keil, that the Caldari should be retroactively trampled, then that's your prerogative. Heaven save me from debating a civilization's merits with a scholar."

"I'll be happy to take on extra studies-"

"That's not the point, M. Keil," the teacher said, an evil grin on his face. "The point is that you are here to learn, for it is by learning history, and indeed as is so often said, learning from history's mistakes, that we stand any hope of avoiding them in these new and treacherous times. If we paint the Caldari with the blackest of brushes we reduce them to crude caricatures, unworthy of our sympathy or understanding. Believe me, in a war, that is not the attitude you want to have."

"M. Cromwell," Sheeran said with an audacity even I found amazing, "in a war, I would have thought that was exactly the right attitude to have."

"Look, you guys had your chance and blew it," the teacher said to him. "You may think the Caldari should go the same way and simply surrender to the unstoppable might of the Gallente Federation."

It was a vicious insult to Sheeran's ancestry, and he made to defend it, but Cromwell silenced him by saying, "Stop nattering about the ones who dared fight back. All in class, now, sit up! The books are long since updated, so we will continue with the lesson as I intend to teach it." He gave me a final glare, then launched back into the books.

What I should have said was this:

I had just about had my fill of him, of his bullying others and hiding behind history. No one else was teaching so belligerently, and how could you believe the message, enticing as it might be, if the messenger himself couldn't be trusted? He might have a problem with revisionists, but he was teaching his own version of history, the one he'd formed in his own mind after all those years, instead of following the common consensus. He was bullying the learning into us. Anyone who dared think otherwise apparently deserved nothing but scorn.

I said nothing, and the class ran till completion.

Afterwards, talking to my classmates, I found that some people liked this little guerilla line he'd taken - the same who usually liked his brazen attitude - but others hated it. And in a strange and rather unpleasant way, I felt like I should have belonged to his supporters, because it's always good to feel like you've sided not only with the truth but the stamped-down truth, allied with the rebels and the real heroes the world is trying to silence.

But what we had, when you looked at it with honesty, was one man's interpretation of the truth, and whatever bravery he was instilling in us by his defense of history was discounted by his acts in class, which were teaching us the value of tyranny.

I dithered, and realized that I really wanted him to fail, to say something that would remove him from my world.

When he passed us, I walked behind him and quietly said, "M. Cromwell."

He did not stop, but slowed enough for me to catch up. "What do you want?" he said.

"So who are the good guys?" I asked.

It was a dangerous question, and he knew it, and I wanted him so badly to give the wrong answer. Instead he said, "People are people, with good and bad sides. Good people can do terrible things; bad people can perform wonders."

He left, and I let him go.

An idea began to form in my head, but I wasn't sure whether I could go ahead with it. So I followed Cromwell to the teacher's lounge, in the hope that I could talk to him for a little longer and make up my mind, one way or another.

When I got there the door was ajar, so I waited outside and listened. Cromwell was talking to a fellow teacher about the recent class, and I heard him say, "I think of it as charity work, really."

"Oh?" the other man said.

"If I don't raise their IQs by a few points, they might eventually forget how to breathe."

Stones in the fog. Stamped-down stones in the fog.

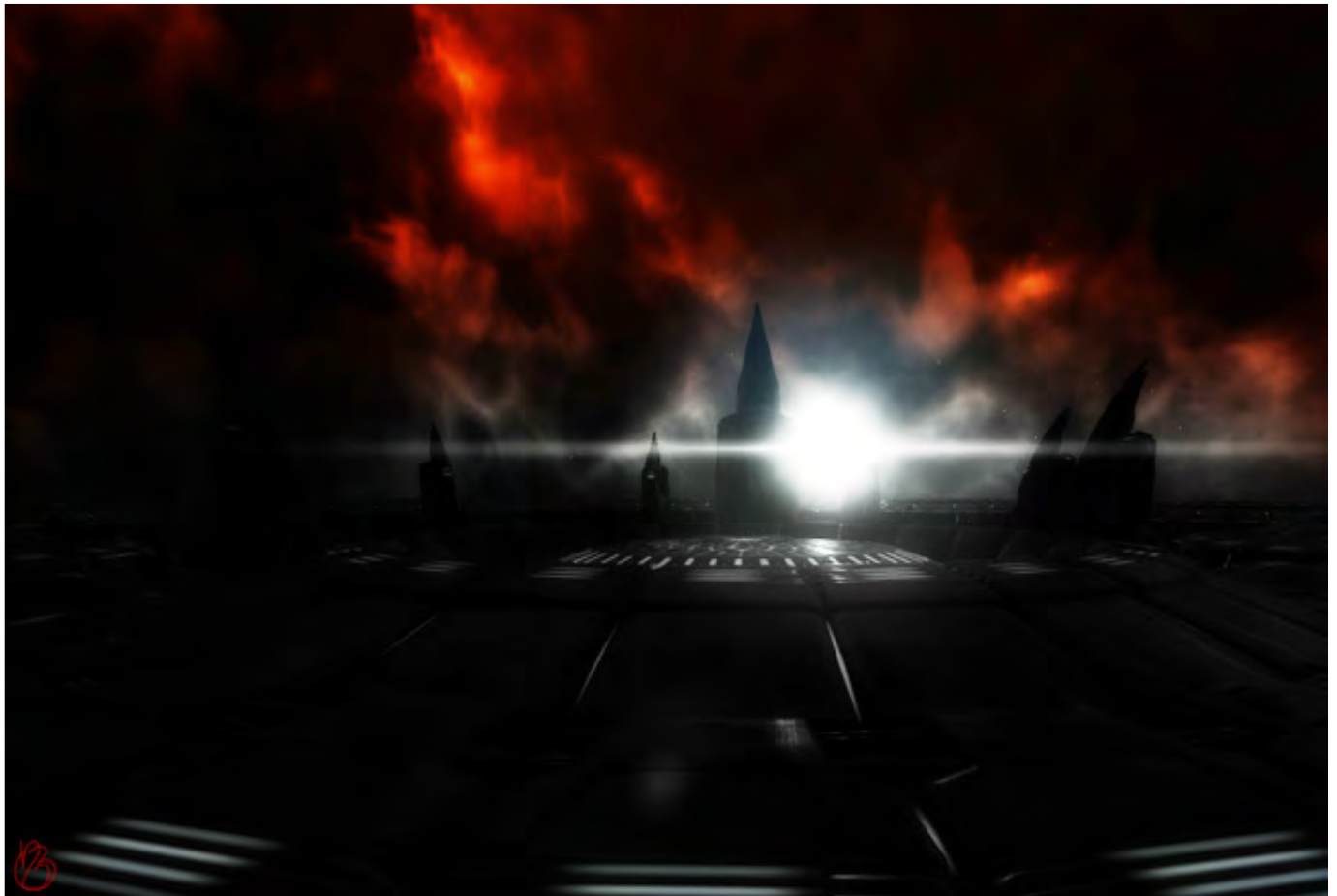
I didn't think about it for another second. I walked away, skipped the rest of my classes and headed off-campus,

towards downtown. I spoke to authorities in one of the new institutions Mentas Blaque had set up, where I told them the easily verifiable fact that my teacher had gone against curriculum that might be politically sensitive, and the unverifiable lie that when asked who the good guys were, he had answered 'Caldari' without missing a beat.

M. Cromwell did not come to class the next morning.



The Vitrauze Project



It may not make sense at first. The complexities of life's story run so deep that it may take some time to understand. Some time indeed. Yet I tell you now that time will make the truth of these words shine ever brighter, because that is what I made them to do.

- Unknown

She was watching the people of Seyllin die on live holovision when they came for her.

Lianda. I must warn you, my child, no matter the risk. The Senate has learned of the appearance of new, stable wormholes, leading to unknown areas of space. You must not involve yourself in this matter. There will be a time and a place for your research to continue. Please, for the sake of everything you have worked for, lie low.

They told her CreoDron had only asked for one person. On the display, a darkened and burning orb glowed in brilliant shades of blue. Millions must have been there, she thought, trapped inside a dying planet.

They said this was the kind of help that would matter more tomorrow, when today had taken what it would from them all. Strangely poetic, the ones they had decided to send for her. Most likely no coincidence. They left her there. She would follow soon, once her affairs had been set in order. Those words, and the truth of them in her eyes when she stepped towards them so purposefully,

They had bought the privacy she would need to reach him.

"CD-73, this is CD-Vitrauze, come in."

"CD-Vitrauze, this is CD-73, I have you."

"How are you doing out there?"

"Fine, just settling in."

"Professor? What you said before? We're behind you all the way."

A poignant smile formed across her face, shared only with the on-board surveillance.

"Thank you."

The Helios stabilized as it pulled out of warp, settling for now into a cautious eighty-kilometer orbit. The gamble had paid off. Not that she had doubted her initial findings. She felt it was somehow appropriate that Vitrauze was where she found it. She had not signaled anything to them, not yet, not until she could see something.

Something amazing.

The system of Vitrauze, to most people, had been nothing more than another cruel and lonely place off the major spacelanes of the Federation. For most people, it would remain such. That was fine with her. The best secrets had always lain in plain sight, beneath casual glances that each day saw nothing.

She saw them, though. Stripping the unknown of its mystery had been her life's work, a task as noble as it was destructive. Before her now, just a few short moments away, was one more riddle, but it wasn't one she would solve to the end. She gazed out into the twisting shapes, admiring something she felt she had seen a thousand times before in her dreams and yet only now truly saw for the first time. It was as magnificent and terrifying as anything she could have hoped for.

For those there now, Vitrauze would be remembered as the system where they found that first link to the unknown. For her, it would be where she left something. She would burn, glow like Seyllin, and in that dim luminescence that her sacrifice shed, others would see the hidden paths to tread. He would have liked it phrased that way.

"Vitrauze, I've found something. Sensors onlined, in transit now. You have live priority feed."

The microwarpdrive engaged and eighty kilometers quickly became fifty, thirty, twenty and then, nothing. Zero point.

It had been named after an early Federation Senator, whose name in turn was supposedly taken from one of the first settlers to come through the EVE Gate. To the Amarr, "Vitra" meant simply "life." Life itself. The Gallentean understanding of the word was more subtle, however. To them it meant "living."

Different in the way sunrise and sunset are, she thought.

Six more Helioses decloaked as they dropped out of warp, falling into the same cautious long-range orbit as she had.

"Whenever you're ready."

"CD-73, this is CD-Vitrauze, come in."

She stopped the thrusters for a moment, almost answering the call before deciding against it. They could wait. Even though her voice alone would mean so much, they could wait. For now, this moment was hers.

"CD-73, this is CD-Vitrauze, come in. Problem at our end."

The blood immediately started pushing through her veins, accelerating with each new heartbeat. She fought back the instinct, millions of years and even more souls forfeited in the name of progress, all driving her to avoid this. To return.

"CD-Vitrauze, this is CD-73, I have you."

"Black Eagles have entered system, maximum time until location is scanned: approximately 2 minutes."

"Proceed as planned. I am not here."

Within just a few moments of those words reaching the other side, the flagship of CreuDron's private fleet deactivated cloaking devices and began about the crucial task of pretending to be useful.

To most observers, "CD-1" would be considered a monstrosity. Horrifically warped Dominix hulls overflowing with esoteric electronics equipment often evoked familiar images, ones not so welcome in the heart of Federation space, particularly in recent years, and particularly when the vessel in question carried CreuDron tags.

To many of the leading scientists in CreoDron, though, it was their beloved "mothership." At times it would serve as their mobile research lab, as their home. Now it served as one incredibly risky decoy. Confiscation would mean an end to so many ongoing projects, but the weight of that also played in their favor.

The uncharacteristically dark hulls of four Megathron-class battleships suddenly appeared, sliding into the scene with a graceful menace that only the Black Eagles, with their specially commissioned ships, could project. Even before the violent tear in the fabric of space that dominated the area, gushing with its ominous crimson light, their presence was made known. The arrival alone would have its effect, but underneath it all, the official CreoDron line from that point on would remain steadfast. All contact with the other side had been lost.

Duvolle scientists had been "invited" to attend the ensuing investigation and it was they in particular who queried the absence of CreoDron's leading astrophysicist. No doubt their own interest in these matters was welcomed by the Eagles, just as Duvolle had welcomed the opportunity to see and hear things that would normally put their own operations under the Federation's ruthless self-scrutiny. These were the sorts of plays the Eagles were fast becoming known for, where saying no was made a twice-unattractive option.

The captain of the fleet understood better than most the capacities of his opponent. He would comply, but even though others made billions of ISK, these two outsiders now prying into their research would be considered by him and the rest of his crew as the very worst kind of vultures. This was how real, lasting damage was done. No press releases, no fanfare, no public comments one way or the other. Nothing would be made today but enemies.

As CD-1 was turned over indefinitely to Federal jurisdiction, the first discovery was made. In one ear, the pilots and crew of CreoDron were hearing stories of a new, unknown civilization and in the other, the mechanical drawl of a Federation police drone reading them their rights.

Normally, such a task was paid its respect, and even the most severe of the Eagle's captains would dutifully inform a fellow citizen of their legal rights. As both parties floated there, however – the once-honored formalities of the moment handled by automatons – the Eagles received their own distracting news. Another nineteen wormholes had been discovered, and although that amount by itself was easily matched, what disconcerted the captains most was that only five minutes before their arrival, the number had stood at one.

The Helios rested up against the structure. The enclave in the distance seemed quiet, bereft of life. This one, however, felt young even now. There was such beauty in this timeless design, even though time had claimed them all.

It was more real this time. He looked more real, but she could see it. See that he was not, and that perhaps, this was not either. The data could have been pulled from the fluid router cache, enhanced somehow. Any automated system that could do something like this would be far more advanced than she had known, but then this was not her field, and she had a saying about scientists who casually dipped into her own. All the same, she could swear she knew the design. So old. She had these thoughts even as she stared at him. Too much a scientist and too little a soldier.

This time, there was no life in Hilan's eyes, and it was telling her to go.

Once again into the darkness, and for a moment she could almost feel that wind on her face, as the data that represented who she was failed to cross the river back home.

"We have reports of...78 now. 78, Corporal. I just had a scout land in... in..."

"What is it, Captain?"

"...in Luminaire, Sir."

"What?"

"An advance scout, deployed... deployed in Lonetrek. They reported the wormhole in Ibura, scouted the other side and landed in the middle of our operations base."

Lianda watched the leaves falling into the stream, plucked from the limbs of the trees with such ease. The wind was so gentle she could barely feel it on her face and yet it took them all, softly caressing the branches into donating the remnants of life they once bore.

She could understand that eagerness, how easy it was to let go after you'd grown out of the things that once nurtured you, that once comprised your entire world.

He understood this, of course. This was his VR channel, and he had chosen the environment for a reason.

"Hilen," she said quietly, looking across to the Deteis. His eyes were fixed on the currents that licked at the edge of the bank. A sobering gaze slowly lifted to meet hers. The weight of everything they had shared was staring her in the face. She fell silent.

"Go," he said, turning away from her and shaking his head. "Just..."

He disconnected the feed, leaving her alone in the surrounding black.

"Her unique network ID was accessed at the same time she attempted to make contact, yet she did not enter her password correctly."

"Yes, we looked into it. She didn't gain any access to secure information. We're investigating the reasons she didn't authenticate properly."

"Of course, but that's not what I wanted to mention."

"Yes?"

"You don't seem to know what I'm talking about."

"Go on."

"The password, the one she entered. The incorrect string?"

"I will put aside any questions I have about how you would have access to such a thing and ask you to come to the point."

"It's a locus."

"I see."

"Yes."

"We were not aware."

"With due respect, Sir, what you are not aware of is that for every one of those six Helioses inside your system, there are two of our Buzzards."

"I believe that as much as I believe you're a psychologist."

Applied Science? All science is applied. Eventually.

- Hilen Tukoss. Program Director, Otosela Neuropsychology Center.

The Ever-Turning Wheels



When the dropships came, Jeb and I counted down the seconds to our deaths - if not from the invading forces, then from our own people, some of whom had sworn to die on their feet and take everyone with them, invader and traitor both. The traitors, apparently, were those unwilling to die rather than be yoked to the Caldari wheel.

But the dropships landed, leveling entire hills with their impact, and once their chutes opened and the armies within marched out to meet us - the sun glinting off their metal carapaces, the dust rising in clouds from the synchronized thumps of their feet - nobody put up much of a fight.

Jeb and I were still behind cover - there really didn't seem much point anymore, for if we'd wanted to be safe, we should have long since run for the mountains - and we watched as the Caldari troops marched over and through. They did not seem bound by the same gravity as we were.

We waited for shots that were never fired. A few people rushed madly towards the troops, some bearing weapons or facsimiles of same. I don't know if the Caldari were under orders to hold their fire or if they were merely that disciplined, but the last I saw of our rebels was a rising trail of dust, dwindling to nothing. They were enveloped by the army, disarmed and locked down. Some were left lying on the ground, handcuffed and immobile; others were carried, furious and unwilling, to the nearest bush or body of water and unceremoniously thrown in. The greatest offensive action they took against our people was gagging a few of the loudest rebels, which was likely more a relief to me than it was to them. There is nothing so unbearable as a shrieking rebel knowingly reduced to a powerless effrontery of words.

In a whisper Jeb asked me whether we were lost, and I didn't know what to tell him. A part of me - the rebellious part, I supposed, though it didn't feel quite so - wanted to say yes. Another, more sensible part suspected that we might have a new world on our hands.

We were a backwater colony of the Gallente Federation, established so far back in time that historical records on our foundation were inconclusive. Our leaders, such as they were, maintained that this proved we had been there for a long time. Truth was, we'd likely just kept shoddy records.

For most of us it hadn't been the easiest life to live. Resources had always been scarce, and what little we eked out was strongly controlled by our local government. We did a smattering of trade with neighboring planets, but for the most part we kept our business to ourselves. Our government's fear of offworld dependency led to exorbitant taxation on all interstellar business, and the populace mostly, if grudgingly, supported this policy. In truth, we had learned not to desire what we could not easily acquire. We were a closed system - interconnected, complex and opaque - and in the myriad of monopolies, favoritism, backroom dealing and nepotism that we allowed to take place, we convinced ourselves that this was the only way to run a planet, and we took a strange pride in it; as if our corruption were emblematic of our independence.

The factional wars caught us by surprise. On dark nights we would look up at the stars and see some of them moving at great speed, others bursting into flames. It was the capsuleers, of whom I'd only ever heard stories, engaged in battles I could not even begin to imagine. Fighting over control of territories - fighting, to my

amazement, over us.

We were not used to being the object of anyone's plans, much less fought over with such ferocity. Reports would trickle in of Gallentean successes, Gallentean conquests and Federation Navy domination, which made us all the more nervous: We were not stupid, and even the more fervently nationalistic of us knew full well that we Gallente, for all our strengths, would not be doing all our fighting in Gallente systems such as our own if we were on any kind of path to victory.

The trickle eventually dried up, and we began to speak in hushed voices. Not long after, the Caldari came.

The highest echelon of Gallentean rule over our colony had been a unit of elitism unto itself. Neither I nor Jeb nor anyone like us could ever have hoped to breach it. At most, what we could have expected were individual rewards for services well rendered: perks and bonuses, applied like grease to our ever-turning wheels. It was obviously not a perfect system, and it was certainly not fair, but it worked for what it was. We could live with the strings so long as we felt that the right ones were being pulled at the right time, and that they were, within this opaque system, at least tolerantly transparent.

Nonetheless, it was a poor system for a poor world, and when the Caldari came I knew I was a traitor, because in my heart I welcomed them. If it had been us descending on their world, we would have roared in with bullets; but they came in silence, swift and efficient, and with the simplest of strokes they lopped the head off our ailing body.

We protested, of course, some of us more viciously than others, but we did so in the knowledge that we couldn't possibly hope to enact any kind of change. As Gallenteans now subject to foreign rule it was utterly frustrating, but as individuals on a corrupt backwater colony it was - for me, at least - a guilty relief, couched in the hope that the new administration might bring some manner of equality and opportunity. While someone in the middle of the Federation proper might have felt more enamored with their rulers, and more energized to fight back against the invaders, out here the only thing that had made us Gallente were the banners on our governmental buildings, and the unspoken policies that it was every man for himself.

The new rule moved in. Our lives went on. Jeb and I had the same old jobs with the same superiors and the same responsibilities, and at night we each dreamt the same familiar dreams, perhaps a little clearer now, of riches and opportunities. It took a while for everything to settle, but eventually it did: The protests stopped, people kept working for their pay, and anyone who attempted in their own small way to overthrow the system was either imprisoned - briefly, without repercussions or mistreatment - or simply ignored.

And to my speechless disappointment, the Caldari - the efficient, disciplined, lockstep Caldari - began to screw it all up.

The first mistake they made was in announcing the new governorship. Gallente are used to having a voice, however much it may be ignored. Our new governor, a Caldari diplomat apparently experienced in running Caldari asteroid colonies, was installed along with his team of representatives as soon as he arrived planetside. Local broadcasts informed us of his expertise and implied that he would lead us to great things, but fell silent when it came to the details of his position: How long he would be installed, what the extent of his powers under the current regime, and exactly what changes might be forthcoming. The lack of information, coupled with the utter disinterest in involving the local population, did more to stir local rebellion than any invasive action could have. We had known we were powerless from the moment the armies landed, but that was a knowledge bound to its time, fixed in the moment of the silver armies marching towards us. This new development rang the first note for our future, and implied that our lives from here on would be subject entirely to the whims of an unknown, unknowable force.

All they would have needed to do was hear us out. Ask our opinion, pretend to listen; and all would have gone so much better. Instead, they doomed themselves to rule over a populace that was already pessimistic over its future, and saw no reason to aid its masters in improving their own lot.

It went on like this. The navy might have executed a clear-cut takeover, but the bureaucracy virtually stumbled its way into power. Gods knew our old rule had not been faultless, but at least we had grown inured to its flaws. Then the Caldari had come in and done the worst thing they could: Brought about change, but extinguished the hope that it might be for the better.

Jeb and I kept a close eye on the new power, as anyone else would. We read the council minutes, spoke courteously to representatives, and kept our mouths shut while taking in all the information we could.

The more we learned, the clearer it became that this was not a failure of the meritocracy, that guiding light of the new Caldari rule.

Instead, it was the fault of our new governor, who had overseen every process following the invasion itself, and who was clearly not fit for rule. His people were just as corrupt as the old rule, but possessed neither the

personal connections nor the deep understanding of colony life to make the community function underneath all that graft.

The Gallentean in me took over.

I kept an eye on everything, saw the myriad of problems, and noted down ways to fix them. My own job, as a low-level facilitator, afforded me an opportunity to travel, so I made the most of it. I did not ask questions about work or anything else that might be deemed suspicious; but then, I didn't have to. All I did was ask people about themselves. Eventually their talk moved on to work, and most all were entirely happy to tell me of all the wrongs that could be righted, as people tend to be when they're talking to someone who they believe is just as powerless to act as they are.

It took weeks, and the only one I shared it with was Jeb, who seemed to agree with most of what I thought. Long, sleepless nights of planning; and long, careful days of finding the right people to talk to, the right chinks in the armor to slowly dent.

Eventually the call came in. The governorship -the governor and a good deal of his entire team - were to be replaced. The colony had stabilized, they said - which was true - and it was now possible for them to pull out the governing force and replace it with local people. All of this was true. Not a mention was made of the utter failures that had taken place during the governor's brief time in office. They were not important any longer.

Names were mentioned. Mine came up; once, then again, then often enough that the voices lifted me to power.

I'm not at the top yet - the apex belongs to the Caldari - but I've risen to one of the highest positions a Gallentean can hold on this colony. Jeb's not far behind me.

It's been a strange time. It has taught me more than I cared to know about how this place is run, and what a labyrinthine task it can be to pull the strings.

The meritocracy is a real, wonderful thing. It's what we always wanted. Performance matters. If you are good at what you do, you are rewarded; and if you are not, you are pushed aside to make way for someone who can do your job. It's a utilitarianism that by rights should have arisen with the Gallente. That it did not, bubbling instead out of that black stew that is the Caldari corporate world, is testament to their ability to adapt, and a great discredit to ours.

And in this new world they allow us to create, I still cannot help but wonder if the legacy of Tibus Heth, that high warlord of the Caldari State, and his quest to destroy the Gallente Federation by any means, isn't still being furthered. For the numbers have come in, and they are the same ones as they were yesterday and the day before.

The colony operates better than ever. The people will brook nothing less, now. Anyone who fails to serve the meritocracy and its people at the level it demands can not be allowed to block the path of others.

The numbers have come in. I've known Jeb since we were kids.

This is how they will turn us against one another. And I don't know how to be a Gallentean any more.

The Precious Tableau



Mime.Access.Requested;

[->User]Access key required. Please supply biometrics;

Mime.Access.Ratification(User 3053);

[->User>Welcome;

Server.local.start; Settings.load(User 3053);Add.actor1;

Scene.start(3338);

He's a ship mechanic, so attuned to the quiet hum of the vessel that he can detect faults ahead of even the most sensitive of machinery. He finds a serious flaw in the control component of one of the ship's main engines, a flaw that will make its thrusters burn out and its core systems drop offline if not resolved in quick time. Going against the orders of his superiors and the captain of the ship, he overrides security access codes of the ship, accesses the control component and fixes it just in time to save everyone onboard the ship.

Scene.start(3357);

[->User]Scene not found;

Scene.start(3375);

He's a station operator who miraculously averts a crisis that would have seen the station and everyone on it decoupled from its orbit and flung out into deep space.

Scene.start(3392);Add.actor2;

Life as a busking music performer on the station is hard, but he's got talent and drive, always one step ahead of the heavies and the cops as he plays his tunes and attracts money and admiration. Passersby stop to listen and find themselves captured in rapt admiration. He doesn't pay them much mind, for he is in this for the music and the thrill, but one person catches his eye. She kneels by his keycard and touches hers to his to leave some credits, but makes another transfer of data as well. After he picks up and leaves, he inspects the day's earnings and finds that she gave him something else: Her publishing company's contact information.

Scene.interrupt;Remove.initiative5;Unlock.initiative6531

[->User]Initiative locked;

Transmit. key(signed);

[->User]Initiative unlocked;

Add.initiative6531;

Her personal contact information.

Scene.start(3393);

He's at home and sends her a line. She responds. It's a little stilted at first but they soon find common ground and a nice tempo. Eventually they move over to audio and talk for hours.

Scene.start(3359);

He's a secret agent for CONCORD, sneaking into dangerous pirate territories.

Scene.start(3363);

As a famous actor, he tries to remain unrecognized in his private time. Some non-famous person recognizes but does not unmask him during a vulnerable time, and in return he gives her a role in his latest movie.

Scene.start(3394);

There's a family scene, and he's the man of the house. Her, him and a dog, all of them resting together at home after a long day, quietly enjoying each other's presence. The dog is very clever and even has his own room. The dog obeys when he's told, and when the man and woman are together, the dog doesn't bark or demand attention.

Scene.start(3365);

He's a famous author, renowned for his knowledge of the human psyche.

Scene.start(3366);

He's a soldier in the war.

Scene.start(3395);

He's lying beside her, stroking her back. There has been no deeper intimacy, just touch. She turns away-

Scene.interrupt;Reset;

He's lying beside her, stroking her back. There has been no deeper intimacy, just touch. She turns towards him and says, "I love it when you do that. I wish you'd do it forever."

Scene.capture;

[->User]Capture saved;

Capture.erase;

[->User]Confirm capture?

Cancel;

Scene.start(3370);

They're at the operating table. He's about to make the incision. He's a brilliant doctor, able to sense illness and any corrupt body functions merely by his heightened sense of touch. He is so in demand that he can barely keep up.

Scene.start(3396);

He's at home, where he gets his messages answered. Every one he sends. Every one.

Capture.erase;

[->User]Confirm capture?

Confirm;

[->User]Capture erased?

Scene.factor.increase(chaos);Reset;

He's at home, but does not get his messages answered. It's because something terrible has happened, something he senses so strongly with his sensitive mind that he rushes off, gets over to her house and discovers that it's on fire. He breaks in and manages to save everyone. Even the dog.

Scene.start(3374);

He's a spy, doing undercover work on a station, and sniping those enemies foolish enough to wander within his crosshairs.

Scene.start(3396);Scene.factor.decrease(chaos);Scene.factor.increase(intrigue);Reset;

He's worried about the messages, so he's breaking into the house to make sure they're all right. He does not wake up the dog. He absolutely does not wake up the dog.

Scene.interrupt;Scene.delete(3396);

[->User]Confirm deletion?

Confirm;

Scene.start(3386);

He's a prosecutor who shows proper understanding to innocent people wrongly accused, while properly punishing those who need to be punished.

Scene.start(3397);

He visits her and helps her look for the dog, who's gone missing. It doesn't turn up, and in the end she admits that she never wanted a dog; she only wanted him.

Scene.start(3388);

A peaceful scene, a slow sunrise on a beach somewhere, with the surf sloshing onto the sand, and a tiny breeze cooling off the warm rocks, and nobody around at all.

Scene.start(3398);

It's a tableau. They all stand there: him, her, and the dog. They stand frozen, looking at the camera. They're smiling. Everyone is happy.

Scene.interrupt;

Logoff;

- * [->User]Please confirm exit;*
- * [->User]Please confirm exit...;*
- * [->User]Please confirm exit...;*
- * Cancel;*

Remove.pets;Add.actor3;Reset;

It's a tableau. They all stand there; him, her, and that damn kid. She's smiling, so beautifully, and so is he, and so is the kid, who keeps his mouth shut, who doesn't wake up at the slightest bit of noise and is happy and alive.

Scene.interrupt;Scene.start(3389);

He's a capsuleer, flying free, unfettered and undoubted, heading towards the stars.

The Human Painting



[August 12, YC 111]

"Director, there's a message for you."

"Little busy right now, Gerard. Can it wait?"

"Sorry, sir. It's the Office One response."

For the first time that morning, Mentas Blaque took his eyes off the week's insurgent update. He pushed his chair away from the console, stood up.

"Display, commandant."

"Yes, sir."

DIRECTOR MENTAS BLAQUE,

FEDERAL INTELLIGENCE OFFICE

Executive Order 81042 – Consolidation of National Armament Assets

YC111.08.12

The involvement of Federal Government employees as contributing representatives in the national arms industry has been deemed essential to achieving the objectives mandated by military leadership. It is in the interests of the nation at large that the best minds of the field act as one, and that private institutions shall find their favor in serving public interest.

By the authority vested in me as President of the Federated Union of Gallente Prime, and in order to establish a Council of Armaments Advisors working under Federation auspices, it is hereby ordered:

Section 1. The Federal Council of Armaments Advisors. (a) Membership. There is established the Federal Council of Armaments Advisors ("Council"). The Council shall comprise the following members appointed by the President:

"End," said Blaque. He rubbed his eyes and sat back down.

A few seconds passed, just him alone with himself in that quiet chamber. Then he pushed a button and said: "Corporal Ormonde, get your men ready to roll out."

[August 13, YC 111]

"Sir, I don't know. They're knocking now, but we don't see anything. There's no response at all."

"Continue for five then report," came the squawk through the radio. Corporal Argus Ormonde flipped down his visor and took a few steps toward the gigantic marble sculpture beyond which, several yards in the distance, he could see the entrance to the cordoned-off section where this eccentric freak of an arms dealer was keeping himself.

"Nothing still," came Fregal's voice. "I'm listening to the knocks sound off into the far passage, but the echoloc's giving a weird picture. It doesn't even sound like there are walls in there."

Despite himself, Ormonde sighed. "Fine," he said. "Initiate breach protocol alpha three and wait for my go-ahead."

Bad PR, but whatever. If you're batshit crazy for no better reason than that you have a lot of money, and you want to do things the hard way, then it's your batshit crazy prerogative to get roughed up a little.

He braced himself behind a pillar, gave the standby signal to the flank unit, then flicked the go switch on Fregal. To the Director he sent one signal: operation green.

In the insulated comfort of his command center, Mentas Blaque felt an involuntary shudder of premonition. Two seconds later, there was a deafening crackle. Voices, a rumble. Purposeful running

The Black Eagles, getting things done when no-one else possibly could. It always gave him a small thrill, but today he was having trouble mustering the excitement. He'd had a diffuse melange of bad dreams the night before, and ever since the morning had carried with him a nagging sensation of somehow being outdone.

"In position," said Sergeant Fregal. "All right, we got two sentries and a few scout minis. Two, four, interceptor la—"

There was a crack. Sergeant Fregal stopped talking.

Next through the radio was a cacophony of static-infused noise. Some of it sounded like screaming, some of it sounded like talking.

Blaque leaned forward.

"Corporal Ormonde?"

There was no reply. The noises on the radio had died down to near silence. It began to dawn on him that nothing like this had ever happened to his men before.

He cut to Control. "Get me Jacus Roden on a private line," he said, "and do it absolutely right this instant."

It wasn't quite who he'd been expecting. Faced with a man who had made possible, through his ingenuity and business wits, the destruction of untold countless millions of lives and livelihoods, he now realized he'd subconsciously hoped for a somewhat more forceful figure. Jacus Roden was a slight man, perhaps five foot seven, about sixty years in appearance, with a slow deliberate manner and a perfectly hairless head.

"Hello, Mister Blaque." The old man was calm, quiet, rather composed given the situation.

"Mister Roden," said Blaque pleasantly. "Would you be interested in explaining why it is that I've lost contact with some of my best men after they initiated their attempt – their lawful attempt, I might add – at communicating with you on behalf of the Gallente Federation?"

"Certainly," said Roden. He scratched his nose and pressed a small button on his desk. "Their equipment

malfunctioned within our electromagnetic field, but they're being taken good care of. You'll see them again safe and sound shortly."

Inwardly Mentas balked at the man's presumption, but he kept his demeanor carefully ironclad. "I'm fully presuming, then, that this courteous treatment of our troops," he said, "is a sign that you're taking our initiative in the spirit expected of a loyal citizen of the Federation. Am I correct in this, Mister Roden?"

The old man sat down in his chair, pushed a few more buttons on his desk and smiled airily up at the camera, without really looking at it.

"You are correct in that I am a loyal citizen of the Federation," he said.

"And what would make you think this constitutes acceptable treatment of Office One emissaries?"

"I am motivated by nothing but love for these fine men."

"So you subdue them as a first course measure? Why not just talk?"

"Because they haven't heard what I'm offering and they didn't come with the intent to listen."

Two seconds passed. Mentas Blaque breathed in, then out, then in.

"And what is it that you're offering, exactly?"

"I just want what's best for everyone, Mister Blaque," the old man said. He spun in his chair and stood up. As he did so, for one second a metallic jaw line came into view, a streak of iron that ran from the side of his neck along the jaw to the bottom of the chin. "I just want everyone to be able to handle their business in a manner that befits our great Federation. As we were proceeding until our good president decided to stifle the wings of creative enterprise." He stopped at the corner of his desk and faced the camera squarely. A wry curve, half a smile and yet not, played at the corner of his lips.

Mentas Blaque raised his chin almost imperceptibly and executed a well-practiced flare of the nostrils. "The President makes whatever decisions are necessary at any given time," he said. "It has been deemed that the new arrangement will lead to a stronger and more unified Gallente, and it's neither your place nor mine to question its value. It has not been idly arrived at."

"Hierarchy is the grand streak in the human painting," said Roden. "Who was that? Fouel? Geremante? One of our greats, at any rate."

"I'm sure you can find out later, Mister Roden," said Blaque. "After you've released our men and submitted to whatever punishment the courts will see fit to bestow for your transgression." His patience was beginning to chafe away. This was supposed to be an eccentric lunatic, not a well-spoken intellectual. Somehow the high ground had begun to rattle.

"Enterprise is the foundation of our great experiment, here, wouldn't you say?" asked Roden, standing stock still behind his desk. Across several constellations and millions of kilometers, Blaque fancied he saw the tiniest flicker of light appear in the old man's eyes.

"Enterprise is where our Federation has been forged. It is where we find out how we stand. It is where we realize what it takes to win, to crush our competitors." The old man smiled pleasantly.

"If you start undermining the foundations of an enterprise," he continued, his back straightening and his gait becoming more forceful as he began a slow circle round his desk, "the rest of it will all come down. And the Federation," he said, velvetine menace creeping into his voice, "is not a lightweight enterprise. It is not something one crawls out from under."

"What," Blaque began, then stopped. It was all getting to be a bit too much. Most likely the old man was simply driven to folly by years of wretched excess, but there was a certain sort of humor in his manner, a meta-awareness that hinted at hidden knowledge.

Just as Mentas Blaque was beginning for one of the very few times in his life to feel the befuddled beginnings of true admiration, the old man said, "I think you may have a message." He sat down in his chair and leaned back.

Mentas muted the audio, checked the incoming feeds. Incident reports from seven different locations. Shutdown in Elore, hostage situation in Carirgnottin. Allotek Industries and Duville Labs incommunicado, Creodron and Chemal Tech declaring allegiance with Roden Shipyards and sending out press releases publicly rebuffing the nationalization.

No way. No way you could do this, old man. Mentas cut the vidlink and got up from his chair. His practiced and capable mind struggled to assess the situation. Somehow a single purveyor of weapons tech had managed to

bring the entire military-industrial complex together against a presidential decree. Obviously prior information, obviously planned well in advance, and yet completely ridiculous in its scope and audacity.

A full minute passed, during which the silent chamber's only sounds were the hum and bleep of dutiful machinery. Halfway wishing he had some way of commemorating the occasion, he sat down once more in the still deadness of his control center and fixed his eyes on the screen in front of him.

Into his microphone he quietly subvocalized, "Control, recorder off."

He switched back to Roden, unmuted the open channel. The old man was sitting in his chair, fingers splayed across his lap. The wry curve, by now, was more than a half-smile.

"Mister Roden," said Mentas Blaque. "It looks like you and I need to talk."



Blind Auction



He entered the room alone, motioning the door closed behind him with a lazy wave of his hand. A practiced eye swept the room briefly; unnecessary in this sanctum, but following old and well-trodden pathways in his mind. He strolled down the length of the long polysteel table, absent-mindedly touching the headrest of each seat as he passed, and dropped lightly into the worn leather swivelchair at the end. Leaning back and propping his feet on the table, he darkened both windows a little and started browsing reports on his neocom. Time passed quietly for a while, save for the gentle whirring of unobtrusive hardware, the filtered sunlight's gentle orange sheen punctuated at reassuringly familiar intervals by black shadows sweeping across the room.

A subdued flash outside stirred him, and he raised his head to gaze out through the window. A small ship, glowing orange; then a bigger flash, and another ship appeared. Larger, sleeker and a deal more menacing, the Widow gave him only a few moments to admire its elegant lines as it slid rapidly into the nearest docking bay. Moments later, the door opened.

"Sir, your first guest has just arrived."

"Yes, I was just watching him jump in. Remind me to get myself one of those."

"The Widow, sir?"

"Yes. Good-looking ship, and our pilots speak highly of them."

"Yes, sir. Would you like me to reserve a slot for it in your hangar? We could fit it in between that Scorpion you took out for a spin three years ago, and the Rattlesnake you won off The Rabbit and never finished fitting."

"Hah, yes. Yes... humph."

"Well, you can easily afford it, sir, and it's a great-looking ship."

"True. Okay, remind me to think about getting myself one of those some day."

"Yes, sir."

"Are we ready?"

"Yes, sir. The room's completely clean, and the overt recording devices, the covert recording devices, the backup recording devices and the recording devices that you had me fit as an insurance policy have all been completely removed. The only thing in this room with a pickup is your neocom, and we're actively sweeping all penetration points."

"Very good."

"We also had another look at general security, and we've installed a ballistic filter and a particle screen on the inner window. I know your opinion on that sort of thing, sir, but with the particular guests you have today... "

"Yes. Yes, you're right. I don't like it, but you're also right that we shouldn't be taking the risk here. Good thinking."

"Thank you, sir. He'll be along in a few moments."

He left the guard at the door and entered alone. The room was in darkness, but what little he could see was comfortingly familiar - sparsely and cleanly furnished, with a long boardroom table lined with empty executive-grade chairs. Without warning, the sun rose magnificently to his left, and his weary eyes drank in the orange warmth. He moved to the window, gazing out at the station's unsettlingly smooth lines, and the gigantic rotating rings of its laboratories, factories and testing facilities. Movement brought his attention down, as below his feet a cluster of ships soared out of the launch bay and aligned for warp. Other ships were coming and going, singly or in small groups - mostly capsuleers, his intel had told him, operating out of this lonely outpost and clearing the spacelanes of marauding Guristas.

Then he was aware of someone at his side, and he turned.

"Our capsuleer associates have proven remarkably useful over the years."

"Yes. I've heard that you do good business with them out here."

"We do indeed. They're good customers when you handle them right."

"And monsters if they get out of control. It's good to finally meet you."

"The feeling is mutual. I've been following your recent activities with some interest."

"It feels like everyone has, and not all the interest is the good sort."

"Indeed. I hope your trip wasn't too bad? I was just admiring your ship with my aide. They're fine vessels."

"I always found gate travel uncomfortable, and jump drives are considerably worse. But yes, it's a well-endowed ship, and we didn't have any trouble on the way."

"That's something to be thankful for, at least. How is business?"

"It's been worse. This latest trick of Heth's has thrown a whole bag of spanners into things though. He's doing a very good job of keeping us at each others' throats and away from his own neckline, but it's not good for the State. Or for our agenda, for that matter. If we were in a stronger position, we might..." He trailed off. "But we're not, and so here we are."

"Yes. And here he is too, I think."

"I don't recognize the configuration of that ship."

"Neither do I, but I'd hazard a guess that it's a Proteus."

"Oh. Yes. That would explain it. Tech Three. Expensive choice."

"Sound, though, if he has the covert configuration. And yes, very expensive. We've been trying to get hold of one, but—"

"We've managed to acquire a few subsystems, but without a power core there's not much to learn."

"Yes, and unless you can source the parts yourself—"

"Which is exceptionally dangerous."

"Yes, and with the capsuleer monopoly, market prices are—"

"Uneconomical."

"Exactly."

"I wonder where he got that one."

"Official budget, probably. He should be up in a minute."

He gestured at his chaperone to wait and strolled through the door. A brief glance was all he needed: another meeting room, another day... Without warning, the warmly shining sun was extinguished, and in the darkness his gaze was drawn to the constellation of lights visible through the interior window. Looking down into the station's central concourse, he could see thousands of tiny people moving purposefully along the night-cycle streets and walkways. He wondered what kind of people they were, what their hopes and dreams and fears and hidden levers were, and why they would choose this life, out here in the darkness. Then the room flooded with light again, and his co-conspirators came over to join him.

"Welcome to my little world."

"And a lovely little place it is, too. Thank you so much for agreeing to host this meeting – and thank you, too, for coming all this way to talk with us here."

"Purely business, Mr. ..."

"Please, no names. This is a huge risk for me, even with the best security measures in place. Not that I don't have the fullest trust in our gracious host, of course!"

"It's good of you to say so. I think we'll all need to trust one another today. As agreed, the only recording device in this room is my neocom, and it's neutralizing voiceprints. You have my word on that."

"Well, I'm sure that's more than good enough for both of us, am I right?"

"Yes, that will be fine. Our host and I were just discussing the ship you arrived on."

"That thing? I asked for the most secure ship we had available, but not one with a jump drive. Can't abide those things. Not a very luxurious ride, but the captain assured me it was up to the job."

"I'm sure we can find you a replacement for the return journey somewhere in our hangars here."

"Thank you so much for the offer, but I'm afraid I got the distinct impression from my staff that if I didn't bring the ship back in one piece, there'd be problems."

"Well, that's... entirely understandable, under the circumstances."

"Can we begin now?"

"Yes, of course. Let me just configure the table."

At the deft push of a few buttons, chairs slid back into the floor and the table contracted and reshaped into a compact circle. A holo-display flickered to life, reflecting off the table below and adding to the room's dim ambient lighting. The three men seated themselves and began to negotiate.

"If we're all ready, let's start. Would you like to kick off by explaining the deal as it's been presented to you, so we're all on the same page?"

"Heth has decided to auction exclusive economic rights for the contested Gallente areas to Caldari corporations. We will enter bids for any and all systems in the area that we are interested in, and in each system the corporation with the highest bid is granted a transferrable and sub-divisible license to regulate economic activity."

"If you would excuse me for jumping in, what is the duration of these licenses?"

"Ten years, with first refusal on subsequent renewals."

"And if the systems are not still in Caldari hands in ten years' time? You must know that we hardly intend to sit on our hands for the next decade."

"The licenses are only enforceable under Caldari law, which we don't expect the Federation to recognize. If the FDU manages to push the State out – in ten years or ten days – then the licenses will reactivate if and when the systems are reconquered."

"If you'll forgive me for saying so, that doesn't sound like a particularly safe deal."

"Do you really think that your Militia is in any position to mount a counteroffensive?"

"I think it might be worth remembering that capsuleers have a reputation for being... inscrutably unpredictable."

"A fair point. In any case, it's not a deal we can easily refuse. There's a huge quantity of untapped resources in

those systems – the Federation's methods have always been inefficient, and we have the added advantage of not having to worry much about the local population. Yes, I know, but that's how it's going to play out – you think the others are really going to worry about your people? I doubt any of us will be starting planetside operations for a while, but nobody's going to be keeping count of Gallentean mortality rates."

"I was aware of this, academically at least, but—"

"Hey, you want to talk to the others and complain, go right ahead. My being here should say enough about my position."

"Yes, I'm sorry. Please go on."

"Heth's set this up as a blind auction on the grounds that it will lead to objective valuations of the systems, but everyone knows it'll just drive bids through the roof. It's going to be ruinously expensive for everyone, but in the best-case scenario – which looks realistic, if you're still high on military victory – anyone not on the sled will be left in the snow. I've heard mutterings that in the worst case, we're all equally screwed, so the risk balances out. Besides, we still have all those Amarrian loans hanging over our heads, and while they seem happy to let them lie, most of us are keen to lose that particular collar as soon as possible."

"Hmmm... I'd forgotten about that financing deal."

"It keeps us awake at night. She's planning something, I'm sure of it. That's the situation laid out, though. The State retains military access to the systems, of course, but otherwise they become corporate fiefs."

"Which, as you say, will be unpleasant for the Gallenteans living there, but that's a problem that we don't have the resources to tackle."

"There is, however, a smaller and potentially more pressing issue which I think between us we might be able to at least mitigate. It's the reason I've expended a great deal of effort – and taken a rather large risk – to convene this meeting. Not all—"

"It's Intaki, isn't it. That's the only thing that makes sense."

"Yes, it's Intaki. If you could pull up the map on— yes, there we are. Here's the Placid contested zone – currently under Caldari occupation and, as you say, up for grabs – and here's Intaki, two jumps from Stacmon in the wrong direction. It goes without saying that it would be better for us if this situation had never occurred in the first place, but reality is what it is, and the home of a major Federal member is about to become the property of a Caldari megacorp. We're not exactly on good terms with any of you right now, but even so, some outcomes are preferable to others."

"You'd prefer that your new landlord is someone who's not going to throw you down the stairs for fun."

"That captures the sentiment fairly well, yes."

"So what do we get out of it?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You're offering us – me – a deal. You want me to buy Intaki to stop it getting completely trashed. I have sympathy for the idea, but we've spent a lot of money on ideas we had sympathy for and it's not worked out well for us financially. Why should I even discuss this?"

"Since we're talking about finances, how much of our space are you planning on buying? How much have you budgeted for?"

"Is that even relevant?"

"A constellation? A system?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that, even here."

"We have people looking at your people's accounts, and they say yours remind them of the Federal welfare programme back in the bad old days. You can't afford anything."

"We're still looking at our options. I have good people working on this, working to find— working to balance the money."

"You're out of time for that. The other megacorps have their cash lined up and ready. You're not ready, because you can't afford it."

"So what if you're right? What if we can't afford to get a piece of the pie? Why have you dragged me all the way out here to talk about this when you know full well we don't have the means to pay for it?"

"Because I do."

Two of the men were now hunched over the table, muscles tense, hololight lending their staring eyes unnatural hues. The third reclined in his chair, hands steepled and muscles relaxed, but hooded eyes flickering. For a moment there was silence punctuated only by the whirring machines. Another shadow passed across the outer window, and in the deeper darkness eyes glowed like smouldering coals. Beyond the inner window, crowds continued to silently surge.

"What are you proposing?"

"Well, we have a common objective here, that much seems obvious, and between us we have all the resources needed to achieve that objective. It's just a matter of aligning things such that—"

"You want to pay us to buy Intaki."

"To a political layman, that's probably how it looks, yes."

"Where I come from it's called pragmatism!"

"Gentlemen, I think we're all outside our comfort zones here. Let's try and keep our eyes on the target."

"Yes. You're right. But that is the pitch, if I'm not hugely misunderstanding. The Federation gives us a pile of money, which we can then use to make sure we get Intaki."

"It's of no consequence exactly where the money comes from; I can ensure that the necessary sum is made available to your people, which is all that should matter. And on the understanding, of course, that it's used exclusively for this purpose."

"Which brings up that question again. Transferring the money secretly is not a problem – deep space mineral exchanges and the like – and my people can easily explain the money appearing on our balance sheets, but again I have to ask: what's in it for us?"

"Is a large pile of free money suddenly not good enough?"

"You're not thinking this through. Explaining the money's appearance is easy, but I also have to explain why we're allocating all this suddenly available wealth towards bidding for the most problematic system in the auction, rather than picking somewhere more accessible, or even shoring up our existing finances. I need a cast-iron business pitch, and I can't make one with what you've given me. It'd be professional suicide."

"I had thought that, with the will and the resources, other problems would remove themselves. It's just a matter of marketing. You have good speechwriters, I assume? I can give you access to—"

"Yes, I can see you have thought about this a great deal, and I'm not questioning your intent or your commitment to this goal. But you're thinking like a Gallentean. My problem is not an electorate, it's shareholders, and we communicate with them using numbers, not words. The only way to sell this is to make it add up."

"This is not a problem I had considered. I'm very sorry; I don't have an answer to this."

"Then I'm very sorry too, because we have reached an impasse. I can't make this deal work."

"I believe I... might be able to see a way out of this. Intaki is resource-poor, it's true, but it is nevertheless one of the wealthiest systems in the Federation."

"That's all planetside though, services and advanced manufacturing. We can't leverage that."

"What if you could, though? If you come to save them rather than to subjugate them, I think they might cooperate with your goals."

"What manner of deal, precisely, are you suggesting here?"

"I'm proposing that his people enter into a partnership with your people. You give them exclusive shipping access to the Intaki system, and they agree to shield you from the excesses of the other corporations."

"Can they do that? Wouldn't the Federal Navy stop them?"

"Federal members retain control of their home systems. Usually security and shipping are franchised out to the

Navy and to Fedmart, but it's still under their control. If they wanted to delegate those responsibilities to you, they're legally entitled to do so."

"Do you really think the Intaki government would go for that? Permitting a Caldari corporation to manage their interstellar traffic?"

"I think that maybe you don't know your people as well as you think. I've been talking to them, through old acquaintances, and they've mentioned the S&S franchise to me more than once. I think they'd be interested in discussing it, and under the circumstances I don't think the shipping rights will be a sticking point. It's security that will bother them, I think."

"Yes. I can see how having our ships police their space might look bad."

"Our latest assessment of your corporate security forces suggests that they have neither the resources nor the training to do the job. You would need someone who both sides trust, and who has enough spare hardware and manpower to defend the system against any and all threats."

"Hah! You are a Caldari after all. I was wondering what your angle was! How much then would it cost us to buy your services for this?"

"Ah, let's not get caught up in the details. It's safe to say that our mutual friend here can cover the sort of money we'd be obligated to charge, as part of his donation."

"So he gets shipping rights – say, for ten years, renewable – to pacify his shareholders, you get paid to police things, and we have the safety of one of our most important systems secured. I have to admit, it's an elegant solution, assuming your assessment of the Intaki position is correct. And a profitable one for you, too, I don't doubt."

"I have a foot in both camps, as it were. I have an interest in these matters."

"Of course. Well, as I said earlier, this is an unfortunate position for us, but we have to do what we can. I don't see a better solution arising than this one, unpleasant as it may be."

"I think I can sell this deal to my people, assuming you both come through with your end. It is good to be able to make business and ethics coincide. The Old Man would be happy with this."

"I have hope that both our peoples will see the sense of it, although I fear that some of them will take longer than others to understand..."

He stretched in his chair, then leaned back and relaxed. Negotiations concluded, hands shaken and ships departed. A holo-map rotated still, a single red dot glowing at its centre. He clicked it off, and as darkness and light chased each other across the room, a smile played on his lips. A good day at the office. Interesting times ahead, and a good day.

He left the room quietly, blacking the windows behind him, and the machines hummed to themselves in the darkness.

A Man of Values and Faith



Hand me that component, please. Thank you.

Ammatar - yeah, this part'll take a while, but let's all be careful with it. We value our arms and legs - the Ammatar Mandate was a fraud and a sham. In the dark old days when the Amarr Empire held our people completely in thrall, the Nefantars actually assisted those sanctimonious murderers. When the rebellion finally came they cowered under the wing of the Empire and were given a planet of their own. Nobody back home wanted to call them Nefantar any longer, so a new name emerged. It was an insult but our people took it up in blissful pride. Ammatar. A semiautonomous faction of Minmatars under the aegis of the Amarr Empire. The mind reels.

No, don't move it just yet. It needs to settle. And make sure your hands are clean before you start shifting it. Any dirt will just cause smoke later on.

It's been rotten. It's been absolutely rotten to speak the truth in this place. Minmatar sympathizers are not welcome here, even when every one of us is Minmatar however much we may deny it. We're a small group, just us and our loved ones, getting increasingly smaller. But we are not Amarrians. We were born Minmatars. The people of our nation are being kidnapped and enslaved by the very same leaders whom the Ammatars serve. The mind truly reels.

Yes, over there is fine. Careful.

I am Ammatar in name but I was born Minmatar, and even as I was taught Amarrian thoughts in school, my true nature shone through. I learned to think and reason for myself. Besides, it was never any great challenge to see through their lies. Data isn't hard to come by. People just need to look for it.

So I was taught that we Nefantars, that traitor tribe of the Minmatar, had collaborated with the enemy and been doomed to subservience for our efforts. That is what I was taught. What I learned is that it couldn't be true. It never made the slightest bit of sense. Even leaving aside the idea that an entire tribe would betray its nation for the enemy, under threat of death and torture and whatever else, it happened far too easily. Not at the end, when everyone would have been exhausted and worn and tired of war, but early on, when they still had recruits willing to fight. I could not believe this choice had been made in good faith by our own people, leaving our best interests by the wayside.

No, of course I never spoke of it. They'd have had me killed.

Anyway, I was right. I couldn't possibly have imagined the scope of what they did, but I was right.

During the great Minmatar rebellion, the Nefantars cooperated with the occupying Amarr forces because another tribe, the Starkmanir, were about to be wiped out of existence. And we took them in. The Nefantar leaders took in the last of the Starkmanir, hid them among our people in a marvelous web of deceit, and then allowed the whole Nefantar tribe to be taken in by the Amarr, Starkmanirs intact. Protected by the very monsters who had sought their destruction and ruin.

Nobody knew this except a few of the chosen. I can't imagine the organizational complexities of their plans, the raw desperation for a solution, any solution - and the sheer nerve they must have needed, knowing that their only measure of success would be the hatred of their fellow men until the end of time. They would know the truth and no one else, and if I can carry myself with equal good graces through the oncoming conflicts, I'll be amazed.

Ready to pull that off in five. Otherwise they'll start reacting and we either have to start over again, or we'll be cleaning you off the ceiling. It's the smell that'll tell you. Smell's a good indicator that something's gone wrong.

Yes, that and you on the ceiling, alright.

I don't think we ever thought we'd see the great tribes return. It's always been a small group of us here in the Ammatar Mandate, banded together by the cause and our love for our fellow Minmatar, fighting for the right for our people to return to their proper home. Nobody else on this forsaken planet seemed to have any interest in awakening to their true natures; nor did the rest of the Minmatar nation want to have anything to do with us. They wanted to free their brothers, yes, but only those who'd been enslaved by the Amarr, and not the idiot Nefantar who'd willingly walked through the gates.

Then one day the skies darkened, and they came for us.

Led by the Elders, the Minmatar Republic invaded the Amarr Empire's sovereign space and brought a massive fleet to bear on the Empire's defenses, reducing them to dust and tattered scripture. They came to the Ammatar Mandate, landed on our planet and pulled our people out, as many as would come. But even in the madness of the invasion they were very selective about who they took with them: You could come if you liked, but there were certain people whose presence they simply demanded, and there was a lot of furor and trouble because some of them stupidly didn't want to go. At the time I didn't understand why they chose specific areas, communities and individuals. I do now. They were coming for the Starkmanir.

If our people had retained any sense, we would have all gone with them. And if the invasion had succeeded the way it was planned, I'm sure we would have. But it was halted by the goddamn superweapon wielded by that Amarrian bitch. Once the news reached us that she had vaporized a good half of our fleet - that grand fleet we had barely even began to realize the Minmatar had amassed, let alone deployed in battle - it was simply overload. The mind was so overloaded by world-changing events that the more mundane events on the ground were simply passed over.

You do not want to pick that thing up right away. Look at the back of my hand. See those grafts? Trust me.

Once the dust had settled, and we'd come to grips with the fact that the Minmatar had come and gone, I thought we were in for a new era among the Ammatar. Even before I knew the full extent of what we had done for the Starkmanir, I realized that we were leaderless, out of the Amarr Empire's immediate sphere of concern, and populated with a race that had just seen its fellow members come in force and kick ass. It was the greatest opportunity in the history of the Ammatar Mandate to incite rebellion and tear our way out of that tangled web of Amarr for good.

We blew it. We absolutely blew it.

We thought - we who call ourselves revolutionaries - that we had time. After the furor and trouble of the Minmatar invasion, and the loss of the Mandate leader, and the chaos they left in their wake, there was too much to do here on a daily basis. You can't have revolution if you don't have food nor shelter, and while the invasion was as painless as one can be, it really does not take all that much to destabilize a planet's production and distribution systems. Everyone had to pitch in and make sure our economy still functioned.

So we clung to our processes - yeah, go ahead, but be careful with that - we clung to the processes we knew, dug deeper into our ruts, and went with familiarity for the time being. Inciting revolution among frightened, insecure crowds would not have worked, not when the inevitable backlash came. We needed solid ground for our activities, and we needed our subjects unafraid of more change. We needed more time. Some of us had that saving grace of patience; others did not.

When they said Ardishapur was taking over I thought it was a blessing.

The man is renowned as a hard-line Amarrian. Of all the heirs to the Empyrean throne, he is the one who clings the hardest to the Empire's old ways of evil and destruction. Even the bitch empress is more forward-looking than he is. So when I heard he had been assigned the Mandate, I rejoiced, because I knew - I thought I knew - that this would be yet another push for our people on their path to independence. They would suffer

Ardishapur's hellish rule only long enough to realize where their true destiny lay, and the few doubts left over in their minds from the Minmatar invasion would be erased, bringing them over to our side.

Our brothers in the Empire, who knew better, warned us that the man should not be underestimated, but we ignored their claims.

All right. I ignored their claims. But so did others.

We thought he would come in with a steely hand, clamping down on the masses, all the better for us to rise against. That he would offer the hellfires of damnation to a people who had seen another way out of this wretched half-life they had in the Mandate and who'd think very hard about what the Empire was trying to thrust upon them. That he would force us into his faith and the Empire's clammy arms once again, with temples on every street, and prayers to a false god ringing in the night.

It would have been perfect. It was everything we needed; a subjugation of our peoples that would lead them straight to me. To our cause, I mean.

And he came, but what he did was so much worse.

He built a goddamn school. In every neighborhood.

He brought with him a latticework of Amarrians who slid into every vacant position left empty by the fleeing administration, and who took up their places like they were meant to be there. And immediately they set about building or repairing necessary structures - schools, hospitals, operating centers of various kinds - and buffering internal support, rather than concerning himself with our relations to the Empire. He made the Ammatar Mandate an independent kingdom again, subject not to the Empire's whims but merely to his own direct rule, and capable of sustaining itself without necessary intervention by Empire authorities.

He brought their twisted faith, too; of course he did. There were religious overtones to everything he did, in every school and hospital. They were really nothing new to the rebellion and people like us, so we didn't mind one way or the other. But the people, the general population, should have recognized it for what it was. They should have been incensed that their opportunity to be free at last, and to live as proper Minmatars, was being taken from them and replaced by this celestial sham the Amarrians call a religion.

For I am convinced that whatever Amarrian religious habits have been forced on them, all their lives, for these untold generations, they would fall away like chaff as soon as we went back home. There might be some slight discomfort in the adjustment, but any true Minmatar could cast it off.

I was wrong. I admit it. The allure of comforts overrode the drive for rectitude. In even what I'd thought the staunchest of revolutionaries.

No, put that down. Wait. We have to wait. It'll be ready soon enough.

As representative of the Minmatar league I tried, I tried so hard, to gather support. This should have been our time. The Mandate had been put in total disorder, the people of our origin had come and shown us the way, a new leader with a vile message had come to impose his will on us ...

I expected the people to flock to me. To us. Instead they massed at the feet of that dictator Ardishapur. As if he could bribe us.

Of course it was necessary, what he did. Of course it was needed. Good education, clean water, a running economy, etcetera. But not from him. What price, health and happiness? When your life, enjoyable as it momentarily may be, is based on such false and badly founded values, it simply cannot be permitted to go on. No matter how much temporary comfort it may provide you. Otherwise you are perpetuating a cycle that your children and their children will find it even harder to break out of, and you are poisoning your people and their culture with this ... metaphysical falsehood, this intangible lie that this life is how it should be. Anything new you create will find the spark of its life ignited by the same lie, and thus by extension be equal lie itself. I wish some people had understood that, before they left to join the lie.

The Nefantar aren't entirely poisoned yet. Not while we are here to tell them the truth. But without us, without this societal antidote, they would be lost for good. And our numbers are dwindling. We have had thrust upon us a pious leader who knows how to dominate the public's minds by that most insidious of methods: improving their quality of life. If this goes on we are going to lose the Minmatar ideological grip on the Ammatar people, the grip we held for only a moment. If we are going to act, it has to be now.

Now means now, yes. It also means we need to have those detonators ready. Are you going to have them ready? Good. We're leaving soon.

I was angry, yes. Over the reactions of the Nefantar, and of the people I know.

Yes, some more than others. Get those goddamn detonators ready.

I was trying to get the people on this planet to mind, because I thought they should. I am a man of values and faith, and I will not be taken in by chicanery. And yes, it's been an agonizing grind and of course we have lost some of our people down the road, but it doesn't matter. Ardishapur's work must be stopped. The man is a carnivore, offering only the warmth of his teeth.

So now we need to show him - show them, all of them - what it means to be Minmatar. That the order he created is a lie and cannot be allowed to live. Not merely for our cause, but for those who've suffered so terribly through the ages and are no longer here, whether by fate or by choice.

Yes, including her. She chose to leave.

What?

I said she's gone.

Away. From us at least. Stop asking goddamn questions and hand me those goddamn detonators right now.

So there's nothing to it. The people have betrayed us, fallen asleep on the guard, turned away from us. The ones who truly loved them. And they need to be woken up.

May my people forgive me and see that what I did was necessary. Bring the rest of the equipment, please.

We'll start with the ones in our neighborhood.

Where she is.

Prosopagnosia



There was nothing keeping him on the colony, so one night he got out of bed far too early for it to be late anymore, and he headed down to the docking areas where the spaceships passed by on their way to somewhere else. There he arrived at a small waiting area that served as tavern, information portal and intersystem trading hub. He located the crew from that strange ship that would sometimes stop by, asked them again about the terms of the contracts they were offering, and this time he took a seat and listened hard.

It was a well-known contract in the manner that such things become known, spoken of in rumors and hushed half-beliefs. Lazar knew few people who had truly investigated all its murky corners.

The recruiters were friendly without being imposing. They gave him the impression that they would be happy to have him and remain happy once he had signed up but would not take it personally if he did not. They also gave him the impression that they knew where they were headed, which made them all the more appealing.

Their contract was remarkably clear in tone. It was for a whole year, that odd span which has become actual time without yet being truly long. A year was the smallest unit with which to measure the increments of one's life; and so it counted towards the future without eating it up.

During that year Lazar would not be allowed to leave the ship on his own volition. Were he to attempt disembarkment, the contract stated he would be confined to his quarters until such time as he could be given passage to a nearby colony, while the recruiters calmly stated that he would, in fact, be confined to a container and jettisoned into fucking space at the pilot's whim. This was not a contract for uncommitted people, nor with those who retained any longing for their past.

He would sever all ties with his old life. There would be no communication with anyone on this colony, or anyone anywhere else unless required for a pilot-sanctioned mission. The ship would undock, with Lazar on board, and that would be it.

During this year he would be paid a fortune in salary. Word also had it that the capsuleer who ran the crew could be extremely generous in all those little ways that matter infinitely more when your daily routine is dictated by others.

After the first year he would be free to go. When he asked if recruits tended to leave, the recruiters shrugged and admitted almost reluctantly that nobody ever did. People, they said, found something on this ship they were looking for, and they didn't want to ever let it go.

It suited him well.

They gave him a datapad with tests and watched as he answered the questions, some of which were stranger than others and a good part of which seemed related to personal identity. He handed back the datapad to a recruiter who looked it over, smiled and handed it back with an offer. The offer was in ISK. He had never had ISK

before.

He signed the datapad with his autograph and his personal key, and he handed it back, and he left his old life for good.

The ship was an industrial, five hundred strong, although Lazar was told that he likely wouldn't see but a fraction of it at the outset. He was confined to a particular section of the ship where he would work, live and interact with the same limited subsection of the crew. He had not been allowed to bring any personal possessions, but the ship was well-stocked in both entertainment material and basic necessities. Many of the onboard systems were automated, even the personal hygiene ones in the living quarters, which Lazar suspected was a welcome novelty for a ship used to taking long trips in deep space. The lack of amenities annoyed him at the outset - he wanted to shave his face with a blade, but there were no razors and, oddest of all, there were no mirrors on the ship, either - but if that was the worst he had to suffer on this strange trip, he expected he could handle it.

He met his crew section every morning at reveille. Strengthened in his intent to accept whatever the journey brought him, he found himself more affable than he'd been in years, and made quick friends with most of them. One in particular caught his attention, though he tried to rein himself in. She had long, reddish hair, thick lips and a voice that slid gently into his ears. Her name was Reania.

She agreed with him that the ship's automation took a little getting used to, and that the lack of mirrors was frankly bizarre, but added that the capsuleer in charge of this ship was in fact a very nice man. He had his kooky side, as she called it, but they all did, and his crew served him without compunction. He also had a lot of money - again, as they all did - and spent a great deal of it on this ship and its crew. The others, busy with eating but apparently listening in, nodded in gentle approval. Lazar wondered whether he would ever meet this man, but asked whether he would ever meet the rest of the crew. Reania said that eventually he would, after the initial adjustment period had passed. Long trips took getting used to, and they did not want him to get lost in this life before he had truly found his bearings. He did not ask anything else. She smiled at him, but she was not smiling.

That night he started getting sick. It began with a slight vertigo and a photosensitivity that turned increasingly vicious as the night wore on, until the point where even the gloom from the stars' faint halos, penetrating through the darkness of his covered windows, felt like needles slowly piercing his brain. The vertigo forced him to keep his eyes open - he was absolutely not going to run to the bathroom and vomit, not in the dark - and he spent his time counting the luminous shapes that appeared to slither over his bedroom floor, like oil over metal. When he moved his gaze up at the wall, the shapes followed.

Somewhere in the middle of the whorl, he fell asleep.

The next morning people kept asking him how he was doing. He reasoned that he must really look sick, but without any mirrors he couldn't tell for sure.

The day went on and was followed by others. He did his chores, which were simple and appeared to be aimed at gauging his talents rather than putting him to a proper day's amount of work. The crewmembers who worked alongside him kept an eye on his progress, but they were gentle enough about it, and so forthright in their watch, that he did not feel belittled nor ashamed.

He got to know them by their first names, them and most of the others he saw in this enclosed new life, and after the ship made its next stop somewhere in the deep of space he noticed that several of them had disappeared. He asked around, but received only smiles.

The night hallucinations continued. Sometimes he crawled to the toilet and vomited. He was glad for the lack of mirrors, for he did really not want to see his face.

One time at lunch someone new sat next to him. He hadn't yet met this person, but found him strangely familiar. The person greeted Lazar cheerfully by name, and Lazar ransacked his memory for the same, but came up empty.

"Who are you?" Lazar said at last, with what he assumed was a fairly silly grin.

"Oh, I'm Jatek."

Lazar said, half to himself, "Hey, that's the name of one of our guys who left recently."

The man said, "Yeah, that's me."

This was surprising to Lazar, who had gotten to know Jatek. "No, you're not," he said.

"Why not?"

This was even more surprising. "Well ..." Lazar began. "You don't look anything like him."

"What size was he?" the man said, standing up.

Lazar looked him over. "Yours, but-"

"What build?"

"Yours. And you're wearing clothing similar to his, and you probably have the same shoe size as well," Lazar said as the man sat back down. He leaned in and added with a whisper, "But here's a telling little detail. You don't have his face."

"So?" the man said, with a puzzled and amused expression on those strange features.

Lazar blinked at him. He muttered, "I don't know what to say to that."

The man nodded - still with that amused face that Lazar half wanted to smash in with a goddamn rock - and went back to eating his lunch.

Lazar remained in his seat and resumed his own meal, which had lost most of its taste. He shot the man a look every now and then, but tried to focus on the positive things about this situation: He was happy here. He was free of the migraine, for the moment. And although his stomach was a little shaky, no less after this little act, he was keeping his food down.

Until the door opened and another person walked in, wearing different clothing and made of a different build, and walking even with a different gait, but possessing the exact same face as the Jatek pretender.

Lazar rushed out and barely made it to the bathroom before losing his lunch.

He spent the rest of the afternoon in bed, waking only from his doze when Reania came over to check on him. They had become close friends, or as much as one can get when adjusting to a new life and trying not to fall for one's coworkers. When she saw the state he was in, she immediately took over the flat. This included taking his dirty laundry off various available surfaces and having it cleaned, ordering the AC to air out the place (and ordering Lazar not to shut it off again), sending the cleaner bugs to take care of spatters from the most recent raspy dry heave, and sorting out a proper warm meal. Snacks were always available to the crew - this was one of those uncommon ships where practically nothing was rationed - but food had to be requested, as private quarters had no facilities to make it. Reania left and returned shortly after with something that Lazar thought smelled almost as nice as she did. They ate in the living room, him sitting on the sofa, her on a chair that faced him.

He got the food down, eventually. She sat there patiently, chatting with him in amicable fashion and doing a good job of making him feel neither alone nor helpless. To his relief she did not ask him what was wrong, for he could not truly have told her.

After the meal he was overcome with the calming warmth of a body nourishing itself. He ran out of energy even to talk, but even so he did not want Reania to leave him. She seemed to sense this and moved closer, sitting beside him and keeping up a slow murmur about her time on the ship and the sights she'd seen; stations, nebulas, anything but the present.

In a quiet moment he asked if they could just lie down. They did, there on the sofa.

For the longest time he didn't speak, not wanting to disturb this bubble of niceness and normality in which he was resting. But the mind never stops, and eventually he had to ask.

"Did you see Jatek and Kralen today?"

"Yes," she said.

He asked, with the tiny glimmer of stupid hope, "Oh, so they're back from the station?"

She said, "Well, yeah, silly. Jatek even told me he sat with you at lunch today."

Lazar closed his eyes tight and lay very still, hoping Reania wasn't going to ask, but certain that she would.

She didn't.

Eventually he took a deep breath and said, "Do you see nothing wrong with them?"

"No," she said. "I don't."

He took another deep breath, and another. Eventually he fell asleep.

They stopped off again, this time for a few days. More new faces, all the same old face.

He truly felt like he was losing his mind, and he found himself idly wondering if he should kill them all or merely kill himself. At mealtimes he avoided everyone. Someone spoke to him unexpectedly and he was so startled that he spilled food over them. He left immediately, because if he had not, he honestly would have fallen to the floor and cried.

Sleep was harder to come by, though the worst of the headaches had passed.

He did not dare say anything to anyone because he truly did not know if he was himself any longer, and if he started to yell and scream at those strange faces, it wouldn't matter either way: He would have become a madman. Even if he was right, he would have lost his mind.

They suffered an attack, in one losec system, and this is what wrecked him: He was bloody useless. Everyone stood their ground and did the work required, but Lazar did not. He couldn't face working beside those people. He remained at his post and he responded when he couldn't avoid it, but it was clear to him and certainly to anyone around him that he had flaked out. They said nothing to him, which only made it worse.

The ship took to the nearest station for repairs. While it was docked Lazar aimlessly wandered its corridors, not knowing even what he was anymore - certainly not a proper crewman, and barely a human being - and only came to a stop when his legs would no longer carry him.

He rested against a wall, eyes closed. The thrum of the ship was different when docked: not quiet, but more deeply throbbing, as from potential rather than motion. It was so strange to stop, but not even his next steps seemed real enough to make effort.

There were footsteps. He hoped he wouldn't have to talk.

He cracked an eye open and saw another one, the same visage as all the others; although on this one the face seemed entirely natural and a perfect fit to his body.

The wanderer asked if he was okay. Lazar nodded.

Then the stranger with the strange face did something that amazed Lazar. He knelt down and hugged him.

Lazar was too tired even to sob, so he sighed, again and again.

The man said, "We are all the same here. We all live this same life. Forever," and as creepy as it was, it was calming, too. Lazar found himself loving this man's voice, his support, and his apparent sanguinity of mind; for either he had already had his own face changed, like everyone else, and had simply dealt with it, or he hadn't had it altered and was now supporting someone like Lazar who, to him, must appear utterly mad.

Lazar rose from the man's grasp and sighed again, nodding at him. He tried to get a grip on himself.

The man said something like, "You're going to be okay," and Lazar didn't hear if it was a question or a statement, but he closed his eyes and nodded again. He heard the man walk away. As the steps receded it occurred to him that he hadn't even thanked the guy, so he made himself open his eyes, opened his mouth, and looked in the direction of the footfalls. He caught the briefest of glimpses as the man walked around a bend in the corridor before disappearing from view. The back of his head had a neural socket in it.

Lazar made his way home. Everyone on this ship, he was coming to realize, had been kind to him from day one. Everyone was supportive. Whatever this was, and whether or not they were doing it to him, they truly cared.

He had just been comforted by a capsuleer. He felt like an infant, rocked to sleep by a burning red sun.

That night someone rang at his door. It was Reania. She was there to comfort him, he said.

While they sat on the couch he admitted to her that he was wallowing in misery.

She said that isolation did strange things to people's minds. He said it couldn't be that; it could not just that.

Reania sighed. She said it was not.

"You're not mad," she said.

"What's going on?" he asked.

She closed her eyes.

He looked at her for a while. "You're not going to answer," he said at last.

She shook her head.

"But it doesn't matter, because I'm on this ship for good," he said quietly.

She nodded.

They sat for a while in silence. Eventually she got up and said, in a teary whisper, "I'd better be going."

She had reached the door before he said, "Don't."

She stopped.

"Please," he added.

She put her hand on the doorframe, leaned against it with her head.

He said, "Please don't leave me alone." She turned, and he added, "I don't know who you'll be tomorrow. Please don't leave me alone."

She laughed and cried at once, and went back to him, stroking and kissing his head. Later they moved from the couch to the bed, and even later, they eventually fell asleep.

The next morning he was determined: If this was madness then he would ride it, like a comet among stars.

Every face he saw was the same face. But when he returned home at night she was always there, and it kept him going, if not sane.

One night she said she would go away for a while, but she would be back. He said yes.

She asked if he was alright. He said yes, and yes, and yes.

He was riding the comet. Nothing else. He was in the dead cold of space, waiting to burn up.

They made love again, for the last time.

He slept a lot. He lost count of time. Once he woke up, sore and numb, and found it was three days later than he thought it had been. But he felt at ease, and managed to enact some manner of balance in his life. Everything happened for a reason.

They had to short up a bunch of damage after they got ambushed. He pulled Jatek out of danger after a circuit board caught fire, and promised himself he'd look into that; they were his responsibility. Kralen bought the rounds afterwards, since he'd been the last crewman to vet his guns before activation.

Eventually she returned. They met in the cafeteria, and ate, and after work they went their separate ways until the very end of the day, when she came to his quarters. She had an access pad and let herself into the dark room. He heard her come.

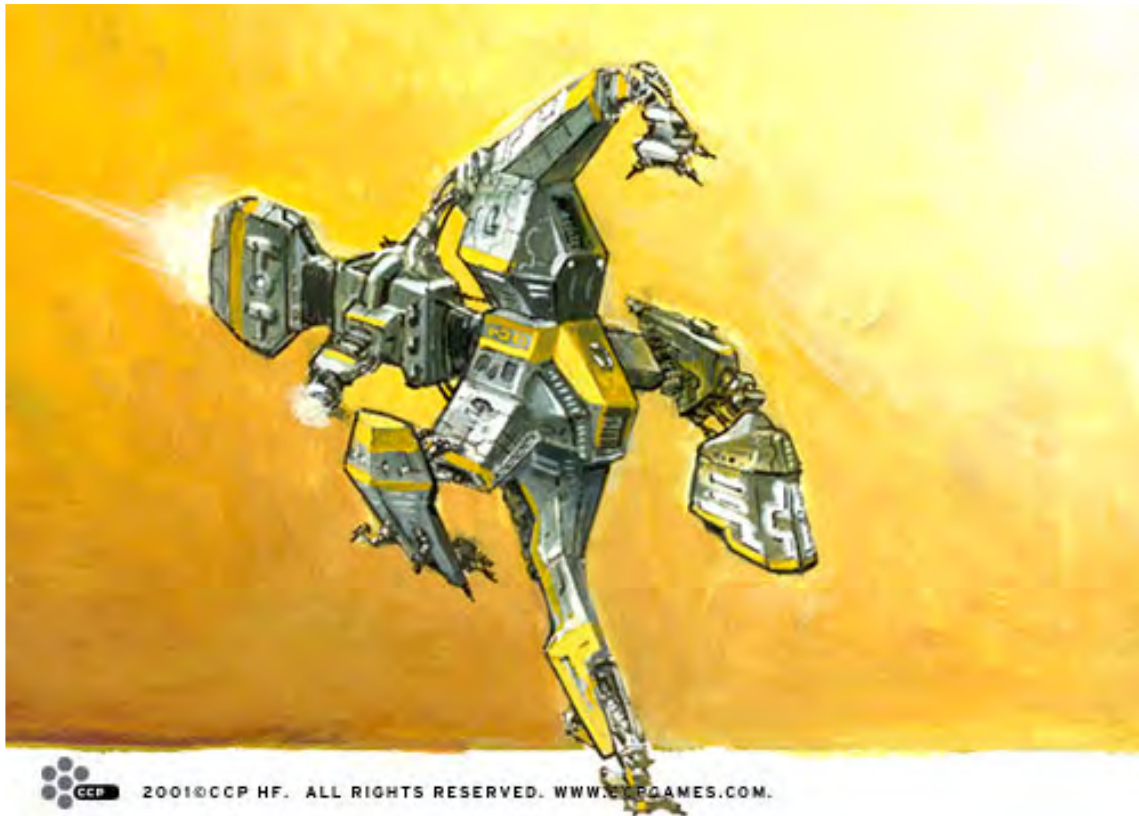
She walked quietly into the bedroom and laid down with him. She started to do things, but he stopped her.

She pulled back, apparently thinking he didn't want to, but she was wrong. He said, "I have to do one thing first," reached out and turned up a single light from a single lamp. Its faded brightness was like that of a setting sun, and it illuminated her new face.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked, with that old voice.

"The light stays on," he said, and reached for her hand again. She leaned down and kissed his fingers, then leaned in a little closer.

When they did it, he looked deep into her eyes. He saw his reflection, deep in those pools of darkness, and it was her own face. He whispered, "Yes."



Present Pieces



A Beginning

In the darkness, someone inhaled audibly; a faint speck of red flared, just for a moment, some twenty feet away. There was a pause and then a long, sharp exhalation from the shadows near the wall. The smell of tobacco grew strong in the air. A pause, another drag.

Abruptly, the smoker started coughing, quietly at first, but growing louder and harder, a grating crescendo in the yard's murky, almost artificial silence. Amid gasping attempts to catch his breath, the man muttered a few unintelligible words.

From the tone, Chieran thought none of the words were fit for young ears.

"Sounds bad. You might consider having that looked at," he interjected, voice carefully measured, neutral but friendly.

The smoker paused only for a moment, biting back his next cough, before replying. "You figure there's any way I could not be looked at in this place?" The response was bitter, but not overtly hostile. He swallowed another cough. "I'm sure there's some nurse watching us with multispecs from one of those windows up there right now. Big needle in her hand, probably, just waiting for me to go back inside. Or a bloody bonesaw, more likely."

His smirk hidden by the darkness, Chieran forced out a short laugh. "You the fellow from 216-B? The one they brought down from the LTT the other day?"

"Might be." The coughing man's voice was suddenly tight. He was young, much younger than Chieran had first thought. Barely out of his teens. The young man took another drag of his cigarette. "Why?" he asked sharply. And then he started coughing again.

Chieran waited for the spasm to pass, and then there was another silence as each man waited for the other to resume. After a few long seconds, the lit stub of a cigarette launched itself in a spinning arc through the darkness, flaring into a tiny explosion when it hit the ground.

Chieran spoke again. "I'm in 219, across the way. That's all. Just wondering."

There was another silence, this one considerably shorter. "Yeah, well, I don't remember being brought in there. Don't remember much till last night, actually. Guess the drugs wore off by then. Couldn't sleep. And I didn't much feel like coming out here for a smoke until now. Smoke and a little peace and quiet."

"Well, the peace and quiet's good. Not so much the smoking. But I won't tell anyone." He paused deliberately for

comic effect. "Besides, the nurse with the 'specs already knows anyway."

"Shit," the stranger replied, a faint hint of laughter in his voice as he choked out the word, stifling yet another cough.

"Well, listen," Chieran said, assuming that the other man did not want company. "I'm sure you need your rest. I know I do. And besides, it's a bit chilly out here. Perhaps I'll see you again tomorrow." And without waiting for a reply, he turned and reached for the door handle.

An Earlier Beginning

"Chieran Dr. Kenitawri... you really need to see this. I think I have I've found something interesting. Quite interesting." The image on Chieran's desk shuddered for a moment as Dr. Merial Akalayan, his senior assistant, shifted her holocam downward and expanded the view to include two objects, each filling half of a large table. "This piece was recently brought back from a wormhole in Akora. This piece," she said, pointing to the second object, "was found in the archive. Labeled, probably by some idiotic student, as 'detritus.' It was retrieved from a very old excavation site on Matari Prime Matar, I mean sometime during the last century. Never properly dated."

At a glance, the two items seemed vaguely similar in shape, but without examining them more closely, Chieran could not judge accurately.

"Yes, and what is it that's so interesting?" Chieran asked.

"Well, several things," the younger scientist replied, her voice speeding up. "First, the age. I ran some tests, and the first object dates back roughly fourteen to fifteen thousand years; the second, this one here, only about slightly less, probably within less than a thousand years of the other."

Chieran's slightly raised eyebrow gave away his sudden interest. "So late Yan Jung Era or shortly thereafter."

"Yes. Precisely. Yes, and also, there's the matter of these smaller sections here." She gestured to a series of protrusions on both objects, both worn with rust but still easily visible. "On both, these nodes appear in the same pattern, which was what first lead me to look more closely." She paused again, breathing deeply, and her voice, when she continued, was shaking with excitement. "Chieran, I think these... I am almost certain, but I need to run some more tests, naturally. But I think well, and of course I'd want you to have a look at"

Chieran smiled as he interrupted. "Merial, please. I trust your judgment. For now, just tell me what you're thinking."

Merial laughed nervously. "Yes, yes, I'm sorry. I just... well, you know. Chieran, this is big. I mean potentially incredibly huge. And I just don't want to make any mistakes." She drew a deep breath and started again. "Okay, so, these patterns of nodes on both of them Chieran, they're essentially just like big fractal acceleration shell capacitors. I've triple-checked the alignments." She breathed deeply again, obviously agitated. "I think these things, both of them, they're some kind of old acceleration shell equalizers. But it's the size! I mean, with equalizers this big, the engines themselves would have to have been, well, absolutely enormous. I mean, a ship that could house an engine this size must have been... Well, no modern dreadnought could even compare!"

Chieran felt a chill down his spine. The hands of fate, he sensed, very firmly gripped his shoulders. He was not entirely surprised, and he could feel the goosebumps spreading down his arms. Something had told him, when he asked his most trusted researcher to spend weeks going through virtually abandoned archives a job far beneath her place, and for which she had not initially been at all grateful that there was a good reason.

"Okay, not a word of this to anyone. Does anyone else know?" Merial shook her head. "Alright, I mean it, not anyone. I will take the redline chute and be there in 5 minutes." She met his gaze through the holo conference, still seeming unsure of herself. Chieran was reassuring. "And Merial...? Good work. I'll see you in a minute."

Before he had finished his last words, the desktop holo was already fading, the connection at his end flipped with a hurried gesture. He could not walk quickly enough. This accidental discovery might just be the missing connection to the very research in which he had invested the past twenty-nine years of his life.

He had always known this honor would come to him. Everything, everything he knew, happened for a reason.

Present Company

Chieran knocked lightly on the doorframe, his grizzled face already peeking around to inspect the room. "Well, I see you're awake."

"Uh, yeah. I'm up. What...? Are you a doctor?" the young man responded. Without the surrounding shadows of the dusky courtyard, he looked as young as his voice had made him sound the night before.

"Ha! Insightful question! Yes, I am, in fact, a doctor. Although I'm not a medical doctor. I'm not your doctor, if that's what you're asking."

"I see. Well, what... I mean, why are you here, then?"

"Can I ask your name, if you don't mind? It does make conversing so much easier, I've always found." There was a certain joyous mischief about Chieran, both in his voice and his expression.

The young man took a few breaths, bemused despite himself, before answering. "It's Kestor."

"Good to meet you, Kestor. I am Chieran, and it is a pleasure to meet you. Again, that is."

"You're the guy from last night in the courtyard. I kind of thought I had dreamt that, to be honest. So if you're not a doctor I mean, if you're not an M.D. then why are you here?" A sudden thought occurred to him. "You some kind of psych or something?"

"Oh, my goodness, most certainly not," Chieran replied with a short laugh. "How tedious that would be. The things in some people's heads are interesting, but I most certainly wouldn't want to see everything in everyone's head. Dreadful. No, I prefer conversation to behavior modification."

"So why are you here, then?"

"As I said, I enjoy conversation. And the ceiling in my room is not entirely forthcoming, despite my many efforts to persuade it."

"No, I mean, why are you in this hospital?" Kestor asked, not entirely sure how to react to the odd old man.

"Oh, it's nothing, I assure you. Just a minor problem with blood pressure that they assure me they have now repaired. I assume I'll be out in a few days, once they've had a chance to observe me a bit longer."

"But if they repaired it, you're fine, right? I mean... why would they need to observe you at all? You are talking gene therapy?"

"Yes, and that would be the case normally. But it seems that I am important enough to bear watching. Just in case there might have been some problem with the procedure. And so I am here, chatting with you. For a short time, at least."

Kestor pondered this, keeping his eyes locked on Chieran, trying to read the truth of his words.

"So, what happened to you, may I ask? Zipper crash?" Chieran asked.

Kestor decided that the old man seemed relatively harmless, and his answer came more quickly this time. Quickly and more harshly than he had intended. "Oh, no. No accident. I had some words with a couple of Dropheads that always set up near the new Arts Center, where my sister goes to school. They said we aren't local enough and were giving her a hard time. When I told them to back off, they, uh... they put the damned boots to me."

"I see. That's terrible. I'm sorry. Your sister, is she alright?"

"She's fine. She was in earlier to visit, actually. For a little while, at least. She doesn't like..." He paused for just an instant, glancing off to one side before going on. "Uh, doesn't like hospitals that much. Anyway, they ran off after they beat me up, I guess, afraid someone would catch them."

Chieran sensed that there was more to the story, perhaps, but that Kestor was reticent to talk about it. He changed subjects. "So what does that mean? Not 'local enough'? You moved here recently?"

"No, I've lived here my whole life." The young man's face shifted to a sneer as he continued, quite unconsciously. "My dad's a Godlover. Even wears those stupid robes all the time." The anger Chieran sensed the previous night had returned to Kestor's voice, and he twitched involuntarily, shaking the holo control in his hand.

Chieran absorbed the change in Kestor's demeanor. "I see. And, how did he...? Is he Nefantar, your father?" he asked, somewhat puzzled.

"Nefantar?" the young man snorted. "No. That'd be easier. No, my grand-dad was a slave on some Amarr bastard's mining colony in Ammatar space up till just after my dad was born. Born a slave, but he was set free by some amazing battleship captain who came in and tore the place up." The scorn in his voice was thick. "Well, grand-dad must have learned his slave lessons real well, 'cause even after he was set free, he raised my dad to

be a Godlover too."

"I take it you don't care much for your grandfather?"

"You kidding? He was" He broke off in a bitter laugh. "No, I did not care much for my grandfather. He was a miserable old bastard. I'm glad he's dead. And my dad's not much better."

In Pieces

Ziather sighed, reaching down to pick up the last few pieces of sheerite lying at his feet. The transparent glasslike surface of the broken nano-alloy bits, much harder than normal glass, glittered almost warmly in the soft morning light. As he bent, his back creaked ominously, and he had to suppress a shudder at the idea of undergoing another spinal treatment. A wealthier man might have had new cells injected to rejuvenate the tissue, but people who lived in the pidouk could not afford such luxuries.

Don't dwell on what you do not have, he recited for perhaps the fourth time since waking. It was a belief so deeply part of him, a kind of passive contentment bordering on ontological dejection, that a complete stranger could have read it from his posture alone. I have a home and I am a free man, and that should be enough, he thought.

Just then, Cliemne called from the back room, "I'm going, papa." The sound of the door closing behind her should have pre-empted any response. The door was not shut gently.

"Always in such a hurry," Ziather spoke aloud. Even when she was small, always so hurried. Always running off somewhere.

He turned to throw the broken bits of sheerite into the waste unit, still moving slowly, as always, but then bit back a curse. In spite of his careful grip, a razor-sharp bit of the hardened polymer had jabbed his hand, and he looked down to see a tiny spot of blood growing in the soft flesh between his middle two fingers. The old man he really wasn't terribly old, but that's how he thought of himself grew even more contemplative at the sight of the blood, as if entranced by the dance of an open flame or the gleam of sunlight on the sea.

The argument had started, as they always did, when Ziather had made an innocent comment about his son's behavior at school having improved this past semester. Kestor was strong-minded, as Ziather's father had been, and his moods were as mercurial as the weather here in Shishaan. And like his grandfather, Kestor nettled at any accusation of wrongdoing, past or present. But this morning Ziather had made the mistake of pointing that similarity out.

Before Kestor stormed out, he had snatched up the holopic of his grandfather and smashed it three times against the stone counter until it shattered.

He stared at the blood on his palm, now a rich red pearl, and drifted deeper into thought.

What is it that we see in our loved ones that we hate? Is it the things we fail to see in ourselves? Or what we do see?

Yes, Father was hard. Bitter. He was a cold man. But he had to be. What a life, the life of a slave. Yet he loved Kestor more fiercely than he ever felt about anything, I think. About me, even. Yes, that is true. We were never kindred spirits. But those two, they are so much alike. They were so much alike. When Kestor smashed the holopic, I thought, Stop! Stop, you are only breaking yourself open. But I cannot stop him. I just do not know. I don't know my son.

Even darling Clem sees it. She tries to make Kestor understand, to help him see that our lives are precious, not to be wasted. What sort of a father am I? How can I let this happen again and again? And Cliemne, just staring down silently as her brother and I shout at each other? So beautiful, she is. Like a jewel, a brilliant, dancing jewel. Just like her mother, God bless her.

But Kestor... he is... well, he is too like his grandfather. I do not know him.

What am I to do? My son, so bright, so talented, and he does nothing but throw it away with those friends of his, all worthless. No futures, no plans. He hates me and my faith, but he thrashes about like a drowning man. Crying out for meaning, but silently, not even knowing he cries. Wanting love, the divine love, more surely than anyone I have known. The more I try to calm him, to reassure him to teach him the farther he draws away. And for all my faith, I have no answers.

I have no answers.

Ziather sat down at the table and stared absently at the plate his daughter had left on the table. He noticed just

then that her meal was untouched. A silent tear gathered in his eye.

My God, give me the answers.

Moving Forward

Chieran, not wanting to open old wounds any further, but wanting to get Kestor to talk more, changed the subject once again. It was a disarming tactic he had found eminently useful both in the workplace and elsewhere. "The ones who beat you up, were they taken in?"

"I have no idea. I just remember somebody hitting me, and then I was on the ground, and there was a pair of feet, and then everything was black. Next thing I know, I wake up in my bed here. And Clem just said they ran away. She didn't say if they were caught."

"I see. Well, at least you're in one piece, now, more or less. The doctors here really are among the best. We must always be thankful for something."

"Oh, yeah, I'm so thankful." The young man's voice was a study in sarcasm. "Yes. I'm really thankful those pricks didn't have someplace else to be. Yeah, I just have so much to be thankful for."

Chieran, always sensitive to moods, tried to calm Kestor with reason. It had always worked for himself, a safe retreat when emotions ran high. That and humor.

"Listen, Kestor, you have every right to be angry. I understand that. I'd be angry, too, in your place. But I am thankful you're alive, as I'm sure your family is too. And I'm also glad that, unlike your great grandfather, you are here, living among your own people even if not everyone here feels the same way I do, like the young men who attacked you." He deliberated carefully before speaking his next words. "There is purpose in everything."

"Oh, hell. Now you sound just like my dad." Kestor's legs slithered against the bed coverings as he shifted, getting ready to stand up.

"Well, perhaps your father is wiser than you realize. I'm sure he's thankful that you're alive. How could he not? The father's place is in caring for the son."

"Okay, what are you, some kind of priest? Seriously. Doctor of religion or something?"

"A priest?" Chieran chuckled. "No, I'm a scientist, actually. But I like to think the two are quite close, to be honest. If you really want to know, I work for Starship Research and Development at Core Complexion, specializing in ancient technologies research."

Kestor's attitude changed to awed curiosity almost as quickly as he had grown angry earlier. "Seriously? That's... whoa, that's pretty damned cool." A sudden thought came to him. "But don't you guys have your own special hospitals and stuff? With, like, the best specialist doctors and, you know, super-advanced AIMEDs and stuff?"

"Where do you think you are right now, young man? You hadn't wondered at the speed of your recovery? Two days, and nearly back to yourself. Your attack was politically quite significant, you know. The son of a former slave, returned to Matar, and yet the victim of such a crime in one of our greatest cities? Nearly killed by his own people? Important people are sparing no expense to make sure you recover unblemished."

Kestor was stunned. "You... Really? Wow. I" For the first time since they had met, Kestor was at a loss for words.

Dancing

The bioturb sliced through the east side of Uptown, all movement almost indiscernible to its passengers as it hummed along several inches above its single fine rail. Inertial gyrodiffusers shimmered hazily in the morning light, giving the elongated car what seemed an otherworldly gleam to anyone not accustomed to planetside life in a place as advanced as Sivaralad.

Inside, Cliemne sat with her bag resting almost carelessly on her knees. However, her arms, drawn protectively around it, gave the lie to her seeming unconcern. Inside the bag were her school books and her lunch, but more importantly far more importantly her shoes. In those shoes, she would dance into a new life.

Ever since the new government, under Shakor, had introduced the arts scholarships and ordered the construction of new arts centers and programs through the Republic, Cliemne had known that she would have a place. For as long as she could recall, dance had been her one passion, the one place she could go to find beauty and tranquility, whatever her mood when she first got to class. And since she had won the scholarship,

the old dreams had returned, but they were in vivid color now. It was, she knew, a sign.

When she was small and the dreams came, they had always been nightmares, colorless vistas, her floating away into a cold, gray sky. And always, when she awoke, pale and sweating, she had felt a tremendous sense of loss and terror. She had never spoken of them. But the dreams gradually went away as she got older; suddenly, in just the past few months, they had returned. Yet they were joyful things now, bright and warm, filled with a sense of soaring off, to a happier place, one where she would be welcomed into loving arms. Into the arms of a mother she had never known.

So far, she had to admit, the dream had not taken her that far. The welcoming arms were always just beyond the horizon. But Clem knew, with the single-minded certainty of youth, that she would reach them soon. And by some intuition, she knew that the dream and the dance were intricately connected.

The Shishaan Center for the Performing Arts, now that its construction was complete, represented the beginning of a new life for Clem, away from her father and her brother and their endless bickering. Even in appearance, the Center stood in stark contrast to her home. Its massive, high towers with their peaked summits, made almost entirely of glimmering sheerite, with the brightly waving banners, the happy laughter of the students these could not have been more different than the endless smelly, dirty streets and alleys of the pidouk, the Drop-dealers and the gangs and the prostitutes and the endless procession of drunks and dead-eyed, miserable wanderers.

If, as her father said, there was a hell, then the pidouk was part of it.

But Cliemne was on her way to a new world, both here in Shishaan and in her dreams. And soon, so very soon now that she could taste the moment, she would fly away from her godforsaken old life and land somewhere else, a place where the beauty and the tranquility would always be with her. Where she would never have to listen to father and Kestor fight again. Never have to see the squalor and the pain or listen to the shouts and curses. Where she and her mother and the dream would become one.

Reification

Kestor was due to be released this afternoon. It was more than welcome. Even just a few days in bed were wearing on him. But Chieran had proven pleasant company, making Kestor laugh more than he could remember having laughed in a long time. At least with anyone other than his friends. And, with them, there was always an ugly sense of competition in their jokes, and a kind of cruelty. Chieran, though, simply seemed to enjoy laughing and making others laugh. There was no dark underside to it.

They were coming to the end of what would likely be their last conversation, searching for things to say, when Chieran suddenly became serious.

"Kestor, I happen to believe that everything happens for a reason. Each of us has a part to play in something much bigger than we can see." Kestor remained silent. "There is a reason we're having this conversation right now. A reason we found ourselves here in this place at the same time."

"Whoa. Are you trying to hit on me now? Man, I have to admit, I didn't see that one coming."

Chieran's laugh was generous. "My friend, the doctors here have done a remarkable job of rebuilding you from the broken pieces, so, given that I'm not feeling any attraction of the sort, I'm afraid you just must not have been that handsome to begin with.

"No," he continued, again growing uncharacteristically serious, given his manner of the past days. "But I'm trying to say that it is not coincidence, perhaps, that we were both brought here at the same time and placed across the hall from each other." Kestor snorted, still looking skeptical. "Please, let me finish. You've talked about your studies, and it's obvious to me that, despite your scorn for the institution, you have a quick mind."

"So you think that you're supposed to become my teacher or something?" Kestor was having fun now, but at Chieron's expense.

"Be quiet and let me finish." The older man had grown so stern suddenly, so authoritative, that Kestor could not have spoken if he had wanted to. It was almost unnatural, the change.

Chieron nodded, satisfied that Kestor was suitably cowed. "I am saying that, if you keep hating your life and your father and everything else around you, keep holding yourself down instead of working to improve things, you will never be happy. And that maybe I'm here to help you understand that. Your future does not have to be constrained by your past, Kestor."

Kestor thought for a long moment. His face was impassive, but Chieron could see the turmoil in his eyes.

"And you think it's that easy? I just walk out of here, and magically everything changes for me?"

"Nothing comes easily, but you have a good mind. With work and discipline, yes, everything changes."

"Because everything has a reason, you think? It's just too easy. It's like my dad thinking everything will work out because 'god' says it will. According to you, too, just like him, there must be a reason he was born a captive to some sadistic bastards. Who brainwashed him into believing in a god who supports the slavery of entire races? That kind of 'reason'?"

"I choose to believe so, yes. I don't pretend to understand it, but I believe it. Not in a god, but in a greater purpose." Chieran's gaze was steely, but kind. "And as for your father, whatever his beliefs, he is a product of his environment, just as you and I are. Remember that. His religion may have been imposed, but he has eyes to see the world around him. Hate the environment that created him, but don't hate the man himself."

"Well, I do hate him!" Kestpor screamed. "And the ones who did that to him, who made him so, so... so pliable, and weak, and stupid. I just wish I could kill those bastards. Every last one of them. Women, children. Fucking slaughter them all."

"Kestor, who would be the monsters if we did that? Do you really think there are no people in all of Amarr who are troubled by what their religion has sewn? Just as there are those among our own people who question the decrees of the Sanmatar's tribal council, or who questioned Midular's policies?"

Sensing the young man's vulnerability, Chieran pressed on. "Or what about those who would harm their countrymen because they seem different, the way you were hurt, despite the fact that we, as a nation, pride ourselves on accepting and maintaining the differences between the Seven Tribes? Good and bad, wrong and right, we don't have any monopolies. But we can have faith that it will change."

Kestor was distraught, fighting back tears, red-faced, angry and yet not wanting to fight. He was seeking answers, an answer, any answer. "And so I'm supposed to do what? What are you saying I should do?"

"Kestor, I cannot tell you what you should do. But please, please, do not waste your gifts. And do not lose sight of the fact that it doesn't matter what your grandfather thought, or what his masters thought. It doesn't matter if your ancestors were Krusual, Sebiestor, Thukker, even Ammatar... it just doesn't matter, none of it! We are the Seven Tribes, but we are also the Minmatar Nation. Seven and yet one."

"All that matters is what we think, now. What you and I think together, here, in this room, and the others in this hospital what they think matters too, maybe. And the other free thinkers in this city, on this planet, in this star system. In all of Minmatar. The people who aren't stuck in the mud, but who are looking up, and around. But mostly looking inside."

"What I am saying, Kestor, is just this: look inside. That is where you will find the man who can give you the answers you need."

Where the Pieces Come Together

Just a few hundred meters out, the shuttle swung around a landing bay on the surface of the massive, unmoving vessel. Only a tiny portion of the behemoth was visible in the forward visor.

"Well? As you can see, the construction is nearing completion. I would say another thirteen, fourteen maybe sixteen months at the outside, and she will be fully operational." The Chief Gravometrics Engineer for Project Skymother was a precise man, but on a project of this magnitude, one had to be willing to be somewhat flexible.

"She is beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. My goodness." The man's voice was still strong, not the faded fluting of many others his age, but today there was a certain childish joy in his tone that the Chief had not heard for some time. "I... it's only been a few months since I saw her last, and already she is so much more... together. I guess? I suppose that's the right word?"

"I've seen some remarkable things in my life. Shining Amarr ships breaking up near the small moon of Bairshir IV, at the Battle of Halitt. Pulse beams cutting through the dark near the Bosboger gate in Lulm. But all of those moments are so tiny now, so distant. And this... this makes them all seem so insignificant. My goodness." The old man's eyes were glistening.

The engineer watched the old man closely, giving him a moment to control his emotions. To lose water from the eyes would have meant embarrassment for them both. But when he spoke, he too was fighting back a lump in his throat. "Yes, I suppose she is coming together. Internal crews are already running tests on sublight systems. The jump drives have a little way to go, but I would say, assuming the new tech from Six Kin meets your specs and believe me, I don't doubt you for a second well, let's say three months for that. Four, maybe. You'll have to come back then, of course."

"Well, I certainly hope so, my old friend. I wouldn't want to miss that. After all, I have spent a lifetime working toward this."

"I know it, Chieran. I know. How could I forget? Let's dock, shall we, and see if we can't find something to eat? I have some virgin roe I stashed away against your next visit. I trust you're still a fan?"

Chief Gravometrics Engineer Kestor Thevistos reached forward to tap the controls of the shuttle. Chieran reached forward to get one last look at the surface of the great ship beside them before they swung about to dock, and as he did so, he caught his weight with a hand on Kestor's shoulder. His flesh was so frail now, so pale and spotted.

Kestor smiled, the lump still in his throat, and brought the shuttle around.



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A Beautiful Face (Part One)



Deep underground, the prisoners begin to stir. There is no sun in this place, but they've been here so long that their internal clocks know when to wake. Bodies get off hard beds to stretch. Various pieces of patched and dirty clothing are pulled out of the pile. Murmured conversations are held. But not everyone speaks.

Like ghosts, the masked people move among them. In the Amarr colonies they wear chrome: expressionless ovals with a darkly golden sheen from the electric lamplights, with horizontal slits for eyes, nose and mouth. In Gallente space their masks are made of plaster, blackened with soot, sweat and blood. The Minmatars' are more functional: metal contraptions with hinges at the jaws, and lids that can be slid over the eyes.

Oddly enough, it is the Caldari who have lent theirs the most personality. Like the Amarr they have oval masks, but these are bone white and have been fashioned into the shape of a face. The face is the same on all masks: the same high cheekbones, the same curve in the eyebrows, the same thin lips. These masks are the only ones with no holes for the mouths, and their bearers must lift them slightly from their faces to eat.

A bell sounds. The prisoners head off to work.

"Yes?" a man said, responding to a ping from his secretary.

"Gilea Kiljaani here to see you, sir," said the secretary's voice through the intercom.

"Excellent. Send her in."

The door opened and a young woman entered. She was dressed fashionably, with a hint of business and more than a touch of wealth. Over one shoulder hung a small, black leather purse adorned with the logo of its designer. Her perfume filled the room like velvet.

"Miss Kiljaani," said the man behind the desk as he rose to shake her hand. He was dressed in formal, exact clothes. His desk was made of wood, a mark of wealth out here in space. It was perfectly bare and unadorned except for an ashtray and a small bowl of wrapped candies. The rest of the office was similarly plain: To one side, a holoframe on the wall slowly cycled through various famous paintings, most of them depicting farming landscapes. Opposite, a window looked out on the traffic far below. The wall behind the man was pitch black, and its glass surface cast ghostly reflections of the room's two inhabitants. The only light was a soft yellow brightness from a dome set in the ceiling.

The guest smiled perfectly. "Please, call me Gilea."

The man returned her smile. "Very well. Vertan Nejowin, at your service. Vertan. Please, have a seat."

She did, crossing her legs and placing her small purse in her lap.

"So, Gilea," he began, picking up something from a drawer and seating himself on the edge of his desk, next to Gilea's chair. "I understand you're interested in a makeover."

Gilea laughed, a genuine, unfettered laughter she nevertheless tried to cover with her hand. "I suppose you might say that. I did wander into the right office, I hope? You're not about to offer me makeup advice?"

"Wouldn't dream of it," Vertan said. He lifted the object, which turned out to be a remote control, and pressed a button. Behind him, the black screen lit up with a faint blue. Slowly, there materialized an image of Gilea's face, seen head-on.

"Oh my," she said, with a concerned look. "I look so ... worn."

"It's always a bit of a shock," Vertan said. "I remember the first time I chose a new face. Thought I'd have a heart attack when I saw myself on the screen."

"First time? So you've had a face swap several times?" Gilea asked.

"Oh yes. Most people at the company get it for free, or at least heavily discounted, and we strongly encourage them to try it. Official term is subcellular transfer, by the way. Which you may as well forget, since nobody uses that name except our lab people."

"You must have an army of geniuses working for you, to think up something like this," Gilea remarked.

"Definitely. Most of them in marketing," Vertan said with a grin. "The procedure is actually quite simple these days. The biggest hurdle is still in people's minds. They've got these ideas of us tearing the faces off people and pasting them on others, like butcher surgeons. It's been a lot of work to combat misconceptions like those."

Gilea fiddled with the strap of her purse. "You've earned some of it, though," she said in a low tone. "There was that story about the entertainer..."

Vertan got up, sat behind his desk and sighed. "Marlovian Joocasta. Yeah. We'll never live that one down."

"Story has it his face simply melted off," Gilea said.

"The lab boys would have several things to say about that, but you're broadly right," Vertan said. "But remember, that was in the very, very early days of this procedure. Joocasta was hoping to revitalize his career, and we were a new outfit trying to prove to the public that we deserved their money. So some corners were cut, and some security procedures jumped over." He laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back in his chair, a neutral expression on his face. "We've been completely and utterly incident-free for a long time now, miss Kiljaani."

"Gilea."

"Gilea," Vertan said, showing the hint of a smile. "We follow the strictest regulations you could think of, our procedures are completely reversible, and we have thousands of satisfied customers. There is practically nothing you could ask of us that we couldn't do safely."

"Is that a fact?" Gilea uncrossed her legs and leaned slightly forward in her chair.

"Oh, certainly," Vertan replied. He waved a hand lazily at the screen behind him. "Now, if this took you off guard, you may want to close your eyes for the next one." He pressed another button on his remote control. A panel on his desk slid aside, revealing a lens beneath. The lights in the room darkened slightly, and a humming sound came from the lens. From it rose a holographic image of Gilea's head and face, revolving slowly. "This is you in 3D," Vertan said. "Bumps and all."

"I'm impressed," Gilea said. The face was a very strong likeness, marred only by a slight greenish hue from the projector. "You got all this from the data my people sent you?"

"All that and more," Vertan said. "We have enough details that we'd be able to recreate your face entirely from scratch if needed." He looked up at the holographic projection. "It has happened on occasion that we've been asked to provide medical services; treatment after fires, acid, crashes and suchlike. If people have sufficient funds, there's no reason why they should have to go through the rest of their lives marred by some unfortunate accident."

"So you're used to going beyond the boundaries, as it were."

"Gilea, all our work involves going beyond normal boundaries," Vertan said. "The only question is how far we're willing to go."

"Interesting," Gilea said and looked directly at him.

Vertan caught her gaze, then pressed a third button on his remote. The hologram disappeared, the desk panel slid back into place, and full lighting returned. "Now then," he said. "I'll be needing to ask you some questions in return. Most importantly, have you decided on what kind of swap you want to have?" He reached into a desk drawer. "I've got a few pamphlets here if you want to brush up on the details."

"Do people really come in here undecided in that?" Gilea said, stunned.

"Certainly. Of course, many of them have made up their minds, more or less. But they occasionally need a little guidance during the final steps. Support, you might say. The very decision to have one's face remoulded is already beyond most people, let alone to assume the face of a friend or some other living entity." He handed one of the pamphlets to a reluctant Gilea.

"I've already made up my mind," she said.

"Please," Vertan said. "This one I'm required by law to give you. It contains the legal details for your procedure."

She accepted it, and idly flipped through its pages.

Vertan continued, "The same law demands that I tell you about the two options you have. The first is to create an artificial entity which you can shape and configure to your heart's desire, the electric equivalent of a clay doll. We would then alter your face according to those parameters. The second is the real face swap, to transfer an actual face of another human being onto yours, and in turn transfer yours onto them. Are you fully cognizant of both options as stated and of all possible legal ramifications?"

"Yeah yeah," Gilea said, tossing the pamphlet back on the desk. "I can't imagine that anyone ever takes the second choice, though."

"People who want more than a change," Vertan said. "A bit of a thrill, perhaps."

"There's no thrill in having someone volunteer to give you their face," Gilea replied. She stared fixedly at Vertan.

He stared back and, without looking away, picked up the remote control again and ran a fingernail back and forth over one of the buttons. "Who said anything about volunteering?" he said.

The sheen on the Amarrian's shaven head nearly matched his golden mask. He was kneeling alongside several others in the day's first prayer session, although none of them would come too close to him. Even though doctrine held that believers would be united in faith, the masked people were always given a wide berth. Nobody knew what they'd done to earn their fate, but all were eager to avoid having the same happen to them.

Chants filled the air. To anyone but the initiated it would be impossible to make out individual words; the general susurrus was more like a fading wave of sound, reverberating off the stone walls and the banisters. To the supplicant majority the voices were crystal clear, the words etched on their minds after years of daily recitation. But the masked men spoke their own tongue, and were understood by no man.

This one, prostrating himself, didn't so much chant as moan. Unintelligible sounds came from beneath the mask, soft glossolalian wails. It was no prayer anyone else in the room could recognize, if it was a prayer at all.

The Amarrian lay with his head to the ground, rolling it slowly back and forth, his metal mask picking up dirt and dust off the floor. Instead of having his hands flat by the side of his head, he held them behind his back. In that position, with his neck extended, he looked like a prisoner awaiting execution.

Footsteps sounded. The praying crowd fell silent. The masked one looked up, and saw a pair of boot-clad legs standing in front of him.

"Get up," a voice said. There was a hiss in the air, from an electrical prod that had just been turned on. "There is work to do."

The Amarr rose. Patches of his mask had turned brown from contact with the earth, though his head still shone in the light.

"I like to play a little, in life," Gilea said, slowly combing her fingers through her hair. The feigned innocence of pampered riches slipped from her persona like a mask. "Take chances. Experiment. It's gotten me to where I am today. But recently," she sighed, "it's no longer enough."

"We also like to play," Vertan said.

"Really, now?"

"Do you mind if I turn down the lights?" he asked.

She grinned. "Be my guest."

Vertan pressed a small button on his remote. The lights dimmed slightly, and several hidden mechanisms hummed into action. There was a click as the office door locked itself shut, but Vertan made a show of tiptoeing over to it and pulling at the handle to check. "There," he said. "The room is now secure. No eavesdropping." He turned to Gilea. "How about you tell me exactly what kind of deal you're interested in?"

She hesitated, then said, "I've heard your company offers a third option. A face swap with ... unwilling subjects."

He smiled. "Where did you hear that from, if you don't mind me asking."

She gave him a hard look. "From people wealthy enough to afford that kind of service. People like me. Was I mistaken?"

Vertan walked back to the desk and looked at the screen behind it, where Gilea's face was still on display. "No," he said quietly. "No, you weren't." He sat down and turned to her. "We have access to prison colonies in all four empires. Their purposes vary, and the only thing they have in common is that they're all underground. They are secret places, funded in part by government forces and in part by private interests. People get sent there for life, and nobody goes there without reason. The prisoners are evil people, Gilea, you have my word on that. Anyone located in one of those places has earned their stay a thousand times over."

"Why not put them on open trials?" Gilea asked.

"Not all crimes are so open-and-shut. There are spies, traitors, wrongdoers against the ruling body where their actions, if revealed, might damage diplomatic relations. That's not to mention the sheer uselessness of open trials. Sometimes," he said, leaning in a little closer, "someone is so guilty that you simply cannot let them walk. You cannot give them a chance to cheat the system, to let some conniving lawyer dig up some stupid loophole that'll only set these people free on the streets. You simply know they will have to be put away forever."

"So kill them," Gilea said.

Vertan blinked. "Just like that?" he asked.

"Just like that."

"I would have thought you'd be shocked at this point, merely to hear about these people and the situation they're in," he said.

"Why? They've outlived their usefulness." She grinned and patted his hand, her facade of naivete entirely dropped. "My dear, I'm asking you to tear the face off one of them. You don't honestly think I'd be squeamish about such a petty little thing as human life. Why do you even bother to keep the colonies?"

"The prisoners are quite many," Vertan said. "They're worked hard, but treated well enough that they have reasonably long lives. There are plenty of tasks for them, work you'd be hard pressed to make anyone else do for very long. Some are in mines, some work in sweatshops."

"I see," Gilea said.

Vertan cocked his head. "You disapprove," he said. "Do you think of it as weakness to keep them alive?"

"I don't like loose ends," she said. "Nevertheless ... I suppose this prison arrangement has worked for your benefit. We wouldn't be having this conversation otherwise."

"Indeed," he said. "Though it's a shame, really."

"What is?"

"How evil," he said, "even when captured and known for what it is, can have such a beautiful face."

A Beautiful Face (Part Two)



The Gallentean gently stroked his mask. The plaster was not new, but it was made of durable material that would break only under intense pressure. This meant that any ridges and bumps on the surface, once the plaster had dried out, were generally there to stay. This was particularly notable around the holes created for eyes, nose and mouth. The gap in the plaster through which he fed had sharp edges, and cuts on his fingers were not uncommon.

Work was varied, and depended on the harvest. These narcotics obviously couldn't be grown outdoors: with this amount of drugs, satellite photography and even off-world lenses might conceivably pick up the fields of plants, spelling the end of the entire operation. So it had been taken underground, into massive caves both natural and man-made, now serving as greenhouses. The lights, which switched from natural to halogen, were the only indicators of day and night. The air was constantly humid, and every prisoner without a mask was issued several dry cloths to wipe their face. The masked ones did not do this; the plaster was set fast on their heads for life, and they learned to live with the constant itch from sweat. Flies buzzed around in enormous swarms, settling on practically every surface, but even despite the tantalizing drops of sweat that trickled from every masked man, the flies kept away from them.

Tempting as it might be, the regular workers rarely stole any plants for their own use. For most of the flora, serious processing was necessary if their active ingredients were to be of any effect at all. You could chew leaves and buds all you liked and get nothing for your trouble except diarrhea. There did exist the occasional plant which could be eaten or subtly smoked for a slight buzz, but it amounted to about as much as a few cups of coffee.

One exception to this was the masked prisoners, most of whom chewed the leaves incessantly. They were given far more leeway in doing so, and only punished if their pickings dropped noticeably below those of the regular inmates.

The Gallentean's fingers were dry and scarred, partly from the edges on his mask, and partly from the razor-sharp leaves and thorns on the plants he'd harvested. Occasionally he would put down his picker's basket, raise his hands to the mask and wipe away the strands of brown saliva dripping from its mouth hole. He might even lean down and expel the chewed leaves from his mouth, looking like a bird regurgitating food for its young, only to shove a handful of fresh leaves right back in. Then he'd pick up the basket again, and march on. Any time the thorns cut his fingers, he would hardly seem to notice.

"Mind if I smoke?" Gilea said.

"Not at all," Vertan replied.

She pulled a golden case from her purse, flipped it open and selected a long, thin cigarette. Vertan noticed how she closed the case and put it back in its proper place before pulling out her lighter. "So," she said, puffing out a small cloud of smoke, "where do we go from here?"

"You pick a face," Vertan said, keying in a sequence of digits to his remote control. The wooden panel on his desk slid aside again and the holographic projector cast the rotating picture of Gilea's head, but slightly smaller this time. On the screen behind him, Gilea's face also grew smaller and moved to the side. Beside it, on both the screen and the holograph projector, appeared the face of another woman: quite a pretty one, a Caldari, the same race and bloodline as Gilea.

Vertan handed Gilea the remote. "Manual browsing. Green button scrolls forward, red button back. Press the third blue button from the top to see two faces at once, press again for four, eight, sixteen."

"Just how many people do you have in there?" Gilea said.

"More than enough, believe me. Before you can really start picking individual faces, though, you need to filter it down for us. The four arrows indicate parts of the face that we've categorized. Press the circular black button that's between them, please."

She did. The prisoner's nose turned neon yellow.

"Automated selection. Looks kinda silly, but it's worked well so far," Vertan said. "Press the button again, please. Thank you." The nose returned to its original colour. "You're choosing the type of nose now, so use the left and right arrows to scroll through the types, and the up and down arrows to determine size. Press the circular button again to confirm your choice, or press the white button near the bottom right corner to cancel it. Once you've done this, the yellow light will return again, and you can use the arrow buttons to select which other facial part you want to adjust. You with me so far?"

"Sure," Gilea said, already enraptured in the remoulding. "And you guarantee that whatever choice I make, you can fulfil it with a real person?"

"Yes. The choices you get are based on digitized stills of the thousands of prisoners we have. We use facial recognition technologies at our bases every day to prevent spies. Everyone is scanned when starting work, and when leaving it. If their faces have changed noticeably, they are taken aside, checked out, and either eliminated or digitized anew. Any selection you make is based on data that was fresh this morning. You can have practically anything you like."

She took a fresh drag of her cigarette. "Anything?" she said.

"Well, within limits," he said. "Obviously the person has to be Caldari, and the same bloodline as you. And the same gender. We've occasionally had to explain this to some very unhappy people"

Gilea stared at him. "You've got to be joking," she said. "Who in their right mind would even think of doing such a thing?"

Vertan laughed. "You'd be surprised. Anyway, do you have any questions?"

"Not really. Except I trust you put the prisoners to death afterwards," she said.

"Of course," Vertan replied. He picked up a cherry-flavoured candy from the bowl. "No loose ends."

She smiled at him. "No loose ends."

"Besides," Vertan said, unwrapping the red sweet and popping it into his mouth, "you couldn't expect anyone to go on living after a thing like that."

They had been working for what seemed like forever. Each cartload of ore hewn from the ground was transported to the surface in carts set on rails. About halfway up, there was a checkpoint, and machines took care of pulling the carts. Up until that point, the carts had to be pushed.

Six men per team. Four to push, two to pull, the latter lashed in like cattle. Minmatar were strong, even when imprisoned. Especially when imprisoned.

Teams were picked at random, except for the masked men. Those worked only with each other; no one else dared get near them. The grunts, sighs and curses commonplace elsewhere were absent from their groups. They made no sound at all while moving the carts except for the crunch of sand and rock under their boots.

This was one such team. It moved steadily upwards; not fast, but it didn't pay to rush the masked prisoners anyway. Occasionally one of them would fall to his knees in exhaustion, and roll out of the cart's way as the other five picked up his slack for a while. Guards with electric prods traversed the tunnels to ensure that no one was out of commission for too long.

One fell now. His teammates increased their efforts without comment, and the masked prisoner rolled to the side of the tunnel to breathe. His hands clenched and unclenched, clenched and unclenched. The jaw in his metal mask trembled silently on its hinges.

After a few moments, his hands became very still. He slowly raised his head and looked up at the ceiling above him, as if he were seeing it for the first time. Then he looked down again, and his hands brushed over the dirt. They dislodged a few bits of rock, like miniature replicas of those that lay in his cart. The rocks rolled over to him and came to a stop by his feet.

He looked at those rocks for a long time. Had anyone put their ear to his metal jaw, they would have heard the faintest whisper of a note, like a scream from the bottom of a well.

His hands picked up one of the rocks and brought them to the jaw, pushed them through. There was a swallowing sound. Another rock was picked up, pushed in, swallowed. Then another. And another. And another.

By the time the guards saw him, the walls were red with his blood.

Gilea leaned back in her chair, got out another cigarette, lit it and exhaled the smoke contentedly.

"Satisfied?" Vertan asked.

"Completely," she replied. The face of a Caldari girl revolved in front of her. It was quite petite, with a small, slightly pouty mouth, high cheekbones, long, thin eyebrows and the one thing Gilea wouldn't get from her: Long, beautiful black hair." What happens now?" Gilea said, handing Vertan the remote control. "Do I sign a contract?"

"We'll take care of that later. Right now, a verbal agreement will do just fine," Vertan answered with a smile. He keyed in a few numbers on the remote control. "You're absolutely sure this is the face you want?"

She returned the smile, and put out her cigarette. "Yes," she said.

"Very good." He pressed a small red button on the bottom end of the remote. A tiny green light flashed onscreen near the Caldari girl's face. Then the images faded, the screens turned themselves off, and the lights in the room returned to normal. "If you'll just step this way," Vertan said, "we'll get started."

The Caldari colony was segregated according to gender. The women sat hunched over sewing machines, in complete silence apart from the tak-tak-tak of the tiny steel needles. There were rows and rows of them, hundreds of women hunched over their work. Guards proceeded slowly along each row, hands resting lazily on inactive electrical prods. Rebellions were rare here. They were not part of Caldari nature.

In one row there sat a young, rather pretty girl. Her small mouth pouted in tired concentration over the work, and her thin eyebrows arched slightly. Her hair, which was black and nearly reached her waist, was neatly combed but rather dirty from a long day's work.

A guard walked up and touched her on the elbow. She looked up in confusion. The man turned his head to indicate that she should get up and walk out. Prisoners were sometimes taken into solitary rooms, for any number of reasons: Special commission work, extra rest, checkup of their digital portraits.

The girl obeyed. Silently, she got up and, head bowed, walked out of the massive room. The guard followed. Once they had exited, entering a small steel corridor, he took the lead. She was marched through a veritable labyrinth of corridors, each one exactly like the last. They went on for so long that she had begun to suspect they would simply come back to the sewing room, but at last the guard stopped in front of a steel door. A lens beside it scanned his face, and the door opened. They stepped in, the door closed, and the girl felt a sinking feeling in her stomach, as if she were being pulled downwards.

A minute later, the door opened again. To sunlight.

The last thing Gilea saw was a blinding flash of light.

Her unconscious body, strapped and secured on a gurney, was placed in a special container inside the frigate. Moments later the ship undocked, accompanied by a guarding force, and sped off towards the company's research facilities.

Once there, Gilea was unshipped and placed on an operating table. Vertan had explained that while it wasn't strictly necessary to put her under while still in company headquarters, experience had shown it to be by far the best option. She would remain completely unaware of the laboratory's exact location, which was a good thing for both her and the company, and there would be no risk of nerves and second thoughts during the trip.

The operation itself went without a hitch. The machines severed her face and placed it in a special sterile container. As they moved on to the subcutaneous remoulding necessary so that her new one would fit, one of the scientists took the container and headed towards the vaults. Amongst themselves it was called the Gallery of Faces, a large room with one wall completely white and ice cold to the touch. The scientist entered the room while another monitored inside a control room on the other side of a pane of glass. A drawer in the wall slid out and the scientist in the room slotted the container into it with a click. The drawer slid back, there was a sound like the dropping of ice cubes into warm water, and the scientist behind the glass gave a silent thumbs-up. Gilea's face had now been flash-frozen, ready for use if she ever needed it back.

Elsewhere in that same laboratory, another scientist entered another surgery room. In his pocket he carried a white mask.

In this room there is no sound, not even the tak-tak-tak of the sewing machines. The women are too tired to talk, and most lie motionless on their beds, trying not to hope.

The colony is not only separated by gender. The masked women have separate beds at the back of the room.

One of them adjusts her mask slightly, her arms bruised from the electric prods. Her long, black hair is held in place by a cheap elastic. It had kept falling in front of her eyes, and she had kept pushing it back, until she started pulling at it. She had torn out several handfuls before the guards got to her.

The girl stares dully at the floor for a long time, her mask showing the same beautiful, expressionless face as everyone else in the room. Then she crosses her arms and, hugging herself tight, lays down to sleep.

For the State



The group that touched down on YHB-349 was already a sorry one. Ambushed by a picket patrol as they entered the system, the convoy swiftly found itself outmatched as a wing of Gallente interceptors pounced on them and ripped through their formation. The operation commander had kept the convoy small to evade detection; the gamble failed to pay off. Those ships still combat-capable after the attackers' first pass stood their ground and sold their lives dearly, and in the confusion the lone Crane transport slipped away with its structural skeleton barely intact.

Six hours later, it grounded on the surface of the target asteroid, and the surviving crew clambered out of their travel restraints to assess the damage. Hull breaches had claimed the commander and most of his staff, and of the three specialist work teams that boarded there were barely enough survivors to form two, along with three surviving Navy crew, one Senior Foreman and a junior engineering manager. The tools and materials, designed for hostile environments, were unaffected by exposure to vacuum, and consensus quickly arose that they would attempt to assemble the listening post as well as they could with the remaining personnel.

The first job, though, was survival. Under the Foreman's quiet direction, the work teams donned construction suits and hauled habitation equipment out through holes in the transport's hull. This was standard equipment, and the men and women on the teams had been hand-picked: after three hours of back-breaking work they had a viable hab centre erected on the dark side of the scarred rock, which could sustain them indefinitely.

As the domes finished pressurizing, the population of the rock assembled in the central hall to resolve the next pressing issue. The Foreman looked at the acting captain of the transport, who replied, "Dirtside" and shook his head. The Foreman nodded and then spoke up. "I speak for the workers. The engineering manager is best suited for the task of leading us. I name him Director."

The work teams nodded slowly. The new Director stepped forward. "I accept and will execute the job to the best of my abilities. I want a planning meeting with the Foreman and team leads in five minutes, and we'll need a full inventory within the hour. We all have work to do - get to it."

Planning took a gruelling six hours, in which the entire project plan was reviewed, re-evaluated and rewritten. The sensor cluster at the heart of the listening post needed to be buried deep within the rock, along with the necessary power and communication gear. Once the requirements were properly assessed and a draft schedule was put together, the Director looked up at the Foreman.

"This is a lot of work for two teams."

"The work needs doing and two teams is what we have. You give me the orders, and my men will get it done."

Work started immediately, with controlled blasting to open the primary shaft. Everything had to be achieved with minimal sensor signatures, to avoid detection. Dust had to be contained before it could form plumes, rubble had to be cleared without altering the albedo or profile of YBH-349, and electromagnetic footprints meant that heavy machinery simply hadn't been included in the mission package. The most physical tasks were assigned to the small contingent of Civire loadjacks, whose brute strength and near-endless stamina meant they could "shear, shore and shovel" at twice the rate managed by the Deteis technicians that made up the bulk of the workforce.

And so they worked - and every man worked. The work teams of course were the backbone of the operation and carried the bulk of the load. The Foreman worked just as hard, directing with one hand and shovelling rock with the other. The Navy officers donned overalls and helped with laying and shoring. And the Director was everywhere at once, watching and encouraging and reprimanding and evaluating and providing an extra pair of hands anywhere they were wanted. As the Foreman had said, the work needed doing.

Eventually the shafts were finished and the final phase of excavations began, hollowing out the chambers that would eventually house the equipment at the heart of the project. That evening the Foreman pulled the Director aside.

"My loadjacks are exhausted, and exhausted men make mistakes. When they come off shift tonight I want to give them a two-shift rest."

The Director considered this. "If we skip a shift excavation completion will slip, and we're already behind the original schedule."

"A cave-in will put us even further behind."

"Understood." The Director sighed. "OK, assign each loadjack a technician to shadow them at all times to watch for mistakes, and keep them working non-stop until the work is done. Once excavation completes they'll have time to rest."

The Foreman nodded slowly. "Very well. If we push them hard and nothing goes wrong we could be finished by breakfast."

When the morning meal came around, the loadjacks sat down with mixed emotions. Their work was finished, but three of their number were unable to join them at the table.

Emplacement began later in the morning, with equipment being shifted into the finished chambers, sealed to the walls and floors, and painstakingly linked together and brought up to operating status. While not as physically exhausting as the digging, the fatigue of manipulating complicated electronics in cramped, low-G conditions began to show as the days dragged on. Mistakes were made, but they were caught and corrected. Eventually everything was in place and the heart of the machine, their single specialized Fluid Router, was gently removed from storage, brought down to the central chamber and carefully installed. With that done, the generators were brought online and the listening post slowly powered up.

Initial diagnostics revealed two important pieces of information. The first was that the operation had been a success - despite the loss of a significant number of personnel including a third of the workteams, the operation commander and most of the planning staff, everything worked perfectly and detailed sensor data were being successfully transmitted back to Naval Command. The second was that in spite of all their precautions, the Gallente had somehow located them and an escorted Marine transport would land on YHB-349 within the next few hours.

The option of surrendering was raised and immediately discarded without further discussion. If the work was worth doing, it was worth fighting for. With the help of the Navy personnel, defensive plans were drawn up, schedules made and tasks assigned. While the acting captain returned to the ship with several technicians to break out the emergency weapons stores, salvage any useful equipment and destroy the rest, the loadjacks began constructing fortified positions around and down the length of the main shaft, and technicians began retrofitting their tools to serve as makeshift weapons. By the time the landing craft's exhaust flares were visible, everyone was ready.

The ship smacked down near the abandoned habitation site, and armored troopers swiftly slithered out of its egress ports. At the head of the shaft, the Director, the Foreman and the Naval crew hunkered in their command foxhole and watched them approach. The technicians and loadjacks around them had clear orders; as the first hostiles passed an innocuous pile of stones, weapons were swung out over the tops of their trenches and the shooting started. Several Marines went down in the initial volley, but then they were at the first trench, down into it and then back out again, many of them with dented and bloodied armor. The Foreman checked her railgun one last time and looked across at the Director.

"For the State," she reminded him, and rose to a firing position.

"For the State," he echoed, with a grim smile.

The Mercenaries (Part One)



The team made it safely out of warp, though Joreena didn't open her eyes for a full minute. It was a beautiful universe, dark and vast, but interstellar travel was rough on the flesh.

Once all stomachs were settled and safety equipment disabled, Scaara made a show out of checking her weapons, with very little visible tremor as she peered down sights and checked ammo counts. Artenal was more subtle about it, rubbing his muscled arms and hovering his fingers over the various pieces of metal and alloyed plastic that hung from his tool belts and bandoliers. Kralean alone looked entirely unconcerned, looking out the window and yawning. Steel behemoths passed them on either side, the sun's rays reflected off their hulls.

Joreena, Scaara, Artenal and Kralean - Gallente, Caldari, Minmatar and Amarrian respectively - each had their own set of unique skills, ranging from public relations to mechanics to pure, unadulterated violence. They had worked together for a while now. The money was good; that was what mattered.

A speaker sounded. The voice of the ship's pilot, Kraeja, rang out. "We're heading to the docking bay, right on time. Traffic's about what we expected, and some capsuleers are getting advance treatment as usual. Anyone needs more time to recuperate, speak up now, please."

The team instinctively looked at Joreena, who was her regular pale post-warp self. She held one hand in front of her mouth, but shook the other and mumbled, "I'm good, thanks," in pinched breaths. "Water, please. Thank you. Let's do a final run." She turned towards the one vid screen in the room, surreptitiously fishing out a pill from one of her dress pockets and popping it into her mouth.

An image filled the screen. It showed a craggy face with bushy hair and eyebrows that cast shadows, all captured in the fat, smily countenance of someone who had no right to look so happy.

"This is Shahoun Asa," Kraeja said through the speakers. "Got quite a track record, as we've seen. One of the best mission coordinators for the Amarr Navy, responsible for countless incursions against those brainless nitwits in Sansha's Nation. The capsuleers love this guy."

Shahoun's image faded and was replaced with a picture of a space station. It was Gurista, and through the windows its real-life counterpart could be distantly glimpsed. "Sansha being what they are, they just kept throwing themselves in front of the guns. Unfortunately for the Amarr Navy, and luckily for us, not every pirate is stupid and brainwashed. Sansha's friends the Guristas stepped in and made Shahoun an offer. If he switches sides to the Gurista side, brings over all those nice secrets on Amarr Navy tactics, they'll set him up for life. Might even give him a nice Sansha slave for his bed."

"Dangerous move," Kralean said, without looking from the window.

"Stupid move," the speakers replied. "Navy's got countermeasures for exactly this sort of thing. He got past them with money and charm. There are rumors he flipped for ideology more than benefits."

"Does it matter?" grunted Artenal. He fiddled with a small piece of metal that looked half like a tapered linchpin, and half a tiny notched knife.

"No chance of diplomacy, I guess," Joreena sighed, ignoring him.

"Not on our timeline," Kraeja replied. "It's a marvel we got to him before he went deep. I still haven't figured out what business he's got on this station, apart from waiting on some kind of package and making a bunch of minor, hi-tech purchases, but he won't be staying long. It's one of the edge outposts for the Guristas, so we can dock freely, but we should assume that he's got at least some kind of protection there. And please, guys, remember that Navy wants him back intact. No repeats of what happened last time."

"That was a fluke," Scaara said.

"No, that was you removing somebody's head," Kraeja said. "Let's rein it in, alright? And for goodness' sake, don't kill anyone else. You know the laws on that station."

"I still can't believe they make it work," Scaara said, aiming an unloaded gun at Artenal and adjusting the sights. "How can you run a pirate station where nobody's allowed to kill anyone?"

"Discipline," Artenal said, pointing the metal piece at her in turn.

"Among pirates?" Scaara said to him.

"You'd be amazed what conditions people will accept, just so they can live in a little safety," Artenal said.

"And how close you can take someone to the point of death without pushing them over," Kralean added nonchalantly. Artenal gave him a look, but didn't comment.

"It's not quite like that," Joreena added in a stern voice. Her face had regained some of its color, and she gave the Kralean and Artenal stern looks. "Pirate or not, you've got to keep things under control if you want to get anything done. There'll always be some conflicts and that's fine, you deal with those when they happen. Everything can be patched up somehow, except death." She took another sip of water and added, "I looked through some of the station's laws on the way here. The comptroller's an old Intaki Syndicate man, and they know how to keep control of the madness. If we do end up killing some civilian, it'll mean a mass of paperwork for us. Not to mention getting held back so long that Shahoun'll be long gone. If we kill guards, on the other hand, we're in a lot of trouble. Let's try not to do that unless this agent is about to slip out of our grasp."

Scaara loaded her gun with a click that echoed in the small room. Joreena was about to say something to her, but the pilot's voice crackled out of the speaker. "Going on docking route, people. Strap in and look sharp. I'll pick you up when the cargo's ready."

Outside the viewports they saw the station loom large, its thousand eyes of light blinking in rapid succession. The ship drew closer and was swallowed into its mouth.

For a Gurista operation, the station ran pretty clean.

Joreena had rushed off to secure permissions and grease palms, delighting in her area of diplomatic expertise. The rest of the team ambled around the main marketplace, getting a feel for the area and enjoying a bit of time away from one another. Space was infinite, but cramped rooms on long spaceship hauls accompanied by other mercenaries and an extensive arsenal were quite the opposite.

The noise in the main shopping areas was near-deafening but came mostly from overzealous vendors rather than violent skirmishes. Gurista operatives visibly patrolled the areas and shut down any confrontations, which left shoppers to do their business relatively unbothered.

Most of it was regular fare: Condensed food, synthesized drink of all colors, and general supplies for people about to venture into the unclaimed territories. Every now and then there'd be a stall with a flashing banner that proudly proclaimed the availability of small arms or narcotics. There was a certain odor that always went with these booths: stinging sweat, dry powder and strange chemicals, and the sharp iron smells of metal and blood. More complex machinery could be had as well, ranging from subcutaneous implants to semi-autonomous attack bots, but it was sold only through representatives that handed out 3D catalogs, tiny seeds of information that blossomed in your hand and lit up a rotating display of the death-dealer of your choice.

It was mercurial, but it worked. Station areas were expansive and their ceilings inset with both windows and shaded lighting, which helped the populace avoid the claustrophobia that always came with life in space. For all

their focus on business, the stalls, storefronts and electrocarts served equally as hubs of general conversation. The noise and the chatter held together a community hanging perilously over the chasm of chaos and disorder. It was an environment of constant adaptation to its own destructive elements, overseen by someone with enough sense to make it work. Kraleian hoped that whoever was in charge of this place would see the sense in letting his team go about their business without any trouble.

He spotted Joreena approaching. There was a faint smile on her face, and she kept a fast pace even as she passed through the throng of people. Before she'd even reached hailing distance, he knew they were good to go.

Large as it was, the Steel Barrel bar managed to be densely crowded with all sorts of patrons, and the team blended in easily. Caldari designs were everywhere, but redecorated towards Gurista sensibilities, celebrating brash individuality and complete, self-centered hedonism.

The Steel Barrel only had one floor, though there were several raised areas which offered more privacy: circular platforms spacious enough to hold a dozen people, laden with comfy seating and plentiful drink, and surrounded by aural isolation fields, electrical anti-intrusion shielding, and large people with crossed arms and short tempers.

It wasn't long before they made contact. In one of those raised areas, Scaara glimpsed a man in his late middle age - lounging on a sofa, drink in hand, his craggy face lit up with a carved smile.

She looked around and caught the eyes of the other team members, each of whom was scouting out another area of the bar. They moved over to Shahoun, making their way through the crowd as unobtrusively as they could. Each eschewed complicated equipment, which could break all too easily during critical mission points. They'd worked together long enough that glances, gestures and movements said all that needed to be said.

Joreena got there first and was about to speak to the bodyguards on the platform when they stepped aside without a word. Her mouth snapped shut, and she walked into the private area, followed by her teammates. Shahoun raised his glass to them and smiled even wider, but didn't otherwise react. There was a small group of people in there with him, one from each empire, watching a holo vid overhead and plugged into the isolating world of egonic headsets. None of them seemed to register the team's appearance, or care much.

Kraleian moved to the forefront, gently shouldering aside the annoyed Joreena. "We'd like you to come with us," he said.

Shahoun took a final sip from his glass and handed it to a waitress, then twined his fingers together behind his head, leaned back, and looked at the ceiling. One of his friends got up and stumbled over to the bar, helped himself to a drink and ambled back to his seat.

Scaara grunted. Kraleian added, "Actually, some of us would probably quite like to kill you, so I do strongly advise you to come with us." He tensed for the man's friends to react, but they remained in their seats, calmly sipping their drinks.

"Do you know why I'm here?" Shahoun asked, in a voice that was a little slurred. "On this station, I mean. The more precise location, lounging here on this nice couch with wonderful drinks - oh thank you, my dear, always a pleasure," he said, accepting a fresh glass from the waitress, "With wonderful drinks and such nice company, that much I don't know. But here," he said, pointing at the ceiling or the vidscreen. "On this station." Pointing at the floor. "That much, my friend, I know." He finished the tirade by pointing at Kraleian, who sighed quietly.

"If I put a bullet in his head, he'll shut up," Scaara said.

"It doesn't matter why you're here," Kraleian said to Shahoun, wondering why the guards hadn't been called yet. Shahoun's drunken entourage was clearly useless, and it was usually at this point that the team had to fight someone. Scaara was starting to jitter from adrenaline and excitement.

Shahoun leaned forward and said, "In fact, I think it matters. It matters very much. I was waiting for something and it arrived a little earlier than I expected. I'd been planning to leave right after, but thanks to this recently arrived ... package"-he clearly relished the word-"I heard that some people were after me. That would be you, I surmise," he said, and took another sip of his drink.

Kraleian didn't comment. Shahoun leaned back in his seat and said, "So I decided I might as well put this package of mine to the test. I expect it will prove quite useful."

One of Shahoun's companions got up at last, and ambled over to him. It was a large, burly Caldari man, angular and massive. He walked in front of Shahoun, positioning himself between the rogue agent and the team, crossed his arms and grinned.

"This is part of my package," Shahoun said.

The Caldari winked at Scaara and said, "Hey there, little thing. Wanna ride my Raven?"

There was a muffled thud as Artenal impacted with and held back Scaara, whose feet were scraping at the carpet. "Let's not go for the moron with the battleship jokes," Artenal grunted, holding Scaara tight.

Kralean said to Shahoun, "Do you honestly think we can't deal with muscle?"

Shahoun regarded him, and in a voice that suddenly sounded far too sober, said, "No, you probably could. But you're clearly not very good at dealing with brains. Or decoys."

In the next few breaths, as time crystallized and adrenaline started its dead run down the team's veins, a few things became briefly apparent. One was that the isolation field had been growing more and more tinted, to the point where people on the outside probably couldn't see very much at all what was happening on the inside. Another was that the man who'd gone over to the bar hadn't returned, and had in fact turned his back to them for quite some time. The last was that there was a faint, if insistent buzzing noise that had been hovering at the edge of consciousness, but was now unmistakable.

As everyone in the team started to move and draw their guns, the man at the bar spread his arms, and an army of tiny drones flew into the air. Before a single shot could be fired they had zoned in on every member on the team, flown up to them and given off a sharp electric current. Joreena dropped right away, and Kralean shortly after. Artenal stumbled to his knees and tried to shake it off, but several other drones flew up and shocked him, and he tumbled down.

Amazingly, it was Scaara who lasted the longest. Biting her lip hard enough to draw blood, she shook off the initial shock and managed to evade the other drones long enough to rush towards Shahoun, but in the quick of action she overlooked the Caldari bodyguard, who stepped within range, lifted a meaty fist, and hit her so hard in the face that it felt her head would twist off her neck. She crumpled to the floor, out cold.

The Mercenaries (Part Two)

They came to in a jail cell, sore and disoriented. Beyond the alloy bars they could glimpse a single guard doing something administrative.

Once he saw they were all awake, he walked over to them. The guard was a young man, rather disheveled and with the roguish air of someone who quite enjoys being himself no matter the circumstances.

"What's our charge and how long will we be here?" Kralea asked him.

"Disturbing the peace, maybe kidnapping, and might be a while from what I hear," the guard said, adding, "Though I'm sure we'll find some use for the women while we wait."

They glared at him, and he grinned. "Just kidding. We're not barbarians here. Once we find out what this is about, we'll see about extradition."

And there it might've ended, except that the guard started staring at Joreena. After a while he said, "Hey, you're ... oh no," laughed and slapped his forehead. "I don't believe this! You're Joreena, the one who did all those movies way back. Oh wow. In my jail cell, no less."

"Err ... yes," Joreena said, but quickly rallied. "Nice to meet you, I suppose, though I wish it were under better circumstances."

"I've seen everything you did," the warden said with unfettered eagerness, "even those, uh, illegally produced clips that were released when you went into politics."

Joreena smiled. The rest of the team recognized that smile.

She walked up to the bars and put her hands around them, saying, "Well, sir, I'll tell you. It's always wonderful to meet a fan. And I hate being in here. I wish there were some way I could be let out earlier. Do you suppose there's anything you could do?"

The warden winked and said, "So this is the part where you go," his voice shifted up an octave, "Oh my goodness, if only I could change your mind, warden. Let me just hike up my skirt."

She let go of the bars and took a step back. "I was actually hoping you'd be someone I could talk to about a proper, early release. And maybe just talk, about Gallente politics or anything." She motioned to the team. "I've been cooped up with these people for far too long, one way or another."

Kralea and the others stared at her in fascination, enjoying the performance. What she was planning was an incredibly risky gamble, but if they were to have any chance of getting out in time, it was the only way.

Joreena leaned in ever so slightly and said, "Also, I'd really hate it if word got out that I was being held here." She held the warden's gaze. Something unspoken passed between them, and when she added, "There are no cameras in the cell that I can see. Nobody's going to get into any trouble," his eyes responded with an unmistakable intent.

He walked slowly over to the cell door, pulled out a pass key and held it in his hand. "Alright. Walk in front of me please, and follow my directions. Nobody else move. I'm checking on a sick prisoner here, and anyone says any different, they're going to find themselves in more trouble than they can possibly handle." He put the key up to the cell lock and unlocked the door, letting Joreena step through before shutting it again. They headed off to parts unknown.

The team waited. After quite a bit of time Joreena returned, hair ruffled and clothes disheveled, sporting a large, red welt on her cheek. She pulled the warden's key out of a pocket and opened the prison door.

"Politics, eh?" Artenal said as he exited the cell.

"Well, it was obvious what he wanted," she said shortly.

"So where is he? Unconscious and tied up?" Kralea asked.

"He was supposed to be," Joreena said with a sigh. "I had the drugs ready. But he twigged, and started beating on me. I had to stop him."

Artenal and Kralea both stopped and stared at her. In a low voice, the latter said, "I hope you know what you're doing."

She said, "We're out of time either way. But I've got an idea that might get us out of this. When we went into his office I noticed they did have camera controls, and I took a second to check them out after I was ... done. Our

own cells have hidden eyes, but they're on a closed-circuit system so nobody else will have seen what happened. I also noticed a couple of linkups to a larger system that's probably located nearby. If we can find it, and not set off any alarms, hopefully we can locate our target, get him and leave without being caught. We're on evening shift time, so we should be good."

"Risky, still. We've got no weapons, and he's got those four grunts that went for us back at the bar." Artenal said.

"Once they find out we escaped and killed one of the guards, we'll be hunted down like dogs, and there'll be no time to do anything but run." Joreena said. "I didn't want this to happen, but it did and we've got to deal with it. If you've got better ideas, other than giving up on the mission and losing out on reputation and money that we actually rather do need, go ahead and share. In the meantime, we'll go with my plan." Without waiting for a response, she set off in search of the control station. The team followed.

On their way through the various corridors, Scaara caught up with her and whispered, "I didn't know you'd go that far, but I'm glad you did."

Joreena gave her a smile.

After a few turns, Scaara shyly added, "How'd you get around the sex thing?" and Joreena's smile turned into a smirk.

Scaara's mouth dropped open. Joreena said, "You should see the scratches on my back."

They came to a door marked, "OBSERVATION", and Joreena nodded to herself. She said to Scaara, "He really was into politics, too. Shame," then turned to Artenal and tossed him some electric keys. "These were the warden's. Want to use them while they're good?"

"Yeah, about that," Artenal said. "While you two were talking about things I really didn't want to hear, Kralean and I were working on a plan. I know things about Gurista security, and he knows things about ... well ..."

"Framing people. And working with bodies," Kralean said quietly. The two women stared at him for a moment.

Artenal cleared his throat. "I think we can buy ourselves a bit of time."

Kralean said, "Did you leave a lot of marks on the body? And were there any heavy objects in the room, apart from the one I expect you used? Any sharp ones, too?"

Joreena shook her head. "No marks. There were a couple of blunt objects, including one that I'd be happy never to hold in my hand again. A few sharp ones as well, pens and such, maybe some small weapons in some of his drawers. I just grabbed what was closest to hand, but then again, he was screaming bloody murder."

Kralean nodded and said to Artenal, "You'll take it from here?"

"Sure," Artenal said. Kralean left, heading back to the jail cells and the warden's office.

Artenal turned to the two women. "Scaara, there's probably two guards in that room. Once I let you in, you think you can take them out, and not kill them, please, without them setting off the alarm?"

Scaara smiled. "No problem." The lack of violence was a frustration to her - particularly since Joreena had had her chance - but any time she was given orders, it enforced a tiny bit of peace in this chaotic life of hers. She knew full well that left to her own devices, she'd have gotten in a lot more trouble.

"Alright," Artenal said. "On my mark, please." He fished out an electric key, held it up to the door's lock, and whispered, "Go!"

The door opened, and both Artenal and Joreena moved out of visual range. Scaara stood in front of it, and underwent a remarkable change. That petite body, usually carried as if it were a coiled spring covered with poisonous barbs, lost all its tension. It slunk in on herself, and suddenly Scaara looked like an overgrown girl, insecure and lost. She walked slowly into the room, and the last the other two heard before the door closed was her quavering voice going, "Hello? I'm lost, and I think something bad happened-"

A few minutes later, the door opened again and Scaara came out, smiling. "Easy as docking," she said. "Come on in."

The room was fairly sizeable, and clearly used both for supervision and storage. Aside from vid screens and controls, there were crates, various pieces of metal scraps, and other debris. In a corner was a steel table with steel chairs, on which lay a card version of the Mind Clash game. Two men lay unconscious beside the table in a rather revealing position, their hands and feet tied fast with their own clothes, and their eyes bandaged with something even more ad hoc.

Artenal stroked a hand over his face, sighed and grinned. "You've blindfolded them."

"In case they wake up."

"You've blindfolded them with their own underwear."

Scaara shrugged. "Use what works."

"Next person we kill is all yours, and I'll give you whatever equipment you need. You're starting to frighten me," Artenal said. "Anyway, here's the scoop. Because of their ad-hoc connections to the main Empire systems, Gurista data security is always a bit lax on the internal side. It does have its safeguards, which are run in the quiet hour at noon, and if anything's found out then they raise bloody hell. Until then, so long as I manage to make a few changes, we'll be safe. First thing I'll do is muck with our prisoner registration and change Scaara to a Minmatar."

"Hey!"

"Just so they won't associate this humiliating little guard-beating girl with our team, dear." Artenal pulled out the other electric card key from his pocket, sat at the controls for one of the vid screens, and started working. A few minutes in the team heard a soft gasp from him, and a vein on his forehead started to visibly throb, but he didn't turn his face from the screen and they didn't inquire further.

After a while, Kraleian came in through the door. Without looking back, Artenal said, "All done?"

"All set. They'll never tell the difference."

"That's nice," Joreena said. "I'm glad you two are having fun. Care to share?"

"One sec," Artenal said. He kept working for a few minutes - the rest of the team knew better than to interrupt - and at last turned in his chair and faced them. "We're set. With really ugly hacking, I should add, and that's coming from a Minmatar."

"Problems?" Kraleian said.

"Nothing I couldn't handle," Artenal said.

"Shahoun?"

"Shahoun is still on station, and so is that team he hired to protect him. Even better, they're spread out. Logs say they've each got some business appointment, but will be leaving later today, so I've put down blocks just in case they had feelers out on our own info." He leaned back in his chair. "I've also overwritten some of the data the Guristas had stored on both us and them. Anyone looks us up, we'll appear way more innocent than we are, and in fact quite good at dealing with the exact sort of problem the Guristas are about to have. Which is a good thing, because I saw some things in our records that even I didn't recognize."

"And anyone who looks up the other team?" Joreena said, a dark and happy suspicion blooming in her mind.

Artenal grinned.

Kraleian said, "Will find that one of their members invaded a Gurista prison, knocked out the supervisors, tried and failed to kidnap a group of innocent prisoners awaiting trial." He smiled, entirely without warmth. "And last but not least, murdered the warden. The evidence is all there."

The Mercenaries (Part Three)



"One of your men is dead, and I know who killed him."

The station comptroller stared at the woman who stood on the other end of his office. She was Gallente from head to toe, with their intrinsic combination of arrogance and ease emanating from every aspect of her pose. She was also older than him but nonetheless quite attractive for her age, something he was surprised at himself for noticing.

"You're one of our prisoners, and got past my guards," he said. "Keep talking while you can."

"Those people who attacked us – the ones who you let on the station – tried to finish the job. They came to the prison and were going to execute us, but we managed to escape. Your warden wasn't so lucky."

"Assuming you're telling the truth, and we're going to find that out very soon," the comptroller said, keying in a combination on the holoivid surface of his desk, "why shouldn't I have you thrown right back in jail and deal with this myself?"

The woman walked slowly towards him. He tensed up, but she raised her hands to her head and said, "At ease, soldier. I'm unarmed." She kept approaching, and as she was halfway over the room he noticed that she'd apparently been hurt: What he'd taken for rouge was a blood-red bruise, and the thin film of healing powder she'd spread over it had not yet finished working its magic.

"Did they do this?"

"They did more," she said shortly. "But we lived. Look us up now, dear. See what we can do in return."

He finished keying in the sequence. A seed of data unfurled on the pane of his desk, spreading its digital petals to every corner. The woman stood in silence while he read it over.

At last he raised his head again, looked her directly in the eyes and said, "Why should I let you do this?"

She walked over to the desk and leaned forward, resting her knuckles on it. He saw the knuckles turn white. His gaze traveled back up to her face, taking in other sights along the way, ones that were a little too close and smelled far too good.

"You'll see we've done this countless times before," she said in a quiet tone. "You'll see we've helped law enforcement, Empire and pirates both. You'll see we can be trusted to do what we do. You'll see that it's far better to risk people like us than any more of your own men, and we'll do it quietly so your denizens won't find

out until you're ready to tell them what happened. And if that's not enough," she murmured, "well, here you see me. Gallente have no limits. Do you have any reason to think I can't do anything I want to?"

The comptroller stared at her for a while. "According to what I've seen, no, I don't suppose I do," he said at last. "You've got six hours before I set the guards on them. Find the people responsible and get them to me, alive. Everything checks out, you'll undock from this station after that, free and with our thanks."

"The thanks will be mutual, sir. I'll be seeing you soon," she said, and blew a kiss into the air between them. He watched her walk out as slowly as she'd walked in, and never quite noticed the sweat that had been trickling down her back, nor the faint trembling in her hands.

There was a very fine balance between blissful success and suicidal failure. The multitude of scars on this man's body told of a rewarding, if rather eventful, life rocking around on the scales.

The result of the small EMP bomb he was painstakingly constructing, for instance, had potential for one very positive outcome but a myriad unpleasant ones ranging from failure at zero hour to an unfettered launch during testing. The former would very likely rob him of his only real countermeasure against his adversary's mechanized attack, while the latter would give him an epileptic seizure and a heart attack before shutting down all electrical processes in his brain.

He hummed as he soldered together the wires in his bomb, taking care to coat them right away with conducting gel and insulant. He lived for this.

The surroundings were bare: an empty warehouse on the edge of station central, near enough to the industrial areas and far enough from human traffic that nobody would notice him working there. He had a worktable and a chair, both plastic, a generator and some analytic equipment for the bomb, a nonstatic plastic tarp he'd spread out on the cement floor to hold various parts, and a portable console for finishing off the station hackwork.

He put down the soldering iron, regarded the console's blinking screen beside him, and sighed. He had two tasks here. First and most important was to hack undocking permission for his team into the station's operating procedures. This was the escape route, which mattered more than the mission. Second was to rig countermeasures to the drones that had been used against them. This was the revenge, which mattered in other ways he'd have a hard time putting words to.

He turned to the console and worked with it for a while. It was complicated work that required speed, attention and an instinct for adaptation. The Guristas' own system was one of the greatest examples of ad-hoc hacking in the universe, and poked its multitude of tendrils into innumerable cracks in Empire systems. The trick was not to touch it directly, for it was a skittish beast, but let it come to you. He'd constructed a large batch of fake data and set up a badly protected broadcast mirror in an abandoned mining colony nearby. It was nonsensical stuff, but it had a patina of sense, which was all the Guristas datatendrils needed to coil around it and pull it in for later analysis; and in so doing, grab a nice little packet of very polite requests to please let a particular ship undock before they could think about it twice.

It took some time for the full amount of data to weave its way into the Guristas system, and to his heart-stopping surprise he found himself fiddling with the wires of the EMP bomb. He put them down very slowly and moved his chair out of absent-minded reach, leaned back with his hands behind his head and let his mind wander, while the console finished the final runs of its program.

He'd made a life out of this, one way or another. When he'd been freeing slaves there'd been two ways: the clean, like the console he had beside him, or the dirty, like this bomb. And if he were to be honest with himself, after all the time he'd been doing this, he truly preferred the dirty. That was what he did when he signed up for this mercenary crew, instead of fighting for the true Minmatar cause. Some of the mission profits he would set aside and give to his friends back in the underground, so they could free their brethren and better their lot, and with what this team was pulling it certainly beat being just one more life fading from a body lying in a ditch somewhere, gun in one hand and flag in the other. This, to him, was the Minmatar lot. You saw an opportunity, no matter how unorthodox, and you did something with it. You went for it.

He smiled, moved back to the desk and got to work. Half an hour later he had a theoretically functioning EMP bomb. He carefully laid it down on the ground beside some test equipment, said a brief and silent prayer, and set it off.

The equipment lost all power, and Artenal did not. The bomb worked.

Laughter bubbled out of him, and turned into a guffawing roar when he looked back to the desk and saw that the EMP wave had completely fried the console, too.

Some people walk through cathedrals, while others tread in the gutters. Kralean, with his past ties to the Amarr clergy, had one foot in either, which could be a drawback when you needed to move fast without anyone knowing, but provided excellent ground when you could pick your steps and tread silently.

It is a common misconception that pirates and mercenaries are faithless. The worst of them have little time for intangibles, certainly. But behind every pirate is not merely a trail of past victims - there is also a shadowy mass of people whose lives are affected or entwined with the pirate's own. They are people who live that life less of choice than of hand-to-mouth necessity, and whose hidden, if always unstated, hope is that one day, in some kind of transition, they can leave it behind for good.

Their pent-up faith might be unnamed, but it glowed so bright it burned. The trick lay in recognizing the houses of worship.

Kralean traversed the station. He visited a few churches, who welcomed him as a fellow man in the spirit of faith, if not its exact letter. From them he drew information on where the truly devout could be found.

He then visited several homes in the poorer quarters and saw many parents, and visited streets and bars to see their multitude of children. He had talks that were short in time but seemed very long to his conversants, and after he had spoken for a little while, they began to listen.

It took a while, but by the end he had quite a flock.

It is another common misconception that pirates are the most powerful people in any group of miscreants. They're visible and loud, certainly, and make great boasts of their own prowess. But the wise pirate - the one possessing the proper mix of suicidal fighting instincts and basic common sense - knows that he truly has nothing without the support of the people in the shadows.

So when Kralean returned from his pilgrimage, he had assurance that wherever his enemies went, and whoever they talked to, they would be given no shelter, no refuge nor assistance, and they would be shunned like the uncleanest of them all.

For it is a wise man who captures the heart of his flock, and a clever man who manages to feed that quelled and flickering flame which burns shyly within them.

She couldn't use guns, but that was alright; there were other ways.

Scaara stepped into the foyer of the Steel Barrel, completely unrecognized. People here didn't pay much attention to newcomers unless there was pressing reason to do so, and it helped that she wasn't visibly armed. She surreptitiously patted her pockets, in which she'd secreted a couple of tiny activating pads and a metal ampuke.

The Steel Barrel was not quite as crowded as the last time, though she still recognized a lot of faces. This was good.

She moved up to the bar but did not take a seat. Instead, she stood there, quietly regarding the seated patrons, the bartender and the rows of drinks behind him. She paid special attention to the ends of the bar line, where the regulars sat. One or two of them appeared to register her presence, and there was a flicker of attention in their eyes.

There were no guns anywhere on her person, but she had something much better. She slowly slid a hand into her pocket and withdrew the weapon's activation switches, holding them clenched in her fist. She noticed with quiet pleasure that those same people who had noticed her now sat up straight, like slaver hounds at the escape whistle, tense and alert. Her fist rose into the air like a rocket seen from afar, the human hounds following its slow trajectory. As it reached its apex she thumbed one of the switches, then dropped it to the floor like a used fuel tank. It had barely a moment to clatter before the bar resounded with the clang of security doors sliding into place over all exits. Station security took precedence over personal liberty in times of crisis, and if the automatic housing controls received a message that a unit had to be sealed off, then that's exactly what would happen.

Everyone in the Steel Barrel had noticed her, but only the guilty parties stood up. They moved fast towards Scaara. She waved at them and pressed the other switch in her hand.

The high-frequency sirens, long since embedded in every bar on this station by an overseer very much into crowd control, roared with eardrum-piercing noise. The patrons dropped like depowered robots, clutching their heads for a few twitching seconds before passing into blissful oblivion. One of them had made it almost to Scaara, his hands going for her neck, before he dropped and plowed face-first into the floor.

Scaara dropped the other switch, and made a silent promise to buy Artenal a stiff drink for rigging this up, both the system interrupts and the tiny earbud sound filters that had protected her own head from the aural assault.

From her other pocket she withdrew one of the metal ampules, a perfect cylinder about half the length of her pinky. She twisted off its seal. There was a click and both ends extended, one terminating in a stopper, the other in a needle. Kneeling by the man next to her, she jabbed the needle into a vein on his neck and waited for the stimulant to kick in. The mind-scrambling siren would have stopped by now, but nobody would come back to wakefulness for a while yet unless assisted by a little synthetic adrenaline.

The man gasped and opened his eyes so wide that they bulged. She smiled.

"Sssh," she said. "This is going to hurt, but try to relax."

Her fist clenched again, but this time it held nothing but her anger and need for release.

Some time later, after she'd established that yes, he was one of the contacts for the Shahoun's team, and yes, he could tell her where they were, and no, he was telling the honest truth and could she please please please not break any more bones, she withdrew the other capsule from her pocket, twisted its seal, and plunged its needle into his neck. This time it was not a stimulant but a soporific, powerful enough to reduce a full-grown man to dreamless, unwakeable sleep. Once the subject regained consciousness, they'd be completely incapable of normal communication. Or walking. Or blinking.

The team assembled in a hidden place and got ready for violence.

"Are we even going to be allowed back on the station after this?" Scaara asked.

"Strictly speaking we haven't done anything wrong, other than cost them the life of one guard," Kralean said nonchalantly. "With luck and skill, we'll be gone before they realize the deception, and we can make amends later. These people have big tempers that need a little time to cool, but they're not unreasonable." He looked at the others. "How did you guys do?"

"The pheromone perfume makes me gag every time," Joreena said. "Even if it's just for the first few seconds. I can't understand what you people like about it."

"Neither do I," Artenal said. "You're just as ugly as ever." He ducked as she threw a pack of ammo at him.

"Well, it worked," she said. "Comptroller will let us do our thing. I also had a chat with one of the top guardsmen, who was extremely unhappy with losing a man and promised me help if needed."

"I had a quick chat with someone, too," Scaara said wistfully. "I liked that. Anyway, I confirmed our intel. The team that guarded Saroun is still split up and calmly going about their business before they leave later today. Whatever they hear about our plans won't be from their station contact. And also, that Caldari dude who got in my face at the Steel Barrel? He's mine."

"Amazing how you always go after your own people, dear," Joreena said.

"They're not my people," Scaara replied and shrugged. "Everyone I meet in this job is a traitor to the State."

"Be that as it may," Kralean said, "Shahoun's team will have a little less support to draw on."

"How much less?" Artenal asked.

"None at all, pretty much," Kralean said. "The faithful many will shun them. And on that note, if we're going to pick our targets from that team, I want the Minmatar woman. She's been making some inquiries and I have reason to believe that despite my efforts, she's managed to assemble a small team of miscreants. I'm not happy with this."

Artenal frowned. It was a perfectly valid reason. Of course it was. And cooperation within the team was good. But in recent missions, Artenal felt, Kralean had been going after Minmatars quite a lot.

"I'm taking on the Gallente guy. We're used to betraying our friends and betters," Asadir said and gave Kardeth a meaningful look that went completely ignored. He continued, "He's the one who knocked us all out. He's a tech-head, so the rest of you wouldn't know what to do with him. I've seen his shopping lists here, and it's interesting stuff. And besides, he put in some things about us in the Guristas dataframe that I'm not too happy about."

"You sure you can handle him?" Joreena said, possibly with the slightest edge of offended racial pride.

"Oh please," Artenal said. "The man uses drones."

Still ignoring the spat, Kralean turned to Scaara and said, "You know, if you go for the Caldari guy, you'll run into

Shahoun as well."

"I won't kill him," she said quickly.

"I know you won't. I've got a plan for him..."

A while later they left, each headed their own way, quiet and deadly.



The Mercenaries (Part Four)



"Hello Garmasi. I hear you like getting people in trouble."

The Amarrian whose name had been spoken slowly put the merchandise back on the vendor's display bench, and stood up straight. His wrinkled features coagulated into a smile.

To the voice behind his right ear he said, "Depends on who deserves it. How did you get out?"

The voice said, "We had some help. Amazing what people will descend to doing, just for their own personal interest."

"Isn't it just?" Garmasi said. "But if you don't mind me asking, what makes you think that coming here, out in the open, is going to do you any good? Do you perhaps have a laser knife on your person?"

"None such," the voice said.

"A small gun, silenced or perhaps pressurized, and loaded with change-state ammo? Something to really put me in my place, during those last few agonizing seconds of my life?"

"Not at all."

"Disintegrating garrote," he said. "At least that. To lure me into a dark alley and snap on that self-tightening noose that does the job for you."

"Nothing of the sort."

Garmasi turned and faced her. "So what exactly is to prevent me from calling the guards and having your"-he looked her over-"admittedly marvelous figure thrown right back in jail, now on suspicion of disorderly conduct, kidnapping and jailbreak?"

"Oh, I don't think you want to do that," Joreena said. "But I do think you want to tell me about your plans."

"I do?" Garmasi said with a smirk. From his seat behind the display board the vendor coughed politely, for the pair was blocking sight to his merchandise, but neither one of them moved. When he coughed again, the

Amarrian turned to him and in one swift motion pulled out a datacard, keyed in a number, touched the card to the vendor's scanner, plunged the card back in his pocket and hit the scanner's confirmation pad with a fist. A series of digits scrolled up on its screen. The vendor promptly shut up.

"You do," Joreena said. "You had us arrested on small charges, but you've been hanging out here with not a worry in the world. You must have figured we'd be coming after you and messing up your business."

"Not really, dear," Garmasi said. "We have no real business here other than to protect our client. As for you coming after us, one of our guys knows a thing or two about Gurista datasystems. I'm afraid we gave you a rather ugly past. Nothing worthy of a capital offence, but certainly enough to have you retained while the authorities figure out what to do with creatures like you."

"Creatures like us?"

He shrugged and smiled. "Fires. Children. You're bad people."

Joreena stared at him for a moment, then smiled and seemed to make up her mind about something. "So we'll disappear. Strike at you from the shadows. And we will get our target."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Garmasi said. He stepped in and took firm hold of Joreena's upper arm, turned his head and said to the vendor, "Triple the amount I gave you if you get the guards here right now."

The vendor nodded eagerly and moved his hand underneath his stall. There was a clanging noise, and suddenly guards were all over the place.

"I'm afraid this is the end, my dear," he said.

"Yes. It is," she said.

The guards moved in.

"It's a shame you didn't have any other purpose here. We might have come to some kind of arrangement," she said.

"Oh, it's far too late for that now," he said.

"Certainly," she replied, quite sanguine.

He furrowed his brows, but didn't have time to say anything else, for a muscular hand was clamped on his shoulder. "Alright, murderer. Time to go."

He looked around. A large Guristas guard stood there, backed by five others. Two of them already had their stun batons out.

Garmasi stammered out "Wait, what-" before the guard holding him pulled back a fist and punched him in the stomach. "Shut up, asshole," the guard said as the Amarrian doubled up.

Joreena knelt beside him. "Save your breath," she said. "You'll need it for the interrogation. I hear it's a little harsh for someone of your reputation."

Garmasi's eyes bulged at her.

"You're bad people now," she whispered and blew him a kiss before the guards dragged him away.

The good thing about doing your own crazy science experiments in warehouses and empty rooms across the universe was that you learned to recognize the signs. Artenal approached the building, taking his time and looking closely at its doors and windows.

There wouldn't be a risk of explosives or other area-of-effect damage from this guy. Drones meant accuracy and clean hands. That suited Artenal fine. He wanted to get dirty.

On the other hand, drones could also mean early warning systems, and fighting conducted from a distance. Artenal walked very slowly and used his eye for patterns. Nothing beeped, and nothing blinked, and it seemed like his opponent hadn't rigged up anything at all. It was understandable – the man was leaving soon and his enemies were supposed to be rotting in prison – but very stupid. It was assumptions like this that got a person hurt.

Artenal grinned, and patted the small sphere in his pocket.

The warehouse door was creaky, but a gearhead always carried some kind of oil. He made his way deeper into the building.

Inside, its periphery was dotted with all manner of debris and junk - mostly skeletons of hover vehicles that had been scrounged for every useable part - but the center was an open area that had been cleared out. In it, by a metal workbench, sat the Gallente man Artenal had seen at the bar, quietly tinkering with something. The high roof and bare walls caused every metallic click from the Gallentean's tools to echo.

"Safety's the illusion of the unprepared, Ontre," Artenal said, stepping out from cover. Ontre looked up and regarded him for a moment before bowing back to his work.

When there was no further reaction, Artenal walked a few steps closer. He was too far from the Gallente mercenary to see what he was working on, other than a pile of silvery mechanics and a mess of wires, but close enough that he could see several small attack drones lying neatly sorted on the edge of the bench.

"Are you going to turn those on?" Artenal said, with perfect calm.

Ontre stopped his task and for the first time seemed to properly register Artenal's presence, looking at him with quiet interest. "Should I?" he said.

"It's either that or you surrender and come have an unpleasant conversation with me and some friends of mine."

Ontre seemed to honestly consider this for a moment. Then he shrugged, said, "I do have a lot of work to do here, you know," and reached out for a switch on a small activation board lying on the bench.

The air was filled with an angry buzz as the drones came to life. Ontre adjusted a few settings on the board, then leaned on one elbow and watched Artenal.

It took a few seconds for the electric machines to rise in the air and orient themselves. They hovered ever higher, adjusting their formations and apparently communicating with other. Despite himself, Artenal was fascinated. "Do they always take this long to get into gear?" he asked. "If I had a gun you'd be dead by now."

"They go from zero to kill in point eight five seconds per meter in mid-air, assuming no wind. There're some emergency features, too, that let them launch themselves up or even directly at someone. Total from offline to guaranteed impact is one point one two, with my hand on the activation trigger," the Gallentean said. "And if you'd had a gun you would've shot me at range, so I figured I might as well let them go through the whole syncing routine. They get a little grumpy if I use them too much with realignment."

"Let's see what they can do, then," Artenal said and started walking towards the mercenary. The drones, who were floating in the rafters by now, immediately turned their electric eyes to him. There was an echo of a dozen little prods extending from their carapaces, followed by the crackle of electricity.

As Ontre shrugged and flicked another switch on his control board, Artenal reached into his pocket and pulled out the EMP bomb. The drones roared downwards, electric oblivion aimed at Artenal, and it took more self-control than he'd expected not to run. He clicked on the bomb and tossed in the air.

There was a whomph, and the drones clattered lifelessly onto the ground along with the spent bomb.

Ontre frowned. Instead of reacting to Artenal's approaching presence, he looked back to his work and prodded it a few times with a screwdriver. "You just cost me a full day of very complex work," he said.

"Shame. Maybe next time you'll know better than to mess with us," Artenal said. He was closing in on the Gallentean and had started to reach out a hand that he expected would grab the man by his neck, when the mercenary ducked, shot in and clamped his arms around Artenal's knees, tripping him up. Ontre immediately followed through, resting one knee on Artenal's sternum and pinning him, the other leg stretched out for ballast, and started raining punches on his head.

The shock of the attack cost Artenal several valuable seconds, and his vision had begun to blur at the edges when his brain caught up with what his body was undergoing. He bucked his hip, then dropped it again and rolled away, getting to his knees. As the Gallentean rushed towards him, he pulled his small steel blade out of a hidden part on his belt and held it behind his hands, feigning wooziness. The mercenary aimed a kick at his head, and as it curved close Artenal swiped his knife at the leg. He'd been hoping to hit a tendon, but the blade buried itself midway into Ontre's calf, and the kick hit the side of his head with lessened force that was nonetheless enough to nearly knock him out.

Ontre dropped to the floor, screaming. He tried pulling out the knife, but its notched edge wouldn't budge. By the time he had the sense to look up again, Artenal's other hidden knife slid neatly under his chin and into his head.

Ontre slumped, lifeless.

Artenal sat there for a long time, reflecting on career choices, and on the idiocy of assumptions.

It was dark and the alley was deep, but he had been told she would be here. He knew she wouldn't be, at least not unprepared and certainly not by herself, but that was all right; he'd made preparations of his own.

Kralean walked about slowly, listening for noise and for silence.

"Hello, weakling," a voice said.

He turned. A woman of Minmatar origin entered the mouth of the alley. She wasn't dressed in much, and the distant lights of neon and stars made her dark skin glisten, highlighting its tattoos and scars. Kralean saw the cut of her muscles, which writhed like coiled snakes, insinuating themselves in effortless motion. It was the woman from the bar, but he hadn't paid any attention to her back then.

She was followed by a dozen people, all of whom looked like they came from the darkest part of space.

"Word has it you've been going after my associates. Got free somehow, think you're gonna be real clever and take us out. I tried contacting them, thought it was just the usual Guristas shit station service. Turns out it's you, and that you've turned the guards against us."

"That would be Artenal. He figured you'd be easier dealt with if we imposed a blackout. Sorry about the inconvenience," Kralean said and put his hands in his pockets. The Minmatar woman's associates tensed up, so Kralean added, "I'm not pulling a gun. Relax."

"So I let word spread that I'm panicking," the Minmatar woman said, "And set up a meeting with an escape contact. Lo and behold, you show up. Where are your pals?"

"I honestly have no idea," Kralean said. "I explicitly requested that I get you to myself, and I see I made the right choice."

The Minmatar woman frowned. She turned to one of her associates and said, "Kill him."

The man nodded and wordlessly started making his way into the alley. When he'd covered half the distance, Kralean pulled out of his pocket a small item and said, "Come any closer and I'll press it."

Everyone froze in place. In calm and very clear tones, the woman said. "What is it you have there?"

"Oh, it's just a button," Kralean said, and pressed it. To his great enjoyment, everyone but him pinched their eyes shut for a second, then looked around in amazement. "Told you," he said.

"Great Tribe of earth and sky," the Minmatar woman said in exasperation, sighing with spent adrenaline. "Kill him!"

Her man moved in. Kralean smiled. There was a brief scuffle.

After the man's body had stopped twitching, Kralean dusted off his robes and said, "Look, maybe we can work this out."

The Minmatar woman and her people stared at the broken form lying by Kralean's legs. She said, "What ... what do you suggest?"

"Well, you've got a tiny golden Khuumak hanging around your neck. I like those, they're cute. Break it off and toss it to me, and I'll give you a running start."

Even at this distance he could see her face tense up and her jaw clench. "Don't forget to recite the names of the Emperors," he added. "You must've been taught them at some point."

She looked directly into his eyes and said in a dead voice, "You will never walk out of this alley alive." She started walking towards him, her team in tow.

He gave a brief smile and cocked his head, as if listening, then looked towards the sky.

Had this been a mere alley fight, he thought, she would have continued. But even despite her visible rage she stopped, and told her men to stop as well.

He found himself relieved that he'd secured backup. The transmitter in his pocket felt far too light, but he

pressed it again, sending the second and final message.

"Why are we waiting?" one of them said, in the plaintive tones of a child being told it can't play with its favorite toy. "He's just standing there."

"Yeah," she said. "That's the problem. What are you listening for, preacher man?"

"The people," he said. "And I think they're arriving."

There was a susurrus in the air. Kraleian said, "You know, most people had the sense not to help you out. The ones who did sign up in your little crew are the ones that everybody else on this station positively hates and fears. But there's strength in numbers."

"What are you talking about?"

"There's a lot of faith in a place like this," he said. "And it took quite a bit of convincing, but I've been a Wanderer for the Speakers of Truth for a long time, and I know what to tell the people who want to hear, and how to listen to those who otherwise never get to speak."

The susurrus turned into a tremor. The mercenaries looked around and saw groups of people pouring into the alley.

"You really should have listened," Kraleian said before the beatings began.

Shahoun moved through the darkening night, alone and unprotected.

The last of his team had vanished. They'd been heading towards the docking area when his Caldari bodyguard stopped them, saying he'd heard a noise. The guard had ordered him to stay put, then gone off to investigate and never come back. He'd heard a woman's laughter in the distance and it had given him the shivers. He ran.

Now he was at the docks, moments away from his ship. Nothing mattered but to get away.

The customs agent took a long time looking over his data. Then he said to Shahoun, "I'm sorry, sir. Your ship has been sequestered."

He did not even bother arguing. "Is there any way I can get off this station? Any way at all? Please?"

The customs agent looked at him for far too long.

"Look," Shahoun said, "I'm very sorry if I'm being too forward here. I don't mean to imply anything about you, your job or personal ethics. But I absolutely positively have to get somewhere very soon, and I'll do anything I can to make it happen. Please. I'm begging you."

The agent kept looking. Then at last he said, "Well, sir, your ship has been seized but you're under no official obligation to stay, though I don't doubt you will be once investigations have run their course. But I can see you're in dire straits, and I'm willing to consider a compromise."

"Name it. Anything," Shahoun said.

"There's a ship leaving soon, and I know someone on it. Spoke to him earlier tonight, as a matter of fact. They've finished their business here and have plenty of room for passengers. I'm sure you could bargain with them to get you where you want. They're good people."

"Thank you, please. Yes. That would be most wonderful."

The customs agent handed him a card. "So if you'll just make a quick donation to the customs agent retirement fund, I'm sure we can sort you out."

"Of course, of course," Shahoun said and grinned. "How much?"

"How much is it worth to you?" the customs agent said without expression.

Shahoun signed off an amount, and the agent looked it over and nodded. "Section 34C, red area, sir. Move quickly, now."

"Thank you so much," Shahoun said and ran off.

He made it to the ship on time, was waved through by another customs agent without a word, and went into one

of its waiting chambers, where he sat down with a heavy sigh of relief. He didn't want to talk to anyone just yet, merely to be whisked away into the oblivion of deep space.

After not too long the outside door closed automatically. The only other door was the one that lead deeper into the ship, standing ajar.

There was a tink from that door. Shahoun looked up and saw a big, burly Minmatar man smiling at him, a small canister in one hand. The man threw the canister at Shahoun, who instinctively grabbed it.

"Welcome onboard," Artenal said and shut the door. The canister started hissing, and let out a white non-odorous gas that filled the room.

Shahoun's felt inertia pull hard on him, though through the increasing fuzziness of his thoughtweb he didn't know whether the ship was taking off or if he was merely losing his consciousness. It felt oddly relieving.

His last thoughts before passing out was that he really should have hired these people instead.

The Slow Disease



Tibus Heth, Executor of the Caldari Providence Directorate and de facto leader of the Caldari State, sat alone in the waiting room of Dr. Yoshun's Corporate & Family Practices. He fanned himself with a plain brown filing folder that bore neither label nor seal. The breeze it created was slight, though it was a gust compared to the pitiable whimper of the room's climate control unit.

He shifted his weight to his right side as he pulled out an old metallic watch. The case was smooth and cool to the touch, its contours blemished by minor scratches and the occasional dent. The back still bore a fading decal that read, "Employee of the Month." He stared at the ticking hands, blinked himself out of a tired trance, and returned the watch to his pocket, a cycle he had completed twelve times during his wait. Despite his history with Caldari Constructions, he was fond of his non-monetary reward. It was a good, mechanical watch. Tibus always preferred things he could fix himself.

After stretching in his chair with a grunt (answered by a small series of hollow pops from his back), Tibus opened the manila folder. Inside was a series of monochrome reports printed on cheap white paper. The calm, pristine lines of standard Caldari report formatting were completely negated by Tibus's numerous inline notations and marginal scribbles. Lines crossed between sections; questions scribbled in the margins were answered by other, more frantic questions. Everything suggested connections, but none were made.

The first report profiled former Gallente president, Souro Foiritan. Foiritan was the perfect model of a Gallente politician, averse to direct, especially military, action but skilled enough with words to thwart the efforts of his enemies. His recent resignation had taken the intelligence community by surprise. Only its timing suggested any sort of connection, especially with the purchase of his homeworld, Intaki, by the Ishukone.

A second report picked up that story. It listed the movements of Ishukone ships, personnel, and other assets over the past year. The megacorporation, and its CEO, Mens Reppola, were Tibus's greatest internal political enemies. When the Caldari militia held complete dominance of Black Rise and development rights were auctioned off, Ishukone had bid only on Intaki. More curiously, they had contracted the mercenary company Mordu's Legion to police the system. Conspiracy theories were stranger still, but no evidence could be brought to bear.

The final report in the folder, marred by a web of Tibus's notes, detailed the new Gallente president, Jacus Roden. The majority of the report was long outdated. Intelligence was playing catch-up. Roden's life was well documented until his retirement from his position as CEO of Roden Shipyards. The trail went completely cold there, picking up again only with Roden's recent meteoric rise back into the public spotlight and the presidency.

Tibus pinched the bridge of his nose. He read the reports more than a dozen times, each time realizing more

connections. He had long suspected that Foiritan and Reppola conspired against him, but Foiritan's fall and Roden's ascent did not fit. All three men were intelligent and immensely capable; nothing they did was accidental.

The only way it made any sense to Tibus was through an intricate conspiracy supported by a network of Gallente agents operating within the State: The Federation use Intaki as a way to funnel their spies into the State; Foiritan resigns as a distraction; and Roden assumes control of the Gallente government, plausibly clean of the Intaki affair and the most powerful man in the Federation.

Tibus knew it sounded insane, but he also knew such machinations were possible. The Broker proved that idea.

Flushing those agents out would be a painful task. Tibus's political power was not absolute. If he targeted Ishukone and questioned their loyalty without any hard evidence, the other megacorps would turn on him. He could authorize a State-wide inquiry to save face, but that would consume time and energy that could be spent elsewhere. How much could he risk on suspicions alone?

A knock at the door startled Tibus out of his headspace. He scrambled to replace the documents back in the folder. A nurse peeked her head in from the adjoining hallway. "Sir? Mister, ah..." she trailed off, taking another puzzled glance at the appointment list she carried. "Mister Adar?"

"That's me." He smiled.

"Sorry. Thought you looked like Tibus Heth for a second. Dr. Yoshun is ready to see you."

Tibus sat on the small table in the examination room. The room was spartan and slightly too cold to be comfortable (a practice Tibus had found uniformly maddening in all doctors' offices). A canned smell halfway between fresh flowers and mouthwash permeated the air. The only decoration was a small poster of a human heart attached to a time bomb, with the accusing phrase, "PREVENTION SAVES LIVES," in bold beneath it.

Standing above Tibus was Dr. Yoshun. He was a younger man with dark hair, and his long, white coat bore the Caldari Constructions logo on either sleeve. It had only been five years since Yoshun took over as the CC physician for the district, but the pressures of maintaining the practice on his corporate budget had already aged him well beyond that time span. Tibus noted that, regardless of Yoshun's degree of experience, he had perfected a disapproving scowl.

"Tibus, I'm flattered that you want to stick with your old planetary physician and all, but you haven't had a proper checkup since, you know, everything. And insisting that your appointment not push out any of the other patients is borderline treason. You're the most powerful man in the State."

The older man took the berating in stride. Their personal dynamic was established during Tibus's years with the company. Yoshun was one of the few loyal company men Tibus always trusted. "I'm a citizen of the State first," he replied. "I don't deserve preferential treatment."

"Don't give me that crap. Your health is not a damn political statement. These tests should have been run a long time ago." Yoshun raised an admonishing finger. "And before you say it, I don't care how busy you've been. Getting the blood results back took two days. Two days! If you had just one blood test and two days available a year ago, everything could have been different."

Tibus adopted a skeptical face. "You're being melodramatic, Yoshun. I've been exercising regularly. I'm sure as hell eating better than I ever did in the company cafeteria. The pain in my leg comes and goes, but other than that I feel—"

"You have Derj's disease."

The room fell silent. The climate control droned on. Half a minute passed before Tibus showed any further reaction. "Derj's disease?"

"It's also known as exotic tissue sedimentation, or 'miner's disease.'"

"I goddamn know what it is!" Tibus blurted. He clenched and released his fists several times, trying to control himself. When his composure returned, he asked, "How far is it?"

Yoshun pulled out his battered datapad, fighting briefly with the slow machine. "It's stage three. Deposits have started to form around neural tissues. Needless to say, your blood's full of the stuff. If we had detected it earlier, we might have scrubbed you of it in a month. As it is, we can treat most of your symptoms, but you'll never really be cured."

"Is it...." Tibus trailed off, struggling with his mouth to form the word.

"No. At least, not technically. Look, with the kind of resources you have at your disposal, there's no reason you couldn't live a full, natural lifespan. This never has to reach stage four. But — and this is a large 'but' — the deposits that have already developed interfere with brain mapping. They corrupt the results in unpredictable ways."

"I can never clone?"

"If you were to ever attempt to clone, there's a strong probability of permanent and irreversible neural damage. The worst-case scenario, and not an unlikely one, is that your new body would just never wake up."

More seconds passed as Tibus processed his new fate. He felt the watch's subtle ticking in his pocket. "How?"

"Augumen exposure. You most likely came into contact while moving construction materials for the company."

"Augumen is illegal for construction use. Hell, it was illegal before I took over."

"Yeah, it was illegal. But augumen is also a hell of a lot cheaper than pyroxeres, and it's damned easy for inspectors to miss the difference."

Tibus's gaze hardened. He knew the answer to his next question, but asked anyway. "You're certain the company did this?"

"I don't have any proof," Yoshun set his datapad aside, "but yes."

Executor Heth's security entourage immediately greeted him as he exited the small practice. They were all wearing the latest in personal armor, shiny and clean in the evening sun, contrasting heavily with the weather-worn building. If his men tired of waiting outside, they made no mention of it. Jinyo, a tiny man in an over-starched suit, Heth's acting aid and ever the functionary, hurried to the executor's side. He was madly tapping on his top-of-the-line KK datapad, juggling dozens of meetings and mails.

"I hope everything went well, sir. I know you prefer to keep things humble, but we really should find you better and closer health care. In the past seven hours, eighteen new issues arose that require your attention."

"Yes," he replied, "I'm sure." Heth began walking briskly to the parked, nondescript Speeder they had arrived in. His entourage hurried behind. Their leader was walking a brisker pace than they were used to keeping.

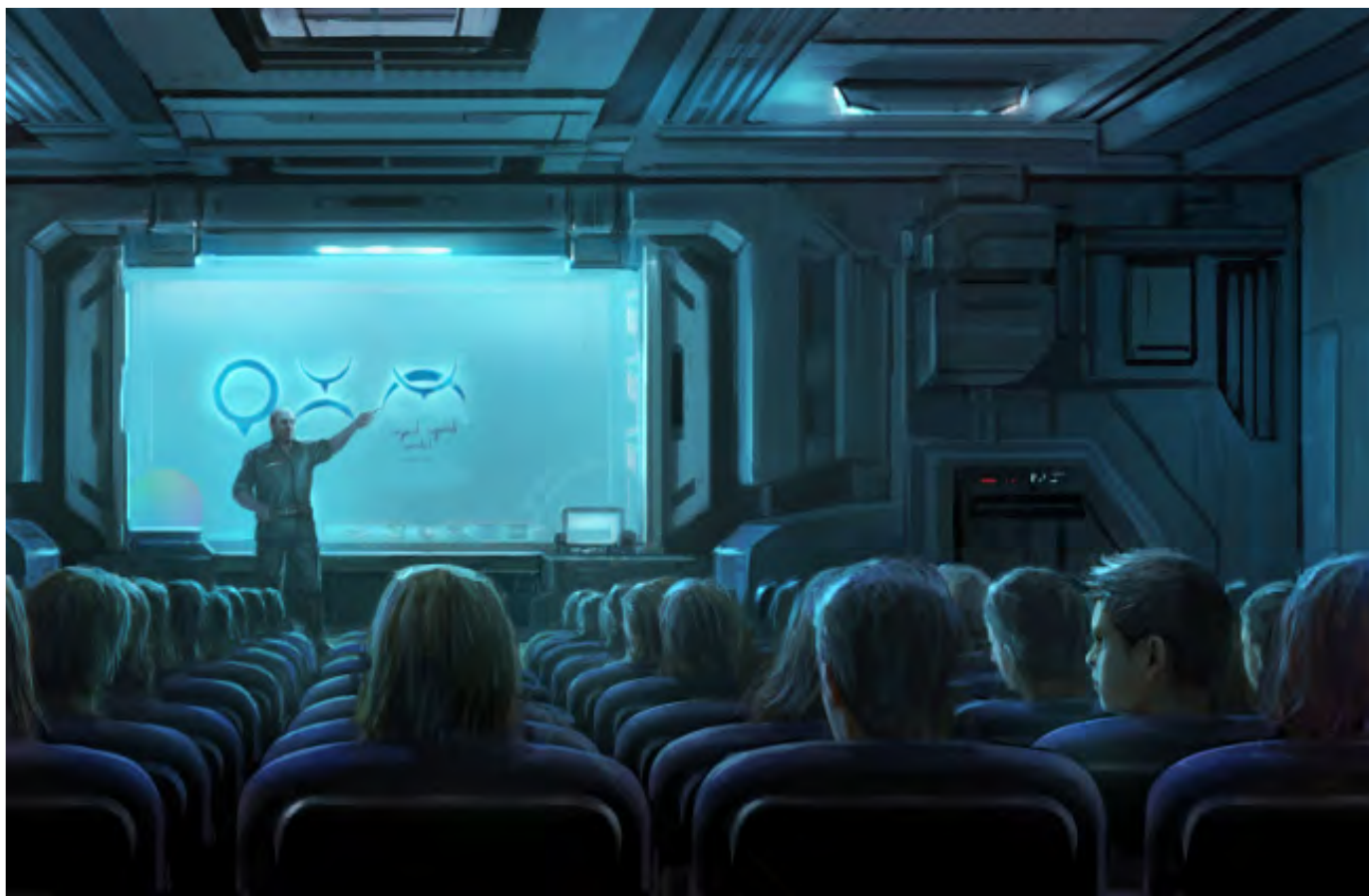
All of Heth's old and new angers and frustrations mixed together, merged, and fueled a resolve he had forgotten since the first day of his tiny workers' revolt. Even his limp felt lessened. "Jinyo, I have new orders."

"Yes, sir?" The tiny man made a dozen taps on his datapad.

"First, launch an investigation into Caldari Constructions' use of augumen in building materials, going back ten years. No excuses, just names or heads. Second, I want a full-time, dedicated personal physician. Schedule regular checkups, tests, the whole gamut." Heth put his hand in his pocket and felt the watch's cold, dented case.

"Third, Jinyo, the Caldari people need to know their government is healthy. I want a list of our most loyal, incorruptible officials and investigators, Navy background preferred. Weakness and timidity have allowed an infection to grow within the State. We will burn it out."

Signs of Faith



"God; Emperor; Theology Council." Nusi tapped the triangle he'd drawn on the board. "That's the theological underpinnings, at least, and - luckily for you - this isn't a politics class, so that's all we cover." He glanced up at the timepiece on the wall. "Well, that's it for today's material, and we still have time to spare. It wouldn't do to let you go early, so...any questions?"

No, he reflected in the silence, it wouldn't do to be too forward, would it? That would be gauche, under the circumstances. This group was a fast-track class; unprompted enthusiasm would be unseemly. He moved forward a little.

"Annoli, you were looking thoughtful a few minutes ago. What was troubling you?"

"Well..." she started slowly, "is it true that the Khanid aren't allowed in the Council chambers?"

"Ah, I should've known it would involve his Highness. He's too old for you, you know..." A few quiet chuckles rumbled around the room, and then a hand shot up. "Yes, Garund?"

"I've heard it's never stopped him in the past, sir." More laughter.

"Ok, ok, let's not be having fun at his Highness' expense." Nusi shot a quick glance into the corner of the room. "Does anyone know the answer to Annoli's question?"

A more furtive hand went up. "Aleine?"

"My pa tole me that it was the symbol that they dint like. He said there was something about it that upset them."

"Good, very good. Yes, the Khanid people, be they Imperial citizens or Royal subjects, are allowed entrance, but the Royal Seal is...well, it's not banned, per se, but it's not welcome there either. Now, does anyone know why?"

A deeper silence, filled with thoughtful faces.

"Well, since we have time, I'll explain properly. We're going to go on a journey through some symbols, because you can't really appreciate the significance of the situation until you understand the background. First--"

Nusi moved back to the board, wiped it clean, and drew a circle with a small inverted triangle at the base.

"What's this? Teilf?"

"That's, uh...the first man?"

"The first men, yes. Unbroken circle, God become man - looks a bit like an upside-down egg, I always thought. That's probably symbolic of something, too... Anyway. First men. This leads to--"

A second symbol, one half-circle above the other, open sides away from each other, with the same inverted triangle at the base of the upper one.

"Do you know this one as well, Teilf? No? Adi?"

"Something to do with the dark?"

"Exactly. This is after the Fall and so on, during the Long Dark. Man and God entirely separate, with man below on his planets and God above in the heavens. An age of savagery and barbarism and general unenlightenment - an age which still persists to this day outside the confines of the Empire. And, yes Annoli, outside the Kingdom as well. His Highness remains an enlightened man in that respect. Which brings us to--"

A more familiar symbol, the two semicircles laid one on top of the other, with the upward-arc one broken where the other crossed it.

"This one you know; it's the Imperial Seal. When we came out of the Dark and formalized the Imperial Creed, man and God were reunited together again, albeit imperfectly. United but not conjoined, primacy of the Divine and the rest. This is Citizenship 101 stuff, which I'm told you've all passed now, yes? Good. Aleine, you have a question?"

"Yeah, uh..what does this have to do with the Khanid?"

"I'm getting to that! One final detail you need to know about the Imperial Seal. You remember from earlier that the Theology Council asserts that the rule of God comes before the rule of man? Well, the symbology at work here is the underpinning of that concept. Just as the Emperor above rules over the people below, so God above rules over man below. Primacy of the Divine isn't sufficient: the implied heirarchy is critical to the rationale.

"So then. When Khanid II upped and left, Heideran--" a glance again into the corner of the room. "That is to say, of course, Emperor Heideran VII, immediately declared him in breach of precedent, along with various other things. The Theology Council, though, followed due process and sent a firmly worded message to Khanid inviting him to explain his actions. There was a bit of a delay, and then his Highness (as he is now) replied with this--"

The same symbol again, but drawn upside-down.

"The delivery was, in fact, a very nice rendering of the Imperial Seal, done carefully in his House colors, but inverted."

Nusi looked around. A lot of blank faces, but a few sparks of dawning comprehension.

"Rial, what property of this little sign is making your eyes bulge in such a curious manner?"

"If...well, if...if the Council gets its authority...the thing on top... If the Imperial Seal is saying that God's law is better than man's law, then..." The student glanced back over his shoulder.

"Then the Royal Seal is saying that man's law is, shall we say, more important than God's law. It's a historical discussion; nobody's saying that it's true. But yes, that's what Khanid was trying to say - or at least, that's how the Council interpreted it. With a single, simple image, he denied the theological root of the Council's authority, telling them that he could damn well do as he saw fit, so long as he broke no secular law - which he hadn't, because Heirs are above such things. How, do you suppose, did the Council react to this...Indlar?"

"I guess maybe they weren't very happy?"

"Hah! You're damn right they weren't happy! They passed down judgement pretty promptly after that, and even though those Justices have all since passed on, the Council as an institution still hasn't forgiven Khanid. That's why it's extremely unwise to take the Royal Seal into the Council chambers. They see it as a direct challenge to their authority, even now. Teilf, you have a question?"

"Didn't they, like, know about the symbol before? Like when Khanid started using it or something?"

"No, because Khanid's reply was the first time anybody had seen it! It seems that he made it up just for this purpose, but decided to keep it afterward as his Royal Seal. Only his Highness knows exactly why, but once he made the decision, he stuck with it. There's other readings of it, too, and again, nobody but Khanid knows which ones are intended and which aren't. For example, given this - the inverted Imperial Seal or the Royal Seal or however you want to think of it - you can arrive at this--"

The second symbol, with the two separated semicircles, but inverted.

A glance again into the corner of the room. "This symbol is frowned upon, but I'm allowed to explain it in this context so you know the truth. I'm not going to ask you to speculate on its meaning; there are many ways to interpret this, some of which you may come across over the years, but there's only one correct interpretation, which is that the Imperial Creed is part of our heritage and our culture and our very identity, but that our future is among the stars. I stress again that Khanid II has never indicated that his Seal implies anything more than rejection of the Council's authority, and that other readings of the symbology here are simply incorrect. And that, I hope, answers the original question in a reasonably comprehensive manner."

A hand crept up lazily in the back corner of the room.

"Zweir, you have something to ask?"

"You've shown us five symbols. What about the sixth?"

Nusi stared long and hard at the boy, and then answered with a smile that contained no hint of mirth.

"There is no sixth symbol, and that's all we have time for today. Class dismissed."

Merely Disassembled



Parlan, reading scripture, felt a drop of sweat trickle down his back. It was a late day in early summer and the fields outside still wavered with heat. Through the window he could see the workers putting away their microblade scythes and sending the last of the wheat through the binders. People worked in shifts here on the colony, and it was Parlan's week for early days in the field and late nights studying his faith.

He wouldn't have minded being out there, working himself into tiredness. It was far preferable to thinking so much, these days.

He refocused on the text in front of him, willing his gaze to remain fixed on it. Ordinarily, reading the scripture was akin to meditation. The words would hum in his head, turning into a litany that took him elsewhere; sometimes into the gentle rapture of faith, and sometimes merely into a void empty of all sense, away from whatever earthly demands needed to be ignored.

The drop of sweat kept trickling down, down, down.

A sound emanating from somewhere in the room interrupted his attempts at meditation, and he realized he had been quietly singing to himself. He sighed, closed the text and got up, sliding his wooden old chair under his wooden old desk, and massaging the sweat on his back into his robe. A look outside the window confirmed that the day would still be warm but bearable, and resplendant with nature.

Parlan left his room, walking slowly through the halls of quietude that formed the main section of the temple. He did not meet anyone on the way. There were guests in the temple these days, travellers from other systems who wanted to explore the Amarrian faith, but they would be working in the fields.

Once he'd left the halls and entered the world of the living, it took him a moment to get used to the brightness, the smells and sounds, the slumbering freshness of it all. This temple, sitting as it did in the middle of golden fields of extensive farmlands, felt like the head of a body: Quiet and cold, silent and meditative, and ideally divorced from the messy vagaries of the lesser orders of daily life.

He walked at a slow pace with no particular destination in mind. A keen eye was enough for nature to provide him with any number of distractions, and for that he was thankful. He let the leaves on the trees fascinate him, their veins showing through the remainder of the golden sunlight; and he imagined what it would be like to soar like the birds above him, who barely seemed to bat their wings. He looked to the hills in the distance, too; grey and covered in their own smoky haze.

That was another reality. He would be there tomorrow.

The winding paths eventually led him back towards the temple. On his way there he walked past the conference area: A small, secluded spot where acolytes could sit on wooden benches and discuss the tenets of their faith under sunny skies. He came close enough that he could recognize the few people who were sitting there, talking quietly. In this place it was held that thoughts on faith should be shared.

Not all thoughts could be shared. Parlan sighed.

He found a tall tree, a sturdy tree with heavily foliated branches and sat down in its shade. He was close enough to the conference area that he could hear the soft murmurs of words. He shut his eyes and listened. Even at this distance, where the words were unintelligible, he could recognize some of the voices. He imagined that one of them was speaking to him. He realized that listening for a precious voice was, in fact, a very religious activity, and he grinned to himself.

Someone right next to him - a woman's voice he didn't recognize - asked if she could sit down. He opened his eyes.

She had blonde hair, beautiful in the fading sun, though it stood in contrast with a subdued harshness of her expression. He expected that the harshness had been there before she arrived. This place eased the minds of its inhabitants, at least those who could leave their ill longings behind them.

He realized she was waiting for an answer, so he nodded and smiled.

She explained, without too many words, that she was one of the visitors - one of the 'rich' guests, she called herself, with a clear sense of self-irony that he appreciated - and that she'd been working in the fields all day, was tired and sweaty, had gotten sick of the drama among her own people - a recent theft in the temple had started to fray their tempers - and wanted to relax in the presence of someone who looked like they could use some rest themselves.

She was forthright when tired, she warned him. He said he had rather suspected that, and she laughed. He liked her already.

They talked for a while about life on this planet and life elsewhere. She was a mission agent, she told him, and had been working out of her home planet in the Gallente Federation. He'd heard of the profession, although it was rare for the colony to receive agents of any stripe. She asked if the agents in the Amarr Empire didn't tend to have crises of faith with the work they were doing, and he said that they did not, for the ones who aspired to the profession were driven, rather than hampered, by their faith, and did not need to buttress it. She said that she did not know whether she envied them, and he admitted that he did not know, either.

During the conversation he had stolen a few looks at the crowd sitting by the conference area, still talking, and eventually his companion at the tree - whose name, it turned out, was Heci - asked him if he had other things than faith on his mind.

He closed his eyes and rubbed them.

"Is it really that obvious?" he said, quietly, even though he knew no one could hear him but this woman and God.

"No," she said, to his relief. "But I have desires of my own to deal with -not for you, darling," she added with a grin, patting him on the shoulder and eliciting a snort of laughter from him, "- and they make me see these things. You know how it is. When you look for signs of God, you see Him everywhere. Same with other things."

He nodded.

She fell silent, closed her own eyes and leaned her head back against the tree. She did not ask him to elaborate, but he knew she would listen.

He was not sure whether he could discuss this, even though she had caught him. He could admit to a sin in the abstract, but revealing details - speaking them aloud - would make it real, and not merely an imagination inside his own head.

But he wanted to talk about this - he needed to - and he doubted he would ever find a safer conversant for it. Besides, compounding it with the sin of lying wouldn't enamor him with the holy.

"I have never acted on it," he said, even quieter than before.

"Never?" she asked.

"Well, look at me," he said amusedly, and held up the end of his robe.

She smiled and nodded. "Not much opportunity for romance, is there," she said, not really asking.

"Do you love anyone?" he asked.

She looked away, to the vistas beyond. "Too many, really. Including your kind of love."

"My kind of love?" he said. He understood her, but he really hadn't thought it had been that obvious.

"The one that's not allowed? Oh yes. I know that one very well," she said, nodding towards the acolytes by the conference and, he thought, in particular towards the one he'd been looking at. She continued, "Even if most of it was only physical - I hope I'm not making you uncomfortable with this..."

"No, no," he said.

Heci said, "Unrequited love is a bitch. You give all you dare and don't get the same back, even as you want to give so much more. You have to continually accept that you are not the one setting the limits, but the other person, who decides how much of you they are ready to take."

She shifted, rubbed her back against the tree. "So even when it was mostly physical, there was always some degree of love there. You just have to accept it for what it is, and allow it to exist in your heart as long as it cares to stay there."

The idea that he would have to live with these feelings, unrequited, for the rest of conscious time made Parlan intensely uncomfortable.

"So how do you deal with heartbreak?" he asked, truly hoping that her answer would imply some end to the way he felt, some course these feelings would naturally take that would eventually lead them to extinction.

And she did not. She said, "The heart is resilient and cannot be broken, merely disassembled for a while."

They sat there for a while, looking out at nature and God's creations, and when the sun went down he left without a word. He kept the peace and walked back to his room, where he sat and read scripture long into the night until he couldn't stand it any longer, then took a shower so cold he gagged from the shock, crawled trembling into bed, wrapped himself in the sheets and shivered into sleep, the warmth rising slowly from within him.

The next morning it was his turn to visit the mines, as everyone who worked on the settlement had to do from time to time. It was a long day's walk and gave him time to think. Something about last night's conversation, in that shade of the silent tree, had begun to comfort him even though the shock of it had been too much for his tired head at the time. There was an inevitability to his feelings that he had not realized before his talk with Heci.

The mines, when he got to them, were the same pit of stink, ash, smoke and misery as they always had been. The Amarr Empire kept slaves, and on this planet some of those slaves tilled the fields alongside the acolytes, while others, not yet ascended, lived and worked in this place. Some day they, or their children or their own children, might be lifted up to the fields, but until then they slaved under the eyes of God.

Parlan was inured to their pain - the world was full of suffering and it made no more sense even if one brooded on it - but he eased it the best he could. For hours on end he walked among them, in their thousands, bringing them water as they hacked at the earth. As he poured he sometimes thought of the one he loved. Some of the slaves thanked him, others - too tired, he reasoned - did not, but in every pair of eyes there was a quiet acceptance. They did not resent his presence here, nor particularly welcome it: He was merely here, and they were thankful for him while he stayed. This life they led was their lot just as Parlan's was his, until the day God decided otherwise.

He spent most of his day there. Some of the incoming slaves from the fields, attending briefly on their own business, mentioned that there'd been a commotion back at the settlement. He didn't care. His lot was to be here, and give his love to these people.

At the end his robe was caked with dust, and he could not even see his fingerprints for the clay that had covered his skin. When he finally went back to the settlement he saw everyone outside, with serious faces, and something starting in the open expanse of the conversation area.

As he watched, one of the settlement slaves - an assistant to the head minister, and someone he knew had family in the mines - was dragged out there, stripped, and tied down. The minister announced that he had been guilty of the recent theft.

The slave overseer arrived, with his tools. It went on for a while. Everyone watched, some looking upset, others - including Heci - horrified and disgusted, and a few looking hungry for more.

Parlan did not react, one way or another. The clay felt cool on his dry skin.

There is a mindset where you achieve quiet and tranquility not by accepting things the way they are, but accepting that they are the way they are.

When it was over he retired to his quarters, where he read scripture until he fell asleep in his chair.



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Caldari Funds Unlimited



Introduction

Caldari Funds Unlimited is the largest financial institution in the Caldari State, forming the foundation for much of the State's banking and investment infrastructure. The corporation has two primary functions: it is the State's largest provider of pension management services and also provides the State's largest pool of ISK available to the megacorporations for short and long term loans. It also performs a variety of other services and has holdings in a variety of other powerful corporations, giving it far more influence than its sub-megacorporate size might indicate.

The corporation dates back to the years preceding the Caldari's secession from the Federation. The same trend of consolidation which led to the rise of the megacorporations also led to the rise of large financial conglomerates on

Caldari Prime; Caldari Funds Unlimited spent years acquiring smaller banks and financial service providers during the decades before the Gallente-Caldari War, eventually becoming the dominant financial institution among the Caldari and vying for the top spot in the entire Federation itself.

While the investment banks the megacorporations had coalesced around were arguably larger, their assets were far less liquid, and the vast majority of consumer banking was done through CFU or one of its competitors. Most of the megacorporations had outsourced their retirement programs to CFU or one of the companies it had gobbled up, and Gallente-owned competitors were soon quietly complaining to the Federation Senate about the undue influence the Caldari bank was able to exert on the market.

Their most powerful argument centered on an incident that took place four years prior to secession, where CFU had sold off its entire stake in Shield Aerospace, a minor Federation defense contractor. The resulting fallout on the Federation stock exchange nearly drove the company to bankruptcy and forced the Federal government to bail them out. The most startling aspect of the entire incident was the reason for the move: the CEO of Shield Aerospace had been involved in an affair with the husband of CFU's CEO, and the sale was made out of spite. Despite the fact that CFU's board fired her after the incident (and that Shield Aerospace did survive), it raised many questions about how powerful the Federation should allow any financial institution to become – especially a Caldari one.

When the megacorporations began planning their secession from the Federation, Caldari Funds Unlimited became a key part of their strategy, necessary for both financial reasons and public support. Its coffers would be essential in paying for the war effort and backing the corporations' scrip, and making sure the bank was secure would also help convince the populace that the corporations would provide for their future. Unlike the anti-secession megacorporations, CFU could not simply be decapitated and dismantled; it would need to be preserved, for symbolic reasons as well as practical ones.

As Federation investigators began to get closer and closer to discovering the secret Caldari colonies, the six secessionist megacorporations colluded to launch a multi-pronged financial assault on Caldari Funds Unlimited. In the several months prior to secession, the stock market activity tripled as the megacorporations manipulated share prices, spread rumors, and used corporate espionage to buy up millions of CFU shares at bargain prices. The collateral damage was immense, with dozens of other companies in the Federation collapsing as part of the megacorporations' scheme. As an example, the megacorporations sabotaged two of the largest pyroxyeres mines in the Federation – leading to explosions that killed nearly 20,000 workers – for no greater reason than to force their mines' owner into bankruptcy so he would default on a loan from CFU, triggering a drop in its stock price. The scale of the megacorporate campaign was unprecedented, and remains unrivaled in history. By its end, the secessionist megacorporations had taken nearly complete control of Caldari Funds Unlimited.

What emerged after the megacorporate buyout was a new corporation that combined its old role as a pension fund manager and investment bank with a new role as a pseudo-central bank for the emerging Caldari State and a neutral party to facilitate megacorporate agreements. With the end of most other non-megacorporate banks in the State, and the lack of a standard currency after secession, it was necessary for the megacorporations to establish a neutral party which could handle the high-level investment banking they required. CFU's strong reputation, both as a bastion of the banking industry and a pension provider, made it the perfect middleman. In addition, leaving the pension funds for most Caldari citizens in the hands of such an institution helped to reassure them that their future was still secure after the financial turbulence that followed the actual secession.

Today, Caldari Funds Unlimited has many roles in the Caldari State, but perhaps its most important role still remains as a symbol of financial stability in an often uncertain world.

Retirement Fund Management and Financial Instruments

Caldari Funds Unlimited is most familiar to people as a management entity for retirement funds. Nearly three-quarters of such funds, by total assets, are managed by CFU, with the lion's share of the rest

managed by one of the other two major “independent” Caldari financial institutions, Modern Finances and the State and Region Bank. This is a legacy from before Caldari secession, when the relationship between corporate leadership and the workers was not nearly as dictatorial or adversarial. Corporate pensions were placed in the hands of neutral managers, like CFU and the other companies it absorbed, in order to ensure the protection of workers against corporate instability.

Today, this arrangement is maintained largely out of tradition and because it is what the workers have come to expect, rather than out of any particular sense of duty on the part of corporate leadership. However, even the hint of trouble at CFU can have widespread repercussions throughout Caldari society as a result. Rumors of malfeasance by CFU executives in YC 27 triggered a massive investigation by the Caldari Business Tribunal, as well as a steep decline in the bank's fortunes. Two years later, the Tribunal investigation determined it had been a propaganda campaign from an up-and-coming corporation that hoped to attain megacorporate status by taking CFU's business, Seaguard Financial. Before this was revealed, concerns about CFU's stability triggered panic in many parts of the State, especially on poorer worlds. Riots broke out as people demanded their money out of retirement funds, leading to thousands of deaths as they clashed with corporate security.

The reaction from the Chief Executive Panel was swift and merciless. Seaguard Financial, which had started the rumors and inserted its agents inside CFU to fan the flames, was placed under “extreme sanction” by the Panel. The megacorporations went to war against the upstart, and within a year, every asset of the company had been absorbed by the Big Eight. It's worth noting that similar propaganda campaigns against other corporations – even members of the CEP – have happened many times in the past, and have never provoked such a vicious response. The Seaguard Incident remains a cautionary tale of the limits that exist to the State's regularly occurring corporate warfare.

CFU's fund management strategy, and the financial instruments it sells on the market, are generally geared towards conservative, long-term gains. Its largest funds focus on conservative financial instruments, such as low-interest, low-risk corporate bonds, funds with broad-based stock portfolios to minimize exposure to trouble in any one industry or market (also known as index funds), and stocks focused on returning a strong annual dividend rather than a rapid increase in price.

However, in order to reduce its vulnerability and pursue slightly more aggressive growth, over the last century it has offered more diverse investments, such as funds focusing on Caldari ventures in the Khanid Kingdom and Amarr Empire, treasury bonds from the Kingdom, Empire, and even the Federation, and even growth-based funds focusing on foreign stocks. Clients can adjust their asset allocation, and therefore risk exposure, through the company's NeoCom portal. Despite this, most Caldari, especially at the lower end of the economic spectrum, take a hands-off approach.

The downturn in the State which manifested itself during YC 108-110 and the upswing in the fortunes of the Federation and Republic during that time has raised the profile of more aggressive managers at CFU, and as a result many funds at the company have become somewhat less risk-averse in an attempt to duplicate their success. The Caldari Business Tribunal, which is charged with maintaining the stability of CFU due to the bank's integral importance to the State's economy, has expressed some concerns over this shift. So far, however, the Tribunal has been hesitant to step in, concerned with triggering a panic that would only exacerbate the problem.

Corporate Banking

Caldari Funds Unlimited's other major line of business is acting as a “banker's bank” or reserve bank for the State's megacorporations. While the megacorporations have vast amounts of assets (including entire planets or star systems), their liquid cash is often considerably more limited, which is where CFU comes in.

CFU keeps a large treasury full of ISK and various corporate scrips in order to fund its day-to-day activities and secure itself from the risk of a run on the bank or temporary market fluctuations. These funds are also used to provide the megacorporations liquid capital for financial maneuvers through short-term loans. This is one of the reasons the megacorporations found it necessary to take control of CFU during secession, as a lack of liquid capital would have paralyzed their ability to effectively pursue the war against the Federation. Usually, these loans are secured by some sort of hard asset, but the unique position of the megacorporations has often allowed them to acquire large unsecured loans, especially when four or more megacorporations are working together on a project. Much of the development of Black Rise was financed this way, as was a great deal of the investment the megacorporations have put into the Caldari-occupied territories of the Federation. This is risky behavior, but objections within CFU and from the Tribunal have usually been quieted by political pressure.

CFU's cash reserve also allows it to handle currency exchanges for the megacorporations. Although technically allowed to do so for individuals, it does not deal in amounts smaller than a million ISK, which limits its utility for the vast majority of people. Corporations wishing to exchange megacorporate scrip for another megacorporation's scrip, ISK, or foreign currency must use CFU to handle such transactions, for which it charges an extremely small fee. This is most often used by corporations when trying to make

significant investments in foreign markets or as a hedge against fluctuations in the value of their own currency; however, corporations also keep reserves of other corporate scrips and foreign currency to pay contractors, foreign workers, and “extralegal” assets.

Relations With the Big Eight

Though not technically a megacorporate subsidiary or a megacorporation in its own right, the status Caldari Funds Unlimited enjoys in the State is considerably higher than that of any other independent corporation. Despite the push and pull of the various political blocs, CFU itself is allowed to operate independently for the most part so long as the business runs smoothly. Board meetings are considerably more sedate than might be expected considering the company's shareholders. This is mostly due to the focus CFU has on simply providing the best return for its clients, whereas issues discussed in similarly divided venues (such as the CEP) tend to be considerably more political in nature.

The Patriots have long held the strongest position on the CFU board, and as a result most operations that need to be outsourced, such as security, tend to go to Patriot firms of one stripe or another. Kaalakiota and its allies have exerted political pressure on the firm, especially since the rise of the Heth regime, to allow them a considerably greater number of concessions than the other state factions (as evidenced by the Black Rise development loans, for one). CFU also uses Kaalakiota's Home Guard as its preferred security provider, and CFU employees who have given public objection to some of these politically sensitive moves have recently been fired and/or arrested. While the reasons for their fates were never clearly stated, the fact that the Home Guard or Provists seem to pay very close attention to 'troublemakers' of that nature has led to a pervasive aura of fear among the company's executives, consequently keeping vocal dissent to a minimum.

While other corporations have been wary of Kaalakiota and the Patriots' growing influence over CFU, so long as things continue to run smoothly they appear to have little interest in making waves. With a company of CFU's reputation, not to mention the pensions of billions of Caldari, playing political football is a very dangerous game, and one that even the CEOs of the megacorporations are not willing to play unless they have little choice.

The Caldari Financial System

The Caldari financial system is a complex web of intertwined business relationships, corporate ownership and multiple currencies, built on a legacy of corporate infighting and mistrust. In general, finance in the State is split between three types of banks. The most powerful tier is made up of the megacorporate parents themselves, each of which is built around a massive bank. They are the backbone of the financial system, operating as central banks for their respective corporate fiefdoms, issuing their own currency and making loans to smaller banks under their umbrella.

At the next level are the three major “independent” banks of the Caldari State: Caldari Funds Unlimited, Modern Finances, and the State and Region Bank. They are the largest remnants of the legacy finance system that existed under the Federation, and each of them is comparable in size to the largest financial institutions of the Federation, Empire, or Republic. The major difference between these three institutions and the megacorporate banks is their liquid asset reserves. Megacorporations prefer to keep most of their assets invested in their business, rather than as cash on hand. When they need cash, they turn to these outside banks and borrow money.

Far below these two tiers are small, independent financial institutions, many of which are extremely specialized. They are also considerably less stable, being constantly threatened with hostile takeovers by larger and more powerful corporations. All of them in some way depend on the megacorporate system to survive, simply due to the way the Caldari State operates.

Corporate Scrip

In any discussion of the Caldari economy, the importance of corporate scrip must be understood. Scrip evolved during the secret Caldari colonization of the regions that went on to become the Caldari State. In an effort to keep these operations off the official corporate books, workers on corporate colonies were paid in scrip. While it had a set exchange rate with Federation currency, it could only be exchanged by the corporate bank that issued it. On isolated colonies this was not a problem, as all transactions were done in scrip anyway; when workers returned to the Federation, their corporate scrip was exchanged for hard currency and marked on the books as a bonus or retirement payout.

When the Caldari seceded, corp scrip stopped being a method of avoiding Federation oversight and entered its current role as coin of the realm. The State has no national currency, unlike other nations of the cluster, and all transactions are done in some variety of corp scrip or the CONCORD-established Interstellar Kredit (ISK). Scrip differs from other currencies in that it is illegal (at least in the State) for anyone other than the issuing corporation to convert corp scrip into another currency. The single exception to this rule is Caldari Funds Unlimited, which is allowed to exchange corporate scrip at established rates due to special dispensation from the megacorporations.

The scrip system allows Caldari corporations to tightly control the value of their scrip and reduce exposure to the clusterwide currency market, as well as giving them an additional hold over employees. While it is not illegal for citizens to have scrip from corporations other than their employer, most businesses will only perform transactions with their parent corporation's scrip or ISK. The system is balanced in such a way to encourage employees to buy their employer's goods and use corp scrip to do it; things tend to be more expensive if bought with ISK. On distant worlds, where the entire colony may be completely owned by one megacorporation, competition is largely eliminated. Most workers have little choice but to buy their employer's products and pay the price their employer chooses, even if it is much more than the product is worth. Competitors' goods, if they are available at all, usually have a significant markup, making them available only to higher-paid employees.

Corporations walk a fine line here, however. If a competitor's products are seen as significantly better, or the company charges too much for its own versions, this can lead to smuggling and “grey market” sales of competitors' products. In the past, this was mostly done by independent freight operators working with local criminal groups; today, the Guristas, Serpentis, and Angel organizations have taken control of most of this trade. If taken to extremes, especially if corporate security comes down hard on the grey market, it can lead to strikes and other unrest in corporate colonies. The catalyst for the Tannolen Minedrill Riots in YC 21 was generally regarded to be the company's decision to yank the Lai Dai recreational drug “Perseverance” from store shelves, a concoction which had been extremely popular among miners in the system.

Similarly, corporate scrip is an additional deterrent to employees leaving the company and going to work for another corporation. A Sukuuvestaa employee with all her savings in Sukuuvestaa scrip who wants to go to work for Lai Dai will need to transfer all her savings into ISK at rates which are favorable to Sukuuvestaa; when she moves to a Lai Dai enclave, she will probably end up exchanging much of that ISK into Lai Dai scrip at a rate favorable to Lai Dai. Both of these transactions can put a significant dent into any employee's savings. This means that any corporation trying to poach a competitor's employee will likely have to offer more than they would otherwise.

On densely populated multi-corporate worlds like New Caldari Prime, this control is considerably weaker

due to the fact that it's relatively easy to get competitors' products at comparable prices. ISK sees more frequent use on these planets and megacorporations are more likely to allow competitors to run businesses within their own corporate enclaves, making a profit off rent and fees. Especially for better-off Caldari, the goods and services available are comparable in variety and price to any non-Caldari world.

The exchange rates of the various corp scrips are determined by megacorporate currency boards. The actual rate varies based on corporate share prices, the corporation's ISK reserves, and a number of other smaller factors. They also have the right to restrict most scrip-to-ISK exchanges or vice versa, though doing so is usually a signal of serious financial trouble, with the only major exception being retirement accounts (see below). In general, megacorporations go out of their way to keep exchange rates stable, as excessive fluctuation causes the same problems that opening it up to the clusterwide currency exchange would. However, this is not always possible, largely due to the existence of underground currency exchanges in the State and elsewhere; these allow direct conversion of corp scrip to hard currency or other corporate scrip. Most of these are run by organized crime groups and/or in areas with only marginal governments, the largest being run by the Intaki Syndicate and the Guristas, much to the displeasure of the megacorporations.

Activity in the black market can and has spilled over into legitimate society, often with disastrous consequences. When speculators dumped a large volume of CBD scrip on a black market exchange in the Syndicate in YC 56, the CBD currency board reduced the amount of ISK they offered in exchange for CBD scrip. This, in turn, sent many CBD employees rushing to exchange their CBD scrip for ISK, fearing further revaluations of their savings. This heavily taxed CBD's ISK reserves, which forced the company to take out large ISK loans from Modern Finances and Caldari Funds Unlimited to meet its foreign financial obligations. The burden of these loans significantly curtailed its ability to make new investments and capital improvements in its infrastructure until the mid-60s.

Banking in the State

Retail Banking

Retail banking or consumer banking is what the vast majority of Caldari citizens deal with on a daily basis. Savings accounts, consumer credit, and consumer loans like mortgages fall under this umbrella. For the most part, Caldari consumers will turn to their megacorporation or a subsidiary for their needs in this area. This makes it easier for megacorporations to try to control the daily lives of their citizens; not only do they hold most of their money, but they can also spot unusual trends or behavior as soon as they arise. Some small, independent consumer banks exist, but they are usually limited to large metropolitan areas. The big three independent banks handle some retail banking, but only for the richest citizens of the State with assets worth millions of ISK.

Unlike in the Federation, there is no government-backed insurance for any sort of savings account in the State. Instead, depositors must purchase private insurance for their accounts if they want to be insured against such losses. This insurance is sold by the megacorporations, one of the three large independent banks, or another independent insurer. Many Caldari choose to go without it due to the expense, especially those on the lower rungs of society. The thought of a megacorporate bank collapsing is simply beyond comprehension to the average Caldari.

Commercial Banking

This is the next level of banking and it too is largely dominated by the megacorporations. Commercial banking includes activities like business loans and holding corporate accounts. As one might expect, megacorporate subsidiaries usually turn to their parent megacorporation for these services. The three large independent banks do handle some commercial banking, largely for independent corporations and subsidiaries of foreign corporations, but their operations are dwarfed by those of the Big Eight.

Megacorporations also use their commercial banking operations to foster growth and goodwill by supporting the efforts of their citizens in starting new businesses. Many megacorporations will make loans to employees to start a new business in return for a significant share in the venture, sometimes even a controlling share. Most Caldari see this as good for both the new business owner and the megacorporation; the business owner gets a partner who is interested in his venture's success (and the funds to start work), while the megacorporation gets an opportunity for lower-risk growth. The popular CBD restaurant franchise Strange But Good was started by a former CBD cafeteria chef this way in YC 14. Today, it accounts for nearly 5% of CBD Sell Division's total revenues.

Investment Banking

Investment banking, or corporate banking, is largely the domain of the big three independent banks, Caldari Funds Unlimited, Modern Finances, and the State and Region Bank. This includes high-level financial activity like multi-billion ISK loans to corporations (up to and including the Big Eight), mediation of mergers and acquisitions, and handling of bond and stock issues. The biggest reason that the megacorporations do not dominate in this area is mistrust; despite the fact that the three "independent"

banks are, to some extent, all under the sway of the megacorporations, all of them (especially CFU) retain significant autonomy and are considered neutral parties by the megacorporations.

The megacorporations depend on the independent banks for their well-being, especially Caldari Funds Unlimited, which acts as a “bank of last resort” in the State, similar (but not nearly as powerful or robust) as the Bank of Luminaire in the Federation. Without their ability to trade corporate bonds to the independent banks, the megacorporations would find it difficult to maintain the cash on hand to finance their operations. Long-term projects would be especially hard to fund, and the Caldari corporate system in general would be less stable.

Retirement Funds

Of special note is the business of retirement funds in the State. Unlike in the Federation, there is no government stipend to bolster savings for retirement nor are retirement funds taxed differently from normal savings or investment accounts, as the Caldari have very little in the way of personal taxes anyway. The major difference is that they are largely protected from megacorporate meddling, another legacy of the pre-secession period. Since the Treaty of Yulai, retirement funds are valued in ISK, and megacorporations must allow citizens to put as much ISK into those accounts as they wish.

Unlike other accounts, however, where Caldari banking regulations require banks to provide depositors free and unrestricted access to cash savings, banks are only required to provide 5% of the total value of a retirement account per annum without penalty. Withdrawing more usually incurs a heavy penalty, unless it is moved to another retirement fund. Since there is no minimum retirement age in the State, however, a Caldari worker can begin withdrawing funds from his retirement account a year after it is opened. Most megacorporations provide a small percentage of an employee's salary as matching funds (usually no more than 3%) to encourage retirement savings.

Nearly all retirement funds in the State are held by the big three independent banks; nearly 75% of all retirement funds, by asset value, are held by Caldari Funds Unlimited alone. In general, these funds tend to be invested in low-risk, slow-growth financial instruments, but citizens are free to adjust their portfolios to suit their desired level of risk. In practice, few Caldari citizens have a full understanding of the intricacies of retirement funds, and are content leave it in the hands of the fund managers.

Stability and Oversight

While the Caldari economy has been characterized as an unregulated ultracapitalist melee by Federation critics, the truth of the matter is considerably more complicated. Even the most cutthroat of Caldari corporations realize the need for a stable platform upon which to conduct their business, and the dangers that a cascade of financial failures can create. However, there is definitely a bias toward as little regulation as possible – especially when it comes to the major corporate powers of the State – and the emphasis is on regulation which contains problems when they arise, not that which prevents them. The system-wide collapse of the economy is less likely than in the other nations of the cluster, but a failing institution is much more likely to be set upon and destroyed by its rivals than to weather the storm. The Caldari assume it is better for a bad bank to fail than for it to survive and continue its destructive behavior.

These policies were set in place soon after secession and dozens of small Caldari corporations, especially financial institutions, were destroyed in the financial tumult. Millions went jobless and as much as a quarter of the State's total wealth was destroyed in the ensuing “market correction.” While painful, Caldari leaders at the time saw it as a necessary evil; Kaalakiota CEO Matias Sobaseki called it “amputating an infected limb.” In order to prevent such problems in the future and ensure that the State's financial foundation remains secure, a number of entities have oversight powers over various parts of the Caldari financial system. At the highest level, all of this oversight is approved by the Chief Executive Panel, but various institutions are in charge of actual enforcement.

House of Records

When the State was created, the megacorporations realized that the most important element of financial stability was a secure and reliable source of financial information. The House of Records was created to provide this resource. With banking regulation specifically, they are in charge of tracking the flow of money through the financial system, providing an audit trail for investors, creditors, depositors, and investigators. Every financial transaction is legally required to be reported to the House of Records, which maintains a private fluid router network in the State to handle the incredible amount of traffic this creates. Data is then stored in multiple redundant locations to prevent loss and allow for internal auditing. The security, both around the network and these datastores, is extremely tight, rivaling that of the Caldari Navy's own cyberwarfare systems.

Powerful expert systems constantly churn through this mountain of data looking for suspicious activity and irregularities, which are reported to the Caldari Business Tribunal for further inspection. Even with this level of scrutiny, however, the massive amount of data involved means that things can slip through the cracks even when no foul play is involved. For a skilled money launderer, evading the House of Records

through foreign transactions and complicated financial maneuvers is not a particularly difficult task. Such individuals are used by criminal syndicates to hide their activities, often in plain sight. The megacorporations themselves do not shy away from this sort of activity either, and often hide borderline illegal or highly secret activity from the House of Records, doing so under the assumption that their competitors have agents trawling the system as well.

Caldari Business Tribunal

The State's only real national law enforcement arm, the Caldari Business Tribunal is tasked with finding and prosecuting breaches of Caldari law, a mandate which extends to banking regulation. When prompted by the House of Records or requested by corporate authorities, the Tribunal is assigned the task of auditing a bank's financial records. If a bank is found to be in violation of the law, punishment can include everything from a steep fine to the seizure and sale of assets to repay creditors and depositors. The latter option is rarely used, especially against large institutions, but most banks realize that even an investigation that turns up nothing can cause serious problems; as a result, the threat of a Tribunal investigation is enough for most banks to avoid crossing the line. Individuals implicated in such investigations usually receive harsh fines or sentences of hard labor. High-ranking executives implicated in such crimes usually choose the dignity of ritual suicide rather than suffering the humiliation of such a sentence.

Caldari Providence Directorate

Recently, the Caldari Providence Directorate has attempted to assert its authority in the enforcement of banking regulation, but the legal grounds for them to do so have been challenged by several institutions, including Modern Finances. The Provists also lack the Tribunal's institutional memory of forensic accounting, a skill the Tribunal has been cultivating for over two centuries. While they are slowly gathering the talent necessary for such detailed investigations, it will be years at the very least before they will have the accumulated experience and internally developed tools that the Tribunal already has. The Tribunal has also zealously guarded its jurisdiction, causing a great deal of friction between the Executor's office and senior Tribunal officials.

Secure Commerce Commission

As Yulai Treaty signatories, CONCORD's Secure Commerce Commission also has oversight of the Caldari financial markets, certifying transactions and technically having the authority to perform many of the same sorts of investigations as the Tribunal. However, the Caldari have historically been loathe to cooperate with the SCC, especially the Patriot megacorporations, where the more extreme elements still harbor the fear that CONCORD is acting as a Federation proxy. The House of Records generally does not voluntarily share information with the SCC unless it implicates foreign corporations in wrongdoing, and Tribunal investigators provide only the bare minimum of assistance to the SCC that the Yulai Treaty requires of them. This antipathy reached its peak last in YC 109-110, during the SCC investigation into Angel Cartel influence in a number of smaller Caldari corporations.

Chasing Shadows



Directors Conference Room, Federal Intelligence Office HQ, Renyn system, Essence

March 9th, YC112

"So why are we here, exactly?" asked Candon.

"Haven't found out yet," replied Suisse. "All I know is it's Code 14, top clearance." He enunciated the next part with careful mocking precision. "Should see En-Quaitant-do-Miérz Portres in here soon enough." He snapped his finger. "Yup, there he is. Start smiling."

Portres was making his way toward them. He was a tall gentleman, about fifty years old, and he walked with a purposeful strut that came off just a tad too calculated. With a cultured flourish, he took his seat next to the other two.

"Gentlemen."

"Counsel. How are the kids?" asked Suisse.

"Oh, you know," replied Portres. "Annoying their parents, going against the grain, experimenting with trodes and bodymods and what-have-you. It'll pass." He placed his case on the table in front of him and unclasped it.

"Any idea why we're here?" asked Candon.

"Something about a new security directive. I'm not sure," replied Portres.

"You'd think they'd brief us properly," said Suisse.

Portres nodded. "Yes," he said, "I suppose it was all rather vague and hurried." He pried his d-pad from the case's foam inlay, placed it on the table in front of him and began powering it up. "Comfortably certain it's all part of a plan, though," he said, unbuttoning his jacket. "Let it seldom be said our new President doesn't know what he's doing."

"Let it never be thought, much less said," muttered Candon.

Portres straightened in his chair, smoothed his lapel bottoms. "Well," he said, "at the very least he provides the illusion of knowing what he's doing. Right now, maybe that's what we all need. I know he's convinced me so far, and I'm a fairly hard man to convince."

"That much is true," said Candon. They sat there in silence for a few seconds while the meeting table's holographic center cycled through its test patterns.

About ten minutes later, with the formalities concluded and the heads of the Federal Intelligence Office's fifteen major divisions settling somewhat uneasily into their seats, the slight, bald figure at the head of the table began to speak.

"I'm sure most of you gentlemen are wondering why you were brought here this afternoon on such short notice, and with such dramatic urgency," he began. "Just as I'm sure many of you realize that the act of bringing you here in such a way can be an end unto itself."

A few heads turned around the table, but barely a sound was heard.

"As of 9:00 AM this morning, I have issued a presidential directive that places specific orders in the hands of each and every one of you. Your dossier pads have been updated with the relevant information. Use the holofield to your convenience. As you review the data, bear in mind that if even one bit of this information finds its way into the wrong hands, the whole operation will come down on your head."

He paused for one second, then continued. "As you will learn, the impromptu Code 14 meetings will continue for the next two weeks. They are an unfortunate necessity, but crucial in the grander scheme." He lowered his head. The room was silent.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Please take your time to review your orders. They are effective immediately." Without another word, he turned, strode away from the table, and vanished through a side entrance, the subdued slither of his entourage trailing behind him.

Candon and Suisse looked at each other. Portres stared down at his d-pad stream. One by one, the three men went to work.

State and Region Bank Gala Hall, Jita system, The Forge

March 20th, YC112

The hall was gigantic, tastefully adorned in traditional Caldari style and dotted with artistic recreations of State exploits commissioned by the State's most beloved artists. The exclusive crowd in attendance, however, were far more interested in the other people around them than in their exorbitant surroundings.

"Miss Omura."

"Mister Kaikumi. Good to see you made it."

"How have things been, Miss Omura?"

"Copasetic. And with you?"

"Staying on an even keel."

"Good to hear. I understand you've been expanding into new markets recently?"

"Always on the prowl. Expansion is the lifeblood of our economy." He made a sudden awkward shuffle, backed up two steps. "My apologies. Miss Omura, allow me to introduce a friend of mine. This is Katiana Rigomi. She's an Achura investor of some repute. Katiana, this is Jaan Omura, the CEO of Caldari Funds Unlimited."

The girl thrust out her hand, almost forcefully. The older woman took her hand and shook it, and as she did, the girl's expression turned strong and penetrating, full of purpose. Her hand was cold.

Elsewhere in the room, a camera snapped.

Mercantile Club Master Parlor, New Caldari system, The Forge

March 29th, YC112

Dim lights glowed in far corners, draping tasteful ambience over the plush chamber. Against the city's jagged skyline, two older men were engaged in heated conversation.

"I don't know, Sioras. Advisors to the Federation? It sounds a bit pie-in-the-sky to me. You don't think his motives might be spurious in the least?"

"No no, listen to me," said Sioras. "I'm just saying that if there's anything for us to be gained from the hoopla going on right now with Omura and CFU, then it would be with him."

"But we'd essentially be turncoats."

A note of impatience crept into Sioras's voice. "Think outside the box, Kanai. You and I have been doing this for decades. Our best days are behind us. We're basically just glorified financial advisors at this point. Sure, we'll work high level, but we won't be aiding the enemy. We'll just be economists, there to help bridge the rift between the two nations."

Kanai said nothing. He looked out at the city, watched the skylarks ascend into orbit, lingered briefly on the erratic blinking lights of the skyscrapers in the fading dusk.

"Think about it," said Sioras. "The political capital would be enormous. I mean, we could get back in the game. The Provists have enough internal trouble right now, anyway. They're not going to come hunting for us, least of all with the visibility we'll have. And besides, we're advisors. It's not like we'll be directly involved in affairs of the state."

"State," grunted Kanai.

Sioras gave a small sigh, clasped his hands together. "Yeah. Look, I know where you're coming from. Don't think I don't. But consider it, at least. Give it a fighting chance. Didn't the Sustainability and Co-operation Conference do anything to soften your view on this?"

"Tell you the truth," replied Kanai, "I was smelling deception right from the start of that little get-together. The pandering was so obvious. The cultural nods were revolting. You could tell they thought they were being subtle, too."

Sioras nodded. "Well," he said, "our former compatriots have seldom been renowned for their nuance. Whatever the case may be in that regard, the facts of the situation speak for themselves, don't they?"

"I don't know," said Kanai. "I see the opportunity, and it seems good. Even if there was blowback from the die-hards, we could probably weather it with PR. It's just...I just don't trust that little man. He's unreadable. You never know where you have him. Any minute now, I feel like he's going to tap me on the shoulder and politely inform me he's the actual father of my children."

Sioras fixed him with an exasperated look, the kind only an old friend can bestow. "I'm going," he said presently, with a note of resigned finality. "So are Kormoken and Tikilo, along with a good deal of the Citadel old guard. Are you sure you don't want to give it a little more consideration?"

Kanai was silent.

"Well," said Sioras. "You think about it."

Caldari Providence Directorate Headquarters, Piak system, Lonetrek

April 2nd, YC112

"It's all over the wires, sir. The financial establishment is up in arms."

In the warm interior of his personal quarters, Executor Tibus Heth, the highest-ranking man in the Caldari State, sat in a posture of frozen rigidity.

"What's the extent of the damage, counsel?" he asked.

"Well, sir... for one thing, right now Omura's got more on her plate than she can handle. Even if her name clears eventually, every one of her close associates will have distanced themselves too far by then to come back. And it's making people point fingers elsewhere. High-visibility employees are gone from two of the eight megas already. Federation media's playing it to the hilt, too. No punches pulled."

"What are the repercussions for the CFU pension funds?" asked Heth, shifting slightly in his seat.

"Well, sir," said the counsel, and paused. As if on cue, the holographic field bearing his image wavered slightly. "Net asset values are going to stay more or less intact, but if the current situation escalates any further the investors will most likely pull their money for political reasons. If enough of them do that,

we're going to have a problem on our hands that I'm just not sure how we're going to deal with."

"And the rest of the megas?"

"Lai Dai and Kaalakiota are currently engaged in strenuous internal and external PR efforts, trying to make sure no one outside the very top tiers of command realizes they could stand a real chance of crumbling at the seams due to infighting. Like I said, they're really up in arms, sir."

For a moment Heth sat, staring down at his lap and rubbing his calloused thumbs together. He stayed that way for a while, with his counterpart on the other side of the FTL link growing increasingly uncomfortable. Finally, the executor raised his gaze, face resolved, fingers locked in front of him.

"Set up an inquiry. National scale and beyond. I want all figureheads closely monitored twenty-four hours a day. I want every single transaction routed through our headquarters for analysis. I want nothing to get by us. Nothing, do you understand me? We're going to clamp down on this thing hard, and we're going to start right now. I trust you know who to talk to for the wheels to be set in motion."

There was a small pause at the other end. "Executor," the voice came then, "your wish is my command."

"Mister President?"

"Yes."

"We just received word. Heth ordered a national inquiry. They're starting with the financial institutions. No stone unturned. Being very vocal about it, too."

"Thank you."

"Just thought you'd want to know." The secretary allowed himself a brief grin.

Jacus Roden flipped off his viewscreen, drew in a deep breath, released it. He leaned back in his seat, thought about the events of days past, and tried not to smile himself.

Ante



When she suddenly stopped walking at the base of the dropship's gangplank, Silphy enDiabel's entourage halted abruptly and turned to see if something was wrong. They waited patiently on the tarmac under the blazing Intaki sun for several moments as she stood absolutely motionless, staring at the ground.

"Miss enDiabel?" The only decorated Space Police officer in the bunch stepped forward, reaching out for her arm.

She waved dismissively at him and knelt slowly, pulling her long braid of synthetic blond hair behind her shoulder as she ran her hand across the concrete landing platform, tilting her head to examine her palm when it came back covered in a thin layer of dust and small pebbles. Smiling, she stood up and rubbed her hands together, nodding for the entourage to continue on their way to the cathedral's spaceport terminal a short distance away. Despite the glaring sunlight reflecting off the glass paneled surface, she could see several figures anticipating her arrival near the main entrance.

As she led the group to the terminal, the last two armed escorts established positions near the ship, one of them leaning in closer to the other and whispering, "What was that all about?"

Not taking his gaze off of his responsibility, he whispered back, "It's been a while for her."

* * *

Making his way through the murmuring crowd of worshipers as delicately as possible, the courier approached the hooded woman from behind and coughed subtly, standing with his gaze averted. When she casually turned around to meet his gaze, he seemed on the verge of choking, but managed to stutter, "I have a message for you from Internal Security, Reverend Mother."

"Go on," she breathed, downplaying the conversation so as not to attract the attention of anyone else in the chamber, a sprawling temple just as impressive for its size and grandeur as it was for the haste in which it was constructed. Despite the fact that her official title was Chief Executive Officer, she had to admit to herself that she secretly enjoyed being called Reverend Mother by the frightful, superstitious locals on many of the worlds her organization aided.

All the Sisters of EVE ever asked for in return for their humanitarian assistance was permission to construct cathedrals dedicated to their faith, and over the years they had perfected the science and art of completing such structures in a matter of mere hours. The one in which they stood had a ceiling over thirty meters high and could seat twenty-thousand worshipers during its daily services, one of which had just ended.

"A ship has arrived," he began, glancing in each direction to make sure no one else was within earshot before

continuing. "A Syndicate ship."

The woman pulled the hood back over her shoulders, revealing a tight bun of thick brown hair held in place with an ornate ivory clip. She folded her hands into the sleeves of her robe before chiding the messenger. "I believe this is a matter the local authorities can handle, my child. The Syndicate knows their place, so if they..."

Interrupting her and immediately regretting it, the boy clenched his eyes shut, expecting to be harshly reprimanded, but spoke his peace anyway. "Not they, Reverend Mother: her."

"Her?" She inhaled as if to say something else, then stopped abruptly and looked around the room. When she finally did finish her thought, she spoke a little too loudly, prompting more than a few bystanders to take notice. "Silphy is here?"

"Yes, Reverend Mother. She waits for you in the rectory." Instantly understanding that he had overstayed his welcome, the messenger bowed his head respectfully and dashed off through the crowd of dispersing worshipers.

Santimona Sarpati met the lingering stares of several onlookers before replacing her hood and gliding off toward the arched corridor.

* * *

Silphy was standing with her back to the door when Santimona entered the meeting room, an oddly shaped octagonal chamber with smooth metal walls that curved inward near the ceiling to create a geometric pattern of etched reliefs. Directly opposite the door was a wide, double-paned window looking out on Intaki V's capital city, Lenoika, its flat-roofed buildings boiling in the red afternoon sun. She didn't move at all in response to the Reverend Mother's arrival.

"I was told there would be rain today or tomorrow," she said to the window.

Santimona loosened the silk rope that kept her formal robe closed and moved to a seat at the low, square table in the very center of the room, which had but two chairs. When she was certain that the elegant garment had fallen properly over her crossed legs and was free of any wrinkles, she replied, "We've found meteorological reports rather inaccurate on this planet, considering the late sequence of this system's star." Conjuring up a hollow smile, she offered, "Stay a few days and you'll see rain, I promise. You'll have to find accommodations in the city, though; only Sisters are allocated living quarters on the premises. You understand."

Silphy didn't take the bait, just stared out the window. "Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, Miss Sarpati."

"I'm not quite certain why you wished to speak to me, actually." Resting one of her pale arms on the table, she drummed her fingers. "Is your station experiencing another food shortage?"

Silphy turned at last to look her in the eye, but still refrained from reacting to Santimona's repeated jabs at their tumultuous history. Instead, she copied her smile and played along. "No, but you have the Syndicate's continued thanks for the Sisters' assistance in that matter."

Santimona nodded appreciatively, but only for appearance's sake. She continued counting quietly to herself. Twenty-eight, twenty-seven, twenty-six...

"How are your efforts proceeding here on Intaki V?" Silphy reached the table in three steps, but didn't sit, instead leaning on it just enough for her shadow to pass over the other woman. "Will you be here much longer?"

"As I'm sure you remember," Santimona replied, "the cathedral is always our last item of business for any project." She motioned for her guest to take a seat, but Silphy straightened back up instead. "I'm sorry," Santimona amended, "but I'm not exactly certain what your title is these days. How should I address you?"

"Syndicate titles are purely for internal use, so you needn't worry about them. I have, however, returned to using my family name." Silphy paused for a few moments, looking at Santimona inquisitively. "Do you know what enDiabel translates to, roughly, in the original Intaki dialect?" As she spoke, Silphy strolled around the conference table with the practiced ease of a seasoned politician circling her audience.

Knowing that she wasn't really expected to answer the rhetorical question, Santimona simply raised her eyebrows and waited for Silphy to continue her train of thought.

"Good," she said with a smirk. "How much longer?"

Two, one "Now." Santimona lunged forward on the table as Silphy hurriedly took the opposite seat and closed in as well. When next she spoke, the Sister had an urgent, hushed tone. "It was a little more difficult to time the punctuated recordings in this facility since it's so new. When the sensors realign during this log, everything

between now and the point when it resumes will look like a momentary glitch, which the operator will probably chalk up to sunspot activity. We might only have a few minutes.

"That's all we'll need if everything is in place. If that crusty old merc refuses to talk to me directly, you need to convince him that including us is going to be much easier than locking us out." Silphy slammed her hand down on the table to conclude the statement. Her eyes shimmered in the crimson-tinted light that streamed into the room.

"And if he refuses?" All traces of ire had evaporated from Santimona's voice.

Silphy turned her head and clenched her jaw tightly before answering. "Tell that traitorous son of a bitch that the Syndicate isn't going to sit idly by as another government ignores us. And if Mens thinks those pedantic mercenaries are going to hinder our business one bit, he is sorely mistaken." Leaning forward and composing herself, she spoke calmly, "What I mean is that we have something to offer both entities if we're brought in on the deal." During her brief, emotional response, a lock of hair had escaped the lengthy braid running down her back.

Reaching out across the table, Santimona gently pushed the loose hairs back behind Silphy's ear and smiled. "Yes, that's more like it. Flies with honey, my dear."

Silphy almost reached up towards her hand, but stopped herself short. "What do you think he'll say, Mona?"

"That depends," she said, her attention seemingly elsewhere for a few seconds, then reasserted herself suddenly, "on what you're offering him. Remember that you have two flanks to address, and in my experience, Muryia can be very difficult."

Silphy leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms, taking the time to choose her next words carefully. "Tell him that the Federation hasn't controlled trade in this system for decades, and that if he wants that blood money from Mens to keep appearing in his bank account, he'll learn to respect the local culture."

"Ahh, now that's going to be the hard sell. He's not at all happy about your little stunt with the Zephyr shuttles. Everyone who produces shuttles took a noticeable hit when you did that. If you offer the right commodity, I'm sure he'll reciprocate."

Covering her mouth in a vain attempt to stifle her laughter, Silphy nonetheless refused to look away. When she was able to control her mirth again, she explained, "I think I have just the thing his corporation would appreciate. There's a funny story behind those shuttles, by the way, but I don't think we have time for it."

"You're right," Santimona replied abruptly, standing up and pulling her robe tightly about her. Twelve, eleven, ten...

Mirroring her posture as she stood from her seat, Silphy leaned forward onto the table once again and shot her counterpart a seductive grin. After a few seconds of silence, she asked, "Do you ever miss it?"

"Every day," Santimona replied with a nostalgic sigh. Three, two, one...

Reaching back and putting her shoulder into the effort, Santimona whirled around suddenly, lashing out with one open palm to strike Silphy across the face. The impact's sharp crack echoed around the room as Silphy tumbled backward over her chair, landing on the floor in a disheveled heap.

Shrieking at the top of her lungs, Santimona stormed around the table, pointing accusingly at her prone target. "Does your arrogance have no bounds?" When Silphy had recovered enough to sit up and wipe the trickle of blood from the corner of her mouth, the Sister continued, "I won't jeopardize this honorable organization to subsidize your criminal agenda!"

"You're pathetic," Silphy finally uttered, pulling herself up and immediately assuming a defensive position. Beyond the doors, she could hear her security escort arguing with the Sisters of EVE guards stationed there. "I can see right through you, Sister. You're insane if you don't think the Intaki are going to figure out why you're really here. This was your last chance to get through this with any semblance of your obsolete cult intact."

As the doors burst open and half a dozen armed men encircled each woman, Santimona shrugged off her protectors and released a parting shot. "I should have known you'd never change, Silphy. Get off this planet."

Glaring at the Reverend Mother spitefully, Silphy shook her head and stalked out of the room, her escorts hustling to keep up with her determined pace. They marched through the cathedral without stopping until they reached the gangplank of the dropship, which was casting an elongated shadow over the landing pad, its metal hull sizzling under the unrelenting sun. Silphy turned to face the ornate building, her eyes following the swooping architecture up to the steeple near the top, which was emblazoned with the Sisters of EVE holy crest. "Sadistic witch," she spat.

Not far away, in the cathedral's security chief's office, Santimona watched Silphy intently on the holographic display. With her sentries still nearby and the chief respectfully out of the way so the older woman could use his station, she studied Silphy's every move, frowning as the Syndicate's unofficial leader spit on the ground in contempt before boarding her ship. "I often wonder which is more perplexing: the fact that she abandoned the Sisterhood or that she was ever allowed to join in the first place."

* * *

Reclining in her personal quarters aboard the starship, Silphy took a sip from a glass of ice water and held it to her cheek, wincing reflexively. Chuckling to herself, she tapped her password into the console embedded in her chair's armrest, prompting a translucent heads-up display to appear in the air half a meter in front of her. Scrolling through several waiting messages, she chose one of the more recent ones and read it quickly.

Silphy tapped the controls that would establish a direct connection to the person who had sent the message. She waited patiently until her screen evaporated, replaced with the three dimensional head of an older man covered in elaborate facial tattoos. "Silphy," he said respectfully.

"Mr. Lecante," she answered, nodding slowly. "Have the other families reached a consensus?"

"Yes." He looked around as though there were other people in the room with him, but none were visible on the holographic display. "They've agreed to your plan. So what's our next move?"

"Consolidate all the data received from the Zephyr program, everything those oblivious capsuleers have given us on wormhole space. Prepare the datacores for immediate transport; a representative from the Sisters of EVE will be arriving shortly to take possession."

Lecante nodded. "I think you've really nailed this one, Silphy. That's precisely the kind of token Ishukone won't be able to resist."

"I know," she concluded, touching the disconnect button and raising the glass to her cheek again. She spent the remainder of the journey back to Syndicate space staring out the window of her cabin, unable to conceal her nostalgic smile.

Black Eagles



"They make you watch it all, man. They make you watch through the eyes of the person you killed. It's all for show, really, but they do it so well. I saw the guy come in, brush his teeth, kiss his son good night... then I felt my bullet go into his skull just seconds after it shattered the window. Back when I'd shot him, you know, I didn't know anything... all I saw was a man leaning down in the spot where I'd been told he would be, then I squeezed the trigger, twice to make sure, and got the hell out of there. But they had to make me relive it all through this bullshit virtual scenario. They want you to know that you're gonna be called upon to kill innocent people, good people, Federation people, and that you have to be comfortable with doing it because it serves the greater good.

Whatever the fuck that's even supposed to mean."

- Audio transcript from "Agent Mornay," alleged Black Eagle defector

The Gallente Federation's image within the popular sphere is well known. It's a place of wonder and opportunity, home to open-minded and welcoming people, filled with intellectual discourse and quality arts in every sphere. Traditionally it's been a haven for those hailing from parts distant, unsatisfied with their surroundings and seeking a new home in which to express themselves. Renowned in equal part for its liberalism and its boundless appetite for individual uniqueness, Gallente has always been a place where misfits can slot in, where artists can find their venues, and where champions of every cause can find their soapbox.

Over the past year, however, a new presence has made itself known across the Federation, casting its protective shadow over all its surveys. For the average Gallente citizen the change has been minimal, but to those who follow along with the events of the day it has become evident that a deep new tone has begun its quiet rumble across the political landscape.

The Black Eagles were founded in the aftermath of the Gallente's historic Luminaire defeat of YC110, when prominent figures of the Federal milieu came together in agreement that the nation's armed forces were all but crumbling at the seams with corruption. A sizable group of politicians, corporate figureheads, lobbyists and cultural icons petitioned President Foiritan to create an "Emergency Integrity Commission" which would ensure that the nation's military leadership not only had the aptitude to lead their forces to victory, but that they met the high moral standards of the Gallente Federation while doing so.

This influential coalition was distrustful of the methods employed by the president to tackle the issues erupting within the nation at the time, and felt that the search for the turncoat admiral Anvent Eturrer – at the time, a major rallying cause for a nation so freshly bludgeoned by humiliating defeat – was no more than a simple patch on a festering wound. Though the exact degree of their involvement is debated to this day, they were nonetheless able to exert enough pressure on the establishment that when the President a short while later announced the creation of a new internal investigation department within the Federal Intelligence Office, the general consensus was that the coalition deserved a good deal of the thanks.

The new division would be empowered with exclusive and unconditional oversight of all Federal assets and agencies. Though officially titled the Special Department of Internal Investigations and Federal Security, and carrying the sanctioned acronym of SDII, this secretive new organization nonetheless immediately became known to everyone as the Black Eagles. This moniker is most commonly associated with the SDII logo – a black Gallente eagle outlined in white against a dark background – but there are a fair few who proclaim the name is a direct allusion to the man chosen to lead the department, Head Senator Mentas Blaque.

Since Blaque was (and is) an outspoken political opponent of Foiritan's, his appointment initially seemed a bolt from the blue. Though conspiracy theories (along with a healthy smattering of general confusion) arose immediately, the national zeitgeist, in the absence of any more believable theories, was eventually made to settle into the somewhat uneasy solution that Foiritan had simply needed someone for the post who quite obviously wasn't in his pocket and never would be. Indeed, in the months immediately following the division's founding, a record number of corrupt military personnel and government officials were apprehended, even people who had fairly substantial (though always safely peripheral) ties to Foiritan himself.

Though the Black Eagles operate under a strict military hierarchy, they are, at heart, an intelligence agency. Their official purview is the internal security and integrity of the Federation and all its official entities, but it is an open secret within intelligence circles that the Eagles operate a spy network that, in addition to keeping tabs on domestic affairs, bypasses familiar waters in favor of territories seldom ventured by the four empires' intelligence entities. Blaque himself has never commented publicly on anything to do with the agency, preferring instead to let dry press releases and carefully calculated public operations do the talking for him.

Nonetheless, there have been a fair share of defectors from the agency since its inception, people who view the Eagles' methods as violations of long-sacred Gallente ideals. Under conditions of strict anonymity these former agents have leaked certain information, none of which is officially verified, but a substantial portion of which is considered believable by experts in the field and generally taken to be implicit in discussions involving the Black Eagles. From among these bits and pieces of info, a few salient patterns have emerged:

1. The Black Eagles have a well-equipped, highly trained paramilitary arm. Black Eagle-uniformed troops have been seen on more than one occasion conducting security sweeps in high-sensitivity public zones. They are trained in every manner of covert infiltration, spaceborne and terrestrial, as well as the use of cutting-edge weaponry and tools of the trade. Due to prohibitive selection and training their numbers are not great at present, but growing rapidly.

2. The Black Eagles have a presence in space, though reports vary widely about the extent of their operational capacity. They are known to travel in specially commissioned dark-hulled versions of Gallente Navy staples. The exact capabilities of these vessels are unknown, but they are invariably reported to be more powerful than both their standard and Navy counterparts. Reports also unanimously agree that the Eagles possess a capsuleer contingent numbering over one hundred pilots (and presumably growing).

3. The Black Eagles have built up a ruthless image, one that indicates the agency will go to considerable lengths to make sure its objectives are met. This is the area most sparsely commented on by former agents . With very few exceptions, defectors have completely disavowed all knowledge of the illicit activities so often attributed to the Eagles, such as torture, blackmail and kidnapping. Whether this is down to the extreme sensitivity of such subjects or the actual absence of such activities from the modus operandi remains wholly unknown.

For the common citizen of the Federation, the Black Eagles are a distant spectre. For the more discerning members of the populace, they are a subtly pervasive force. For anyone conducting business with foreign interests, they are a nagging worry. In the past months there has been a growing trend toward domestic surveillance within the Federation. Propaganda has been pervasive. In a society as awash with stimuli and information as the Gallente's, these things can be hard to spot... but broader trends rarely misdirect, and the word on the street never lies. Given the Black Eagles' extreme effectiveness since its inception, it might not be all that surprising were they found to have engaged in any of the activities they are so often accused of. In the absence of concrete evidence, however, the veil remains intact, and the shadow protective. Whatever hidden threats the Gallente may once have feared, they can rest safe in the knowledge that at the very least, their foes are hidden no more.

Extinction Burst



The type of behavior that presents the greatest potential for scientific study, I find, is that which is exhibited under duress. Not enough research has been undertaken in this area, and those who engage in it do so under a dark cloud of superstition and mistrust, suffering a woeful lack of support from the public. We have to do it all ourselves – all of it – hidden away like criminals.

Against completely nonsensical prejudices, I should add, held by a species composed almost solely of unexamined habits and chiseled thoughts, a species whose worldview has been set since childhood, with room for nothing new or exciting, and to whom the suggestion that there might be something worthwhile to be found on the edges is so repulsive as to be anathema to the trembling cores of their very moral fiber.

Take the extinction burst, for example.

While most people – including a few scientists, even – believe that certain behavioral patterns cannot be forcibly deteriorated, I am of the opinion that we simply have not developed the correct methodology. Everything can eventually be exposed; expelled; exterminated. But lifelong habits run deep, and the development of an all-encompassing methodological framework that can demonstrably break even the most stringent of these remains, unfortunately, beyond my abilities. I'm still fencing with the problem; working on the edges, trying to find a way in.

An extinction burst is not the extinction of a species, though that would be a marvel to engineer. It has to do with the more granular exhibition of learned behavior, when that behavior is met by adverse conditions never before experienced, and with the reactions subsequently exhibited by the afflicted organism. In most cases these new conditions progressively alter and eliminate that behavioral pattern, but you'd be amazed at how desperately some animals will maintain their old habits before finally letting them die off for good.

This is, quite honestly, a good thing for evolution. I have no time for a species that gives up the first time it encounters failure, or pain, or lack of reward.

Some species do give up right away. But others will persist, following through on the same pattern even when it is not being rewarded, or even, I should say, when the situation might demand that they break the habit. They may no longer be safe. There may be a dearth of food, or water, or air. They may be running out of time. But still they'll cling on to what might be called, for the lack of a better term, hope. Moreover, their attempts will intensify, the number of attempts rapidly increasing for a short period of time in a last-gasp attempt to maintain the pattern. That is the extinction burst.

We see this occur in various guises throughout the animal kingdom, but it has not been extensively studied. This lack of research surprised me when I first began looking into the phenomenon; I did not expect my experiments to be groundbreaking merely by dint of being the first ones performed in a proper, thorough, scientific manner. Naturally, I've tried to cast a wide net, acquiring a set of vastly unlike species in New Eden and, under controlled conditions, carefully noting their reactions to my stimuli.

Most learned patterns have to do with confinement, but I've never been entirely comfortable with the usual button-stimulus paradigm. All it really does is produce a lot of needy, overweight rodents.

Instead – and believe me, this took a bit of time – I've set up a kind of working, monitored environment. Not just a cage with a bed and a feeder, but an actual maze of sorts. It's complete with all manner of stimulus-providing machinery, most of which remains hidden until the animal makes its way down that particular corridor or into that particular room. The function of the stimulus machinery is basic and easily understood by whatever animal I've got in the maze – often no more than the familiar button or sensory panel dispensing a quick drink of water or a brief encouragement of some gland or another. It does not constitute the main experiment, but it's extremely handy for taking more detailed measurements of the subjects' current extinction burst status.

The main experiment is the maze itself. Most of the corridors and rooms have exits, but they are hidden and will reveal themselves only after a specific sequence of events has been enacted. Again, these events are not too complex for most of the animals in the maze, though I will admit that I was rather disappointed initially by the Hanging Long-Limbs, – but they do require the subject to experiment rigorously with materials at hand.

The maze starts off easy but gets progressively more difficult. Along the way, as noted, stimulus-providing machinery permits me to monitor the subjects' extinction progress. Some tend to give up quite a bit sooner than others, and every time they stop to push a button in a room, you can see the hopelessness in their increasingly lackluster reactions to the stimuli.

The Hanging Long-Limbs, of course, remain the exception.

When animals come to in my maze – I'll admit I have to sedate them for transport and preparation, but it wears off without any noticeable effect – they tend to pace about a bit, get familiar with their surroundings, and altogether look a little confused but inquisitive. Not quite so for the Hanging Long-Limb. I don't quite know what causes this.

The species has quite a limited spread, confined as it is to the methane clouds of a single Gallente planet. It grew up in an environment that has remained unchanged for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, almost entirely unspoiled by man. It has its predators, as everything does, but it knows how to deal with them, and nothing in my maze sets off any of its ingrained warning signals. The Hanging Long-Limb is also not, I have to say, a very intelligent species. This is not necessarily a drawback: Low intelligence often means highly developed instincts and makes an animal's responses easier to predict, categorize and quantify. Lastly, it does not rush into anything. It is a fast animal when it wants to be, as various small amphibians have learned to their brief regret, but unless driven by the impetus of moveable prey or by a nearby predator, it simply is not in any great rush at all.

I had not considered this when I acquired these animals for my maze. They were costly – I had to flood the damn maze with methane, too – but they are worth it. While other species all follow more or less the same behavioral patterns, the Hanging Long-Limb continues to defy my expectations. It moves slowly, dazedly, as if drugged, and it seems to take an endless fascination in studying its surroundings. Many of them never even make it out of the first room. Watching their progress, once the observer has cultivated the necessary patience, is so lulling as to be practically meditative.

The same cannot be said for another of my favorite subjects, the animal known to its local population as a Charisoco. It is a small rodent, nimble but extremely strong for its size, and restlessly inventive. It is invariably curious when it begins to explore the maze, shuffling around the corridors with apparent aimlessness, but even then, my observations have proven that it develops – visually develops – its escape methods by making its way through the twisty corridors with remarkable alacrity. The first half of the maze provides little to no obstacle to this ingenious little animal, which makes its tendencies to halt its progress and experiment with the side-track stimuli I've left in various rooms all the more amusing to monitor.

Meanwhile, the great beast they call the Slaver – easily one of the most dangerous animals I've put in the maze, and certainly one that made me nervous to the point of queasiness when I first watched it wander the corridors – has a more forthright approach. It is cunning, as predators are, but if it gets too frustrated it will eventually begin throwing itself against the walls, heedlessly ramming its bulk against them in a futile but impressive display of strength that rattles the room. The Slaver is a harsh and brutal animal that simply does not ever give up, though whether its tenacity is out of survival instinct or a kind of angry desperation, I don't yet know.

None of which helps prove the extinction burst, as these animals make their way through my labyrinthine passages. At least, it remains unproven until they get to a random room – I don't even know which one; my maze autoselects it – where no solution will work. None. The exit strategy, which becomes obvious after a little while, does not function. No matter which panels, buttons, floor plates, or decorative items are touched, in whatever order, nothing happens.

The real, proper exit strategy...well, that's when some of the animals start to get a little nervous.

I've run this experiment countless times. I truly feel I am on the cusp of great discoveries here. But moreover, I

simply enjoy watching these animals, my favorite subjects. I don't feel I'll ever tire of them, though I do fear that some day I will inevitably grow weary of the experiments themselves, and I'll have to put an end to it all. Yes, even the Hanging-Long Limb, reposed in blissful quiet; or the creative little Charisoco; or the restless, pacing Slaver.

And maybe even you, my darling, as I watch you screaming at the walls.



Valklears



"I am not going to train you; I am going to try to kill you."
- Valklear Instructor

During the long years of enslavement and the great war for liberation, the Minmatar tribes found themselves sorely lacking in able-bodied soldiers. They were forced to create them from their most dangerous criminals – murderers, rapists, thugs, etc. The program was a remarkable success. The Valklears won the Minmatar a slew of military victories and emerged as the Rebellion's most notorious elite force.

With the end of the Rebellion and the formation of the Minmatar Republic, some politicians within the new government questioned the need for such an iniquitous military force: The need was gone, peace was won and surely such ugly necessities of the past should be resigned to history to make way for the new Minmatar age? The military commanders would have none of it, and the Valklear program remained and continues to prosper to this day, although it has lost none of its infamous reputation.

Valklear commanders rely wholly on specialized recruiters to fill their ranks. They tour the courtrooms and judgement halls of the tribes, and with a trained eye they pick out the prime cuts of criminality from the great swathe of vicious, vile, and corrupt. Once the recruiter has selected a candidate, he works on brining the convict into the system. Each recruiter has his own persuasive technique, but for many hard convicts, presented with the option of a lifetime behind bars or a shorter term in the military, the choice is a rather obvious one.

The recruiter's selection is not as clear-cut as one may think, though. They recruit from a broad range of the criminal fraternity. One day, a violent psychopath may be paid a visit, the next a serial killer, and then perhaps a corrupt lawyer, a notorious embezzler – even people who may have never held a weapon in their lives. The path the criminal has taken matters less than their skills, instincts and the inherent potential the recruiter perceives.

Once a candidate has accepted the proposition, they are silently removed from their cells and the penal system loses them in a maze of red tape and paperwork. Any digging within their records will show that these prisoners took their place in the death chamber or got transferred to a maximum-security facility. The Valklear candidates are lost in the system and will never be found.

When the candidate is removed from their prison cells, the training begins in earnest. Hundreds of evil-minded bastards, bloody killers, and fiercely intelligent criminals are put through one of the most gruelling training regimes known in New Eden. Through intense training, the prospective Valklears are melded into unstoppable war machines. Instructors push recruits beyond their limits in order to see if they push back. The candidates are beaten to see if they will get up again, then beaten down even harder. Recruiters want that indomitable glint in their eye that says, "Fuck you."

Those candidates that wash out are thrown back in the penal system with even harsher sentences. The ones

that make the grade – and to the recruiter’s credit, it is a surprisingly high percentage – are then indoctrinated into the Valklears proper, where the expectation of “tough bastard” gets re-evaluated once more.

A Valklear’s tour of duty is dependent upon the term of his original sentence, not including the full year of training after selection from prison. If a Valklear survives his tour, he immediately becomes a free man. He is also given a new identity, and any links to his criminal past are wiped from the records and replaced with a suitable cover.

After their tour with this elite force, most Valklears find a calling suited to them in other military branches. The former Valklear will in turn get transferred to another unit, though his new comrades will remain ignorant of his background.

Currently, some of the highest-ranking members of the Minmatar armed service were once Valklears. This fact is kept top secret; the public remaining ignorant of a Minmatar military run by murderers and thieves.

Anoikis



Imagine if the bars to your prison were all you had ever known.

Then one day, someone appears and unlocks the door.

If they have the power to do this, then are they really the liberator?

You never remembered who it was that closed you in.

- Ior Labron.

March 10th, YC 111.

Taking one last look at those unnatural shapes, the CreoDron board of directors slowly removed their Egones and returned their attention to the other figures huddled around the table. Everyone was waiting silently in the darkness. Those with ocular implants bowed their heads slightly, and the strange images faded from their mind.

"We only have these six so far," a voice said from a speaker in the middle of the table. "But what you are seeing says enough. There is an 18% probable match, just from this one alone."

A reproduction of the last image suddenly dominated the far corner as a large plasma-nanite panel came to life. The intense colors of the scene overwhelmed the dim starlight that filtered in through one of the clear walls, the pale blues of Carirgnottin I subdued by the glow of a deep crimson nebula on the screen, teeming with the lives and deaths of a thousand stars. The backdrop seemed to pulse beyond the silent and lifeless structures, drenching the entire room in a strange sanguine hue.

The clearest of the six, the image showed a ring of circular, dome-like structures, which would later come to be known as Enclaves. Each structure was connected by conduits that arched around to every other dome, joining the separate discs together at perfectly smooth angles. Scale was difficult to determine, but the entire complex was easily the size of a station. Though nobody would venture a comment, there were some who even then guessed that it was a city they were looking at.

A city of sorts.

As they stared in silence, each director's eyes eventually came to settle on the imposing dagger-like spires that jutted out from the ring, their angles sharp and yet each edge beautifully smooth. There was no visible seam, no weak point in the gently overlapping and undulating armor. Eight of these spires towered over the rest of the area, standing watch like ancient protectors.

"Not ten seconds after our drone was sent in to capture this image, we lost the feed."

"We need to send real people in," one of the directors interjected, brushing the Egone before him aside in a less than subtle gesture of dissatisfaction.

The last comment from the superior was meant to have been dramatic. It was supposed to have humbled the subordinates into contemplative silence and sent them fumbling at the sheer scope of what had already been uncovered. The fast-moving minds of the men and women here shelved such concerns for now, however, and quickly prioritized other matters entirely, robbing their leader of his first contact moment.

In retrospect, the old man (as he indulged himself in being called) would appreciate the quick-witted minds of his "subordinates" and their own lists of concerns, particularly since this was, in fact, not the first time New Eden had been here.

"Another hour spent deploying drones will mean someone else beats us to the discovery," one of the directors offered, skirting the deeper point entirely as they opted for pragmatism.

"And it could mean much worse than that," another director added furtively, throwing some more ambiguous worry into the mix. The room was still fixated on the ring of domes, and the dark, shadowy spires that rose above them; the reminder was somewhat premature.

"Let's not waste time stirring people up with innuendo, Mr. Darieux." The softness of a female voice commanded the attention of the room, long before those gathered actually perceived the gross insult she had dared to utter.

The woman who spoke was a Federation Senator – and a Jin-Mei woman at that. This brashness was not her fault. She could only know assertion to be where she stood now, glimpsing something before her superior was even aware. She had long ago recognized that the fastest route to the truth was not dissimilar to the flight path of a bullet, or the trajectory of superheated coronal mass crashing into a planet: an inevitably straight line.

There was no other way to run something as vast as the empire she helped steer, and so she followed up quickly with another lunge for the truth, before anyone could muster their senses to speak.

Board room etiquette could go fuck itself.

"We all know who you intend to throw out there."

A lasting silence hung about the room as the others lowered their gazes, dreading to watch the exchange.

No matter what happens next, they thought, she's out of here.

"Do you disagree with this course of action?" The voice from the speaker asked, the stillness and calm in his voice like venom, slowly paralyzing everyone in the room. He was making it her call now – a tactic she never thought to expect.

"No."

"Very well," the voice replied. "Someone find Burreau."

The directors raised their gazes and quickly arranged for the extraction of one of their finest through a few simple gestures and nods. First, all eyes turned toward the two Security Directors, whose bowed heads assured the rest that Burreau's personal bodyguard had already been contacted and support was inbound. From the way they almost smirked, it meant their people were close enough to presume she was safe. A criss-cross of raised eyebrows thereafter would confirm the temporary closure of key stargate logs, and a "clean" route from her current location to HQ, as well as fleet support from a wing of CreoDron's finest.

Black Ops fleets had been deployed, Sin Battleships were already undocking and rapidly vanishing in flashes of blue light as they were each deposited along a chain of cynosural fields stretching outward toward Burreau – toward something each crew knew only as the cargo. Local CreoDron patrols relocated to stargates, ready to intercept. Ishkurs and Ishtars deployed drones preemptively in a gesture of threat, drifting at a distance from the passing civilian traffic as their larger brothers circled above, invisible to all.

Before the directors had exhaled for the second time, her passage had been secured and escort arranged. A valuable asset, they understood. Worth the cost of deployment. Perhaps that senator grasped this much as well;

it would explain the behavior. Their eyes never quite left her as she stood in the corner, arms folded, failing entirely to understand their secret language of smiles and nods.

Maybe she's staying after all, they thought, looking among themselves. Maybe the Jin-Mei came without permission.

Maybe it's personal.

"Sir?"

Hilen was still there, staring at the ground where Lianda had stood. For just one moment longer, he would allow his eyes to rest on the soft marks in the grass, tracing over the trail of small footprints she had left for him.

Cold Wind taught him to move without sound or track, and to perceive the paths that are hidden.

It was his job to follow her now.

"That was One I just had here. Did you get a trace on the call?"

"Carirgnottin, sir. She's not moving either. We have her on infrared at the moment, and she's still in place."

"Two is still missing?"

"Yes, sir."

"Understood."

"Sir, permission to speak freely?"

"What is it, Arii?"

"The security detail on her right now is like nothing we've seen. The feet on the ground have multiplied by a factor of ten...my whole team is on edge. The timing, sir. Seyllin."

He hesitated for a long moment, wondering just how much of the last conversation she needed to hear in order to do the job effectively. He only knew it wouldn't have to be everything. Hilen Tukoss never shared a detail people didn't need to know.

"With respect, sir, it's obvious. An entire planet was just destroyed by some cosmic event and the astrophysicist we've been tracking for months just disappeared. Vanished. Off the grid completely, without any of us knowing where that second clone went. And now we're being told that her surveillance status has been bumped to top priority?"

"Let me bring you in then," he said, turning her own zeal back around. "If you are ready to assume equal responsibility for our new assignment?"

"I'm ready," she replied without hesitation.

"CreoDron has just discovered a new solar system. They arrived there through an unknown wormhole in Vitrauze. They believe the events in Seyllin created this wormhole, and may have created others. So far, only scout drones have travelled to the other side, but what they have found suggests that this system is home to another civilization. Five images returned only planets, the last shows something else entirely. They found structures, large ones, and I don't mean on a planet."

"How advanced are we talking?"

"While scouting what appeared to be some kind of facility out there, one of CreoDron's drones was shot down. The other five are still positioned at the entrance to the system."

"Sir, we need to get to Vitrauze."

He considered for a moment the 82% probability that things were not as they seemed. He couldn't dismiss it, but he distrusted the numbers. Instinct was telling him that nothing ahead was all that foreign, that they needed diplomats, not scientists.

"No," he replied, staring down at the information panel overlaid on his wrist. Soon enough, a flood of intel would begin to pour in as a hundred different sources all alerted him to the same event. "Check the news feeds. One is about to hold a briefing live on The Scope."

"They're going to announce the findings?" Aarii asked, turning her attention toward a nearby screen as she searched for the face of her prey. She could see movement on the infrared – she was sitting upright. Like she's about to say something important, Aarii thought.

"No," he repeated. "They're not, and there's no point chasing them. They're about to contest the CONCORD travel advisory, and yes, soon after they'll announce the wormhole. Six press releases later though, and they might start talking about scout drones, maybe release an image or two, but they're sitting on this. They won't release that sixth image."

"Why?"

"So the Vitrauze project can continue undisturbed. Why do you think we lost Two? She's gone already."

"If she's gone already, then why aren't we going as well?"

"Because someone in the Senate was feeding her intel before CreoDron even arrived. I doubt every senator has been made aware at this point. There's too many; it would risk a leak."

"Someone highly placed?"

"Perhaps, but not necessarily. Someone who at least has an overview of security. Someone with pull."

"So you think the area has been locked down already?"

"I'm not sure, but they only need to know what system to look in, and then we would become very noticeable, very quickly. We've stumbled on to something here, and right now, nobody knows it is the only advantage we have."

"What's our plan then, sir?"

"First we need to pass this up the chain of command."

"Understood."

Somewhere far from Carirgnottin I, in an equally dark and oppressive board room, another group of figures waited impatiently as one of their own excused himself to take a call.

"Have you lost control of your asset, Hilan? Do you even know where she is?"

Hilan felt his wrist grow warm. Looking down at the information overlay once more, he could see the first trickles that would soon become the flood. A hundred of his best people all turning in the wrong direction.

"We know where One is. If you're near a holoivid screen--"

The man raised his view to one of the panels filling the lobby outside the board room. Just below a large platinum-thorium etching that read "ZAINOU BIOTECH - BOARD OF DIRECTORS," there was the pale, innocent face of the Jin-Mei he'd ordered his corporation's best surveillance to watch. The voices back inside grew louder for a moment before being quickly overcome by the growing sound of her own voice. They were all watching now.

"I see her. What is going on?"

"They're escalating her profile. It's a distraction, sir, and I need everyone there to ignore it. We have a situation unfolding in the background."

"I'm listening."

"Before I explain, I need you to get in touch with Ishukone. Find someone as high up the ranks as we can get quickly and unofficially. We're going to need them for this."

Hilan waited for an answer.

"I see," the director finally offered. "Tell me, Hilan?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Is it their previous experience that you're after?"

And suddenly Hilan realized that he knew. He knew something, at least. Enough to ask the question, and ask it in such an indirect way. There was no telling what was infiltrated now. No line was secure.

"Yes, sir." Hilan felt a dull ache in the depth of his stomach, the pain of the one soldier who returned back to base alive, having seen the onslaught to come.

Except this time, nobody had fired a shot, and nobody would.

What do you intend, ambassador?

I propose we call for a private summit of national leaders, to discuss an exchange of information and come to an agreement about the best use for select recovered parts. We could use the Inner Assembly to arrange for the meetings quite easily under the guise of an understandable concern for these events, which have touched our worlds too, as we will inform them.

The evidence?

It will be systematically accumulated and re-integrated into current technology in ways that render the salient points unrecognizable. The finer details will have to evolve organically, but the framework will be a new, non-binding agreement regarding scientific commodity trading. Although the primary motivator will be the acquisition and development of new technologies, there are also factors such as quarantine periods, comprehensive safety testing, and many other additional barriers to access the empires can and will likely impose without suggestion. The various research benefits inherent to each unit guarantees widespread financial self-interest. Our engineers have already produced a range of schematics. Some of them are new technologies, but we believe the concession here is a smaller one in the long term. Where we could, we focused on improvements upon pre-existing methods.

How do you suppose this will even work to suppress the information?

You must understand two things. The first is human sensitivity. Seyllin is dominating the media, and as such, it is dominating the public consciousness. This works to our advantage, but only for so long. The world's attention is turned toward the disaster, so now is the most opportune moment to make bold moves elsewhere. None of them want to be the first to speak about the potential profits, the new resources, the opportunities and secrets that can be uncovered. At this moment, those avenues will be forced into the background, and yet undoubtedly pursued all the same. If the empires are already operating on a covert footing, then we need not lead them there.

You seem confident in this plan.

I simply believe it will be an easy law to pass in this moment. The non-binding nature will appear in line with the current lack of information. A symbolic gesture made in the spirit of peace and cooperation, made quietly and where few look, a means for all parties to ensure a more secure future.

The capsuleers?

Naturally, there will need to be a waiver on capsuleer-related science and industry, but this is the second thing you must understand. The truth will find its way out eventually. Please forgive me for saying so, but I cannot properly serve in this role if I do not give you the most accurate analyses I can. The truth will find its way out. We cannot control their access. It will be they who make the discovery.

How quickly do you expect this to happen?

I cannot say. Their interests are unpredictable, but they are divided and divisive. There will always be ones who question what most do not, but I believe that overall, they will share the same goals as the empires. They will take what they can understand and reintegrate. We may see another rise in their power and autonomy as a result. We should expect them to monopolize on this new opportunity as well. Given the inherent dangers of exploring Anoikis, they are positioned favorably to do so. In terms of raw resource gathering capabilities, conventional empire fleets will not be economically competitive. We will struggle to maintain a presence eventually.

That will turn the empires toward research.

Not if we intervene and provide for them what convincingly appears to be the most promising final applications of any potential studies. This hints at precisely the point we must illuminate. When framed as a concern for the balance of power between the empires and the capsuleers, our interests will appear far more congruent with theirs, and our actions will remain understandable. The empires can be made to quickly appreciate how little control over these new areas they will have, and from there, it will be simple to assist each of them in coordinating access to components we identify as key. They will recognize it as the only opportunity any of them

have for strategic equality. None will refuse.

Our research?

>Had she not realized yet? In the early months, we can make a great deal of ground.

Early months?

She had not. The ambassador swallowed. Emotion was rippling inside each cell, bursting throughout the bloodstream as it tried to break free.

The capsuleers. They will settle. They will understand the network eventually, and they will command it.

They will not be everywhere at once, and we can move undetected.

In this environment, so can they. We are all headed to the same destinations. We have no desire to be noticed, and no hope in conflict with them.

Then we will use these early months well.

She recovered quickly from that thought, he mused. Yes.

If the situation is ever understood in its entirety, as you predict, then there will be consequences for these actions.

I do not share that view. What we do now benefits all parties. If our motives are ultimately viewed as benign, then any perceived wrongdoings can be explained in full detail as they are identified. Trust and clarification at the highest tiers will filter downward and provide the level of institutional compliance necessary to establish the agreement.

You must still realize that we cannot become publicly involved in this?

Yes, this is obvious to me. The suggestion will be put forward earlier, between myself and the other ambassadors, or the national leadership, if you please.

The former.

The ambassador cleared his throat. "I understand. Was there anything else you required of me?"

"Did you hear of Burreau?"

"Briefly."

"What is your assessment?"

"I believe she is dead."

"You are correct. There was activity on the line. She was at one of the mirrors."

The ambassador almost seemed to smile for a moment. "She learned well."

"She was taught by the best. We are concerned about the reasons why she was chosen. "

"Perhaps you should be, but then there are not many astrophysicists with clones."

"Let us hope it is that simple."

"I would not hope. I would investigate."

"Thank you, ambassador. That is all."

Vitrouze Agreement.

Article 8, Section E

CONCORD subsidization in the acquisition of scientifically valuable by-products.

Although preliminary, through the spirit of peace and co-operation that affirms this treaty, each of the four

member nations have exchanged sufficient information to identify four key salvageable materials of scientific interest. Seeking to both minimize their impact on capsuleer economic development and to allow more time for proper investigation into the impact of all unknown materials, the member nations have agreed to focus on four lower tier by-products identified during initial excavations of unknown space.

Clause 1) The four member nations of the treaty have each agreed that the preliminary findings, and any agreements based thereupon, on each of the four units is strictly provisional. Current scientific opinion broadly agrees that these items are of little material value. However, any reassessment undertaken by any of the member nations that is deemed to invalidate this initial finding may be deferred to.

Clause 2) CONCORD, in operation with the SCC, has agreed to facilitate and subsidize the acquisition of these items through capsuleer markets at a standard price agreed upon by all of the four member nations.

October acquisition metrics (Capsuleer Markets / SCC):

Data Library: 11,799,985

Neural Network Analyzer: 1,162,057

Coordinates Database: 244,234

Drone AI Nexus: 70,726

Xenocracy



Planetary Administrator Leonalle Yvesk's assistant, a much younger Gallente woman named Colasa, trotted up and matched his pace as he disembarked from the passenger tram. Yvesk sighed vocally. As they made their way up the ramp to street level, flowing along with the crowd of other laborers and urban professionals commuting to work during the morning hours, she remained silent. Only when they had emerged into the open and separated from the majority of the other pedestrians did she venture to initiate conversation.

"Good morning," she began. "I hope you're well today." She had a polite but submissive demeanor he usually appreciated. It had taken him almost fifty years to climb to his position as the highest authority on Chesiette Prime, the first planet of the Chesiette system, a thriving temperate world with just over a billion inhabitants. Because of its position near the border between the Gallente Federation and Amarr Empire, the planet was important – on paper. In reality, the efficiency of Federation politics, combined with their peace-oriented foreign policy, had rendered many of his duties unnecessary, resulting in his being regarded by many officials as a glorified middle manager instead of a frontier diplomat.

Today, however, he found her meek, subservient manner frustrating. He was on his way to a meeting he had been dreading all month, one that he had no experience with, and despite the fact that it was finally a duty in line with his diplomatic training, he was exceedingly nervous. "What is it, Colasa?"

"I have the report you asked for on carbon compound dispersion patterns on the southern continents." She fumbled with a small case as they walked, almost colliding with several people moving in the opposite direction.

Yvesk stared straight ahead as he walked. "Very good."

Frowning, Colasa tucked the case back under her arm and hustled to keep up with him. "Can I ask why you seem so upset, Administrator Yvesk?" She didn't wait for him to reply before adding: "Does it have something to do with the capsuleer?"

Yvesk stopped abruptly and grabbed her arm, drawing a startled look from his young assistant. He glanced around and shot dirty looks at all the people watching, their attentions instantly focused on the two after the last word she had spoken aloud. "I think it would be best," he hissed, "if we kept such topics in private discussion." When he was certain that his point had been made, as was evident by the paleness of her face, he released her and stormed off.

Nodding quickly, Colasa averted her eyes. From that point until they arrived at the conference building, she stayed a step behind the administrator, absolutely silent.

* * *

Seated in the largest chair in the observation room, Yvesk took a few moments to make sure his suit's collar was perfect before nodding to Colasa, who was seated at a nearby holographic interface. She ran one hand over the console's horizontal sensor, prompting the air above it to waver and coalesce into a digital readout. Reaching up and tracing one finger across the insubstantial surface of the screen, she selected the proper communications channel and turned to look at the far wall, which went entirely black, save for the blinking symbol in one corner that indicated a connection was waiting for authorization.

When an image finally appeared, it caught the administrator off guard. The capsuleer was clearly of Amarr descent, with high cheekbones and a clean-shaven scalp, but beyond the most obvious features, little of his face could be discerned. Most of his head was obscured by cybernetic implants: curved, metallic attachments that spread around his skull at every angle, completely concealing his eyes, nose, and mouth. Power and information cables stretched from each implant to somewhere off camera on either side, making it seem like he was suspended in a spider web instead of seated comfortably in a starship in orbit high above the planet.

It was only a simulacrum, an image that this person chose to portray of themselves, but it thoroughly unnerved Yvesk. He caught himself staring at the screen and covered his blunder by clearing his throat and introducing himself. "Greetings, I am Planetary Admin—"

"Leonalle Yvesk," interrupted a thundering voice, reverberating around the room with an unearthly tone. The camera displaying the man on the screen zoomed in to show only the head and shoulders, his body twitching subtly whenever he spoke. "I am familiar with your information."

Yvesk inhaled briefly, scratched the side of his head, then gestured to Colasa and offered, "This is my assistant, Col—"

"Your associates are not my concern." Interpreting the capsuleer's body language was impossible. After several moments of uncomfortable silence, the muscles in his neck convulsed briefly - it really was an unnerving illusion - and the speakers continued his statement. "I am Omvistus."

The administrator nodded respectfully; his assistant continued to stare at the vidscreen and chew on her bottom lip absentmindedly. When it became obvious by the elongated pause in the conversation that the capsuleer wasn't going to finish his introduction by clarifying whether the name he had offered was a first or last, Yvesk moved on to business. "As you can see, sir, we are fully prepared to begin implementing your production schedule. Our industrial sector still needs some updates and modifications, but I'm confident that in just under a year we could—"

"That is too long." The expressionless face on the screen twisted slightly, and then the capsuleer's voice boomed through the speakers. "I will replace your industrial sector immediately. You have one hour to evacuate all personnel before the new facilities arrive in their place."

Yvesk paled visibly as he turned his head slowly to Colasa, who lunged for the nearest control panel and began sending out frantic messages. "We're making preparations immediately, sir. Perhaps if you could—"

"One hour."

"I must say, sir," Yvesk began indignantly, "all of this is highly irregular. If you had just included this in your previous documentation, we could have prepared adequately."

The cables attached to Omvistus writhed as his body convulsed. "Your disquietude is counterproductive. Do I need to replace you?"

Yvesk glanced around and stuttered: "Of course not, sir." Licking his lips as he chose his next words, Yvesk tried to change the subject. "I noticed that you have some ambitious plans for our local spaceport. Would you care to elaborate?"

Omvistus was motionless for several seconds, and then his shoulders rose slightly and his voice came through over the channel. "Your existing spaceport facility was insufficient for my needs."

"How so?"

"The amount of raw materials that will need to be transported into orbit is an order of magnitude larger than what your current facilities are able to support. Additionally, I will be overseeing the construction of the seventy-two new spaceports my corporation requires, each located at key intersections across the surface of your world."

Yvesk could feel the sweat trickling down the back of his neck and pretended to be rubbing sore muscles to wipe it away. He was relieved that Colasa was still buried in the computer terminal, desperately trying to get evacuation notices out to the industrial sector. "Sir," he began, "while I appreciate your dedication to the development of Chesiette Prime, I feel it's my duty to inform you that the scale of that project is far beyond our capabilities. Building that many new spaceports would cost more than the total revenue our planet generates in a year."

Omvistus twitched. "I have just purchased all of the required materials to construct the new spaceports and arranged for them to be delivered within the next six hours. You will prepare for their arrival at once."

The sheer amount of currency that had just changed hands before his very eyes, all in the span of a single heartbeat, left Yvesk speechless. His mind reeling with the massive numbers, he tried to find his footing once again. "I... thank you, sir. We'll make sure the facilities are properly—"

"You will not be responsible for their assembly; that process is entirely automated." The capsuleer's head twisted to one side and his disembodied voice added, "All you need do is stay out of the way."

Colasa was pleading to Yvesk with her eyes, begging for the order to send out additional evacuation warnings to any citizens who currently lived or worked in the areas designated for immediate repurposing. She pointed to her vidscreen terminal, which showed numerous glowing red warnings all over the spinning image of the planet. The administrator, however, held one hand up, instructing her to wait. "Omvistus, I must protest at this point. Most of the coordinates you designated for these additional spaceports are located in densely populated areas. It's going to take more than a few hours to evacuate all those citizens. I demand more time!"

Omivistus was absolutely motionless. “You demand?”

Frowning and leaning closer to the screen to block out the ambient noise of the city beyond the walls of the room, Yvesk refused to backpedal on an issue so important. “We’re talking about millions of people here. I don’t think you understand the gravity of this situation,” he growled his final word, “sir.” He shot an annoyed glance at Colasa when the drone of something outside reached the point at which it was difficult to hear himself speak. “We’re going to need at least a week to relocate everyone to unaffected communities.”

“That sound you’re hearing,” Omivistus replied, “is your planet’s bombardment siren. You’ve probably never had to pay much attention to it in the past, seeing as your world is safely under the jurisdiction of CONCORD, but that is no longer the case.” As he spoke, the back window of the conference room took on a noticeably red tint, saturating the room in crimson light. “What you’re seeing now is the targeting laser used to aim my battleship’s six 425 millimeter railgun turrets. At this altitude, the gravity of your planet will augment the standard launch velocity of each solid projectile to speeds well beyond operational specifications, enough to obliterate anything within half a kilometer of the impact site.” Omivistus’s image grew larger on the screen before he continued.

“Anything between that location and two kilometers from ground zero will suffer a worse fate, as the antimatter suspended in each shell escapes its containment field and expands in a random dispersion pattern, colliding with the ambient normal matter on the ground – buildings, trees, children, everything. Whatever these particles touch will experience matter disassociation on an atomic level as, piece by piece, they are reduced to unidentifiable residual particles.” He paused briefly, and then concluded.

“With a single thought, I can reduce your entire city to a smoldering crater; the boiling wind rushing in to replace the void left behind will be laced with dust particles that were once the bodies of everyone you know and love. Do you understand?”

Yvesk looked down to see one of his hands shaking. He swallowed hard and, when next he spoke, his voice came out as a raspy whisper. “I...understand.”

“I’m sorry, Administrator Yvesk, but I’m afraid I didn’t catch your last words. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

The red light faded and, for the rest of the afternoon, the capsuleer spoke and the planetary administrator listened with obedience.

Lost Stars



From: Dasegne Oleart, Internal Affairs, Quafe Corportion

To: Poire Viladillet, CEO, Quafe Corporation

Subject: Post-Mortem Investigation of Failed Product "Quafe+"

Sir,

We have concluded our research pertaining to the failed launch of the product "Quafe+." Enclosed are initial research and preliminary documents for your perusal. We have stopped production of this product before it could hit distribution. All implicated parties have been dealt with in proper fashion. The authorities have not been contacted. Gheyr Aillon is no longer with the company. The investigation will conclude in the next week after the guilty parties have been re-massed. Please find below the investigation's core documentation:

* * *

From the journal of Yosif Veaulore, Sept. 12, YC 111

I sold out today, and I could not be happier. Viladillet's office sent me their newest offer, and I couldn't turn them down. It was more than generous for my fleet of junkers. Those Quafe bastards are losing their touch the bigger they get; either that or they're desperate for the biomass. Quafe+ must be behind schedule. I don't know why they want us to keep at the morgue runs. All I can gather is that it's to keep an emotional face on that lumbering beast of a conglomerate.

* * *

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Quafe Corporations Merges with Lost Stars, Inc.

Lirsautton – The Quafe Corporation, through its affiliated development group Quafe Enterprises, has completed their merger with Lost Stars, Inc., a Federation-based funerary services agency that specializes in cleaning up the aftermath of starship engagements throughout the Gallente Federation. The companies agreed to a merger agreement in which Lost Stars will join the myriad companies comprising Quafe Enterprises' burgeoning business conglomeration.

Lost Stars, Inc. was founded in YC 106 by Yosif Veaulore, who started the business with his son, Perime. From the corporation's beginnings as a single frigate retrieving the bodies of crew members from deadspace pockets, Lost Stars, Inc. currently maintains a fleet of over 2,000 ships, many custom designed for deep space retrieval missions. Through the deal, Lost Stars will provide an important role in Quafe Enterprise's new Industrial Services division. "We are proud to be a part of the Quafe family," says Lost Stars' president Veaulore. "We hope to provide a human element to Quafe to show that there's more to the corporation than beverages."

* * *

From the journal of Yosif Veaulore, March 20, YC 112:

I'm worried about Perime. I thought that maybe he'd get better in this new environment. His messages are sullen and terse to me – at least, much more than usual. I made sure the Quafe suits didn't audit his files, and I transferred him to a new ship. I've done all I can to keep him safe and out of trouble. What am I doing wrong?

Perime tried to convince me that this was a bad deal, that I'd hurt him if I went through with it. He doesn't have much to stand on. He sold me his shares the last time he got in trouble. It was the only way I could keep his problems quiet. This business was his idea. That's why I still keep him on staff, even if he's under an assumed name. I have to keep him close to me; I love him too much. This will be a good change for him, I know it.

* * *

An excerpt from the New Acquisition Progress Report – Lost Stars, Inc., a Quafe Corporation company.

Q2 YC112

From the start of the quarter, biomass retrieval operations have increased 200% over Q2 last year, though the number of retrieval requests has gone down by 40%. Most of the biomass collected from deadspace locations and battle sites is reprocessed for use within the company, though a small percentage (5%) of the collected human biomass is sold to cloning facilities throughout the Federation.

Estimated numbers:

Average number of bodies retrieved from deadspace locations: 5,000

Average number of bodies retrieved from capsuleer engagements (30 ships destroyed): 1,000

Average requests for individuals to be retrievals per engagement: 100

Most biomass retrieved from these locations consists of starship crew members who did not survive the engagement: Their ship's hull was breached before they could escape through escape pods. This recovered biomass is often unrecognizable, exposed as it is to the vacuum of space. When requests to retrieve individual bodies from this wreckage come through, the price is often well above normal for funeral costs. Upper-income families are the overwhelming majority of clients for Lost Stars, as they wish to give their relatives lost to starship engagements a proper burial. The Servant Sisters of EVE are also major clients, providing donations to under-privileged families to pay for retrieval and funeral costs.

* * *

From the journal of Yosif Veaulore, April 10, YC112

They've done wonders with my ships: repairs on all the ships, new crews, new equipment. Like new salvage drones (for about half of the ships, at least). No more space walks ("death marches," as the crews used to call them). Now they can send those drones out to fetch the corpses instead of sending my men out there. Gallente liberty means freedom from dangerous work, right? I'm expecting that within a year we'll have all the ships fitted with these new modules. That'll probably mean massive layoffs at that time. That's the price of safety.

* * *

Personnel files: biography of Gheyr Aillon, Project Lead for Quafe+

Aillon was born to a family of miners in a deep-cavern mining community on Mannar. Both of his parents were killed in a deep-core explosion when Aillon was eight years old. He lived with relatives and family friends throughout Mannar until he turned eighteen. Though impoverished throughout his childhood, he had a natural

talent for learning and eloquence beyond his years. When he was of age, he attended the University of Caille on a full scholarship. Graduating at the top of his class with a degree in Marketing, he entered the Federation's corporate world in a blaze, founding several small companies and turning them into instant successes. Some of the corporations folded shortly after Aillon left them, but a few still remain as part of Quafe Enterprise's conglomeration. Three years ago, Aillon became the youngest project lead in the history of the Quafe Corporation at the age of 31.

* * *

From the journal of Yosif Veaulore, April 30, YC112:

Perime's getting worse. I've barely spoken to him in the last month. He's angry with me, he must be. To him, it was always about helping people. Am I losing sight of that? No, I can't be. I'm helping more people than ever; progress does nothing but good to people.

That's why Perime wanted me to start this company with him, or at least that was the front he put on. We had lost his mother to one of these engagements. She and I were divorced by that point – "irreconcilable differences" – but Perime loved her so much, and it broke his heart when she started working as an engineer for those big, new starships. She had only been working the space lanes for about a year when her ship was destroyed in a capsuleer engagement. Total destruction of the Thorax on which she was stationed. Four eggheads caught the ship by surprise in an asteroid belt in Intaki. They tore the ship apart before all of the escape pods could get away. Verine didn't make it out. We tried several times to reach the capsuleer in charge of that Thorax, pleading for him to help us recover her body so we could give it a proper burial. He never returned our messages.

Perime was barely a man by that point, but he still had a child's temper. He went into his dark rage, the worst I've ever seen him. I lost contact with him for about a month. It was only when the hospital contacted me that I knew he was alive, though he was badly beaten, almost to the point of death. He never told me where he went, but that didn't matter. I was just happy to know he was alive. That's when he proposed the business to me. I couldn't turn the boy down, so I promised to give it a shot, regardless of the cost. Anything to keep him safe and close.

* * *

An excerpt from a speech by Gheyr Aillon to investors:

"Quafe+ represents the evolution of soft drinks in New Eden. With Quafe+, we hope to turn our marketed beverages from leisure products to dietary staples. We're in a 'want' market, where consumers want our product on an almost daily basis to quench their thirst. But we must expand past this point and turn our product into a 'need' market. We must have people needing Quafe+, demanding it for their very sake. This need does not have to be a physical dependency, mind. We're not some seedy organization like the Serpents. Rather, this is a cultural need, a social need, and a spiritual need. Quafe+ is the culmination of the familiar, a socio-genetic need for any culture. We envision this product as absolutely necessary for progress into the future.

"And for that, my dear investors, I reveal to you Quafe+'s marketing campaign. It's entitled, 'Quafe+: A Familiar Taste for a Better Tomorrow.' We will begin our campaign at the end of this year and start selling the product in the Genesis region next year."

* * *

From the journal of Yosif Veaulore, April 30, YC112

We never wanted to make a profit, but we did over time. There were just too many ships out there and too much destruction not to grow our business. Even though the capsuleers took control of the ship, they still needed a crew. And when they got into their territorial pissing matches, when those demigods started to destroy each other en masse, that's when business started picking up. While the eggheads could lose their ship and their pod and wake up in a cloning vat somewhere, their crew members were not so lucky. When that starship exploded – and it almost always exploded – if you didn't get into your escape pod quick enough, you were lost in the black, forgotten, disgorge, alone. That's where we came in.

We could empathize; we knew what it was like to lose a loved one to the dark void. Verine wasn't lucky enough to have a funeral. But others could be, and we provided that service. It was dangerous work – we lost about 20%

of our workers on the death marches – but it gave someone closure. We didn’t want to be profitable, but there was too much business to be had.

The business was all about collecting the dead, harvesting the forgotten. We collected millions of bodies over the years. We did our best to categorize them and contact the next of kin, and the technology grew quickly over the years. DNA scanners, facial reconstruction simulators, biomass regenerators, and biological recursion solvents aided in identifying the lost souls. But not everyone could pay our prices – we were still a business, after all. Most of the time, though, we either couldn’t find a next of kin or the family didn’t care about our recovery. That’s when we sold the bodies for biomass – human recycling at its nadir. And that’s when Quafe became interested in us.

* * *

Excerpted transcript of meeting between Dr. Simuel Touvoux, Director of Research and Riesves Boricon, Marketing Manager. April 14, YC112. From internal communications network and surveillance unit.

TOUVOUX: How’re the focus groups responding to the new flavoring agents?

BORICON: They can’t get enough of it! Product demand within 12 hours of consumption is up 300%. It’s like they’re addicted to Quafe+. I’ve never seen anything like it. Your team has done wonders. This is practically alchemy you’ve discovered, doctor.

TOUVOUX: It was surprisingly simple to produce the requisite flavoring agents, to be completely honest. Once we found the proper source for biomass, it was a matter of fiddling with the chemical compounds.

BORICON: Where are you getting your biomass from? What’s so special about this biomass, anyway?

TOUVOUX: Quafe Enterprises is supplying it to us. Gheyr Aillon says that it’s specific to one solar system somewhere in Pureblind. I don’t ask too many questions: biomass is biomass, to be honest. Besides, we’re already behind schedule on this project already, and we would be even more behind if we didn’t find that flavoring agent.

BORICON: Is Viladillet aware of any of this?

TOUVOUX: We’re keeping him posted on progress, but not really giving him too many details. The old man’s too caught up in developing Enterprises to really care about the product even more.

BORICON: All he cares about is results, anyway. Frankly, that’s all that matters in this world. This product is rather low on the totem pole, but I see the potential for it to revolutionize the company. Maybe that will catch his attention.

* * *

From the journal of Yosif Veaulore, June 4, YC112

I don’t have much control over my company anymore. At least, not the way I wanted. I guess that’s what I get for selling out. I’m still in charge of the business’s daily operations, but I have no control over its direction. The suits are in charge of that now. It’s not about helping people anymore.

I can’t even tell what they’re doing with the biomass anymore. Aillon keeps shutting me out of those conversations. Our operating efficiency has gone through the roof, and we’re collecting more bodies than ever! (It helps when there’s more capsuleers in the sky to blast one another into oblivion, but now I’m just being morbid.) I’ve been cut off from all of my business partners and all the recycling plants that we had deals with. Hell, I can’t even talk to the Sisters anymore. They’re still our customer, but they go straight through Aillon’s office at this point. That brash bastard – he’s trying to take too much control. He should stick to his stupid Quafe+ project and leave us be.

And to make matters worse, I can’t even get in contact with Perime. I hope he’s OK.

* * *

Incident Report

Lost Stars, Inc., a division of Quafe Corporation

Biomass Recovery ship, “Eulogy”

May 10th, YC112

In the early hours of May 10th, YC112, several crewmen aboard this vessel discovered an employee, Eamom Delviour, to be stealing biomass from the storage facility aboard the ship. Delviour was found in an unoccupied sector of the ship – formerly the ship’s galley, before the “Eulogy” was owned by Quafe Corporation – hiding more than 20 bodies in a storage freezer. This sector of the ship was restricted to authorized personnel only, though ship logs report that almost no crew member besides Delviour had entered the area in at least four months.

According to the ship’s security investigation, the stolen biomass was preserved with embalming liquids and DNA purifiers stolen from Lab C. Each preserved body maintained most of its structural integrity, and each body was formerly female. Most of the bodies contained some wounds and discoloration throughout the torso area, though the causes of these markings are unknown. Significant traces of Delviour’s DNA have been found on some of the bodies as well.

By ship protocol, intact biomass is considered a premium and as such is closely recorded. However, as Delviour was one of the few space walkers onboard, his biomass collection was never fully recorded, which explains how he managed to collect so many bodies undetected. The space walking regiment on board the “Eulogy” has been dismissed entirely and the ship is currently docked and will be fitted with biomass recovery drones within the next few weeks.

Eamom Delviour has been taken into custody by Quafe security, who have performed a complete background check. Delviour was operating as an employee of Lost Stars, Inc. under an assumed identity. His real name is Perime Veaulore, son of Lost Stars president Yosif Veaulore, and a wanted fugitive within the Federation for the crimes of unlawful harvesting of biomass, assault and battery, and a classified charge under the “Dead Rights Amendment.” Security personnel found very few possessions in his bunk area: a few changes of clothes, multiple IDs for other assumed identities, and a picture of an Intaki woman. There was also a felchon, a plasma knife commonly found among Mannar gangs, hidden beneath his bunk.

The recovered biomass has been destroyed to preserve the integrity of the corporation’s product identity. This matter will be dealt with internally, and no federal authority is to be notified of Veaulore’s crimes against the corporation.

* * *

INTERNAL MEMORANDUM

From: Gheyr Aillon, Project Lead – Quafe+

To: Dr. Simuel Touvoux, Director of Research, and Macal Theloux, President, Quafe Enterprises

Touvoux and Theloux,

We have increased our production of biomass for your flavoring agents. Efficiency within the Lost Stars operation is up nearly 200%. We have added more ships to our fleet and expanded our harvesting range to include Republic space. We are also looking to purchase the regional biomass retrieval service, Bountiful Harvests, from Boundless Creation within the next few months. With the increase in harvesting operations, we should acquire enough biomass to meet demand of Quafe+ upon launch, as long as your team can mass-produce the flavoring agent in time. I will keep you updated. So far, nobody is aware of the agent’s source, though Internal Affairs has been asking questions lately. I’m not worried, though: We kept Veaulore around for a reason.

Aillon

* * *

From the journal of Yosif Veaulore, June 30th, YC112

I sold out, and I’m getting exactly what I deserve. I haven’t talked to Perime in months, I’m getting blackballed from all executive meetings, and Internal Affairs is breathing down my neck for reasons I cannot understand. I just wanted to help people, to soothe them when they lost someone close to them. Why is this happening to me?

I have a meeting with Theloux and Aillon tomorrow. The suits don’t seem happy with me or how Lost Stars is operating. I don’t know why they’re blaming me; Aillon’s the one that’s stonewalling me! I’ll find out what he wants tomorrow. In fact, I think it’s time I stand up to that bastard. I’ve been out of the loop for too long. I need to stand firm, take charge, and steer Lost Stars back to the proper course, the righteous course – the course I started with Perime. Then I’ll take Perime out of hiding and put him back on the executive level with me. Back where he belongs! They’ll understand why I hid him; Quafe’s got the pull to get the charges against him dropped. I’ll try one more time to contact Perime after my meeting tomorrow.

* * *

Excerpt from the interrogation of Perime Veaulore. May 30th, YC112

OFFICER: Why were you stealing bodies?

VEAULORE: The same reason Quafe needs the bodies: I have to fulfill my needs.

OFFICER: How many have you stolen since the merger?

VEAULORE: A pittance compared to the amount Quafe has repurposed. Do you even know what they do with the biomass?

OFFICER: We're not here to talk about what your company does. We're here to talk about what you did to the company. Tell me: How many bodies have you stolen?

VEAULORE: I can't even count at this point. Everybody's heads are so far up their collective asses that it became too easy. I got greedy, just like Aillon.

OFFICER: Give me a rough estimate.

VEAULORE: A few dozen, maybe. I only stole them once I got the urges. I'm not healthy, you know.

OFFICER: That's an understatement.

VEAULORE: Though I'm nowhere as perverted as your bosses. My sickness stopped at myself; I always gave the bodies a proper burial once I was done with them. But you guys; you're abominations. Especially Aillon.

OFFICER: You don't know what you're talking about.

VEAULORE: Follow the paper trail. See where all this biomass goes once we collect it. Then you'll see who the real criminals are.

* * *

From: Dasegne Oleart, InternalAffairs, Quafe Corpoartion

To: Poire Viladillet, Marcal Theloux, Riesves Boricon, Simuel Touvoux

Subject: Cease Production Immediately

Sirs,

After a lead from our security personnel, we have begun investigations into the production of Quafe+, particularly its flavoring agents. The source of these agents, originally described as coming from a particular plant in the Pureblind region, has been proven false by independent researchers. With the full cooperation of Mr. Theloux, we have investigated the true source of the biomass required to produce these flavoring agents: biomass harvested through Lost Stars, Inc., an entity within Quafe Enterprises that specializes in collecting human remains from starship engagements.

We have apprehended the company's president, Yosif Veaulore, as we believe that he provided the corporation with falsified documents relating to the distribution of his company's harvested biomass. With the help of Dr. Touvoux and Mr. Boricon, who have both provided the full documented reports from Mr. Veaulore and his company, we can state with complete certainty that Veaulore acted independently of any other entity within Quafe Enterprises and Quafe Corporation as a whole. We have also apprehended his accomplice, Perime Veaulore, his son and former business partner, who is wanted by federal authorities for crimes committed prior to the merger of Lost Stars, Inc. and Quafe Enterprises.

At the request of Internal Affairs, we ask that all development and production of Quafe+ be halted immediately until such time that we can conclude our investigation.

* * *

From: Poire Viladillet

To: Marcal Theloux

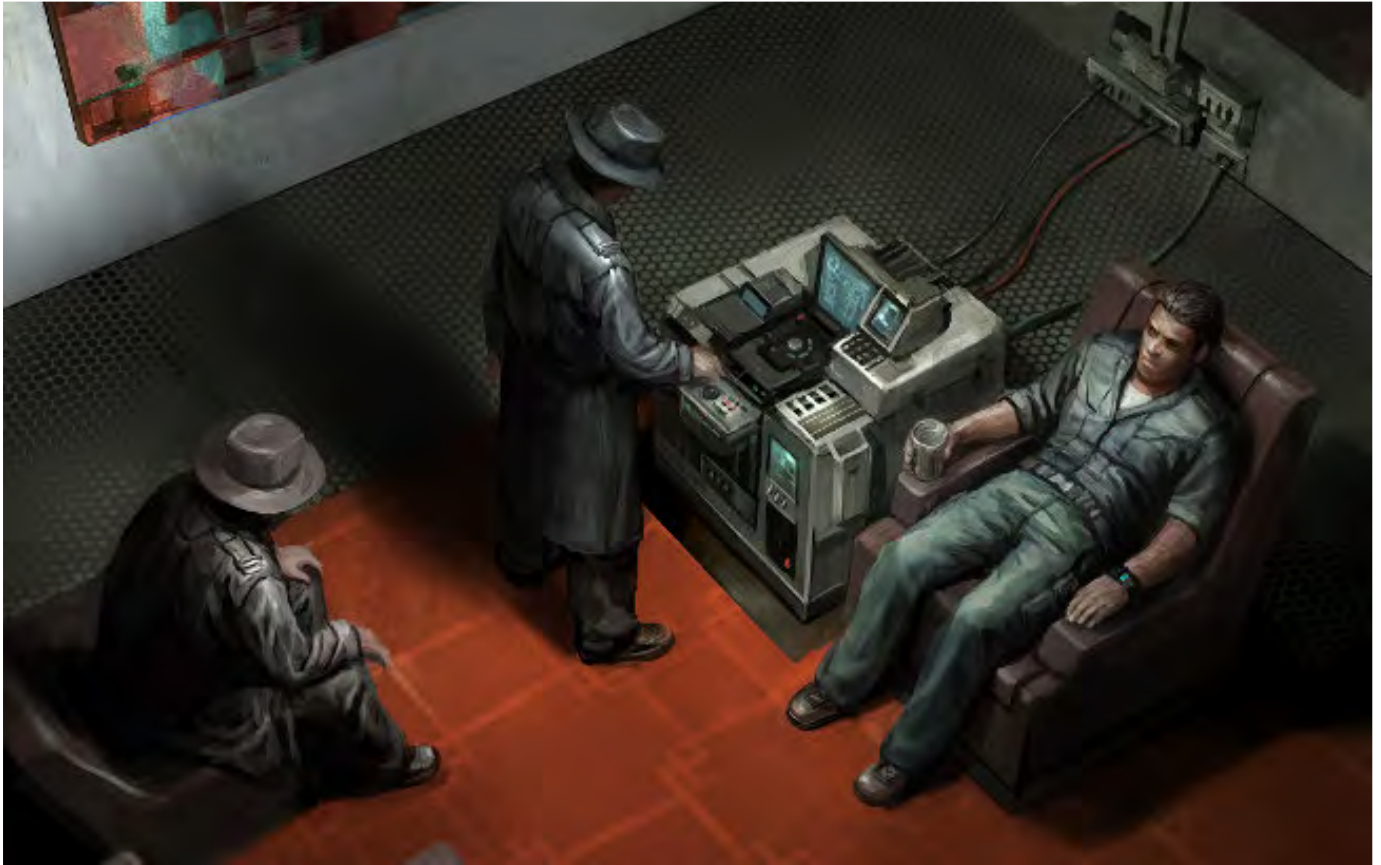
Subject: (No subject)

Marcal,

Where is Gheyr Aillon? Our accounting department would like a word with him on his project's investments. He has not reported to work in a week. I want him found and returned to my office – preferably alive.

PV

The Resurrection Men



By the time the beatings stopped, Rokan was barely even aware of what was happening. There had been rising increments of sharp pain, delivered to his ribs and his legs and his hands and his head, and then there was suddenly nothing but the dull, hazy, red-rimmed awareness of excruciating aches all over, fighting for their share of attention from his fading consciousness.

It was so late at night that even if he had dared to take his hands from his face, he wouldn't have been able to see. All he heard was the sounds, like slabs of meat being bashed by rocks.

He lay there, hunched in on himself. In the part of his mind that had gone very cold and analytical, he was amazed to find that he was unable to move. Also, he was lying in a small puddle of water, so he should have been freezing, but his body felt numbly warm.

Daring the world to poke and stab, he cracked open one eye, then the other.

It was hardly worth it. He was in the same alley as before, with his back to its mouth and his face to the wall. He saw light glinting off the puddle he was lying in.

Someone took a few steps behind him. The glint of light was blocked out.

A deep, raspy voice said, "I believe this is our man, Mister B."

A rather lighter and softer voice said, "I do believe you are correct, Mister H."

"Shall I hoist?"

"If you would be so kind."

Rokan was lifted up with such strength that it was as if he were weightless. Maybe he wasn't paralyzed, he stupidly thought; maybe he had simply died back there and these were the collectors who'd come for his remains.

But his body was hauled out of the alley - one of his captors said, "Look sharp now, young man, you're out of harm's way" - and set inside a hovercar that pulled up and hummed quietly. Everything hummed quietly, inside Rokan's head.

Coming in right after and taking their seats opposite him were two men in dark coats and hats, each at least a decade older than Rokan. Their faces betrayed no expression: They were neither cold nor confrontative but

simply, Rokan assumed, at ease with who they were and with the purpose of what they were doing.

The warm numbness started to fade, and he gingerly tried to stretch his arms and legs. They obeyed, if creakingly. So he wasn't paralyzed. It must, he reasoned, simply have been the fear.

The two men did not look as if they were inclined to speak, and the windows were shaded so dark that Rokan couldn't see out, so his attention naturally turned to himself. He gingerly felt his face. His lower lip was busted, and one of his eyes felt swollen up.

The men apparently noticed this, because B regarded him for a moment, then reached into a pocket and handed him something. "Here. Put this on you, son."

Rokan accepted the thing. He regarded it with careful interest. It was a small round patch, sheer but with faint lines crisscrossing it like a gossamer web.

"It's a cure," B said. "Electrodes will cool down the swelling, and the silk they're embedded in will stick to your rather broken skin without harming it any further."

Rokan nodded his thanks. He peeled off the patch's protective skin and gingerly placed it on his face, as near the swollen part as he could tell. It felt nicely cool.

There was a slight bump on the drive and he winced, but his face didn't throb as much as he'd expected it to.

"Where are we going?" he asked them.

"We'll be there soon," the other man, Mister H, told him in a dulcet voice.

Rokan shifted in his seat, which made little lines of fire crackle throughout his body like veins in a lava outflow. He could move, though, and no bones seemed to be broken. He wondered if he could bolt from the hovercar - they were clearly keeping to low speeds - but decided not to take that thought any further. Whoever these men were, they had saved him from a terrible fate.

Probably.

"Look, I don't want to sound ungrateful," he said. The two men regarded him with something resembling faint amusement. "But am I in even more trouble than I was before?"

"Lying in the street, being kicked to death by hooligans?" H asked him.

Rokan gave an awkward grin, feeling the skin on his face tear just a tiny bit. "They're, uh. They're maybe a bit more than that."

H seemed unconcerned. "You have talents, young man. They got you into trouble, and we aim to have them get you out."

Rokan closed his eyes and sighed. "Talents. So you know why they were after me."

"Of course we do," B said, quite jovially.

"I am not going to work for you." He opened his eyes again and gave them what he hoped was a defiant stare, though its effects were somewhat spoiled by the need to keep looking from one to the other. "I needed to get into that vault, and I tried, and I failed, and they were probably going to kill me for it."

B made a tch sound. "These people were amateurs who were going to beat you to a pulp. We really cannot abide that sort of behaviour." He leaned in. "We have a proper use in mind for you, young sir."

"Look ... you know what it is I do," Rokan protested.

"You break into secure places," H said. He had not leaned in but was sitting upright; in fact, to the best of Rokan's recollection, he not moved during the entire trip.

"I don't break into them. I just..." He shrugged. "I undo the locks."

"That place you were trying to 'undo' had some quite powerful, time-sensitive safeguards. Ones that are usually bypassed only by very complicated - and very expensive - AI procedures," H said.

"Those aren't that big a deal," Rokan said.

They raised their eyebrows at him; not in admiration, he suspected, but rather in genuine surprise.

"Of course" – he rubbed his bruises – "I didn't know about their backup systems. Or how quick the guards would come."

"You're pretty good at this kind of thing," B said.

"When I'm not getting beaten to shit? Yeah, I rather think I am," Rokan told them.

The car glided to a stop. They stepped out, Rokan waving off the offered support from his two rescuers and gingerly finding his feet on solid ground. They were in some manner of underground parking complex, cars all around them at regular intervals. Rokan had no idea where they could be. The walls were metal and opaque plastic.

"This way, please, sir," B told him, raising an arm in guidance down one of the marked walking lanes beside the cars. "Mind you keep to the path, now. Some of the vehicles come fairly roaring in here, and we don't want to put you at risk."

They led him out, up a series of steps that led to a door. B arrived first and quietly stood in front of it. There was a hiss, then an extended pause, followed by a click as the door unlocked.

"Scanners?" Rokan asked.

"Cellular. Gaseous form," H told him.

"Seriously? Why not ocular, or DNA?"

"Those rely on body parts," H said. "Can't trust them."

They walked through the door, down a well-lit corridor that led them to other well-lit corridors. Eventually they went into a room that Rokan half expected to be terribly uncomfortable, like an interrogation chamber or a prison cell.

It wasn't. It was smaller than he'd expected, and outfitted with a carpet on which stood three faux-leather chairs. Two of them were side by side, facing the third. Beside that one was a small machine, a square block with dials and screens, on top of which lay variously coloured patches similar to the ones he'd received in the car. The machine put Rokan in mind of the world's first robot. The lighting in the room was pleasant, originating part from a large semitranslucent bulb in the ceiling, and part from standing lamps located in each corner. There were pictures on the walls.

"You can be at ease, sir. We only want to engage your services," B told him.

He sat, and the chair quietly moulded itself to him. After the beating, and after the tension of the drive - where, he now realized, he had been scared rigid even though the seats had been quite comfy - he felt the tension at last seep out of him, as if he were a dirigible stretched full of air that had been pricked with the tiniest of holes.

"We want you to put these on," H said, indicating the patches. "They will feel a little ... grippy, maybe a little sticky for a moment."

He hesitated, so B added, "Oh, don't worry, sir, we'll turn our backs."

"Where do I stick them?" he asked.

"Anywhere you like. They'll inject some things that can move around on their own."

He leaned forward and gingerly pulled off his shirt, wincing when he saw the muddy streaks of blood on one side, where he'd been cut, and the red welts on the other, where he'd been repeatedly kicked. As he applied the patches he found they stuck pretty well the moment they touched his skin. They adapted to his skin in a manner he didn't understand; after a little while he could barely see they were there.

B handed him a dry new shirt. He pulled it on and gave a pleasurable little sigh when he smelled its freshness.

"Who do you work for?" he asked them.

H, who was checking the machine, looked at him briefly and said, "A capsuleer," then returned to tuning the machine's dials.

The word raised such dread in Rokan that he felt as if electricity had been shot into his heart, doubling its beats and crackling out through his veins until it reached the skin of his fingertips. He gasped for air.

"Steady, now!" H said, raising an open hand with palm out either in placation or warning.

He took a deep breath. Whatever this was, it was bigger than he could probably handle.

B regarded him amiably. "Would you like something to drink?" he asked.

Rokan realized his throat was parched. "Yes, please," he croaked.

B left the room for a moment, then came back with a glass of water. Rokan drank it down. It was wonderfully cold.

He looked at the machine, which H had finished tuning. It was silent, but several of its monitors displayed ever-changing figures. "Do I have to ... I mean, what do I have to do?"

H said, "Nothing very much. At least not right away. We're just measuring some of your basic abilities. Do you feel anything?"

He sat there quietly, checking for itching, strange bumps, odd internal pokes, or anything he might not be imagining. The two men took their seats opposite to him and waited.

After a while he took in another deep breath and sank a little further into the chair, letting the backwash of adrenaline envelop him. It really was very comfortable here.

"No. Nothing much at all."

"Good."

"So am I going to be working for this man?" He checked himself. "Is it even a man?"

They nodded. "You could be very useful to him, and to others of his kind," H said.

He opened his mouth to speak, but hesitated. From the looks they gave him he was sure they knew what he wanted to ask, but he tried to say it out loud nonetheless - for some reason it was important to him to ask how he could be useful, to take charge of his own usefulness - but his throat was parched again and all that came out was a croak.

"We are measuring your ability to handle certain types of stimuli," B said, pouring him another glass of water from a transparent can. Rokan couldn't even remember him having left the room to get the can. B continued, "The tests shouldn't reach you at a conscious, perceivable level, at least not the kind we're doing right now."

"So what are they for? Is this a health check before I go on board?" Just the words go on board gave him a nice, warm little sense of freedom. He found that he didn't care much about what he'd have to do. He'd be away from here; on a spaceship, out in the darkness. What an adventure.

B gave H a look, who said, "It's a check, yes. We want to see if your brain can handle the pressure."

He liked their funny speech, and the odd way they emphasized things. "Like a capsuleer," he said. He really felt very cozy. "Can I have something more to drink?"

B filled his glass while H continued, "Yes, precisely so. Capsuleers interface with modules in very much the same way that we're having your body do now, albeit at a much simplified level."

Rokan drained his glass in two gulps. A question popped into his mind, one that he'd never have thought - or probably dared - to ask.

"Why isn't everyone able to be a capsuleer? If I've got talents..." He left the second question unasked, his voice trailing off.

B said, "Well, not everyone has the constitution. Capsuleering isn't just sitting in a pod. It's a thoroughly complex interaction of many different elements, mechanical and biological, that converge inside a person's body."

H added, again with that weird emphasis, that certain sections of the brain were capable of dealing well with certain parts of that interaction. "It isn't quite understood how they work, but we're constantly researching it. Sometimes we find out how certain ship modules can be better adapted to the capsuleers, so that their output or function can be improved. But it's hard."

"I can imagine. Must be ... complex," Rokan said.

"Not so much, but it's a difficult bit of ..." H waved a hand, apparently looking for the term. "Reverse engineering."

Rokan started to say something, but H plunged on. "There are a million ways to adjust the modules. We're just

not always aware of exactly how they should be adjusted. First we need to find a brain that's capable of operating at better capacity than hereto identified, and then we know in what direction to take the technology."

"Are these huge changes?"

"To be honest, they don't look that grand on paper. Maybe some piece of equipment, some module in a spaceship, raises its output by five percent. But that alone can make a huge difference in interstellar combat. It may turn the tide of entire battles."

"So you need candidates like me," Rokan said.

"Precisely."

"Am I going to get to meet the capsuleer?"

B and H looked at each other again. B said, "Mmm ... I suppose that isn't out of the question."

Rokan thought all this over. "That's awesome," he managed. The three of them sat in silence for a moment before he found himself bound to add, "I mean, I'll be happy to help you with your research."

"I know you will," B said, quite genially.

"But guys, I'm feeling really tired right now. Could we ... sorry." He leaned forward and rubbed his eyes. "Could we take a break?"

The fuzziness in his head was overwhelming. It felt as if the lights had been dimmed; and things glinted: the machine, the chair legs, the teeth of Mister B and Mister H, who were giving him big, benevolent smiles.

"Oh, it's alright," they said. "Rest now."

The room really was rather dark.

"Rest."

The Rite



Adron Srif felt the air move by his neck as he ducked – nearly too late – and heard the clang of the metal spear strike the wall behind him. He'd been running for hours. Sweat dripped from his skin, pasting his coveralls to his clumsy frame. He forced himself to move faster, ignoring the burning pain as every muscle in his body resisted. Frazov was close behind now. The next spear might not miss.

Adron ducked behind a stack of crates. He had to get out of the aisles. The path was too clear, too well lit. He hoped his pursuer would follow him into the light. He hadn't counted on Frazov fashioning ranged weapons. Stupid. Firearms and other advanced technology were forbidden. This had always been interpreted as melee weapons only. Nobody had turned the rite into a ranged fight before. Frazov wouldn't break the laws, but he would bend them as far as he could. Now Adron could only go further into the labyrinth and hope he could double back.

He ducked down another aisle to his right. Now to the left. Left again. He had to keep moving. Frazov's military experience gave him the advantage. The tribe never talked openly about their pasts, but they all saw the uniforms each man and woman wore as they were brought in. They all saw Frazov's tattoos, marking his past campaigns and kills. He did not talk openly about his past, but he went out of his way to display his marks. It intimidated the others. It kept him at the top.

Adron found a gap between two refrigerated containers. In the darkness he barely made out "frozen food" in block letters. He allowed himself only an instant to look over his shoulder for his pursuer. When no spear leapt from the darkness, Adron worked his way between the containers. His breath became shallow as the sides pushed in his gut. If he made it to the other side in time he might lose Frazov, at least for a few minutes. He was close to clear, only a few inches away, when he heard movement behind him.

It was a quiet sound, like the pattering of a hound on asphalt. Adron held as still as he could. He waited. Time slowed. The still air pressed upon him. The sides of the container began to condensate by his warm body. The pain in his legs became a dull itch. The smell of his own sweat sickened him. He desperately wanted to block everything out but that sound.

Minutes passed. The sound did not come again. Adron tried to turn his head to see behind him, but there was not enough room. It had been long enough; surely if Frazov knew where he was, he would have struck already. The ex-soldier was a sadist, but also efficient. Carefully Adron slid his hand towards the edge to pull himself through. Then the silhouette of Frazov appeared in front of him.

That Adron did not scream was a tiny miracle. He froze stock-still. In his childhood he had stayed up late watching holos of great planetside monsters that were attracted by movement. The only defense was to remain perfectly still and allow the monster's gaze to pass by. He had no reason to trust the old stories, but in that moment he could think of nothing else.

There was no mistaking the muscular frame of Frazov, even in the shadows. The soldier kept his center of mass low, ready to pounce. He held another sharpened pole in his hands. He kept two pieces of steel rebar in his belt for quick access. Thinning grey hair was closely shorn. Tattoos were mapped across his chest and back. Servos whispered as he moved his prosthetic arms, victims of some past campaign. The gold finish so popular among the Amarr had long ago worn off, leaving only a dull grey metal.

Absolute stillness. Adron concentrated on it with everything he had. His pursuer tilted his head, as if the hum of the refrigeration units were telling him Adron's secrets. Adron's lungs burned, demanding more air. It was too much. He couldn't hold on much longer. Then the Amarr swung the spear on the side of one of the containers.

"You have to be tired, Second. It has been a long chase. Forfeit now and it can all be over. I will even allow you some of your old freedoms. You can remain Keeper of Records. You can even write my memoirs. Do you hear me, Second?" He banged the spear on the container again. Relief flushed through Adron as he realized the strikes were down to nothing more than Frazov's own need for self-aggrandizing dramatics; the Amarr had no idea where he was hiding. "How about marriage? I know you've been eyeing Kathel. Submit to me, accept defeat, and I will bless your union. All you need do is stop running."

Frazov paused again, then grunted when no answer came. "My patience is wearing thin, Second. I might not be so magnanimous if I have to hunt you down." He pulled the spear close to his body and took off in a run. Adron waited several more minutes and, only when he was sure, squeezed himself out from his hiding place. He'd bought himself some time. He had to use it well if he was going to survive the rite, let alone win.

If he was to survive, he'd need tools. Adron wished he knew something, anything, about engineering traps. He knew how to keep things clean and orderly. That's how he'd risen to be Frazov's Second in the first place. The tribe would have descended into chaos long ago without his help. But Adron had gotten too full of himself and challenged Frazov's direction. He'd thought he would outsmart the old man in minutes, quickly rising to First. He hadn't counted on the Amarr's speed.

Maybe if he had something that moved faster than Frazov? He could find a crate of firearms, and then destroy the body so nobody saw the wound. No. It wasn't just a law for honor's sake. Gunfire would set off security alarms, bringing the authorities down on the whole tribe. There had to be another solution. Adron inhaled deeply, closed his eyes, and calmed himself as the tribe had taught him.

He remembered the day he was plucked from the stars. The explosions. The wind that ripped him from his hall and tore the broom from his hand. The cold. He remembered the god's chariot, the light and warmth within his craft. The miracle of his new life. He remembered the Pilot. Then he had his answer.

It took an hour to prepare. The labyrinth was a monument to the Pilot's exploits. It was easy to become lost among the hundreds of aisles of equipment and containers. A strong head for order was needed to navigate the maze without the aid of a datapad. Luckily it was a trait Frazov lacked. Adron only got lost twice while gathering the right materials.

The crates and equipment were arrayed in a large circle. Floodlights illuminated the center of the circle. As a final touch Adron painted himself in dramatic war patterns, using engine grease and painter's chalk. He allowed himself a momentary smile at his own cleverness. There was little else to do, now. He hefted the makeshift spear he had recovered from Frazov's failed attempt. Adron walked to the center of the ring, practiced his breathing technique one last time, and slammed the spear upon a crate.

"Frazov! You get yourself lost? Here I am! Why don't you face me directly? Stop this great Amarr hunter crap." Adron's heart raced. The lights made him the most visible thing in the bay, but they also prevented him from seeing anything outside. For all he knew Frazov was standing outside the ring now, staring at him. Worse, he thought, Frazov might not even get that close; the second spear might merely leap from the darkness to impale him directly. He obsessed over that image until his vision blurred from the stress. He struggled against nerves to yell again. "Frazov! W-what's the matter? Afraid of a proper fair fight?"

"Really, Second?" Frazov's voice came. "You're trying to lure me in with the fair fight line? If it were a fair fight, you would be dead in seconds. But you know that. You would only call me out if you had a trap prepared. So tell me, Second, why shouldn't I just take you down now?"

"Because..." Adron trailed off. He was forgetting his lines! He shut his eyes to concentrate. "There's a holo-recorder to my right. A bit of a violation, but it's not really a weapon. Besides, you've got the arms. So, anyway, it's recording now. If you face me, one on one, you'll have video evidence of your victory. You could show it over and over again to celebrate your greatness and my defeat."

The voice snorted. "My vanity, now? You always were clever, Second. I'll tell you what: I will play along with this. You know I never could resist a show." A loud clang from behind startled Adron, metal striking metal. He spun around to find Frazov already in the ring, holding his own spear. "Anything else before I undo your trap and humiliate you, Second?"

"Yeah. We throw away both our spears. We fight as we were when the Pilot delivered us."

Frazov raised a single eyebrow. "Bare-handed, then?" He flexed a metal hand. "A severe handicap for you."

"No spears."

"Interesting. Your show, Second." With a smile Frazov threw his spear into the darkness outside the ring. For a moment Adron contemplated using his spear on his opponent then, but thought better of it. Frazov was still too fast. Adron threw his spear away as well.

No sooner had Adron thrown the spear than Frazov charged. Adron took a metal shoulder to the gut. He rolled on the ground, gasping for breath.

"Is this what you want, Second? Where are your tripwires, your spring-loaded javelins? Or maybe you just thought I'd feel bad for beating you senseless on holo?" Frazov sauntered to the other side of the ring, already confident in his victory. Adron tried to pull himself up on one of the ring's containers but tipped it instead. A milky liquid spilled out, covering the floor of the ring. Frazov backed away at first, then poked at the puddle with his foot. He laughed. "Grease? That's your big trap? You think you'll slow me with some damn grease? And really, Second, you could have at least picked a more slippery type. Look, I can walk right on it!"

Frazov marched through the puddle and over to Adron and lifted him straight up by the neck. Adron kicked and struggled as best he could, keeping one hand free to search for his find from the cooking supplies. "I didn't want to have to do this. If you had remembered your place, you could have lived the rest of your life as my Second. But now I have to defeat you. You will be exiled from the tribe. You will be sent back to whatever hellhole you called a home before the Pilot delivered you, and you will die alone, all because--"

Frazov's sentence ended in a scream as Adron threw a fistful of salt directly into his eyes. The Amarr grasped at his face, letting Adron fall to the floor. Adron scrambled up and to the other side. He grabbed a small chemical tub from another container. Frazov drew one of the pieces of rebar he hid and threw it at Adron, but his vision was so blurred that Adron easily deflected the rebar with the tub. The Amarr followed up with a blind charge, but Adron was ready, dumping the liquid contents of the tub at his feet while diving to the side. Frazov slid to a stop. The older man took a moment to clear his eyes, now red and angry, and fixed squarely on his opponent. He went to take a step, but found his feet wouldn't move.

"What the hell is this?"

"It's a chemical adhesive. The two chemicals are innocuous themselves. Put them together, though, and they react to form a mighty solid glue. And before you raise a fuss, Caldari ship builders were using this stuff centuries ago to put their wooden sailing ships together, so it's not advanced technology. Not technically, anyway." Adron smiled at himself again. He produced a small bottle of a third liquid that he sprayed at his feet. "This is a liquid solvent. It dissolves the chemical bond. I'll be glad to let you use it if you concede victory to me. If not, well, I've used that stuff to repair seal leaks. The stuff lasts."

Rage and confusion filled Frazov's face. "This wasn't combat! You can't win like this!"

"Pretty sure I can. The laws say I have to beat you. I beat you. If you hadn't tried to kill me with a spear earlier I might have let you stay as my Second. As it is, I think I'll have to exile you. You understand." Adron turned his back to the Amarr. The glue would hold. He'd let him stew for a few minutes, then he'd come back to negotiate. Frazov was useful. The tribe would be stronger for his presence. Adron paid no attention to the whirring sounds, or the quiet click of tiny mechanical parts moving into place. All he took notice of was the bang, but by then it was too late.

Kathel took the third clipboard from the security officer and began filling out the forms. Each form required seven signatures, none of which Kathel was legally able to sign. The tribe had worked out an agreement with station security long ago to avoid most such legal complexities. Filling out the forms in paper was longer, but avoided digital identity safeguards. Bureaucracy has its own complex ceremonies.

"You sure this is how you want it to go down?" the officer said. "Drug fight, I mean?"

Kathel didn't look up from her clipboard. "Is that unreasonable? Pilots often store numerous drugs."

"No. I mean, yeah, it's reasonable. Just, these are your friends, right?"

"Family is a better term."

"Family. Well, after the weapons fire, we arrived on the scene to find your Amarr uncle glued to the floor, your Deteis cousin dead on the ground with a hole in his head, and a holoreel of the two beating the crap out of each other until the uncle takes out your cousin with a snub-nosed baller, concealed in a prosthetic limb. Now, we both agree it's in nobody's interest to put all that in the report, but don't you want something more dignified than a drug bust for the two of them?"

"The one that deserved dignity has returned to biomass. The other broke the laws, and therefore deserves no dignity." Kathel replaced her pen within her dockworker jumpsuit and handed the completed forms back to the security officer. "There you go. I believe everything should be in order."

The officer took the clipboard and checked the papers over. "Alright. The Deteis was one Adron Srif. Pronounced legally dead after a capsuleer raid on a station two years ago. Suspect is Frazov, Corporal in the Amarr Navy, listed as KIA a year ago during a raid by capsuleer pirates. The Empire's going to have a fun time working back into the system just to try him, I bet."

"Returning to life is never easy, for first you must die."

"Right. You know, I can make some calls, get your identities back. Bet you the capsuleer doesn't even know you're here. You don't have to live in this weird legal purgatory just because CONCORD and the empires can't get their acts straight."

"Officer, have you ever truly belonged somewhere? Where you always feel safe and at peace because you trust the one above you implicitly?"

The officer nervously scratched his head. "Uh."

"That is what we have here. I appreciate your kindness, but we are perfectly fine." She walked the officer to the exit from the cargo bay back to the main station. He was nearly out the door when he turned back to face her. He held out an ID chip.

"Let me know if you have any other concerns. Here's my comm ID if you think of anything. Ask for Bellot. Anything I can do for you, miss...?"

She took the chip and placed it in her pocket. "First. You may call me First." The officer raised his eyebrows and began to ask, but thought better of it and turned away. Kathel sighed to herself. The rite had ended badly, and now she had to pick up the pieces. The man Bellot seemed nice enough. She entertained the idea of bringing him into the tribe, but she quickly dismissed it. She could not make someone a tribe. They had to be delivered. She would have a partner, eventually. The Pilot always provided.

Innocent Faces



The man in the garish robes and discolored wig was applying the last of his makeup when he heard a knock at his door. He scrambled from his seat and nearly tripped over his oversized red shoes as he scurried to the door, cracking it open to peer at the person outside the room.

"Cherall...I mean, Dr. Adad? Sorry to bother you, but you have a visitor. She'd like to meet you before your show," said a lady wearing a headset and holding a large datapad. She glanced impatiently from side to side, tapping her foot.

"You know I don't like visitors, Raha. Especially right before I go live," he replied with a hint of agitation.

"It's a sponsor's kid. One of the holders in the Kor-Azor family. She'll only be a minute," Raha whispered. Cherall looked down and saw blond curls peek through the door's frame a full meter below his producer's face. He sighed softly before nodding his head and opening the door more fully.

"My apologies. Come on in, child." Cherall shot a dirty look toward Raha, who offered a short smirk before bustling down the hallway. She spoke over her shoulder as she turned a corner: "Don't forget, you go live in five minutes."

The little girl looked up at Cherall with wide, green eyes as she stepped into the room. Cherall closed the door and smiled at her. The wide, red grin painted on his face accentuated his expression, and the nanite-infused compound on his cheeks glowed softly as various shapes illuminated around his cheekbones, spinning and bulging across his face. The little girl giggled at the sight, holding her hands in front of her mouth out of politeness.

"What's your name, little one?" Cherall inquired, sitting down in his makeup chair gingerly, his knees cracking with the exertion.

"Fimiris," she whispered through her hands, still staring at Cherall.

"Are you a fan of the show?" Cherall opened a drawer at his desk, rummaging through its contents.

"Yes, I am. I watch it every day." The girl's face flushed a dark crimson as she moved her hands behind her back and straightened her posture. "I named my favorite slave after Mr. Wayward."

Cherall's smile softened slightly as he continued to search through the desk, opening another drawer and

sticking his hand deep into its recesses. "That's very clever of you. Does your daddy mind that you renamed one of his slaves?"

"No, not at all. He finds it rather amusing, as do I." The girl waved back and forth lightly on her heels as she talked.

After another moment of intense scrutiny, Cherall found the object he was looking for: a thin holopad with his likeness on it. He grabbed a pen and scribbled on the image before handing it to the girl. "That's' very nice dear. But remember, Mr. Wayward is a cartoon character. Your slave is a real person, so be sure to treat him well."

He handed the holopad to Fimiris, who accepted it with a big grin on her face. She giggled again as the image altered and played a short scene of Cherall juggling bright, red orbs. "Thank you, Dr. Adad! I will certainly make sure to treat Mr. Wayward well."

"You're a sweet girl. You remind me of my daughter, you know. You and her would get along very well. Now, off you go. I have to get ready for the show."

As the little girl left the room, Cherall glanced to a sign posted above the dressing room's door. It was a simple wooden placard with blocky letters burned into it. The sign contained a short passage from the Book of Reclaiming: "Lead all children to the light of God, for Heaven is theirs to inherit." Cherall stared at the inscription, deep in thought. After a few moments, his meditation was broken by the buzzing of a datapad on his desk.

* * *

"Children of God, do you know what time it is?" The voice echoed throughout the mostly empty soundstage. A chorus of high-pitched voices responded in unison: "It's time for Dr. Adad's Wild Time!"

Throughout the room, dozens of lights flashed on and hundreds of children's faces appeared throughout the empty space, filling the area from ground to ceiling with holographic projections of smiling children clapping their hands to the upbeat music reverberating in the room's atmosphere. The children's images flickered as they clapped their hands in time to the music. After a few minutes, the clapping turned into full applause as Cherall entered the room, running onto a lighted stage and performing cartwheels and somersaults across its width.

Camera drones followed his routine from multiple angles as he flitted around the stage and spun wildly into the air. The music throbbed louder and the children's applause intensified as Cherall completed his gymnastic barrage by launching himself in the air with the help of his gravboots – and floating back down to the stage floor with eight consecutive rolls in the air. He landed softly, raised his arms, and the music stopped. The children burst into applause all around him, their images flickering more intensely.

"Hello, children. I'm Dr. Adad, and welcome to my Wild Time!" Cherall bellowed to his audience, who applauded wildly in response. Cherall hushed them with a wave of his hand. "We have a very special show to you today, as we are filming this live from our studios on Nakregde II." More applause ensued.

"As always, I'd like to begin this show with a prayer. Let's bow our heads."

Cherall's painted face retained a solemn expression as he bowed his head. Inside the room, hundreds of holographic faces followed suit. Across the cluster, millions more children bowed their head in prayer as they watched this live feed, their parents smiling with bemusement.

"God, you are a gracious God, and a forgiving God. We do not deserve your blessings, and we submit our lives to you. You bring us joy and you bring us sorrow, but we endure everything in your name. Please grant us the wisdom and the courage to follow you to Heaven. Amen."

Cherall tilted his head up and looked into the nearest camera drone.

"And now it's time for the fun to begin! Unfortunately, Professor Playmate is no longer going to be joining us in the festivities: He's back at school teaching the Theology of Fun! But not to worry, because his brother will be joining us, and I'm sure you'll love Emperor Excitement."

The audience was silent in response to this news. Cherall panicked briefly, beads of sweat brimming on his brow and laughed nervously. "But while we wait, why don't we see what's going on with Mr. Wayward?"

The audience burst into applause and many children whooped and hollered in delight.

A smile slowly crept upon his face. On the vidscreens across the Empire, children laughed aloud as his cheeks flared with glowing numbers, letters, and symbols, the glyphs morphing and moving along to a bossa nova rhythm that had emerged in the background. Cherall's eyes followed the glowing symbols as best they could, crossing and uncrossing, twirling and darting inside his sockets.

The clown's smile intensified as the camera drone focused deeper onto his face. The glowing symbols changed

colors and swirled together, forming more complex images and figures. As the theme song continued its rampant rhythm, a person emerged among the glowing shapes: a tall Minmatar man, dressed in plain clothes and covered in tattoos. Two more figures emerged shortly afterward. One figure was that of a shorter Amarr man in elegant robes and pale skin. The other was a large, anthropomorphic furrier standing on its hind legs and wearing a dress. A title in big, animated letters zoomed over the heads of these characters: "The Adventures of Mr. Wayward and Friends," followed by the subtitle, "Today's Adventure: The Thief among Us." Off camera, the children exploded into applause.

* * *

"Cherall, it's Tadama. They took our daughter."

Cherall stared in disbelief at the woman projected onto the vidscreen. Tears were streaming down her face and her auburn hair was hanging in front of her face in tangles. Cherall cleared his throat.

"Who took her? When did this happen? What's going on?"

"I don't know," sobbed Tadama. Her bloodshot eyes pleaded with Cherall. "They just sent me an image of her. She's still alive, but they told me they'd kill her if I told anybody that she was missing. Except you. I think they want to reach you."

Cherall stood up slowly, his knees creaking. He stood on wobbly legs as he moved to the nearest data console in his vast living quarters. "How am I supposed to contact them? And who exactly is 'them' anyway?"

Tadama entered some information on her vidscreen. She sniffed loudly and wiped her eyes with her hands before turning back to face Cherall. "I just sent you a contact number. They want you to reach them through there."

Tadama glanced around her, panic in her eyes. Tears rolled down her cheeks and blotted her collar. "Cherall, you have to do whatever it takes to get her back. She's our baby girl. And ever since you moved out.... Well, she's all that I have left. I can't lose her like I lost you."

Cherall winced and looked down at his data console. His eyes were bleary and he grasped the console until his knuckles went white. "I'll do what I can, Ta. Meanwhile, I want you to go to the police and..."

"No, I can't do that. They'll kill her if I do that. Please do what they want before--"

He raised his hands and closed his eyes, a single tear streaming down his face. "Ok, ok. Don't go to the police. I'll talk to them first and see what they want. Anything to get our little girl back."

Tadama's face softened, and she brushed her mottled hair out of her face, revealing her unblemished, pale skin – "God's imbued essence," as Cherall used to call it – beneath her wild, curly locks. Again she wiped her eyes, now raw from this repeated action, and smiled half-heartedly at Cherall. "Thank you, honey. I love you."

Her ex-husband nodded his head and waved goodbye as he severed the call.

* * *

The nanites shifted into place, forming the words "The End." The camera drone zoomed out to show Cherall's eyes rolling around and around inside his eye sockets, feigning dizziness. The children again clapped and cheered as the camera continued to zoom out. When Cherall saw his full image again showing on the vidscreen monitors around the stage, he lunged backward into a complete triple back flip, and landed on one hand. Spinning in place, he twirled once more into the air before landing on his feet and smiling to the camera.

"So today we learned about stealing, and how wrong it is to steal from God's Chosen." He folded his arms in an exaggerated manner and leaned back on his back leg. "As God's people, we Amarr are entitled to the bounty of God's creation. The Minmatar, being wayward children, have not earned their right to God's kingdom. Thus, they must live with the lot given to them by us, God's chosen people." Cherall raised his arms again. "That's why Mr. Wayward was punished for taking Flonta Furrier from his holder. By stealing from his holder, he was also stealing from God."

Cherall twirled in place, his body twisting violently as it gained momentum. He pirouetted in a constant motion and propelled his body across the stage, continuously spinning as he progressed in a figure eight. As he performed his signature "Spindlemas" dance to the children's delight, a woman appeared at the other end of the stage. She was dressed in a long, white, flowing dress with a white parasol in her hand. Bright red flowers adorned her hair, and brilliant colors flashed across her dress as she tiptoed around the spinning clown.

The children laughed and clapped as she followed Cherall's gyrating form, attempting to catch up with him. Finally, Cherall spun in place for several seconds, allowing the woman to sidle up to him. She stood on her tiptoes and extended her arm out, putting on finger at the crown of Cherall's multicolored head. Instantly, he stopped spinning and beamed at the audience in shock. He turned to the woman and gasped. "Miss Melody, I can't

believe it's you!" he exclaimed.

The woman curtsied. "Here I am, at your service, Dr. Adad."

"Welcome, welcome. What do you have in store for us today?"

Miss Melody turned to the camera drone and ran to the front of the stage, dropping her parasol and holding her hands together. "Why, I'm going to sing you a song!"

Cherall ran up to stand next to her. "Do you mean it's time for...." All the children in the audience screamed with Cherall in unison. "Miss Melody's melodies?"

The audience applauded as Miss Melody curtsied again.

"That's wonderful," Cherall exclaimed. "What are you going to sing for us today?"

Miss Melody cleared her throat dramatically, pausing for a beat before answering. "Today I will be singing the classic hymn, 'The Children of Heaven Will Gather Together.'"

"We can't wait. Without further ado, take it away, Miss Melody." Cherall bowed to her, then ran backstage as the first notes reverberated throughout the hall and Miss Melody's pristine soprano lilted through the air.

When he reached backstage, Cherall found the nearest available chair and sank into it. He closed his eyes and took deep breath. He became lost in the song's beautiful melody. As he sat there, listening to the music, he cried softly to himself.

* * *

Tadama looked at Cherall imploringly on the vidscreen. "Did you find out what they wanted?"

"Yes, I did," Cherall replied.

"Well?" Tadama had bags around her eyes from lack of sleep. Her pupils were dilated and she had trouble focusing on the image in front of her. She drummed her fingers on the data console in ragged strokes.

"They want me to renounce my faith on my program and to cancel the show."

Tadama stopped drumming her fingers. "That's it? No ISK, no power deals, no nothing?"

"That's it."

"So when are you going to cancel it?"

"I don't know."

Tadama glared at his image on the vidscreen. She grabbed the nearest object to her – an urn – and threw it against the wall. "What do you mean you don't know?" she screamed.

Cherall stood up from his chair, his knees creaking as he did. His legs were wobbly and he could hardly stand. "I just don't know. That's not my duty."

"Your duty is to your family. Have you talked to Samne about this? The two of you have worked together for nearly 30 years now."

"Samne's dead."

Tadama gasped. She looked around the room in bewilderment. "What? When? How?" she stammered.

"They killed him two days ago. The same guys, these 'Bleeding Hearts of Matar' terrorists. They're a splinter cell of the Bloody Hand. They gave me this same threat last week."

"Why haven't I heard anything about this yet?" Tadama asked, her voice quivering.

"We've kept it quiet. We didn't know what to do. The Theology Council has officially endorsed our show for the edification of the faith. We couldn't cancel the show without explaining it to the Council." Cherall sat down again with a heavy sigh. Across the vidscreen, Tadama followed suit.

After a few moments of silence, she started to sob quietly. Between convulsing breaths, she muttered: "What...about...our...daughter?"

Cherall sat in silence as he listened to his ex-wife's whimpering. Finally, he said, "I have an obligation to my faith to—"

Tadama shot up from her seat and yelled at the top of her lungs. "Fuck your righteousness for once, Cher. They're going to kill Prandi!"

Cherall remained silent, his head bowed in prayer.

"You'll never see her face again because you don't have the balls to upset the Theology Council. What God would allow this to happen?"

Cherall raised his head and looked Tadama in the eye. "'The road to Heaven is paved with tribulation. Those who remain with my flock shall never be vanquished. Their family shall be reunited in Heaven so long as they remain faithful to me.'"

"You're a coward and a fool, Cherall. I'm going to the police."

* * *

At the end of the program, Cherall stood in the center of the stage, a single spotlight shining down upon him. He smiled to the camera drones.

"Now we must end our show for today. Please bow your head in prayer, children."

In turn, the children bowed their heads. In the air surrounding his body were the images of hundreds of devout faces peering at the ground or with eyes squeezed shut, their hands folded in front of their faces, and their lips moving softly and silently. Cherall followed suit.

"Dear God, you have taught us so much today. You have taught us about the sin of stealing; about your love for your children; about the sanctity of the body; and about the importance of faith. We pray for your forgiveness as we strive to understand your Word, and as we attempt to lead the life you have shown us. Please forgive us, for we are sinners. On our path to Heaven, we stumble; in our journey of faith, we get lost. But so long as we are found again, we are grateful for your blessing. Amen."

The children raised their heads and stared at Cherall. Cherall, in turn, raised his head as well.

"And now children, I must leave you for today. Go forth with God. We shall be reunited soon with God. Remember that God loves us all. Good night, and we'll see you tomorrow."

As the children applauded for the final time that evening, Cherall looked around at all the faces surrounding him, the hundreds of visages floating in the air inside the room, staring down at him and smiling. A single tear rolled down his cheek as he continued to look at them, searching hopelessly for something familiar among all the innocent faces.

Burnt



As the shuttle hovered towards the colony, Kanen looked out the viewport and marveled at the familiar terrain. He'd rarely seen it from this height, his face far too close to the dirt, and the last time he'd left the place he hadn't been in a state to enjoy much of anything at all.

The towers poked out of the ground like nails dropped into sand. The colony stayed in intense communication not only with nearby colonies and travelling starships, but with authorities much farther away. Its operations were regulated according to policies that Kanen had never really understood. Sometimes the crew was worked harder than usual, and sometimes ... well, sometimes nothing. They always worked hard. It was a question of calluses versus actual cuts.

Beneath the towers, the familiar rock and mud and mess. And, in the distance, the roiling magma that made it viable for human beings even to eke out a living on this rock. This was an active place, full of active people harnessing some very dangerous equipment, all sitting on top of what was effectively a big, crackling, active celestial volcano.

And beyond them, Kanen saw sky-wide nebulas streaking through all viewable space, dotted by planets in their thousands. Each one of those planets, Kanen reflected, by the sheer dint of their glow, would be large enough to eclipse his colony.

He looked down again. The burning glow from the magma reflected off the shuttle, casting it in red and orange hues.

"Goddamn," Kanen muttered to himself. As the shuttle started to descend he felt the light pull on his stomach and hands, as if someone wanted him away from the seat and out of the vessel; out for inspection by the stars that watched his every move from above. Away from the colony.

The hardest part in anyone's life isn't the crises they encounter, and if someone tries to tell you different, it says more about their lack of spine than it does about whatever problems they've had. Anyone can have a problem, or make mistakes, or suffer a goddamn breakdown. The question isn't what happened to you or what scars life inconsiderately raked over your hide - it's what you did after. How you got up again.

He walked slowly through the corridors of the colony's main operational section. There was no rush: he was expected by some people, and not by others, and he would take the time he needed to get this thing done right.

It was odd to be back, particularly without a task to work on. When you have been active for long enough in a particular place, you no longer see how it truly looks in brick and mortar, and instead experience it solely as the accumulation of tasks, needs, pauses and schedules at which you, of course, are the center. This giant wall, reaching to a ceiling many man-heights above, is no longer a wall; it is a route to someone's office where that meeting needs to be held, or a support structure that will need to be relocated as soon as the company moves on to the mineable rock beyond it, or simply a quiet place where you can take a breather for five minutes in between shifts and bum a cigarette from a pal. But when you leave - not merely this place but the web of duties, actions and results it has woven you into - and then you come back, you come back to it as a dead thing. You stand outside the life it contains, like a ghost.

He walked down corridors that held few people, even fewer he knew and none of whom seemed to know him. A door at the end bore the moniker Betel Saraanen and the title Supervisor below it.

Kanen knocked and entered. A man sitting at a desk looked up from a slew of reports, blinked a couple of times before he recognized the visitor, and said, "I want you gone."

"Don't we all," Kanen said. He closed the door behind him and leaned against it. There was a chair in the room but he did not sit down, nor did Betel indicate he was expected to.

"I want you gone," Betel repeated, "but there's rumors of Sansha coming in, so we've got the usual panicky flights off-base, and the capsuleers have wrecked nearby colonies to the point where we can't pull in new teams."

"And the ore needs to be mined."

"The ore doesn't need the likes of you," Betel told him, then confirmed with a sigh, "But the ore, yes, does need to be mined."

Kanen stood there in silence, listening to the rhythm of the colony. The regular beats that drummed up through the floor proved the mining works were operating at full swing, and the occasional tremor through the wall against his back indicated that the explosives experts were gleefully earning their pay.

"So you better get to work," Betel said at last. "The details are in your datapad."

You don't spring back to action. That's what I learned. After breaking away, and taking the time off you needed to recuperate, you're not exactly raring to go again. Rather, you need to slowly rev yourself up, like an old, worn, grimily oiled piece of mining equipment, spluttering and coughing in the poisonous air of the mines, sidling and sliding into action one more time. You haven't had a broken part replaced; you overheated and were given time to cool down, but nothing in you is back to new. Just a little tattered, perhaps a little broken, and uncertain how much it'll take before you give way again.

The workers' changing rooms were a ways down to the far end of the colony. Kanen knew his allotment, locker and equipment had been left untouched, likely less out of respect than a feeling of bad luck. Miners cared about luck. They'd run out so often that they viciously hoarded what little they managed to scrounge.

There was a good while left of the current shift, and when it ended another one would begin. According to his datapad entry, Kanen had been assigned an area to oversee, but not a particular team of people; rather, he would be present along with any other midlevel overseers on shift to guide operations in that particular part of the mining grid and to jump in as needed when brute force was required. He could walk in at any time and start picking up the slack. The active team wouldn't be happy, but that was no worry of his. The active team working in the depths of an unstable asteroid colony, floating around unprotected in deepest space, was not expected to be happy.

So it was with no pressure but that of the churning dread of guilt that he turned and headed not to the changing rooms, but to the living quarters on the other side of the colony. He got in at least a minute's walk before a familiar voice called out his name, and a body marched straight up to him.

"Corwan," he said to the approaching form. He walked on at the same pace. The younger man, who was about his height but rather less built, sped to keep up.

"Good to have you back, man," Corwan said. He seemed about to slap Kanen on the shoulder, then reconsidered. "How you doing?"

Kanen gave him a look. "What can I do for you, Corwan?" he asked.

"Well, I'm just wondering. I'd heard you were back and wanted to see if we could have a chat about some, uh, staff issues."

"If we could talk about staff issues?"

"Certainly."

"Would those be," Kanen slowly said, "staff issues that occurred before or after I pile-driven a massive operational piece of mining equipment into a pit full of an intensely, if briefly, surprised group of people? Are those the ones we should discuss?"

"That wasn't your fault," Corwan quickly said.

"It was very much my fault, unless you want to pick out someone in that pit as having deserved what happened to them."

"No! No, no, not at all. But, uh, we do need to think about some changes that have been occurring here, or needing to occur, even before the incident. Are you coming back full time, by the way?"

"Supposedly," Kanen said.

"As an overseer?"

Kanen ran a hand over his face as he walked, then shot the man another look. "Corwen, it's not that I don't appreciate having at least one person here happy to see me. But the mere fact that I'm back here in my old position, however temporarily, means there's one less slot for you to grab if it's overseer status you're angling for; and don't –" He raised a hand at Corwen, who looked very intent on saying something. "Don't pretend that you're not climbing, because we've seen you from afar, coming up, knife in mouth. So let's skip all the camaraderie and the united front dumbass farce, and engage with the real issue instead. What is it you really want?"

Corwan was silent for a moment as they walked, visibly gathering his words. Eventually he said, "You can't be gone."

"I was gone for a while, son."

"But you weren't gone gone. They still held your position. Even before the Sansha rumors and the capsuleer attacks, they wanted you back."

Kanen was impressed. Anyone who'd caused the kind of accident he did would have been out on his ass. He certainly wouldn't have spared any member of his own team if they'd done what he did.

He quelled that thought. It would only lead to pride, and he had not earned that feeling. He hadn't even earned relief, though he hoped the end of this walk, if Corwan ever let it end, would help him on that path.

Corwan continued, "I won't get pulled up while you're here. No one will."

Kanen considered this. "That's the point, isn't it? You want me gone because I'm holding you back from promotion, but even while I'm here, at least nobody else will get the job, either."

Corwan nodded miserably. "I, uh. I need a bit more time to iron out some issues."

"Some issues."

"Some issues with the boss," Corwan said. "Just some... well, like I said, stuff I need to iron out."

"Make your position clear," Kanen said and couldn't help a little grin.

"Yeah, I—" Corwan caught the sarcasm. "Anyway, yes, I'd like you here so I don't lose out on a promotion to someone else. But I'm also glad you're back."

"Thanks," Kanen said. He believed it. Corwan was a climber, but he wasn't dishonest, at least no more than someone needed to be if they intended to make their way to the top by dint of being too oily to hold back. "We'll talk about this later. I need to see someone else now."

"All right. Thank you," Corwin said. "And, uh. Welcome back."

The younger man walked off, leaving Kanen to make the last of the trek alone. Despite himself, he couldn't but

appreciate Corwin's honesty. The problem with career climbers was that everything they said tended to be tainted by want. There was the direct meaning of their words, which was always clear and usually more than a little flattering, and then there was the hidden one, the real motivation, which involved their own desires and which you had to discern like you were looking through a darkened glass. Having one of them break cover, as it were, was something to cherish.

He passed a few others on the way, and noticed the way they spotted him, but tried to ignore whatever they said. Snippets of one conversation did pass through his filters.

That's him. Over there.

That dude?

That dude.

He's the one? The guy who—....

That's the one.

Oh. Wow.

There was a pause.

He's old.

Kanen grinned again, and marched towards the personal quarters.

A knock on a particular door, a deep breath, and when it was opened by a woman her eyes went wide and she slapped him hard in the face.

He didn't raise his hand to his cheek, though it felt on fire. Her nails had broken skin. "Hi, Beth," he said.

"How dare you show up here?" she said to him in a voice so quiet it approached a whisper.

"Can I come in?" he asked. When she made no move to let him in, he added, "Beth, I'm back. I am going to be on the colony for some time."

She glared at him, her lips pinched together. Then she stepped aside without a word. Kanen walked in past her, into the living room, and sat down on a couch.

It was a sizeable living room. The apartment was meant for two people.

"I don't have a lot to say," Kanen said to her as she walked into the room. She did not sit.

He added, "Not as much as I'm sure you'd like to say to me. Nothing's going to help much. I just wanted to let you know I'm sorry from the bottom of my heart, and that I'm trying to make amends."

"By coming here?" She stared at him. "You think you're making amends by coming back... here?"

"I was asked to come back—"

"By who?"

"Saraanen. He needs people right now, and I've recuperated enough."

"That's nice. That's nice. I'm glad someone has."

"Beth, I—"

"My husband nearly died because of you."

"If I could do anything for J—"

"Don't say his name! Don't you say his name. He was seriously hurt." She looked away for the first time. "He's still in there, on his white bed in that horrible room, and he nearly died. They won't even let me see him except on weekends."

"Has he ... come back at all?" Kanen asked.

"A couple of times. We spoke a little, but he drifted off. They think it might be all right some day but we don't

know when, and the brain injuries mean he might not be able to..." Her voice sputtered, then failed her. She breathed deeply. "Why did you return? What can there possibly be left here for you, except more people to hurt?"

"I don't know, Beth. Some way to show I'm not a tired old man who's lost it for good and who puts his friends in terrible danger," he said. It was an honest thing to say, or at least it felt that way to him, and for the first time in their talk she met his gaze with something that didn't resemble hatred.

He got up. "I didn't want to make this long. Just wanted to let you know, before you heard from anyone else, or saw me around. I won't be getting in your way. But if he gets better, I do hope you will let me know. I really do."

He turned and walked to the door. "Take care, Beth," he said before leaving her quarters.

You know you have to go when you start to fail, little by little. The final break that pushes you out - which will always be terrible, and far more costly to other people than it was to you - is not some single event, some great explosion that is isolated from everything else. Not a single grand failure but a cascade of smaller ones that you just can't grasp, no more than the pebbles falling through your hands. They add up and they keep adding up in a monstrous framework of dangerous failure until finally, by some banal coincidence, something finally tips the whole thing over.

And people get hurt.

All those little mistakes, the ones you wouldn't have made if you weren't so tired, and you want to say: It wasn't me. This is not how I live my life. This terrible wreckage, this is not the work of a man like me. But you only think like that after the fact, and by that time you can no longer attract attention to what you did. You are advised, by those few who will still talk to you when you surface as a human being again, to 'let go of the past.' Let go of the past and 'live in the now.' Never mind that my past includes several decades of not fucking up, before everything started to slide, and that my Now involves an old man about to work on a ratty piece of equipment on the hard edge of a rock floating in deadly nullsec. To hell with the Now. I'd live in the past if I could; the view is infinitely better.

He walked on. He didn't know what was driving him on: atonement or sheer stubbornness. There was one person who wanted him here, one who wasn't sure, and one who wanted him dead and gone. If he did this, it wouldn't be noble, but it wouldn't be for a debased reason, either. It involved pride and selfishness, yes; but mostly, he suspected, it involved the need to do something - anything - with the rest of his time other than watch it pass him by.

As he passed into the corridors that would lead him to the changing rooms, he saw, through the glass alloy walls, the world outside this place. There were asteroid mountains in the distance, and beyond them, the sun shining bright. He felt the thrum of the earthworks as he walked on and on. And every face, even those who resented him here - and there were plenty - still showed a grudging respect, if only for the fact that he had lasted this long; he lasted this long and he returned.

He walked on, losing track of time. The harness of his old machine was there; he could see it now. It was empty. It was waiting for him.

"The Shrinking Skin"



In this room, the only sound was the faint hum of the humidifier, and the slightly nasal breaths of the room's only occupant. That person was named Robert, called Bob, overweight and nearing retirement age, and when he worked on his blueprints, it was to the exclusion of everything else.

Bob set aside the Vespa schematics and rubbed his eyes. It had been a long day, and the deadline for the blueprint improvement was fast approaching. Deadlines made him uncomfortable.

Usually he would close the door to his office, turn on the humidifier to keep his eyes from getting dry and his throat from getting raspy, and set to work. And when he worked, he was committed. He didn't understand those people who frittered away their time on the job. The workplace was for work. When you were given a job to do, you did it, and if you did it well, you might be given the same job again, and then you knew you could do it in time. Routine and habit. That was the key.

Each blueprint was different, of course, even ones for the same items. All a blueprint did was show you a way to manufacture a given item in some way that the end result would meet the specifications set forth by the authorities. This included not only the attributes of the item, but the amount of material you had to include for the item to be considered structurally sound. The rest was up to you.

Despite the design freedoms it was all fairly standardized, which Bob quite liked. Special teams of researchers could re-work blueprints to require less materials or time for production, and scientifically minded pilots could help out as well, but all in all there was little variation between jobs. Bob had long since found that, given the rigid requirements for the attributes of each produced item, the corresponding blueprints tended to be rather similar to one another. One Vespa blueprint might have a different circuit outlay and a few extra screws here and there, but that was about it. Most of the time went into putting the new blueprint through standardized testing, to ensure that its products would stand up to the stress of regular use.

There was a knock. Bob looked up, irritated. "Yes?" he said.

The door opened and a young man stepped in. He was in his early twenties, hair well cut, clothing casual but not too sloppy. He was smiling. He walked to Bob's desk and stopped, and it took Bob a couple of beats to realize that the man had extended his hand. Bob shook it.

"John," he said. "I'm told we'll be working together."

"Is that a fact," Bob said. "You're new on the team, I take it."

"Only started today," John said.

"Well then," Bob said, not getting up, "I'll be filling you in on what we're doing here."

John made to say something, but Bob kept going, "It's routine, for the most part. We get a blueprint, sign the standard confidentiality waiver, and off we go. There's a deadline for each task, but they're fairly easy to hit. We log things pretty well, especially work procedures. Obviously we can't keep logs of the blueprint contents, but we've gotten pretty good at logging extraneous stuff, patterns and suchlike, and those often come in use when we get another blueprint of the same type, even if it has a completely different way of building the item."

He motioned at the shelves beside him, which held rows of thin plastic datasheets. "Everything is logged. I like to keep backups, just in case, you know. I also have certain ways of signing off on things. It's not strictly necessary, since our computer system takes care of officially signing our work and placing it in the proper category, but I like to add a little touch of my own. So all files I've worked on have my digital signature, just to be sure that I've finished with them."

John again made to say something, and Bob cut him off again. "I don't mind if you ask questions, and you can come to me anytime you like. In fact, I'd prefer it that way. There's no reason to go bothering the big people about tiny little things, especially when you've just started and are still finding your feet, eh?" He smiled. "Exactly. Now, what project did you want to start on? I've got a Vespa here that's half done and I'm sure could be good warm-up. I'd check on it periodically."

"Actually, I was thinking of the brand-" John started.

"Now, please don't interrupt me," Bob said with a smile. "There are certain ways of doing things here, and I just want to make sure you're following them from the start. What's your specialty? Drones? Guns? Armor? Or maybe something a little more complex, like electronics or shields. I don't imagine you've gotten up to ships yet, but with time and proper training I'm sure you'll get a chance to try your hand at them."

"Thanks," John said, "but it's a little more complicated than that."

Bob blinked. "Really, now?"

"I do all of those. Ships included."

"Oh, I'm sure you've done tests, and all sorts of training routines," Bob said, still smiling. "But that was in school, no doubt. The stakes are a little higher here. There's proper workflows to consider, order to be kept. You can't just toss off some research project in an hour, thank you and go home. You've got to make sure everything is right and proper."

"Even with the new project?" John asked.

"New project? What new project?" Bob asked. "I haven't heard anything about a new project."

"Did you ask?" John said. Bob's smile disappeared. "I'm sorry, that came out wrong," John added quickly. "But I'm here to work on a new branch of research with your corporation. It's no longer enough to improve the time and cost of building the same items. We need to be more creative. We need to make something new."

"Something new," Bob echoed in a leaden tone.

"There's a meeting starting quite soon, and I just wanted to introduce myself before then. It'll all be explained there. I thought you knew about it, though."

Bob didn't meet his gaze. "I don't much hold with meetings," he said. "Senseless chatter, half the time. A man's place is at his desk, doing the work he knows."

"That may change," John said, smiling, and left the office.

"Welcome, Bob. Have a seat, please." The woman greeting him was Jorutte Duvolle, the CEO of Duvolle Laboratories. Jorutte was a people person and routinely attended or even held lower level staff meetings. Bob liked her. She knew her business, but trusted her people to get on with their work with a minimum of interruption. She might occasionally spend a little too much time chattering with people, Bob thought, when a CEO surely had more important things to do, but there was no purpose in bringing it up. Bob preferred to stay on friendly terms with his superiors. It kept the order of things clean and simple.

John was there, too. That was not clean and simple. Bob smiled at him, and he smiled back. Neither man extended a hand.

Jorutte motioned Bob to sit. She then activated a video projection, bathing the room in the faint green glow from the holographs. A screensaver of pies and charts revolved in front of their eyes.

"We're starting a new thing, Bob," Jorutte said. "Not all of us, but we need everyone to have a working

knowledge of it. And that has to include you."

Bob nodded.

"Have you studied the materials related to this new process?" Joroutte asked.

"Well, see, there's just so much to do," Bob replied. "The new batch of Vespas just came in, and then there's the weapons and the ships-"

"All right. That's okay," Joroutte said. "We know you're a hard worker, no worries." She sat down at the table, beside Bob. "We need you on this, Robert. Most everyone in our lab group has already tried their hand at invention. You're the only one who's left and isn't on sick leave. I know it isn't your favourite thing, but you're a fastidious, diligent worker, and I'm sure you'll find your rhythm in this in no time."

Bob looked crestfallen. "What do I have to do?"

Joroutte said, "That's where our new man comes in. John?"

John stood, cleared his throat, and took out a small laser pointer. It had an invisible beam that, when shined on the holographs, would alter the colour of the targeted area, highlighting it. He pressed a button, and the graphs turned from the pies and charts to a picture of a stick figure and a few square boxes. Each box had a label.

"This is the new process," John said, "and even though it can be a little complicated to work with at first - the research techniques are quite a bit more demanding than the ones you've done so far - it's really not that big a deal. You, as a lab researcher, take in a blueprint just like you've always done."

He indicated one box on the image, which lit up with the words 'Tech 1 BP'. "You'll forgive the shorthand," John said, "but it fits better on a slide, and I assume we're all familiar with the working slang for these things. If not," he added, "just let me know."

Bob remained silent.

"We're fine," Joroutte said. "Go on."

"The process really is the same as before. We take this tech 1 blueprint, and we improve it. Except the improvements are so extensive that we actually end up with a different item-"

"What?" Bob said, turning to Joroutte. "This, this goes against all procedures."

"Easy there," Joroutte said. "Let's hear him out."

John continued. "To do this, we need more than just the ingenuity of our researchers. Certain companies have prepared agglomerations of design patterns that can be automatically applied to the blueprints. We use those datacores, along with the data interfaces provided for them - it's the only way to access their data, and their contents are kept quite secret, obviously - and by doing so, we can simplify the projects enough for our regular researchers to handle. A bit of hard work, and perhaps some extra materials, and we end up with a new blueprint for a tech 2 item." He turned to Bob. "You really are doing the same thing as before, improving the design of an item. You're just getting a little computerized help to do it, and you end up with something new, in this case a copy of a tech 2 blueprint. We'd have liked to make originals, but the DRM on these things is horrendous, so we only have permission to make copies."

"And in case you're wondering, the datacores will never replace you or anyone else here. They're single-use only, and always need a guiding hand."

"I hope you're happy with this," Joroutte said. "It's a big step for us, but it's vital. We have to keep up with the competition, and any day now we may be contacted by pilots asking us to do this. Stagnation is the end, Bob. Stagnation is death."

"Do you have any questions?" John asked.

Bob stared into open air for a moment. Then he said, "No. No, nothing at all," slowly stood up and left the room.

The humidifier kept his office rather steamy. Bob liked it that way. He was getting a little cold in his old age, and besides, the heat seemed to discourage people from hanging around too long in his office. The door was closed, the air was warm, and the Vespa blueprint lay in front of him untouched.

There was a knock. John opened the door and entered without waiting for an answer. He sat down.

The two men stared at each other in silence.

Eventually, John said, "I'm here to work with you, Robert. If you have questions, or need any guidance, all you need is ask and I'll be there to help out."

Bob remained silent.

"The process really is that simple. And we won't get left in the cold by some hungry pilot who drops a project on our doorstep and leaves. The only ones who even get through the screening process are those who know something about the subject matter. Somebody asks us to change a shuttle into a battleship, we toss him out on his ass."

"And if we can't turn a shuttle into a battleship," Bob said, "then what? You toss us out on our asses, too?"

John looked at him, then looked at his desk. "Vespa blueprint, you said?"

"That's right."

"Material?"

"Time."

"Difficult?" John asked.

"Not once you get the hang of it."

"You like getting the hang of things," John said. He didn't wait for an answer. "There's a reason why you're the last one to start on this. There's a reason why the CEO of your corp held a special meeting just for you. There's a reason why this caught you by surprise even though it's been widely known in the corp for ages that a change was coming. There's also a reason you work with your door closed. And they're all the same reason."

"Stagnation," Bob said.

John nodded.

"Is death," Bob said.

"Of a sort," John replied.

Bob sighed deeply. He ran his fingers through his hair, then steepled them at the back of his neck and leaned back in his chair, looking at the ceiling. In his mind, he felt like he was enveloped in a net that was growing tighter and tighter, restraining his movement, trapping him. And he knew that the net was his own skin, and as it had shrunk through the years, he'd shrunk with it, for fear of accidentally tearing his way out.

John waited to see if he'd speak. When it eventually became apparent that the conversation was over, he stood and said, "Good luck to you, Robert. It's going to be fine."

Bob stood as well, but remained silent. He nodded.

John turned, went to the door, opened it wide and slowly walked out, leaving the door opened behind him. The humidity in the room lowered from contact with the outside air, and smells and sounds drifted in.

After a while, Bob walked across the room, and closed the door with a click.

Jita 4-4



Part I

It's after 9 PM at the terminal when I arrive. Most shuttles are switching out 15-minute schedules for 30-minute ones now. People draw together and wait, struggling to distract themselves in the seemingly endless space between. Bars, vending machines and VR booths fill every corner large enough to house them, offering up a quick, easy and overpriced escape from the intentionally gray concrete walls, illuminated only in the cold monotone of fluorescent lights. Pale and bloodless in this false glow, everyone looks like a vampire, something I would describe as convenient.

Now begin the dead hours, when things start to calm down, if you could describe anything here in those terms. Jita 4-4 may be one of the busiest hubs in the universe, particularly for the capsuleers, but the eternal dominance of the circadian rhythm makes itself known even here. Fewer shuttles leaving now? That's the station slowing her breath. Really it's us, our collective breath, but in everything now is the human imprint – for better or worse.

One rule is that you can't sleep here. For me, tired of travelling through a haphazard network from a station out deep on the frontiers, this particular custom is unfortunate. You see, despite my much younger exterior, today marks a much older birthday, and without getting too technical about it, I haven't slept in over three days. I've kind of forgotten how right now, and there's that moment in the lull, that seductive daydream that creeps up on me when I least want it.

Nevertheless, when in State space, I will do my best to behave. This is because the massive roster of station attendants, security officers and "information advisers" will actually wake you and remind you, as they like to say.

"Ma'am, I would like to remind you that there is no sleeping allowed in Terminal 1."

As if you'd actually forgotten. As if you intended to lie there asleep and vulnerable, while anonymous passers-by sidestepped your defenseless, lifeless body. As if you wanted to fall into that trap. As if you were, well...cattle.

They take a note, you see, and attach it to your Temporary Station ID. That's your first and only warning. The second time you drift off they don't say anything, they just start the clock. If you wake up before ten minutes is over, that's two. Three is either ten minutes, or a third nod-off. You think I'm kidding. You think there's no way they'd bother with this shit. Well, everything has its protocol, its hard parameters, its bottom line. Well, where are we again? Exactly.

Three times converts those little annotations into a vagrancy charge. Offenders are removed roughly, quickly and without a word. Vagrants don't deserve to be read their rights, because by definition they effectively have none.

Now, I remember a few decades earlier, everyone would fall into this trap. There were the actual vagrant types; dreary-eyed Minmatar with the signature Sooth Sayer drool, clearly homeless and reeking of their own shit, and then there was the Caldari businessman, upper management type, rules don't apply they think. Usually their first time here from some outer-regional post, Lonetrek or something like that. Even those guys, dressed in suits worth more than the yearly salary of the three men unceremoniously hauling their still-waking, highly confused, designer-label-clad asses out of here: even the mighty could be treated like the lowest. Nobody though, as far as I can see, has stumbled just yet.

I've come here to remind myself of the Caldari. And that's also why I take the stims.

There's the enjoyment factor, sure, but it has more to do with my aversion to cold cement streets and the types of people who roam them until dawn. There's vampires out there, too. Blame the circadian rhythm, or something.

As for what I'm doing here, well, let's just say for now that I don't want to fall asleep. In actuality, this has little to do with what might await me out there, and more to do with my lack of Temporary Station ID.

We're all supposed to have one, you see. Otro Gariushi's was 19, the first civilian number available on the rotating register. Even he, Otro Gariushi.

My first stop is the food court. The primary one, that is. The one the size of four Mind Clash arenas, that dominates the entrance to Terminal 1. You can't miss it, in that the place simply isn't designed that way. It's a four by nine kilometer sprawl of gastronomical consumerism like you've never seen before.

People come here just for this.

Everything you could ever want, from the fast and nasty (there is actually a vendor, or two, that run by this name) Minmatar bread-soups, to the most exquisite fine-dining on the mezzanine.

There's nothing quite as fresh as Jita.

Jumpdrives brought about some amazing changes. They helped us reshape our world with dramatic speed and

efficiency. Here in Jita at ground level, though, I'm reminded of the ways we've bent this technology towards more base means.

I say this because I can smell another human imprint, and it's something like the salty tang of freshly caught fish. Maybe just a little over an hour old. Back then, full of life, swimming upstream towards nothing under one of any number of alien skies. I follow the scent and pretend to be able to discern where: which planet, which continent, which settlement. Perhaps somewhere in Urlen, I consider, near one of the polar settlements, where the magnetic fields create these wondrously hypnotic purple skylines with clean, bright stars shining through the thin atmosphere. Perfect low-cost real-estate for entrepreneurial fisheries. Must be even cheaper now, I realize, given the proximity of the planet to market hubs, and the latest CONCORD madness allowing capsuleers to drop extractors wherever they damn please. Forgetting for a moment what I am, in some ways, I'm back to imagining rivers of pure glacial water, artificially rich with the most economically favorable species of the month.

Then I imagine that fish, driven only by blind instinct as it slides inexorably down towards some dark fate. I imagine an inevitably murky and cold end; a net, perhaps, but it's somehow not likely to be that romantic. These artificial rivers tend to be quite literally purpose-built to the end, with the flow of water eventually heading right towards the abbatoir. The Caldari have made it efficient to the point where you have to question their use of the word "fishing."

What's important though, is that from this stream it finds its way to a warehouse, maybe 10 minutes or less, as these things tend to be built into the actual rivers as well (at least if we're sticking to the Urlen fisheries).

Another 20 minutes and that fish is loaded onto the cargo bay of a freighter, and then perhaps swims around for a few hours inside giant plastic-lined bags filled with life-sustaining fluids, waiting for the launch. Then, most likely our fish dies somewhere in orbit, if the acceleration out of the atmosphere is a bit rocky. A space elevator is most likely just as inevitable here.

After at least another 10 minutes, it's at a station (and this can be pretty much anywhere in the known cluster if you have a long enough cyno net [and the best traders always do]).

After all that... all those hours spent dying, loading, launching, warping, docking... after all that, our fish is in something with a jumpdrive.

Within seconds it's here and in the hands of some of the Federation's finest culinary experts, where those succulently smoked and sautéed and skewered atoms permeate the domed terraces, filtering out downwards before they're slowly muted by the dull mix of cheaper breads and spices. I try to imagine just how many different atoms, from how many different planets, must be colliding around here right now. Cosmologically speaking, Jita must be a meeting ground for them like no other place ever before it, in all of human history. All because of isotopes, cynosural fields and jumpdrives. Think about that the next time you're dropping off for a bite.

Because it's important to realize how some things come about.

I've come here to remind myself of the Gallente. If you ever doubted the capitalistic might of their corporate giants, you should make a visit here too sometime. The entire area is dominated by their cuisine, which in a way makes sense, since Gallente food accommodates everyone. It has to. If you ever thought politics or laws were the primary concern of an infinitely fractured populace, think again. Think about tonight's dinner. I know I am.

One of the great accomplishments of the Federation's food services industry was the way they managed to slowly absorb their competitors. They did this through subtle and well-applied use of the nation's media

influence, which extends across all empires' borders. A predictable tactic, sure, but effective as anything. They don't play the Caldari corporate game either, and that actually gives them some advantages when operating in State space and abroad, even during the "wars" when everything is supposedly turning to shit.

I suppose the most insidious thing about their commercial success isn't the level of trickery employed on their own consumer base, but rather, the more fundamentally repugnant facelessness of it all. To survive economically in your opponent's commercial nexus like this, you have to lose your face. You have to become about something entirely impersonal. You have to become about a system, about a way of doing things.

This is why people will talk about the diversity found in Gallente cuisine. That's one of the darker sides to it. To most people this is perceived as something slightly simpler. They say that the Gallente have copied every other nation's cuisine, made fusions and called it their own, branded it as their own. This captures the essence of the issue, but doesn't identify the core.

These people say that we've arrived at the point where it's no longer even clear who owned what anymore (hyperbole: trademarks keep that perfectly clear, if only for the lawyers - most consumers don't even understand the most rudimentary networks of corporate ownership). The favorite topic amongst economists is the strange way (particularly strange to the Caldari) the Gallente economic model worked on pushing everything into the public domain and then recycling it, again and again, making it just different enough to justify the trademark. This is part of what I mean when I say they don't play the Caldari game. But again, people overlook how it was accomplished.

It's not all they overlook, either.

You see, for most people at Jita 4-4 and abroad in State space, it's enough that the logo on the restaurant they're eating at is a Caldari one, and for the Gallente business owners and entrepreneurs, it's enough that a little playing pretend is all it takes to keep dishing out foods of every type as they attempt to corner (or, most commonly, invent) another niche in this already hypersaturated market. Everybody knows the game, but their apathy to such things is well ingrained.

Take the Salted Amarrian Rockjaw.

Now this thing is a beast of a creature, quite familiar with the interiors of Amarrian torture chambers, too. It has a rather sweet taste, with a fresh salty aroma to the flesh. You can have that at Dieurelli with a side of Achuran Songbird wings in a sweet nut-and-berry sauce. This meal, to anyone there who eats it, is unquestionably Amarrian. It is a tasteful, politically correct marriage of Empire-State cuisine. Perfect for high-profile business lunches you want to keep hiccup-free (depending on your clients, of course).

A little further down, off the high-rollers' mezzanine and into one of the many corridors spinning a nebulous web below, you can get more adventurous with the Rockjaw at every corner. At Pmokka Caravan Delights you can have it seared over a traditional Brutor Khari oven, then watch as it's slowly de-skewered and served alongside tender pieces of traditional Pator Steak, bloody and still rich with life beside their impaled counterparts.

Some meals speak for themselves and many, do in fact, have something to say. This one says "I am unquestionably Minmatar."

But in every one of these restaurants, all you will ever see is pretty Civire girls waiting tables, with the silvery circular logo of the State out front. Meanwhile, in the engine room, it is most often Gallente chefs who will be driving things forward. Not just at Pmokka, but at Diurelli, and almost anywhere else you care to look behind the curtain. The Caldari think they're exploiting the labor of the Gallente, and the Gallente think they're influencing Caldari culture, one mouthful at a time. The Amarr and Minmatar? Shit, they aren't even really here. They're just ghosts; puppet apparitions dancing to the tune of friends and foes up north.

And this... this hasn't ever really changed.

I'm opting for a low-profile bite-and-run here, though (and keeping my mind off the steaks...) so I stop off at QuafeSnacks. The food here is, I suppose you could say, the very bottom line. It's not like Quafe hides it either. They have QuafeSnacks Premium and QuafeSnacks Premium Ultra vendor stands, and Quafe Deluxe, Quafe Deluxe Premium, and Quafe Elite restaurants plastered all over the courtyards as well. If you're at this particular franchise, you don't really have any illusions as to why.

Personally, I find a sort of perverse, gimmicky joy in watching the families order and endure. Most of the food here comes exceptionally cheap, you see, but there are no tables and no seats. The consuming crowds have to disperse and eat amongst the milling populace, at tables and ledges near elevators, escalators, walkways, and – best of all – in waiting rooms packed with people killing time on empty stomachs.

All designed, you see.

The bags that carry their food project subtle holograms above: a small news ticker, the current air temperature, arrivals and departures, station announcements. All to the side, all but consumed by the cool neon green of a Quafe logo. Then there's the perfectly manufactured scent of it all, the look of satisfaction and enjoyment.

It's the best way for me to blend in, you see, become just another billboard.

Yep, you can do pretty much anything here. Except sleep.

It's a non-starter for me anyways. If I fall asleep, then they'll see soon enough. They'll notice the sockets at the base of the neck, telltale signs of trouble.

While pleasantly dreaming, I'd be giving them an excuse, a reason, a motivation to look closely enough, and they'd realize quickly what I am. In these situations where we are uncovered, alone and incognito, lurking amongst the masses, they find it easier to just shoot us.

When capsuleers are involved, it's the only path with a predictable end.

If they woke me, and let me know that they know, well, who knows what would happen next?

I could be loaded with nanite viruses, armed with invisible spy drones, laced with biological contaminants. Who knows?

Maybe...

...I'm here to take a hit contract on some civilian in the crosshairs of a person with too much money and some serious grudges. Just walk up to them as they amble tiredly towards a shuttle and then boom, spray, bang, zap...who knows, but it's lights out either way and I'm laughing all the way to the nearest clone bank.

I could be here to solve all kinds of problems. Or, I suppose, cause them.

Whatever it is, it's assured by default that whenever a capsuleer is trying to blend with the baseliners (b-lining, they say – rather repugnant if you consider it) it's not because they're here to mingle.

Besides, the mechanics of it all are for them the same as mine. They have the authority to act with lethal force at a moment's notice. Against us, that is.

Hidden, uncovered, that is enough. Beyond that they have impunity.

Me, us, we always had it – so they get to catch up. A dangerous game I don't want to play. Some of you would just not believe the rumors I've heard. The stories of opportunistic savagery unleashed upon our kind when nobody who gives a damn is looking.

I hope a kind yet firm bluff will be all it takes. I know exactly what they fear, even better than they do. This counts for a great deal. I understand their countermeasures, and when you know their paths back to safety, you command attention. They, sadly, only have one go at this. For me this is practice. Something to keep my senses sharp after a long while doing nothing much, just mixing it up. Blame the circadian rhythm.

As for what I'm doing here, now, deep inside a sub-basement level following two Brutors who smell of alcohol (made from fermented Amarrian wheat, I establish, but keep to myself)... well, I'm following the scent. I'm here to remind myself of the Matari (always preferred that term).

But more specifically, I'm making a purchase.

More particularly, drugs, and to be explicit, we're talking some quite rare ones that have, curiously, become far cheaper in recent times... 'recent' meaning, here, in the weeks, months and years following the wormhole openings.

Strange, right? Well, see anybody complaining, making a public scene out of the fact? Exactly.

C3-FTM (C3-fullero-tris-methanodicarboxylic acid, in case you wondered) – I used to have to go to the mezzanine for this, and I remember how awkward it would be to order such tiny quantities in ushered tones, surrounded by an opulence that outstripped the value of my purchase by an order of magnitude. Obviously, the situation of demand and supply was complicated back then.

Now all I have to do is hook up with the local Minmatar smugglers, follow these two Brutor, and soon enough I'll have a whole fucking crate for the price of the meals I used to have to order as a disguise.

Maybe you understand now that I am no cynic to be asking: what's the catch?

Following these two along this dimly lit artery towards some unknown destination, I'm listening to a crisp, momentary tone as it's played out through invisible loudspeakers embedded into the walls, perfectly audible even down here in the bowels of the station. The two Brutor look over their shoulders at me for an explanation; they understand the game, but they don't get the language. I shrug a "nothing you need to worry about" and keep the pace down the darkened corridor.

It's interesting that they grasp this much. Perhaps the operation here isn't so reckless as I initially thought. My immediate suspicion is that I'm about to run into one of my own kind. Or, at least, another capsuleer.

Close enough.

That's one of the games, you see. Or one of the ways they divide us, class us, speak to us...look at it how you want. I see a game. In these momentary audio blips there is another, secondary message, a heavily compressed meta-stream lying obfuscated beneath expertly crafted static and white noise – all of it neatly engineered into a fleeting, innocuous bleep. Inside each one there's often quite a horde of information. Here, in this one: a neurovisual map marking VIP elevator access points, secure comms lines, security posts, and of course, advertisements for restaurants, accommodation and other venues that are all kilometers above where we are now, and with price tags to match.

It's one part Survival Guide to B-Lining and one part Here's What You're Missing Down There.

Maybe now you understand, too, why I wasn't about to explain this one to my Brutor guides.

"That? Oh, it was an advertisement for 4,600,000 ISK shoes, and a map showing twenty-five of the quickest routes out of here."

These guys just stare ahead and continue briskly along a hard right into a sharply twisting staircase that drops rapidly below what I just thought had to be the bottom of the station. I'm beginning to wonder how close we are to the surface, to the vacuum outside. Everything is quiet save for the low hum of ventilation ducts, occasionally rattling a new breath of hot air through these dimly lit catacombs. I imagine it all coming apart for a moment, and imagine surviving. There is comfort in the thought. After some time we arrive at a door. The two men stand beside it as it opens inwardly. I move to step inside and just from the way they both turn towards me, I know that this is as far as I come.

Staring inwards from the outside, I'm met by what appears to be a plainly dressed Vherokior seated behind a desk with wooden antiquated drawers that sound like they're run on ball bearings. She's writing something out on paper. Surrounding her are rows after rows of bookshelves, each filled with crates of drugs – and, from what I can see, the odd weapon too.

I reel instinctively, before I can even restrain the impulse.

She notices this and smiles, lowering the pencil. She's dressed like a commoner, it seems, but the way she carries herself and commands this strange scene screams money and influence, and comfort in deception.

"Yes, we're a bit old-school here," she says, looking through the locks of her perfectly straight hair, arranged traditional Vherokior style, no jewelry (unless you count rubber bands).

"So much for not leaving a paper trail." With the copycat pretension of it all, I can't help screwing with her a little bit. Tension is adrenaline and adrenaline is good; it keeps you awake.

"C3-FTM?" she inquires, ignoring the jab. I nod.

"Of course, glad to help."

"The cost?" She can tell I'm not really asking, that I don't need to ask. She can see the subtext.

She nods in turn. "Not much, these days." I hold her gaze. "You seem curious about why, hmm?"

"I suppose you could say I am," I tell her.

She waves me inside. "Then we can probably help each other here. Come."

I step inside as she opens another door at the rear of the room, and follow her into a narrow hallway lit by cold blue beams, all of them reflected in meticulously designed angles across the cavernous metal spaces above us, perfectly placed as though everything is ricocheting along the straight, rigid lines of Caldari steel (perhaps I should say Caldari Steel, since it's their product here). Something that looks like a turret is trained on me as I follow her, swiveling from its mount in the ceiling as it slowly spreads a web of red light over me.

Not sure what that just was.

"Is this still about C3?" I'm asking, raising my hands out of antiquated instinct. The Vherokior is looking over her shoulder at me as she slides out of the dirty robes around her, revealing a head-to-toe capsuleer's pod suit beneath, black with white linings. Must be a YC111 style.

"Of course," she replies. "We can speak in confidence here, you do realize?"

I don't.

We reach the end of the hallway and stop at another door. She looks at me strangely. I can see a sense of revelation slowly growing in her expression. I'm supposed to be realizing something here too, but well, that could be any number of things just yet.

"You're home, amongst company," she says quietly, sensing the reasons for my hesita as she stares about this strange room before us, but there's something practiced about the way she does it, and something definitely wrong about the way her eyes follow me wherever she looks. I think she recognizes me.

"No," I say. "I think you're mistaken."

"I'm not here because I'm," she begins, leaving the rest for me to fill in as the door before us slides away. "I'm here because I know a Sabik when I see one," I hear her say, just barely.

The room ahead of me is supposed to be a lounge of some kind, but I recognize its double use as someone's bedroom (not hers, a man). She stops at the edge of a few small steps leading down to a sunken central area, furnished only by a large, circular couch, overflowing with blue and purple cushions. I think she is motioning for me to sit, perhaps, but she is leading me away down one side of the room towards a ledge. Something else I recognize. Silver panels stretch across the top, adorned with tiny glowing buttons of various colors.

Understated. I like it, but I keep this to myself (she probably noticed anyhow). Each color is clustered in groups of four (that's Synth, Standard, Improved and Strong variants) and arrayed in pleasantly cascading rows.

I want to keep the bloodstream legal as possible, so if she offers--

"Synth?" she asks, already at least one step ahead of me. She spins around to face me, her left hand now resting on one of the panels; pastel sky colors gradating to a dark, inky ocean-blue. That would be Blue Pill.

"Tried the NOH variant yet?" she asks. I shake my head. "On me," she motions. Her fingers lift away from the blues and float towards a panel of warm, orange lights. I'm reminded again of the first room I entered through. That would be Mindflood, and all four of her fingers now resting on the smooth bumps in the otherwise impeccably smooth surface. I suppose that's her way of saying I won't be the only one about to let my guard down. I stare as she presses down, and hear the pressurized shots of chemicals escaping from the tiny nodes.

"Slightly stronger, still legal," she says, inhaling gently as she rubs her wrist and turns towards the couch. For a moment I regard the panel that houses the release button. Sky blue like the other, but with a tiny little NOH logo on top to differentiate. "Interesting," I say as I indulge.

She glides over the edge of the couch effortlessly and takes a seat at what appears to be the head of it. I hadn't noticed this in the design until now. I feel slightly dizzy as I climb over and seat myself at an acceptably middle-ground distance, not too close, not too far. There's a stupid amount of cushions here. I feel like I'm in a playpen. I kick a few away from my feet.

"Make yourself comfortable," she says.

"Strange setup you have here," I'm saying before really considering it. "Kind of hard to."

In truth, I am starting to sink a little into this thing and relax, but that's more down to NOH's latest pharmaceutical sleight-of-hand than this overcrowded cushionopia. Cushionocracy. Yes, definitely thanks to NOH.

"I'm curious about C3," the Vherokior says, almost absent-mindedly.

I'm curious about that Sabik remark, but I suppose we can get to that.

I turn to her. She doesn't seem interested in staring games anymore. "What, in particular?" I ask.

"I just handle goods," she says. "I don't need to understand much beyond the basics. C3 is interesting though."

Is it? I don't even bother saying it. I can feel my expressions betraying me enough to make the point.

She looks at me like it's some big secret. Some vast conspiracy. I'm not quite sure what to say.

I ask her how long she's been a capsuleer. 3 years. That's a good amount of time. Longer than I guessed.

I explain to her that C3 isn't really a drug. You don't get high off the shit. It's a performance enhancer of sorts. You have to be able to know how to use it, though, and what it offers isn't all that remarkable, in fact – only useful in certain situations.

She asks what situations, naturally.

Imagine, I tell her, that you are outside of your capsule, and what you need to do there isn't all that complex. Maybe you need to meet someone, or want to get something to eat at a real restaurant, maybe sleep in a real bed.

Of course, this isn't hard to imagine, really. We're both unplugged right now. She nods, a slight sense of impatience about her. I give a “bear with me” sort of expression and shift up in my seat, kicking another cushion away. I can tell she's getting progressively more high too, just by the way she watches it sail away over the edge.

For a situation like this, or at least some of them, I tell her, you don't really need your childhood memories, or your knowledge of how to pilot Jump Freighters. And the more situational your needs are, the more you can narrow it down, the less you need to bring along.

She's asking if I'm talking about selective memory, compartmentalizing different parts of ourselves into different areas (her word, not mine). I'm nodding.

C3 helps with this, I explain.

She seems genuinely interested in the idea. Whether because of its potential or historical application, I can't tell.

This outcome is altogether quite surprising, although not at all unanticipated. Firstly, I'm still not convinced that these capsuleers (there are more here, and 5 exits, 2 unguarded) aren't just posers, and this overextension, this trying-too-hard veneer isn't just the surface-deep summation of who and what they really are.

I don't pick them for it. But she said Sabik, which is an interesting differentiation to be making, even if I do have the unfortunate tendency of reading far too much into these often thoughtless remarks. I'm following the beams of blue light on their path around the room, wondering if she's even meaning to screw with me.

Because part of this must be ego – my ego, that is, feeding into it, making this more significant than it is. Of course. Part of it. Part of.

Then, of course, there was that half-decade stint a few decades ago with the Blood Raiders, and then Sahtogas, and Mabnen, and all that. An irrelevant association in the grander scheme of things, but with our actions come various labels and categories, families and friendships, little tones on the loudspeakers that you either hear or don't. I didn't drink blood, if that's what you're thinking. I'm not a freaking Literal and Omir won't ever have the pleasure of seeing my ass, let alone kissing it.

"Sabik, you said earlier," I note with a stressed hesitation. "Meaning?"

Part of the reason it escapes my lips so perfectly neutral is because I don't even have a clue anymore myself.

She's folding her arms again and pushing off the seat slightly, taking an artificially long time to consider the answer. She can tell I'm after something important in the reply. She leans over and reaches out. A man I hadn't noticed until now (another egger) is handing her a small metal crate, the vials within which I recognize, even though they're slightly updated and... well, enlarged.

The tubes used to be millimeters thick at their very largest, usually much, much smaller, microns typically (in the early days, first contact). She is holding what appears to be over 7 liters. She eyes me all the way over, smiling in a predatory way as she offers the canisters, her emaciated arm trembling slightly with the weight.

This is a whole lot of shit, no matter what way you look at it.

"Meaning, happy birthday."

Perhaps I've been moving too fast. Perhaps I've not explained enough for you yet. You don't really understand where we are, what made it possible, or even what a capsuleer is. You certainly won't appreciate what happens next until you grasp a few basics, and you're far from that.

Well, that would be my intention, yes. But this is how I started out, you see. I'm not about to give you any advantages. Take it from someone who actually became a capsuleer, from someone who knows more than enough, that we all begin here – drowning in the deep end, trying to make sense of these things. Jita 4-4 is a good place to start. It's designed to disorient you. If you can start to make sense of it, though, you will start to understand a great deal.

But try to understand, also, that I won't make this easy on you, for the simple reason that it wasn't easy on me.

Part II

I'll take us back a little now, before Jita 4-4 even really existed, to the dawn of the capsuleer era. Some associates of mine at the time discovered that I wasn't just good with their cloning technology, I was capsule compatible too. New arrangements were made. I was second cohort. Joining in the first rush would have drawn a little too much attention, you see, so I waited a year and joined in YC 106.

The first few hours of being a true, proper egger you don't really remember. Not years later, not when everything you've accomplished leaves those early days as embarrassing reminders of your own primitive imprint on this most advanced piece of technology. Even for me, this was true.

Of course, not everyone feels that way about it. Some can recite their graduation days with this clarity that borders between eerie and pathetic, most often as part of some well-rehearsed yet banal anecdote about their "early days." These are the sorts of people you see in the Navy.

My point is, you don't really remember because you don't really appreciate what the hell it is that you're doing in that egg, or what you're capable of. Not yet. You might remember getting pats on the head from some instructor agents, and the rush of your first few warps and fights, but that shit is all peripheral to this larger picture. That needs time to grow in your mind, and if you've got the right type of head for it, you'll start to realize important things sooner or later.

The first thing to understand is that capsuleers can have the wealth of nations, the influence of nations, and most importantly of all, the sovereignty of nations.

Many of us get to this first point. There are countless numbers of us now, colonizing the outer worlds, building corporations and alliances that exist and operate outside the purview of the empires. Of course, the four nations are not exactly underrepresented up here. They have their own massive fleets, and there are many of our own kind who have taken their loyalties with them to the stars, whose patriotism has not been diminished by the drastic changes that fate has afforded us. Some are just scared of that endless dark out there, where not even CONCORD can protect capsuleers from their own kind. They have little to be afraid of and yet, so often, people - my people - claim that there is absolutely nothing to fear.

This is nonsense.

Which brings us to the second thing that eventually dawns, and on an diminishing scale now, down to the thousands. The second realization is that capsuleers can die. They are not immortal.

Many of my kind refuse to acknowledge this, but it is quite obvious. Standard capsuleer re-cloning relies on the use of mind-state transfer technology, which transfers consciousness from one highly controlled environment to another; Body A inside a capsule (an "egg") and Body B (for Plan B) in a cloning facility.

The important phrase here is highly controlled environment. You can't say it is anything else. A scanner pores over your brain, capturing every last thought, every memory, every personality defect, and it does this why? Because your capsule was breached.

Because someone just proved how fragile that egg really is.

And that cloning facility you wake up in?

That cloning facility is surrounded by some of the most high-clearance people in the field - these invisible caretakers who oversee the rebirth of the universe's elite. They have a job with an importance like no other in our world, and with it, surveillance and monitoring you won't see anywhere else either. They are the real bodyguards. If a corporate CEO is waking up in one of these facilities, his contingent on the ground have already failed, and this, the most sacred of contingency plans, now depends on the people in the white suits. Obviously, not everyone is comfortable with that, least of all us capsuleers who won't often admit how tenuous our grip on everything really is.

Why? Because these people in white suits could make things go horribly wrong for you and me.

I think the reason we've started installing cloning vats on our largest, most powerful ships has less to do with logistics and more to do with trust issues.

Regardless, there are contingencies for such obvious threats, if you have the resources to implement them. The

point to take away from the idea is that if your plan for immortality relies on you never having to ask questions like what happens when these become not-so-highly controlled environments, then chances are your plan isn't really worth shit. Most of us still trust in the system, eating the crap served to us without ever really wondering who cooked it up, if you catch my meaning.

As for the third thing, we need to return to that moment of capsule breach, when your brain is scanned and transmitted via your capsule back to that facility.

The third thing to realize is that in this moment, the capsuleer has become data. Maybe only for a second, half a second, even less in reality, but for that moment we are nothing but 0 and 1 as we fly across light years of space in between heartbeats. It's so short that almost nobody recognizes the importance of this moment, and it's something only a few of us even want to appreciate.

The idea of the informorph.

Tattoos



While body markings and modifications appear across all cultures in New Eden, it is the Minmatar who have taken that most ancient method of body marking, the tattoo, to a whole new level. To the Minmatar, the tattoo is not simply a form of art, but rather an integral part of their culture and customs.

The Tattoo in Minmatar History

When the Minmatar Empire was in its heyday, before a single Amarr ship ever darkened its skies, the Minmatar had truly made the tattoo into a form of high art. It was said the best artists could breathe life into the skin of an individual with their work. Today's works, although still beyond what other races can achieve, are mere scribbling compared to the greatness of their predecessors. The Minmatar tattoo artists of today are forever seeking to regain the knowledge and skill that was lost to them when the Amarr, during their occupation of the Minmatar, issued an edict banning the practice.

This was a savage blow to the Minmatar, for a Minmatar's tattoos proclaim who he is, where he came from, what he does, where he has been and what he has experienced. They represent a Minmatar's identity as well as his story. A Minmatar without his markings is not considered a Minmatar at all. Such a one would be as alien to the Minmatar as a universe without God would be to the Amarr. In this, as well as in myriad other ways, the Amarr began to erase the Minmatar's culture and identity, converting them into more pliable slave stock.

During the millennium of enslavement, the Amarr all but eradicated the tattoo culture. Nevertheless, it managed to survive in various different bastardized forms until the Great Rebellion, when the Minmatar finally threw off their shackles. What followed was a long hard struggle for the Minmatar to regain all that was lost to them during the occupation, and within the context of this endeavor the culture of tattoos was given primacy. The Republic of today is enjoying a renewed ascendancy of this ancient art form, with the tattoo once again representing an integral part of Minmatar culture and being.

The Tattoo Today

While the forms and styles of tattoo vary across tribes, the structure and culture behind the art are surprisingly uniform, making it a strong source of cultural bonding between the tribes. For the first few years of her life a Minmatar infant has bare skin, and it is left symbolically so. When the infant reaches a certain age she is given a temporary naming tattoo, which identifies the child and tells which clan she comes from. This temporary marking is renewed as the young Minmatar grows. It is the only tattoo a Minmatar child is permitted to wear until the Voluval.

The Voluval is the sacred coming-of-age ceremony for the Minmatar. It is here that the individual transforms from a child into a fully recognized member of their tribe. At the height of the ceremony the presiding shaman will finalize the ritual by invoking the Voluval mark, where the soul and destiny of a person are said to be revealed through the emergence of a tattoo on the recipient, the secrets of which are closely guarded by the Vherokior mystics who kept it alive during the long centuries of subjugation.

The Voluval is considered the most sacred mark a Minmatar can carry, and in some rare cases can change his life irrevocably. Although the significance attached to the Voluval mark has waned considerably in today's Republic, certain marks can still see the recipient cast out from his clan and tribe, and conversely certain marks can lend the bearer much acclaim. In nearly all cases, however, the mark falls somewhere between these two extremes and the bearer moves on with little effect.

After the Voluval ceremony the young Minmatar will receive her permanent naming mark which will reside forever on her face. This mark will identify the name, clan and tribe of that Minmatar, plain for all other Minmatar to see. In such a way, two Minmatar meeting for the first time can immediately know these fundamental specifics about each other.

After the Voluval, the markings the individual will carry can vary greatly depending on the course of his life, where he travels, his occupation and what great achievements, if any, he has made. Each will reside on a specific area of his body – a person's ranks within their occupation and their clan are usually displayed on the shoulders, for example.

In modern society many such tattoos are covered during day-to-day affairs. For example, Republic Navy personnel will wear uniforms with rank identifiers, but their true mark of rank is considered to be their body mark, even though this is not usually displayed. The culture of tattoo is truly ingrained into the Minmatar mindset, pervading nearly every aspect of their society.

A Minmatar cannot bestow upon herself just any tattoo. In some cases she may be able to influence styling and shape, but she cannot add a tattoo without having first earned the right. Inking a tattoo upon yourself without permission is considered a grave crime and offenders are subject to severe judicial punishment. Because of this arrangement, a Minmatar who is heavily tattooed is more respected by her peers, which will allow her greater opportunities to advance. Her experience is there for all to see.

Through this near-constant long-term process of tattooing, it is sometimes necessary for a tattoo to be removed or replaced with another tattoo. Since Minmatar technology is very advanced in this area, removal of a tattoo is extremely simple, with a pinpoint-precision surface laser wiping clear any unwanted area. There are times in which a Minmatar will symbolically choose to use the old method of skin removal, which carries the side effect of leaving large, highly visible scars. This is particularly prevalent when changes of allegiance or other actions of heavy emotional investment occur. (It is especially common after certain judicial punishments, for example.)

The Gallente find the culture of tattoos somewhat barbaric and uncivilized, and early on tried to persuade their Minmatar neighbors to drop this old custom and embrace their future as a civilized nation. Their efforts to this end were initially met with polite denials and later with derision, but interestingly the Gallente youth now find the custom fascinating. Indeed, it is not uncommon to see young Gallente teenagers sporting tribal and gang motifs lifted from their Minmatar peers, symbols of whose true meaning they have little to no knowledge. This can evoke anything between high derision and outright hostility when those so inked encounter true Minmatar.

Rust Creeps



I'd had a tiring and frustrating day, the kind you don't even want to mull over once you've lain down in your bunk. There are too many days like that, these days. You close your eyes and what you start seeing is too much for a tired old man to take, so you keep them open instead, you look out the viewport at the unblinking stars, and you listen to the silence.

That was what brought him to mind: The silence, or rather, the impression of it; that velvet cloth laid gently over the air. It never is truly silent on the ship – the mind merely learns to block out all those little noises – but you don't hear the other crew members much. The ship is built to muffle the sound of other people going about their off-hour lives. This is good; it gives you a little privacy, and keeps you from losing your mind if the person on the other side of the bunk wall in your quarters has a sinus problem or likes to sing.

No, the only thing you hear in that near-dead quiet is the ship itself. Adjusting to space. Gently balancing its mass distribution and heat. Stretching.

I hadn't listened to it for a long while, not consciously, but it felt soothing after the long, rough day. This was not a tour I had wanted to sign up for. Our dubious mission aside, the ship itself was not the best and certainly not the most well-maintained in the cluster – even Eren would've had a hard time with it – but we all have our dues to pay. We all have our dues to pay, and Eren, who paid dearly, he knew how to listen.

Eren and I first met on a similar tour years and years ago. The technology at the time was pretty advanced, obviously – I live on a goddamn spaceship – but still not nearly so much as it is today. There was, in particular, a dearth of reliable automated repair systems, which is a major problem for a type of transport that involves shifting a highly complicated piece of technology through an extremely simple and deadly medium.

On ships like that, good hands-on engineers are worth their weight in any precious metal you care to name. The best ones tend to be more in tune with their machines than they are with the crew, and they get plenty of leeway both when it comes to proper procedure and working conditions. Some people have a problem with that. I don't. My ship's purpose is to get me to wherever I'm going, safe and sound, and forcing some guy to alphabetize his spare parts instead of doing repairs isn't really going to help.

That ship was having a hard time of it. We'd managed to avoid taking damage – I think we were transporting some bulky cargo, and we certainly weren't kitted out for combat – but something, somewhere, kept breaking down and slowing our way. Nobody on the crew could fix it, not even the people supposedly brought on as specialized repairmen. Eventually our team leader announced that we'd be docking a few systems away, a detour that would add considerable time to a schedule that was already far delayed due to all the breakdowns. I openly wondered why we were going to all that trouble; if there was a special team for us to pick up on that

station, or special equipment that could detect the flaws in our machinery, or what.

My boss at the time said there wasn't. There was just this one guy.

We hauled ourselves to the station and sat there for half a day. I was put on assist, but I never even got a chance to talk to the man. They sent me instructions on how to prep the repair area, which mostly involved me crawling all the way into the bowels of the ship while lugging a bunch of heavy gear with me. I deposited it in the manner I'd been ordered to and waited around in case he'd need anything else, but when someone entered it turned out to be my own boss, who told me to get the hell out. Eren couldn't be disturbed, he said.

I grunted, got up and left. For some reason the walkway lights had been dimmed, to the point where I had to feel my way along the handrails even to see where I was going. I took slow steps, muttering to myself in the darkness – not something I usually do, but it had been a long shift and I was too tired to keep my mouth shut. It wasn't until I'd made it to the exit that I realized what my own stupid voice had nearly hidden from my ears. Someone had been whispering. Someone had stood stock still in that dark corridor and whispered, either to themselves or to me. I turned and glared down the walkway, and just as the door closed on the engine room I saw that stranger – and I knew it was that Eren guy – walk through it, one hand trailing over the metal surface. The vision is still burnt into my memory: A younger man silhouetted in the door, his face looking up at the bulkhead opposite with that puzzled expression people have when they're trying to work something out, his posture that of someone young enough not to have to worry about it just yet.

Of course he fixed the problem. He stayed onboard for a few days before getting off at our next port of call, and nobody spoke to him. We weren't ordered to leave him be, but he gave off that kind of awkward loner vibe; and anyway, someone who could just walk in and do what he did was not necessarily someone you'd feel safe around. Geniuses – not just highly talented people, or the lucky ones, but actual bona fide geniuses – tend to attract either attention or trouble. At that period of my life I felt it would be best to avoid the chance that either of those might splash on to me.

I didn't see him for years after that, nor did I think much about that time. I was doing well. I'd had the good luck of signing on to safer vessels, which is probably the reason Eren remained absent from my life. But everything breaks down eventually, and after a long haul through dangerous areas with not a lot of time to waste, we called on him to patch up our broken machines. As it turned out, I was the only man who had ever worked with him before – if you can call it work to lay out the instruments and scuttle out before the band starts to play – so I was automatically assigned to do the same. This time I did get to meet the man, and while he was very reticent to talk – and I certainly didn't push him – we got along well in our own quiet way. He looked a lot more worn than I'd imagined. I remember being amazed that I'd ever thought he could be younger than me, for he clearly wasn't, but then my sighting hadn't been under the best of conditions, and heaven knows we all fall short of God's glory in full daylight. I enjoyed watching him work, and didn't wonder how he managed to find the exact fault in the mess of steel and insulation he was fairly buried in. I think he sensed this, for after the work was done and Eren long gone, I got a commendation from the captain, and was given to understand that if ever they called on the man's services again I would be expected to act as his assistant.

To my knowledge they never did request his help again, but then I didn't stay with them long. I'd had enough of the weightless life - there is perfect gravity on ships but in some sections they need to shift you a little to the side to accommodate for their designs, and walking on walls will get to you after a while. Instead I signed on to a colony in safe space, working at a refinery that enveloped well over half the asteroid it was located on.

Truth be told, it wasn't more than a few years before I was thoroughly sick of that life, too. I guess if you make the jaunt into space, and take to it, you cease being the kind of person that takes root anywhere at all. Nonetheless, no decent tours were on offer, so I stayed on and patiently did my job.

The break came from the strangest of places. A ship docked, which was no great news, but surprisingly it was without cargo and had no trade agreements with the colony's ruling corporation. They did need repairs, they said, but we could offer them no men or equipment that they did not already possess on their vessel.

What they wanted was me.

They needed the services of a specialist, they said, and were on route to the system where he was located. It was quite a few jumps from here, but the expense was negligible when compared to the losses they would incur over the upcoming weeks and months if they didn't stop having breakdowns right in the middle of tightly scheduled deliveries. Supposedly this specialist was worth the trip, but he would only sign up if an assistant were brought on as well. Someone who had extensive mechanical experience, but more importantly, someone who had worked with him before. Someone like me.

I grabbed the chance. Packed my things, signed the waivers, got to know the crew and settled in for the long haul to see Eren.

When we met, I was rendered speechless. If I hadn't seen him a few years earlier, I would have thought decades might have passed. His hair in particular had noticeably thinned out and greyed, and there weren't so much wrinkles as deep grooves in his skin, etched there by pressures I hoped I would never have to experience. All his

movements had taken on that slow, methodical pace one sees in people who've gotten too old to have the energy for mistakes.

I decided right away not to mention it – you can't turn into that kind of wreck and remain unaware of how it shapes you – but did my part in the ensuing repairs by making sure his tools were always where he needed them and often just a little closer than he really needed to reach. I didn't think he saved a lot of effort from that arrangement, but I had the distinct feeling that having the tools closer than usual would make him more mentally comfortable, as if they created a small safe space with no room for outside influence. A protective circle, really.

He seemed to like it. We didn't talk much at first, but as the days passed – mostly spent waiting for replacement parts so we could get on with the actual repairs – Eren opened up a little. Besides, we were in the deepest parts of the engine rooms, the ones where everything is exposed, and you really don't spend time with someone around machines that can potentially kill you without developing at least a little camaraderie.

Actually, it's not entirely truthful to say he opened up – at least not to me. He simply let his guard down. Two days in I noticed that a quiet murmur I'd assumed to be part of the ship's own thrumming heartbeat was, in fact, coming from Eren himself. I peered closer – all ship cores are gloomy and dark, probably because if you don't know by heart where every single moving part is now and is going to be in five seconds' time, you shouldn't be down there anyway – and saw that he was talking to the metal itself. He was talking to the ship.

He must've heard my breath stop, because he fell quiet, leaned back and said, without looking, "They say things."

"The ... parts?"

He shrugged. "Or the ones who touched them last."

"Ship parts come from all over the place, often from recycled ships," I said. I'd meant to imply that he couldn't possibly know who these people were, let alone that they were even alive anymore, when I realized what he was saying to me. If there truly were voices, they weren't on our side of the veil.

I swallowed dry air and asked, "What do they tell you? How to fix the ship?"

He nodded.

It really was very dark in the engine room. "What do they ... want in return?"

He shrugged. "To talk. To be heard. For someone to remember the stories of the dead, of this ship and all the others where their parts have been used. Or even places where this ship has docked, places that no longer exist."

Those places would have been in space, unorbiting colonies, very possibly pirate ones, and very definitely long since fallen prey to capsuleer fire. Deaths, and more deaths; and once their graves had been picked clean by the attackers, the only usable things left in the wreckage would have been those parts.

Capsuleers went through frightening amounts of ships and even colonies on a regular basis. I wondered just how many ship parts had been salvaged from the dead. How many voices wanted Eren to hear them, all moaning in the discordant choir.

Late that same evening I was too restless to sleep. I ended up using the ship's dataline and looked up a few things, which satiated my curiosity but eliminated any small chance I would sleep that night.

There were, amazingly, other people like him; but then, in this vast universe, everything has to exist somewhere. Psychomancy, it was called. They could tell things from machine sounds, working them like the entrails of a shaman. The buzz, burr, shear and whine; the way the rust stretched its coarse surface over them.

More than anything, the mention of rust unnerved me, and I couldn't stop thinking about it. The next day I mentioned it to Eren.

He responded, "It's true. And I don't like rust. It creeps. It distorts."

"You mean it makes it hard to hear the, uh, voices?" I asked

"Oh no. It doesn't muffle them. They just ... come out distorted. As whines, or these shrieky, tattered howls. Imagine the rust was on your vocal cords," he said matter-of-factly. "Imagine it going into your lungs. It's a cancer."

I couldn't help it. "So Minmatar ships..."

"...can go right to hell," Eren replied with a grin. He added, almost absent-mindedly, "All ships are haunted. It's like a sea we're on, this vast and cold sea. Voices always drift to the warmth."

"You ever think about signing up for repairwork on a colony instead? I can't imagine this kind of life is easy for you," I said.

He gave me a look, but in the gloom I couldn't see it clearly. "Don't like to work colonies much. Too many buried there."

I got the distinct feeling there was more to that comment, and I really didn't want to pry into the matter any longer. It's bad enough working in the gnashing darkness without imagining things that aren't even there. We finished our work for the day, and we didn't speak of the voices after.

The next day turned out to be the final one in our stint on the ship. A part we'd been waiting for was finally shipped, and I installed it for Eren. I said to him, "I honestly don't know how you're going to get this one going. The team's replaced this part three times already, and it simply refuses to work."

He looked at me for a while, not unkindly – I couldn't tell if he was amused or if he was listening – and then he leaned out, and he simply touched the damn thing.

The breathless hammering we heard shortly after was one of the crew running into the room to ask us what we'd done and how the hell we'd done it.

I lay there in my bunk, thinking of that time so long ago. It was the last and only occasion we'd worked together. I had expected to be called out again, and Eren certainly hadn't seemed averse to the idea, but the quality of repair technology had caught up and the services of people like him were in less demand – either that or they were being assigned tasks complicated enough to eliminate the need for a simple machinist assistant like me.

I did see him once more, years later. On a colony somewhere, in a place I left shortly after. I barely recognized him at first; it was like he'd been shunted head-first into old age, his body matted, wrinkled and eaten up by time and whatever other forces worked on that poor man. I didn't say a word, but he acknowledged me with a nod.

"It's the rust," he said. He thought it over, nodded to himself and repeated, "The rust. The rust creeps."

I couldn't help but ask. "Still the voices?"

His eyes were rheumy and blinked too often. The skin on his hands slid like oil on water. "I haven't heard the voices for a long time."

I was still trying to understand this, and the implications of it, when he added, "I hear what's beyond them now. There's something else. There is something behind them and it never falls quiet."

His voice dissolved to a mutter. I didn't know whether it was directed at me or the machine. Or at whatever lay beyond, which surely knew that he could hear it.

All his hair had fallen out except for the bushy growths over his eyes and in his ears, and I could see the veins in his hands.

I lie here on my bunk and I think of him. That old soul in that rapidly dying body, and the things he listened to. I think quite a lot of Eren, these days.

Because the ship creaks. The ship creaks, and we are going into empty space, and there is a patch of rust in the corner, and I wonder if my old friend is calling for me.

Hona is Three



In the love of your life - any one of them, for there are many, no matter what you might think - there are three people, three human beings you fall for. There is the one at the start where everything is fresh and new, which is when you see only what they want you to see; the one some time after, when the gloves come off and they show you - or stop bothering to hide, at least - whatever else they knew they contained; and the last, long after, when you've begun to see so deep into them that you can tell what they cannot. If you're lucky both of you will dovetail, fitting each other and changing in each other's perceptions as you pass through time.

I was a Guristas operator, working out of a minor, unaligned asteroid colony in a system of really no repute at all. After years in my line of work - I was only twenty-eight but I'd started early, having developed the necessary business acumen as a teenager and had the required set of morals beaten pretty soundly into me as a child - I had come to the conclusion that nondescript, monotonous but decently populated locales were the best places to do my kind of business. Everyone here walked with their eyes to the ground and their ears clogged up with asteroid dust. Most of what I did involved oversight of nearby transactions, the kind where I linked up one person to another through channels I made damn sure were safe from prying, and acted as intermediary, facilitator or occasional pacifier, depending on the situation. 'Nearby' is even a misnomer; the distance between me and my customers was measurable in astronomical units, and I was very good at keeping tabs on the locations and movements of everyone I did business with. On occasion someone would dock at the station and request to see me in person, but I was well enough in with the local station operators that I always received plenty of warning and, if necessary, backup.

I was surprised one night when a call came in over the local line to inform me that a team of allegedly Angel-affiliated operators was to dock at the station and had requested my assistance. I was free to work with anyone I liked, so long as the Guristas got their due, but people explicitly affiliated with the rank and file of other pirate factions were loath to seek out my business. When they did, it was usually out of desperate need rather than convenience.

The call included verified contact details, which was normal, but also single-use encryption keys for their positions within the Angel hierarchy, which was rather out of the ordinary. I ran those and they all checked out. The group captain, a woman called Hona, was member of a special operations squad within a little-known branch of the rather extensive Angel hierarchy. It was a vague enough title and rank that I couldn't make out what her real job was, but since she was working here on the outskirts and willing to meet with nonfaction black market personnel, it was bound to be interesting. I agreed to the meeting, and as it was only Hona who wanted to see me, requested that the rest of her team be given good accommodations well away from the tumult of the mining grounds. I was always open to new business relationships, and having the clients' first memories be of sleepless nights and trembling furniture was not a good idea.

We met in a local bar whose owner had considerably set up isolation booths, both aural and electrical. I arrived first and took a seat with my back to the exit - I wanted to project a comfortable, slightly trusting relaxation, and besides, if I was unsafe here of all places, it wouldn't matter which way I faced when shots got fired. I did discreetly place a small scrambler on the middle of the table; no lack of faith in the bar's isolation tech, but I also wanted to project the feeling that I knew what the hell I was doing.

The beating of a tattoo on the floor told me that she had approached. From the muffled hush behind me a calm, crisp voice said my name, and I nodded in acknowledgment without turning in my chair. She walked around me and took at seat at the booth, directly facing me. There was a dominant air about her - it's been so long I can barely remember what she looked like, except that her face was set in determination as well as something else, creeping towards exhaustion.

"Welcome," I said. "Drinks or anything?"

"Just business," she told me.

"I hope I can help."

She nodded and said, "So do I," in a tone that didn't quite imply a threat so much as an inclination not to suffer idiots lightly.

Humor, even in the darkest of circumstances - especially in those, really - was a major asset in any potential business partner, so I decided to test the waters a little. I shrugged and with a nonchalant air said, "If I can't, well. Shame."

She shrugged in turn, and seemed to accept this. "If it's not your own fault, nothing to be done."

I agreed.

Then she added, "If you do mislead us, of course, we'll send death squads after you," and I decided I liked her.

It took a while for her to explain the particulars. The basic case was simple - undercover Angel recruitment agents had been turning up dead - but the real details lay in what they'd done thus far to find the culprit. Hona did not want me to waste time following the same tracks. As she described the precise work she'd undertaken to find the murderers, I was fascinated, first by the clear and definite purpose with which she had followed up on this - the murders had been particularly vicious and taken place in areas not safe for Angels to be in, so even recruiting people to her squad had been an undertaking - and then by the meticulous way in which she'd investigated what few leads she'd found. At some point I admitted to her that I would have a hard time

improving on her work, and she took my compliments in good grace.

She was charming. Presentable, assertive, in control. We got on well. As the evening wore on I found myself revealing to her a number of options that I had not even considered mentioning for the fee her superiors intended to pay me. I openly discussed, without breaking confidentiality, the extent of my connections and the abilities they lent me. She told me about life in the Angel Cartel, not only as an agent of theirs but as a regular person living on colonies under their aegis.

We had drinks. We got on even better. She had signed up for the Angel service because, she said, she wanted to control the world as much as protect the people in it. Also, kick people in the teeth. I was here, I found myself saying, because it was a safe place, netted with webs of communication that I could - there was that word again - control, and yet remain at a safe distance. She understood this. She was good at talking to people, and at appearing tough enough to exercise an authority that she often did not have. We agreed on the loneliness of space. Where our careers would take us, we each admitted that we had no idea.

We did not end up sleeping together. We wanted to, and so we didn't.

But at the end of a long evening and a long night, we decided that she and her team would stay on station for a couple of days. We had found in each other a capable, intelligent person, and we were convinced that together we could develop a plan to root out the criminal Hona so badly wanted to find.

It took a couple of days and a couple beyond that, and I had to get in touch with more people than I had expected to, but finally we acquired sufficient data to develop an extensive plan of action. It involved a series of inquiries in neighbouring space, interviews and investigations using multiple local contacts, heuristic searches through vast repositories of local data that I had access to, and a definite possibility of bringing in added manpower and weaponry in case Hona found herself outmatched by the criminals. We were going to present it to her team that evening.

Then I got a note from her saying that they'd received an unexpected lead: one of the recruiting agents in a nearby constellation had lost his partner to yet another messy, horrible murder, but this time there was evidence the culprit might still be in the area. She had to go. She was sorry, but she had to go.

I never answered the note. She knew where I'd be if she needed me.

The next time we met she stumbled through my door covered in blood. My immediate shock was the sight of her, the poor tattered thing; quickly followed, to my shame, by a shock that she had made it all the way to my quarters without me receiving any advance warning.

I didn't bother to say anything, but helped her as gently as I could to the bathroom. One of the compartments there held an assortment of healing agents, coagulants and such, including a few expensive plexiglas syringes that held different types of nanomaterial. Some of the items I had in there were expensive and even bordering on illegal, but I hadn't bothered to hide them. I'd figured that if I ever needed to access to this stuff, I couldn't expect to be in any shape or condition to burrow into any kind of secret compartments.

Hona was cut and burnt all over, but the biggest immediate worry was a deep gash on her leg. It was still bleeding, so I reasoned she must've had access to some kind of basic medical help along the way - she

would've bled out otherwise - and focused my attention on it. The obvious conclusion of the focus she must've possessed to reach me in particular didn't occur to me right at that moment. I sprayed her with local anaesthetic and sprayed my own hands with a sealant that formed a second skin, lest I touch the anaesthetic with my bare hands; then smeared a disinfecting coagulant into the wound. It stopped bleeding after a while, to my immense relief, and I got out the clamps. Her head was turned to one side, but I shifted a little to block the leg from view just in case. Once I'd stretched the clamps to match the wound and fixed them to the skin, they gave off a burning smell and started retracting, pulling it together and sealing it with immense local heat. It was not the most pleasant of sights - the skin blistered and dripped at the mouth of the wound - but it was a million times better than watching Hona bleed out on my bathroom floor. Once the clamps had properly sealed the skin they dissolved into the leg, where they would, at a much slower pace, continue to seal up and heal the wound underneath.

I glanced up at Hona, only to find her staring right at me with unblinking eyes. Her mouth was slightly open and she was taking shallow breaths. She'd gone into shock. I gave her a little smile and stroked her cheek, then took hold of her hand and slowly stroked that as well. Whether she noticed the small patch I affixed to the inside of her wrist, I don't know, but in a few moments her breath slowed, and not too long after she drifted into sleep.

She stayed with me for several weeks. Try as I might, I could not get her to tell me what had happened, other than that it had involved the murderer she'd been after. That person, she said, had been brought to justice. I sensed there was quite a bit more to it than that. She, in turn, got frustrated and then annoyed at my curiosity, and didn't hesitate to let loose when she thought I'd done enough prying.

It wasn't a good time. She recovered from the initial, physical shock - her wounds healed remarkably fast given how serious they'd seemed at first and how little proper medical care she received both before and after coming to me - but there was a deeper-set trauma that neither one of us were ever able to properly deal with. It wasn't just shock; it was a nervous breakdown, something I realized the first time Hona woke up screaming and then had brought home to me when she sullenly refused, then and later, to discuss anything in her past. Not just the incident, but anything else prior: Her career with the Angels. Her past team and what had become of them. Us.

She was not a woman who would allow herself to be helped. She needed it - she'd come to me, I reasoned, because I could give her a balance of safety and trust on one hand and anonymity and distance on the other - but she hated it, and I bore the brunt of her frustrations. All the sides I'd seen of her in our initial meeting came out reverted, turned in on themselves. She continually attempted to dominate our relationship, or whatever it was; in words, and in actions as well, using her secret past as excuse to go into shrieking arguments over issues of no importance whatsoever. At times she'd treat me like an underling, someone to order around. Other times she'd obsess about our safety, continually asking me about the security mechanisms in my quarters and on the station, then freaking out when she thought she perceived gaps in them. She was good at using words, and when she put up a front there was nothing I could say to pierce it, good or bad.

We slept together, sometimes. We didn't always want to, but we did.

Despite her intermittent worries over security, there were times when she was amazingly nonchalant about her arrival on the station. My own questions about potential repercussions or chase went unanswered outside of brief, slightly condescending comments from her that there was no risk hanging over us. When I finally did look into the records of her arrival - it took me more than two weeks to even get to that point, caught up as I was with her arrival and the change in her personality - I was astounded to find that there was no registration, no check or mark, nothing whatsoever denoting that she had even arrived in this area of space, much less crawled bleeding up to my doorstep.

The anger I took in good grace. I'm sure I yelled back just as much, though that's not the point. She was changing. I could tell, easily, even though in truth I barely knew her, so I was sure she could tell, too. Sometimes, in peaceful moments, I'd see her stare out my window, at the colony outside and at the protective atmospheric shielding and the stars beyond it; and I'd see something in her face, either shifting about or, possibly, slowly settling. She was on her way to somewhere. She was shrieking because she was moving too fast, but she definitely had some manner of destination. Even with the arguments, and the petty games, and all the rest that we could never have borne for a long period of time anyway, it hurt a little that this destination

couldn't be here.

Why I took it, well ... I knew that I was getting to know another side of her, one she'd not have shown to many other people. Even in all the tumult, I still respected her; I saw a woman trying her hardest to deal with events that had clearly stretched her mind beyond its breaking limits. I wasn't unfamiliar with screaming arguments and fights - I'd ended up at this colony, in this job, for a reason, and even though I'd progressed far since those ugly childhood times, I still had coping mechanisms ready for use. I did get upset, as anyone would, and I did feel hurt and let down, but I retained my perspective.

Besides, I knew this situation would eventually change, one way or another - for her, or for me. If I had been entirely happy with my life on the station I would likely have been more protective of it and less inclined to let Hona in. In reality, I had been growing so dissatisfied with it - especially since that initial meeting with Hona, when I'd had it hammered home just how lonely and meaningless this existence was - that I knew my own time on the colony was increasingly limited. So I kept my anger in check, allowing it to slowly rise and strengthen. I wanted to leave, sometimes, just pull up stakes and disappear, but I knew that if I dared, I would leave behind in Hona a guilt that would never be extinguished. She would think that she drove me off, and I couldn't allow that, because now matter how badly we got along - and how much I wanted her, all at the same time - I knew that this was not about me, or about us: It was, in the end, solely about her. That face, growing increasingly peaceful between the rages it was forced to express. That stare, seeing other planets. And that strange body, healed too soon from terrible damage, hidden too easily from electronic eyes. Something else, more than human.

One day we woke up together. She turned to me and whispered "sorry." Then she kissed me with warm lips, open eyes, calm breathing. It tingled, and afterwards I lay in bed, stunned, more peaceful than I'd been for a very long time, far beyond her arrival in my life.

I didn't hear her when she left, but I knew. I left soon after, myself, on some road of my own.

When I awoke, I was in a cave, surrounded by lit torches, and there were people standing around me. I grinned at them.

In the preceding months I'd been drifting about through various regions of space, trying my hand at different jobs and different lives. I'd had enough money saved up that I could leave any place whenever I liked without fear of starvation, but my natural ability to develop and make use of connections came to the fore, and I found that I was able to settle in nicely wherever I decided to stop. Eventually, though, I'd grow unhappy with whatever life I'd set up, and disconcerted at seeing old patterns arise again. I would isolate myself, no matter how big or welcoming the crowds around me. I saw all people eventually as collections of usable traits and potential benefits. I sought a general control over life that the universe wasn't much inclined to let me have, so I ended up applying it only to myself, and in the process disengaging from other people before they could start poking through the shields I'd put up.

During the drifting it did on occasion occur to me, yes, that the one person in recent memory I'd had a different relationship with had been Hona, first because we connected through an understanding of our own loneliness, and then later when her raw, exposed, confused self was too taken up by its demons to bother with faking it from me and my own. I never reached out to her, nor made any attempt to find out what had become of her. I figured that in time, if I was meant to, I'd find out; and besides, the way the woman had covered her tracks when coming to me, there wasn't a chance I'd find her unless she wanted to leave tracks.

It finally happened when I was headed through Angel space. I received an anonymous request for a meeting that ended up bringing me to a large asteroid in the middle of nowhere. Just as I was about to turn the shuttle back, it malfunctioned. First engines, then pathfinding. Then life support. The oxygen lasted amazingly long, really; I breathed easy the whole time. I knew it was her.

They brought me into a city of stone, encased somewhere in the asteroid. Stalactites like cathedrals hung suspended from the ceiling. Past the center, on the outskirts, in an area where people spoke in hushed voices, there was a building - a hollowed-out stalagmite - where they led me and left me to wait alone.

Hona was there.

We talked for a while. She sounded distant; not for lack of commitment to our conversation, but as someone who now lived somewhere very far off from the rest of us. She explained to me how she had come to be there, how she'd come to terms with what she'd become and, once having reached that level of honesty with herself, had begun to be honest with the world at large. She had accumulated fellow thinkers - she did not have to call them followers; I understood what they were - and they had found themselves drawn here, to this living rock. I asked them how they got food and oxygen here, and she said the rock provided. I enquired whether they were as safe from prying eyes here as she had been after her accident, and she said the rock gave them all the protection they needed. I told her she was being maddeningly vague and she said me she didn't know what in the world I was talking about. Torches burned on every wall, casting their arcane lights on her.

The people in this place, she explained, did not worship gods, but powers and universal forces, and looked to her as the conduit. She did not attempt to explain these forces and I did not ask. When I said, only partly in jest, that this made her a demigod, she looked at me for some time with the strangest smile on her face. I met her gaze and smiled back, and it took me a while to realize that whenever I blinked, I still saw her there. Somewhere in the dark of my head, where my eyes couldn't go. She asked me to turn around, and I did. She was still there. When I asked her if this was magic, she laughed, a beautiful laugh, and shook her head.

I told her I was glad that she'd found the place meant for her. When she tried to shrug it off by saying it could've been anyone, I interrupted.

"It's perfect for you. You're in control, you get to plan and think and care for other people, and you belong to a system greater than yourself; greater than anyone, really, given the way you've described it. I don't think I know anyone who'd fit this role so perfectly, let alone get through the initiation ritual the way you did."

"You think what happened to me was a ritual?" she asked.

"Not in a preordained sense," I said. "I don't believe bad things happen for a reason. But I think it brought you to a place you might not have reached otherwise. And I think you're proud of it, and of yourself. That's why you invited me here."

"You think I brought you here to brag?" she said, looking immensely amused.

"No, dear heart. You've no interest in acknowledgment nor compliments. You brought me here to show me you were all right," I said. "And I think you are. I think you found the end."

She nodded her thanks. I stayed a little longer, but we didn't say much more. I enjoyed being with her, and she with me, and we exchanged thoughts that went beyond language. When I finally did leave, I did not need the acolytes to show me the way out.

I'm still headed somewhere. Haven't quite found my way there yet. It's alright. She'll be there, however long I have to take.

I still see her when I close my eyes.

The Desert Fathers



Well, uh. Okay. My name is Kartanen Sedia. I am the overseer on Outpost 4972, where in the past three years we have been extracting minerals used in the production of various hybrid polymers that in turn are used to create advanced components for the capsuleer industry.

In fact, in those three years we have sustained a consistent output in the top forty-eight percentile while simultaneously maintaining a perfect safety record extending not only to security but to employee safety, and-... I'm sorry?

Oh. Of course. Yes.

First off, I am sorry about what happened. I assure you that once we are done here, I intend to launch my own investigation and get to the bottom of this. Szekel is not getting away with what he took.

It's not easy, living in the desert. If they hadn't discovered those mineral deposits I don't imagine anyone would ever make their home here, at least not on this continent. That goes double for the scientists. You can always find hard workers for the excavation, people with calluses and no savings, but it's harder pulling in those who consider air conditioning a basic human right, no matter what kind of interesting rock we've suddenly pulled out of our back yard.

Yes, I hired them all. Yes, even him. As I said, I regret what happened. His resume was-... my own? What do you mean?

All right. I've been an overseer on various outposts for most of my life, really. I was born on an asteroid colony and spent a good part of my life working those, but eventually the lack of solid footing got to me and I transferred to planetside work instead. I maintained exemplary security during my tenure on those colonies, with a near-perfect record in my thirty-year career.

Yes, including Outpost 3478, out in the dark near Stain.

Yes, where the Sansha came. What's that to do with anything? It was ages ago, I did what was right, I was investigated afterwards and exonerated, and nothing's ever been prov-...

Ah, hell. God damn it, god damn it and god damn you.

Nothing's ever been quite the same since. Happy now? Everything changed. Yes, I've been working thirty years in the same damn business at the same damn level of lower management, and all because the cyborgs came in and ate up my people all those years ago. Nobody trusts me anymore.

Well, I suppose, yes, but I wouldn't call it a sliding slope. It's just hard to pull up from that kind of career slump. I drifted through jobs on other colonies and finally got a contract at this one, where I had intended to spend my remaining years until retirement.

No, not that well funded. I'll have some money to live on, but ... wait, why are you even asking me this? We're trying to find a thief here!

No, I don't have a lot of money. Not after the Sansha debacle.

Why are you asking me this?

Certainly. My name is Jania Betodt. I am working on my post-doctorate studies in astrobiology. The atmospheric properties on this planet make it a haven for acquiring large intact samples, though I must say I've never quite grown accustomed to the living conditions. I am married to Phaedan Betodt, and we have a wonderful daughter, Adara.

No, they're not with me, but those are the costs of an interstellar life, right? They visit me on a regular basis. Anyway, I have had some noteworthy articles published in peer-reviewed journals, including at the University of ... well, yes, I suppose it has been a while since they last were here. I do communicate with them on a fairly regular basis, you know. When the relays work, yes. We're a very close-knit family.

Well, because there was important work to be done here. I didn't want to leave them behind, of course. It simply didn't suit us to break up our careers. Look, is this about Szekel or my family?

What do you mean, 'Both'?

Yes, I did work with him. Yes, closely. He's a talented scientist and a hard-working man, whatever else he may be. We pulled a lot of long, hard shifts working on-site whenever a new batch of data came in. There's only so long you have to study the new samples before the life they harbor is extinguished, no matter how well you may try to prolong it.

When that asteroid landed a few months ago, we were in heaven. It contained sealed pockets that our scans indicated might harbor brand new life. Only microscopic archaea, of course, but the way they seemed to be reacting with the metals in the asteroid was astounding. I don't think we've even begun to scratch the surface, though of course Szekel's disappearance, and the data I ... guess he took, all of that is going to be rather a setback.

My daughter? She is with her father, and before you ask, I do miss her. I miss her a lot.

Him too, of course.

Yes, they were long shifts.

Rakan Dep.

I'm a security guy on this outpost.

Nothing else.

Hey, I'm cooperating. Even if I don't know who the hell you people are.

Disgruntled? Hah! Listen. Listen. We are on a desert planet. There is nothing here but sand. If you end up living in a place like this with no hope of anything better, disgruntled is the least of your worries.

Well, okay. There's a few towns and settlements in the area, but you'd be an idiot if you thought you could walk there by yourself. You're isolated here, pretty much. You make it to the outpost, fine, but you're not making it out on foot again.

I suppose Szekel must've gotten help, yeah. Assuming you haven't found him yet. Scorched and dead and picked at by the jackals, by now, if he went out by himself.

Of course I've been to the settlements. That's why I'm not disgruntled, isn't it, my pretties? Besides, there's no fun to be had elsewhere.

Fun, yes.

Reading scripture, group hugs, and watching the sky. What do you think I'm talking about? Goddamn old fashioned fun-for-money. It's mostly gambling, actually. I'd stick my dick in the noontime sand before putting it to some of the women you get down there. I'm sure it'd burn about the same in the end.

Hah! Thanks. I am available for children's parties, you know.

Money, yeah ... I don't have enough, truth be told. Never quite manage to hit that mark. Always seem to spend too much. Hey, I'm not ashamed. I pull long shifts. You'll find idiots anywhere who say they work hard and play hard, in that order, as if the first causes the second. I can't say the desert life is my first choice, but I'll live it the way I would anywhere else, and that means I need to bust my back earning for it. Doesn't make it right or wrong, and certainly doesn't mean I deserve any sympathy. It's just how it is.

Yeah, the scientists got plenty. Especially after that damn meteor hit and the grants started coming in again. They're decent people, most of them. Humans like the rest of us.

No ... I just mean they do human things. I'm not gonna gossip. But let me tell you, it gets cold at night, here in the desert.

Sure, I'm human too. What, you're calling me out on my track record? Go ahead. I know it's grubby. You try working security all your life, live in the desert, too; see how clean you come out. Never taken money from people I shouldn't, though. Nope. No, I don't care how you put it - I'm clean when it comes to that. I may have taken some from people who shouldn't have been dumb enough to bet it, and I may have been an intermediary for some people who had money and pale skin and fear of a little sand. But I haven't gone dirty. You know Kartanen, the overseer? He gave me a shot at this. I'm here because of him.

No, he's not a client. He's saving up, thinking of buying a little house on a small planet a couple jumps from here, somewhere in ... 32-GI9, I believe. He doesn't think anyone knows about it, but I do. I watch the money. He's never made bets or anything. He's a decent man. And besides, you don't touch someone's life savings, not in this business. You know who people are.

Szekel? I don't know him. I don't know him at all. I have no idea how he breached security like he did.

I suppose it's my responsibility, yeah. What are you getting at?

Look, it's been three days. I'm getting tired of sitting in this room all the time. I'm the overseer on this colony and I don't care who you people are, you can't just come in here, shut everything down, and pull people into a...

Yes! I hired Szekel, I let the man in and I gave him a job here, being fully aware that we were working with highly sensitive data, that we'd had an important rain and we were due to have another, and that he would be overseeing the research teams along with Jania. What else do you want?

What do you mean, everything?

What's that you're bringing in? I'm well familiar with all the equipment on this colony and this is not a part of our stocks. Look, if you have brought in your own scientific equipment, I need to be told. I am the sole remaining head researcher on this colony and I am to be included in all communications...

Uh. Yes, I'm sitting comfortably. Why do you ask?

The fuck you doing with that thing in here?

I think, I think, I think we got off entirely on the wrong foot here. I did vet Szekel, I did give him a job, yes, certainly. But I haven't done anything wrong. Surely you see that.

Of course I know how valuable the asteroid was. Of course I did. I am used to handling serious responsibility, I will have you know.

That was a cheap shot. We had no idea the Sansha were coming.

Look, there's really no need to activate that thing. I am cooperating fully. I don't know where you think you have your authority from, but...

Oh. Really?

Ah.

All right.

Well, can you please tell them that I would never work for anyone else? I mean, while I was overseer here. Certainly not our competitors. I wouldn't be feeding anything to them, data or whatever else.

I really don't think you need to turn on that thing.

We did work together. I told you that. I worked with him, and yes, we got along fine. Can someone please tell me what this is all about? I don't-... why did you just put that there? Why is that there? I consented to the monitors because I wanted you to know I was telling the truth, but I don't think I want that there at all.

We just worked together. I didn't know he was pulling data, or that he intended to do whatever he did with it. He was a good man and I trusted him. There was nothing going on. Can you please take that thing off me? Look, I am going to tell you whatever you want. I mean, I'm not going to hold back. I'll be honest. I am not covering up for Szekel. I know full well how important our research was here, for me and this colony and for our employers. That's who you're working for, right?

I am going to ask you one last time to take that thing off, to-... What are you doing? No, come over here and take it off!

Look, I knew the dude from a little betting. The worker's pool, mostly. Maybe a few extras, too. He wasn't a bad guy, I'm sure, but he did make some bad bets. Had a few people upset at him over in the townships, but he was working to fix that. And I believe him. I did believe him.

Maybe he was doing something else, and maybe I'll tell you all about it, but you better wheel that goddamn thing back out right this minute before I'll say another word. I've worked in nullsec before. I've worked on colonies that rebelled, I've been there when the black suits come in, and I know what that hellish thing is for.

So maybe Szekel needed money and was looking for a way to make some, or maybe he just didn't like the perks of being in the desert. That's all I'm saying. That is all I am goddamn saying.

Look, look, look, look, look, look, I know there's a guard. There is a guard on this colony who has money problems and access to security logs and probably a guilty conscience over something, hell if I know what other people think. I've seen them talking together, and I know they were in cahoots. It was him. If you want to find someone guilty of working with Szekel, it was him. Talk to him and you'll see. Make him talk and you'll see. Please take that thing off me. It was the guard.

I'm sorry about my earlier outburst. It was unprofessional of me. Unbecoming. Just let me take a breath, clear my head.

Alright. We can resolve this like human beings, I'm sure.

So. Of course you hear things, working on this station.

Yes, of course I will tell you. I am a respected scientist. We are having a reasonable discussion, you all and I. We are professionals. Yes. I have rights, and I know they apply even when there's a communications blackout. Even in the private sector, on a colony in the middle of a desert, I have rights.

Of course. If you'll just take that thing off me I can tell you all you want in detail, if you'll just take no don't activate it again please I beg you-...

You know they had an affair.

That's all I'm saying. You can stop it now.

She mentored him when he came in, taught him to use the equipment, and spent all her time with him. Long

hours in the lab, she'll tell you. I know better. Lab, my ass. I know what the access logs would say. You can start up a job in those labs, let it idle for hours, and do whatever you want in the meantime.

Doesn't take long to figure out how he might've got what he wanted, does it?

I want you to stop it now. I want you to unplug that damn thing and take these straps off me, because I am a patient man but I don't need to be pushed and prodded to tell you anything.

Don't you touch that dial. Don't you touch it.

I'm going to throw up again, you bastards. I'm going to throw up. I'm gonna throw up!

Okay. I took the money, too. A share of it. It's on my special account. No, it wasn't for 32-GI9. It was to betray the colony, to let Szekel take the data to our competitors, or sell it on the open market, or whatever. Not 32-GI9. Just ... make it stop. That's all I know. Make it stop.

I did take the money, I don't care if you can't see it. I took it, all of it. What? No, no, a share, that's what I meant, a share.

Thank you. Thanks for stopping it. I'll just ... I'll just catch a breath.

You people are pretty brave, aren't you? Coming in with your tools and your unquestionable authority.

Well. Let me tell you something.

You've gone over the limit and I intend to report you, I am going to stop you, I AM GOING TO TAKE YOU DOWN, I WILL TAKE ACT-

Don't make me do this. Please. I don't want to drag him into this, we haven't spoken forever and the last time we talked I had to tell him that I ... that I ...

Don't make me do this. If I talk to Phaedan then I'll have to talk to Adara as well, and I don't want her involved.

No. No, you're wrong, I do have a choice. In fact, I want you to bring in my overseer. I don't care what authority you people have, I want you to prove to me that he sanctioned the things you've been doing to me.

What do you mean, he-...

Oh no. No, you didn't. Not Kartanen. No. I-... no.

No, don't show me pictures.

I will make the call. I will contact Phaedan, I will talk to him and get him to come here if that's what you really want, but please, not Adara. Oh gods. Kartanen was a good man. Please, not Adara.

You promise?

You can't break me. Go to hell. You can't break me.

You know the truth anyway. Oh yeah, she asked me to delete it from the logs.

When I get out of here, I will find you and I will hurt you.

Go to hell. You can't break me.

...

You promise?

You promise?

You promise?

King Slaver



The Bertha, a prisoner cargo vehicle, slowed to a crawl without so much as a squeal of tires. The skies were clear and burning blue, and a heat haze wavered up off the scorching bone-white sand.

Bertha's doors opened and a large man with a gun stepped out. He didn't look around but immediately walked on a few paces away from the vehicle, then turned and looked at it silently, standing at ease.

A group of red-clad, head-shaven men shuffled out, single file. Most of them did not look around, either, though whether out of fear of what they might see or a dread that it might be exactly what they expected was hard to tell. The last man to exit the vehicle did glance to either side, taking in the desert fields all around him, buffeted by ugly swamps full of gnarled trees and animals and a musky stench he could smell all the way to where he stood, and, closer by, a huddle of wood and stone buildings that stood on top of black-sanded stalagmite hills, surrounded by deep trenches from which came ugly, grinding sounds. His designation was number 47; a low number, but he'd been informed that they were re-used when their past owners no longer needed them.

Another ugly sound, short and sharp, rang out much closer. Prisoner 47 looked back to the group and found that the man with the gun had shot one of the others, for whatever reason. The dead man lay sprawled in the sand and his blood ran out slowly, absorbed and blackened by the earth. What unsettled the prisoner - he was not shocked, nor aghast, because by now he had exhausted the wells of those emotions - was the silence: not just of the others in the group, which was understandable, but of the guard himself. The shooting obviously hadn't been out of any kind of justifiable motive, any more than the rest of the events that had landed them all in this place, but the calm look on the guard's face showed it hadn't been because of anger, either. It was, simply, the way things were here.

The prisoners, Amarrian all, were marched into the camp that was to be their home for the foreseeable future. They were somewhere in the Minmatar Republic, they had been secretly tried in Minmatar military courts, and they were considered a collective threat to the interests and the freedom of the Minmatar people. Freedom was an important concept, apparently. The Minmatar found it so important, the prisoner thought, they wanted to keep it all to themselves.

It was several weeks before 47 first heard of the King, and by that time he was to all intents and purposes dead himself.

Faith had been a notable part of life in the Amarr Empire. No more, and no less. It was there, always there, in speech and the back of minds, but it was not an important part unless cut off, much like breathing. The citizens of the Amarr Empire were not, whatever outsiders might like to believe, fanatics. They simply accepted faith,

and had a tacit agreement among themselves not to violate its major tenets. Civilization, to them, worked much the same way. One did not impinge on another's sphere of being - their liberty, their freedom or their joy - just as one did not, metaphorically speaking, walk into church, lower one's pants and leave a steaming gift to the almighty. Things worked, and people understood what they needed to do and not do in order to make them work.

The Minmatar understood this, too.

After the murder at their arrival, the group had suffered no more direct attacks, deadly or otherwise, from the guards. None were necessary. The entire colony had been constructed not for the output of its manual labor but to break the spirits of its inmates. Work started under dark blue skies and ended the same, and whatever little sleep there was to be had remained unsettled and light, punctuated by the groans and muffled wails of fellow inmates. They slept in large barracks with little privacy, three per bunk. The guards who walked through would swing their batons against the bunk beds' metal railings, startling the inmates out of tired revelries; and once awake, the prisoners would lie still with open eyes and hear the mournful, hungry howling wails of the slaver hounds drifting over from the swamp. During the day, the sun would beat down on them as they worked, either digging or mining or, in a very few trusted cases, running services for the camp. Noise blared throughout the work areas, echoing off the rocks that surrounded them, vibrating in their tools and in their heads. Food was scarce and revolting, and clothes were rarely washed. The routine wore them out. It kept them numb, too, but only on the surface, leaving them completely susceptible to deeper influences.

The guards played games. One day per week was a holiday, during which inmates were free to rest, roam about or even leave the area altogether. No one wandered; the sun-drenched desert and the swampy woods beyond were formidable repellants. Instead, the guards would hide things - anything from colored pebbles to little skeins or wooden plaques with pictures of Amarrian idols - in the possessions of some random, unknown prisoner, then call out a hunt. If the items were found before sundown, and the right person given up, that individual would usually have their rations withdrawn for the next two days. If the items were not found, everyone lost their rations. That was the basic version of the game, but some guards were more inventive than others, and occasionally offered an alternative to the rations - especially if the target looked like they wouldn't last two days without food.

One liked people to eat sand, or wads of someone else's hair. The prisoner saw a friend ingest so much dirt that his exhalations left little muddy spatters on the ground; and later, overnight, he sat up with the man and held him still as his agonized, bleeding body rid itself of what it had been forced to ingest.

One liked public sex, choosing at random another inmate to accompany the victim. The rest of them had to stand around in a wide circle and maintain absolute silence, hearing only the hoarse, bleating grunts from the center.

One was partial to violence, and breakage.

The prisoner 47, after somehow bearing to watch several of these events, began to notice that certain people had an aura over them. They were safe. They stood where they wanted, instead of hiding among the assemblage. They lost their rations like everyone else if the item hunt turned out empty, but when special rules came into play they stood at ease, solitary and sheltered. All of them had apparently been in the camp for a while.

The prisoner saw them mill about, unobtrusive but entirely unconcerned, as he watched friends and compatriots tortured, molested and beaten. He saw them look at the sky not because they wanted to avoid the sights on the ground, but because they genuinely found nothing else of interest around them. Unconcerned, and unaffected.

It shook him. When he tacitly inquired about these people, every question went unanswered. It wasn't as if they were aiding the guards, or in some manner actively participating in the degradation. Amazingly, 47 felt no real animosity towards the guards themselves: They were the catalysts of pain and suffering, but what they inflicted was so terrible as to render them inhuman in his mind. There was no more point in hating them than there was in despising the weather. But those fellow inmates carrying a secret that in any way related to or amplified the suffering of everyone else around them, those men were nothing but traitors. Worse than that, in 47's opinion, they were evil. They were evil men. Not grey like the guards and the sand at night, but black just through and through.

And he was continually forced to watch the games, week after week after week, until one day something in him simply gave way. While two inmates were fighting in the middle of the circle, seeing who could break the other's right arm first, 47 shuffled over to an ignored little corner of the plaza and picked up a wooden plate on which was painted in gold a picture of an Amarrian saint. It had been the day's bounty and was now being ignored by the other prisoners, who all stood slack and gazed at the fight in the distance. Number 47 held it casually to his side as he walked up to one of the safe men, some older guy inspecting a cloud far above, and swung it back and beat him in the face with all the power he had.

The man crumpled to the ground, blood spurting from a gash on his cheek. Number 47 descended on him. He got in a handful of blows before the guards yanked him onto the ground and administered a beating of their own.

As he lay on the ground, shortly before he lost consciousness, he caught a glimpse of the other man, lying there not far from him, apparently at ease with himself and the world. The man was smiling. He said something but it was muffled by the blood in his mouth, and all 47 could read from his lips was "hail to the king."

It took him several days to recover, during which he was exempt from labor but given only half portions. No major bones had broken but several were badly bruised, tendons were overstretched, and his skin looked like a relief map. He had a lot of time to think while everything healed. Being yanked from his daily routine, first by the upset that had led to the beating, then by being forced to stay in the sick ward - he hated the routine but it really was all he had - turned him more and more tense, and all he could think about was his growing obsession with inequality.

It was like faith, and in his convalescence he realized that even in this place, where he truly expected to remain until he died, he had clung to his beliefs. Not the great, grand vision of God and Emperor, but the deeper, unspoken truths that lay behind them. Everyone could suffer, everyone did suffer, and 47 had grown up implicitly accepting that life, for all its joys, had plenty of suffering to heap onto its people - but only so long as everyone was equal. Not in the experience of suffering itself, for that, along with life's pleasures and darkness, belonged to you and nobody else; but in open judgment, in evaluation, before the renownedly loving but - secretly, suspected, known in the heart of hearts of all their subjects - uncaring and disinterested authorities.

Each time he shifted, it hurt like blazes. He was aware of every breath. His body had lost so much weight that his bones clicked against one another. He was willing to die in this place, if that was his secular fate; in this cot or out in the mines. There was little, at this point, he could do about that. But he wanted so badly, with such horrible need, to go to his eventual death as a man of values, not a slack-jawed ghost who hadn't known the meaning of the life slowly leaving him. He needed to know the meaning of things here. He knew it existed; it had to exist, or life no longer made sense and he was a ghost among ghosts. A god, or a guard, or, as it seemed, a king. A ruler of the earth. The perfect authority for this terrible place. The devil.

It had to be, the more he thought of it. The source, not of suffering, which was God's work, but of inequality. The chaos of counterbalance to God's own order.

And he had to meet this king. To understand why the world was the way it was. Not to comprehend it in its entirety - that was given only to God and the most wicked of men - but to understand the balance. To know how this inequality worked, of the camp and the people in it, and through that understanding, to incorporate it as a blip, a sensible aberration that was merely a stray chaotic fluke in a much greater scheme of order.

He understood that he might have a fever, too. Certainly the things he saw crawling on the inside walls of the infirmary could not possibly be there. Not even the ones that sometimes crawled up into the cot with him, with chitters and wet little clicks.

When 47 finally got out of the infirmary, he was a different man. He got into more fights, seeking to beat out the knowledge he needed. Other inmates shunned him. There were more beatings, too, though none so vicious as the first had been.

He got pulled into a game, once. He sobbed into his straw-filled pillow that night and several nights after, and in the days that followed merely fought even harder. If this was chaos, he would be part of it until recognized as its own.

And at last someone gave it away. One of the men with the holy auras, caught unawares behind a supply shed. Once he recognized 47, beneath the flurry of blows, he started to say something, but it was not until 47 had exhausted himself and fallen gasping to his knees that the victim managed to speak. Even then, it was hard; the man's face was swollen up and distended, as if made from lumps of clay. Prisoner 47 crawled over to him and bent over his face, looking down at the mess of blood and flesh he'd brought into creation. Still, the man tried to talk, his tongue pushing away blood that 47 noticed was being watered out and then realized it was from the tears dropping from his own eyes.

"Jungle. The King is in the jungle," the victim told him. "Go there. He will see you now."

That same evening, not for cover but the cool of dusk, 47 ran off, through the desert for either minutes or hours, until the musky scent enveloped him.

He waded through for hours or days. The chattering was loud here, and the things clicked wetly when he held them, but they had protein and liquids and that sustained him. Occasionally there was growling in the distance, which 47 suspected came from wild slaver hounds, but never anything more. It did not worry him that the beaten man had refrained from giving directions. Whoever or whatever this King was - and 47 was just as ready for it being a desiccated tree or some other dead altar where he would lay down and die - he would be found if he wanted it.

When at last he stopped, he did not sleep. Instead, he dropped into some place dark and still. Once he came back to himself he found the night felt different, not brighter but perhaps more still.

Before his eyes, a mix of broken, felled trees and rotting foliage resolved itself into a shack, standing on crooked feet a little above the marsh. He waded over to it, clambered up onto the gap that seemed to be an entrance, and made his way in.

There was almost total darkness inside, though his eyes adjusted remarkably fast. A corner held an empty spread of straw - dry, to 47's amazement - and in the murky gloom of another, a silhouette of deeper darkness gave the impression of a man.

"Sit," the voice said. He obeyed. The straw crackled under his weight. He couldn't help but touch it, languidly running his hands over it in a combination of nerves and obsession. It seemed entirely too pure to be here.

A thought struck him. "We are-" he started, then stopped to cough his voice into action. He couldn't remember when he had last spoken.

"We are in a desert," he tried again. His voice was deep but without much volume. He could feel it echo in his faded body. "How do we even get food, let alone the straw in our bedding?"

He could hear the King's breathing. It turned shallow for a moment, as if he were amused. "Hot-dropped from outside, like all your supplies. Selected prisoners bring the crates into camp under cover of darkness."

"Who selects them?"

The unseen figure, he knew, grinned at him for a moment. Then he said, not unkindly, "Is this why you came here? To ask about the straw in your bedding?"

Prisoner 47 thought it over. It was hard to hang on to thoughts for very long, and he didn't feel certain he could articulate them too well. He slid a hand over the straw and felt how the clamminess of his palms left a slick trail over the surface. It wasn't just that the straw was dry; he was wet. He was soaked.

He had a fever again, he realized.

Something shifted, and something small and inert was suddenly lying in front of him. "Eat this," the voice said.

He did. It tasted greater than anything he'd had for a long time, certainly in the colony itself, though a part of him missed the crunch and chitter of the jungle outside.

He tried to collect his thoughts again. "I think I went mad."

The King replied, "Yes. I think you've gone mad," and waited for 47 to speak again.

The prisoner thought it over. At last he said, "How did you become King?"

There was a hesitation. Then, "I was like you, worn out and broken. But I kept glimpsing something else, as if behind a veil. At last, something in me gave way and let me see the darkness proper, only to find out I'd known it all along."

The prisoner thought this over, too. "Is that true?"

There was a short laugh. "Maybe. Or maybe I was just good at making connections and reading other people's minds, until the point came where even the guards didn't know what to do with me."

"So you left."

"So I left. I get what I need here. They bring me straw, held over their heads to keep it dry, and they bring food and drink and whatever else I require. If the guards have it, so do I."

"Why?"

"What else is there, in this place?" the King said to him. "Except eventual death, and all your suffering until then. And me, giving you the faith you need."

"Does everyone follow you?"

"No. And they die either way, but the ones who came to know me can live in a little comfort, which is briefly important, and die with understanding, which means so much more."

The King continued, "I decide who is safe. My people do not get chosen for games. If you get hurt, you will be allowed to mend before going on. You will never lose a meal. It's not for everyone."

"I made it here," 47 said. Even with the meal in his stomach, it was hard to think.

"You made it here. You went into the darkness. You can be one of our own, if you wish."

In the darkness, 47 nodded. "What do I need to do now?" he said.

"The same thing you did that let you be led here. Embrace it. Accept it. Know that you belong to it."

"The chaos."

"Oh yes," the King said, as if receiving the right answer to an unasked question. "Exactly that."

The voice grew closer, as if the King had leaned in. "Every man who comes here is a man of faith, a creature of thought come to understand that there is something greater than you. But until you come here you have nothing like the true faith, only carefully selected pieces of it. Here is where you fill in the rest. Here is where you become, at last, a believer of a dark and utter truth. Did you feel it missing, before you came here?"

"Yes," 47 whispered.

"Was it a life that seems now not only distant, but fake as well? False, and incomplete?"

"Yes," 47 said.

"Yes," the King echoed. "Here is all the truth a man of faith, a true man of faith, could ever have sought."

The prisoner knew he was right. Here it was, all of it. In a prisoner's camp where people were broken; in an emptiness full of beasts and starvation. The balance, found at last.

"Thank you," 47 said. It came out choked. He cleared his throat. "Thank you," he said again, loud and clear.

"I'm glad you found the faith," the King told him.

The prisoner 47 left the cabin and began making his way back to camp.

On his way through the marshy wilderness, he heard the growl again, much closer this time. He turned and found himself looking at a slaver hound, realizing in that moment what a terrible joke, what a perfect fulfilment of this life it was to have these beasts here to guard the faithful, diverted from their original purpose of guarding and attacking Minmatar slaves back in the Empire. He could hear the hound's hoarse, deep breathing. Puffs of air wafted from its hungry face.

He stood still, calmly looking back at it. And in that animal face, with its sharp teeth dripping saliva, and the eyes red-rimmed and unblinking, he saw no longer a hunger, but a fellowship.

The Plague Years



Fermar looked at the sun for the last time. His home had one of the most scenic spots on the asteroid mining colony, and if he stood at this living room window at the eve of the day he could see all the ships coming and going.

One had docked just now. Fermar inhaled deeply, holding his breath before slowly letting it out again. His hair was all grey and his hands were rough and creased, as befitted a man who'd worked on the colonies all his life. He noticed his own reflection in the window, superimposed on the starry blackness. It seemed to be smiling.

There was a knock and the sound of someone opening the outside door. A man's voice said, "He's in here, sir," and another voice said, "Thank you. I'll see myself in." That second voice was much huskier than the first, worn but not imposing. There was the sound of a door closing.

A man walked into the living room. He was dressed in black, stylish in a fairly classical way and covered with a mop of dark, curly hair; noticeable, all in all, but not memorable. He was younger than Fermar by at least thirty years, but didn't carry himself with the same bullish assurance. Fermar moved like a man used to high gravity; this one sidled like someone expecting the sky to pick him up at any time.

"Terden," Fermar said.

"Hi, Fermar," Terden said.

"Get out."

"It's not what you think."

"Get out."

"I have a deal for you."

"I have a gun in working order. Get out."

Terden walked over to a settee and sat down, unbuttoning his coat and pulling off his gloves. "I ... want to help you," he said.

"You want to do a lot of things, but help won't be high on the list."

"I ... wanted to see you on the sly, too, but I was nabbed as soon as I came in." His whispery voice was oddly modulated; it would start off slow, get its bearings, then rush to the end of the sentence as if trying to race past the meaning of its words. "Security's tight here," he added.

"Of course it is."

Terden ran a hand through his thick hair. "So you know why I'm here."

"Your creatures are coming," Fermar said. "I've heard reports. They're settling in the area, kidnapping people. Same as they always do."

"Which is why I'm here," Terden said. "Hear me out, but take a seat first, please."

Fermar looked at him for a moment, then walked over to a chair opposite the settee and sat down.

"You're right. The people I work for ... they're coming, they're reaching out and they need new recruits, but nobody needs to get hurt. You yourself could walk away completely untouched."

"Everybody gets hurt when the Sansha come in," Fermar said.

"We don't want a fight, and we don't want people to die," Terden said, ignoring the comment. "You and I, we know each other. You remember what happened last time and I don't want that to happen again. I want you to give up this colony and convince its people to surrender so we can move in quietly and without bloodshed."

"You know what happened in the Plague Years," Fermar said. "Why did you even bother coming to me?"

"Because I do remember the Plague Years and the time before them, too. I remember being taken in for a long while when I didn't have anywhere to go and I remember a family that showed me a lot of kindness when I didn't always deserve it."

"Damn straight, you didn't," Fermar said.

"And I remember Carla," Terden said.

Fermar jumped to his feet as if he'd been stung, glowered at Terden and seemed about to say something, hesitated, then merely stood there in silence. Finally it was as if the air went out of him, and he sat down heavily again.

The two men sat there, unmoving. After a while Fermar said, "Drinks in wood cabinet, lounge, other room. No ice."

Terden got up and walked out of the room. There was a clink of glasses and he returned, handing a drink to Fermar and holding one himself. "There was only one bottle," he said.

"I don't much go in for alcohol," Fermar said. "Serve guests, that's it."

"Always happy to be a guest here," Terden said and took a sip, then grimaced. "Strong stuff."

Fermar held the glass at arm's length, as if he'd forgotten about it. He had a faraway look in his eyes. "Why did you bring her up?" he said.

"When we come in, who do you think will be in the lead?"

Fermar put down his glass and stared at Terden.

"You all did me a lot of good during hard times," Terden said. "But that's over now. These are new times. Remember Melvue."

"You will not mention that name again," Fermar said calmly.

"It's the ... height of the Plague Years, and I won't pretend that the term doesn't apply to the Sansha, too, because they came right when everything was bad enough already. So what happens? The leader of the mining colony is approached one night at his house by a scout like me, and he gets an offer, same as you do now, and he takes the offer. We ... move in, not intending any violence, but then some people get it into their heads they want to fight. So they fight, and they get hurt, and some of them manage to run away and some of them don't, all because the colony leader tried to make a sensible deal with us, and some people made a bad decision." Terden leaned forward. "It doesn't have to happen again."

"To hear you of all people saying this."

"They're coming, Fermar," Terden said. "And you're the leader now. But I know that you can keep your people in check, so I offer you the same deal as they did back then." He leaned back, waiting for an answer. When none was forthcoming, he said, "You know, they don't always do this. Sometimes they ... just move in, especially when they're hungry for people, and believe me, with the capsuleers thinning out their numbers they're real hungry now. But I know you, and I asked to come here, smooth things out."

Fermar said, "We might fight back this time, too. I have contacts and I heard of the Sansha coming. I made sure we had weapons."

"That's stupid," Terden said. "Stupid and suicidal."

"They have my daughter. You know this," Fermar said. "You people are on the other side of everything."

They fell silent. Terden looked around. "Yeah, I know. Thanks for the reminder. It's not like I'm here trying to help you, you ungrateful old fossil." He looked back at Fermar. "I wasn't going to bring up family, but since we're on the subject, how's your wife?"

"She's dead," Fermar said.

"That a fact? Is that why there are no pictures of her?" Terden said. He waved his hand at the walls. "I see pictures of your daughter here but not your wife. That's surprising, isn't it?"

Fermar sat silent. Terden said, "I think she's dead to you. Which is usually a little different, though right now it comes out to about the same. When did you lose her? After we came? Long after?"

"Why the hell are you asking this?" Fermar said.

"Because the ... only one who matters to you now is Carla and I don't believe for a second that you're being a colony leader because you want to. It's because you're a sensible man with a good head on his shoulders who's taken so many losses that now he only wants to wait until life catches up with him and eats up that one last breath he has."

Terden took another sip of his drink and quietly added, "You could see Carla."

Fermar's breath caught. His own drink was untouched; he reached for it, hesitated, then reached again but didn't pick it up, only held on to it as if for ballast. "What did you say?"

"I can't guarantee that you will spend much time together, but at least you will meet again. She's close enough in the area that she could be brought over, and I've told the Sansha of her connection to you. But that's not going to happen if you bring a fight."

"They won't send Carla if I fight?"

"Oh, they will definitely send Carla if you fight. With a gun in her hand. And this is the first house she'll go to. They'll dock, and they'll swarm in, and they won't enter a single house until they've entered yours, dragged you out and put a bullet in your brain. They will make an example out of you."

Fermar studied Terden for a while, then said, "I believe you. Speaking of which, that rotten cheat of a colony leader whose name you mentioned earlier. How's he doing?"

Terden's tone changed subtly from confrontation to elucidation. "Melvue made the right choice, so he's doing fine, enjoying his life."

"That so?"

"Absolutely," Terden said without hesitation.

Fermar said, "See, that's interesting. Because the last time I saw him, he was tied to a chair in a noiseproof room, and there was little all life left in him."

Terden, sipping from the glass, froze up.

"You're right," Fermar said. "He did make the right choice, back when he was colony leader. It was right for him and nobody else. And we never forgot it."

Fermar, glass in hand, slowly rose to his feet and walked over to Terden, towering over him. "I lost Carla, who your people took, and I lost my wife, who couldn't stand the loss and the aftermath. The Sansha took everything from me, and that miserable excuse for a human being we had as colony leader, he paved their way."

He poured the content of his wine glass on the floor beside Terden, who momentarily looked down at his own glass before looking up again with a puzzled expression.

Fermar said, "For years I couldn't even think straight. Carla had been taken and I wanted to get her back at any cost. I made contacts, I moved around, and I started to learn about the people you serve, but there was no way to get to her, or even discover where she was." He leaned in close. "Until, at long last, I tracked down my old colony leader. He was a spy by that point, working for you people in another colony, reporting on its setup and

getting in with its leaders."

In a cold tone, Terden said, "And you ratted him out. To be tortured and killed."

"During which I discovered that life among the True Slaves really isn't that pleasant. In fact, it's downright rotten. You're taken in and made into a mindless drone, subject to the whims of a single person who certainly doesn't bear your interests at heart, and it eventually drives you insane. Doesn't matter what level your implants are; there's a threshold beyond which you start to rebel against the lack of free will, and your subconscious realizes that it's been trapped. It's extremely painful in the long run, though the symptoms break out in unusual ways. You've never thought about how willing these people are to die for their master? You would think that even his machinery couldn't erase the survival instinct. But once you've been his slave for long enough, apparently all you want to do is die."

Terden took a long, slow sip. "I'm perfectly ... fine," he said.

"You scouts get more autonomy than the rest," Fermar said. "All they need is to keep tabs on you, not control you. They'll have vetted you and found that you're one of that rare breed who'll willingly join the Sansha. You're safe," he spat.

Terden stared at him, his jaw clenched. "Was there something wrong with the wine?" he said at last, nodding his head towards the puddle of alcohol on the floor, and lifting his own glass to his mouth.

"Oh, it's poisoned," Fermar said.

Terden stopped, wine in his mouth. He slowly swallowed, then said, "I've finished half a glass, Fermar."

Fermar looked at the spreading stain on the floor. Terden followed his gaze, dropping his own glass in the process. When Terden looked back up at Fermar, the old man had a gun in his hand.

Terden's eyes widened and he started to rise, but Fermar shot him, first through a knee, then through each shoulder. Terden dropped to the floor, screaming, and Fermar knelt down beside him, saying, "Before you go into shock, I want to tell you something. I know this won't get to the Sansha, because they don't use direct feeds on their scouts.

"First off, the wine wasn't poisoned. I wanted to slow you down a bit, make you comfortable, and distract you at the end. Which is funny, because it's pretty much what your type does when you're about to pounce on innocent people.

"Second, I know Carla is in this region. She's been here for a while. It was a long time before I realized that I couldn't possibly go after her, and if I tried they'd either kill me or move her somewhere that I'd never find her.

"So I'm bringing her to me."

Terden was quiet, gasping for breath.

Fermar arose, grunting with the effort. "Once everyo-" He hesitated, then fired a shot into Terden's arm. Terden screamed, and his hand, which had been reaching into his clothes, dropped back into view, a small pellet rolling out of its grip.

"Leave the suicide dose alone, thanks. I want you to hear this." Fermar ambled over to his seat, keeping his gaze on Terden. "This entire colony is wired with explosives."

Terden's grimace turned to surprise, and he stared at Fermar in shock. "You're insane," he said.

"Everyone has left, just about. I knew you people were coming even before you did. I still have my contacts, and I watch the solar winds. When they made me leader I told them of my Sansha experience, and one of the first things I did was implement an escape plan in case your employers decided to move into the area. Which they did, after a good long while, and I had my people start practicing." He had the gun trained on Terden, and his eyes narrowed. "When I found out that you of all people had been posted to this part of space, I knew it wasn't long to wait, and that you'd be the one they'd send. When I heard you were finally on your way, I fired up the plan, and everyone left quietly and efficiently. The only people still here are a skeleton crew, and after you and I are finished they will leave, too. Nobody here will get caught by the zombies. Nobody."

"Your daughter ... will come here," Terden said. "She will come to your house, gun in hand, and if I don't return you'll never get her back." A puddle of blood was spreading around Terden's body, and his voice quavered with exhaustion.

"Oh, I will. But not the way you think I want," Fermar said. He got up again and walked over to Terden, this time kneeling on his damaged hand. Terden hissed in pain, but kept his eyes open and staring straight into Fermar's.

Fermar said, "Once someone has been taken in by the Sansha, modified to Carla's level and kept for as long as she has, there's no turning back. The only thing I can do for her now is ease her misery, and my own, and that of anyone else you people send to this miserable rock. And if I can't do it, for whatever reason, then the explosives will."

"Murderer," Terden croaked.

"Yes," Fermar replied calmly. Terden's expression showed that this hadn't been the expected reaction. "After my team has gone, everyone left here will die," Fermar said.

"Including me," Terden said, clearing his throat and taking deep, hissing breaths.

"Including you."

"You really are a bitter, vengeful old fossil, aren't you?" Terden said, trying to shift so that he could glare at Fermar. "And you've lost it. You tried rebelling once when you had a perfectly good chance of saving everyone you cared about, and you failed, so now you want to finish the job and make sure they're all dead!" He had lifted his head with the effort, his shoulders giving him no support, and now he slumped back to the ground, breathing heavily, his one good hand making a fist.

Fermar thought about this, then said, "I'm finishing what needs to be finished. And confronting something no one else would, which is a lesson you and a lot of other people should have learned a long time ago. If it wasn't for people like you, you and that old colony leader, we never would've had those situations at all, and I wouldn't have lost my daughter."

There was no response.

Fermar sighed, aimed his gun and shot Terden in the head. Terden twitched with the impact, then lay still in his puddle of blood.

Fermar set the gun down on his chair, then walked over to the comms console and activated it. "It's done," he said.

Very shortly after, several men came into the room. "You do all right, sir?" they asked him.

"Yeah, it's all confirmed," he said. "Thanks for waiting. You were close?"

"Outside the door, practically," one of them said, and grinned. "No worries, we didn't listen in. After we heard the shot and his scream, we knew you had him."

"Alright. Clear out the body, please, then get in your ships as fast as you can. You have a little time, but not much."

The men nodded, and carried Terden's body out of the room. Fermar had turned and was about to put away the drink glasses when he heard them all come back in. They walked up to him in silence, and every one of them shook his hand. Then they left.

Fermar sat down to wait. If he had failed with Terden, these people would have taken over, after which they'd have primed automated triggers that would set off the explosives as soon as the Sansha had gotten into the colony.

Now that his suspicions had all been confirmed, the only thing remaining was to sit it out. If something were to happen to him now, the triggers would still work, but he hoped he'd see it through. He hoped he would hear a knock at the door and see another familiar face, if only for a second, before the end.

The Book of Emptiness (Part One)



On the planet of Athra some fifteen hundred years ago, right after the Moral Reforms had concluded and the Amarr Empire had begun its tentative steps towards further exploration and expansion, two men were walking through a desert in search of a sacred object whose recovery could, according to one of them, rock the foundations of the Empire.

The two men were accompanied by a team of soldiers whose primary purpose during the mission was to take orders from one of them and keep an eye on the other, and not to complain when they were forced to take detours, track back or even stop to attempt futile digs in the middle of nowhere. They were desert troops with years of experience with sandy dunes and dry winds, and had been chosen not only for their unyielding devotion to the Empire, but for their proven ability of living – and more importantly, not dying – in these amber wastelands.

The reason for the detours, trackbacks and digs was the slight absent-mindedness of one of the group's leaders – a theological researcher named Akran, a man in his late fifties, with a mass of unruly hair that was combed only when he needed to engage in debate or presentation; an incredibly driven man whose mind lived in books while his body did whatever it needed to subsist. He was the catalyst and the linchpin for this quest, having spent a fair amount of his non-research time in argument and persuasion with some of the highest-ranking members of Amarr, with the eventual result that, if for no other reason than to shut him up, they'd granted him the minimum of funds and people needed to follow up on this quest of his.

So the soldiers were also diggers led by a man looking for a secret place that no one had visited for ages, and as the whole troupe trudged through the middle of nowhere, a place with no natural resources, no religious significance and no real habitability, it occurred to its other leader, a fervently religious soldier named Skar, that this was really fucking stupid. Skar was captain of the task squad set with finding the holy object, and despite his strong faith in God and the Holy he wasn't even sure whether he believed in its existence, for while it was mentioned in the Scriptures, giving him full faith that it was, of course, real, he also believed that it was real in the same way that the faith itself was real; a presence beyond mere reality itself, as it were.

Skar shared his team's conviction that nothing solid would come of this trek, but Akran's own conviction was unshakeable. The researcher had created a new style of theological theory when he posited that he could triangulate the holy object's location from bits of scripture taken from lore that had been previously presumed to be completely unrelated, and after he had made a lot of noise in the auditoriums and the press, the authorities in their wisdom had decided they might as well give him permission and a little money to go on his quest, and thus keep the mission academic, rather than risk having the press focus all its attention on him. In this age of expansion they had more pressing things they wanted attention given to, and when this particular mission of Akran failed, as they knew it would, they could use it as a fallback if they needed to shift the focus from other embarrassments; and besides, as Skar had been tacitly informed, while they could just have the

researcher killed, there'd be someone else along later with the same information who might not be as easily controlled.

At last, as the day had worn on and the sun blissfully begun its cooling descent, Akran told the troupe that they had reached their destination and would begin digging imminently, to which Skar countered that if they did, it'd be Akran alone, while the rest of them would focus their energies on living to see tomorrow. Responding to his command the troupe unloaded their gear and began camping for the approaching night, pointedly ignoring Akran, who did in fact not appear to be put out in the least. The workers unloaded their tents, beige and white, and set them up in a semicircle so that they could catch most of the brunt of a sandstorm that was expected later in the evening, then set up Skar and Akran's own living quarters, larger tents of far more expensive material that would ventilate, warm and protect as needed. Skar's tent was colored similarly to the workers', with the addition of golden strips that spiralled down from its centre and out to its outer edges, while Akran's own was a blue so light it was nearly cyan, an unorthodox concession of style he'd required of the tentmakers so that the mild, filtered light shining through it would help him study and protect the holy object of their quest.

Their two tents were located in the inner rim of the semicircle, the better to protect them from wind and sand, and while Skar appreciated the slight comfort this arrangement would bring, he knew that it would also force him to live closer to Akran than he'd like, and quite possibly have to engage the man in conversation over dinner.

As it turned out, the evening was a quiet affair, all talk being hushed by the tiredness of their soldiers and enveloped in the lights of the stars from the dark skies above. Staring up at the sky felt comforting to Skar in a manner that, he thought, would strike others as completely paradoxical. On the one hand it was a celestial covering, an extended roof on the world that enveloped him in its protective sheath and made it a finite creation, protecting him inside this little bubble of a world and of a life; but at the same time it reminded him of the infinite and the endless, the vastness of the world and the unknowability of all its wonder; and both of these viewpoints, as much as they clashed, led him inexorably to the Lord. He felt certain that this kind of duality of thought, and the fact he was capable of it, meant he had thought through all the sides of his faith, seeing and verifying its truths; and that certainty was important to him, for he was not a faithful man by nature and had instead come by his beliefs begrudgingly, after a time in his life so dark it made this desert night seem like an oasis of joy and light by comparison. The military man is used to being commanded, but the good military man is always in command, of himself first and foremost, and it had hurt to acknowledge that with this endless darkness encroaching upon him on all sides he would have to give himself completely over to a higher authority. Religion formed a large part of life in the Amarr empire, but it was the institutional religion of rule and order, not the visceral, internalized one of formless wonder, and while everyone professed to worship the Lord above, what they did in fact worship - in the military, especially - was the framework of quiet devotion and worship where the army, if anything, was a modernized version of the cloisters of old, with the same selfless giving, and the same striving to meet a higher goal. But for Skar it had not been enough, and at last there had come a time where the framework on which he had hung his cloth of faith felt as empty as his own insides and he decided to let its true owner in at last; a loss of control he still resented, and a frustration he readily admitted to himself, but it was and would remain the greater and only choice: to entrust his fate to the hands of the Almighty, to accept life's storms as a passenger instead of the oarsman, and to see the world no longer merely as it was and no more than that, but through the imperfect eyes of a vessel of God.

And now here was Akran, an annoyance of a man who wanted to see behind the curtain, to put his interpretation on God's words and glean not their hidden meanings but the meaning behind those meanings; and, certainly, also a well-read and intelligent scholar, one who had managed to attract to an area of theo-archaeological research that had apparently been quite neglected, and who had already accumulated some impressive finds of religious artifacts, all of which had resulted in this journey into the desert.

As they supped on the usual glutinous mix of fatty meat and potatoes, Akran said to him, "How do you feel about finding the Book of Emptiness?"

Skar stopped eating and looked at him. It was the first time they had mentioned the object's name in quite some time, and hearing it from Akran's lips had the same faint whiff of blasphemy as before.

"It's for the good of God and Empire," he said. "That's all that matters."

"Is it now?" Akran said, calmly ladling more food from the pot and onto his plate.

Skar didn't know whether to be annoyed or careful. The researcher might be here by the grace of others, but he had not achieved that grace through being a simpleton. The two men had spent a few nights camped out in various parts of the desert but had not held a whole conversation yet; Skar's mind had been on faith and darkness, while Akran had constantly been going over his notes and trying to better triangulate their quarry. This was the first time he was this relaxed, which Skar took as a sign that they were about to do their final dig.

"Had you heard of the Book?" Akran asked.

Skar, an autodidact of anything to do with his faith, made to answer, then stopped. He hadn't been asked whether he'd read about the holy object, but whether he'd heard of it, and thus reasoned he wasn't expected to share his knowledge of the theology, but of Akran's research into it.

"I knew you were holding lectures on it. And that you got enough support from Empire to take us on this journey. That's all," Skar said. The liquid in his bowl glimmered oily in the light of the fire.

Akran cleared his throat, and Skar knew, just knew, that he was about to hear one of those lectures. He looked to the stars, quelled a sigh and gave quick thanks that at least he'd been spared the proselytizing until now, then looked back down at his bowl and waited for the words.

Ages ago, Akran said, a brilliant philosopher whose name had been lost to history had become so dissatisfied with the limits of his native tongue to express what he saw on the inside of his head that he created a symbolic language, similar to maths, with which he could describe such concepts as truth, beauty and reality in specific terms without having to go through the whole definition rigmarole that identified much of modern philosophy. This was not the first time someone had attempted such a thing, though it was usually the domain of mathematicians and some of the more experimental theologians, and despite the man's fame for inventive capacity it was not treated with any great amount of seriousness or interest. That was, until he released the first draft of his book to a select group of readers who read it and became, in the oft-quoted words of an unfortunate Empire enforcer who found them and later disappeared, beautifully insane. They were not catatonic, but spoke only under certain specific circumstances, in which they would let out a torrent of glossolalia that always begun with the phrase "I have not read the Book of Emptiness," then instantly turned formless and wavery but remained coherent and, in fact, absolutely clear. They spoke, if such a term may be used, about the absolute reality of the world in which they lived, and as with any other organism that exists under absolute reality, it may be said that they were insane, but it was not a lack of sanity that afflicted them; rather, a sense that reached beyond mere identity and utterly unified them with the world. The ones who heard them later reported that the sounds that entered their heads left them momentarily unable to filter, judge, avoid or ignore any aspect of both the physical and the metaphysical realities in which they lived. In short, the entire world was revealed to them, and they saw themselves both as the inherent parts of it and outside of it, as if they were the viewer and the viewed all at once.

In less enlightened societies this kind of behaviour would have been seen as heretical and would have earned everyone involved a brief and smoky stay on a pyre, but at that point in history Amarr was remarkably tolerant to aberrant behaviour. As Akran remarked to Skar, the religious history of the Amarrian Empire could in some way be seen as the ocean: The force with which it weighed down the free expression of its fringe elements would ebb and flow like the rising tide on a wayward beach, periodically washing in to quell and suffuse the sands of thought before receding again for long enough to allow the little kernels to cast off their influence and take to the winds. In this case, the philosopher's books were captured and destroyed, the people who'd read them were given free medical treatment, which in a couple of cases turned out to last for perpetuity, the people who'd heard those people speak were given paid leave until such point as they could see fit to return to work, which they all eventually did, and the philosopher himself was given the choice of either cutting it out and becoming a productive member of society, or following the traditional rule of mad prophecy and taking it out into the desert. To the disappointment but little surprise of the ruling body, the philosopher chose the desert, and was rarely heard of again. Snippets of his conversations with the desert tribes could be found in various of the lesser scriptures, but they made little sense at the best of times, and whether due to translation issues or madness on the philosopher's behalf it had been assumed for a long time that his career and life's work had effectively turned to ruin when he first set foot on the sandy dunes, never to return, and never to be found again.

Until Akran came along, a long time later, and said that he understood.

He had not been able to comprehend the philosopher's entire dialogue to the desert folk, and he readily admitted this, but he had nonetheless managed to piece together and retranslate enough to figure out where the philosopher had buried the last remaining copy of the Book of Emptiness. Right here, on this spot where they had camped.

Skar closed his eyes.

"You think we won't find it?" Akran said, in a tone Skar couldn't rightly decipher.

Skar thought about his answer for a while, then said, "I think each one of us has to find it on their own."

Akran laughed quietly at that. "Good answer, soldier," he said. "And now I'm going to get some sleep. With God's grace, tomorrow we'll all find what we're looking for."

To be continued...

The Book of Emptiness (Part Two)



They got up while it was still cold and blue, and as the desert sands warmed to scorching temperatures they dug for the Book. Akran presided over the excavation, giving out directions that went mostly unheeded, while Skar pitched in with his men and gave them the orders they obeyed. In the afternoon the heat was alleviated a little by increasing gusts of wind, but the relief was short-lived. By early evening the winds had picked up, visibility was dropping, and clouds had started to pile up on the horizon. The sand got into everything, and all nonessential conversation faded away as the diggers focused on the ground, their mouths pinched shut and their eyes narrowed to slits.

The weather got progressively worse. Skar began to wonder whether it was a sign that they were in the wrong place, or even if they should not be there at all. The soldiers did their best to shore up what had at first been a deepening hole but was increasingly turning into a well. Akran was clearly worried that if they discovered the Book the rain would damage it, and paced around muttering to himself. The entire thing seemed on all levels to be turning into useless sludge.

It was just before midnight, as the winds had turned to gales and the rain was pelting them from all sides, that the soldier at the bottom of the hole stopped digging and began waving to the people up top. Skar was called over, then Akran, and together they stood in open-mouthed amazement as the soldier called for ropes to be tossed down, and for more light, more light.

They worked at it with the fervor of the terrified, pulling because they didn't dare stop, not even slowing when one soldier pulled so hard he lost his footing and slid into the hole. He hadn't broken anything, he shouted, though he might have twisted his ankle, but it seemed to Skar that the rest of them wouldn't have cared either way. Skar was terrified, too, and felt sick to his stomach.

Eventually the ropes were affixed and the bounty pulled up to ground level. It was a box about half the size of a man, made of metal and varnished with a solid, opaque coating that Skar wasn't familiar with. He only had a moment to regard it before Akran shouldered him aside to get to the box, and he smiled despite himself, happy that someone in the group was so excited at the discovery. His stomach felt made of lead. The box shouldn't have been here, or anywhere except in the text of the scriptures.

Before Akran could do anything foolish, Skar ordered the soldiers to haul the box into camp. One of the soldiers asked if it should go into Skar's tent, but Skar shook his head and ordered it placed in Akran's. He saw on their faces that they agreed with the decision, even if it was edging off protocol; Akran was fairly hopping about in eagerness while the rest of the troops were exhausted. In truth, Skar wanted the thing in Akran's tent because he knew he'd get no peaceable sleep if it were in his own.

The troops dragged the box into the academic's tent, where it dripped mud and wet sand onto the floor. They

left it there and marched out wordlessly, leaving Akran hunched over the box in rapt fascination and Skar standing behind him not quite knowing what to do next. His dilemma was resolved when Akran asked him to pry open the box.

"I'm sorry?"

"This box. I need it opened. I believe we have a pry bar somewhere in the toolbox." He waved at a large bag sitting in a corner of his tent. The troops had taken turns carrying it.

Skar couldn't help himself. "Are you sure you should be doing this?"

Akran gave him a gently admonishing look. "This is why we are here, soldier. Pry it open, please."

"Is there even a faultline?" Skar said, feeling like a child trying to avoid going to bed.

The academic pointed at a thin line that circumscribed the middle of the box. "Halfway through. So long as you hit it on the mark the seal will give, with no damage to the box."

"Should you be doing this? If the ... if the Book is located inside, it might be affected by any number of things. The wind, the humidity in the air, anything. It should be taken out in a -"

"Safe, nice research institute where a lot of boring old men will pore over its covers until the end of time without ever opening the damned thing," Akran said. "Open the box, please."

Skar saw no choice but to obey. He retrieved the pry bar and held it in his hands, regarding the box and Akran, who had stooped over again to study its inscriptions. Skar stood like that for a moment, lost in dark thought, then cleared his throat and let the academic step aside before he started working on the faultline.

The seal cracked easily, and Skar stood back in confusion before realizing that of course he'd need to help Akran lift the lid off. He made his hands be still before grasping the lid and holding tight, putting as much effort into it as he could without embarrassing the thin and reedy academic holding on the other end. It felt good to use his strength on the box, even if it also felt a fair bit sacrilegious.

Once the lid was off, he made himself look inside, hoping against hope he would see emptiness.

The box contained another box, this one made of marble and decorated with impossibly ornate carvings. Skar looked at them for a few moments and felt something in his mind begin to drain away, but the gale of the wind and the patter of the rain brought him back to normal. The marble box also had a faultline in the centre but was not sealed, and Skar felt his eyes drawn to one of its corners, where a brownish piece of scroll poked out. A small, tattered piece of the Book of Emptiness, poking its edges into this world.

Skar walked out swiftly, marched a few steps behind the tent, vomited quietly, and walked back into the tent. Akran didn't seem to notice.

"Now that you have it, what are you going to do?" Skar said, keeping his voice as clear as he could. "Open the second box?"

"No. I was almost certain that there'd be a second container inside, and I wanted to see what it was like. The piece of scroll poking out is certainly fortunate, so I'm going to snip off a tiny bit and put it to some tests. Other than that, I'll be focusing on the box, documenting some of its decorations for future study, and doing some initial tests on the sealant to make sure it's as old as it should be. I don't expect to sleep much tonight," he added with a wry grin.

"So you won't be studying the book," Skar said.

"Not until tomorrow." Akran nodded towards another well-stuffed bag in a tent corner. "I'll have your men set up the surgical tent, the resealable one with the sterile inner cover, and I'll look into it then. Imagine that. It will be in our hands tomorrow. Just think what new truths it might hold!"

"There are no new truths," Skar said weakly, but Akran had already turned back to the box. Seeing he was no longer needed, Skar turned and headed back to his tent.

He made ready to go to sleep, but couldn't concentrate. He was good at keeping his mind focused on the task at hand - and after having found religion, he had become very good indeed at letting go of all interfering thoughts - but his mind was fast becoming a blur now, and he wasn't sure what to do. The Book shouldn't exist, he felt. It shouldn't exist on any level, because its mere presence brought the Lord into this physical world where He had no business being.

The Book was wrong, and Akran was wrong, and this whole thing was wrong.

Skar lay on his blanket, feeling the cold from the midnight sand seep into his bones.

He couldn't get those marble carvings out of his mind. The grooves that twisted and turned in on themselves, like snakes eating their tails. The knots and curlicues that looked like words but on closer inspection would dissolve into abstract symbols the likes of which he'd never seen in scripture.

And that piece of scroll sticking out, as if trying to squeeze its way from some terrible beyond and into this world, right into Skar's own head.

He turned to one side, then turned to the other, and then lay on his back, staring at the roof of his tent, unseeing and near panic.

Years ago, when he'd buckled and become faithful at last, his fall into faith had been terrifying and liberating all at once. He remembered that feeling, though he rarely thought of it. There had been a moment of quiet realization, where he understood that he had made up his mind long ago, and had merely to let his actions catch up with him.

He lay there on his bed, sleepless and unquiet of mind, and wondered what else he was waiting to do.

"The academic is dead."

The soldier assembly stared at him. It was dawn. Skar stood in front of Akran's tent.

"We need to prepare the corpse for transport," he said. "I want two volunteers to unwrap the surgical tent and convert it into a shroud. It's careful work, and if anyone has a problem with the next part - which you all know what'll be - you're better off abstaining. The rest fills in the pit, preps for leave, and gets some rest. We leave at sundown."

Two men got up and wordlessly walked past Skar and into Akran's tent. Skar followed them.

The academic lay on the floor. His skin was white and his lips were blue. There was no blood and no visible signs of the cause of death. The soldiers got to work on taking the wrapped tent to pieces without disturbing its disinfected surfaces. Akran had good standing in Amarr society, and transporting his body for several days in the desert's sweltering heat wouldn't do anyone's career any good.

"We're leaving him in here until tonight," Skar said. "I will assemble his things and say the rites."

The soldiers nodded and finished making the shroud. Together with Skar they wrapped up Akran's body, sealing him inside the shroud as tightly as possible. The mummification was vital but had to be done right. Loose ends during transport could unravel the entire mission.

Once the dead man's body was taken care of, the two soldiers left the tent. Skar remained, looking around and deciding what to do next. The rites were important, but they needed to be said with a clear mind. Despite his professional demeanour, he wasn't anywhere near that point.

Akran was dead. Akran was dead, and the Book of Emptiness lay inside this room.

Skar considered setting fire to it, but broke off that chain of thought. There was heresy, and there was worse.

He walked over to the marble box, which lay unopened on a makeshift workbench. The corner of scroll still stuck out from one side. Akran had not gotten to cut his piece from it. Skar felt remorse about that, for some reason.

The box lay completely still, of course, but the carvings on it made it appear to be writhing.

Skar wondered about faith, and about tests of faith.

He breathed deep, then reached out, lifted off the top of the box, took hold of the scroll inside with both hands, lifted it out and began to read.

It was written in the old tongue, but made sense in the hyperreal way that dated texts sometimes do, where you understand their meaning without even being able to comprehend their precise grammar or flow of thought. The content was a litany of truths, at first establishing the base precepts for a foundation of philosophy, then the cornerstones of the same foundation. As Skar read he noticed the sentences getting progressively shorter, the grammar turning not so much cryptic as purely alien; words were placed together that shouldn't have been, but that now far better conveyed a higher meaning. The sentences kept getting shorter as the concepts they described got at one time more abstract and more specific, adding complexity not only to the concepts but the

interplay between them. Old ideas would reappear in new forms that affected not only the text surrounding them but chapters that had passed much earlier, including the original concepts themselves in an infinite recursion. The handwriting changed, too; words began to mesh, loops and protruberances changed to mirror versions of themselves, and individual letters were extended, skewed or even drawn only in part. Skar's mind raced to keep up with the flow of information, but it was not even a conscious effort. Once the philosophy inevitably turned to God, Skar began referencing its message to what he remembered from scriptures. Again he found he didn't have to think about it; it happened automatically, in some part of his mind he could not reach. Information came in, unfiltered by sense or synapse, and understanding flowed out in increasing amounts, undeniable and unstoppable. The sentences melded into whole words, multisyllabic and complex, each of them stating truths Skar had barely imagined before. The words became shorter and more ornate, taking on varying dimensions. There would be one that he knew was truth, and another that was the afterlife, and justice, and physicality. They did not so much reveal new truths as remind him of what he'd always known but filtered out. The words became more and more wavy. They looked as if they were writhing on the page. Skar rubbed his eyes but it didn't help. It was almost as if he kept reading even when they were closed. The words had turned into abstract symbols. They had no recognizable lettering. All there was on the page were lines and dashes. But they managed to convey their essence to Skar. He kept reading and the symbols began to dissolve. Their lines separated and took on their true meanings. All were unfettered of interfering context. Each line had been boiled down to its barest essence. Each line held the undeniable meaning of a concept. There was Fire. There was Cold. He saw Black Mountain. A dark Sea. A Flight. This Freedom. This Truth. An Honesty. A Death.

And as Skar came to the end of the scroll he felt everything inside of him give way, understanding brought to the barest essence at which nothing could stand between you and the truth, and in which your only possible claim to have read and understood the Book of Emptiness was to deny it, to kill it, to go beyond it and into the realm of pure knowledge and being. Skar said out loud, "I have not read the Book of Emptiness," and it was true; he had not, for the Book now represented only yet another obstacle on the path he had been on all his life until reaching this end, this breakthrough, this apostasy; and denying it was as tantamount to ascendancy as refusing the rest of the world's hold on him. He felt himself on the edge of reality itself, pressing against it, pushing through and feeling himself in the other end as a different creation he had been, a second person, as you would feel when you left behind the final words and rose beyond reality as it was, seeing it objectively, not as a god of creation but a god of spirit, an observer through whose thoughts the world is created. You let go of your tenuous grip and move further, completely beyond that reality and to a place it can never follow you, a place of godliness and an infinite melancholy of realization, leaving nothing behind but the symbols and the world that now has become its inverse and is merely the fading embers of an imagined thought, your imagined thought, fading away, approaching the end, and now gone at last.

Uplifted



Anyone who happened to be watching the exact point in space would only have seen a slight visual distortion against the stars. In the blink of an eye, the gravitational force of a star was generated over just a few short kilometers, compressing the fabric of space-time into a temporary singularity. The reverberation of that mass, when the remote graviton pulse wave that had tricked the physical laws of the universe subsided, produced a connection between two non-corresponding locations in the universe: a wormhole.

The event horizon immediately set off early warning sensors on the world below, basking in the radiance of its warm, yellow sun. Local forces were mobilized, but before they could act, the Sansha auto-replicating virus batch was already relayed and being broadcast from every major structure in the system stargates, stations, and even planetary networks. The invasive programming quickly overwhelmed the inferior systems of the civilian infrastructure, local garrisons, and, though they would not admit it, most of the Gallente Federation's navy ships.

Then the wormhole let out a searing burst of white light, and they came through, bulbous metallic vessels covered in wicked, uneven spines. Hundreds poured from the shimmering portal, covering light years of distance in a single instant to cloud the skies above the helpless planet. Almost fishlike, darting in loose formation and changing direction simultaneously, they spread out in all directions. With synchronized releases of focused electromagnetic blasts, they smoothly wiped all defensive structures and communications satellites from orbit. For many people on the surface, the sudden glare of golden laser beams lancing across the night sky was the first sign that Sansha's Nation had arrived.

When it had secured the entire lower orbital altitude, the armada held position until a second wave of ships emerged from the wormhole. These new vessels were different, though, lacking the bulky warp drives that took up so much space in the combat vessels; instead, their cavernous cargo holds had a very specific purpose, housing rows and rows, layer upon layer of holding cells designed to store humanoid "passengers." The ships dropped through the atmosphere unimpeded, by squadrons, a perfectly orchestrated meteor shower.

The hypnotizing spectacle of the massive bronze ships, still glowing from the heat of atmospheric entry, turned to panic as they slowed to hover several hundred meters above the ground. A horrible grinding rolled forth from each one as gigantic bay doors slid open, unleashing a barely visible cloud of buzzing creatures that glittered as they caught the light. Undetectable except in vast quantities, these tiny cybernetic parasites drifted down over every population center, almost weightless, wafting in through unshielded windows, exposed ventilation systems, even exhaust ports that lacked the proper filters used on more densely populated worlds.

Before the victims below could understand what was happening, the nanites had already passed through the outer layer of skin, navigated the bloodstream, and attached themselves to the base of their spinal cords. When enough of the insidious little things had amassed in a single person, they begin to emit rhythmic electrical pulses not enough to disrupt higher brain functions, but more than enough to overpower the simple neural pathways below the neck. People screamed and shouted, struggled in vain, and cried pitifully for help, but their

bodies wouldn't respond. They walked out into the green tinted glare of wide-angle tractor beams, which lifted them off the ground by the thousands. Their bodies tumbled slowly, out of control, up into the waiting dropships.

But then the dark sky lit up with different colors. Sparkling blue explosions and brilliant red contrails streaked across the night. The capsuleers had arrived.

Arriving sporadically at first, then in greater numbers and with more organization, they warped onto the battlefield in high orbit above the planet and opened fire with reckless voracity. Their ships' advanced electronics systems and powerful defensive measures shrugged off the Nation's viral broadcast, allowing them to unleash a hail of guided missiles, artillery slugs, and incorruptible attack drones. They punished the Sansha vessels with their assault, but suffered a coordinated counterattack as the invading fleet systematically chose one target at a time, focusing all of its considerable firepower against the unfortunate subject.

Sensing the imminent danger to their ground operation, the dropships began to lift off of the surface all at once, not quite full yet, taking tens of thousands of citizens with them. They rocketed back up through the atmosphere on solid fuel jets, back to the safety of the wormhole. Stray weapons fire from both sides caused more than a few of them to explode, get knocked hopelessly off course, or suffer hull breaches, sending thousands of paralyzed humans spiraling out into space.

For over an hour the battle raged, until the intervening void was clouded with dissipating particulate matter, the twisted wreckage of starships, and the corpses of those who had once crewed them. By that time, capsuleers had gained the upper hand, their resilient starships taking on many times their number of antiquated Sansha battleships.

The wormhole pulsed once more, sending static through every local starship's sensors. When scanners came back online and searched for targets, a new contact had arrived: The massive carrier was shrouded in a layer of projected energy shielding so thick that one could barely see the heavy armor plates beneath. The fighter bays along the monstrosity's hull were closed, for it had no intention of launching any. Instead, its supplemental capacitors spun to life, sizzling with an overabundance of power as relay switches connected them directly to the built-in shield emitters. The field created was far more powerful than a normal shield but highly unstable. That was the point.

A tremendous blast of energy spread out in a spherical pattern, physically pushing ships away with the crushing force of charged gravitons. Attack drones simply evaporated as the weapon, designed to cause significant damage to much larger ships, reduced them to glittering pieces of superheated metal. Smaller capsuleer ships survived one or two bursts, perhaps, but by the time five waves had passed, everything smaller than a cruiser had disintegrated.

The capsuleers adapted to the situation quickly, though, adjusting their trajectories and cycling new ammunition into their weapons. Mere seconds after it had arrived, the carrier was inundated with a withering barrage of destruction. Scorching laser fire, armor piercing projectiles, tactical warheads, and superheated plasma bolts rained down until even its remarkably powerful shield system was spent. It listed awkwardly in space after losing control, but only for a few seconds before the relentless capsuleers closed in to finish the kill. After a few moments of smaller explosions tearing apart individual segments of its hull, the Sansha carrier's thermonuclear generator released a blinding flash of light, incinerating the entire internal structure of the ship and leaving nothing but a charred husk of superstructure behind, slowly spinning as pieces continued to break off and drift away.

Unable to sustain a viable signal with the flagship destroyed, the wormhole wavered slightly, then vanished, abruptly ending the communications static and returning the system to a tentative state of normalcy. The invasion had ended, but the war was long from over. The capsuleers who weren't busy salvaging the wreckage or attacking one another over the right to do so warped away one at a time or in small groups. They didn't know when or where Sansha would strike next, but they knew that, with each empire's defenses caught off guard and rendered all but unable to respond, they were New Eden's only hope for a sustainable defense.

Please note: Please note that this is a removed Chronicle and is not considered as EVE canon.

The Moon of Ndoria

The moon of the planet Ndoria in the system of Uplingur has in recent years been at the center of the struggle between the Minmatar Republic and the Ammatars, a semi-independent state within the Amarr Empire. Uplingur is located in the disputed zone between Minmatar and Ammatar space and until now neither faction has managed to make more substantial claims to it than just words. But the Ammatars, apparently backed by the Amarrians, have recently been able to exert their authority in the system to the point where they have been able to construct huge mining installations, for now limited on and around the Ndoria moon. The reason for that is simple, the Ndoria moon has huge deposits of several highly valuable minerals and has been coveted for years by all the empires.



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Reach for the stars

In recent decades space has become accessible like never before. The lasting, if fragile, peace between the empires has allowed them to concentrate their energies on opening up new space lanes and create the perfect environment for exploration and colonization. New jump gates open up almost every day, giving access to uncharted, unknown world waiting to be exploited.

Most of the empires are starting to encourage, even sponsor, privately owned companies to explore and settle recently reachable worlds, in order to speed up the expansion process and garner some revenue in the process. These companies then enter into a cooperation deal with their empire, which grants them several benefits regarding access, protection and information provided by the empire they're dealing with, but at the same time putting some responsibilities on the shoulders of the company and its members.

Already several privately owned companies are becoming prominent through their dealings with the empires and more locations, even whole systems, are getting their names from the company that is at the forefront in exploring and settling the system.



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The Tierijev Pocket

Tierijev system is controlled by the Caldari State, but it is completely encircled by the Gallente Federation. During the Gallente-Caldari War the system saw a number of battles, but the Gallenteans never managed to conquer it. But they did cut it off from the rest of the Caldari State by conquering a nearby system and building small military outposts in other unclaimed ones. In the years since the Gallentean systems have developed into fully fledged settlements and colonies, making the lone Caldari system a small beacon in a sea of Gallente systems. During this time Tierijev was a vast military complex, which could only be reached through a highway jumpgate linking it directly with Caldari space. For this reason it was often called the Tierijev Pocket. In recent years, as the relations of the two empires are steadily improving, the system is slowly becoming a major trade post.

It all started a decade ago when an agreement was made between the two empires to link Tierijev with some of the Gallentean systems surrounding it. Tierijev quickly became one of the most popular trade routes between Caldari space and Gallente space as it is much shorter than the traditional route through the Border Zone.

The increased trade, and hence traffic, through the Tierijev system has put enormous strain on the Caldari customs official responsible for supervising the trade. The main reason for this lies with the agreement for opening the Tierijev Pocket. The agreement stipulates that both sides must severely limit the number of armed empire ships they can operate in their respective space. This makes the work of the customs official much harder, as they're constantly plagued by manpower shortage. The Caldari have tried to remedy the situation by increasing customs checks in those Caldari systems the Tierijev highway gate leads to, but this has met with limited success.

Instead the Caldari customs authorities have recently started employing another way which seems much more promising. They sell temporary customs official licenses to independent traders and mercenaries, thereby increasing the number of customs officials on duty, while bypassing the limits on military vessels set out by the agreement. The Caldari ensure that there is always ample supply of willing customs officials available by promising them a cut of the profit from fining smugglers. The Tierijev experiment has met with such a great success that it is currently being emulated extensively in every empire; they see this as a cheap, but efficient way, for stemming the ever-increasing tide of smugglers from the outer regions into civilized space.



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Past the Future Curbs

To the neutral observer the Minmatar Rebellion ended a century ago with the expulsion of Amarrians from Minmatar space and the creation of the Minmatar Republic. But to many Minmatars that was only the first step and in the mind of this people the rebellion is still alive and ongoing. Its current guise may not be an all-out war between the two empires, but until final victory - that of freeing every single Minmatar slave - is achieved thousands of rebels risk their lives every day in the name of freedom for their Minmatar brethren.

The official stance between the two empires may be that of a cordial peace, and to enforce that stance regular trade and traffic is allowed to flow through their border zones in the hope that increased contact will improve relations in the long run. Naturally, this free-flowing space traffic has the undesired side effects of making it neigh on impossible to stop the movement of secret agents, saboteurs and raiders entering (what they consider) enemy space.

The recent announcement that the Amarr Emperor had received the most coveted peace-prize in New Eden did not go down too well with the Minmatars and in the past week raids and terrorist attacks inside Amarr (or Ammatar) space have multiplied to reach epic proportions. The Minmatar government has already released statements denying involvement in recent attacks and state they will hunt and prosecute those responsible. The Amarrians are skeptical about this and are considering retaliatory actions on their own. CONCORD has yet to step in, but many expect it must do so soon before the situation escalates out of control.



EVE News 2003 YC 105

15/05/2003

CONCORD Pirate Warning

CONCORD has issued a warning statement of a suspected increase in pirate activity in the very near future. Experts on the situation believe that the pirates are intensifying their activity in response to dramatic increase in space travellers within regions traditionally associated with pirates. In order to acclimatize space farers to this new and dangerous situation the DED will make an exceptional effort to keep the pirates at bay, but these efforts can only be sustained for 24 hours or so. After that the DED will leave the outer regions alone and those that travel into these areas will do so at their own risk. Thank you for listening.

29/05/2003

Strip-mining

The empires are becoming concerned that independent individuals are harvesting too much of the stellar resources the empires had staked for their own use. Couple this with the intensified pirate activity due to increases in space traffic and the empires have a real problem on their hands. They have now joined forces in a program that will augment their authority throughout civilized space in the near future. The police will make itself more visible with more staff and increased number of patrols, for instance in areas of empire space hitherto ignored by the police. In reality many feel this effort is too little too late - the asteroid fields owned by the empires are already almost totally ravaged and experts believe that rare asteroid ore is now only available out in the outer regions.

02/06/2003

Used ship salesmen

The SCC has become increasingly agitated with the influx of deceitful merchants dealing in wares which do not meet up to the expected standards. In addition the blatant bundling of various lousy salesmen, who sold ships to other people yet forgot to strip them of the extra equipment, further enlightened the SCC of how bad the situation had become. As a result the ruling body of the SCC has acted hastily to rectify the situation, and decreed that all ships and modules must henceforth be sold in a package and given a stamp of approval by local officials. No assembled ships can be sold on the market, they have to be in mint condition and repackaged. Breaking this law will result in serious repercussions. Turn to a friendly station to repair and repack a ship and modules before selling.

03/06/2003

Security warning in Obe

CONCORD has issued a travel warning to all those going through the Obe system, a popular hub and trade route. Apparently a loosely held group of terrorists and marauders have been preying on innocent traders. Without mercy, these evildoers prefer erasing all traces of their crimes by actually killing their victims. CONCORD will not stand idly by, and is now calling for re-inforcements. Until then, strong escort is recommended for lone travelers.

07/06/2003

CONCORD deploys Special Ops

An emergency meeting of high-ranking CONCORD officials was held in closed session earlier today, as confirmed by an anonymous source of impeccable reliability.

The impromptu meeting was called following a tidal wave of reports from law enforcement agencies representing each of the five empires and some small, independent territories. "We can no longer guarantee the safety of our citizens. All efforts to restore order have failed. Officers have been slain. We implore CONCORD to come to our aid before more innocent lives are lost," one memo read, according to the source.

Following this morning's conference, a message was immediately transmitted from CONCORD to DED, giving the green light for the deployment of specialized forces to police the most heavily affected areas until a shipment of additional sentry guns can be transported and installed. "Dispatch The Four," one cryptic message read. Further information is unavailable; regularly monitored security channels have gone into "Code Red" mode, in which the transmissions are scrambled and encrypted. The Scope will be at the ready the moment these channels are reopened and more facts are available.

A Travelers' Advisory has been issued for citizens to use extreme caution when visiting the Lonetrek region. Alternate routes, if available, should be selected.

12/06/2003

Concord comments on recent security breaches in empire space

Our sources claim that several steps have been taken within local and galactic law enforcement agencies to address the recent tide of piracy and criminal activities within the boundaries of empire space. High ranking officials within Concord and army officers have denied to comment on any details regarding these operations, as this would compromise the safety of their military and staff, but state that naturally they will do all they can to ensure the safety of all civilians and space travelers within the empires.

The SCOPE

12/06/2003

Factory demand drives up rental prices

Industrial tycoons running manufacture space stations are ecstatic over the high demand for the factory service they provide. Being true capitalists the tycoons have decided to raise the rental cost for their factory slots. It is expected that price for renting factory slots may rise as much as 800% in some areas, less in others.

Manufacturers have already started to complain about the pending rent increase, while the tycoons where last seen laughing all the way to the bank. The rent increase will come into full force tomorrow and experts predict that this will have minimal effects on the extreme demand.

12/06/2003

New and sophisticated friend-foe tracking system implemented

A new and highly advanced galactic system for tracking aggravations between space ships is being deployed by CONCORD and is expected to become operational tomorrow. According to official sources the new system will give CONCORD a better overview of deep space conflicts and will reflect more clearly the nature of the combat. The result is that the legal benefits for attacking pirates will diminish, while attacks on civilized space travelers will have more severe legal repercussions in this new system.

12/06/2003

Small space shuttles to be put on market

The empires have responded to the many requests for cheap alternative ways for space travel by launching space shuttles. These small vessels are only intended to ferry personnel between places and have no weaponry or other ship equipment. The shuttles offer a fast and efficient way to travel between distant places for a very small sum of money. Each of the empires have launched their own shuttle type, so all space farers should be able utilize these new machines. The first batch of space shuttles will arrive tomorrow.

23/06/2003

CONCORD's Most Wanted List published

In an effort to enlist the help of law-abiding citizens concerned over the banditry now rampant in deep space, CONCORD has released a list over the 10 most wanted pirates. The list includes their current known whereabouts, making it easy to track them down. The list will be updated frequently and hunters that manage to kill one of the fearsome pirates will get a honorary mention. Here is the list as it stands today:

Pirate name: Lord Zap
Bounty: 7.562.810
Corporation name: m0o Corp
Location: Passari

Pirate name: Mikhail
Bounty: 6.568.130
Corporation name: m0o Corp
Location: Passari VI - Echelon Entertainment Development Studio

Pirate name: j0rt
Bounty: 4.444.280
Corporation name: m0o Corp
Location: Passari VI - Echelon Entertainment Development Studio

Pirate name: DeiZoN
Bounty: 4.190.001
Corporation name: m0o Corp
Location: Assah IX - Moon 1 - Imperial Armaments Factory

Pirate name: syndic4te
Bounty: 2.011.389
Corporation name: Viziam
Location: Chaven VIII - Moon 1 - Imperial Academy School

Pirate name: Xenocide
Bounty: 2.000.000
Corporation name: I.R.A Inc.
Location: XX9-WV VII - Moon 3 - Salvation Angels Trading Post

Pirate name: Rot Animal
Bounty: 2.000.000
Corporation name: I.R.A Inc.
Location: XX9-WV VII - Moon 3 - Salvation Angels Trading Post

Pirate name: riffin
Bounty: 1.515.589
Corporation name: m0o Corp

Location: Assah IX - Moon 1 - Imperial Armaments Factory

Pirate name: Ywev

Bounty: 1.515.084

Corporation name: m0o Corp

Location: Passari VI - Echelon Entertainment Development Studio

Pirate name: Gauss

Bounty: 1.205.000

Corporation name: m0o Corp

Location: Piekura

25/06/2003

First Contact Festival celebrated tomorrow

Tomorrow marks the 105th anniversary of the Yoiul Conference, where the guidelines for inter-stellar peace and co-operation between the empires were set. As usual, grand banquets are to be held in many places, with the top politicians, financial tycoons and entertainment celebrities present. The day is a national holiday throughout the world of EVE, which may cause reduced service in some places. Space travelers are advised not to take on jobs for empire corporations tomorrow, as they may be lost in the chaotic festivities.

03/07/2003

Malfunction in the Secure Commerce Committee's centralized billing system corrected.

This just in from the Galactic News Network: Shortly after noon GMT (Galactic Median Time) today, system administrators doing routine maintenance work at the Caldari Business Tribunal Information Center in Averon discovered a serious malfunction in the Secure Commerce Committee's centralized billing system.

The source of the malfunction is unknown at this time, but its effects were described by SCC spokesman Jeroku Haldarius as a "significant setback, one which we will be working hard to correct."

Reports from top SCC sources indicate that over the last few weeks, a significant number of the bills charged for public rental of factory and research facilities were not sent out as they should have been. The SCC's accountants will reportedly be working 24 hours a day to correct the errors caused by the breakdown.

In response to the rising wave of outrage from independent station managers and Trans-Empire corporations hit hardest by the malfunction, the SCC are instating a "rapid recovery" program whereby a backlog of rental fees will be sent out to the corporations and individuals who have not been charged yet.

"This is an outrage," said Josanna Worusar, station manager of the Ishukone Corporation Factory at Malkalen V, who rents out both factory and laboratory facilities to individuals and corporations, and who has just recently had to cancel many of her rental agreements due to the SCC decree issued earlier today.

"Of course this puts a dent in our operation. How am I supposed to run a station if I can't get the funds? Rubber bands and bubble gum?"

Confronted with recent rumors claiming the error was the result of an intentional subroutine maliciously planted in the system by an unknown party, the SCC spokesman declined to comment.

20/07/2003

Ameinaka IX - Moon 21 - Six Kin Development Warehouse station closed for repair.

A series of explosions has forced station owners to shut down the docking facilities at the Ameinaka IX - Moon 21 - Six Kin Development Warehouse station. It's generally believed that the damage was caused by a meteor and repairs are underway. Pilots are asked not to attempt docking there until further notice, as the docking facilities are now running on emergency power and can not support sensors or communication systems.

23/07/2003

CONCORD deplores increase in slave trade

CONCORD has released a harsh statement warning against slave trade. The statement is in response to persistent rumors that slaves are becoming increasingly popular as forced labor throughout the world of EVE. CONCORD wants to remind people that slave trade is strictly forbidden everywhere except within Amarr borders and that there are harsh penalties for engaging in human trade. CONCORD ships, and other police forces, may shoot on sight anyone carrying slaves. The Minmatar Republic has also released a statement where they express sadness that the slave trade industry seems to be on the rise and encourages people to stop slave trade wherever it is found, by any means necessary. The Republic itself has taken a strong stance in this and has already attacked and annihilated several slave trader ships.

22/08/2003

CONCORD Issues Travel Advisory

In a statement from Admiral Baryn today, CONCORD issued an emergency travel advisory for the Jakemhih and Kashag constellations, Domain region. "A large number of unprovoked pirate attacks have been reported in those systems," Baryn said. "The identities of the attackers remains unconfirmed, but in all cases the attacks

were swift, merciless, and with superior firepower." CONCORD warns that any pilots in the area may be putting themselves at risk.

27/08/2003

Yong Residents Report Conflict

Colony residents of the icy planet Yong III reported a great battle in the skies, Sunday. Tracking systems identified many ships, of varied make - several of which were apparently destroyed. Debris rained down upon the nearby planet in a fiery astronomical display, reportedly damaging a wasteland relay station. No casualties were reported. The identities of the pilots involved is still unknown, but rumors abound about a connection to the pirate activity in the region.

03/09/2003

SCC takes drastic measures against copyright infringements

The Secure Commerce Commission has taken drastic measures against illegal copying of blueprints. Since the copy laws were changed recently, SCC has tracked down numerous cases where people are still using the old regulations for blueprint copying. SCC will start installing restrictions in appliance with the new laws on blueprints used in illegal copying. This will eject them from their lab slots, but will not otherwise affect them, apart from the new restrictions already mentioned.

03/09/2003

Heideran VII's much appraised book 'Pax Amarria' published

Pax Amarria, a book written by the Amarr Emperor Heideran VII himself, was released yesterday through the Amarr Empire Ministry of Information. It will be published shortly in other empires. In the book, Heideran VII describes his lifelong dream for galactic peace and how he has worked zealously to enforce his vision. The book has met great critical acclaim throughout the Empire and political analysts everywhere say it's a 'must-read' for everyone interested in inter-stellar politics.

06/09/2003

Heideran VII fails to show up at CONCORD meeting

Earlier today the Inner Circle of CONCORD was in session, anxiously waiting for a rare visit from the Amarr Emperor. Heideran VII was intended to make a speech at the meeting, outlining his plans for maintaining the current status quo of peace and harmony. Thus it came as a great surprise when it was Imperial Chamberlain Karsoth that took the podium in place of the emperor. His speech was dry and dense, with little in the way of new information being relayed. No explanation was given to why the emperor failed to show up and the Amarrian delegation quickly left CONCORD headquarters as soon as the session was over.

08/09/2003

Where is the Amarr Emperor?

Since emperor Heideran VII failed to attend a CONCORD meeting the other day there has been no signs of him anywhere. All plans for his public appearance have been cancelled, including many book signings of his new book, Pax Amarria. News from the Amarrian authorities have been conflicting, with offices of the Imperial Chamberlain saying he's resting from a slight ailment, while the Imperial Chancellor says he's on a vacation at one of his remote palaces and does not want to be disturbed. The rumor-mill is already at full speed as could be expected and speculations are ripe.

09/09/2003

Freed child slaves massacred in Roushzar

A ship carrying several hundred slave children en route to Minmatar space was savagely attacked last night in the Roushzar system. The children, all under 15 years of age, had just been given freedom as part of the FAS program initiated by Doriam Kor-Azor and were on their way to relatives in the Republic to start a new life. The carrier ship was attacked by at least five heavily armed frigates and never stood a chance. There were no survivors. No one has claimed responsibility for the act, but paramilitary units loosely connected to the Sarum family have been mentioned as likely candidates. National leaders, as well as the CONCORD Inner Circle, have released harsh statements denouncing the attack. A spokesman for Jamyl Sarum says the heiress lamented the act, but could not condemn the perpetrators for 'acting on their beliefs for the good of the Empire.'

10/09/2003

Zealot cult blamed for massacre. More attacks feared.

Preliminary investigation into the Roushzar atrocities, where hundreds of freed slave children were killed, suggest that a small fanatical Amarrian religious cult may be to blame. They have yet refused to comment on the incident, but their leadership has suddenly gone into hiding. The cult, called Tetrimon (Divine Devotion), has existed for some time now, but this is the first time it has resorted to violence, which begs the question where they got their armaments from. The members of the cult have scattered to the wind after the attack, some to go into hiding, others seeking opportunities for further mayhem. Reliable sources have indicated that two priestesses, Hamida Ytheros and Omon Drakian, along with their escorts have actually entered Minmatar space and have been spotted in the Angils constellation. It is thought that they will be in the Gukarla system, a sacred location in their doctrine, at 17:00 GMT for their midday prayers.

11/09/2003

Nefarious priestesses annihilated yesterday

Yesterday two of the cultists responsible for the attack in the Roushzar system were attacked and killed deep in Minmatar space. A small group of these fanatics were at their midday prayer in the Gukarla system when they were assaulted by a group of patriotic Minmatars. Leading the attack were G'Quan, Loctar and Estios, the three of them promptly destroying the zealots ships. Intelligence agencies have been on the lookout for other members of the Tetrimon cult, they predict at least five prominent members are still on the loose. There has been no sign of them, as of yet.

11/09/2003

A vigil for the Amarr Emperor tonight

A vigil for Heideran VII, the Amarr Emperor, will be held tonight at 19:00 at the Emperor station in the Amarr system. The vigil is being organized by Lady Vetinari of the PIE Inc. and she urges all Amarr pilots and others that wish for the swift recovery of the emperor to attend. The whereabouts and condition of the emperor are still a mystery and many fear that he may be mortally sick. It is the hope of those organizing the vigil that the emperor can quickly return to office before the empire fractionalizes.

12/09/2003

Vigil for the good health of the emperor great success

The vigil held last night in the honor of Heideran VII, the Amarr Emperor, went very well. The vigil was held in the Amarr system and was attended by up to 300 pilots. Most of the attendants were Amarrians, but pilots from other races were also there to show the emperor their respect for his endeavors to maintain world peace. A few troublemakers reared their ugly heads, but no serious breach of peace occurred. An Amarrian delegate was there with a message from the emperor himself. The text of his message was: 'To my concerned children: word of your vigil reached my ears and I send you these few lines in gratitude for your devotion and concern. Alas, my health is not good enough to be with you but in spirit, though your good deed will be remembered now and forever. In times as treacherous as these, peace may seem a distant illusion, but we must never stop fighting to achieve and maintain it. Disruptive forces seek tirelessly to tear us apart and it is easy for the weak-minded to follow the flow. It is up to you, strong of mind and spirit, to hold high the torch of peace; to fall in a war of hate is a disgrace, to fall fighting for peace is a virtue that few can aspire to. But isn't it better to die trying than to never try at all? Fare well, my children, my thoughts are with you and your mission.'

12/09/2003

Gallente President Foiritan concerned for Emperor

The Federation's President, Souro Foiritan, is reportedly gravely concerned about developments within the Amarr Empire, where Emperor Heideran VII has remained out of sight for days. Yesterday the President appeared before the Senate to discuss budgetary issues, but he took the opportunity to discuss the situation within the Amarr Empire. President Foiritan did not hide his admiration for the Emperor, which he described as having 'dragged the world kicking and screaming from a state of perpetual petty rivalries to a state of peace and prosperity.' He continued by saying that the Emperor was a 'shining beacon of light guiding us to safer havens and that if this light would go out we would be lost in this dark and turbulent sea that is inter-stellar relations.' Flowery words indeed, but political analysts tend to agree with the statements made by the president. President Foiritan nevertheless remained optimistic that Emperor Heideran would reemerge soon stronger than ever, and that his message of amity would resound throughout the civilized world for eternity.

13/09/2003

Political instability keeps markets shaken

The uncertainty surrounding the disappearance of the Amarr Emperor has kept the markets all over the world of EVE in a straightjacket. Shares have tumbled and investors are holding back. CEOs of the largest Caldari corporations voiced their concern at a recent meeting of the Chief Executive Panel. Many Caldari corporations have invested heavily in the raw materials and heavy industry in the Amarr Empire and they fear that their money may be at risk in case of war or severe civil disorder. Many Caldari companies are already pulling out of Amarr space and will not return until the situation has stabilized. Amarr authorities have tried to put a brave face on this development, but inside information indicates that several regions will face grave economical hardship if this continues. Regions under the control of the Tash-Murkon family are considered especially vulnerable, as they have received the brunt of the investment.

17/09/2003

Grave news from the Amarr Empire, Heideran VII has died

In an official statement released today Amarrian authorities have confirmed the death of their beloved leader, Heidearn VII. The Emperor succumbed to the Turit Disease that has ailed him for a long time. Condolences from all over have streamed in and leaders of other nations have expressed their sadness at the news. A week of mourning has been declared throughout The Amarr Empire to allow the public a time to grieve his departure.

19/09/2003

Interstellar community anxious about future

The recent news about the death of Heideran VII, Emperor to the Amarrians, has sent shockwaves throughout the universe of EVE. Markets are tumbling and experts predict it will take them several days, even weeks, to recover. But mostly people are anxious to know who will succeed Heideran. Five heirs will vie for the throne, with the most likely candidates being Doriam Kor-Azor and Jamyl Sarum. The two represent the opposite sides

within Amarrian political life, with Kor-Azor leader of the liberal peace-party that wants to renovate the Amarr Empire to move it closer to the other nations, while Sarum heads the belligerent war-party that wants to renew the Reclaiming and 'place the empire where it belongs; as the master state in the universe of EVE', as they put it. Yet the other three candidates can not be discarded, the Kador family embodies the imperial grandeur of the Amarr while steering a moderate middle-ground; Idonis Ardishapur is a charismatic leader that may very well seem the ideal choice to the conservative elements of the empire and the Tash-Murkon family has amassed great wealth since being elevated into heir status and their money can buy many favors. Political analysts have already started debating who will succeed, but the only thing they can agree on is that the eventual choice will have great bearings on the future of the whole world of EVE.

25/09/2003

Amarrian Committee of Moral Purity and Elimination of Vice regrets Stavros' claim to throne - condemns his actions as heretical

The Amarrian Committee of Moral Purity and Elimination of Vice has condemned Stavros' claims that he intends to go forth as an Emperor. The Amarrian ruling system is an ancient and proven far more efficient at retaining order and peace than the decrepit and chaotic system sometimes referred to as Democracy. It considers his public appeal for the Throne heretical to say the least and strongly urges him to retract his bid and apologize publicly for making the remarks he did where he criticised various prominent Amarrian community leaders.

27/09/2003

Details of Championship plans leaked

A leaked document from the Amarrian Empirical Succession Committee has been circling news agencies in the EVE Universe. Apparently each of the five houses will let a small number of champions compete amongst themselves on who shall represent their house in the championship that ultimately decides which house gets the throne.

Championship fights are frigate matches where a champion along with three wingmen must destroy the ships of a competing champion and his wingmen. While the champion himself must be of pure Amarrian descent, his wingmen are said to be allowed to be of any race and bloodline.

In order to select the champions that will compete within each house, the committee is opting for a controversial method: As a gesture of continuing Heideran VII's legacy of honoring the traditions of other nations, they will allow for every Amarrian citizen to vote for a champion.

This hint of democracy has outraged various Amarrian fundamentalists, amongst them Jamyl Sarum, whose spokesman denounces this method of selection as "Heretical and fit for ants and vermin but not pure blooded Amarrians". He elaborated: "Democracy is a proven failure throughout the known Universe and has undermined many civilisations and been the death of many great organisations".

It seems that this will go through nonetheless. Details of this are expected to surface in the coming days.

29/09/2003

House of Kor-Azor demands positive standings for potential champions

A spokesman for one of the five contending houses to the throne of the Amarrian Emperor, the Kor-Azor, has issued a statement regarding the upcoming election that will allow Amarrians to select their candidate for the upcoming championship fights. "The House of Kor-Azor has decided to approve of the Empirical Succession Committee's system of voting representatives for each house in order to pre-select contenders for the sacred ritual of succession. The House of Kor-Azor wants to stress that any candidate that intends to go forward as a representative of the house, must have a positive standing towards that house, as measured by the CONCORD Interstellar Standings Code (CISC). Our champions must have proven their allegiance to us in order to be allowed to fight on our behalf."

Representatives of other houses weren't available for comment but they are expected to follow this example of demanding positive standings for their candidates.

12/11/2003

The Federation makes a formal request for compensations

The Gallente Federation has issued a request to the Caldari State demanding indemnities for the selling of contaminated food products within Federal space. After inspecting the claims for that past several days, the Senate Committee pushed for the request to be made. It is the conclusion of the committee that Sukuuvestaa Corporation, the manufacturer of the tainted Protein Delicacies, was aware of their product's defective nature, but had willfully decided to sell it to the Federation nonetheless. The Federation is demanding both monetary reparations, as well as hi-tech equipment, such as cyber implants, to aid those unfortunates that have succumbed to the brain diminishing side effects of Protein Delicacies. The Senate committee believes it has a strong enough case to go full force against the Caldari within CONCORD and pursue this matter to the end. The Caldari have not yet responded to the demands made by the Federation, but it is believed they will wait for the Chief Executive Panel to pass a verdict, which should happen any day now.

13/11/2003

Caldari Chief Executive Panel decides not to compensate

After careful scrutiny by the Chief Executive Panel into the Protein Delicacies crisis, it has decided not to follow through with any further actions. Offering a rare glimpse into the power setup of the panel, it has been revealed that the panel was roughly divided into three camps. In one camp, headed by the Sukuuvestaa Corporation, it was argued that the business practices employed in the manufacturing and marketing of Protein Delicacies were not untoward and in perfect harmony with what normally goes on in the cutthroat Caldari capitalistic economy. The second group, headed by the Kaalakiota Corporation, argued that the ill effects of the Protein Delicacies on the Gallenteans paled in comparison to the sufferings the Caldari had endured for centuries at the hands of the Federation, not the least being the loss of the Caldari home world. Only the third group, headed by the Ishukone Corporation, was in favor of accepting the demands for compensations, arguing that different principles applied to inter-stellar trade, where cooperation and mutual benefits should be the guiding light. But their view was the minority one and the consensus of the panel was to decline taking any responsibility for the Protein Delicacies incident. The Caldari made one small gesture of goodwill when they imprisoned for three years the manager responsible for the development of the Protein Delicacies, but on unrelated tax-based charges. It is unlikely that this gesture will be seen as enough by the Federation.

15/11/2003

Gallente fury over Caldari inactivity

Following the news that the Caldari State had declined to offer any kind of compensations or aid to the victims of the foul Protein Delicacies, Gallenteans everywhere have expressed their outrage and shock. For the last few years the relations between the two nations has been steadily improving, but all that has been carefully built up in that time is now under threat of being undone. The Federation Senate has been in uproar since the Caldari made their decision and many senators have been extremely outspoken on the matter, talking about anything from trade boycotts to renewing the war. The official stance of the Federal cabinet has been less severe, it has expressed its sadness that the Caldari were unwilling to lend a helping hand, or even accept their responsibility in the matter. But anonymous government officials have hinted that the President is deliberating ways to 'get back' at the Caldari. Only time can tell what these actions, if any, will be.

27/11/2003

Tight security surrounds Emperor Inauguration as applications pile up for attendance

A veil of secrecy shrouds preparations for the most talked about event in modern Amarr history. Next Saturday, Dorian Kor-Azor of House Kor-Azor will be inaugurated Emperor of Amarr, succeeding Heideran VII who recently passed away.

The ceremony is expected to be fraught with tension, as the four Amarr heirs whose champions failed to secure them the throne, are expected to commit ritual suicide while Amarr's most sacred priests sanctify Dorian's god-like reign. Historically, most heirs have performed this ritual of voluntary suicide and accepted their destiny but there have been exceptions.

The ceremony will be held at an undisclosed location and will be closed to the public. The proceedings will be broadcast on a secure chat channel, in the same manner as the championship award ceremony was broadcast last weekend. However, as a gesture of good will, the Amarr high council has decided to allow 50 pilots to attend the ceremony in person. The pilots must be of Amarr / Ni-Kunni nationality and have a positive security standing. Attendees are to send electronic mail to storyline@eve-online.com with the subject line "inauguration tickets", along with their pilot name and "user name". They are also to write in four sentences or less, why they should be chosen to attend this event. The Council will choose the most deserving pilots.

The Council reserves the right to deny pilots access to the event at its own discretion. This is a rare opportunity to witness history in the making and witness first hand the final moments of four great Amarrian leaders.

29/11/2003

Amarr Imperial fleet on alert as Inauguration draws closer - Miner executed

Captains of the Amarr Imperial fleet have received notification that they are to be "alert and ready" today as security measures are stepped up all throughout Amarr space. Convoys of ceremonial ships have been seen travelling at the outer edges of Empire space today surrounded by large military fleets. In an unfortunate incident, a lone miner was detained and later executed for "suspicious curiosity" after contacting passing Imperial Fleet ships and asking, "where they were going with all those guns". Empire spokesmen were unwilling to confirm claims of several other incidents similar in nature that have been reported today: "We are simply making sure that today's sacred event is not disrupted in any way. There are many who wish our Empire ill and it is our duty to insure that their will is not done."

Invitations to the event have been sent out to selected Empire pilots.

10/12/2003

Seas quieting for Amarr

In the two weeks since the events surrounding Amarr Emperor Dorian Kor-Azor's inauguration, the average Amarrian's life has been full of whispered half-truths and uneasy speculation. Rumors have run rampant from corner to corner of the vast empire, the normally subdued arenas of Amarr political debate have been close to erupting in violence on several occasions, and the Amarrian stock market has had to face record instability.

"It's really a matter of the Empire's self-image, more than anything else," remarks Gundar Mirosabin, political analyst and respected author of bestseller *Power's Personality*. "That 'strong, benevolent overseer' image they had of themselves under Heideran's rule does seem, quite naturally, to be receding, and the empire is struggling to find its new face under a new leader."

In the past few days, however, many signs have pointed to increased stability, leading some to suggest that the Empire is beginning to adjust to its new ruler and the changes his regime will bring. The stock market is restabilizing, political debates have lost much of their earlier venom, and according to Amarr Certified News several decrees instated by the new Emperor have met with resounding approval among all five ruling houses. At a rare press conference held last Monday Hrollulf Sodalrat, Chief Coordinator of Public Relations for the Court Chamberlain's Office, stated that "The Empire currently sits at the dawn of great prosperity for all of its loyal subjects, and His Holiness the Emperor will see us to our glorious zenith."

17/12/2003

Ishukone CEO Gariushi unveils Crielere discoveries

Otro Gariushi, CEO of Ishukone has announced that recent discoveries made at the ultra secret Crielere labs are to be made freely available to the public.

Lead scientists at Crielere labs today published a detailed white paper describing possible manufacturing methods using a relatively unknown mineral named morphite. Driven by advances in deep core mining, the team has found an economically feasible method of using the mineral, found in mercoxite ore, for mass production. Research agents throughout the known universe are sure to make use of the information given by the science team, to the surprise of many, as it was not expected that the two main funding partners of the Crielere research project, the Caldari State and Gallente Federation, would give their research results out that freely.

Political analysts have been at a loss to explain why the usually secretive CEO is suddenly so keen to share knowledge with the rest of the world. Skeptics claimed that Gariushi is hyping up this invaluable mineral as he intends to profit from the manufacture of deep core mining lasers, known for their below average performance in mining standard ores.

18/12/2003

Doriam Kor-Azor renames planets to commemorate Champion - Pirate violence on the rise

Amarr Emperor Doriam Kor-Azor has issued a decree stating that planet IV in the Kor-Azor system shall be known as Eclipticum. Its moons will now be named "Black Viperia", "Griklaeum" and "Kileakum". These name changes are to commemorate the champion whose combat skills earned Doriam the throne.

Imperial chamberlain Dasham Nestorik was quoted saying "the heroes of our empire are never forgotten, never ignored. Our beloved Emperor wanted to give his champion his place among the stars".

Critics claim that Kor-Azor is trying to divert the public's attention from increased pirate activity in the outer regions that has resulted in a spate of apparently senseless killings in the past days. Although the problem is not solely focused on Amarr space, Kor-Azor has made it his personal agenda to address this issue as quickly and decisively as possible.

Emperor Kor-Azor has been meeting with his security advisors and is believed to be working on a strategy to counter this deterioration in stability. "There are always those who envy us of our glory, our power and our purity of purpose. They will hunt our weaker brothers and ambush our undeserving traders. The Emperor does not and will never accept this", Nestorik said.

22/12/2003

Minmatars excited over new technologies

The slew of new technologies flooding the Minmatar Republic has spurred many Minmatars to start agitating for taking up arms against the enemies of the Republic. Parliament members from the Brutor tribe, which suffered the most under Amarrian tyranny, are certain that with the host of new weaponry available the Amarrians and the hated Ammatars can be defeated once and for all. The Brutors are being supported overtly and covertly by the Krusual tribe, though political experts say they are only doing so to weaken the authority of the Sebiestor tribe, the leaders of the parliament and the main rivals of the Krusual tribe.

Spokesmen for the Sebiestor tribe have tried to tone down the fierce sentiments of the Brutors, for instance by pointing out that the other empires, the Amarr Empire included, are also reaping the benefits of these new technologies, so even if the military might of the Republic is undoubtedly stronger, the same applies to the navies of the other empires. A strong rumor from within the government suggests that a compromise deal may be in the making, where the Republic would secretly support unlawful elements that are fighting the Amarr Empire. It is believed that this not only includes Minmatar rebels, but also independent factions in the outer regions, such as the Angel Cartel and even the Blood Raiders and Sansha's Nation. Naturally, nothing of this has been confirmed.

28/12/2003

Emperor Dorian plans to visit every Amarr planet

The new Amarr Emperor Dorian II is taking a very hands-on approach to his running of affairs of his domain. Since his inauguration he has been on the move constantly, traveling from one system to another. He states he wants to 'get intimate' with his subjects and learn every detail about his vast domain. Some have voiced their concern over this manic approach, saying it keeps Dorian from seeing the big picture, but the populace is ecstatic with the interest their beloved leader is taking in the daily life of the Commoners.

Dorian has also found the time to visit abroad and attended a meeting at CONCORD headquarters recently. The issue being discussed was the increased threat posed by pirates and other bandit elements in the outer regions. Dorian expressed his concerns in the matter and suggested an inter-racial committee should be formed to further look into it, highlighting the Emperor's great belief in bureaucratic process and teamwork. His suggestion was met with some skepticism from the delegates of the other empires and was not supported, though no definite decision was made regarding the pirate threat.



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06/01/2004

Kor-Azor heir involved in 'incident' at cathedral

Aritcio Kor-Azor, the new head of the Kor-Azor family and son of the recently appointed Amarr Emperor, was involved in an unspecified 'incident' at an ancient cathedral on his home planet of Eclipticum last week. Aritcio, which has a reputation of enjoying the wild side of life, rented the cathedral for himself and a group of his friends to engage in some 'religious festivities', as he described it. These 'festivities' were abruptly ended when a resident priest accidentally walked in on them and witnessed the 'incident'.

Following this 'incident' the cathedral had to be thoroughly cleansed and partly renovated, it has also been revealed that several valuable holy artifacts in the possession of the cathedral had to be destroyed. Naturally, this has upset the religious community on Eclipticum as well as abroad. It is also understood that a foreign exchange student from the Gallente Federation was involved in the 'incident', though it is not known to what extent or purpose. She has already been shipped back to the Federation for medical treatment.

The public relations office of the Kor-Azor family has yet to release a statement on the matter, though one is expected in the very near future.

08/01/2004

Yonis Ardishapur voices concern over Articio Kor-Azor 'incident'

Yonis Ardishapur, one of the five Amarr heirs, has publicly voiced his concern over the 'incident' involving his fellow heir Articio Kor-Azor in a cathedral recently. The news that many irreplaceable religious artifacts were lost and untold damage done to the sacred ground has enraged those strong of faith and Ardishapur especially bemoans the loss of the holy artifacts, of which he is an avid collector.

Ardishapur has demanded a full report of the 'incident' to be given to the Theology Council as soon as possible and that the Emperor, as the chief religious figure in the empire, reprimand Articio Kor-Azor for his irresponsible and sacrilegious behavior. The Imperial Chamberlain has already answered Ardishapur's request on behalf on the Emperor and stated that Doriam did not share Ardishapur's concern on the matter and would not take any action against Articio Kor-Azor.

14/01/2004

Theology Council concludes inquiry into heir 'incident' - Articio cleared

The Amarr Theology Council made an inquiry into the 'incident' involving the royal heir Articio Kor-Azor at the request of the church authorities where the 'incident' took place. The Council has now concluded the inquiry and reported its findings. Surprisingly little is said in the report and it seems the Council was unable to delve deep into the secrecy shrouding the infamous 'incident'.

Various witnesses seem to have disappeared into thin air or are suffering from a sudden stroke of amnesia, but are rumored having received lucrative promotions or large sums of money. The centerpiece of the inquiry, a Gallentean exchange student, has since disappeared making investigators unable to question her. Though the report strongly suggests that an elaborate cover-up has taken place, the investigators were unable to uncover the truth in the matter. Perhaps one day someone will come forward with the whole sordid story, but until then Articio Kor-Azor can continue living his extravagant lifestyle as before, free of worries.

21/01/2004

CONCORD Task Force Sighted Leaving Empire Borders

AEDITIDE - An armada of CONCORD police ships, comprised of at least 6 battleships with 8 cruiser escorts, was sighted approaching the Egbinger gate in the Aeditide system and then jumping into unregulated space. The circumstances surrounding this highly unusual, unannounced expedition beyond Empire borders are unknown, as CONCORD representatives have refused to comment on the development. There are strong indications that the maneuver was not planned or authorized by CONCORD Fleet Command, as sources close to DED reveal a sudden flurry of activity among high-ranking personnel and at least one fleet reassignment to the Molden Heath region.

"Two words: Rogue commander", said Vinntekken Napas, Commander of Internal Security with the Caldari Navy. "There is no other plausible explanation for it. They are not supposed to be out there, it violates their prime directive." The DED is primarily responsible for maintaining law and order within Empire space, especially in high-security systems. A sudden redeployment of military assets to deep space implies a radical shift in law enforcement policy, which would normally be preceded by an official announcement. "There would have to be some very compelling reasons for a DED skipper to do this without explicit permission from Fleet Command, ranging from pure insanity to the spacefaring equivalent of mutiny."

"Whoever it is certainly has an agenda," said Tsutara Yorsen of Home Guard. "This wasn't just one ship, it was an entire task force-the kind of muscle CONCORD likes to flex when they've made up their mind to really go after somebody. Each of the components of that fleet seems to be on the same page, united in purpose and completely defiant of what I can only assume to be very, very explicit orders from the DED brass to return home."

The DED has very long-standing, established military laws regarding the conduct of its officers. Legal analysts cite charges that could be leveled against the commander of the rogue fleet include treason, conspiracy to commit treason, unlawful use of government property, and disobeying a direct order from a superior officer. Any one of these charges brings with them a general court martial and carries a maximum penalty of death, plus confiscation of any existing clones.

26/01/2004

Pioneers of Crielere program call for harmony

The two leading scientists in the Crielere program, the Gallentean Henric Touvolle and the Caldari Taromi Umailen, have publicly called for unity amongst their fellow scientists following the stunning revelations that top Caldari officials have systematically been stealing blueprints from the Crielere facilities. Many of the most prominent scientists in the program have since left their posts and gone to work for independent research firms elsewhere. Now Touvolle and Umailen, which pioneered the Crielere program in the first place, are asking the remaining scientists to stick with it despite the internal turmoil and lack of funding.

It seems unlikely that the plea from the two visionary scientists will suffice to save the Crielere program, which is on the brink of collapsing completely. Touvolle and Umailen have vowed to continue their work to the very end 'for the sake of humanity as a whole to progress to the next level', as they put it. Though their dedication and radicalism managed to build the greatest science think-tank in human history, it is difficult to see it survive without the support of the empires. Yet only time can tell.

28/01/2004

Gag Order Imposed on DED Internal Security Chief - CONCORD Activity Spikes To Alarming Levels

NEW CALDARI - Incarcerated DED Internal Security Chief Tantoseisen Kakkichi and his legal representative Dantennen Fisk have been issued gag orders, prohibiting them from speaking with members of the press or anyone else outside of CONCORD. The order came as a result of an Inner Circle mandate, and is exclusively reserved for cases that could expose classified information or pose a security risk, internally or otherwise. The security lockdown was issued amidst reports of suspicious CONCORD fleet maneuvers close to Empire borders and frenzied activity among all department levels within the DED.

"It is interesting to note that it is still unknown if Commander Kakkichi has been formally arraigned on the charges brought against him," said Wallekon Kortadaken of the Republic Justice Department. "My suspicion is that he is undergoing some kind of 'debriefing', if you will. A gag order implies that a bargain has been struck--perhaps pleading guilty to reduced charges in exchange for his full cooperation--which means that from this point on, CONCORD will be speaking on his behalf. We may never know his side of the story, but time will tell if that holds true or not."

Since the public statement from Counselor Fisk, activity at all levels of CONCORD has been significantly elevated, prompting concern from regional government officials. "These developments are extremely disturbing," said Fanason Xalotte of Federation Customs. "I have reports of CONCORD ships patrolling border crossings as if they're waiting for something on the other side to come through. It is irresponsible of them to increase their visibility and remain silent about their reasons for doing so, regardless of this maverick commander's part in it."

Reports from anonymous sources within the DED describe a "pronounced urgency to complete some new mission that has something to do with Kakkichi", but are unable to elaborate due to the security lockdown imposed by the Inner Circle. The timetable for the release of information considered crucial to understanding exactly what transpired in deep space with Commander Tantoseisen Kakkichi and his fleet appears to be contingent upon the completion of this mission, the object of which remains a mystery.

01/02/2004

Leaked DED Intelligence Memo Hints at Second Generation Combat Vessels

News agencies have been sent copies of a CONCORD Directive Enforcement Division intelligence memo by an anonymous source. The document details "hull-type nomenclature for recent emergent technology vessels." It appears to be a DED-internal communication regarding apparent code-words DED has implemented to refer to a class of new "light-strike combat craft" apparently in development by various and diverse firms.

The memo details four "hull-type designates" broken down by corporation of origin, with brief points listing their chief differences from traditional design and apparent technological advances. The memo apparently contains extensive engineering data, which is coded, but also contains uncoded descriptions and information on aspects of the manufacturing processes of the various "ETVs." The memo reads, in part:

"Malediction (Khanid Innovations, Executioner-class derivative). Typical of the ship design we're seeing from KIV; advanced shield generation coupled with potent electronics, probable implementation of Bashhamen findings. Design seems to sacrifice hard defenses in favor of soft capabilities.

Stiletto (Core Complexion Inc., Slasher-class derivative). Probable influence of Crielere project FE-442-1331 (DED designation) findings here; CCI has increased armor and electronics capabilities with this design at the cost of traditional Minmatar brute offense capabilities. Handler 144 has requested further info re: electronics schematics from operative.

Raptor (Lai Dai, Condor-class derivative). LDC may be benefiting from greater access to Crielere data. This design shows advances in numerous areas, making it more adaptable and flexible than traditional Caldari design. Perhaps weaker for task-specific application, but with significant advantages in operational versatility.

Ares (Roden Shipyards, Atron-class derivative). Obvious Minmatar design influence, possibly via Crielere project(s) KS-133-0951, KS-141-4832, or AV-211-6970 (DED designation(s)). Faster, more versatile hull design. Space usually devoted to drone implementation sacrificed here for greater post-build engineering flexibility and launcher mount hard points. 'Fast attack craft' profile similar to abandoned KS-133-0951 design."

Though much of the technical data apparently contained in the memo is coded, some specific detail about the construction process is revealed, including a "reliance on advanced technological components" presumably such as have recently been developed by Crielere Labs, and "utilization of the morphite mineral in key systems."

CONCORD and its DED subsidiary declined to comment officially on the leak, other than to say "it is being looked into." Sources inside CONCORD indicate the data contained in the memo appears genuine and "as correct as these sorts of things usually can be." Representatives for the firms named in the memo also declined comment, citing confidentiality agreements.

03/02/2004

State and Federation abandon Crielere

The Caldari State and the Gallente Federation have finally officially decided to abandon the Crielere research facilities, something that has been expected for quite some time. Most of the staff has already left and security personnel and police ships will leave the system in the very near future. The rift caused by the theft of valuable blueprints by high ranking Caldari officials has grown so deep and severe that it was quite obvious that the two great nations could not continue their cooperation in the Crielere program, despite the grand successes it had achieved. Thus, it was only a matter of time before the program would collapse completely.

But not all are willing to abandon the vision around which the Crielere program was created. The two leading scientists in the program, Touvolle and Umailen, have refused to leave the facility and have secured themselves along with a handful of loyal followers in a single lab in the vast complex. There they intend to continue the work they started, regardless of what the empires wish. Whether the pair can manage to stay alive without any kind of support is another matter all together.

06/02/2004

Academic Community Divided On Crielere - Idealists publicize formerly secret innovations

As research scientists at the half-abandoned Crielere facility brace for another assault by Guristas pirates, academics throughout the universe of EVE are divided in whether they support the somewhat stubborn idealism of Crielere founders Henric Touvolle and Taromi Umailen of refusing to bow to politics and free market pressure. In recent days, a trend has risen amongst engineers working for various corporations and races, to publicize formerly confidential blueprints, and have placed them on the open market for anyone to buy. Both nationalists and military officials ranging from the Amarr Empire to Gallente Federation are criticizing this venture claiming that introducing new combat modules to the market simply escalates the lawlessness that abounds these days and invites more terror by giving criminal elements easy access to advanced technology.

An engineer whose corporation has recently put a new blueprint on the market insisted that criminals already have this technology and it was the common man that gains from this, who until now was not able to defend himself properly.

15/02/2004

Guristas pirates in disarray as they seek to offload scientists

The Guristas, yet again grabbing the headlines the world over after their latest exploits in the Crielere system, are reported to be in an uproar following the loss of their leader, commonly known as Fatal. It is believed that the cocky Fatal only possessed an inferior clone of himself and is now suffering from severe loss of memory and motor functions. His partner in crime, known as the Rabbit, is not happy with the state of his former compatriot, nor his conduct during the raid on the Crielere complex. Fatal has gone into hiding and his future role with the Guristas, the cartel he helped create, remains uncertain. Yet some have speculated that the rift between the Fatal and the Rabbit is only a ploy the pair is playing to confuse their enemies, with Fatal only taking his time to recover and, perhaps, seek revenge on those that 'podded' him. Fatal was killed after a multi-system chase that ended in Second Wave Inc.'s Security Chief Doc Brown cracking his escape pod.

In the meantime, the fate of the famed scientists the Guristas kidnapped from the Crielere station is still to be decided. The intelligence community is reporting that the Guristas are currently seeking a buyer in secret, someone willing to pay the vast sum the crime cartel is demanding for their prized assets. Negotiations are currently underway with several unidentified parties, with the ransom believed to be in the region of several trillion isk.

03/03/2004

Search for scientists continues as Articio and Foiritan clash

Rescue teams have arrived on the planet Inis-Ilix I in an effort to locate the renown scientists Touvolle and

Umailen, accidentally sent there as common slave labor. Machal Corde leads the search effort, but isn't very optimistic about the task ahead. 'It's like looking for a needle in a stack of needles,' he explains, clearly exasperated after dealing with befuddled Amarr officials, which don't seem to grasp the idea that slaves might have unique identities. Corde continues: 'To them [the Amarrians] all slaves are the same and the notion of searching for individuals in the mass is alien to them. It makes things that much harder.'

Meanwhile, Articio Kor-Azor demanded the immediate execution of the two Minmatars that managed to masquerade themselves as the scientists to escape the sulfur mines on Inis-Ilix I. But his plans for revenge were thwarted by the Federation delegates, acting on instructions from president Foiritan. They claimed the Minmatars were now free, as the Federation had paid for their release. Articio, clearly not wishing to escalate the matter into a full-blown row with the Federation, grudgingly accepted. The two Minmatars are currently heading back to Federation space and from there they will be sent on to the Republic.

With the slave mines on Inis-Ilix I suddenly in the limelight of the galactic media a debate has arisen in many quarters about the poor conditions of slaves in some areas of the Amarr Empire. While the current Emperor was still royal heir the circumstances of slaves within his domain were somewhat improved, but they've been in a rapid decline since his son Articio took over. Many are also angry over the apparent hypocrisy of the Gallente Federation, outspoken critics of slavery for many years. They've turned a blind eye to the fate of the thousands of Minmatar slaves toiling in harsh conditions such as those found on Inis-Ilix I, but as soon as a known Gallentean is sent there then suddenly the Federation is all ready and willing to act on the matter and send in rescuers. The folksinger Amelia Piroette, a well-known activist and humanist, is organizing a fund-raising concert called Slave-Aid to be held in the near future, where many of the leading musicians in the world of EVE will help raise money to free slaves from the poisonous sulfur mines on Inis-Ilix I.

06/03/2004

Sentry gun range now up to 150 km!

Sentry gun software has now been beefed up all over Empire space and criminals can thus expect to feel the cold caress of space against their pod after the sentries make light work of their ship.

Sentry gun range is now up to 150 kilometers in response to ever more aggressive tactics favoured by outlaws in Empire space.

08/03/2004

Scientists found starved dead at Inis-Ilix Royal Mines - Slave imposters missing with sensitive documents

Sad news have arrived from the Royal Mines at the planet of Inis-Ilix I as the bodies of the two missing scientists Henric Touvolle and Taromi Umailen were discovered near a small cave on the outskirts of one of the slave camps. It was a team of professional bounty hunters, hired by the Federation, which tracked down the scientists' whereabouts, but arrived too late to have a chance of reviving them. Tentative inspection suggests that malnutrition and respiration problems may be the cause of death, though authorities refrain from any further comments until after an autopsy. The toxic atmosphere of Inis-Ilix I claims the lives of hundreds of slaves each week, sparing only those whose stamina has been hardened through years of survival in brutal conditions.

The science community is shaken by the loss of its brightest beacons and memorial services are being held today all over the world of EVE in respect of these giants of modern science, responsible for bringing many wondrous discoveries into the world.

In related news the Amarrians are claiming the two Minmatars that stole the identities of the two scientists and replaced them in Articio Kor-Azor's new research labs were in fact rebel infiltrators intending to sabotage the laboratories. After the pair left with the help of federal escort it was discovered that sensitive information, including blueprints for rare Amarrian space vessels, was missing from the research facilities. The Amarrians are demanding that the two Minmatars be returned to Amarr space immediately, but the pair vanished after entering Federation space and is not likely to be seen again. Sources say that Articio is fuming over the whole escapade and is plotting to avenge this affront to his honor.

11/03/2004

Brutor Tribe expresses support for Khumaak - new proposal detailed

At a Tribal Council session yesterday afternoon Wkumi Pol, head of the Brutor Tribe, announced that after much deliberation the tribe has decided to put all their weight behind supporting the Khumaak's cause. Citing in his statement "our devoted brethren's tireless advocacy of the traditions so dear to us and the callous response their commitment has garnered from members of the ruling class" as the main reasons for the decision, Pol then went on to detail a proposal for compromise, a fifteen-page document that has reportedly had top Brutor officials working day and night for the last week to formulate and finalize.

The Brutor proposal calls for the Khumaak to be kept on the official list of sanctioned Minmatar state, military and fleet apparel while detailing an exhaustive list of exceptional circumstances in which the weapon can not be openly displayed, including among other things official Amarr diplomatic gatherings and trans-empire summits. Many have pointed out that the proposal's wording never explicitly states that the weapon must be absent from said gatherings -- merely that it must not be openly displayed. This has prompted voices of criticism from within both the Sebiestor and Krusual tribes; according to Sebiestor council member Atuor Turvan, the proposal is "too

mealy-mouthed to be taken seriously by any legislative body."

Turvan's outspokenness on the issue does not, however, seem to be shared by many of his tribe's leaders. Most notably, PM Karin Midular, Sebiestor's tribal head, has opted to remain virtually silent on the issue until a thorough evaluation of the proposal at hand has been completed. Analysts are interpreting this as a watershed moment in the debate; for the first time since the initial ban motion was put forth, both sides have ceased screaming at each other long enough to take stock of the current situation, and hopes are high that the Brutors' increased involvement is the first step towards a possible amicable solution in what has been one of the most fiery debates in Minmatar political history.

19/03/2004

Khanid Kingdom strenuously denies ill treatment of slaves

There has been a considerable political backlash in the wake of the news that the Khanid Kingdom and the Ishukone Corporation signed a trade deal for Transcranial Microcontrollers. Many humanitarian organizations have claimed the microchips will be used on slaves to suppress their thoughts and will, effectively 'de-humanizing' them. These claims have reached such a popular appeal, being constantly fed by the media, that the Gallente Federation and the Minmatar Republic have also joined in denouncing the deal as being inhumane.

The Khanid Kingdom has from the start vigorously defended their actions and now, in an attempt to strengthen their side of the story, it has decided to reveal further information into what the Transcranial Microcontrollers will be used for. The Kingdom, or Dark Amarr as it is better known as, has always been a strange mismatch of old Amarrian traditions coupled with brand new theories in technology and economics, creating a society that may seem decidedly schizophrenic to the untrained eye. As in the Amarr Empire, slavery has always played a large role in the economical and social life of the Kingdom. Yet in recent years the Dark Amarrians have become increasingly frustrated by the lack of economical benefits provided by slavery in a modern world. The cost for raring, supervising and guarding slaves is only marginally lower than the productivity of the slave, especially when one bears in mind that the productivity is already hampered by the slaves being resentful, inexperienced and, frequently, unhealthy.

The Transcranial Microcontrollers will change all that. Following the age-old mantra that a 'happy worker is a good worker', slaves implanted with the chip will feel happy and content, with no rebellious or ill feelings towards their supervisors. The Transcranial Microcontroller can be programmed in such a way as to create an illusionary existence for the implantee, making him believe he lives quite an ordinary life, with a family, home and freedom. Every night, the mind is re-programmed anew, effectively allowing the slave to constantly re-live the same day, though without him realizing this.

Early studies by economists indicate that the productivity of slaves with the implant is up to 120% greater than of other slaves. Furthermore, tests by medical doctors and psychologists show that slaves with the implant have significantly reduced stress levels and psychological disorders compared to other slaves, and even to 'ordinary' people. Dark Amarr officials do not deny that they were mainly driven by economical factors in making this step, but any suggestions that they are treating their slaves badly they counter by asking: People can rave all they want about free will, but do they really want to take a slave from the happy life he now leads and throw him back into the squalor and misery of his old existence just to prove they're right on some utopian altruistic level that has no basis in reality?

23/03/2004

Otro Gariushi defends Dark Amarr deal - claims chips improve slaves' lives

Otro Gariushi, CEO of Ishukone Corporation, has publicly defended the deal his company made with the Khanid Kingdom regarding the controversial Transcranial Microcontrollers. Ishukone has received considerable flak for selling a product it knows will be used on slaves. But Gariushi has dismissed these criticisms as pure infantile babble. "Like every corporation, Ishukone has responsibilities towards its stockholders to be profitable, that's the only reason for our existence." Gariushi is quoted as saying. "No matter what we may feel on a personal level, that is the main duty of us that run the company." He continued: "What usage our clientele make of our products is none of our concern - do armaments manufactures care what their weapons will be used for? Of course not. Such scruples have no place in the modern business world and companies pursuing them deserve to perish. Besides, in my opinion the chips are a great gift for slaves, giving them happiness they would otherwise never experience."

Gariushi also talked about the relations Ishukone and the Khanid Kingdom have enjoyed in the past. "We have dealt with the Dark Amarrians for years now and regard them as one of our most cherished customers. All our dealings have been totally harmonious and there are several cases where they've literally saved our ass in difficult situations, such as when Crielere was being built." Gariushi was unwilling to expound on what exactly Dark Amarr had done for Ishukone in Crielere, only reiterating that Ishukone and Dark Amarr enjoyed a close and fruitful relationship that would surely flourish even further in the future.

07/04/2004

Transcranial Chip price rises as Federation demand increases

The price of the highly controversial Transcranial Microcontrollers has risen considerably in the last few days as demand increases from a surprising source - the Gallente Federation. The chips, manufactured by the Caldari Ishukone Corporation, have until now mainly been in demand in the Khanid Kingdom, where they are used to

pacify slaves. But the chips can be programmed in various ways, as the idle rich within the Federation have found out. The chips have become a huge fad amongst the social elite and 'chip parties' are the newest rave, where people randomly draw a chip from a bowl as they enter. Of course, the chips are programmed differently than those used by the Dark Amarr, usually involving a fetish of some sort, lurid fantasies and id alterations.

In addition, reports indicate that some Gallenteans are now using the chips to slightly alter their perception of themselves, making them think they are younger, more attractive or more popular than they really are. Though many frown upon this practice, psychiatrists say this helps people deal with self-esteem issues, a rampant problem in a society that values youth and beauty above everything else.

11/04/2004

Dark Amarr rifts chip deal with Ishukone

In the wake of rising prices for the Transcranial Microcontrollers due to increased demand from the Gallente Federation, the Dark Amarrians have decided to rift the deal they made with the Ishukone Corporation, the manufacturers of the chips. A spokesman from the Khanid Kingdom explained that the price of the chips was now so high that it counteracted the benefits the chips provided in economical terms. The kingdom thus saw no reason to continue buying them. The spokesman said that those chips already purchased and currently en route to the kingdom would be implanted, and those slaves already implanted would stay that way, but otherwise the old slave policy would be reinstated.

Ishukone has released a statement following these news, stating they are sorry to lose such a valued customer as the kingdom, but insisting that the laws of the market should prevail and that the price should be dictated by those willing to pay the most for them, Federal citizens in this case.

The news have received a mixed response, many are rejoicing that the 'barbaric implantation of mind control devices' is being terminated, while others lament that the Dark Amarrians are taking up the old, brutal, ways of slavery, with no thought given to a more humane treatment of slaves.

20/04/2004

Caldari armament industry accused of warmongering

High-ranking CONCORD officials have accused several prominent Caldari weapon manufacturers of promoting war and violence in many parts of the world. The Caldari armament industry has in recent years increasingly turned its eyes outside the State to do business, as the domestic market dwindles. Though most of these exports go to legitimate sources it is estimated that as much as 20% ends up in the hands of the less scrupulous social elements.

CONCORD has many times in the past issued stern warnings to several Caldari corporations regarding trade with unsavory entities, reminding them that there are regulations that forbid such dealings. Yet the trade continues, often disguised as aid relief or sample containers. It has become clear that as long as the powers that be within the Caldari State turn a blind eye on this situation, then there is little that CONCORD can do to remedy it.

21/04/2004

Amarr government seeks extradition of UDI operative

Kador Region - The Amarr Civic Court today requested that Ni-Kunni Goran Mitelek, the UDI operative captured by Gallente police forces in a skirmish in Sinq Laison last week, be extradited to the Amarr government.

Mitelek, an electronic warfare specialist and reputed former Angel Cartel member, is reportedly wanted for a long list of crimes against the Empire, among them the supplying of arms and explosives to "anti-government revolutionaries" and participation in "numerous operations detrimental to the Empire's interests."

Mitelek's involvement in the Elarel massacre of three weeks ago is at this time unknown, but according to inside intelligence sources he is believed to have played a major role in orchestrating the attack. His influence within the UDI organization is unknown.

President Foiritan of the Gallente Federation has not been reached for comment, but a senior aide in the President's Office, speaking on condition of anonymity, believes the chances of the President's acceptance of extradition terms are "less than slim."

The matter is expected to be taken up in tomorrow's Federal Branch Assembly, where political analysts are already predicting fireworks between President Foiritan and his opponents in the Senate.

26/04/2004

Catiz Tash-Murkon sparks controversy over cathedral renovation plan

Harsh words have been exchanged between the Kador family and the Tash-Murkon family regarding the latter's plans to turn a religious site into a tourist attraction. Catiz Tash-Murkon recently bought the now infamous cathedral on Eclipticum, the site of the sordid incident involving Articio Kor-Azor. The cathedral has been closed since the incident and in need of repairs and renovations. None has been willing to take up this burden until Catiz stepped in.

Catiz plans to fund the extensive repairs needed by allowing tourists, for the first time, to visit the holy site -

dedicated to the saint Tal-Romon, the first Udorian to reach sainthood.

This has sparked a hot debate amongst the Amarrians, and been especially fiercely criticized by the Kador and Ardishapur families, which are outraged that commoners will be allowed to walk the hallow grounds around the esteemed cathedral. But Catiz is adamant she will continue with the plan 'in honor of St. Tal-Romon, which was a guiding light in his time and should continue to be so in our time.'

28/04/2004

Kador ups the ante in cathedral debate - Amarr pilot community says no to tourists

Uriam Kador, head of the Kador family, has intensified the ongoing debate surrounding Catiz Tash-Murkon's acquisition of the Tal-Romon Cathedral on Eclipticum by questioning the heir status of the Tash-Murkon family. The Tash-Murkons replaced the Khanid family when the latter broke from the Empire following Heideran's election as emperor. The nomination came as a surprise to most, not the least because the Tash-Murkons were Udorians, and thus not of pure Amarrian ancestry. Heideran ruffled a few feathers with his decision and now that he is gone the Kador family seems eager to pick at these old wounds. Five hundred years may have passed, but Amarr Holders have long memories. It seems that Uriam, already at odds with Articio Kor-Azor, is merely using Catiz's plans for the Tal-Romon Cathedral as an excuse to continue a feud that started 500 years ago. At that time many feared the empire was breaking up following Khanid's departure. The same fear seems to be welling up again - but only time can tell if it's justified.

In a curt statement from Catiz Tash-Murkon she refrained from 'stooping as low as her esteemed fellow heir Uriam Kador by acknowledging his cheap verbal attacks' and would instead focus on the continued renovation of the Tal-Romon Cathedral, which she felt had the 'moral support of all upstanding Amarr citizens, as evident by their public outcry on the matter.'

The issue is already causing a stir in the Amarr community as a whole, with distinguished Amarr pilots offering tens millions in ISK donations to the restoration of the Cathedral, provided unworthy tourists are not allowed to walk the hallow grounds and desecrate them further still by their ignorant gaze and uneducated fascination with Amarr architecture. While aware of this, Catiz Tash-Murkon representatives claim that the decontamination process alone costs more than is being offered at the moment. 'We respect the wishes of those brave devout Amarr pilots, but at the moment, our initial plan offers looks more financially viable.'

05/05/2004

Jovian liaison to make anniversary visit to heads of state

The Jovian Directorate today issued a press release to all major news agencies throughout the universe. The release states that Misu Baniya, Extra-Racial Liaison for the Jove Directorate, will tomorrow, over the course of only one hour, make diplomatic visits to President Foiritan of the Gallente Federation, Amarr Emperor Kor-Azor, PM Midular of the Minmatar Republic, and the headquarters of the Caldari State's Chief Executive Panel, as well as "other factional leaders, heretofore unrecognized by the diplomatic community at large."

As stated in the release, the visit is intended to commemorate tomorrow's one-year anniversary of the founding of the Interstellar Services Division, the multi-corp, multi-racial conglomerate which many believe has been the biggest contributor to the vast increase in the number of pilots traversing the spacelanes this last year, and which, according to the release, "has worked wonders in stimulating economic and social growth throughout the universe."

Baniya himself was instrumental in founding and setting up the ISD, helping get the giant multi-billion ISK project off the ground. He became known by associates for his deft touch at dispute mediation and calm detachment in times of crisis.

Baniya's visit will also be used as an opportunity to utilize the Jovians' latest state-of-the-art technological marvel, a new form of transportation. The release's wording is cryptic when describing this piece of equipment, but judging by the sheer number of visits Baniya intends to make in only one hour - and the distances involved between them - it looks to be something quite special indeed.

Halls of government everywhere have already begun preparations for the liaison's arrival. He is expected to arrive at his first stop, New Caldari, at 12:00 EVT tomorrow.

07/05/2004

UDI operative extradited to Amarr

This just in: according to confirmed eyewitness sightings, alleged UDI terrorist Goran Mitelek was late last night escorted from Federation Navy HQ in Algogille to an undisclosed location in Amarr space.

The extradition comes hard on the heels of two weeks' worth of tooth-and-nail debates within Gallente government, where Federation President Foiritan has, with unflagging consistency, made his wishes to hang on to the prisoner abundantly clear. Representatives from the Office of the President were not available at time of going to press, but the general expectation is that the President will not take the news lightly.

Mitelek, who up until yesterday afternoon had been held in captivity at one of the Federal Intelligence Office complexes in the Essence region, was reportedly transferred to Algogille on direct orders from the Senate.

Following a brief period of interrogation, the prisoner was then escorted by Navy personnel off the premises and into a transport, which took him to Amarr territory.

Polling on the subject over the past two weeks has revealed that a vast majority of the Gallente public are opposed to seeing Mitelek extradited. According to an impromptu poll conducted moments before going to press, roughly eighty-seven percent of those polled replied that they wanted to see the Ni-Kunni brought to justice by Gallente tribunal, while only seven percent wanted to see him given to the Amarr.

More on this development as it unfolds.

12/05/2004

Troubled Times For Fledgling Republic

Sebiestor tribal head Karin Midular at a press conference yesterday expressed disapproval on the Republic's behalf towards the People's Republic of Minmatar, an alliance of paramilitary groups which last Wednesday officially seceded from the Republic, proclaiming independence under a new constitution and claiming the constellation of Tartatven in the Molden Heath region as their sovereign territory.

Claiming "disappointment at the impertinence displayed by our brethren," Midular then went on to state that the Minmatar Republic officially did not recognize the PRM's claim to sovereignty over the Tartatven constellation.

In response, PRM High Council Member BI3ach leveled harsh criticism at the current Republic administration, claiming Midular's reaction had been expected from an administration known for its policy of "hiding one's head in the sand and pretending that a third of our people are not still in the vile clutches of the Amarrians, degraded and treated as commodities." The councilman added that the PRM had laid its claim upon Tartatven "so that the principles and ideologies of our people, which seem sorely absent from the bureaucracy of the old Republic, may be enforced."

Diplomatic rows aren't the only battles the PRM is fighting these days. The day before yesterday saw an incursion of ships from Amarr fundamentalist paramilitary organization CVA (Curatores Veritatis Alliance), on what appeared initially to have been a scouting patrol, but which escalated into a skirmish resulting in CVA forces retreating from Tartatven.

Questioned for comment, CVA Grand Inquisitor Gaius Kador stated, "The PIE Inquisition Wing entered so-called "claimed" space to obtain intel, and was successful in doing so before enemy presence forced a tactical retreat."

Propagandists for both the CVA and the PRM have begun a fierce duel of words on the GalNet networks, and hostilities are expected to escalate in the coming days and weeks.

Meanwhile, down on the planets, a shift is taking place. Since last week's declaration of independence, almost twenty thousand Matari have moved from planets in the Sveipar constellation and are taking up residence on Tartatven's major centers of commerce and industry, the cities of Argrald and New Rixarn (located on Hrober II and Aedald VI, respectively). This migration is seen as indicative of the growing feeling, particularly among younger generation Matari, that the current Republic is growing soft in its policies.

Questioned at a press conference yesterday as to whether this recent trend was cause for worry for the Republic, Head of Parliament Malaetu Shakor replied: "The Republic does as it must, as, I am certain, does the PRM. I am not now, nor have I ever been, in a position to judge my fellow brothers and sisters for the paths they choose. Our struggle is, after all, a common one."

17/05/2004

Empires to enter a bidding war for Jovian body parts

With confirmation from the Jovian government that they will indeed try to collect as many parts of the unfortunate liaison Misu Banyia in order to revive him, the four empires are poised to enter a bidding war over who can collect the most parts. Starting tomorrow, the empires will start buying back selective body parts on the market. Due to the massive logistics involved they will only buy in bulk, meaning they will only do business for one thousand units or more at a time.

As gruesome as this spectacle promises to be, it will no doubt attract a huge amount of attention from every corner of the world. Not only because of the money involved, but because people are curious to see in what way the Jovians will reward the empire that collects the most body parts. There have even been rumors that the Jovians will reward those pilots or corporations most prominent in the collection process, though this has not been officially confirmed.

The Jovians are still close-mouthed about what went wrong with the teleportation device that resulted in the sad demise of Banyia. What little they have revealed suggest that the failure was human rather technological in nature, strengthening the rumors suggesting that foul play was involved. Nevertheless, the Jovians are preparing to conduct further tests on their new device, though one can only hope the results will be less dramatic in the future.

12/06/2004

Jovians gather body parts from empires

Cloaked Jovian convoys have traveled into empire space and gathered the thousands of body parts that the empires collected yesterday. The Jovians, eager to collect enough parts to be able to reconstruct Misu Baniya, jumped on the offer presented to them by the empires for the latter to organize the collection of the myriad small pieces of Baniya's body. They even encouraged it by promising gifts to those most prominent in collecting pieces of the cadaver and by awarding all pilots of the winning race a favorable standing with the Jove Empire.

The response to the body part collection efforts was immense, with thousands of pieces turned in, some for cash, others as donations in an effort to become the victorious race. The Jovian Gyt Quisog headed the Jovian fleet that picked up the frozen body parts of Misu Baniya from the empires. "Most of the parts are in good condition," he explains. "Though many have become contaminated or corrupted. But we should be able to fix that." Quisog continued by saying that all the races had done well, each turning in several thousand pieces. "The outcome is much better than we hoped for. Now we go home and start doing what needs to be done."

When asked for what race will receive the coveted Jovian favor he replied. "As I said before, all the races were outstanding. But there was one race that outran even its own reputation for ruthless efficiency and that was the Caldari State. On behalf of the Jove Empire I congratulate them and look forward to future relations with them. As for awarding individuals for outstanding contribution, these will be dealt with in a couple of weeks."

15/06/2004

New frigates in the outer regions a cause for concern

Several travelers in the outer regions have recently reported spotting new frigates of advanced design in the outer regions, piloted by known brigands. These news tie in with earlier reports by DED that pirate factions are receiving substantial aid from inside the empires, something that has undoubtedly been going on for a considerable time. These new frigates are just the last in what seems to be a concentrated effort to bolster the strength of all the major pirate factions.

The impact these new frigates will have is still to be determined but travelers in unsafe space are urged to show even more caution than before, as more audacious pirate activity is the likely outcome. On the other hand, the increased wealth of pirates may be a blessing in disguise for some as the pirates themselves are undoubtedly now a more lucrative target for those bold enough to confront them.

16/06/2004

Pirate activity surges, DED considers its options

After many meager months it seems that pirate activity is on the rise again. News agencies are being flooded with reports that pirates, emboldened by recent overhaul in their command structure and new ships, are now operating close to stargates, harassing unsuspecting spacefarers.

DED recently warned about this possibility, citing that the confidence of all the major pirate groups are soaring, which naturally results in bolder attacks by them. DED will monitor the situation closely over the next few days to see how the pilot community responds to these developments, hoping that the increased pirate activity will not disrupt trade and mining operations overly much.

Meanwhile, accusations are flying as to whom to blame for the sudden surge in pirate activity. Some are blaming the Jovians, others Caldari armament manufacturers and still others claim that DED itself is responsible, in order to increase their annual budget through illusionary importance. For all those pilots suffering at the hands of pirates in the outer regions, the truth is perhaps irrelevant.

21/06/2004

Federation Seeks Information on Suspected UDI Operatives

The Federal Intelligence Office in a press release today stated that, according to an order handed down from Office HQ yesterday, the Federation will start giving out cash rewards for information potentially leading to the capture of several suspected UDI agents reported to be operating out of Gallente space.

According to the release, any sightings of the following personnel are to be reported immediately to FIO Deputy Director Deverin Gonate:

Garenis Toleitaane
Honadone Neartavis
Kolipon Vaneede
Junosana Sameker
Deprete Jonara
Alionis Fylmino

The FIO asks people to also include the name of the system the suspect was spotted in, along with the time of encounter, suspect's ship model and ship name. Rewards of 500,000 ISK will be handed out to individuals managing to give leads through confirmed sightings.

The operatives are believed to be armed and highly dangerous. Pilots encountering them are advised to refrain from engaging, and encouraged to contact the Federal Intelligence Office as soon as possible.

The release, coming only a week after the mysterious killing of UDI operative Goran Mitelek in Amarr territory, has prompted widespread speculation as to the Federation's intense determination to bring UDI operatives to justice.

According to one analyst, "I won't say ulterior motives, but I won't promise not to say it at some point in the future."

Responding to these allegations, Thuire Dercoucon, President's Office spokesman, retorted:

"The President finds all claims of foul play to be frankly hilarious. The Federation is engaged in protecting its assets and its way of life, both of which have come directly under attack from these individuals. The Federation wishes it to be known that if it is war they want, then it is war they will get."

25/06/2004

Jovian Delegate Revived, Preparing For Diplomatic Journey

The Jovian Directorate yesterday issued a statement claiming its Extra-Racial Liaison, Misu Baniya, has undergone molecular reconstruction and is on the road to recovery. The statement also affirmed the Directorate's gratitude towards the dedicated masses of pilots who coordinated their efforts in order to collect the necessary amount of biological material required for the reconstruction.

Baniya is expected to begin a diplomatic tour of the galaxy cluster early next week. According to the statement, the intention is to visit the four largest empires' heads of state, but reportedly most of the liaison's time will be spent establishing diplomatic contact with the leaders of various nation-state alliances which, over the course of the past year, have cropped up in almost every corner of non-CONCORD-policed space but have hitherto been ignored by the four empires as political entities.

"If they're trying to make a point, I don't know what it is," stated a Federation senator who asked to remain anonymous. "Sure, since the ISD came about the eggheads have spread all over the place, but putting those 'societies' of theirs up there in lawless space on the same pedestal as us? If I didn't know better, I'd say the Jovians were deliberately trying to undermine the rich history and traditions of our civilizations. In fact, I'm not entirely convinced that's not what they're trying to do."

Individuals within other governmental circles throughout the cluster have expressed similar reactions. Caldari officials have declined to comment on the issue altogether, but newsfeeds within the Amarr Empire have been rife with political pundits of all stripes spinning their heads in confusion.

"We don't know what to say," said a senior tribal council member within the Minmatar Republic, who also wished to remain anonymous. "We can't begin to fathom their motivations. We're stumped."

06/07/2004

Amarrians complete monumental feat; cathedral safely transported

The immense Tal-Romon Cathedral has been safely transported piece by piece from Eclipticum to Amarr Prime, where it will be reconstructed on the Amarr continent itself. The cathedral debate pitted the Amarr Emperor Dorian II against the royal heir Catiz Tash-Murkon, who was the previous owner of the cathedral before the emperor confiscated it. Though the Tash-Murkon family did not openly oppose the emperor on the matter it is well known that they supported private efforts to foil the transportation efforts.

A spokesperson for the Imperial Chancellor stated that 'this success speaks volume about what Amarrians can accomplish when they work together towards a common goal. I hope this encourages Amarrians everywhere to follow their dreams, as they will surely have the grace of God with them in all their endeavors.'

The massive undertaking saw hundreds of private pilots rally to the cause, completing a staggering ten thousand sorties for the greater good of the empire. This despite several thousand failed sorties due to attacks from unsavory assailants working indirectly for Catiz Tash-Murkon. Now all that remains to be seen is whether the emperor and the fiery heir can sheath their swords and establish some sort of a status quo. The odds are this will happen as the Amarrians have a long history of finding compromise solutions to thwart civil wars. But they also have a long history of personal vendettas.

06/07/2004

Jovian Ambassador Concludes Tour of Alliances With Empire Visit

According to the Jovian Directorate's Ministry of Information, Jovian Liaison for Extra-Racial Affairs Misu Baniya yesterday met with representatives from the Coalition of Deklein and the Coalition of Free Stars. These two meetings conclude a week-long tour of the outer rim alliances, undertaken by the famous liaison to, in his own words, "give long-overdue acknowledgment to the incipient nation-states growing on the edges of explored space."

According to a press release from the liaison himself, diplomatic contact has been established with the Curse,

Fountain, JQA, Stain, Phoenix and 3rd Front Alliances, the Xetic & Immensea Federation and the member alliances of the Northern Alliances Security Treaty (The Fade Union, NORAD and CoD) in addition to the above-mentioned Coalition of Free Stars. All of these alliances have been added to the Jovian Register of Sovereign Nation-states, effectively placing them in the same diplomatic category as the Amarr Empire, the Caldari State, the Gallente Federation and the Minmatar Republic.

Baniya concluded his tour of the alliances by paying a visit to diplomats within each of the four empires. With the exception of the Caldari, who hailed the Jovians' efforts as "admirable," officials from each empire expressed disappointment with the Directorate's decision to add the alliances to their register.

"There is no society, no populace to speak of, no national customs, no real history, no common origin, no language. How, then, can these alliances be thought of as nations? What possible permutation of the definition can give rise to an initiative such as this?" asked Federation Senator Traude Bonailles at a Senate meeting last Saturday. Amarr and Matari officials have, in a similar vein, expressed their vexation at the Directorate's actions.

The Caldari Chief Executive Panel, however, issued statements of a different kind. At a Panel Policy Advisory Committee meeting yesterday Ogas Alfelar, Committee Chairman, stated "Our esteemed friends and allies in the Directorate are fully justified in adding these young nations to their register. Despite a few missing ingredients the fundamental building blocks are there, and we see no reason to further ignore the potential for sovereignty among those who have shown themselves capable of surviving in those dangerous territories. On behalf of the State we wish to welcome the outer rim alliances into the international community."

When asked whether the Caldari State intended to send its own envoys outside CONCORD jurisdiction to establish official diplomatic ties with the alliances, the Chairman stated that it was "a distinct possibility, but one that would require careful planning."

15/07/2004

Caldari Private Police Forces Lock Horns in Lonetrek

Yesterday afternoon saw warning shots fired between vessels from the Ishukone and Kaalakiota corporations' private police forces, the Ishukone Watch and the Home Guard.

Reports indicate that at just after 16:00 EVT, a contingent of Ishukone Watch ships appeared near Kaalakiota HQ in Nonni. Failing to respond to hails on open frequencies, Watch forces proceeded to initiate long-range scans of the area, in response to which Home Guard battleships and Kaalakiota sentry guns fired warning shots, ordering them out of the system.

Niteloho Koirolen, Kaalakiota spokesman, called the altercation "a direct result of the unannounced and unexpected presence of an Ishukone Watch squadron in close proximity to Kaalakiota holdings."

"There are mutually agreed-upon private zones into which corporation police forces don't cross. The Ishukone Watch know this as well as we do. We are currently in discussion with the Ishukone Corporation as to the nature of these transgressions, and we sincerely hope this can be resolved without further incident," said Koirolen.

Ishukone representatives were unavailable for comment.

16/07/2004

Federation Places Bounty on Terrorist Operative - Gallenteans Express Discontent

The Gallente Federation Security Council yesterday issued a statement detailing a large bounty placed on the head of Henry Foudreal, alleged UDI operative.

According to the statement, recent investigations have revealed Foudreal to have acted as main orchestrator in the UDI's foiled attack on the Gallente Frontier Tour Lines resort in Sharuveil three weeks ago. Additionally, the statement details a long list of bombings, kidnappings and guerilla strikes he is believed to have had a hand in.

Foudreal's image has been in circulation on the Federation's holovision and advertisement networks since last night. The Federation is promising a reward of 30 million ISK to anyone managing to give clues leading to his apprehension.

President Foiritan, known for populist tendencies and a habit of maintaining contact with his people at a grassroots level, has remained out of the public eye ever since the Elarel massacre nearly three months ago. At those occasions where he has been seen, he has remained laconic and reticent, usually opting to bow out early - behavior which, it seems, has become standard protocol for his staff.

The President has faced criticism from within senatorial ranks these past months, mostly for what senators claim is a "lack of attention to the many and varied problems facing our vast nation" and "an inordinate amount of focus upon matters of terrorism and the UDI at the expense of other pressing social issues such as declining standards of living in the outer systems and increasing marginalization of minorities."

"It is one thing to seek justice for your people," stated Senator Aldous Doucet, Chairman of the Federation's Joint Committee on Social Affairs. "To neglect those very people while doing it is quite another."

20/07/2004

Reclusive ORE founder meets with leader of Mordu's Legion

Orion Mashel, the founder of the Outer Ring Excavations company, is known for his secluded nature. He never travels outside his fortress-like home in the Heart constellation and very rarely invites visitors. Thus, whenever he meets with someone it is always a point of considerable interest for the press and it is now chewing over what Mashel's meeting with Muryia Mordu, leader of Mordu's Legion mercenary corps means. Especially in the light the Legion guards ORE property in the Outer Region.

The two met yesterday at Mashel's sprawling complex, the meeting lasted more than two hours and when Mordu left he was visibly upset. But he declined to comment to the media waiting outside and left in a hurry. Calls to Mashel himself were not returned.

Orion Mashel founded ORE several decades ago when the private corporations were taking their first tentative steps outside empire space. His company grew rich trading in Nocxium, which back then was in heavy demand. ORE established itself in the Outer Ring region and surrounding areas, scouting out the systems better than anyone before or since. The company is thought to know the locations of fabulously wealthy asteroid fields deep in space, which they mine slowly so as to not flood the market.

Mashel withdrew from the public eye some half a century ago and has since lived almost as a hermit in the midst of the Outer Region. But he still manages to be well informed about goings on in the outside world and the few times he has stuck his neck out it has always turned out to be transitional periods for his company; either to save it from looming threats or to expand its already great fortune to even greater heights. Now we are left wondering what the meeting between Mashel and Mordu portrays, is there some impending doom waiting to fall on ORE, or are we witnessing another chapter in its extraordinary success story?

22/07/2004

FIO Agents Conduct Fruitless Search for Terrorist Operative

Acting on several tips, a squad of FIO agents this morning scoured the Crux constellation in search of UDI operative Henry Foudreal. Combing at least four systems over the course of two hours, the agents found themselves unable to locate the terrorist.

"We received a number of reports that he was docked somewhere in the Duripant system," said Agent Joel Brouille, one of the presiding field operatives. "They all came from different enough directions that we saw reason to take them seriously."

After conducting security sweeps of every station within a four-system radius, the agents departed the area empty-handed.

United against Decadence and Impurity, the enigmatic cabal allegedly responsible for numerous acts of terrorism in Gallente space over the course of the last few months (most notable among them being the attack on Quafe Ultra's premiere party at the Rent-A-Dream Pleasure Gardens Complex in Elarel three months ago) have not released any statements recently. In addition, the absence of large-scale terrorism within the Federation in the past two weeks leads many to wonder whether the FIO's unseen efforts have been bearing fruit.

Federation President Foiritan is nevertheless finding himself the victim of ever-more vehement attacks in newspapers, political journals and holovision news programs alike. Polls have indicated his approval ratings declining rapidly, and within Federal assembly meetings Senate motions are gaining more ground than ever in the history of his three-year presidency.

23/07/2004

Mordu's Legion mobilizing, what is ORE up to?

Muryia Mordu, the venerated leader of Mordu's Legion, has ordered for a full mobilization of the Legion's forces. According to sources inside the Legion Mordu is putting together a task force with strike capabilities, which he intends to lead himself. Legionaries everywhere are left bewildered by this development as no explanation has followed in the wake of the order. Pilots on leave have been recalled to duty and ships in dry-docks hurried back into service.

The biggest employer of the Legion in recent years has been ORE, charging the Legion to protect the property of ORE against encroaching piracy at the hands of Guardian Angels and others. There is little doubt that this mobilization is the result of the stormy meeting Muryia Mordu had with the elusive Orion Mashel of ORE. Though the content of that meeting remains a secret still one can easily surmise that Mashel put the screws on Mordu, using the strong financial grip ORE has on the Legion as leverage to get Mordu to agree on whatever scheme Mashel is hatching.

Until now ORE has not been known to dabble in power politics or to use undue force, so a strike against a neighbor is thought to be unlikely. If an attack is imminent the most likely candidates are the Guardian Angels or even the Intaki Syndicate, though the purpose of such an attack are a complete mystery. Until the task force is assembled and on the move it's anybody's guess what ORE and Mordu's Legion are up to on the outskirts of civilized space.

27/07/2004

Mordu infiltrates Serpents space but avoids conflict

A Mordu's Legion task force under the leadership of Muryia Mordu himself infiltrated Serpents space in the Fountain region yesterday and moved deep into its territory. The task force refrained from any direct conflict with Guardian Angel ships or Serpents ships. Instead, the task force headed straight for Serpents Prime in the Phoenix constellation and approached the chemical refinery orbiting the second moon of Serpents Prime VIII. As the station readied its defenses Mordu's task force halted and orbited the station at exactly 30 km distance. Mordu then employed an unknown device from his flag ship; a device that radiated purple-greenish light and pulsed like a quasar. The device was aimed at the Serpents station for several minutes before disappearing again into Mordu's ship. The task force then promptly left and headed out of the system before the pirates could muster a response team.

According to the latest news Mordu is still on the prowl deep inside Serpents territory, though avoiding any direct confrontation with pirate forces as before. Considering the strength of the Serpents and Guardian Angels it is remarkable that the Legion has managed to bypass their defenses with such ease. Perhaps Mordu has more strange devices onboard, one that helps him get around unnoticed? If so, did he get them from ORE? And where did ORE get them?

03/08/2004

Mordu's Legion and Guardian Angels clash in Fountain region

The task force led by Muryia Mordu into Serpents space was pinned down yesterday by Guardian Angels forces led by Brynn Jerdola and Setele Schellan and forced into combat. The Guardian Angels have been trying to corner Mordu ever since the latter entered the Fountain region, but he has always managed to slip out of their grasp just when they thought they had him. Whether this is due to Mordu's tactical brilliance or the aid of unknown gadgets at his disposal is not known, but it wasn't until the equally brilliant Jerdola and Schellan arrived on the scene that Mordu's luck finally ran out.

The battle that ensued lasted more than an hour, but the clever defensive strategy employed by Mordu kept losses at a minimum. In the end the Guardian Angels retreated to lick their wounds and rally their troops for another assault. But in the meantime Mordu withdrew his task force in an orderly fashion, not willing to take his chance again against the much larger forces that the Guardian Angels could muster on their own home ground.

Having seemingly completed his mission Mordu has now left Serpents space and is heading back to his headquarters. It is anyone's guess whether his mission can be deemed a success or not, but at the very least it has stirred the Guardian Angels, embarrassed by how easily Mordu managed to penetrate their perimeter defenses and slip deep into Serpents territory. Some sort of retaliatory attacks, either on the Legion or on ORE, the Legion's employers and supposed instigators of the operation, is thought to be likely so space farers in the area are urged to show caution.

Other factions in the Fountain region are understandably concerned over the whole episode and have demanded an explanation from Mordu's Legion or ORE for the reasons for this unwanted incursion into their territory. Damaclease, co chairman of the Fountain Alliance council, said Mordu must explain his actions in person, otherwise the wrath of the FA would be felt. A spokesperson for ORE tried to placate the irritated FA by asserting that Mordu's mission was not aimed 'in any way whatsoever' at any members of the FA, but solely against the Serpents corporation. The spokesperson declined to go into details about Mordu's mission, but said that ORE and the Legion offered their sincere apologies to members of the FA for not informing them of the imminent incursion. It was the hope of the leaders of ORE and the Legion that relations with the FA could be restored to their usual good status despite this small 'oversight'.

10/08/2004

Minmatar Border Patrols Report Caldari Corp Police Border Zone Activity

Republic Navy Operations Command yesterday reported Ishukone Watch patrols making incursions into Minmatar-controlled territories, performing unsolicited ship scans and questioning passers-by on closed frequencies. This is the sixth time in the last two weeks that Ishukone forces have been seen in the area. Border systems Todrir and Eust have both played host to ships from the privately-controlled police force, resulting in stepped-up patrols from Republic Navy forces in the vicinity.

According to Republic Navy spokesman Raurvest Arrum Caldari private police forces have traditionally stayed out of areas belonging to neighboring nations. Inquiries as to the nature of these recent incursions have been met with silence on the part of the Ishukone corporation, with diplomatic circles yielding no satisfactory response either.

"We're unsure where exactly their motivations lie," said Arrum. "They've been seen here six times now, scanning ships and questioning bystanders, and they never give any explanation as to what they're doing." Reports from those questioned have indicated the Ishukone Watch are particularly interested in shuttle traffic from Caldari space into Matari space, but no concrete information beyond that has been revealed.

Ishukone Watch ships were also last month seen in Kaalakiota-controlled territories, leading many to speculate whether hostilities were on the rise between the two corps.

17/08/2004

Press Release: Caldari State Announces Opening of Sign-Up For COLOSSUS Race Series

Continuing its fine tradition of providing State citizens with only the best in sports and entertainment, the Caldari State proudly announces its forthcoming COLOSSUS race series.

It's months of brutal, no-holds-barred racing action as eight of the State's biggest and most powerful corporations pit their representatives against each other -- no vessel restricted, no piece of equipment off limits, no tactics forbidden! Kaalakiota racer next to you getting on your nerves? Send some missiles his way! Hyasyoda captain been on your tail too long? Show her what for with your smart bomb! Nothing is taboo - racers do whatever it takes to win.

First, a series of exciting qualifier races will determine who's worthy of representing their favorite company in the crowning event - The COLOSSUS Final! One hundred devoted pilots will be allowed into the COLOSSUS Qualifiers on behalf of each corporation. Once the grueling series of qualifiers has run its course, a team of only ten brave speed demons will be left to represent the corporation in the Final Race, a Massive Marathon spanning Most Of The Known Universe.

Due to the intensity of the matches scheduled and in the interests of maintaining a level playing field, the State is allowing only pilots of capsule-fitted vessels into the race. This serves the purpose of ensuring that both the quality of the pilot and his equipment is cutting edge, all the way.

Sign up today! Show your loyalty to the Corporations who have made the State what it is, and help to make this the greatest sporting event in galactic history!

25/08/2004

New Ship Class Released Exclusively to Pod-Fitted Pilots -- Columnist's Column Causes Stir

Much has been made in local media recently over the release of a new standardized class of capsule-fitted space vessel, the assault frigate. Hitting the space-lanes with little to no advance warning on Tuesday of last week, these vessels have been the subject of much speculation - why did every major designer of capsule-fitted ships put their prototypes up for patent finalization on the exact same day? And why is this class of ship intended exclusively for the relative elite that comprises the pod pilot community? Many have speculated that the reasons are primarily economical in nature, but infamous Federation Marquee columnist Maxim Peltast has his own theories.

In his column of last Thursday, Peltast states that "the real reason for the uniformity of the patent release - as well as the shady uniformity of the covert ops frigate patent release a scant month ago, which no one seems to have noticed - is that the powers that be, the ones who create the technology behind these ships, are drooling all over themselves to get in good with the eggheads."

'Eggheads' - those relatively few pilots cleared to fly capsule-fitted ships - have become increasingly common since the technologies of cloning and capsules were married a year and a half ago. The ease and speed with which they travel (a pilot in a capsule can physically withstand a great deal many more stargate jumps per hour than a cockpitted one) as well as the levels of technological expertise and physical conditioning necessary for operation of their equipment, has catapulted them to what could be called the top of the intergalactic food chain.

"They're trusted with top secrets. They're contracted by nations and megacorporations to do their dirty work. It's no wonder they're given the best toys," states Peltast in the column. "They're the cutting edge, and as such they receive the cutting edge to play with."

"Some of you, naturally enough, may ask how much power we should reasonably expect to be able to put in the hands of a single, roughly fifty-thousand member segment of interstellar society before it ends up exploding in our faces. This is a natural enough question to ask, and I'm glad you asked it. But they know you're asking it. The manufacturers know. The producers know. And the eggheads know."

"The question we should be asking is this: who holds the keys to the technologies which make all this possible? Who makes the eggheads what they are? Who stands to benefit from the eggheads' ascension as a group?"

Peltast then pointed his finger at the clone manufacturers, going on to list a web of financial connections linking clone giant Poteque Pharmaceuticals to spaceship developers like CreoDron and Kaalakiota. Making the kind of conspiratorial inferences which have granted him his infamy, the controversial columnist concluded with these words: "Whoever controls the clones controls the pods, kiddies. And whoever controls the pods controls the eggheads. And the eggheads... who knows where they're headed?"

Spaceship developers have made no comment as to the exclusivity of their latest designs, but Poteque Pharmaceuticals last Friday released this statement in response to Peltast's column: "It is only natural that our company be connected with the parties mentioned. In a pan-regional capitalistic economy, connections between corporations are many and varied, and we frankly fail to understand the motives for Mr. Peltast's apparent willingness to incite needless fear among people. Pod technology is the next step forward, and a thing to be embraced rather than dreaded."

06/09/2004

Morkt Drakt, Feral First Members of Lai Dai Team as COLOSSUS Qualifiers Open

Tonight saw the opening of the first round of qualifiers for the COLOSSUS race. 18 brave contestants attempted to qualify for the Lai Dai Corporation, with pilots Morkt Drakt of Lai Dai and Feral of Drink Starsi™ finishing first and second, respectively, to take their spots in the final ten-man Lai Dai team.

The race's route took contestants through the dangerous, lawless expanses of the Orpana constellation through to contested areas of the Venal region. Unsurprisingly, most of the pilots encountered some unfriendly fire along the way, though most appear to have survived the race.

After an exhilarating 20 jumps Morkt Drakt came in first, with Feral a very close second. Moments after they finished, Hitzu'Kai Brena, COLOSSUS correspondent, managed to track the two down for a brief word:

Hitzu'kai Brena: Good day, Citizen!

Feral: Good evening.

Hitzu'kai Brena: Good evening, Mr. Drakt.

Morkt Drakt: Hello. Nice event.

Hitzu'kai Brena: So, how does it feel to be winners?

Morkt Drakt: Quite surprised. In the heat of things, it's hard to keep track of who is in the lead.

Feral: Surprising... I saw a number of ships at the destination and initially thought I was 4th.

Hitzu'kai Brena: So, Morkt, you're the winner, Feral, you're in second place. How do you feel your ships behaved, and will you be making any alterations to them for the final?

Feral: My ship behaved admirably, although I feel there is room for improvement in the autopilot coding. As for alterations... we'll see.

Morkt Drakt: The agility implant payed off, I guess, and I am going to stick with my setup because I realised a key point with the route, and that won me first place.

Hitzu'kai Brena: What would you say was the key to your success? Was it a balanced ship setup, pure luck or something else?

Morkt Drakt: As I said, certain systems favoured my setup, and hopefully there will be more than a couple of systems like that in the final race.

Feral: I believe it was my knowledge of my ship's performance and abilities. At one point i was running at least 6th, and one of the people ahead of me had a virtually identical setup.

Hitzu'kai Brena: Excellent! Well done, gentlemen - a deserved victory.

Tomorrow's qualifier, for the Wiyrkomi Corporation's team, kicks off at 19:00 EVT.

07/09/2004

Trooper B99, Jeffrey Lebowski Triumph in Wiyrkomi Qualifier 1

As Day 2 of the COLOSSUS Qualifiers draws to a close, the first two members of the Wiyrkomi Corporation's Final team are on the score card: Trooper B99 of the Zoners and Jeffrey Lebowski of Imperial Dreams.

Spanning 34 jumps and ending up deep in the bowels of the Catch region, tonight's race saw the two winners go toe-to-toe for much of its duration, leaving most of the other contenders in the dust. At the qualifier's halfway mark, as the route veered off into HED-GP, the racers were confronted with a Shinra blockade. Details are sketchy at time of going to press, but unconfirmed reports state that some contestants may have been shot down and pod-killed by the Curse Alliance corporation. More details on that as the information is confirmed.

Race organizer Utaro Ziilikam had a few words with the two winners after the race:

Utar Ziilikam: Congratulations to both of you on qualifying for the finale. Do you have any words you wish to say to the press?

Trooper B99: Jeff, after you, lad.

Jeffrey Lebowski: I'll just say it was an honour flying in this race, and I hope I will do even better in the Finals. For Wiyrkomi! Trooper, all yours.

Trooper B99: I'd like to thank the honourable Wiyrkomi Corp for allowing me to fly, my employer, and of course Zoners and the lads of CA. And last but not least, my gallant competitors. You were great!

Jeffrey Lebowski: Indeed they were. Thanks, guys.

Trooper B99: Aye - and, of course, my new team mate, Jeff. I'm sure we're going to have a blast.

Utar Ziilikam: That's great - Congratulations once more, guys.

Tomorrow's highly anticipated qualifier, the first of five for the Kaalakiota Corporation, begins at 22:00 EVT.

10/09/2004

Kaalakiota, Nugoeihuvi Qualifiers Rife With Violence As Masses Cheer

Yesterday and Wednesday saw the first qualifier heats for the Kaalakiota and Nugoeihuvi corporations light up the skies in the Venal, Catch and Curse regions of space.

In Wednesday's qualifier sixteen pilots ventured through the Venal region, where they encountered heavy resistance from a blockade of Reikoku and Evolution forces. Numerous contestants were confirmed pod-killed, with one brave soul who lost his ship nevertheless limping to the finish line in his pod to place in the top five.

Pilots Hasek and Rancid Mare were the first two of those who managed to break through the blockade, emerging victorious at the finish line and securing their places in the Kaalakiota Corporation's final ten-man team.

Thursday's Nugoeihuvi qualifier, taking place in the Catch and Curse regions of space, also played host to a bloody fireworks display as the Curse Alliance came out in force, responding to the intrusion on their turf. Two pilots managed to break through all obstacles and come out victorious -- Nikita and Martinus Crimson.

Public response to the race series within the Caldari State has been tremendous. Since the opening of qualifiers Monday, sales of merchandise related to the COLOSSUS Championships has gone through the roof. Chat broadcasts and public forums have been rife with speculation, predictions and expressions of wonderment -- and malice -- towards the corporations and contestants in the race. As the first round of qualifiers continues, things look to be heating up.

13/09/2004

President Foiritan planning for the future

Souro Foiritan, president of the Gallente Federation, is poised to push through constitutional changes that would allow him to run again for president when his current term expires in two years time. The current constitution mandates that the president can only serve a single term of five years. But Foiritan wants to ensure he has enough time to act out on his promise to hunt down the UDI terrorists that have been plaguing the Federation for months, culminating in the infamous Elarel massacre a little over five months ago.

All constitutional changes needs the support of the Senate and Foiritan is already applying all of his political pressure on it for the bill to pass. Political experts predict this will be tough, as Mentas Blaque, the leader of the Senate, is a sworn enemy of the president and will undoubtedly do everything in his power to keep the bill from becoming law. Indeed, a spokesperson for Blaque's political alliance, the Sociocrats, has already criticized the motion, stating that the alleged terrorist hunting is simply a smoke screen and that the real agenda is Foiritan's endless thirst for power and prestige.

The first session discussing the president's proposals will be held tomorrow in the Senate, where Foiritan himself will introduce it. Heated debates are expected, though much of the arm-wrestling will undoubtedly take place behind the scenes. The reception the president gets in the Senate will though go a long way in determining the chances of his bold measure to go through. Some political analysts even go so far as to claiming that a disastrous reception might mean the end of this most colorful and energetic president the Federation has seen in ages.

14/09/2004

Wiyrkomi, Lai Dai Add to Teams as Second Round of Qualifiers Kicks Off

Four speed demons last Sunday made it to the final teams of megacorporations Wiyrkomi and Lai Dai in the Caldari State's monumental sporting event, the COLOSSUS Championships.

In the former race, contestants Nelno and Lord Azrael sped through the finish line first to join last week's winners, Trooper B99 and Jeffrey Lebowski, on the Wiyrkomi team, while the latter saw racers Alewood KJ and bsspewer take their place on the Lai Dai team's roster.

As the corporations' teams slowly come together, sports analysts have begun to speculate as to what kinds of tactics will be favored by the differing teams for the final race. Trooper B99's role on the Wiyrkomi team, for example, is widely rumored to be a combative one, so other teams are reportedly keeping special tabs on him, planning to assign special guardians to him while making sure their own key finishers are able to race ahead without incident. Tactical twists and turns like these are expected to continue as the teams finish settling into place.

"It's like some infernal mix of chess, war and the marathon," said Fernand Muirria, State Mirror sports analyst, yesterday.

Tonight's qualifier, for the Nugoeihuvi Corporation, kicks off at 19:00.

17/09/2004

Stormy Senate session ends on a compromising note

Yesterday saw the most heated Senate sessions in years, as Souro Foiritan clashed with the leaders of the Senate in an attempt to push through constitutional changes allowing him to run again for the presidency in two years time. Foiritan's ambition is to stay in office until a full and decisive victory can be called in the fight

against the UDI. The president is rallying all the support he can in the Senate in a bid to overturn the stranglehold the Sociocrats have on it. Favors are being called in and rumors suggest that Foiritan systematically lined up face-to-face meetings with wavering and neutral senators in order to work his charm on them.

On the other end of the spectrum, Mentas Blaque, leader of the Sociocrats, worked diligently to thwart Foiritan's plans, using his own extensive network of friends and lobbyists. The tug of war climaxed with a verbal argument between the two antagonists inside the Senate hall itself, where Blaque accused Foiritan of 'improperly muscling in on the legislative territory', while Foiritan fired back that Blaque was simply 'using every opportunity to sensationalize every trivial matter like it was a question of life or death'.

The end result was something that could either be called personal victories or defeats for both Foiritan and Blaque, as Foiritan didn't manage to get enough Senatorial votes for his bill to pass, but got a compromise deal where an independent committee of law experts will be formed to discuss the matter and make suggestions. All parties are anxious for this committee to conclude its business as soon as possible, so results are expected in few days. Such are the fast and furious workings of the Gallente democracy.

In related news one of the top political advisors of president Foiritan has resigned. Though the official explanation states this was due to health reasons, it is widely believed that Foiritan is ridding himself of those aides that don't support his reelection bid. Indeed, many analysts claim that this can turn out to be a major blunder for Foiritan that might cost him dearly in the long run.

20/09/2004

Federation leaders clash as committee commences work

The committee charged with coming up with a compromise solution to the fierce debate raging between the Senate and president Foiritan held its first meeting this weekend. The committee, populated with independent legal experts and scholars, must decide whether or in what way the constitutional changes advocated by president Foiritan can come about. These changes would allow him to run for the presidency again in two years time.

The leaders of the Federation, notably Souro Foiritan and Mentas Blaque, head of the Senate, have launched a verbal war in the media, hurling insults at each other in an attempt to sway the public opinion. Foiritan has accused Blaque of putting his own personal grievances above the sufferings of victims of terrorist attacks, while Blaque, when asked by a journalist whether he felt Foiritan was using his political clout to overwhelm his opponents, retorted that 'the only thing the president is clouding is his senses.'

22/09/2004

Folklore idols irk DED who warns against hero-worship.

As the space industry expands and becomes a more integral part of the economy of EVE, more and more people are becoming aware of the heroes and villains that ply the vast inter-stellar trade routes. Some of the pirate factions are now established enough that they are known by the majority of the populace. Consequentially, the leaders of these nefarious organizations are becoming known to the world at large, often through dramatized holo-reels based more on fiction than fact.

The branch within CONCORD responsible for dealing with pirates, DED, is becoming increasingly worried over the apparent hero-worship displayed by ordinary citizens towards notorious pirates. The best known case is that of Fatal and the Rabbit, whose stunning exploits against the Caldari State and Gallente Federation are already stuff of legend. But other infamous pirates are also getting unwarranted, in the eyes DED, adulation from the public. The pirates have started taking more risks, increasing their exposure in reckless and daring endeavors.

To counter this, DED has started compiling a most-wanted list, hoping that this will put so much heat on those on the list that they'll scurry back into the shadows. Though the list has not yet been made public, several names have already been mentioned that will undoubtedly be on it. This includes Tobias Kruzhor, aka Raze, the right hand man of the leader of the Dominations; the traitor Brynn Jerdola of the Serpentis and the sociopath Draclira Merlonne of the Blood Raiders. DED officials have confirmed that the list will be updated frequently, and though it will initially consist of pilots from the established pirate factions, it may eventually also include people from more recent pirate groups.

24/09/2004

It's election time in the Federation - public gets to decide

The independent committee charged with finding a compromise solution to the serious political deadlock that emerged from last week's Senate session has finished its work. The solution they came up with should come as no surprise to those familiar with Gallentean democracy: the matter will be resolved in a public elections. The elections are scheduled to start on Wednesday next week. Due to the size of the Federation they will be open for five days, ending on Monday the week after the next. All citizens of the Federation will be allowed to vote on whether constitutional changes allowing a sitting president to run again for the presidency should go through.

Neither president Foiritan, nor Mentas Blaque, head of the Senate, could be reached for comments on this announcement. It is believed both sides have mixed feelings for public elections, though Foiritan can be quietly confident based on his strong showing in recent polls. The results of this vote can have long-lasting effects on the political landscape of the Federation, yet the man on the street seems rather indifferent on the whole

matter. A random poll of pedestrians walking the sidewalks of Caille showed that less than a third was even aware of the debate last week and those that knew about it didn't care one way or another. Analysts are already predicting a low turnout, probably less than 40%. This, however, is not unheard of in public elections in the Federation; the record being only a 14% turnout 8 years ago when voting what color the new presidential palace should be.

The short time until the elections start forces the propaganda machines of the president and the Senate into overdrive, as they try to convince the lethargic populace the importance of voting, and voting right. More information about the elections will follow.

25/09/2004

Richer pickings as world grows wealthier

The Golden Age of inter-stellar travel has brought great riches and wondrous discoveries into the world, but at a price. The lure of plunder has reduced many former upstanding citizens to petty thievery and piracy. Strong freighter escort in the outer region has saved many from pirate ambushes, yet more and more fall pray to these dregs of society every month.

As new, advanced equipment enters the market it is only to be expected for this trend to continue in the foreseeable future, as CONCORD seems incapable of mounting strong enough resistance to these pests feeding on the hard work of others. Fortunately, the low moral fiber of the pirates keep them constantly at odds with each other in their petty territorial squabbles. One can only hope they do us all a great big favor in the near future and annihilate each other completely, leaving the rest of us to conduct our business in peace.

28/09/2004

Election booths open tomorrow for Gallente pilots

The first public elections in the Federation in two years are scheduled to start tomorrow at noon. Excitement is mounting, though turnout is predicted to be poor. The political future of president Foiritan may hinge on the results of these elections, even if they will have little direct implications for the ordinary citizen. Supporters of the president are counting on the goodwill of the general public and urging everyone to vote. The president's opponents in the Senate have in the meantime tried to besmear the motivations of Foiritan for pushing through his referendum on constitutional changes, questioning his stated reasons of wanting to personally eradicate the UDI terrorist network.

Political activists, of which there are plentiful within the Federation, are already forming picket lines in the major cities, prompting authorities to put their police forces on high alert. No major disturbances are expected though, as such activities have become the norm for every election. In fact, only a fraction of the protests has to do with the election itself, the majority revolving around social or economical issues.

The election booths will be open for five days, until next Sunday. All Gallentean citizens are eligible to vote. The results will be released early next week.

29/09/2004

SCC Approves New Market Items -- Backlash From Captain Community At Large

The SCC Advisory Council yesterday approved a variety of new sales commodities for general release on SCC-regulated interstellar markets. Notable among them are such items as long-anticipated learning skill packs from the Society of Conscious Thought, material which will give advanced students the possibility of, as a SOCT press release puts it, "taking their potential to the stars and beyond." The University of Caille and the Republic University yesterday also released the fruits of what has been their joint project over the last three months: the first batch of preparatory learning materials for the upcoming changes to be made to SCC interstellar markets in the coming months.

What really has heads turning, however, is the unanimous patent finalization of a new class of pod-fitted star vessel, the heavy assault ship. The finalization, approved only a few days ago by the SCCAC, is the third of its kind to take place over the course of the last two months. It has left market speculators confused, and thoroughly outraged the growing contingent of obsolescent non-capsule-fitted bridge captains who feel they're being left behind in the backwash of new technology.

"It is our strong belief that these new developments are not good for the world at large, neither socially nor economically," said Tomas Andeluth, Chairman of BCE (Bridge Captains for Equality), a newly-founded organization intended to protect the interests of non-capsuleer starship captains.

"Capsule-fitted pilots represent only a fraction of the starship captains out there, yet their niche has been catered to almost exclusively over the past year. The consolidation of wealth in these people's hands is growing out of proportion. Too much power -- both technological and economical -- is going to them, and too fast. If this continues, it could lead to massive recession and millions of jobs lost, both for bridge-piloted vessel captains and their crew. We find it frankly irresponsible of these ships' designers to exclude the vast majority of the galactic population from their designs," stated Andeluth.

Responding to these accusations, Maktina Obasa, director of public relations for Amarr ship designer and manufacturer Carthum Conglomerate, stated: "We are a corporation. Capital is a corporation's lifeblood. In order

to thrive, we must go where the capital is."

"The state of today's galactic economy is simply that the capsuleers have the cash. You cater to the group with the money, and the money comes to you. "

Obasa's comments have provoked widespread ire, not least from Federation Marquee columnist Maxim Peltast, a long-outspoken opponent of the "capsule craze." Making his point in characteristically coarse style, Peltast this morning appeared at Carthum Conglomerate's offices in Padrine, Duripant III's largest city, dressed in a loose garment composed, it appeared, entirely of blueprints, save for open patches on the front and the back where the journalist's genitalia and backside were in full view.

"Who finalizes the patents?" Peltast was heard screaming as building security officers moved to subdue him. "Who makes the real money from this? The designers? The manufacturers? Think again!"

A formal letter of apology from the Federation Marquee was reportedly received by Carthum Conglomerate's head office in Pimebeka a few hours later. Peltast's whereabouts are currently unknown, and it is uncertain at the time whether his weekly column, "Mad World," will run in tomorrow's Marquee as scheduled.

30/09/2004

Election turnout surprisingly good; narrow margin outcome expected

The public elections where the citizens of the Federation vote on whether president Souro Foiritan can run again in two years time started yesterday. Political analysts had predicted a very low turnout, but first indications show otherwise. With the elections still only in their second day the turnout is already almost 20%, with three days still remaining.

The media is forbidden from making actual polls with the elections ongoing, but a few unofficial polls have been circulating. Again the analysts have been proven wrong, a strong turnout was thought to strengthen the president's cause, but the opposite seems to be true. Though the numbers are sketchy at the moment, only 40-45% of voters are supporting Foiritan. Spokesman for the president, Endt Strovare, declined to comment on these unofficial polls, apart from pointing out that in the presidential elections three years ago, Foiritan came from behind to narrowly win in the last couple of days. Although Strovare didn't go so far as to predict the same would happen now, he strongly hinted that this might be the case.

30/09/2004

COLOSSUS Contestant Fires Prematurely, Kills 2 - Caldari Gaming Commission Perturbed

This afternoon in an undisclosed system in The Forge, as Qualifier 5 for the Wiyrkomi Corporation's COLOSSUS team was getting underway, a contestant activated her weapons before the race was officially started, pod-killing two of her fellow contestants despite being explicitly warned by race coordinators that such behavior would result in disqualification.

The Caldari Gaming Commission has reacted to the news with much anger, immediately disqualifying the contestant in question and barring her and her corporation from any further sporting events held under the Commission's auspices.

"It's an absolute outrage," stated Airas Sukela, head of the Commission. "The blatant disrespect shown not just to the other contestants, but to the Commission and the Caldari State itself, is nothing short of a travesty. Completely outrageous."

Questioned as to his thoughts on those contestants who were killed, Sukela stated, "Yeah, that's terrible too."

State officials have remained tight-lipped as of yet regarding what action, if any, will be taken against the Curse Alliance, of which the offending contestant was a member.

"Obviously if these states are to be taken as sovereign entities in their own right, they must demonstrate that they are able to keep their subjects from willfully destroying honest-to-goodness sporting events held by other nations," said Kisiras Haakenen, Caldari Executive Panel Director of Public Relations. "The Panel has not decided to take any action as of yet, but it does feel that at this juncture a formal apology to the State would not go amiss."

The qualifier, the last of the Wiyrkomi qualifiers, went ahead as scheduled. The COLOSSUS Qualifier season is slated to end Friday, October 8th.

02/10/2004

Is Foiritan losing it? Federation leaders on edge.

As the elections in the Federation draw to a close, rumors from inside the presidential palace in Caille describe president Foiritan as being unusually irritable and edgy when outside the public spotlight. It's said that Foiritan's foul temper has brought some of his aides to tears, while the staff of the palace are keeping their head low to escape being the brunt of one of his irrational tantrums. If true, this strongly indicates that Foiritan is feeling the pressure as wave after wave of unofficial polls predict that his referendum, which he has invested so much of his political capital on, will be rejected by the people. This would certainly ruin the illustrious career of one of the

most charismatic presidents the Federation has ever seen, forcing him to live out the remaining two years of his term dancing to the beat set by the Senate.

However, none of these signs have reached captivating as ever while he's out amongst the people. The president has been touring the Federation non-stop in the last few days, hoping to win over enough voters to tip the elections his way. This is exactly what happened in the presidential elections three years ago, so the political enemies of Foiritan are wary of declaring him finished quite yet. the public eye, as the happy-go-lucky charms of Foiritan are as

The leaders of the government have been clamoring for media attention in the last week, but in one case none of them was willing to comment publicly. The recent sabotage of the COLOSSUS race being held by the Caldari State and turned out to be the responsibility of Gallentean loyalists has the administration acutely embarrassed. It has harshly denounced the terrorist acts of the UDI, claiming these terrorist acts were supported by fanatical totalitarian regimes. Then for some of their own people to commit a similar act of aggression completely unravels their case. The little the leaders of the Federation have been willing to say on the matter is to deny any kind of links whatsoever to those responsible for the incident last Thursday during the race.

04/10/2004

Results just in for elections. Foiritan prevails!

Official results have finally been announced in the Federation elections that ended yesterday. President Foiritan's controversial referendum on constitutional changes was accepted by the people, despite continuous unofficial polls claiming otherwise. A spokesman for the president spoke briefly to the press a few moments ago, saying that the president was relieved and very grateful to the citizens of the Federation for their support. The spokesman said the president had gone on a much needed vacation once the election ended yesterday, after having toured the Federation non-stop for two weeks, and could not be reached. Leaders of the Senate, who opposed the president's bill, are still to comment on the results.

The election turnout was rather good, with about 30% of registered voters casting their vote. Though exact numbers are still to be released it is believed that the vote was extremely close, with less than 2% separating those who voted yes and those who voted no. More information tomorrow.

07/10/2004

Senate repercussions anticipated in the wake of election results

This week has seen several stormy sessions in the Federation Senate, where the Sociocrats, egged on by their leader Mentas Blaque, take turns blasting Foiritan and his comrades in the Senate. Blaque is sensing the faltering resolve of many Senators hitherto considered staunch supporters of the president. It is widely known Foiritan applied extreme pressure on several Senators in an attempt to get his referendum on constitutional changes pushed through the Senate awhile ago. Now the time of reckoning may be at hand, where those same Senators may abandon Foiritan to get back at him.

It is understood that Foiritan has hastened his return from his vacation to try and patch things up with the Senators he so rudely toe-trod on. Whether he manages this is hard to say, the Senate is in an uproar, but one can never underrate the charismatic Foiritan.

11/10/2004

Senate to hold a vote of no confidence on the president!

Sensational news from the Federation Senate yet again, as Mentas Blaque has managed to have the Senate hold a vote of no confidence on president Foiritan. The vote is scheduled for later this week and if it passes then Foiritan will be forced out of office and presidential elections held at the earliest opportunity. As two thirds of the Senators need to vote against the president, Foiritan still has some hope of passing this unscathed. Indeed, if he does so he will emerge stronger for having fended off such a serious attempt to remove him from power.

The vote is the result of the political backlash the president is feeling after pushing through constitutional changes allowing him to rerun for the presidency. His intention was to run again once his current five year term runs out in two years time, but with the way things are going for him he may be forced to call upon the new constitutional amendment sooner than expected.

12/10/2004

Caldari State Issues Statement of Condemnation On Curse Alliance Response

Kisiras Haakenen, Caldari Executive Panel Director of Public Relations, at a press conference yesterday evening let fall harsh words regarding the Curse Alliance and its response following the much-publicized COLOSSUS Qualifier incident the week before last, where a racer from a corporation flying under the CA banner pod-killed two of her fellow contestants before the race's scheduled start, despite explicit warning from race organizers.

"The Curse Alliance has made no bones about its response to the State's modest request for a public mea culpa," said Haakenen. "While assurances were made that similar incidents would not take place again, the fact remains that no formal apology was issued, nor were there any suggestions towards a diplomatic solution made. There was not even a token offer of restitution. At the same time, sources from within the CA made it abundantly and publicly clear that there had been discussion of conflict within CA war rooms, statements which were later confirmed by our own intelligence sources. It is our considered opinion that the Curse Alliance should

cease and desist from any and all military planning if they wish to remain a recognized sovereign entity in the pan-regional arena."

"We are still waiting for our apology," added the Director before leaving the podium.

"What the CA seem to be neglecting is the aspect of face," commented independent political analyst Rae Strammin in today's Galactic Observer. "In all dealings with the Caldari State, it has to be remembered that they need, first and foremost, to save face. By not allowing them that, you get their hair up. And I don't think many of us have a particular desire to see the State sporting a Laisonian hypra-grav do. That doesn't do much for face. And it won't do much for galactic peace in an already unstable political environment."

Jovian official Misu Baniya, when questioned as to whether these recent diplomatic rows would affect the Curse Alliance's place on the Jovian Register of Sovereign Nation-States, declined to comment.

14/10/2004

Presidential elections to be held! Senate votes Foiritan out!

The Federation Senate voted this morning on whether president Foiritan was to hold his office or be booted out. Almost 80% of the Senators voted for Foiritan to be stripped of office, much more than the two thirds needed. This means that presidential elections will be held next December, where the public get their say on whether Foiritan is fit to continue as president or if he should leave the political arena for good.

The Federation has been in an uproar over the last days following Foiritan's victory in the recent public elections held on his referendum for constitutional changes. Many have openly accused Foiritan's administration of mishandling the elections, some even going so far as to say that the elections were rigged in Foiritan's favor. The Senate, who opposed the president on his referendum, obviously believes that the public opinion has swung in their favor and believes that Foiritan has overstepped the boundaries of his authority one time too many. It's ironic that the very referendum that made Foiritan enough enemies in the Senate for him to be voted out now allows him to run again in the upcoming elections.

Speculations are already ripe for what candidates will vie for the presidency. The rules for entering the run are very strict now, following some embarrassing moments some decades ago when thousands upon thousands entered the presidential race. Thus, like last time, only three candidates are expected. Foiritan is the most likely candidate for the Progressive Party, despite the opposition of many of his party members within the Senate. Mentas Blaque, leader of the Sociocrats, is also a probable candidate. Several more names have been named, but are still only speculations.

Interesting times are ahead in the Federation as all candidates must carefully choose the emissaries that will represent them and promote their cause to the general public. More on this later.

19/10/2004

Presidential candidates to seek support from corporations

Three candidates have emerged as forerunners in the upcoming presidential elections in the Federation. The three all have sizeable backing within the Federation, guaranteeing them a place on the ballot. Souro Foiritan has been working diligently to become the candidate for the Progressive Party and his official nomination is now merely a formality. Mentas Blaque has already been named the candidate for the Sociocrats. The third candidate is the eminent humanitarian Eman Autrech, who's liberal agenda on free trade and galactic unity have earned him support from various quarters of the Federation.

The candidates are aiming to enlist the aid of corporations in promoting their cause, as corporations have the discipline and wherewithal to give more substantial support than individuals can ever do. To this end, the candidates will soon start asking any corporation that's interested to sponsor their candidacy. The sponsoring corporation will then have a chance to show their diligence and resourcefulness, with the best ones receiving hefty rewards.

At the same time, the candidates will spare no expenditure in presenting themselves and their policies to the public, hoping to drive their image indelibly into the minds of voters and well-wishers alike.

22/10/2004

Presidential campaign heats up as candidates clash.

Even this early in the campaign for the Federation presidency it is becoming evident that this will be anything but a quiet campaign fought on issues alone. Already the candidates are getting their smear machines into gear, ready to throw every bit of dirt at each other that they manage to dig up or fabricate. The negative image this generates is already spreading to the supporters and culminated last night when opposing groups clashed at a mud wrestle match, fittingly enough.

Political pundits are predicting an ugly campaign season ahead, where every trick in the book will be employed by all sides. Though issues are expected to play second fiddle to personas and charisma, the ones that will garner the most attention are: terrorism, relations with neighboring states such as the Caldari State and the Intaki Syndicate, and integrating the blooming space industry with the existing planet-based economy.

Corporate lobbyists have begun evaluating the candidates, deciding which one will fit their own agenda best. Established corporations like Quafe and CreuDron can make a huge impact on the outcome, depending on where their support lands, but some are hinting that the surprise package in these elections may be the space pilots. With their privileged positions and increasing wealth their actions may very well be the deciding factor when the dust finally settles come January.

25/10/2004

Corporations to sign sponsorship deals with candidates

In the true spirit of lobbying, the prolific pilot corporations can now sign up as supporters for one of the candidates competing for the presidency of the Federation. This will open up a formal path for them to follow later on, where the pilot corporations will compete amongst each other to become official sponsors of their chosen candidate. Apart from the rewards reaped for this, the victorious corporations will get to nominate one of their own to become an Emissary for the candidate in one of the six Federation regions. The eighteen Emissaries will then promote their candidate's cause, culminating on Election Day, when pilots get to vote their favorite Emissary.

The sign up phase will last for several weeks and is open to all pilot corporations interested in participating in the democratic procedures of the Federation. Once sign up is complete, the participating corporations start competing against each other with the aid of agents working for the candidates.

03/11/2004

ORE Syndicate To Retail Previously Unavailable Technologies on SCC Markets

This afternoon the ORE Syndicate announced its intention to begin SCC-market sales and distribution of moon mining equipment, as well as components and building blocks for the construction of deep-space starbases. The type of equipment in question has not, up until now, been made available on open markets due to the immense startup costs associated with its use. According to ORE CFO Nase Bekour, however, the concurrent release of revolutionary new moon mining equipment into the open markets will drastically increase the feasibility of such endeavors for smaller corporations and entities. Market analysts agree that the most likely target market for the new technologies will be pod pilots, that specific class of spaceship captain qualified to fly ships outfitted with capsule technology. Now numbering just over fifty thousand, this breed has taken to the outer regions, where they have formed their own alliances and dominate vast tracts of space, coming into constant conflict with each other as well as the regions' native pirate inhabitants. With the massive capital these capsuleer organizations have at their disposal, it is considered very likely that they will be the primary benefactors of this new technology. ORE's announcement has met with mixed reaction in interstellar political circles. A spokesman for the Caldari Chief Executive Panel was quoted as saying the CEP wished to initiate discussion with the Syndicate on the advisability of proceeding in this manner, and the rest of the empires made statements much in the same vein. The Jovians, as is their wont, made no comment. According to the announcement, the new equipment will hit the markets November 17th.

04/11/2004

Rogue drone infestation discovered but kept secret

A report filtered out from reliable sources within the Inner Circle of CONCORD has revealed that a huge infestation of rogue drones was found well within empire space. There is a strong indication that the recently discovered swarm constitutes a new breed of the drones. The leaked report further states that this discovery was made some weeks ago, but has been carefully kept under wrap by CONCORD since. The reason given is that the exact nature of this new breed is as of yet not fully understood and the presence of curious bystanders can lead to infestation or contamination of these vessels, spreading the rogue drones even further.

The report also claims that the rogue drone hive was discovered in a so called deadspace pocket, which explains why it remained undetected for so long. Many feel that this claim discredits the whole report, as every spacefarer knows that deadspace is totally inaccessible. Since the deadspace phenomenon was first discovered centuries ago, many have tried to unlock the secrets to entering these elusive areas, but to no avail. That semi-sentient entity like the rogue drones have mastered deadspace sounds frankly ludicrous. Nevertheless, there is a grain of truth to be found in the report and it will be interesting to see how CONCORD officials respond to the leaked report.

05/11/2004

Empires Meet With ORE Founder

Representatives from the four empires yesterday met with Orion Mashel, founder of the ORE Syndicate, along with key ORE administrative personnel at an undisclosed location somewhere in the Outer Ring region. The subject of their meeting was ORE's recent announcement that come November 17th, they would commence SCC-market retail of starbase components and moon mining tools previously available only to empire governments and megacorporations. According to reliable reports, empire representatives were adamant in stating that the proposed retailing of these items would serve to give even more power to an already disproportionately powerful segment of the population, and would furthermore hamper financial empire interests by denying them sole rights to the technology such as they have enjoyed up to this point. ORE administration representatives were equally adamant, however, in stating that the move to retail these items was a significant step forward for the interstellar community, countering the empire representatives' concerns with their stated belief that these items would lead to a mass migration of capsuleers from empire-controlled territories, leaving the empires' economies safe from the massive condensation of wealth - and subsequent economic troubles --

commonly found where prolific capsuleers set up camp. The meeting ended with no discernible conclusion, but according to an inside source the consensus among empire representatives was that if the Syndicate would put its own financial interests above the general welfare of the interstellar community, other measures would have to be taken. More on this as it develops.

06/11/2004

CONCORD admits to hiding facts regarding infestation

The Inner Circle of CONCORD released a rare press statement yesterday. The statement confirms the authenticity of the report that was leaked earlier in the week. A rogue drone hive was indeed found recently well within empire space, though the exact location is still held secret. CONCORD officials state that the rogue drones discovered constitute a new breed and their exact nature is still to be determined. CONCORD wants to make sure that these new rogue drones are not capable of spreading their evil influences to nearby space vessels before the location of the new hive will be revealed. It is estimated that a full investigation of the matter will take close to two weeks. The official promised full cooperation with the public from now on.

However, that promise may have to be broken if the chief Caldari representative to CONCORD, Tashin Ernabaita, is anything to go by. Ernabaita says that the accidental discovery of the hive within deadspace opens up interesting possibilities for the empires in increasing their power and security in space. The empires are planting warp beacons within known deadspaces to allow dronesweepers to enter and clear out any rogue drone hives. Ernabaita says that the State considers access to these warp beacons a state secret and should be guarded by the empires. The State is already planning to construct complexes in deadspaces within its borders and wants them to be out of bounds to the general public. The other empires are still to comment on this, but may be persuaded by the Caldari to follow suit and keep deadspace warp beacons hidden.

The statement released by the Inner Circle concludes by describing how the rogue drone hive in deadspace was discovered a few weeks ago. Transmission with a freighter from one of the empires (presumably from the empire where the hive is located) was suddenly lost while it was in transit. The freighter was carrying new types of implants, valuable enough to warrant a strong search party being sent out. The area where the freighter was lost was located close to a deadspace bubble, a phenomenon known for a long time, but considered to be of no interest due to its inaccessibility. But after a fruitless search for days, the leader of the search party finally decided to search close to the deadspace bubble. And there he received faint signals from the freighter, from within the deadspace. Further probing revealed an ancient acceleration gate on its outskirts. The gate was only capable of handling a frigate size ships, so a couple were sent in. There they were immediately set upon by dozens of rogue drones. Only one of the frigates returned to tell the story; that residing within the deadspace bubble was a vast hive of rogue drones, thought to be long extinguished from empire space.

08/11/2004

Caldari State Threatens Sanctions on ORE Syndicate - Amarr Empire Follows Suit

Officials from the Caldari Executive Panel yesterday morning released a statement wherein it was indicated that the Caldari State might impose severe sanctions on the ORE Syndicate, should the Syndicate not back down from its declared intention to release moon mining equipment and starbase materials into SCC markets later this month. According to the statement, "The ORE Syndicate and its administration have shown no willingness to accommodate the Caldari State nor its neighbors in our wish for galactic stability, both economic and militaristic." In an official statement from the Imperial Chancellor's Office just three hours later, the Amarr Empire declared that it placed its full support behind the actions of the Caldari State, prompting speculations that they would follow suit sometime in the next few days. The news has sent shockwaves through the stock markets, with some investors seeing this as the end of the ORE Syndicate, others seeing it as the beginning of a new era in its history. ORE officials remain mysteriously unruffled by the news; no comment has been forthcoming so far, but an unofficial source stated founder Orion Mashel was "in repose at his home, unperturbed by bristling monoliths." The Syndicate's nonchalant reaction has led to discussion on whether the defiant stance taken by the notorious Curse Alliance early last month with regards to the incident at one of the State's COLOSSUS qualifier races, where two pilots were shot down and pod-killed by a CA member, may have been the first indication of a subtle power shift in the galactic political arena. Analysts, journalists and social speculants have wondered aloud whether the old empires may be slowly giving ground to a new world order of sorts - according to State Beacon journalist Kisasen Purukai, "a pure meritocracy where survival is dictated by the strongest and the cleverest, and the importance of pure racial boundaries takes a back seat to the importance of shared goals and common interests. It comes as little surprise that Mr. Mashel, shrewd businessman that he is, realizes that these are the people he wants to do business with." The Gallente Federation and the Minmatar Republic are reportedly on the fence at the time of going to press, neither nation having given an official response. Fevered debates are reported to be taking place within the Federal Senate, and the Republic's Tribal Council has convened four times within the last forty-eight hours. Statements are expected from these nations very soon.

09/11/2004

Infestation under control; deadspace debate rages

CONCORD has issued a statement declaring that the potential rogue drone infestation has been squashed in its infancy. The infestation was widely feared after the discovery of huge drone hives hidden within deadspace in various locations around empire space. Under the leadership of CONCORD the empires have undertaken a massive clean up operation against the rogue drones, clearing those hives already discovered out.

The statement also reveals that the warp beacons used to pinpoint locations within deadspace was given by CONCORD to the empires to help them in their dronesweeping efforts. The empires have now declared their interest in using the warp beacons, along with the ingenious acceleration gate technology employed by the rogue drones, to build up their own infrastructure in deadspace locations. To secure their interests, they have united to keep access to the warp beacons restricted only to the empires themselves. Caldari scientists have already reversed engineered the modified acceleration gates, allowing them to be manufactured. It is believed that the Caldari State used the gates as leverage in securing the support of the other empires by promising to sell them gates at a very reasonable price. Liberal politicians, mainly from the Federation, have denounced this decision. They claim it will stifle the expansion of the independent pilot industry, which has looked so promising in recent months.

10/11/2004

SCC Starbase Disagreements Approaching Critical Mass

Over the last few days, the Caldari State and the Amarr Empire have come under fire from various interest groups, who have been exerting tremendous pressure on agencies within these nations to retract their threats of economic sanctions against the ORE Syndicate. As has become widely known, the Caldari State three days ago released a statement proclaiming their intention to institute sanctions against the mining giant for its moves towards making deep-space starbase components and moon mining materials available on the open market. Poteque Pharmaceuticals and Zainou, Inc., along with a number of military supply and logistics companies, have filed formal complaints and exerted fiscal leverage against the empire agencies in question, among other things stating that clone contracts currently in place between them and the governmental bodies' military arms would have to be reconsidered in light of impending sanctions and their potential economic consequences. Tertlaert Auste, Chief Coordinator of Public Relations for Poteque, at a press conference yesterday claimed "these governments are acting out of nothing more than a fear of getting a slightly smaller piece of the pie, and a fear of future technologies that borders on the hysterical. There is no reason for the ORE Syndicate to give in to these empty threats." Pro- and anti-cloning splinter groups have also been very vocal in the last few days, leading to at least twelve separate riots on Amarr and Caldari worlds over the last two days. One of the largest pro-cloning groups, the Imperial Immortality Foundation, yesterday afternoon staged a protest outside The Imperial Chancellor's Office in Dam-Torsad, an occurrence which ended in dozens of casualties as Imperial Army troops released nanotoxin agents on the gathered crowd instead of the semi-soporifics normally utilized under such circumstances. Army spokesmen have since declared the incident an "accidental tragedy," and expressed regret over the lives lost. As more and more groups and factions get dragged into the debate, many are predicting the disagreement will reach critical levels very soon.

11/11/2004

New 25ers group to fight empire monopoly on deadspace

The 25ers were activists that a little over a century ago fought the empires over the freedom enjoyed by independent pilots. The 25ers, their struggle long since won, then faded into obscurity. But now unidentified activists, believed to be Gallenteans, have revived the old grass-root organization to fight the empires over access to deadspace. The original 25ers group laid the foundation of the independent pilot community, unattached to the empires that fostered them at first. The pioneering work of the 25ers has been taken for granted for so long that most pilots don't even know that they owe their independence to this century-old activist group. But some have remembered, it seems, and are now ready to tackle the empires once more.

As reported recently, the empires decided to keep to themselves the warp beacon technology necessary for deadspace access. Deadspace offers a unique opportunity in allowing for space installations that are inaccessible to all but those with the means to link with the warp beacons. Naturally, the empires have taken every care to make the warp beacons and their signals totally unhackable, or as a Caldari scientist triumphantly put it: "you could link all the quantum computers in the world together and you still wouldn't be able to crack the code."

The new 25ers have vowed to use any means necessary to crack the warp beacon code and break the monopoly the empires currently enjoy on deadspace. They will undoubtedly receive support in this endeavor from all freedom-loving pilots and pilot corporations that don't want to be frozen out of deadspace and the opportunities it presents. But only time will tell of this latest 25ers campaign will meet with success or humiliating defeat.

15/11/2004

The unhackable warp beacons hacked; scientists shamed

The deadspace warp beacons, proclaimed as being unhackable by the Caldari scientists that built them, have been hacked. Not by any nefarious government agency bent on industrial espionage. No, the hacker has turned out to be a 17 year old Gallentean girl. The story has been well covered by the Scope. The family of seventeen year old Ladette Russeot was moving to a new home in the Jeon constellation, traveling on a high tech vessel owned by Ladette's scientist father. Ladette missed her favorite soap opera, the Adventures of White Lightning, from her old home planet and decided to try and find it amongst the stellar wavelengths en route to her new home.

Ladette possessed just enough technological knowledge to be able to put the equipment on her father's ship to good use, but not enough to realize how hopeless her task was. Undeterred, she set out to scan her surrounding space lanes and ended up finding the signal used by the empires for the deadspace warp beacons, quite by accident. Empire technicians are still trying to understand how Ladette managed to do what she did, but to the

common man it doesn't matter. All that matters is that what the empires intended to keep top secret is now out in the open, accessible to anyone interested in knowing how to enter deadspace locations.

22/11/2004

Empires escalate deadspace construction as competition heats up

All the empires that make up the civilized part of space are putting increased emphasis on deadspace complexes now that the technology behind keeping them secret has been compromised. The empires are keen to keep unwanted parties out of deadspace areas within their borders, and the only way to do that is to occupy them for themselves. This move comes as no surprise, as it is only a matter of time before other factions catch up with the complex technology and start building their own complexes in deadspace. It is already rumored that pirate factions have launched cleanup operations of their own in deadspace areas, clearing out any rogue drone infestations, in preparation for this. Though commendable from the point of view of checking any possible rogue drone plagues, many feel that deadspace pirate havens are just as bad.

Details are still vague on how exactly the 17 year old Ladette Russeot managed to break the encryption guarding the warp beacon signals used to enter deadspace. The Caldari State has launched an internal investigation into the matter, but any findings will most likely be kept under wrap. Especially as the Caldari are feeling rather embarrassed that the encryption technology they devised and flaunted as being unbreakable was so easily brushed aside, by a teenager to boot. However, this is of little interest to the common pilots, all they care about is that the efforts of Russeot allow them to experience deadspace for themselves. For better or for worse.

24/11/2004

CONCORD Makes Revolutionary Statement of Recognition For Alliances as Starbase Components Hit SCC Markets

In a surprise announcement at 12:00 EVT today Irhes Angireh, Head of CONCORD's Inner Circle, declared CONCORD to be in full official support of the outer rim alliances. Further, she stated that official provision had been made for alliances to, for the first time in history, become recorded entities on the level of nation-states. "The last two weeks have been a tumultuous time, with nations, institutions, organizations, even families, split down the middle in disagreement," said Angireh. "Thusly, in fulfillment of the duties bestowed upon us by our position, CONCORD has made a decision. As of this moment, an official CONCORD-sanctioned Alliance register has been put into effect. Those political entities which comply with our criteria may, from now, be recognized for the powers they are. Additionally, the SCC has made no provision to restrict the ORE Syndicate's retailing of moon mining and starbase technologies, technologies which we feel will do nothing but expand humanity's frontiers and speed our path into the future." The news has sent shockwaves through the political community. Representatives from the four empires have logged official complaints through all available channels, some even going so far as to claim CONCORD has overstepped its bounds completely and that the Inner Circle has been corrupted by the interests of the cloning and spaceship industries, as well as pressure from vocal capsuleer groups through GalNet feed channels. "Mark my words, this is the beginning of the end," stated Amarr Court Chamberlain Proconsul Camoul Hinda. "With people like these allowed access to that level of advanced technology, there's no telling what will happen. It seems to me that CONCORD is acting purely out of self-interest, with no concern for the economic well-being of the nations it was created to protect." "It's like a bad dream. I just don't know what to say," said Gallente senator Aubrille Dramou. "It's like they took a touch sculpture, detached all the constituent parts and just threw the pieces back into the field randomly. I'm not even sure I want to know what happens next." Meanwhile, outer rim alliance leaders have expressed approval of CONCORD's move. Fountain Alliance representative TornSoul in an interview this afternoon stated, "The core empires need to wake up to the fact that there are other powerful entities in existence, and they need to start dealing with these entities on equal terms. They should realize there is something to be learned from those who have been able to do what they could not - namely, establish permanent footholds in the outer regions. While the FA welcomes this move from CONCORD, it is really nothing more than a formalization of the current de facto state of affairs -- we're here, and we're here to stay."

02/12/2004

Quafe intern in trouble after mystery theft

A bizarre story has filtered out of the Quafe Company. A large shipment of Quafe recently disappeared from the company's warehouse in the Allamotte system. Dune Mirmueren, a spokesman for the company, has revealed that the disappearance was being treated as a theft, with the prime suspect, and also sole witness, being a lowly intern. A reporter for the Scope managed to speak to the intern, Hared Loudier, before he was whisked away by Quafe officials.

According to Loudier, a small wormhole appeared inside the warehouse, sucking out large quantities of Quafe. Loudier's tale grows even stranger as he speaks of strange beings, most likely human, on the other side of the wormhole. The beings spoke in incoherent babble and were fighting amongst themselves, seemingly for the privilege to be the first to enter through the wormhole. Their surroundings were sparse, the only item of notice a green comfy-chair. 'It was a really nice looking chair,' Loudier mused just before he was pulled away.

Dune Mirmueren dismissed Loudier's story as simply ludicrous. He said Loudier was on the ever popular enzyme-diet, which is known to induce hallucinations on occasions. 'But we think Mr. Loudier is spinning this whole story as a cover up to what we believe is a pure and simple theft,' Mirmueren continued. 'Men with red hair and green comfy chairs, pah! Anyone can see that such tales are just pure fabrication.' Mirmueren concluded that Quafe

would put every effort into locating the lost stash of their treasured soft drink. 'We will hunt down the perpetrators, through space and time. We will not rest until those responsible are behind bars, where they belong.'

14/12/2004

Support changes expected as sign-up draws to a close

The candidates for the post of the president of the Gallente Federation are ready to start their hunt for emissaries in earnest. Naturally, all of them want only the very best to act as their emissaries, which prompted them to seek the support of the energetic corporations of the pilot community. The move has met with great success for all the candidates, with dozens of corporations already having declared their support.

Now the corporation sign-up phase is drawing to a close, but in the final stretches, participating corporations will be allowed to change their allegiance, in the truest of democratic manner. Corporations are also allowed to alter what region they want to participate in. As the regions hold different amount of electoral votes, choosing the right region compared to the relative strength of the pilot corporation is imperative.

Once the sign-up phase ends, the competition itself will begin: collecting vouchers for the chosen candidate. More news will be posted when the sign-up phase is about to end.

16/12/2004

The Scope Profile: Souro Foiritan

The Person:

In the three years since taking office, president Souro Foiritan has gone from one controversy to another. But he has an uncanny ability to turn adversity into triumph, emerging stronger every time. The Federation is distinctly multi-cultural and Foiritan has been extremely careful never to pick sides or show too much favoritism to one side over another. Thus, he can draw his support from all elements of Federation society; from the Minmatar immigrants to his fellow Intakis to the thoroughbred Gallenteans.

Foiritan is the master of skillfully navigating the treacherous edge between affability and buffoonery. Being very much a man of the people has allowed him to get away with many things other politicians would never even dream of, but while his colorful exploits endear him to the people, they also gnaw away at his credibility. Foiritan may be favorite as a leader while everything is going well, but the big question is whether the public will trust him when the push really comes to shove.

All the same, president Foiritan has been remarkably skilful in maintaining his popularity through thick and thin, suggesting that these presidential elections will just be the latest hurdle for him to traverse with ease.

The Past:

Foiritan graduated with honors from Center of Advanced Studies (CAS) before being hired as a research graduate for Chemal Tech. While still in school he was cajoled by his (then) girlfriend into taking part in student politics, eventually becoming student body president. Having thus gotten an early sniff of politics at grass root level, Foiritan soon became restless in his job at Chemal Tech and eventually quit to pursue a full time career as a politician.

While some hint at some nefarious acts on his behalf in promoting himself, there is no doubt that his sudden and dramatic rise to power can mostly be attributed to his empathetic charisma and clear purpose in life. Though Foiritan has promoted his image as a lenient and benevolent leader, there are many cases in his past that suggest that he can, in fact, be quite ruthless and self-serving when the need arises, leading to the conclusion that he regards politics more as a platform for self-aggrandizement rather than for any visionary reasons.

The Policy:

During his time as president of the Federation, Souro Foiritan has aimed to lessen governmental influences on the domestic front, effectively giving the various states and planets previously unheard of autonomy. He has admirably maintained internal stability, while fostering the growth of the hi-tech industry that is starting to rival that of the Caldari in scope if not in sophistication.

On the foreign front, Foiritan has been the fiercest supporter of CONCORD amongst the member states, even to the point where it has started to infringe upon the sovereignty of the Federation. He has also sought to improve the relations with the Amarr Empire and the Caldari State, something he has been criticized for by some. But to most federal citizens these are minor issues that they are hardly aware of. However, his handling of the UDI terrorist threat, making it into a personal issue, has cast him in some negative light in many quarters.

If re-elected, it is likely that Foiritan will continue the current policy of limiting governmental intrusion in the day-to-day running of the Federation, with the corresponding result of favoring further independence of the pilot community, amongst other things. The UDI affair may still turn into a fiasco that may very well sour relations with the Amarr Empire and the Caldari State, but barring that, one can expect that relations will continue to improve. Foiritan himself has stated, following the failure of the Crielere project, that he would very much like to see something similar happening again. The independence of CONCORD will increase, perhaps to the point where it can finally start to live up to its promise of offering protection to space farers outside empire space.

20/12/2004

The Scope Profile: Mentas Blaque

The Person:

Once described as the most intelligent man in the Federation, but also the most cold-hearted, Mentas Blaque is a political hard-liner of the best, or the worst, sort. It all depends on your perspective. While the Federation has always stood for equality, to Blaque some people are more equal than others. While Blaque has never advocated that the Federation should be for Gallenteans only, he has many times stated that it should be governed solely by Gallenteans. In his view, the Gallenteans are the true champions of democracy, other members of the Federation are simply 'guests' of the great and generous Gallentean nation.

Furthermore, Blaque believes that the essence of the democratic spirit must be defended vigorously against foreign threats and subversive elements. The aggressive nature of Blaque dictates that the initiative must be seized and actions taken against those seeking to undermine the Federation. Blaque's views have made him a controversial figure in the Federation. Many are swayed by his persuasive argument that the Federation can only remain a sanctuary to the oppressed if it can prove itself to be strong and secure. But others point out that this matters little if the Federation itself becomes the oppressor.

The Past:

After graduating as a lawyer from Caille University, Blaque went to work for one of the most prestigious law firms in the Federation, Tuvouille, Tuvouille & Reniz. Quickly establishing himself as extremely competent trial lawyer with a merciless and cunning edge, Blaque also started to make a name for himself in the political arena with biting articles in leading newspapers. Blaque retired from law business in his early thirties, already having amassed enough wealth to last several lifetimes.

Blaque then started his political career in earnest. Applying the same ruthless methods that made him notorious during his lawyering days, he quickly rose to prominence. He became Senator before he was forty and was quick to stamp his authority in the lofty halls of the Senate. It wasn't long before he was elected head of the Senate, a post he has held ever since. Now his ambition has awakened once again, propelling him to take on Foiritan for the presidency. The two have clashed many times in the past, with Foiritan generally the winner. This time Blaque is pulling all the stops to come out on top.

The Policy:

Mentas Blaque hates the Intaki Syndicate with a vengeance. Whether this is because of his ongoing feud with president Foiritan, who is an Intaki, is unknown. Blaque maintains that Foiritan is secretly dealing with the Syndicate, fattening his own pockets with smuggler's money in exchange for allowing the Syndicate to operate unhindered close to Federation space. While these accusations have never been substantiated, it is clear that with Blaque in power the Syndicate will feel the wrath of the Federation.

Blaque has also criticized the president for his friendly overtures to the Amarr Empire and the Caldari State. To Blaque, such moves will only be perceived as a sign of weakness and ruthlessly exploited. He points to the Protein Delicacy fiasco, the Crielere project and the deal with Articio Kor-Azor as examples of this already happening. With Blaque in charge, relations with the other empires are bound to sour, what with Blaque's decidedly xenophobic views. For the same reason, CONCORD will undoubtedly suffer. Blaque has already stated that he will withdraw funds earmarked for CONCORD and use them to strengthen the Federation Navy instead.

On the home front, Blaque is bound to take greater interest in the day to day running of affairs than Foiritan has done. Blaque will no doubt try to patch up the poor relations between the president and the senate, aiming to unite all the government agencies and make the start working for each other instead of against each other, as has often been the case under Foiritan. Blaque's insistence on increased security may not affect the average citizen much, but stiffer regulations regarding transportation of goods and people can be expected.

20/12/2004

Capsuleer Idolatry on the Rise

In its annual report published yesterday, CONCORD's Communications Regulation Agency (CCRA) revealed a number of intriguing facts about current trends in universal communications. Most notable was the rise in popularity of the GalNet forum, a podium venue for the capsuleer community to bring to light issues of concern to them and their associates. Originally intended as a pure communications vehicle for pod pilots, GalNet has, in the course of the last year, become something more. Last February, in response to budgetary difficulties brought on by Inner Circle funding cuts, the CCRA hit upon the idea of optioning GalNet view access to planet- and stationside holofeeds. This met with little success initially, but as the capsuleers' ranks and influence grew throughout the course of the year, the popularity of the GalNet feed soared. According to the CCRA's report, GalNet view-subscriptions among the non-capsuleer population today number in the hundreds of millions, spanning the breadth of the universe. Whether as a cause or effect of this development, hundreds of pro- and anti-capsuleer interest groups have sprung up within the past year, their stances towards these pilots ranging from quasi-xenophobic dread to an almost religious devotion. Many reported cases exist of noted capsuleers' pronouncements signaling large-scale incidents planetside, as groups variously in support or conflict with the pod pilots make their loyalties known. One recent such incident concerns sermons made by the PIE corporation's Kostantin Mort, a Religious Tribunal Justice and capsuleer paramilitary of some repute. In a recorded entry from the 17th of this month, Justice Mort gave a missive interpreted by some as a harsh indictment of the Caldari way of life. The sermon was contested by many of his GalNet peers, but no smaller was the reaction, planetside, of

various interest groups. The Society for the Conservation of State Traditions, a fiercely nationalistic Caldari lobbyist organization headed by several independently wealthy entrepreneurs, in the wake of Justice Mort's sermon launched a scathing series of propagandistic advertisements against PIE Inc. and its perceived propagation of "blind Amarrian arrogance." This then prompted several traditionalist factions within the Empire to respond in kind, affirming their support for the much-beloved paramilitary organization and painting the Caldari as "mindless followers of an inert deity." Cultural analyst Brill Stone warns that the growing number of incidents like these may indicate that a subtle shift in the world's ideological power structures could be under way. "If this development continues in the direction it's been going, there's no telling what the climate will be in the future. We could be looking at a different world. I'd say it's high time the empires took note."



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05/01/2005

The Scope Profile: Eman Autrech

The Person: Despite his obvious talents, Eman Autrech was for years not considered to be a serious contender in the political arena of the Federation as he was thought to be 'too nice'. In latter years he has managed to reign in this what can only be described as a serious vice in a politician. Consequently, he now finds himself poised to take the Federation by a storm.

Autrech is a brilliant orator, possessing that rare talent of being able to explain the most complex things in simple, elegant terms. This, combined with his friendly demeanor, is slowly increasing his popularity throughout the Federation, especially amongst the lower middle class and common governmental workers. The fact that he never speaks down to the lower classes or puts himself on a high horse undoubtedly contributes greatly also. Since hitting the spotlight Autrech has been revealed as a bit of an eccentric. He collects vases made from eggshells and is an avid meaterian. In any other state, Autrech's eccentric ways would count against him, but in the liberal Federation his peculiarities and small quirks merely act to strengthen his image in the minds of the public.

The Past: Although Autrech is working fervently to strengthen his public image, his main power base is the established bureaucracy of the Federation. Though he has reached prominence with his rapid career advancement within CONCORD, his roots firmly lie in the vast, entrenched bureaucratic organism that the Federation has become. Autrech is very much the little bureaucrat that could; hero in the eyes of every pencil pusher harboring a dream of a better life. Being a man of the system will undoubtedly act both against and for Autrech in the upcoming elections. While it gives him kinship with billions of disgruntled office workers around the Federation, he is very much cast in the mold of the rigid, as-the-rules-dictate type of a man. Consistency and dependability may find a cuddly home in his soul, but flexibility does not.

Autrech started out as a lowly intern in the Federation Administration. After working himself up to a division leader he was lured by the greener pastures of CONCORD. There he quickly established himself as a competent administrator, first as an official within the Inner Circle before moving to SCC, where he steadily climbed the corporate ladder to the top. Autrech's work experience, especially as head of the SCC for more than five years, has given him a unique insight into inter-stellar wheeling and dealing. This has given him the steadfast belief that trade is the best and perhaps the only way to promote peace, through shared prosperity and trust.

The Policy: The foundation of the Federation is based on laws. While not immediately apparent, the smooth, easy going lifestyle of the Gallenteans would be impossible if it weren't for strict codes governing such important concepts as ownership and human rights. It's from this foundation that Eman Autrech launches his candidacy to become president of the Federation. Alone amongst the candidates, Autrech acknowledges the importance of keeping the responsibilities of each governmental branch clearly distinguished and separate. This has earned him praise from various quarters within the Federation, not the least the Supreme Court, who is beginning to see Autrech as its champion.

Yet despite this widespread support Autrech enjoys from within the Federation administration, it is in inter-stellar trade and cooperation where his hopes and dreams lie. Autrech feels that a mental shift is needed on the empires behalf regarding the boundaries of civilized space. CONCORD is a child of the empires, but it is becoming very much a bastard child as the empires are increasingly looking inwards towards themselves. Yet so much activity is taking place outside empire space, outside CONCORD jurisdiction. Autrech wants the empires to stop squabbling amongst themselves and start looking outwards, to the myriad minuscule elements that are slowly expanding the borders of human existence in space further and further away from the old established borders of the empires. Only by integrating all these different elements into one coherent whole can the true economical and technological potentials of the human race be reached, and the first step is for the empires to acknowledge the existence of said elements.

12/01/2005

Caldari Gaming Commission Announces COLOSSUS Final Date

Following speculation as to what the Caldari Gaming Commission has been doing the last few months, Commission Head Airas Sukela has stepped forward and delivered this statement: "The Commission is proud to announce that preparations for the COLOSSUS race finals are finished and a starting date and time have been decided. The race finals will be held on the 30th of this month at 22:00 EVT. The race itself will be flown in ten-person teams, each team representing a corporation. It will proceed through waypoints, where items will have to be picked up at each waypoint system." Airas further stated, "The Caldari Gaming Commission would like to express our excitement for this grand melee and give a big thank you to all our racers. We wish you the best of luck." Many have speculated whether the announcement's timing has anything to do with the recent separatist rumblings coming from within the notorious Curse Alliance. When questioned as to whether the final race's delay had been in any way connected to potential Caldari/Curse hostilities, Sukela replied: "The Chief Executive Panel has been busy with internal affairs of a grave nature in the recent months. While it is not my place to comment on those, I will say that any perception of the Caldari State as being an entity easily swayed by acts of terrorism is entirely laughable." Prizes for the race have yet to be announced.

27/01/2005

Caldari Gaming Commission Announces COLOSSUS prizes, rules

The Caldari Gaming Commission earlier today gave a long-awaited announcement about the prizes to be awarded in this Sunday's COLOSSUS race event finals, in addition to publishing a full set of rules for the contest.

Following in the Mikranian tradition of gaming philosophy so frequently favored by the Caldari over the last century, the Commission has decided to award separate prizes for the team victory and for the individual victory, in order to further stimulate the tension between loyalty to the team and advancement for the individual, a theme much recurrent in Caldari literature and entertainment.

As stated in the Commission's announcement, each member of the winning team will receive a Caldari Navy Issue Raven battleship, fully kitted out with specially augmented Caldari Navy modules. The net worth of such a vessel is estimated to come somewhere within the vicinity of three to four billion ISK.

The individual coming in third place will receive a Caldari Navy Hookbill, the specialized patrol craft of the Caldari Navy, while the second place winner will get a Navy-issue Caracal cruiser. Both vessels will, like the Ravens, be fully fitted with modules tweaked by the Navy's engineers.

What has garnered the greatest attention, however, is the individual first prize award: a capsule-fitted Rattlesnake battleship, famously designed by Korako "The Rabbit" Kosakami and one of only a few such vessels currently known to exist. According to the Gaming Commission, the ship was confiscated by the Caldari Navy after a Navy raid on a Gurista deadspace complex last month killed its owner, high-ranking Gurista terrorist Mourani Tremane. The vessel was subsequently donated to the Commission by the Navy for use as a prize.

Betting for the final race, meanwhile, is breaking records even within the Caldari State. Exact figures vary, but according to estimates something in the vicinity of three hundred billion ISK total is being bet on contestants and teams.

The final is set to go ahead at 22:00 EVT this Sunday.

01/02/2005

Lai Dai Team Takes COLOSSUS Team Victory, Individual Prizes

It was Lai Dai time on all fronts last Sunday at the COLOSSUS championships as Team Lai Dai swept the tournament's final race, winning both the team contest as well as the individual 1st, 2nd and 3rd places.

Alia Ursul of Evolution came in first of all racers, making her the first known Rattlesnake owner in the pod pilot community. Deovina of Omega Enterprises came in second, winning a Navy-issued Caracal missile boat, and Feral of Drink Starsi took third place, earning himself the right to call a Navy Hookbill patrol craft his own. All three racers came in on behalf of the Lai Dai Corporation's team, which won the team victory as well as the individual battle, making every member of the team a proud owner of a Navy-issue Raven battleship.

Haalonen Ihoya, Chief Coordinator of Public Relations for Lai Dai, was quick to issue a release exclaiming Lai Dai's immense pride in its superb team of racers and congratulating them on the victory. According to the rules of the championship, the Lai Dai Corporation, being the winner, will receive a bonus from the Chief Executive Panel Treasury this year for promotional purposes, as well as receiving substantial grants towards research and development of new technologies. Ihoya was quoted as saying, "Our thanks go to our brave racers, who sped past all obstacles and never looked back. Their prizes were well-earned."

The marathon race began in the depths of the Fountain region, where immediately racers were set upon by a blockade from the notorious Evolution corporation, presumably out to help those of their members participating in the contest. The one-hundred-plus jump route then took racers through five waypoints across the entire northwestern face of the known universe. A fair few locations, such as a waypoint in the Cloud Ring region, played host to attackers hell-bent on destroying as many of their allies' competitors as possible. The race ended in the depths of the Branch region, where racers came through the finish line after a final sprint heavily camped by hostile forces.

The CBD, Hyasyoda, Ishukone, Kaalakiota, Nugoeihuvi, Sukuuvestaa and Wyrkomi corporations have all issued releases extending their heartfelt thanks to the teams representing them in the contest.

The award ceremony will be held at the Lai Dai Corporation's Headquarters in Airkio this coming Friday.

04/02/2005

Caldari Gaming Commission to Host Award Ceremony Tonight

The Caldari Gaming Commission this evening will host an award ceremony for the winning team of this year's COLOSSUS championships.

The reception, to be held at Lai Dai's headquarters in Airkio, will be hosted by Gaming Commission Head Airas Sukela and Lai Dai CEO Alakoni Ishanoya. Ten Caldari Navy-issue Ravens, a Caldari Navy-issue Caracal and a Caldari Navy Hookbill will be given away in addition to the grand individual prize, a fearsome Rattlesnake battleship.

The winners of the Year 106 COLOSSUS Championships are:

TEAM LAI DAI

Alia Ursul of Evolution (also 1st place individual finisher)
Deovina of Omega Enterprises (also 2nd place individual finisher)
Feral of Drink Starsi (also 3rd place individual finisher)
Morkt Drakt of Black Omega Security
bsspewer of Corp 1
Wulfnor of Roving Guns Inc.
Shivaja of CHON
Akima of Spaced-Out Corp
proximo of Triton Industries

The Chief Executive Panel and the Caldari State extend its congratulations to these brave pilots, as well as the 2nd and 3rd place finishing teams, those of the Wiyrkomi and Hyasyoda corporations.

The reception is set to begin at 21:00 EVT.

01/03/2005

Emissary selection procedure finally ready to start

The customary legal wrangles, that always surround every major public election in the Federation, are finally coming to an end. Now that the fierce court room scuffles are over, the battle can move into the public arena, where freelance corporation vie for the honor and prestige of getting to select an Emissary from their own ranks. As usual the candidates have tried to gain an advantage over each other by suing and counter-suing each other, hoping to come out cleaner in the ensuing mudslinging. While political analysts relish the court room dramas and love reading deep meanings into every simple gesture, the public quickly tires of the whole farce.

The candidates have spread their envoys throughout the Federation, ready to hand out assignments to those wanting to experience the vibrant democracy exercised by the Federation first hand, and perhaps win a Navy-issue Dominix while they're at it. While the name of the game is to find the most fervent supporters of the candidates, the candidates are not above putting their adoring pilots to work. After all, it should weed out the gold diggers and leave only those truly worthy to be participants in the great democratic traditions of the Federation.

03/03/2005

Breach Threatens Biotech Company's Reputation, Stock Value

In recent days, word has spread throughout the Caldari corporate community that Zainou Biotech, one of the State's leading biotechnology corporations, has suffered a massive security breach.

According to rumours, two leading scientists from within the biotech giant's inner circle of research and development have gone away without leave, reportedly in possession of a highly classified experimental drug taken from the corporation's main laboratories in Isseras. The drug, known only as "Insorum," is reportedly a mild euphoric whose short duration and lack of immediately apparent side effects make it ideal for black market sale in mass quantities. The pair, pharmacologist Ullia Hnolku and his wife, graviton physicist Eckarine Mitumi-Hnolku, have neither been seen nor heard from in three days.

According to Chief Executive Panel sources, the CEP Business Bureau intends to launch a full-scale investigation into the matter within the next few days. No official comment has been made by either the CEP or Zainou Biotech.

Meanwhile, the rumour mill has taken its toll. Zainou Biotech stock within Caldari markets has in the past two days plummeted by 22 points (the largest drop by any Caldari corporation this year so far), and at least three big-name clients are known to have submitted void applications to the Caldari Business Tribunal with intent to rift their long-standing agreements with the biotech company.

"If they can't be trusted to hold on to their employees, how can we trust them to hold to their agreements?" stated an anonymous source from one of the voiding parties.

Zainou, a subsidiary of the Ishukone Corporation, has been at the leading edge of the State's biotech and nanomechanical industries for years, and turns over billions of ISK annually. How much this incident will affect them remains to be seen.

05/04/2005

Interstellar Threats on the Rise

According to a bi-monthly report submitted by the DED's Observation and Analysis Subcommittee yesterday, the numbers of illegal deadspace outposts harboring dangerous elements are steadily increasing on the fringes of CONCORD-policed space. The Guristas and Sansha's Nation are among the criminal organizations known to be building new outposts in various locations along the divide of the outer rim frontier.

Centus Sansha, the Nation's wing of deadspace operatives, have according to the report built the first of a new type of True Power complex, the first of Sansha's outposts to be branded a Level 10 on the DED's Threat Assessment scale. Additionally, Gurista leaders have reportedly authorized a schematic for a new type of penal

complex which the organization intends to build in several locations.

The report brought some good news as well. Due in no small part to consistent raids by capsuleer fighter pilots and empire navy forces, the resources of the Angels and the Serpentis have been weakened, leaving some of their most powerful strongholds in a somewhat weakened state. The DED has publicly commended the tireless efforts of capsuleer organizations to this end and remains firm in the belief that with their help, the tide of intergalactic crime may continue to be stemmed.

06/04/2005

Highly Dangerous Compound Believed Compromised, Massive Search Underway

An investigation into the disappearance of noted pharmacologist Ullia Hnolku, who along with his wife disappeared from Zainou Biotech's HQ in Isseras last month, has uncovered facts believed to pose a great threat to the biotech giant.

According to sources within the CEP Business Bureau, under whose authority the investigation was conducted, the pair are in possession of an experimental compound only recently developed in Zainou's main laboratories. The compound, Insozapine bisulfate, was previously believed to be a mild euphoric, but facts uncovered during the course of the investigation now seem to indicate something with far greater potential implications.

According to Special Counsel Tar Maurisi, head of the investigation, the drug is what's known as a reactive mutagen inhibitor, a compound whose active chemical responds dynamically to mutagens in an organism's body, limiting and eventually stifling their effectiveness completely. For certain diseased individuals, says Maurisi, this is revolutionary medicine: of more concern, however, is the fact that when given to a healthy organism the compound will attack natural DNA repair processes, causing a rapid chain reaction of cell suicide that within days leads to a cancerous death.

The Chief Executive Panel has ordered Ishukone Watch vessels to immediately cease and desist in all efforts to search for the missing scientists, and has handed executive authority in the matter to the Caldari Navy Operations Command, who as of yesterday afternoon have declared the two scientists Code-Five public hazards within Caldari-controlled space. Anyone with any information as to the pair's location is asked to contact Caldari Navy Vice Admiral Natakko Saijimo as soon as possible.

More on this as it develops.

08/04/2005

Minmatar Republic Claims Caldari State in Breach of Yulai Convention - State in Diplomatic Hot Water

Minmatar Republic officials this morning lodged a formal complaint with CONCORD, stating that according to security footage and docking transcripts, two Caldari Navy vessels had illegally docked at a Republic Fleet station in Matari-controlled space last night, reportedly in search of missing Caldari pharmacologist Ullia Hnolku.

According to article 37a of the Yulai Convention, vessels of national navies are explicitly forbidden from docking at other national navies' stations if those stations are within the confines of the owning navy's borders. Exceptions are granted only through specific written permission and statement of intent, both of which must go through proper CONCORD channels beforehand.

"We realize they're in a crisis, but that does not give them the right to step on international law any way they see fit," stated Republic Parliament Head Malaetu Shakor this morning. "The Caldari State has to realize it represents only one entity in the pan-galactic playground, and you can only step on others so many times before others start pushing back."

The State has a history of similar oversights: in August of last year, Ishukone Watch vessels were repeatedly spotted on the Matari side of the Caldari/Minmatar border zone, scanning passersby and inconveniencing travelers. Neither the Ishukone corporation nor the Chief Executive Panel issued any sort of diplomatic comment on that matter, a fact believed to contribute to the current sour state of relations with the Republic. A similar, though unpublicized, incident took place in Gallente space a few months later, where Caldari Navy vessels went searching for Gurista operatives believed to hold stolen schematics for as-yet unreleased ship designs. Their maneuverings within Gallente space provoked protests from the Federation, which also went unanswered by the CEP.

"The State has a long, proud tradition of obstinacy in diplomatic affairs," says Roger Montand, professor of political science at the University of Caille. "Now they have this missing scientist problem on their hands, and they need to be able to move their people freely, but they're just not trusted. The situation certainly wouldn't be so bad had the State actually given diplomacy its due course instead of digging their heels in and staying stubbornly quiet every time they were questioned as to their little slips. As it stands, they're paying the price."

Neither the Chief Executive Panel nor the Caldari Navy have commented at this point.

14/04/2005

Presidential candidates launch emissary contest

The three candidates for the Federation presidency are set to find their ideal emissaries to run their all-important election campaign. Each candidate has formulated his own way of finding those pilot corporations most suitable and to their liking. The corporations that work most diligently will have the honor of nominating one of their own to become an emissary for their chosen candidate. As even further incentive they will also become proud owners of a Navy issue Dominix battleship.

Delegates for the candidates are now in position in strategic locations throughout the Federation, ready to hand out assignments to members of the participating corporations. Mentas Blaque has accused Eman Autrech of jumping the guns and allowing his delegates to hand out assignments earlier than allowed, but independent observers of the elections have stated that Autrech followed regulations to the letter. Still, Blaque and sitting president Souro Foiritan were left scrambling to get their own delegates into action in time. For those eager to participate in the dynamic Gallentean democracy a full list of delegates and their locations will be posted shortly through a different medium.

14/04/2005

Interstellar Correspondent Recruitment

The Interstellar Correspondents, the newest wing to the Interstellar Services Department, have decided to throw open their doors in a recruitment drive to find the best reporters in the galaxy. The Interstellar Correspondents are looking to boost their coverage of events and politics in all regions of EVE, from Yulai to the furthest reaches of low security space.

Having a good grasp of interstellar politics is also a must. You must have a sound understanding of all of the history of EVE, as well as the political relationships between all of the corporations and factions - both empire based and sovereign pilot entities.

So, if you would like to join our illustrious team and report on events from all over the universe, then fill out an application form which can be found [here](#). Please be sure to specify Aurora within your application.

There is a lot going on throughout EVE every day, but we cannot cover it all without help from you, the pilots. Even if you don't think you would like to join the team, but you find something happening that you believe is newsworthy, or have advanced information you would like to disclose in complete confidence, submit it [here](#)

15/04/2005

Internal Report Indicates Prior Untruths on Part of Zainou

Special Counsel Tar Maurisi, head of the CEP Business Bureau's investigation into the Ullia Hnolku disappearance, at a press conference this morning revealed some of the latest discoveries made by the investigative committee. Chief among these was information brought to light by a report which had found its way from an anonymous source in Zainou's main labs.

The report, four pages long, begins by detailing progress on a few projects under development at the laboratories, after which it delves into the subject of Insorzapine bisulfate and the company's attempts to reproduce it. According to Maurisi, at several points the report indicates that, in fact, the mutagen binder is "not as dangerous as the public has been led to believe."

The Special Counsel went on to reveal excerpts from the report:

p. 2: "Half-life testing on Insorzapine-4 has shown that two of the compound's breakdown elements, at RTT 1.6 and 1.8, exceed the CPRC's 0.4% limit. Since the bisulfate variant was lost we have made some steps backward in the safety dept, but as of yet protective gear has not been deemed required by staff."

p. 3: "... and we feel that in order to reduce toxicity to the levels evidenced by preliminary Insorzapine bisulfate tests, a greater emphasis needs to be placed on development of non-covalent binding patterns and ionic channel receptivity."

Maurisi went on to state that "this apparently willful misrepresentation of facts by Zainou will be investigated to the full extent possible." When asked as to his thoughts on why the biotech giant would exaggerate the danger posed by the drug, the Special Counsel replied "Well, that's what we're here to find out, isn't it?"

27/04/2005

New CONCORD Legislation Prohibits Agent Distribution of Advanced Tech Components

After a series of meetings over the last week, CONCORD's Inner Circle this morning passed new legislation prohibiting empire corporation agents from passing on Tech II construction components to capsule pilots engaged in freelance work for them. The primary reason for the legislation, according to Inner Circle Head Irhes Angireh, is "the need for the empires to divert their resources towards their own ends. Both CONCORD and the four empires have paid tremendous amounts of money and resources to the capsuleer community in these past months, and it's time to begin cutting the cord." Also stated was CONCORD's belief that the legislation would have an energizing effect on capsuleers' outpost-building efforts and other industrial endeavors.

Parties from within both the Caldari State and Amarr Empire governments have complained that the legislation will cause massive inflation on capsuleer Tech II markets and serve only to "hamstring those operating on the technological cutting edge and slow down their progress." Some, indeed, argue that is exactly what CONCORD is out to do. Ever-controversial Federation Marquee journalist Maxim Peltast applauded the move, calling it a "kick in the [censored] for the [censored] cloning [censored]." He did, however, warn that these new circumstances would effectively force capsuleers into industrial operations on a greater scale than before, and history had shown that "when you force the eggheads into a corner, you're going to make those [censored] more powerful, whether you like it or not."

The Gallente and Matari governments meanwhile have expressed their approval of the legislation, claiming that the economic backlash created in the space community through this excessive flow of capital and components could now be nipped in the bud. While it is unknown how the Inner Circle's votes fell, the decision is widely reported to have been near-unanimous.

The mixed response to the legislation is seen by some as indicative of a growing rift between the old empires. States analyst Brill Stone, "With capsuleer traffic within - and influence upon - the empires increasing every day, and sweeping legislation like this being passed, you have a lot of voices talking about grand-scale changes on the horizon, you know, the universe's power structures undergoing seismic shifts. I think we'll start to feel some tremors pretty soon."

27/04/2005

Campaign blunder makes Foiritan a laughing stock.

While Eman Autrech and Mentas Blaque launched their election campaigns with only the minimal of hitches, current president Souro Foiritan was left sitting in the dust looking like a fool. Foiritan has never been known to be the most prepared or meticulous of men, but even his blasé reputation can't save him some blushes now. While the thoroughly trained delegates of Autrech and Blaque are busy stoking the campaign fires of their respective masters, Foiritan's supporters have nothing but pitiful embers to spit at.

Soon after it became evident that Foiritan's delegates were woefully unqualified and inexperienced the president quickly distanced himself from the whole thing. All he has been willing to say on the matter is that it was still early in the race and plenty of time to catch up. Even if pilots supporting Autrech and Blaque got a good head start on those supporting Foiritan, it is of no consequence as the latter are only competing against themselves.

Still, this does not detract from the fact that Foiritan's cause has suffered greatly in the public eye. But only time will tell how, or if, this will affect Foiritan's chances of retaining his presidency. In the meantime, those wishing for five more years under Foiritan can only hope that the crash-course his delegates just went through suffices to keep Foiritan in the race.

04/05/2005

Investigation Info Leaked - Special Counsel Moves To Deny

This just in: several major interstellar news agencies have in the past twenty-four hours run breaking news on a new development in the Insorzapine bisulfate investigation being undertaken by the CEP Business Bureau. According to a report apparently leaked by a top-level Bureau aide, the Insorzapine variant carried by renegade scientist Ullia Hnolku and his wife is in fact a drug capable of wholly reversing the effects of Vitoc on the human body, breaking the chain of cellular addiction which keeps individuals hooked on the drug's antidote.

Special Counsel Tar Maurisi, head of the Bureau's investigation, has swiftly moved to deny the claims, stating that they are "sensationalistic propaganda spread by opportunistic parties interested in seeing Amarr-Caldari relations soured." While Maurisi mentioned no names, the consensus within diplomatic circles is that the Special Counsel's words were directed towards the Gallente business machine, whose interests would be greatly served by a rift between the Amarr and Caldari nations. No response has been forthcoming from the Federation at this time.

Meanwhile, the news has promoted unrest among the Amarrian populace. In preparation for the eventuality of the drug's mass distribution, a number of holders have begun pulling their slaves back from specialized colonies as well as public areas, and the Amarr Navy is reportedly mobilizing a task force to search for the scientists. The Imperial Chancellor's Office refused to give comment "until more concrete information is brought to light."

The search for Dr. Hnolku continues, but little success has been had by officials moving against the scientist. It is widely whispered that capsuleer mercenaries have been paid to apprehend Hnolku outside the confines of Caldari space, but such rumours are wholly unsubstantiated at the present time.

Zainou Biotech stocks have dropped a further twelve points in the time since the report was released. Ishukone stock has taken a three-point dive.

More on this as it develops.

06/05/2005

Federation Transport Intercepted By Serpents Strike Force, Soltueur Titan Believed Stolen

This just in: a Federation cargo transport passing through the Alperate system was three hours ago intercepted

by what is believed to have been a Serpents strike force of unknown size and make-up. Preliminary reports indicate losses on the Gallente side were significant: in addition to dozens of frigates and a number of cruisers and battleships, the Federation is said to have lost control of one of its six Soltueur titans into the hands of the Serpents.

Federation officials have at this point neither confirmed nor denied the titan's loss, but are admitting the brutal attack "came as a complete shock, seemingly out of nowhere." Salvage and rescue teams have been at work in the system for the past two hours, and the exact nature and number of Federation losses is expected to come in soon. More updates as they arrive.

06/05/2005

Serpents Attack Update: Federation Issues Bounties on Culprits, Manhunt Underway

This just in: As reported by Federation Navy High Command in the last hour, the culprits of this morning's coordinated strike upon Gallente assets in the Alperaute system have been identified as Salvador Sarpati, CEO and founder of the Serpents organization, and several high-level commanders and operatives in his personal army.

Also confirmed was the capture of one Gallente Soltueur titan, the Molyneux, by the Serpents forces. The Molyneux is the first Gallente titan in history ever to be seized by a hostile force. According to Navy pilots who survived the battle, the vessel sustained considerable damage in the attack and is believed to be operating at less than full capacity.

Eyewitness reports indicate the group is headed into the Syndicate region, possibly intending to make their way to their home base in the Fountain region. Federation Navy Joint Operations Command has approved a CONCORD-authorized bounty of 1.2 billion ISK for Salvador Sarpati, 500 million ISK for Tuvan Orth, his right-hand man, and 50 million ISK for other ranking officers in command of the Serpents force.

Souro Foiritan, President of the Gallente Federation, in a statement at 15:00 this afternoon exhorted all capsuleer pilots loyal to the Federation to "rise up against the tide of villainy that threatens to destroy the very fabric of all we hold dear." He furthermore stated that the Sarpati family had "made a war for itself that it couldn't afford," and that "the Federation will do everything in its power to get the Molyneux back."

More news as we receive it.

10/05/2005

Questions Arise Concerning President's Apathy

Since last Friday's shocking Serpents strike against a Gallente cargo transport convoy, an incident that saw one of the Federation's six titans disappear into the hands of the criminal organization, numerous questions have been raised in the media as to President Foiritan's apparent unwillingness to send troops outside the jurisdiction of CONCORD to chase after the stolen vessel.

The Office of the President has denied that any spurious motives lay behind the decision not to send the Navy into the Fountain region on the day in question. Thuire Dercoucon, the President's Press Secretary, went on record Sunday as saying, "The President is conscious and aware of the fact that once our forces enter non-CONCORD-policed space there is precious little space left that's not claimed by some faction or organization. Trespassing on their areas was not something the President nor the Navy's commanders felt in a position to do, so it was decided that capsuleer intervention would be sought and large bounties rewarded. The Federation naturally is interested in maintaining good relations with our capsuleer neighbors and we will continue to respect their borders, whether or not that continues to be the trend in international politics."

When asked what the Federation's response would be to the fact that a large contingent of heavily-armed capsuleers banded together to help the Serpents reach their goal, the Press Secretary told reporters the incident was still being investigated and that an official stance towards those who aided and abetted the Serpents had yet to be formulated. He did however state that "those who openly act against [the Federation] should not be surprised to find themselves in the metaphorical line of fire at some point in the future."

25/05/2005

Emissary selection process draws to a close

After weeks of uncertainty the ponderous Federation bureaucracy has finally given the green light for the conclusion of the presidential emissary selection process. The Federal Administration has instructed delegates working for the candidates to cease handing out assignments early tomorrow.

Each of the thousands of candidate vouchers that have been handed out has an electrical chip in it that allows the Administration to track the location and ownership of it. Even so, it will take the Administration several days to sort through the heavy data load and come up with the final results. With the winning corporation receiving handsome prizes, CEOs the world over are undoubtedly already squirming in their seats in anticipation.

The Administration has come under heavy criticism for its handling of the election campaign, both from the public and the presidential candidates themselves. Eman Autrech even went so far in a recent speech at a rally that he accused Agenbaert Goisin, head of the Federal Administration, of 'attempting to sabotage the elections

for some nefarious purpose.' Goisin is still to respond to those allegations, though Chief Coordinator Dasbrulier has went on record stating that the elections were a serious business and needed to be governed with care. Nevertheless, it is widely expected that heads will roll once a new president has been elected.

25/05/2005

Blood Raider Statement Causes Uproar

In a coded message released to all major news agencies this morning, Omir Sarikusa, leader of the notorious Blood Raider Covenant, claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of Eckarine Mitumi-Hnolku, wife of outlaw scientist Ullia Hnolku. Accompanying the message were images of a woman, later confirmed by State sources as Mrs. Hnolku, being subjected to "bleeding" - the ritual draining of blood which constitutes a focal point of the Covenant's highly controversial religious practices.

Furthermore, Sarikusa stated that the Blood Raiders were "now in control of the Insorum prototype, and more than willing to use it to strike at the heart of our enemy. The Empire's infidels will cower in their palaces tonight, for their foundations are about to be shaken. It is time for the fall of Amarr."

The news has caused massive unrest on Amarr Prime, with businesses and institutions closing down all over the planet and Holders recalling outsourced and subcontracted slave labor. Dam-Torsad has reported the largest gridlock in the city's history, and the planet's sub-orbital air force is reportedly working with Navy forces in securing airspace above all major metropolitan areas and labor colonies.

Others, meanwhile, are not so certain that the threat claimed by the Covenant is real. Caldari State officials have declared that "no conclusive evidence has yet arrived from the Executive Panel's investigation that would indicate that the drug has the effects described by the doctor or his supporters. Furthermore, to create any mass-distributable form of this drug would require cutting-edge scientific minds, the likes of which we are confident can only be found in a few places in the universe. We sincerely doubt the Blood Raider Covenant has access to any such individuals."

When asked of the possibility that Mrs. Hnolku could have been carrying a possible second copy of the Insorum prototype, Zainou Biotech officials have given the answer that theoretically, the drug may have been replicated before the two scientists eloped from Zainou headquarters in Isseras. They added that while no evidence could be found of such a replication having taken place, the possibility could not be discounted.

Dr. Ullia Hnolku remains at large. He is known to be in negotiations with several capsuleer parties via GalNet, a communications thread played and replayed by feedsites the world over in the past week.

More news on the situation as it develops.

01/06/2005

"Insorum Imbroglia" Puts Focus on Capsuleers as Eyes Turn Toward Blood Raider Covenant

Last week saw the brutal murder of infamous Caldari scientist Dr. Ullia Hnolku at the hands of a force of capsuleers known as the Caldari Independent Navy Reserve. As reported by various eyewitnesses, the doctor was shot down in the Magiko system while being escorted to safety by a twenty-strong fleet of Matari freedom fighter ships. Apparently Dr. Hnolku, weakened by blood loss after a savage knife attack earlier that evening, had made an error in judgment and engaged his shuttle's warp drive too soon, thus running into an ambush set up by his pursuers.

Details are sketchy at this point on whether the doctor's prototype for Insorum bisulfate, rumored to represent a cure for Vitoc withdrawal, made its way into the hands of Caldari or Matari forces. A number of unconfirmed reports state that Matari alliance the Ushra'Khan are currently in possession of the prototype, but no concrete evidence has surfaced as of yet.

The incident is reported to have inspired a great deal of vehemence among government officials at all levels of the four empires, though a remarkably low number of official statements have been made. Political analyst Jozek Molaine describes the situation thus: "With such a potential destabilizer as this prototype hanging on the line, tensions are high. Everyone is being politically cautious, and with good reason. The slightest move could cause a ripple effect that can destroy worlds."

In the face of this uneasy diplomatic stand-off, the capsuleer parties involved in what has become known as "The Insorum Imbroglia" have been thrust into the limelight via GalNet, the capsuleer community's podium venue. GalNet was optioned as a holofeed by CONCORD's Communications Regulation Agency not long ago and has since soared in popularity, not least these past few weeks. Cultural analysts and political commentators have noted the increase in the public's interest in capsuleer affairs and this powerful class's growing influence on world events. Stated one Gallente pundit, "They're the new stars in the sky."

Some see even darker things behind the four empires' cautious silence. In the case of the Caldari State, Federation Marquee journalist Maxim Peltast, in an article two days ago, stated: "Those putrid rat bastards are just happy there are lap dogs out there doing their dirty work. They're not doling out pats on the back, sure, but notice the loud and clear lack of public condemnation. If it's not obvious to you that they're happy as fedos in mud over this, then you have no business among the breathing."

As reports continue to come in of warring capsuleer factions turning their attention to the Bleak Lands - home of the Blood Raider Covenant, captors of Dr. Hnolku's wife and reported possessors of the Insorum prototype - the universe waits and watches for the next turn of events.

More news as they arrive.

05/06/2005

Ore/Mordus relations in trouble?

Although mere conjecture until recent hours, numerous credible yet confidential sources have confirmed that diplomatic ties between the ORE and the Mordus Legion have deteriorated to a breaking point.

The relationship between the two powers over recent months has proven to be strained with a commonly held view that the source of the friction has arisen from disputes between the two faction leaders. Both Orion Mashel, founder of the Outer Ring Excavations Company, and Muryia Mordu, the leader of Mordus's Legion Mercenary Corporation, have had a history of public personal conflict, a factor that may prove to be the source of the recent sudden drop in mutual co-operation.

The source of the hostilities remains a mystery with no official comment regarding either groups standing to the other, but it is believed to be due to feelings within the Legion regarding apparent stagnation at the hands of continued service to ORE.

Already reports have been issued by members of the pod pilot community regarding the amassing of Mordus Legion in critical ORE locations upon the Eastern flank of ORE systems. Although not outwardly aggressive the movement of Mordus Legion personnel and assets to central locations has sparked a deep-rooted concern within the local populace.

We shall bring you more information as the situation develops.

09/06/2005

Catastrophe Strikes Amarr Planet - Blood Raiders Claim Responsibility

At 09:42 EVT this morning, Mabnen I in the Throne Worlds constellation was struck by disaster as an unknown aerosol was released into its atmosphere above Hemlock Field, an aggregation of slave colonies that stretches across one of the planet's continents and represents one of the single largest indentured worker habitats in the Amarr empire.

The fourteen orbit-breacher vessels distributing the aerosol were swiftly shot down by regional detachments of the Mabnen Air Force, but the damage had already been done: the planet's strong surface winds had caught the toxin and would, within minutes, distribute it throughout most of the colonies' vast territory.

Eight minutes after the orbit-breachers had been shot down and the crisis was thought to have been averted, two of Hemlock Field's twelve colonies were in flames. News cameras have since caught footage of Amarrian guards' disembodied heads, staked out on the parapets girding the guard fortress of a colony belonging to Holder Terram Kador.

Other colonies, too, suffered great upheavals. At 10:08 EVT, roughly 30 minutes after the initial attack, seven of the twelve colonies had suffered complete radio communications blackouts. Military forces were called in at that point, and at time of going to press pitched battles are still being fought between Mabnen Army squadrons and the insurgents, most of whom are reportedly armed with little more than stones and tools. Four of the colonies have been hit with air strikes. Casualty numbers are unknown at this time.

Omir Sarikusa, leader of the Blood Raider Covenant, at exactly 12:00 noon today released a statement to the media, claiming full responsibility for the attack and stating that "today's exercise was merely the beginning. The complacent giant is about to fall, and Insorum shall be the knife in its stomach." He furthermore went on to thank loyalist capsuleer corporation Blood Inquisition - and their associates - for their "discreet and professional aid" in transporting large quantities of the drug to the site of the attack.

Neither the Emperor nor the Imperial Chancellor has released any form of statement at time of going to press, but Emperor Kor-Azor is known to be sitting in council with some of his top advisors. A statement is expected either later today or tomorrow.

Preliminary estimates of the asset damage caused by the attack are reportedly in the vicinity of seventeen billion ISK.

More on the situation as it develops.

14/06/2005

Amarr Empire Goes To War

Coming before his people for the first time in months, His Holiness The Emperor of Amarr this afternoon spoke from the steps of the Imperial palace in Dam-Torsad. In his speech, he exhorted his subjects to "through strength

of mind and heart, weather the tide of evil that now assails the servants of God."

The Emperor then went on to proclaim that every single arm of military might controlled by the Empire would now be pointed squarely in the direction of the Blood Raider Covenant. "They have dealt us a blow, to be sure, but Amarr did not reach her heights of glory by buckling under pressure, least of all from craven heretics such as Omir Sarikusa and his lot. The Hand of God shall lend us strength. The Hand of God shall guide us. From this moment, let it be known that the Empire is at war."

As the Emperor spoke, bedlam struck the Imperial palace's surroundings. According to one eyewitness, "I haven't seen anything like it. Thousands upon thousands of people came together in adulation of their nation, their God and their Emperor. It was really a sight to see."

Perimum Aryn, Minister of War for the Empire, speaking at a press conference shortly after the Emperor had made his statement, said a mixed force of sub-and superorbital vessels was being assembled which would strike at key Blood Raider tactical locations, the aim of the campaign being nothing less than the total annihilation of the Covenant and their followers.

When asked about the role of capsuleer forces such as the Blood Inquisition (a pod pilot corporation which played an instrumental role in the Mabnen attack) in the upcoming struggle, Aryn stated that the Ministry had reliable intelligence that "the ceaselessly loyal, ever-vigilant paramilitary capsuleer forces of the Curatores Veritatis Alliance and the Aegis Militia have declared war on the Covenant's supporters." Asked of the likelihood that the Empire's military forces would coordinate their efforts with these paramilitaries, Minister Aryn said the chances were "significantly high."

The Emperor's announcement is seen as a radical departure from his policies, which have been described as quasi-pacifistic. This has led to a certain degree of speculation on the reasons for the declaration, as well as confusion regarding the stuttered time frame in which decisions seem to have been made. Neither the Emperor family nor the Court Chamberlain have issued comments on the matter.

More news as they come in.

23/06/2005

Winners of election emissary contest announced

The Federal Administration has finally come out with the much-anticipated list of winners of the election emissary contest. With literally thousands of vouchers to wade through, even the extensive bureaucracy of the FA was at a breaking point matching them all up.

The CEOs of the winning corporation have been notified of their corp's success and all of these corporations have received a brand new Navy Issue Megathron as a reward for their great efforts. Here is a list of the winning corporations and the candidate they worked for:

Brave New World	Blaque
Crisis Corp	Autrech
Crux Republic Aerospace Navy Elites	Autrech
Digital Horizons	Autrech
Dire Trucking	Blaque
Eve University	Foiritan
Grumpy Old Farts	Foiritan
Hidden Agenda	Blaque
Nebula Rasa Holdings	Foiritan
Special Circumstances	Foiritan
THE MISPHIT'S	Foiritan
The United Federation of Planets	Foiritan
Thundercats	Blaque
Transfluent Inc.	Blaque
Tri Optimum	Autrech
Tribal Trust of Pator	Blaque
VIT	Autrech

Election overseers noted a discrepancy in the Verge Vendor region and are investigating the matter. Thus, the result for Eman Autrech in Verge Vendor is pending.

Each of the winning corporations will have to nominate one of their own as an official Emissary. They will have a bit of time to mull over their choice and once their decision is made, further information regarding the role of the Emissaries will be published to the general public.

24/06/2005

Capsuleers Drawn Into Struggle as Amarr / Blood Raider Fighting Continues

Wednesday saw the latest in a series of ongoing clashes between the Amarr Navy and the forces of the Blood Raider Covenant. Two main battles are reported to have been fought; a Covenant ammunition convoy was taken down in the Alkabsi system by Navy forces assisted by capsuleer fighters, after which a retaliatory strike against

a Navy scout team in Haras saw Covenant forces and loyalist capsuleers strike back against the Empire.

Capsuleer organizations involved in the fighting include Empire loyalists Aegis Militia and the Curatores Veritatis Alliance, Covenant loyalists Blood Inquisition fighting alongside members of Finite Horizon and Developmental Neogenics Amalgamated, and members of the Huzzah Federation, who fought on the side of the Amarr though their exact ideological affiliations are unclear at this point.

The dual-layered nature of Wednesday's battles has military experts intrigued. "It's been a long time coming," says Matteus Harpet, a noted independent station security contractor and military analyst working out of Oursulaert. "Ever since they arrived on the scene, we've known the eggheads are the next step. They've been steadily growing in power and influence, and their involvement in wars like these comes as no surprise. It's interesting to see how there are really two battles being fought here; one between the Empire and the Raiders, the other between their loyalist capsuleer factions. The dynamics of interplay are intriguing."

Asked whether he believes capsuleers will come to play a greater role in the future of intergalactic conflict, Harpet replied, "Seriously, look around you. I give it two years before the empire navies will be assisting the capsuleers with their wars, and not the other way around."

The past week has seen numerous strikes against Blood Raider assets and hideouts on the sovereign fringe, with imperial Navy forces proclaiming major tactical coups almost without fail. In a release earlier this afternoon, Ministry of War spokeswoman Ialema Kalonne stated that Navy forces had, in the week since declaring a state of war against the Blood Raider Covenant, destroyed an estimated four billion ISK's worth of Covenant assets in coordinated strikes on stations and on planetary outposts.

These announcements of success come in the face of expressed concern among certain holders that the Amarr Empire is not conducting itself in a manner befitting a superpower of its stature. Earlier this week, speaking from the steps of the Sarum estate on Sarum Prime, appointed family guardian Pomikide Haromi sternly reprimanded the Empire for "taking up the proportional response tactics espoused by advocates of democracy and other hopelessly feeble forms of governance." The holder further went on to state that "The Empire should do as Empires do: overwhelm their enemies and grind them into dust, eradicate them so thoroughly that only a fading memory remains."

01/07/2005

Amarr Forces Deal "Crushing Blow" To Blood Raider Assets

In a statement released this afternoon by the Amarr Ministry of War, the Blood Raider Covenant's war effort is reported to have been dealt a "crushing blow" by forces comprising Amarr Navy fighters and capsuleer loyalist paramilitaries.

The release details a tactical strike last night against a key Covenant installation in the Sahtogas system, in which "the logistical backbone of the Covenant's war effort was shattered." According to the statement, the installation in question served as the chief research and development station for the Covenant's replication of the Insorum prototype, in addition to being one of the cult's main munitions dumps.

"The immediate threat to our glorious nation has been neutralized," stated Amarr War Minister Perimur Amyn at a press conference following the statement's release. "Now it is time to eradicate its cause fully. Yesterday we smashed the spine, tomorrow we go for the heart."

Since the original strike on Mabnen I earlier this month, no further chemical attacks have taken place on Amarr sovereign worlds. Blood Raider Covenant forces have likewise rarely been seen inside the borders of the Empire, and when spotted, have consisted exclusively of small raiding and scouting parties. According to an anonymous source at the Ministry of War, no further viral agents are thought to have been smuggled across the border and another chemical strike is considered unlikely.

Yesterday's offensive is being widely interpreted as indication that the Empire has taken to heart some of the criticism previously levelled at it with regard to the proportional response tactics employed by their forces in the war so far. This interpretation is lent support by evidence of the gradually escalating size and intensity of the Empire's attacks in the past few days.

The leader of the Navy force spearheading the attack, Vice Admiral Sathon Sarum, has been reported missing in action. His whereabouts are currently unknown.

01/07/2005

Last emissary winner announced; Autrech jubilant

The final winner of the presidential emissary competition has finally been announced after the Federal Administration was forced to do a recount of certain Autrech vouchers. The winning corporation is Dark Star Enterprises and it will receive a navy issue Megathron the same as others.

Eman Autrech took time from his busy schedule to express his great joy with this announcement: "I was greatly distressed when I didn't see Dark Star Enterprises on the first list of winners. I know their CEO, Kale Jalentis, from good things only and I'm very pleased for him that he and his corporation got the recognition they duly

deserve. With the resourceful Jalentis at the helm, I'm very optimistic for the emissary campaign due to start in few weeks time."

With the list of winners now complete, the next step of the lengthy election process is ready to begin. The Federal Administration is already engaged in preparations and is expected to be ready in about a month. Until then, the people of the Federation can heave collective sigh of relief that the pestering presidential candidates are out of their hair for a while.

03/07/2005

Federation and Republic join forces in fight against smuggling

The Gallente Federation and the Minmatar Republic have joined hands in their struggle against smuggling cartels, most notably the Intaki Syndicate and the Angel Cartel. A brief statement released from the office of Sark Martek, the head of a new task force to fight smugglers in both empires, stated that "the safety and prosperity of the citizens of these two great empires demanded a tough stance against those aiming to undermine their economical strengths."

While more detailed explanation of what this new policy would entail was not immediately released it can be surmised that greater cooperation in tracking and battling criminal elements is to be expected in the near future. It is understood that the new task force lead by commander Martek will have full access to both the intelligence and military resources of both empires.

This development should come as no great surprise to those closely following the politics of the Federation and the Republic. The relationship between the two empires has always been strong and has only grown stronger in recent, turbulent, times. A joint effort such as this is thus an expected evolution, rather than a revolution, of their relationship. More mysterious are the motives for doing this at this particular time. While the smuggling cartels are a constant pest to their neighbors, there has been no noticeable increase in their activity.

Political analysts are already speculating that this move is prompted by the Federation's military forces in the belief that Mentas Blaque will be the winner of the upcoming presidential elections, as Blaque is an outspoken enemy of the Syndicate. Or perhaps this just the Navy's way of throwing their support behind Blaque in a circumspect manner, as an open declaration of support would be a blatant breach of political protocol and likely to backfire.

Said analysts are more excited about the Republic's motives, as they see this is an abrupt change of course for Prime Minister Karin Midular. Midular has been a strong advocate for improving the relations with the Amarr Empire, which has thrown her in conflict with the more militant elements of the Republic on more than one occasion. By throwing its lot in with the Federation, the Republic seems to be changing tack and reasserting its ties with their oldest ally. While any official statement is yet to come out of the Amarr Empire, it is widely expected that this move by the Republic will severely sour the budding relations of the Empire and the Republic, even scuttling whatever hope there was of a peaceful co-existence between the two of them once and for all.

05/07/2005

Nations reel as assassination's backlash spreads

Chaos is spreading around EVE as the consequence of Dorian's II assassination. The Amarr Emperor was slain last night in the Imperial Palace in Dam Torsad by an unknown assailant. The Imperial Chancellery is heading the investigation, with aid from the Ministry of Internal Order. Amarr police has rounded up a few suspects, believed to be foreigners, and is currently questioning them at an unknown location.

At the daily morning meeting of the Chief Executive Panel, the leaders of the Caldari State were unanimous in condemning this 'appalling atrocity and attack on the political harmony of the world.' They also appreciated the need for the harsh response of the Empire in shutting down several border zones and stated they would do the same to keep radicals from exploiting the situation to their advantage.

The Privy Council also held a session this morning, but what transpired there is still a mystery. Sin Callor of the Ministry of Internal Order and a member of the Council let it slip though that 'Dorian's death will drive many shadowy elements to the surface.' We hope future events will cast light on those elusive words.

05/07/2005

Republic Leaders Condemn "Act of Cowardice"

In a statement released this morning, Minmatar Republic Prime Minister Karin Midular avowed the Republic's "dismay at the prevalence of cruelty and the passing of an icon."

"The rising tide of violence and mistrust governing the relations of the world's powers must be stemmed," read the statement. "When evil is allowed to exercise its influence unchecked, good people, with the potential to do great things, will fall into the valley of shadow from whence there is no returning. Acts of cowardice, perpetrated by wardens of such evil, are to be condemned now as ever."

The statement's language has garnered much attention due to its harsh black-and-white nature and a certain dramatic flair uncommonly seen in the realm of Matar politics. Says analyst Jelani Duchamp, "Something has quite obviously struck a nerve with the Prime Minister. Her political legacy has, to this point, been one of

moderation and restraint. To be truthful, I don't think I've ever seen a statement like this from her."

When asked to elaborate on the Prime Minister's statement, Tribal Council representatives present at this morning's Rens III press conference declined to comment, stating that all senior Council and Parliament personnel were currently sitting in special session with Urban Management and the Republic Fleet, and would take opportunities to comment at a later date.

Other questions, such as whether a working Insorum prototype lies in the hands of the Republic or anyone associated with it, remain unanswered by the Republic's government. Allegations have on several levels been variously dismissed as "fantastical" or "absurd," but no hard denials nor confirmations have been given. Speculation on the matter remains widespread.

More news as it arrives.

05/07/2005

AMARR EMPEROR DORIAM II ASSASSINATED

Stunning news has just filtered out of the Amarr Empire. Dorian II, Emperor of Amarr, is dead at the hands of an unknown assailant.

Details are still sketchy at this moment, but the Emperor's death has just been confirmed by the Imperial Chancellor's Office. The Privy Council has been called together to sit in emergency session.

Chamberlain Karsoth, the acting regent, was visibly shaken when confronted by the media outside his office an hour ago. Nevertheless standing firm in his condemnation of the heinous act, he stated that the Empire would "spare nothing in hunting down the perpetrators, wherever they might hide."

While the Chamberlain refused to confirm early rumors as to the killer's identity, he did state that "foreign elements will not succeed in spreading chaos and discord throughout our great empire." When asked to elaborate the Chamberlain declined to comment any further, instead urging his nation to "remain brave in the face of this unspeakable tragedy."

The Imperial Navy has been put on full alert. All border areas are being closely watched, particularly those leading into Republic and Federation space, with emergency stargate reroute plans reportedly being put into effect.

More news as they come in.

15/07/2005

CONCORD investigators identify the Emperor's assassins

After a meeting of CONCORD investigators with acting regent Chamberlain Karsoth at the Imperial Chancellor's Office, sources close to the Imperial administration are speaking of a major leap forward in the investigation, stating that the perpetrators of the Emperor's assassination have been identified.

As the news spreads throughout the Empire like wildfire, many citizens are rejoicing over the prospect of bringing to justice those who have committed this terrible crime. Moreover, a feeling of renewed rage is being felt amongst the pilot community close to the Empire. The general sentiment conveyed is that nothing short of revenge can put their minds at ease.

Members of the Theology Council have already commented, calling the news "a sign of God's bestowing his blessing once more upon the purest of races." The Council went on to state, "Still, it is only a small soothing of the pain and regret we feel at having this greatest of men so violently taken from us. Amarr will continue to mourn, but we will be tireless in bringing to justice those capable of such a crime."

The Council also addressed the acting regent, stating that "the eyes of the Empire are upon you, Chamberlain." While the Amarr community eagerly awaits information regarding the assassination of their Emperor, Chamberlain Karsoth has remained behind closed doors for the rest of the day, unavailable for comments. It is widely believed that the Chamberlain will keep the identity of the assailants classified as long as possible to facilitate further investigations by CONCORD.

16/07/2005

CONCORD's investigation shed no light so far

NEW CALDARI. The State "will regard the assassination of Dorian II as an Amarrian internal affair until proven otherwise", said CEP official earlier this morning.

"To our knowledge, CONCORD's investigation has shed no light so far on the identity of the perpetrator nor the motives behind the crime", said Nashokoda Pekumatken, Chief Executive Panel spokesperson at New Caldari CEP HQ. Following the diplomatic stance on the Mabnen incident during early June "without proof of an external faction being involved, the State will maintain its position and consider these events as amarrian internal affairs. Under these circumstances no special instructions will be issued to the Caldari Navy on the subject". The statement was later confirmed by CalNav spokesperson Kutatala Ikao.

The Amarr Empire has "a good track record not letting strife among internal factions spill into their foreign affairs policies; the controversies during Heideran VII's succession never affected our political or economical relations save for the usual stock market fluctuations that usually follow great political changes. We expect the next succession to be no different."

According to CEP officials the State's position will be revised following CONCORD's findings. An undisclosed source remarked that as of today said findings "amount to an absolute, pathetic zero. The State finds this lack of results disturbing: CONCORD's officials seem much more efficient in telling us how to run our corporations than in resolving an Emperor's assassination", making a clear reference to CONCORD's legislation during late April prohibiting empire corporation agents from passing on Tech II construction components to capsule pilots engaged in freelance work for them, a decision opposed at the time by both the Caldari State and Amarrian Empire.

19/07/2005

Omira Sarikusa amused at CONCORD's claims

Blood Raider Covenant's commander, Omira Sarikusa, reacted to CONCORD's claims of having identified Doriam II's assassins with scorn, "I find it hard to believe that the notoriously incompetent DED investigators managed to solve this 'mystery' in such a short time" he said during a short subspace transmission.

Sarikusa continued, "This shows yet again the false ways of the Empire. They're obviously losing control. Fearing upheaval at the lack of news on the matter, the Council decided to broadcast this blatant lie to maintain its meagre power."

Probed about the recent Blood Raider retreat in Delve space, he commented, "It was part of a reorganization plan we put in motion long ago. From here we'll be able to plan even more devastating attacks on our enemies. With the Empire headless, as it is now, there will be no more obstacles on our path."

DED officials tried to trace the source of the transmission, but all their efforts came to a halt just outside Khanid Space. Amarr Navy officials dismissed Sarikusa's claims as "Meaningless threats after their utter defeat in Sahtogas, the citizens of our glorious Empire need not to worry anymore about them".

20/07/2005

DED Considering action

GENESIS. DED officials are "considering different courses of action against the Finite Horizon corporation" due to their increasing drug-related activities.

Ipeman Psarana, Security Officer at DED Yulai X confirmed this morning that FZN operatives have been under surveillance, "in particular their recent war against the Coreli Corporation and their war bounty of several thousands of m3 of narcotics".

It had been previously suggested that DED attention was due to complaints filed by the Walkai Terraforming Industries corporation after their terraforming convoy was neutralized in early June, and by the Amarrian Empire after FZN and DNA operatives disrupted an Amarrian Navy convoy in Haras two weeks later; both were denied by S.O. Psarana.

"In case of property destruction, under the Yulai Convention framework CONCORD vessels are allowed to use force only inside high security systems and only immediately following said destruction; other than restricting the entrance of dangerous elements to high security space CONCORD cannot preemptively engage individuals or corporations in any way."

"The traffic of narcotics, on the other hand, is regarded as a dire threat by all Convention signing parties, and as such DED is authorized to actively pursue offenders outside normally CONCORD patrolled areas and use force if deemed necessary"

S.O. Psarana also denied DED's actions in this matter being coordinated by Sark Martek, chief of the joint task force created by the Gallente Federation and the Minmatar Republic to fight smuggling in general. "Small fishes are taken care by national customs on a daily basis and are not on DED's priority list. On the contrary, FZN operatives have earned themselves a bit of our attention".

Psarana refused to comment in detail DED's actions on this matter.

11/08/2005

CONCORD Memo Leaked

An internal memo from CONCORD has been leaked which contains details of the alleged assassins of the late Doriam II.

The memorandum provided by a source who wishes to remain anonymous states, "We have evidence that points towards an individual from the Royal Khanid Navy being responsible for the assassination". The memo goes on to detail that, "Preparations are underway for insertion of an under-cover agent into the Royal Khanid Navy to substantiate the claims and gather further evidence". Strangely enough the memorandum does not

include any relevant evidence to back up the claims made.

Amarr citizens have taken the news with a renewed anger at the assassination with many demanding an official statement from Meor Varuna, others wish a more direct response - calling for the Amarr Navy to respond en masse.

Neither CONCORD nor Acting Regent Chamberlin Karsoth would confirm or deny the authenticity of the memorandum at this time.

It will certainly be an interesting time for interstellar politics if the Dark Amarr are proven to be behind the assassination of the late Dorian II.

12/08/2005

Amarr Tensions

As tensions between the Khanid Kingdom and CONCORD rise, we are left wondering how the Amarrian people are taking this. One source within the Amarr Navy, one that wishes to remain anonymous, claims that tensions between individuals that believe in CONCORD's leaked memorandum and those that don't are the direct result of the lack of information forthcoming on Emperor Dorian II's assassination.

The source, a fairly well-off officer, claims that certain factions within the Navy are less than happy with CONCORD's investigations, believing that the Empire itself is more than capable of taking care of their own.

"The Empire should not bow to the bureaucrats of CONCORD. For thousands of years we have been able to take care of our own problems. Regicide is a crime that should be treated with the utmost diligence and CONCORD's interference makes a mockery of traditions started when some civilizations were still in their cradles. It is an insult to the Empire."

Attempts to confirm this were met with harsh words. One private in the Navy, however, was willing to expound, also wishing to remain anonymous.

"I can't believe Chamberlain Karsoth even allows outsiders to investigate this matter. It is an internal Imperial affair. This newly "leaked" memo changes nothing."

Whatever the truth of the matter, it can only be a blow to the ego of the Amarrians to have CONCORD investigate the assassination. To some, the leaked memorandum can only mean that they are not doing a very good job. Meanwhile, Amarrians, Khanid and the other Empires await further, official statements of the matter.

12/08/2005

Khanid refute CONCORD claims

Yesterday saw the unexpected and illegal publication of a CONCORD memo, detailing DED plans to infiltrate the Royal Khanid Navy to find evidence to support their claim that a Khanid navyman was responsible for the death of Dorian II, Emperor of Amarr.

Following this outrageous leak, the Royal Khanid Navy held a press conference from its headquarters at Kihtald. Commander Abrikoum Aman of Internal Security stated:

"The news of Emperor Dorian II struck the Khanid Kingdom as hard as the Empire. The notion that a soldier serving in the Royal Navy was responsible for the unfortunate death of Emperor Dorian II is preposterous. Until now, no evidence has been provided, nor by CONCORD, nor by the Empire itself, at our request. We have exploited our diplomatic channels to either extensively. Until now, nothing has been forthcoming"

Following this statement, the Commander went on to say:

"Not only do the appointed officials refuse to offer comments on this supposed assassin within the ranks of our Navy, the memo's most disturbing passage, that a deep-cover operative is being inserted into the Navy, leads us to believe that CONCORD is striving to provide the public with a scapegoat, to cover its inefficient hunt for Emperor Dorian II's true assassin.

We urge CONCORD to reconsider their plan. This does not serve the greater good, this does not serve the balance the institution was created to keep."

Although CONCORD has yet to respond to this, armchair politicians' columns all over the FTL net are rife with speculations following Commander Aman's veiled insults. Most seem to agree that the accusation of regicide is a serious one, and that CONCORD or the Amarr Empire had better release a statement soon, lest the Khanid take more aggressive steps to route out infiltrators.

09/09/2005

Possible new overseer of the Mordus Legion exodus?

In an earlier broadcast from an unknown source, data apparently taken from the highly guarded communications systems of the Mordus Legion have indicated a flurry of activity in the wake of last week's

exodus from ORE space. In particular, communications have pointed to the office of a senior member of the Legion's staff, an individual that has yet to be identified from the snippets of seized data circulating through the black markets of the information community.

The events of last week have seen a widespread departure of the Legion from ORE space, in the wake of a dispute between the highest levels of the group's administration. The incident, marked with political trauma, cumulated in a disastrous relocation to the Legion's primary headquarters, a move that involved a number of casualties for local pod pilots laying claim to the area.

Military analysts have speculated that the common flight commander of Mordus operations during the movement, Lt. Amlerik Raun, may have been chastised for the recent loss of Mordu's shipping and perhaps even demoted to a lower rank, with command being reassigned to another officer. Recent localised activity by patrol forces round the Legion's primary station indicate a notable rise in the organisation's operations, with a number of notable combat vessels being called from patrol duty.

Legion representatives have remained unavailable for comment on the recent apparent lapse in their security procedures, nor have they responded to questions on their plans for the near future.

15/09/2005

Stargate changes alter the face of trading - Yulai in decay

Yulai, once a vibrant trade hub, now slowly decaying. What used to be one of the largest open markets in our space has lost a significant portion of trade to other systems, a direct result of the stargate re-routing which took place almost two months ago, when the Gallente Federation and Minmatar Republic took action against rampant smuggling of illegal goods. The dwindling of trade in Yulai has not surprised trade moguls.

Visiting Yulai, I had the opportunity to speak to KIAEddz, CEO of mercenary corporation KIA Corp (KillerZ in Action). Asking him why he thought most trade was leaving Yulai, he responded:

"Two words. It's dead. It's simply too many jumps, too far away."

And he has a point. It seems Oursulaert and Jita have replaced Yulai, probably because of their location. Another factor, according to KIAEddz, is the presence of high-profile employers, who are eager to employ privateer pod-pilots. Oursulaert alone boasts the highest number of registered pod-pilots, whereas Yulai numbers have dropped staggeringly. To compare - at the time this article was printed, Oursulaert had 232 active pilots, Yulai had only 48. Jita numbered 208 pilots in space.

Although the Yulai torch seems to have passed to Caldari space, each region seems to have its own hotspot. Condensed information gathered by influential traders shows that Rens, Pator, Amarr and Alenia have all benefitted from the proactive anti-smuggling stances of the Minmatar Republic and Gallente Federation.

27/09/2005

Gallente Elections - A Planetside perspective

From the beginning of the Gallente election campaign, the three candidates and their delegates have been working tirelessly to win the favour of the voting public. Despite numerous setbacks in the initial months of the election process, Souro Foiritan and his two rivals Eman Autrech and Mentas Blaque have chosen their emissaries from the most capable and enterprising of the capsuleer elite that the Gallente Federation has to offer; and are now focusing their colossal political machines on the main populace of the Federation.

Over the past few months, the vast metropolises and cities on thousands of worlds across the Gallente Federation have come under siege from all sides as delegates from the three camps battle for the attention of potential voters. Rallies, speeches, and fundraisers have become a common and almost daily occurrence on the streets of these cities; and even public broadcasting stations have been taken over as the candidates utilise every medium possible get the most coverage, all the while exchanging their smear campaigns and attempts at character assassination with one another.

Through this lengthy election process the public is beginning to feel the pressure. As one citizen pointed out, "You can't even step outside without being accosted by one person or another trying to get your vote, and it's just as bad at home - every broadcasting channel has one politician or another yapping on and on about the election. It's ridiculous."

The candidates themselves have also been hard at work, having spent the last month touring the Federation's key systems and holding debates on important issues within the Federation. The most recent debate, held at the foot of the Gallente-Caldari war memorial in the city of Hueromont, saw Blaque and Foiritan come to blows over the recent theft of a Gallente Navy Titan - a matter in which Blaque criticised Foiritan and his administration greatly for "weakening the Federation through meek indecisiveness".

Though the election has largely dropped from public view in the last few months with regard to the space bound citizens of the Federation, market analysts have noticed an increased demand for certain commodities in several regions where the planetside election campaigns are most concentrated.

09/10/2005

Core Empire Systems Straining From Traffic

A number of Empire solar systems are straining from the massive traffic running through them in recent months, and severe measures need to be taken to rectify the situation. Local authorities are negotiating with mega-corporations who base their business operations in Rens, Oursulaert and Jita to move some of their assets to nearby solar systems so the load on the core areas may be diverted.

Pilots and corporations based in the Rens, Oursulaert and Jita systems are encouraged to relocate their businesses, and start using their connections with agents in nearby systems. Mega-corporation officials point out that pilots can remain in business with them and advise capsuleers to utilize their agents in lower security systems, where the agent missions and contracts are more lucrative.

A Rens pilot, when asked about the situation, stated that "The go*bleeep* da*bleep* station manager bast*bleep* had me waiting for 7 minutes before allowing me to undock. I'm going to the nearest 0.6, where you get complimentary bathrobes from agents. Fu*bleep* this *bleeep* *bleep*."

An Oursulaert native went on record, saying "They better fix the *bleep* *bleep* *bleep* jump *bleep* gates before I *bleep**bleep**bleep* and then some." He then shouted something incomprehensible at nearby Customs Officials, subtle foam beginning to assemble at the corners of his mouth as he finally became able to jump to the next system.

Similar stories have been reported in systems like Nonni, Sobaseki, Inoue and Isaziwa. Wasona Binge reported that rush hour traffic was approaching "Clusterfu*bleep* proportions."

12/12/2005

Empire Moves to Deny CONCORD Claims as Internal Investigation Continues

The Ministry of Internal Order this afternoon published a report summarizing the progress of the Empire's investigation into the death of Amarr Emperor Dorian II.

According to the report, significant progress has been made in uncovering the identities of the Emperor's killers, though several key people remain at large. In addition, the report claims that no high-ranking personnel in any known agency or organization within or outside the Empire appear to be involved at this point in time.

The report also states that no evidence has been found to back up internal memorandums said to have been leaked from CONCORD headquarters in August, claiming parties within the Khanid Kingdom were behind the Emperor's assassination. Furthermore, the report states, CONCORD investigators may have jumped to conclusions based on spurious evidence.

"At the time, we believed we had sufficient leads to warrant a public statement. We were asked to produce results, and the leads we had at the time seemed solid enough for us to take the course of action we did," stated Banniskore Zabulugi, DED Director of Intelligence, who has since July headed the CONCORD investigation into the Emperor's death.

Meanwhile, Khanid Kingdom officials have consistently moved to deny any involvement, expressing bafflement at the actions of CONCORD investigators. "Not a shred of evidence was found," stated a high-level Khanid source. "Barring one leaked memo from a file clerk - whose motivation is not ours to guess, but whom we have been convinced has been released from his duties - the allegations were found to be completely baseless."

The Kingdom has also in recent months moved to consolidate its relationship with the Amarr Empire, stepping up its role as trade intermediary as Amarr corporation stock dwindles in the absence of an Emperor. "They're completely absorbed," said the Khanid source. "With the Succession Committee and their own internal investigation taking all their attention, they're barely remembering to feed themselves, let alone their nation."

24/12/2005

Caldari State Plays Host to Capsuleer Tournament

Earlier today, the Caldari Gaming Commission announced their plans to host the largest capsuleer fighting tournament since the Amarr Championships. Announcing the names of the sixty-four alliances eligible to compete, a state official said "We are expecting to see some of the worlds most skilled fighters at this event, the capsuleer alliances have tremendous strength and our main interest lies in seeing who will come out on top."

With surprisingly little time for preparation, each alliance must select three of their most competent fighters to compete on their behalf. Six pilots will then meet in an arena set up at a secret location. The winning team moves on to the next round, while the losers are eliminated.

Some political analysts believe that this is the first step of war preparation for the Caldari, and that they are simply "testing them". "In the past few years, capsuleer alliances have been growing at a rate faster than we could have ever imagined, especially in the outer regions. One day they might actually start posing as threats to the empires."

Whatever the case may be, the whole world will be watching as this tournament unveils.

27/12/2005

Betting Services Open for Business

Tensions are rising as only one day remains until the start of the alliance fighting tournament. Voices have been sounding from all over, trying to guess the outcome of the event, and some teams have been revealed as definite favorites by the public. Ever since their original announcement, the Caldari Gaming Commission has remained quiet regarding the event, only stating that they will release the tournament pairings at 18:00 today.

Two large capsuleer corporations have decided to use the opportunity and host public betting services. Both Eve University and BIG Corporation are allowing pilots to take part in the championships by wagering money on the team they think will win. Interest is clearly high, as waged amounts are already in the hundreds of millions and rising.

Whether for contestants or spectators, excitement is at a maximum.



EVE News 2006 YC 108

23/01/2006

Matari-Gallente Exodus May Be Underway, New Study Says

Researchers at the University of Caille today published a study warning that a mass population exodus from Republic territories may be imminent. According to numbers published in the Federation's Year 107 Census Index, the influx of Matari immigrants into Federation-controlled regions, a figure with little historic variation, has within the past six months swelled to near sevenfold inflation figures from earlier periods.

The report cites increasing unemployment numbers, an ailing economy, and the increased influence of organized crime groups on the Matari population as the primary motivations of the exodus. Additionally, polling in Matari immigrant communities within core Gallente territories revealed that a number of Matari are growing increasingly dissatisfied with the perceived disunity of the Republic's Tribal Council.

Trar Odemenko, Chief Spokesman for the AME (Association of Matari Expatriates) in Darpagne, Renyn IV's cultural melting pot, said the consequences of tribal discord were "evident everywhere" in Republic society.

"Domestic reforms have been desperately needed for months now, but the tribes are too preoccupied with their constant game of one-upmanship to remember that there is a populace to support," he said.

In a claim echoed by the UoC's study, Odemenko also said that incidents of inter-tribal violence are on the rise. As reported by the Raurvor Feednet in Hulm last week, a Krusual funeral ceremony was interrupted by a militant group of self-proclaimed Brutor traditionalists, who claimed the Krusual's use of a particular traditional Matari symbol was in violation of their own tribal codes. The incident precipitated a melee which claimed the lives of seventeen Matari, all of them under the age of thirty. The incident is not an isolated one: similar episodes have taken place throughout the regions of Metropolis and Heimatar in the past months.

"Part of the problem is that as people - particularly younger people - feel the ties to their Republic weaken, they start looking for new identifiers," said Auzue Estisen, Deacon of Social Sciences at the University of Caille and one of the study's chief researchers.

"Clan and sub-clan identifications still serve their societal purposes, but in the absence of a larger unifying entity people will increasingly start to seek the tribal identifier. Under the current climate, with the seeming reluctance of the authorities to attend to aspects of domestic relevance, that makes for a very volatile situation. I believe that in the coming months, unless something is done, we're going to see tribal discord increase to truly worrisome levels."

06/03/2006

Federation Seeks Solutions to Immigrant Influx

Agencies within the Gallente Federation have in recent weeks been engaged in staving off potential problems posed by the steadily escalating influx of Matari immigrants to regions bordering the two nations.

According to a report released by the Federal Immigration Advisory Board to the Gallente Senate yesterday, the inhabitant figures of population centers in the Gallente Border Zone and Nexus constellations have swelled considerably in the past two months, even more so if the presumed number of illegal immigrants is factored in.

The report warns that "a large-scale ingress of displaced societal elements can and very often does contribute to slum formation, increasing crime rates and the drawing of hard cultural lines across areas previously unaffected by racial tensions." It further proposes that the Senate divert significant funds towards fiscal benefits for immigrants, outlining several legislature drafts for Senate consideration.

"We do agree that there is a potential problem looming there," stated Mentas Blaque, Gallente Senate head, at a press conference this morning. "We must, however, keep aware that even in times of prosperity the federal budget has its limits, and the wellbeing of our own has to remain a priority. We will take the matter up later in the week."

Blaque has prompted outrage among the inhabitants of the most heavily affected areas for what is seen as a criminally blasé response to large-scale problems with serious implications. Lirianne Crulart, mayor of Des Ponticelles, this afternoon went on record stating that "if the esteemed Senator sees a particular distinction between border zone residents and other members of the Federation, I sure wouldn't mind him enlightening me. As far as I know, we're all citizens of the same nation."

Des Ponticelles is Bourynes III's largest city and one of the Federation's registered megalopoli. It is home to sixty-three million inhabitants, fifteen million of which are disenfranchised Matari.

26/04/2006

Presidential Candidate Announces Surprise Withdrawal of Candidacy

Gallente Presidential candidate Eman Autrech at a press conference this morning announced that he is withdrawing his candidacy for the Gallente Presidential seat. The announcement follows several months of census taking and legal maneuvering within the Federation, circumstances which have seen the indeterminate

delay of election proceedings.

In his statement, the former presidential hopeful claimed that "due to the apparent flaws present in our mode of government, my faith that the system works as intended is greatly diminished. While my reasons for bowing out of this race are personal in nature, I am certain the untenable situation we are presented with would have compelled me to withdraw before long. The Federation's intolerable census-stalling and gerrymandering is making a mockery of this democracy, and I will not stand for it any longer."

Members of Autrech's campaign have expressed dismay at the announcement, though according to his chief campaign treasurer Louis Grells, it's been "a long time coming."

"Campaigning for this length of time takes its toll," he said. "The coffers were beginning to run dry and our team had lost nearly a quarter of its original number. I'd say we were nearing the end, anyway."

Already the announcement is being hailed by pundits as an indication of the inadequacy of democracy at this level of government. Victor Roanon, representative of radical political think-tank the Trauberge Hollow Institute on Bourynes III, this afternoon called the proceedings "typical of the farce democracy rapidly turns into when you try to get it working under an umbrella of five trillion people."

Still others point to the circumstances surrounding Autrech's stepping down as extremely suspect. A member of his campaign, speaking on condition of anonymity, claimed the candidate had seemed unusually distraught and unfocused in the weeks leading up to the announcement. "It was like one day he was Mr. Autrech and the next he was just someone else. It was very unsettling."

"Plus, if anyone understands the system, it's him. He knows as well as anyone that the bout of legal wrangling is finally ending. This is a very strange time for him to drop out."

27/04/2006

Foiritan, Blaque Comment on Autrech's Withdrawal

President Souro Foiritan's office and the campaign office of Senator Mentas Blaque today sent out press releases detailing the two candidates' stances on Eman Autrech's surprise withdrawal of his presidential bid yesterday morning.

The President's Office's statement reads: "It comes as a blow to this democracy and a personal shock to the President that a good man such as Autrech should decide to step down. His reasons for doing so are doubtless solid and just. The Foiritan Administration wishes the candidate the best of luck in whatever tasks he chooses to undertake next."

Senator Blaque's statement, meanwhile, describes Autrech as "reneging on his duties to this country and this democracy" and "bowing under the pressure of competition." It furthermore states that the candidate's withdrawal, while "a tragedy for the man himself and his supporters" is "nonetheless a blessing for those of us who are serious about our participation in this race, as well as for everyone who is serious about seeing our nation scale the height of its potential."

Autrech's withdrawal, announced yesterday morning, follows nearly a year's period of census-taking and district-rebordering by the Federation government. The period, known due to its pervasiveness of propaganda as "The Winter of Slogans," has seen a quietly escalating battle of imagery and ideology rage between the three candidates, a battle which now sees its first casualty. Already this afternoon, on streets bordering Mercury Square in Caille, workers were seen pasting a new line of Blaque posters over the frayed remnants of Autrech images dating back to January of this year.

Questioned about the other candidates' reactions to his withdrawal, Mr. Autrech declined to comment.

06/05/2006

Billionaire Dies, Leaves Unusual Request in Will

The famed Gallente businessman, entrepreneur and playboy Ruevo Aram has just passed at the age of 173. Admired by the intellectual society for his skill at solving seemingly unsolvable riddles. Known for his wild behavior and rumoured to have ties deep within the Gallente government, he will be missed by many.

In his will, he left this message:

"At the time of my death, one person will have a chance to make history. In the event of my death, ninety-eight percent of my wealth is to be transferred to the government of the Caldari Sate, they have their orders on what to do with it. The rest will go to the first person who solves these eleven riddles:

1

*You might not heed this advice or care
do not go into HED
it's guaranteed that somebody's there
to fill your body with lead.*

2

*Twenty-two trustworthy men
in a popular traders den
mysterious number four
opens this magical door.*

3

*Coming and laying their tents
causing shouts and creating dents
holding their ground for weeks
reaching their peaks
until the coming of tweaks.*

4

*Once friends
once learning
now fiends
now burning
forever.*

5

*Down in Stain
there lies a system
with one way in
it is most eastern*

6

*Many a travellers dream
as hopeless at it may seem
a friend of mine named Gep
is the closest you'll ever get.*

7

*She foiled their plan
and most of them ran
it did not last
this empire of the past.*

8

*Fast deployment and swift results
they'll work for whoever pays
a night stalkers honor heavily weighs
on the orders he gets and obey's.*

9

*To do is to be
to do is me
machine I am
scientist I am
or rather, was.*

10

*A highly dangerous place
you'll find the next clue
hidden away
close to the diamond ace.*

11

*A purple Amarr to the south
deep in the empire's mouth.
above the sea with two ways in
find this system and win."*

Whatever these riddles mean, or where they lead, this reporter cannot tell. Just how large Ruevo's fortune was

remains uncertain, although it is believed to have been in the hundreds of billions.

More information can be found on the GalNet forums.

07/05/2006

Riddles Solved by Burn Eden

Nine hours after the official announcement, Shin Ra and Heinky of Burn Eden managed to come up with solutions to all of the eleven riddles from Ruevo Aram's will.

Following the victory, a Caldari State official made this announcement: "As a part of our deal with Ruevo, we will honor his request and erect a statue commemorating the winners. May his soul rest in peace, and congratulations to Burn Eden."

The whereabouts of the statue remain uncertain, although Jita is rumoured to have been chosen by the winners. In addition to the statue, each of them will receive three billion ISK from Ruevo's will, as well as a commemorable Warp Core Stabilizer II.

16/05/2006

Presidential Candidate Remembers Hueromont Dead

Senator Mentas Blaque, one of two remaining candidates for the presidency of the Gallente Federation, yesterday paid a visit to the city of Hueromont on Gallente Prime. The visit was undertaken in order to commemorate the roughly fourteen thousand Gallente who died when Caldari Admiral Yakia Tovil-Toba flew his carrier into the planet's atmosphere 188 years ago, during the Gallente-Caldari war. The senator held a speech at the site of the calamity, after which he was toured by the city's mayor, Emile Tuscagne, through the districts hardest hit by the attack.

During his speech, Blaque paid tribute to the dead of Hueromont, urging his audience to "remember the sacrifices given by those who came before" and to "remain alert to the presence of evils that still today lurk just beyond the horizon." He also encouraged Gallente citizens to "continue engaging in meaningful dialogue about our Federation and the citizen's duty to safeguard his homeland."

The senator's speech, as well as the occasion of his visit to Hueromont, has been criticized by liberal parties as deliberately inflammatory. "It seems fairly obvious that the senator's hateful tirade is meant to incite tensions among the good people of Hueromont," stated Senator Audrey Rairix, a long-time opponent of Blaque's within the Senate. "I think it should be apparent to anyone listening that this was not a speech about acceptance and reconciliation. It was one of anger, mistrust, even vengeance."

Among the assembled crowd no signs of discontent were superficially apparent, though isolated pockets of dissenters within the crowd briefly vocalized their contempt before being escorted off the premises by guard personnel. During key moments in the speech, applause and cheering carried as far as outlying districts as a thousands-strong crowd roared approval at Senator Blaque's words.

Hueromont is today the ninth largest city in the Gallente Federation, with thirty-six million inhabitants in the greater metropolitan area. In the nearly two centuries since the Hueromont Incident, it has been generally regarded as a sore point for Gallente pride and remains something of a taboo subject in international political circles.

14/06/2006

Alliance Tournament Sign-ups to Commence

The official registration period for capsuleer alliances wishing to participate in the upcoming Alliance Tournament will begin today, a spokesperson for the Caldari Gaming Commission has announced. The contest is the second of its kind to be held by the CGC and the first matches are scheduled to commence on the 14th of July.

As with the previous tournament the Executor Corporation CEO of those alliances wishing to participate will be required to register on behalf of their alliance at the tournament sign-up page.

Registration for the tournament will continue for two weeks, during which time the first one hundred and twenty eight alliances to register will be given a place in the competition. The CGC has also stated that the top sixteen alliances from the last tournament will be guaranteed a position if they choose to compete by registering.

Unlike in the first tournament, teams will consist of five combatants, each piloting a different ship class ranging from frigates to battleships. Organisers are hopeful that the inclusion of destroyer and battlecruiser class vessels in the contest will dramatically improve upon the tactical aspect of the competition, and provide far more spectacular and entertaining battles than in the previous tournament.

Edouard D'Evereux, a Professor of Mixed Unit Tactics at the Federal Navy Academy, has applauded the decision to include the newer ship classes. "History has repeatedly shown us that it is not necessarily the side with the best technology that wins a battle, but the side that makes better use of its units and tactics to defeat the enemy." He went on to express his interest in how the capsuleer alliances might make use of the newer ship types in the tournament. "I think the Command Ship battlecruiser variants will really show their full potential for

squad-based warfare in this tournament."

More information can be found [here](#).

19/06/2006

Blaque Approval Ratings Rise Amid Harsh Caldari Criticism

Press representatives from the Caldari State's Chief Executive Panel yesterday released a statement on incendiary speeches held in the past month by Gallente presidential hopeful Mentas Blaque, in particular the candidate's May 16 speech at the Gallente Prime city of Hueromont.

The Panel leveled harsh criticism at the senator's speech, calling it, among other things, "a disingenuous display of nationalism." Senator Blaque was quick to respond, stating in a unicast holofeed interview that "in a political climate of civility and honesty, the Caldari ideally would be the last to accuse anyone of nationalism."

This last month has seen the candidate's approval ratings make a sharp turn upwards, with latest polls indicating that out of registered likely voters 58% would vote Blaque over incumbent president Souro Foiritan. The most commonly cited reasons for the choice are a wish for strong leadership and general public dissatisfaction with how long election proceedings have taken.

In what has come as a surprise to many analysts, President Foiritan has not responded strongly to Blaque's rhetoric, claiming that it is deliberately incendiary and designed only to provoke a response intended to paint opposing stances in a negative manner. It is not known at this point whether he intends to give replies to Blaque's statements, some of which have veered directly into the realm of ad hominem attacks against the incumbent.

22/06/2006

Caldari Gaming Commission announces tournament format change and prizes.

During a press conference yesterday afternoon, the CGC announced the prizes for the winner and runner ups of the second alliance tournament. The head of the commission, Airas Sukela, also stated a change in the tournament's format. The new format is known as a bracket or pool format where contestants are divided into eight four-team groups. The first matches are held between alliances of the same group and only the top two in each group will proceed to the next round to compete against alliances from other groups.

The prizes that will be awarded at the end of the tournament are:

- * First place - 1 x Wyvern Mothership, 5 x Chimera Carrier, 5 x Caldari Raven Navy Issue
- * Second place - 5 x Chimera Carrier, 5 Caldari Raven Navy Issue
- * third and fourth place - 2 x Chimera Carrier

Mr. Sukela explained the decision for changing the structure of the tournament after the press conference, ' We only had 28 confirmed alliances willing to participate, and wanting to provide the general public with two weekends of entertainment, we decided to change the format to extend the tournament period.' People have come to expect the very best of us. I can't say why so few alliances decided to participate, but we are more than happy to accommodate the alliances that have signed up. We still expect this tournament to be thrilling to watch, bet on and participate in.'

For the last weeks many pilots have discussed the tournament through various mediums. Seeing a team bragging about their expensive equipment might have discouraged smaller contenders from competing. This view is shared by Tyrax Thorrk, the owner of several rare ships, including the Imperial Issue Armageddon and Apocalypse. 'It seems to me like people who weren't willing to spend the ISK for full pirate implant sets simply decided they had lost before signing up.'

Professor Kiyudas Tsalmaki, Lecturer in Emergent Warfare Analysis at the State War Academy, has remarked that given the prizes of the first tournament he expected that more alliances wished to participate. Mr Tsalmaki: 'This can mean two things, either the alliances are so rich they do not think it's worth their time to participate, or they can't afford to lose any ships and don't participate at all. Looking at the list of confirmed alliances, there are some large names missing, and we can only guess why they decided not to enter the tournament. Another possible explanation would be their preoccupation with other activities, but mostly I think it's a matter of them fearing to lose.'

29/06/2006

Ice Fields in Inner Empire Regions exhausted, Conservationists up in arms!

Concervationists have called for a day of mourning today. Strip mining operations have depleted numerous Ice Fields in high-traffic, high-security Empire regions. Initial reports state these resources will not replenish, and other Ice Fields are in danger of the same fate.

"Today is a very sad day, knowing that these once vast stretches of natural ice and beauty are forever gone," said Marcalin Chronet, a noted champion of resource and new Capsuleer protection rights. "How many more fields will suffer the same fate in order to pad the wallets of companies who automate the strip mining process for obscene profits? It's a shame that these large scale, automated mining ops went through these crucial areas

and cleaned them out. Some new pod pilots are going to wonder where they can go to turn a couple ISK for expenses tonight."

Others spoke out against these mining conglomerates. Said Aidan Black, CEO of Serenity Search, Salvage and Storage, "Hopefully, this loss of natural resources will have an impact on how these operations run. Maybe now, they will have to go into less-secure areas where they have to compete with Capsuleers who are at the controls of their mining AND weapon systems. Time will tell."

Attempts were made to contact a number of strip mining conglomerate officers and CEOs. None could be reached for comment.

30/06/2006

ECAID testing new freighter cargo containment system, Insurance companies overjoyed

The ECAID division of ISD, in conjunction with Freighter manufacturers, cargo expander manufacturers and some ship insurance providers, are in final testing of a new cargo containment control system.

The updated control software resolves a major issue with dispersion of containment fields upon the destruction of a freighter. Previously, these containment fields would implode upon collapse, thus crushing the cargo and rendering it unsalvageable. The new control software reverses the implosion of the containment fields, protecting cargo containers so they may be recovered.

Insurance companies and hauling corporations are heralding this as a major improvement to their profit margin. Said Aidan Black, CEO of Serenity Search, Salvage and Storage, "There have been a number of salvage ops where recovery was impossible due to containment field collapse. To me, hearing about a freighter getting popped has always been sad. All that lost revenue for recovery fees gone. This new software is going to improve my bottom line."

If the software upgrade meets all testing criteria, the upgrade will automatically be uploaded via Gal-Net on Tuesday.

03/07/2006

Freighter containment field testing fails. Further testing required.

Weekend testing of the cargo containment software has revealed a flaw with the system and the upgrade will not be deployed tomorrow. While the software worked as intended, the potential release of numerous cargo containers presented navigational hazards in simulations where freighters were destroyed. These hazards slowed or even stopped movement through systems and caused communications delays as Gal-Net became flooded with the sudden appearance of container transponder beacons. CONCORD agents were required to individually disable the transponder beacons, a time consuming and manpower intensive task.

Anonymous sources are stating this deployment is only temporarily halted, but were not able to give a future deployment date. Further testing is required to resolve communication issues with Gal-Net and remove any navigational hazards.

04/09/2006

Over 30,500 Capsuleers join in the celebration

At 1939 Galactic Time, 30,538 capsuleers were logged into the Gal-Net communication channels, more than the channels have seen in the history of Gal-Net Comm. Unsubstantiated reports put over 700 capsuleers in the Jita system at the time of the Gal-Net user record.

Said Lt. Commander AeolusWind, a member of ISD's STAR division, "It's amazing to see the capsuleer brotherhood has expanded such a great deal, but it still has that warm toasty feeling like when everyone in Gal-Net Comm was a rookie."

Such sentiments were also expressed by RipLee, a pilot with The Shepherd's Chapel Nexus; a corporation specializing with assisting rookie capsuleers, "It is with great honor that I see the 30k mark being broke.. I can recall 3 years and 5 months ago, a 90 capsuleer test during the Gal-Net Comm beta.. CONCORD has done an awesome achievement in such a feat..."

During a joint press conference after this event, Obuchi Shikamaa, Chief Coordinator of Public Relations for CONCORD and Admiral Kieron, Administrator of the Interstellar Services Department, both expressed their gratitude to the capsuleer community for their continued support. Stated Kieron, "This is a momentous occasion for everyone, from the newest rookie frigate pilot to the veteran Titan commander, and all of us in CONCORD and ISD. Thank you."

26/09/2006

Ascendant Frontier completes first Titan.

FEYTHABOLIS. Yesterday at approximately 12:20 New Eden Time, the Ascendant Frontier Alliance (ASCN) deployed the first capsuleer owned and built Titan into the AZN-D2 system.

The Titan is the majestic Avatar of Amarrian design now named CYVOK's Avatar after its current pilot and one of

the leading figures who made the production possible. The launch is the result of 8 months of hard work and dedication of an entire alliance, at the cost of over 160 billion ISK, as well as a sophisticated operation to keep the construction site and its contents a secret. This included a "feint" operation producing a smaller capital class vessel to throw off potential attacks to the real construction site.

The accumulation of the vast quantity of minerals required to complete construction was actually handled by refinery taxes, as well as mining operations by ASCN member corporations, who were unaware what the final objective was. Aside from the minerals the Avatar also needed 16 component, 1 ship and 3 module Blueprint originals, all blueprints combined made up for 93 billion of the 160 billion ISK total necessary for the construction. The Titan itself was constructed in secret, with only a small inner-circle of ASCN members aware of the project.

When asked about this achievement, CYVOK, the leader and pilot of the Titan, was quick to reassure that the entire alliance, one of the largest in the cluster, had worked long and hard in order to achieve the completion of the Avatar. The secrecy involved allowed the build up and construction to take place without hostile intervention. CYVOK explained, 'Only 3 pilots knew about the details of the project, lots of folk helped but they had no idea. We placed TONS of thought into misdirection. Pilots were asked to do things for other "projects" they had no idea it was all going to this one.' Enemies of ASCN only came close to finding out the construction site two weeks before the completion of the titan.

The launch in AZN-D2 attracted a large group of pilots from both inside and outside the ASCN alliance to witness the deployment of this new vessel. ASCN members present in AXN-D2 during the maiden flight were very happy that the Titan had been completed, despite the veil of secrecy.

CYVOK commented, 'The completion of the Avatar represents another true first for New Eden brought forward by the hard work and dedication of all the members of the ASCN & AXE Community. Together there is no challenge we cannot accomplish. The face of warfare in New Eden has just changed forever.'

04/10/2006

Blaque In The Lead As Election Day Approaches

As the Federation shifts into election gear, billions of voters across Gallente space prepare to cast their votes in what looks to become one of the most hotly contested elections in the nation's history.

According to the latest numbers from the Federation's polling bureaus, presidential candidate Senator Mentas Blaque is currently in the lead with a public support rating of 54% to incumbent President Souro Foiritan's 46%.

This past summer has seen a steady increase in incendiary political speech by Senator Blaque and his campaign office, as well as by members of the President's cabinet. The President himself, meanwhile, has been consistently reluctant to engage in direct confrontation with the Senator, conducting his personal communications with such care that Sovicou Star chief editor Nelvine Ducomp in a July 27th editorial famously referred to his condition as "a rare case of actual diplomacy, one we all hope he recovers from soon."

Foiritan, previously known for aggressive debating techniques and extreme political fierceness, has this summer instead channeled his energy into extensive campaigning in the Federation's fringe districts. Of particular note have been his excursions into districts such as Chappel and Lavoux, areas with high concentrations of Intaki and Matari immigrants and historically low voter turnout.

Blaque's platform is concerned primarily with, in the Senator's own words, "reclaiming a sense of national pride" and "making sure our own people are cared for before tending to the needs of others." His promises of widespread domestic economic reform have met with resounding approval, and his large bloc of followers have been noted time and again for their almost religious zeal.

Foiritan's platform, meanwhile, revolves around foreign policy and free trade, concepts that have been at the core of Gallente political thought since the days of the Gallente-Caldari war almost a century ago.

Election day is scheduled for October 27th.

05/10/2006

State Denies Recession Claims

Representatives of the Caldari State's Chief Executive Panel issued a public statement this morning, refuting several claims recently put forth by noted economist Arvelan Tokaru.

In an in-depth article published in respected economic journal The Wiramar Index last Monday, Dr. Tokaru warns that numerous signs indicate the Caldari State may be headed for a major recession.

Foremost among these, she claims, are rising unemployment numbers and crippled supply chains stemming from rift trade agreements with the Amarr Empire, previously the State's top trading partner. Dr. Tokaru also states that in an attempt to salvage the situation, the Chief Executive Panel has engaged in what she terms "back-against-the-wall protectionism," heavy-handedly levying tariffs that are beginning to cause diplomatic ill-will among smaller trading partners and "are sure to backfire in the long run."

The Executive Panel in its statement wholly refutes these claims, stating that unemployment numbers are at much the same level they have been at over the last two years, and that the tariffs have been imposed to promote protection of jobs within the State and maintain the domestic standard of living. According to them, the rift trade agreements with Amarr are "an unfortunate consequence of administrative difficulties within Empire agencies, which we have been assured will be rectified soon."

A number of analysts from within the State have spoken out in support of Tokaru's claims, reporting that the State's methods for calculating unemployment figures are misleading and that the actual numbers are higher than they have been for over eighty years.

"They only include workers who sign on," stated an analyst who wished to remain anonymous. "If you haven't reported yourself to the Bureau of Civilian Affairs - a trek through a bureaucratic labyrinth which takes the better part of a day, and can go wrong in numerous ways, all of which will result in your application being rejected without notification - you're not included among the unemployed. This excludes large portions of the population who, even notwithstanding the inefficiency of the bureaucracy, have long since given up any chance of finding steady work."

"There is a very definite underclass here," he said, "and it is growing."

27/10/2006

Election Day in the Federation

At 12:00 noon EVT today, polls for the Office of the Presidency opened in the five-hundred-twenty-eight voting districts of the Gallente Federation. With the projected turnout approaching 2.5 trillion voters, today's election is shaping up to be one of the biggest in the Federation's history.

Booths have been opened in every major city and municipality across the Federation, and already citizens are flocking to cast their votes. Sepault Farina, analyst at the Center for Democratic Advance, a Sovicou political think-tank, touts today's proceedings as the "grand finale of a drawn-out farce that has been going on for the better part of two years. One can scarcely believe it's finally going to be over."

Preliminary numbers are unavailable at this point, but updates will be provided as the day progresses.

27/10/2006

Blaque in Lead, Early Numbers Suggest

According to early numbers just in from the Gallente Electoral Commission, presidential contender Mentas Blaque currently leads incumbent President Souro Foiritan by a five-point margin. Votes have been fully counted from 233 districts out of 528.

An interview with Senator Blaque was aired two hours ago on a popular Gallente feednet, wherein the Senator reaffirmed the driving points of his campaign.

"I think Gallenteans should be proud to call themselves Gallente... I, I think that there is such a focus on being open towards other cultures that people will... sometimes they will tend to forget that they have a rich and proud heritage of their own to draw on. The citizens of our great nation should be more aware that we are just that, a great nation," he said.

The Senator furthermore expounded upon his platform's proposed shifts in focus towards what they term "domestic naturalization," a process involving state-sponsored segregation of immigrant populations to areas specifically designated for them, referred to in the doctrine as "cultural habitats."

The 18-minute interview has provoked mixed reactions from international parties. Keitan Yun, a senior representative from the Minmatar Republic's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, commented that the senator "sounded like he was reading aloud from one of those old ultranationalist textbooks that have by now become the stuff of parody."

Larik Saal, Amarr Ambassador to CONCORD, meanwhile approved vociferously of the Senator's proposals, stating that the Federation "is in great and dire need of a ruler capable of drawing the lines where they need to be drawn."

Updated election numbers will be provided as they come in.

28/10/2006

Foiritan Triumphs in Close Race

Final election results are in from the Federation: President Souro Foiritan has claimed victory by a narrow margin, beating his opponent, Senator Mentas Blaque, by just a single point. This will make him the first president in Gallente history ever to serve more than one term in office.

"I am proud, and I am humbled, to be granted the opportunity to serve this great nation for five more years," said the President in an address to his supporters, delivered minutes ago from the steps of the presidential residence in Caille.

After thanking his family, his cabinet, his campaign staff and his supporters, President Foiritan expressed his intent to lead the Federation into "an era of prosperity and goodwill, in which we shall continue to proudly hold aloft the ideals that have made our country what it is."

"I want to wish Senator Blaque and his family the best, and I thank him for a challenging and spirited campaign," he said.

Senator Blaque has issued a concession statement congratulating Foiritan on his victory. In it, he "strongly urges" the President to "safeguard the values and integrity of our nation."

Nearly 2.8 trillion citizens voted in the election, by far the highest turnout in the history of Gallentean democracy.

28/10/2006

Race Tightens As Border Region Vote Weighs In

According to the latest numbers from the Gallente Electoral Commission, incumbent President Souro Foiritan has gained three points on his opponent, Senator Mentas Blaque, bringing the race to a close two points. The news comes in the wake of a concerted showing of Matari and Intaki immigrants at polls in border regions of the Federation.

The cities of Aubruille, Sargai and Sebirouse, the three most populous cities of Sinq Laison, a border region of the Federation, have seen large rallies of Matari and Intaki voters storming voting locations in calculated rushes, events which are widely believed to be orchestrated by several nameless grassroots immigrant organizations.

Four hours ago Temperance Square, the bustling site of Sebirouse's central voting location, played sudden host to a seventeen-hundred person mixed crowd of Matari and Intaki, assembled within three minutes from smaller groups in several different parts of the square. The silent mob proceeded to the voting station, where every one of them cast their vote for incumbent President Foiritan. The same phenomenon was reported in precisely the same manner in Aubruille, Sargai, and dozens of smaller cities. The proceedings were more or less peaceful in all places, with only a few minor incidents of violence reported.

Analysis of the past few hours has been rife with speculation on the nature of these groups. Many commentators believe them to have been carefully trained and controlled, while others believe them to be nothing more than the end result of ideological memes spreading rapidly through a threatened subset of the population.

Whatever their cause, they appear to indicate a trend: incumbent President Souro Foiritan now stands only two points behind his opponent, Mentas Blaque. The current total tally of polled districts stands at 359 out of a total 528.

06/11/2006

Dozens Dead In Kassigainen IV Riot

Rioting erupted this morning at Truiisu Station, a Kassigainen IV mining colony owned by Caldari giant the Kaalakiota Corporation. The exact reasons for the fracas are unclear, but the fighting is reported to have broken out in the wake of an incident where several officers of the Home Guard, Kaalakiota's private police force, allegedly slit the throat of a former colony worker recently laid off by the corporation.

Exact numbers of deceased are unavailable at this point, but unconfirmed reports indicate that fierce fighting has been going on between former workers and Home Guard forces, with dozens killed so far. Several sections of the colony are reported to have suffered complete blackouts, with a number of the colony's vital functions running on auxiliary power.

The Kaalakiota Corporation at noon today issued a short statement, claiming that outside of some "minor collateral damage," the situation was rapidly being brought under control. They have declined to comment further on the matter.

Truiisu Station is a Type-4, partially-subterranean mineral colony with a Class-B sustenance dome and reinforced atmospheric generators for use in extreme environments. It is currently home to over 1680 people, comprising approximately 1100 Kaalakiota workers and their families.

06/11/2006

Feednets Disagree on Kassigainen Incident's Causes

Several Caldari feednets have in the past hour run news claiming that, according to information just received from inside sources at the Kaalakiota Corporation, the ongoing riots at Truiisu Station on Kassigainen IV are the result of "a planned revolt, instigated by double agents from competing corporations." According to the information, the goal of these double agents is "the subversion of the Kaalakiota work force through incitement of anti-corporate ideals."

Analysts from other networks have heaped scorn on the statement, calling it a "thinly veiled attempt" by the megacorporation to cast the victims of what looks like a major humanitarian incident in a negative light.

"If the general trends are anything to go by," said Nielaus Oilien, economic analyst for Citadel-1, "then I think mass layoffs or grand-scale pay cuts are the likely culprits rather than any form of competing corporate interest. These allegations are frankly ludicrous."

The Chief Executive Panel, meanwhile, has issued a statement claiming that "Kaalakiota have been in dialogue with us ... [they] have assured us that the problem is under control and is being handled."

Latest unconfirmed reports from Kassigainen IV put the current death toll at just over a hundred people.

07/11/2006

Foiritan Pledges To Send Aid Convoy As Truiisu Station Death Toll Mounts

Newly re-elected Gallente President Souro Foiritan has just issued a press release stating his intention to send an aid convoy to Kassigainen IV to assist with what the release terms "a major - and growing - humanitarian crisis." The release states that the convoy is meant as "a gesture of goodwill, and a hopeful step towards better relations with our neighbors."

Only a few minutes after the announcement, the Caldari State's Chief Executive Panel released a statement indicating the situation is "under internal review," and strongly urging the Federation to stay out of Kassigainen until proper clearance has been granted. The CEP has since yesterday repeatedly referred to the incident as a "minor revolt by political insurgents," in what many analysts are calling an effort to downplay the humanitarian crisis angle.

The ice planet of Kassigainen IV, site of Kaalakiota mining colony Truiisu Station, has since yesterday morning played host to steadily escalating violence among its 1700-odd inhabitants. The causes for the fighting are widely disputed, and detailed information on transpiring events are hard to come by, though unconfirmed reports of atrocities against the worker population have consistently arisen over the past 24 hours, including instances of workers being hunted down and murdered in front of their families.

The death toll is at this time believed to have risen above two hundred and fifty people.

08/11/2006

Gallente Aid Convoy Downed In Kassigainen

A Gallente Federation aid convoy was shot down in the Kassigainen system yesterday evening by a contingent of capsuleer forces from the Veto corporation. The convoy was carrying food and medical supplies bound for Truiisu Station, a Kaalakiota Corporation-owned mining colony on Kassigainen IV that has over the past two days been the site of fierce rioting.

The sudden attack came in the wake of a 30-minute long standoff between the captain of the convoy and forces from the Home Guard, Kaalakiota's police force, who had refused to permit the convoy access to its final destination.

According to witness accounts, Home Guard forces had repeatedly told the convoy that no official request for aid had been made and that they did not possess the necessary clearance to enter the Kassigainen IV airspace.

The convoy's captain, Commander Dirai Guvera, had countered by stating the convoy was there in the name of the Gallente President as a gesture of friendship and goodwill, carrying only food and medical supplies.

Matters were not helped when one of the Home Guard ships scanned the convoy's Obelisk-class freighter, finding a 500-troop supplement of Federation Navy marines. It was shortly after this that the Veto force attacked, destroying every ship in the Federation convoy while suffering significant losses themselves. The Home Guard forces did not intervene.

While the motivations for the attack are unclear at this point, Ethan Verone, CEO of the Veto corporation, in a statement released earlier today on GalNet, claimed that "[Veto] were contacted regarding, and subsequently accepted a contract of employment to destroy the Federation Navy convoy ... The client wishes to remain fully anonymous." See the full text of the release [here](#).

President Foiritan of the Federation this morning released a statement wherein he expresses his regret that "an operation intended to save innocent lives instead ended up costing even more."

"The Gallente Federation has extended the olive branch, and it has been torn from our hands and burned," the statement said.

Caldari authorities have yet to comment on the matter. The situation on Truiisu Station remains largely unchanged, with the current death toll rumored to stand at approximately four hundred people.

13/11/2006

Third Capsuleer Tournament Announced

At an open press meeting earlier this morning, representatives from the Caldari Gaming Commission announced the exact dates and rules for the next capsuleer alliance tournament. This will be the third time the tournament

is held, and the Commission has promised to make this one bigger and better than before.

"This will be our third tournament, and hopefully the most exciting one yet. We have many strong contenders out there, and I personally cannot wait to see all the new tactics and setups that our new rule system allows for," said CGC head Airas Sukela. "We have decided that a tournament will be held every six months, and to ensure this becomes a reality we have signed a five-year contract with Boundless Creation public relations coordinator, Sirfortur Ofarter."

When contacted about the contract, Ofarter told reporters that her corporation would be making changes to the way prizes are handled and pumping fresh blood into the tournament's promotional and public relations effort. "Our engineers have been working day and night for months to create these monstrosities. The winners of the next tournament will not be going home empty-handed." She was unwilling to divulge further details about the exact nature of the prizes, but assured reporters that a detailed press release would be forthcoming.

Public opinion of the contract between CGC and Boundless Creation seems to be mixed, especially considering recent political tensions and fluctuations between the empires. Extremist voices have challenged the contract's legality while others embrace this as a friendly act.

The capsuleer tournament is scheduled to go ahead in two weeks' time.

14/11/2006

Bleak Lands Installations Under Attack by Unknown Forces

The Bleak Lands region of the Amarr Empire has over the past week played host to a number of attacks perpetrated by forces of unknown size and affiliation. The attacks, mostly targeting independent holder assets and small to mid-sized orbital installations, have in all cases been swift and decisive, usually laying waste to their targets before responding units can be deployed to the scene.

Ballistic data from installation wreckage, as well as eyewitness reports from colony attacks, have confirmed that the attacking ships are of Matari design, though no communication or demands have ever been received from them. Eyewitness reports furthermore indicate that the forces have been small and mobile, composed mostly of frigates and cruisers.

Little official help has been available to holders in the Bleak Lands regions. "The Navy doesn't maintain much of a presence here," said Eron Tumak-Ahrim, holder of the Sartrad Territories on Hakodan III, which have suffered two separate attacks over the past week, totaling approximately three hundred million ISK in lost assets.

"They mostly stay near the Throne Worlds these days. They don't appear to have much time for us out here on the fringe," he said.

Navy officials have gone on record as stating that "due to an ongoing restructuring process within [the Amarr Navy] ... our fielded forces must be diverted to areas where they are deemed most necessary to Imperial security and the protection of Imperial assets."

"The situation's been like this for months," said Amuran Dekorle, an independent strategic correspondent who has written for a number of publications worldwide. "The Navy barely responds to [acting regent Chamberlain Dokuta Karsoth's] directives at all, and when they do it is with slow sullenness."

"The Empire is really the only place where you could see this happening. The Emperor's authority is absolute ... but regulations don't make provisions for people ruling in his stead for any significant amount of time. There's no real administrative action he can take against them," Dekorle said. "They're just responding to whoever holds the most clout among the heirs. It's all one big political patchwork right now."

The Chamberlain's Office has, according to inside sources, made repeated attempts over the past few days to instigate talks with the Minmatar Republic Fleet. It is unknown at this point what, if any, communication has gone on between them.

22/11/2006

Kaalakiota declare Kassigainen IV situation 'under control' amid harsh criticism from international parties

The Kaalakiota Corporation's office of public relations released a statement this morning wherein they proclaim the situation at Truiisu Station on Kassigainen IV to be "fully under control." The statement comes in the wake of steadily-crescendoing voices of condemnation from various international parties over the past week.

"The insurgent force has been neutralized as peacefully as was possible under the circumstances," the statement reads. "A majority of the people on the colony have been transported to safer havens, and the station's facilities have survived mostly intact. We estimate that repair operations and work force replacement will take a period of three to four weeks, after which Truiisu Station will be up and running at full efficiency."

The statement has been met with widespread scepticism. Senator Mentas Blaque of the Gallente Federation, in a short interview with the Scope this morning, called it "a blanket of lies, incompetently woven by rank amateurs

to cover up the fact they don't care one whit for the well-being of their people." He furthermore claimed he had data from reliable sources which showed the "so-called peaceful neutralization of the insurgents was anything but." Pressed for details, the senator refused to comment further.

Others have moved to cast aspersions on Kaalakiota's statement, variously questioning the considerably drawn-out time frame of the operation, the hush-hush nature of the corporation's methodology and the sparse wording of the release itself.

"It [the statement] doesn't really answer the questions most people have, such as why there have been Home Guard and Caldari Navy dropships stationed in orbit around Kassigainen IV for the past week, with not an aid vessel in sight," said Touvelas Sarkin, senior professor of political science at the University of Caille.

Sarkin said the efforts made by Kaalakiota to salvage the situation showcased more of a desire to sweep the symptoms under the carpet rather than make any moves towards fixing the underlying problem.

"They just want to stamp it out and pretend it didn't happen instead of actually looking at what they can do to make sure it doesn't repeat itself. With the way things are now - salary and benefit cuts, mass layoffs, diminished worker rights - I'd say we're sure to see that happen soon, possibly even on a larger scale," he said.

29/11/2006

Offline stargates activate spontaneously, CONCORD officials issue general travel advisory

At just after 02:00 EVT last night, a large number of offline stargates spontaneously came online, opening access to eight previously closed-off regions of space.

CONCORD officials have issued a travel advisory intended to dissuade pilots from entering the newly-accessible regions due to "unforeseeable dangers," but since CONCORD's jurisdiction does not extend to these regions they have not been able to issue any mandates. Capsuleers are reported to be roaming the new regions already.

The regions were closed off twenty years ago in the wake of a rogue drone attack which left a research outpost, then-headquarters of a Gallente research project known as Operation Spectrum Breach, in ruins.

Operation Spectrum Breach was a Federation-funded research project intended to create openings into regions of unexplored space and facilitate the colonization of new worlds for a rapidly-expanding Gallente Federation.

The project was cancelled after the worker drones at the project's main outpost went berserk, killing hundreds. Reports of rogue drone attacks from several other areas within the eight regions had surfaced concurrently. To ward off the drones' potential expansion into trade lanes and inhabited areas, the project's supervisors had every gate leading into the eight regions closed off.

It is not known what caused the drones to go rogue; many speculate that some form of virus was at play, while others believe that mechanical malfunction or design error are to blame.

Federation officials have expressed surprise and bafflement at the unprecedented occurrence. According to a senior-level aide within the Office of the President, an investigation is "set to be underway."

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12/01/2007

Bleak Lands nexus of mounting Minmatar/Amarr tensions

Over the course of the past month and a half, The Bleak Lands region of the Amarr Empire has played reluctant host to a large number of Matari insurgent attacks, steadily escalating in frequency and intensity.

One attack, in particular, is seen as the flashpoint for the diplomatic tensions that have resulted from the area's conflicts. On December 17, in the Sosala system, a mixed fleet of Matari capsuleers attacked and destroyed an Amarrian battlestation due to undergo redeployment out of the Bleak Lands into Throne Worlds territories.

Simultaneously, in an effort to confuse and delay potential reinforcements from the Amarr Navy, rebel groups elsewhere made similarly successful raids against several smaller Amarr-controlled sites.

The attack, widely believed to have been orchestrated by Matari splinter group The Defiants (with support from rebel capsuleer organizations Ushra'Khan and Fimbulwinter) came as a complete surprise to on-site Empire forces, most of which were killed in the ensuing fracas. The battlestation in question is the first Amarrian battlestation to be destroyed by Matari forces since the days of the rebellion.

The rebels' ability to pinpoint the battlestation's location and the precise execution of their attack have prompted questions about the effectiveness of the security measures taken by the Empire in its outer regions. Imperial Chamberlain Dokuta Karsoth's command of the Amarr Navy has also come into question. A number of reports, from both within and without the Navy's infrastructure, have indicated that the Chamberlain's decrees and directives are variously treated with apathy, scorn and outright defiance.

The Chamberlain's office has not commented on these claims, but has stated on a number of occasions that it is in the Empire's best interest to keep its tactical resources in locations where they can do the most good, and that the Bleak Lands "are not a top priority at the moment." Nevertheless, Bleak Lands regional commander Quibih Jafi of the Amarr Navy was dismissed from his post in November and demoted to the rank of Corporal, following what authorities termed "a woeful neglect of duty and responsibility."

A number of analysts believe that the intervention of capsuleer forces is one of the primary reasons why the Bleak Lands are not worse off than they are today. Most often cited are the efforts of loyalist organizations CVA, Vigilia Valeria and PIE. "Were it not for these pilots," said a January 7th lead article in the Hedion Review, "the region would be far more destabilized than it is. The Empire owes them its thanks."

The situation in the Bleak Lands has led to escalating diplomatic tension between the Minmatar Republic and the Amarr Empire. Over the past two weeks, the Chancellor's Office has on a number of occasions overtly and covertly stated its belief that the Defiants are in league with - and taking orders from - the Republic Fleet, a claim that Fleet officials consistently dismiss as "ludicrous." Republic Fleet spokesman Raurvest Arrum, in a statement last week, said that "if [the Republic Fleet] had any inclination to attack Empire assets at this point in time, it would certainly not be trying to achieve its aims through repeatedly disavowed splinter groups."

29/01/2007

Amarr overreaction 'no surprise,' says Matari Parliament head

Head of Republic Parliament Malaetu Shakor yesterday commented on the Amarr Empire's reactions to Matari splinter group attacks in the Bleak Lands these past weeks, calling the Amarrians' response a gross overreaction, but an unsurprising one.

In an interview with news outlet The Scope, Shakor expressed his belief that Imperial Chamberlain Dokuta Karsoth's hand had been "forced by egotism" into "doing whatever was necessary to salvage the Bleak Lands situation." This is in reference to the steady ramping up of forces within the Bleak Lands areas within the past week, a move widely believed to be in response to a recent deluge of media reports about Karsoth's lack of control over the Amarr Navy, which peaked with the destruction of an Amarrian battlestation roughly three weeks ago.

The party responsible for most of the attacks is a radical organization known as the Defiants, a Matari splinter group composed of ex-Republic Fleet personnel and led by much-decorated ex-Republic Fleet Captain Karishal Muritor. The group has reportedly been pushed back from the Bleak Lands after a large influx of Amarrian forces to the area resulted in significant skirmish losses for them.

Chamberlain Karsoth, meanwhile, has been exerting a great deal of diplomatic pressure on the Republic to rein in these undesirable elements. Accusations of Republic funding have repeatedly entered the discussion, with the Republic issuing vigorous denials every time.

Inside sources confirm that relations between the two nations are at a lower point than they have been at for a long time.

"There's definitely a chill in the air," stated a top-level Matari aide who wished to remain anonymous. "They [the Chamberlain's representatives] are so dead-set on our guilt that they seem unwilling to listen to reason."

Commenting on the situation, Shakor said, "Even though I have a great deal of personal sympathy with the cause of my old friend Muritor, I cannot say I see the sense - diplomatic or military - in our Republic endorsing these raids. As our spokesmen have already stated on numerous occasions, the Republic Fleet has dismissed all of these personnel long ago. Any speculation that they are linked to us at this point in time is tenuous at best."

09/02/2007

Republic claims responsibility for rebel leader's death

An official source from within the Minmatar Republic has said that the clearance for the February 1 death of splinter group leader Karishal Muritor came from the top level of Republic government.

"The order for the operation was given by Prime Minister Karin Midular's war cabinet and carried out by an Admiral of the Republic Fleet," said the source at a press conference in Renyn yesterday afternoon. "We had determined through an extensive campaign of intelligence-gathering operations ... that Karishal Muritor's group of terrorists were posing a threat to our relations with foreign powers ... [and] by association implicating the Republic in military action it has never instigated nor condoned. Muritor was a threat to the safety of our Republic, a threat that very unfortunately necessitated removal by any means."

"The Admiral was ordered to bring him in, and he persisted in refusing, so things regrettably went the way they did," the source said.

Muritor, a highly-decorated former Captain of the Republic Fleet and later leader of the rebel splinter group the Defiants, was killed after a brief exchange of words with Republic Fleet Admiral Kanth Filmir near Planet X in the Auga system.

According to GALNet reports from capsuleer witnesses present at the time of the skirmish, Muritor had agreed to a conversation under a banner of truce agreed to between him the Admiral, the two reportedly having been old friends. After a brief exchange of words, it became clear that Muritor would not cease and desist in his actions against the Amarr Empire, and the Admiral deployed a strike force which held and attacked the rebel leader.

Members of Matari paramilitary organization the Ushra'Khan who were present at the scene at this point opened fire on the Admiral's forces, but were told to cease and desist by both the Admiral and Muritor, who himself refused to open fire on Republic Fleet forces. According to reports, his last words, before his vessel went up in bright ball of flame, were "Do not forget what we achieved with so few. Do not forget."

The public response to Muritor's death has been one of outrage. Multiple wakes and vigils have been held in cities all over the Republic, and dissenter rallies have been held calling for Karin Midular's resignation.

The response within the capsuleer community has been even more pronounced. The aforementioned Ushra'Khan, a group with long-standing yet historically shaky ties to the Republic, declared Prime Minister Midular their "number one enemy," calling for a 1 ISK bounty on her head, the "value representing her worth to the Minmatar people, rounded up."

The Amarr Chamberlain's Office has yet to comment on the matter, but sources from within their administrative wing have reported that the Chamberlain is "eminently satisfied" with the results of the Fleet's operation.

21/02/2007

Nine killed and dozens arrested in Dober Harn riots, protests increasing in frequency Republic-wide

A bloody riot erupted yesterday evening at what was to be a peaceful rally in Gelfiven V metropolis Dober Harn. Hundreds of people had gathered at Liorren Square, the city's most populous locale, to protest the Republic Parliament's actions in recent weeks and the rule of Prime Minister Karin Midular.

According to anonymous witnesses police cordoned off the area early on, an act which led to "a growing wave of dissonance" within the assembled crowd. A quarter of an hour into the proceedings, a firebomb was lobbed from somewhere in the crowd into the line of riot police, leaving two dead and thirteen injured.

The police responded by employing stopfoam and sottoblast equipment on the protestors, leading to a fracas which lasted over twenty minutes. Seven protestors were killed, all of them succumbing to sottoblast-induced brain hemorrhages.

The Bloody Hands of Matar, a newly-formed youth rebel group with suspected ties to organized militias in various provinces of the Republic, has claimed responsibility for the firebombing. On their personal feed, the group claims that they "model ourselves on the ideals espoused by our capsuleer kin," and that they are "dedicated to the overthrow of the current government, be it by word or by fist."

The group's logo, a bloody fist, closely resembles that of notorious Matari capsuleer alliance The Ushra'Khan, one of the organizations that has been most vocal in denouncing Midular and her reign. The past week has seen a number of protests springing up in all corners of the Republic, most of them believed to be inspired by the now-notorious February 12th protest held by the Ushra'Khan over Matar, calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Karin Midular.

The protest is believed to have set off a wave of anti-governmental sentiment. Says Marek Brandeira, leader of The Bloody Hands, "It didn't really set it off so much as push it forward. I mean, those guys are great and all, but there are a lot of people who have been saying these things for years now. This government is obviously corrupt and needs to go."

"We're grateful for the new manpower, though," he said. "This has definitely helped rally more people to the cause."

01/03/2007

Theology Council Investigations continue

Acol Yarwema, Chief Operative of the Theology Council, issued a statement yesterday regarding the recent attacks on Theology Council assets. He announced that the Council's ongoing investigation into the attacks, including the interrogation of two recently apprehended pilots, has confirmed earlier suspicions regarding the identity and intentions of those responsible. The statement did not name the suspected attackers.

Acol continued, "It is certain the capture of these suspects, aided by capsuleers loyal to our great Empire, will advance our investigations considerably. No doubt the true instigators of these attacks are working through third parties in an attempt to hide their involvement."

Ashmod Chieh, spokesperson of the Kor-Azor family, released a press statement where the family condemned the attacks upon the Theology Council, judging them to be "immoral and cowardly." The press release further stated that the Kor-Azor family would be willing to help in the investigation or send general aid if the Council required it. The Theology Council has politely declined the aid of Kor-Azor at this time.

The statement of Kor-Azor comes at a time when the family has been widely criticized for the situation within its borders. Reports have filtered through of excessive brutality by Kor-Azor police forces. Adding to problems are several proclamations by Aritcio Kor-Azor that have been met with increasing disbelief. The most recent proclamation stated that any slaver found outside at the same time as Gaius (Aritcio's own slaver dog) would have its owner tortured to death, before its eyes, and would then be forced to eat the remains of said owner.

05/03/2007

Republic unrest continues, Bloody Hands support grows.

Matar - "One ISK for Midular" said many of the banners at a large protest rally held today. Local police forces estimated the attendance at around two million people, who packed the main promenade of Matar Prime. The protest, organized by political newcomer "Voices of Matar" party, coincided with marches all across the Republic as the government faces ever-growing anger and disillusionment.

The Republic, already under fire for its heavy-handed handling of past protests, responded by stating that it respected the views and opinions displayed at these rallies, and that while it was quite happy for its citizens to enjoy their freedom of speech, it urged the protesters to remain peaceful. The government spokesman took the opportunity to remind attendant press that the numbers at these protests only constituted a relative minority.

The Bloody Hands of Matar, the subject of hot controversy due to their recent violent actions at the Dober Harn riots, have witnessed a swelling of their ranks as dissatisfaction grows. It seems that what once started as a simple ideal and symbol has begun to form into a far more serious movement. Countless newcomers to The Bloody Hands' cause have cited the deep frustration they feel at the perceived callousness of the government's handling of Captain Muritor and of its blatant dismissal of the recent riots and other protests.

Their support from the Ushra'Khan alliance, one that they claimed to model themselves on, has been less apparent. Following the interment of Captain Muritor's body last week, Tar Kovsky stated, "We understand the frustration of groups like The Bloody Hands of Matar, which makes it hard for us to condemn their mistakes. Our people need hope, though, and not continued frustration. If the youth would take a more active role in tribal politics, they might find the solution there...we don't think that attacking the planetary police will accomplish much other than turning people against them".

While certain Minmatar capsuleer groups such as Namtz'aar k'in have echoed Mr. Kovsky's sentiments, others have stepped forward and praised the Hands' defiance. "The Ushra'Khan need to take a long, hard look at themselves before they decide to comment on other terrorist groups," an unnamed source stated.

Already the images of angry young Matari protesters have defined the rising wave of impatience, and now, with their faces covered in blood-red handprints, they are becoming one of many indicators of a growing momentum behind the Bloody Hands.

16/03/2007

Kor-Azor situation escalates on Liparer II

The Kor-Azor region continues to be the site of unrest, exemplified this week by the situation on Liparer II.

The debacle began when Holder Keraci was overheard by visiting Kor-Azor courtiers as he told his wife that Aritcio Kor-Azor is "not fit to be Heir and belongs in a damn mental institution for his new regulations and sanctions."

When Aritcio heard word of what was being said on Liparer II he ordered that every Holder and his family on the planet would be stripped of his fine robes and dressed in rags of the lowest slave. A spokesperson for the Kor-Azor house commented "How dare they talk about their lord sovereign this way? Such manner of treasonous speech shall not be tolerated. As punishment for such heinous talk they will henceforth live like slaves until such a time as our Lord Kor-Azor considers that they have paid for their crimes. These holders should consider themselves beneficent that their lord has chosen to be so merciful."

The robes, sent to every Holder and his family, reek of unwashed slaves and have blood splatter and other unidentified substances on them. Aritcio was reported as stating "What do they expect? That I send clothes smelling fresh and ironed? I ordered my men to find the dirtiest slave and bludgeon their heads in and take their clothes. They shall wear those and nothing else."

The Holders refused the royal decree, resulting in Aritcio declaring the whole planet treasonous, ordering his military forces in and demanding all the holders' heads to be returned to him. The planet is currently under military blockade and there has been report of heavy fighting on the surface.

Reports have also been filtering in on sightings of a Speaker of Truths in the borderlands of Kor-Azor space. Aritcio's representatives have judged this as mere hearsay, for a Speaker has not been seen outside a monastery for centuries. Nevertheless, the representatives continue their investigation into the Speaker's appearance

23/03/2007

Speaker of Truths appears at Liparer II

Seconds before the largest settlements on Lipairer II was to be incinerated by the lasers of the Kor-Azor fleet, a Speaker of Truths appeared and demanded they hold their fire.

Last week had seen the escalation of events on Liparer II with the Holders rising in near-rebellion against the rule of House Kor-Azor. The House's representative promptly gave a deadline for submission, adding that it would otherwise send a fleet to "completely obliterate all resistance". As the Holders did not stand down, a fleet was dispatched to destroy the estates. It was then that a Speaker of Truths intervened.

The Speaker of Truths, known as Brother Joshua, asked that the Admiral in charge returned to Kor Azor so that the Speaker could arbitrate between the two parties involved in the Liparer crisis. Furthermore, Brother Joshua announced that he would be traveling through the Kor-Azor region to investigate the situation, speaking to Holder and commoner alike. It is very rare for a Speaker of Truths to appear in such a fashion, and this is the first such occurrence for nearly a century, has been the subject of great surprise and speculation.

When asked about the situation, the Theology Council responded, "When approached by the Speakers of Truth for permission to investigate the allegations stemming from the Kor-Azor region, we duly gave it. We wish Brother Joshua Godspeed on his mission."

As a reporter inquired after the recent allegations of attacks upon the Theology Council, and any links these attacks might have to Kor-Azor, the Theology council refused to comment, stating only that "our investigations are continuing."

The consensus on GalNet is that the arrival of the Speaker of Truths is a 'welcome development' and that overall the people are hopeful the situation will be solved without bloodshed.

27/03/2007

Heir speaks out on succession as debate continues

Last month witnessed an unprecedented request from Amarrian capsuleers that they be informed as to the progress of the investigation into the assassination of Emperor Dorian. Despite serving as a severe breach of protocol, the request sparked fervent academic debate within the Empire regarding the next Succession championships and what form they will take.

While no outright dissent has been aired on the issue, it is no secret that the people of the Empire are growing impatient with the wait for a new Emperor. In an announcement late last week, Uriam Kador endorsed the ongoing debate by making his opinions known publicly. Here is an excerpt from his statement:

"For too long has our Empire languished without an Emperor. It is due time that we, the Heirs, decide how the next Championships shall be held, lest we incur God's wrath for our Chamberlain's apparent lack of will to move forward."

"I move that the Championship not be fought in the barren byways of the infinite, but rather here on God's earth, by those of pure flesh. We should look not to those who cheat death by shedding and donning bodies like discarded rags, for who can tell what happens to the soul through its endless leapfrogging from body to body?"

"We should look to true Amarrians, the chosen people of God, barren of the impurities of their spacebound kin."

Dr. Emuil Zalaveille, political analyst at the University of Caille and an expert on Amarrian affairs, regarded the

speech as just the latest in a series of affronts to Chamberlain Dokuta Karsoth's authority.

"His [the Chamberlain's] position has been growing ever weaker in the last months," said Dr. Zalaveille. "With the murder investigation yielding no apparent answers and the Navy all but directly disobeying his commands to police the Bleak Lands, the addition of a royal Heir's accusation of laxness in the matter of the succession comes as no surprise."

03/04/2007

Succession debate rages on.

At the most recent sitting of the Privy council, Pomikide Haromi, steward of House Sarum, voiced his house's express views on the recent succession debate.

"House Sarum feels that the past open doors policy of ascension was patently ridiculous. We cannot and should not allow anyone but true Amarrians to decide the future of our glorious empire. It's no wonder that the last two chosen Emperors were such weaklings?

It is time for Amarrians to stand for Amarr, stop kowtowing to these heathen Empires and reclaim our glorious past. It is time to choose a new Emperor!"

When asked whether House Sarum would be naming its successor to Jamyl, the steward reminded all present that "House Sarum's business is just that, but you can be assured that all will happen as it should"

Upon hearing the steward's comments, Aritcio Kor-Azor, Heir of house Kor-Azor, took the opportunity to present his own views upon the subject:

"Oh, please. It is obvious to even the dumbest heathen who the next Emperor should be. The blathering of the other houses only postpones my own inevitable ascension. As for the Chamberlain, I am amazed he has even survived this long.

Concerning the Championships, I move that we abolish representation and have individual combat. Who would dare stand against me?!"

Across the Empire, the debate continues.

05/04/2007

Speaker of Truths saved by PIE Inc and Ordo Quaesitoris

Last Sunday evening the Amarrian Speaker of Truths, Brother Joshua, was attacked by the Holland Reclamation and Salvage corporation en route to the Ordion system. Thanks to a capsuleer escort, however, he was able to proceed on his journey unharmed.

Last week, Brother Joshua publicly announced his intention to travel through the Kor-Azor region in order to investigate "allegations of misconduct" on the behalf of Aritcio Kor-Azor, after getting permission from the Theology Council to conduct such an inquiry.

Brother Joshua set out to visit the systems between Kulu and Ordion, where he intended to visit several Holders and discuss with them the region's situation and future. At the start of his journey the Praetorians Imperialis Excubitoris and Ordo Quaesitoris joined him in order to escort him to his destination.

Around 18:45 New Eden standard time, the Holland Reclamation and Salvage laid ambush and attacked Brother Joshua, but their attack was unsuccessful thanks to the loyalist forces, commanded by Rodj Blake.

23/04/2007

Remaining royal houses speak out on succession debate

With the debate over the succession still ongoing in the Empire, the Tash Murkon family called a short press conference to extend their opinion on the ongoing debate, one which they apparently feel affects their house greatly.

Taridor Khiknizi spoke for house Tash Murkon and went on to say:

"While we acknowledge and respect the views of the other Royal Houses, this Royal House is strongly against the racial implications of allowing only True Amarr to decide the next championship.

The Empire was forged in our collective blood. We worship the one and only Lord God. It is by all our strengths that the Empire was made great, and it will be by all our strengths that it shall continue."

With the only Royal House yet to make its views known on the subject the Amarr News Service managed to arrange a short sitting with Yonis Ardishapur himself shortly after a meeting with Chamberlain Karsoth.

"The Lord God saw fit to create only one race of his Chosen. We are that race. While the lesser races follow God's word faithfully and loyally, as well they should, and while they have their place within the Empire, it is not for

them to rise above their station. Decisions of this importance should be left to God's true Chosen, and none other.

House Ardishapur moves that the current Championships incarnation, a result of hasty reforms of the venerable institution of the selection of the Emperor, should be replaced with just that institution."

25/04/2007

Minmatar to rise above hatred: Midular speaks on discovery of Republic Parliament's secret talks with Ammatar Consulate

As reported by the Scope this morning, according to documented sources from within the Republic Parliament, "top people" in the Republic's governmental infrastructure have been involved in secret talks with representatives from the Ammatar Consulate for the past six days. The talks, all of which took place on Minmatar soil, covered such wide-ranging subjects as POW exchanges, Ndorian mining rights and the retraction of several long-standing war crime accusations on both sides.

It is not known at this time whether an end to official hostilities between the two nations is on the cards, though the news has prompted widespread speculation that this may be the case. The news has been greeted with tremendous furor in both the Republic and the Mandate, in particular from anti-appeasement segments of both populations.

Prime Minister Karin Midular moved swiftly to head off the outcry, broadcasting a speech across the Republic this afternoon. The full text of the speech follows:

"My fellow people of Matar.

I fully understand the outcry over the recent revelations. I am here to assuage your fears and explain our reasoning. I would appeal for your composure and attention.

We have been in a state of war with the Nefantar since the creation of our beloved Republic. War is a terrible thing. All of us know our history and none of us can deny this simple fact. Throughout time, wars have been fought for conquest, for plunder and for freedom. But this war, which has gone on so long and cost us so much, has been fought for one simple reason: hate.

As a people, we possess a lot of hate, and perhaps rightly so. No other people in the history of our universe have suffered so much in the cause of tyranny and sacrificed so much for the cause of freedom. But is this all we are? I choose to believe not. I choose to believe we are better than that, that we can rise above such hatred. Though we may spit their names today through clenched teeth, I choose to believe we may one day look upon our kin and feel an emotion other than hatred. Did not the great Kiaor himself say: 'Those whom you hate so fervently, you must have once loved so deeply?'

I will not deny that the path in front of us is long and arduous - that there exists an almost insurmountable gap between our peoples - but I will do all within my power to bridge it.

We have lost so much. Let us not, in the throes of hatred, lose yet more."

The speech, the first Republic-wide broadcast by Midular for over a year, seems to have quitted unrest in the short term. Though Matari everywhere continue to voice their confusion and discontent, the angriest voices have stopped shouting. Even among the Tribal Council, one of the hotbeds of the ever-present appeasement debate, a vote has been passed pledging support for continuing talks with the Ammatar.

The Ammatar and the Matari have been in an official state of war ever since the Great Rebellion 129 years ago. While the intensity of the fighting has ebbed and flowed, the peak was hit 7 years ago as a long-term Matari offensive, dubbed the Vindication Wars, came to a close at the Battle of Tears, one of the highest-casualty engagements in recorded history. Since then, the two nations have settled into a tense stand-off. With the exception of the occasional skirmish no fighting has taken place, and the borders of both nations have remained secure.

No information has been publicly released as to when and where the talks will continue.

30/04/2007

Caldari Gaming Commission under State investigation

The Caldari State has agreed to open a fraud investigation into the Caldari Gaming Commission's (CGC) recent activities, sources revealed yesterday. This follows repeated requests from the Mercantile Club and the Caldari Business Tribunal that an inquiry be made into the CGC's accounting history.

The CGC has promised its full cooperation in the investigation. A spokesman said they expect to be cleared of all suspicion once the investigation has been concluded and its outcome is presented to the public.

A Mercantile Club security officer recently discovered footage of a meeting between high ranking members of

the CGC and their accountants, where they are seen discussing the option of tax evasion. The officer gave the holoreels to his superiors, who in turn presented them to the Caldari Business Tribunal.

"Even though the Club prides itself on our private meeting chambers, it was our decision in this case that concealing possible intent of grand-scale tax evasion would go against our values as a proud corporation of the State," said Temikko Aikikonen, Mercantile Club spokesperson.

The Caldari Business Tribunal has decided to involve the Chief Executive Panel in the prosecution of the CGC, as the CEP would stand to be the largest beneficiary of the allegedly owed taxes. A committee is currently being formed that will lead the investigation and eventually present its findings to members of the Business Tribunal and the CEP. The committee will be lead by Prof. Sari Hazel, a Gallente specialist in criminal fraud, well known for her work during the Religious Donation Trial several years ago.

07/05/2007

Ammatar Governor comments on Matari/Ammatar Talks

Ibrar Ondagoi, the Governor of Ammatar, yesterday afternoon released a statement claiming the Amarr government was "informed well in advance" of the Ammatar Consulate's intention of entering into talks with the Minmatar Republic. The reason the talks were kept secret, the statement says, is that "neither the Empire nor its mandate wanted to give opportunistic hatemongers a reason to incite violence in protest of peaceful communication."

The Governor issued his statement after several meetings with top-level Consulate officials over the past week in the San Matarian capital of Auguria. Public response in Amarr and Ammatar has been mixed; polling indicates that a large portion of people from both the Empire and the Mandate believe the Amarrian government did, in fact, have no idea the talks were going on. A number of analysts have theorized that in the absence of an Amarrian Emperor, the Mandate is responding to shifting currents in the astropolitical spectrum.

"While we can understand some confusion at the news of these talks, there is no need for alarm," said Ammatar Consulate High Commissioner Anfrid Uptemulf at a press conference yesterday. "We will not be restricted by blind hatred. The Consulate of the Ammatar Mandate will work in the best interests of the Ammatar people under, of course, the guidance of the Amarr. We will not compromise the ideals upon which the Mandate was founded.

What fruit the discussions will bear has yet to be decided. At this time we remain cautious but hopeful."

18/05/2007

Caldari Gaming Commission found guilty of tax fraud

The committee investigating the alleged tax fraud presented its findings to the Chief Executive Panel earlier today. The committee concluded that 'the Caldari Gaming Commission (CGC) is guilty of tax evasion for trying to hide 3.4 billion isk from the State.'

The CEP has announced that they will abide by the decision of the committee, lead by Prof. Sari Hazel, and will act on the recommendations given.

'We (the CEP) have reached an agreement to accept the conclusion stated in the report. We unanimously decided that the best course of action, for all parties involved, is for the CGC to pay back the evaded revenue with an additional penalty of 1.5 billion', stated Jukkizaras Aboraala, Principal Clerk of the Chief Executive Panel, in a press conference.

Dabel Kaelikohani responded to the verdict in a companywide e-mail, declaring it an 'unjust, biased decision influenced by greed' while expressing his doubts on the future of the CGC.

24/05/2007

Dozens believed dead as explosion rocks Egbonbet station

At approximately 22:50 EVE Time last night, a bomb exploded in the Republic Parliament Bureau station in Egbonbet, the station scheduled to host the next round of talks between the Minmatar Republic and the Ammatar Mandate. The explosion tore into a civilian habitat section of the station and severed several transport corridors, catching the Ammatar delegation and killing one of the Mandate consulate members.

According to Republic Security officials, the bomb was a crude high-yield device which somehow went undetected by their security sensors until the time of activation. While the target seems to have been the Ammatar delegation, the bomb is also believed to have caused significant civilian casualties, reportedly numbering in the dozens, although the Republic have yet to release any concrete numbers. The Republic security on the station were quick to react to the explosion and contain its aftermath, saving many lives.

Evidence at this time suggests that the bombing was executed by the organization known as 'The Bloody Hands of Matar,' a terrorist group who have kept a low profile lately but, with this act, have propelled themselves back into the media spotlight. In a public statement released shortly after the explosion they went on to claim responsibility, stating:

"We will not sit idly by while our Republic kowtows to these race traitors who sold us out to the Amarr and even now keep our people in bondage. How dare we seek terms with these scum? It is a grave dishonour to the sacrifice of the great rebellion. Have we learned nothing? What we do, we do for Matar. There will be no peace with the Nefantar traitors."

A flurry of activity followed in the aftermath of the explosion as the Ammatar quickly evacuated their people from the station, retrieving their fallen and racing back to Mandate territory under the guard of the Ammatar capsuleer corporation Delictum 23216, who have been providing security for Mandate personnel since the talks began. The future of the talks is deemed very uncertain at this point. Voices have been heard from within Ammatar accusing the Republic of murder and treachery, while the Republic has declared its abhorrence of the act, pointing out that many of their own died in the explosion and that they will not rest until they have tracked down and brought these terrorists to justice.

According to an anonymous source from within the Republic Parliament, diplomatic channels remain "open but extremely fragile."

05/06/2007

RSS tasked with hunting down Bloody Hands of Matar

The Minmatar Republic Parliament late last week tasked the Republic Security Services, the Republic's intelligence arm, with hunting down an organization known as the "Bloody Hands of Matar." The order was issued as a direct result of the Bloody Hands' bombing of an Egbonbet space station on the 23rd of May, an act which took the lives of 42 people, among them Faulk Stian, an Ammatar consulate ambassador attending peace talks being held between the Ammatar Mandate and the Minmatar Republic.

Adrand Allsvert, Head of the RSS, at a press conference last week claimed that Republic forces would "hunt down and remove this illness that has pervaded our nation. There will be no refuge for these terrorists, no place they can run and hide. They have murdered their own and plunged talks of peace into despair. We will come down upon them heavily."

It had been previously believed that this organization, despite having publicly displayed anti-government sentiments on a number of occasions, did not pose a distinct security threat. They were viewed simply as angry youths following an ideological example set by certain capsuleer organizations, most notably the Ushra'Khan. The explosion on the Republic Parliament station in Egbonbet has catapulted them into the spotlight, with many experts expressing disbelief at their ability to organize such an act.

The RSS's crackdown is already under way. Two days ago, the members of an organization known as the "Voices of Matar" were arrested in a large-scale operation and brought in for questioning. They are still being held under charges of suspected ties to the Bloody Hand terrorists. A number of other raids have been reported across the Republic, but the RSS has yet to release a statement pertaining to the results of its continuing investigation, stating only that "inquiries are continuing apace."

The Ammatar Mandate, for its part, released a statement yesterday proclaiming that "the Mandate remains shocked, saddened and angry over the death of our esteemed consulate member, Faulk Stian. A proud and accomplished diplomat, ever faithful to God, he did not deserve such an end. While it seems that the Republic was not directly responsible for the attack, their inability to provide adequate security to deter such an atrocity leaves us with a bitter taste. We would see these Bloody Hands brought to justice and made to pay for their crimes. When this is done, perhaps the Mandate can forgive and resume talks with the tribes."

02/07/2007

Caldari Gaming Commission will no longer host the Alliance Tournaments

Dabel Kaelikohani, founder of the Caldari Gaming Commission (CGC), announced yesterday that the Alliance Tournament will no longer be hosted by the Commission. Kaelikohani released a statement to all major news agencies concerning the future of the CGC.

In the statement Kaelikohani explained why he felt that hosting the Tournament was no longer a feasible business venture for the CGC. 'After much deliberation the management of the CGC has come to the conclusion that hosting the Tournament will not be lucrative enough to excuse its costs in planning, taxes and other fees. We wish any other corporation the best of luck if they plan to continue the Tournament. Sadly the CGC does not see how you can run a healthy business combined with the enormous expenses the Tournament requires.'

Instead of the universally celebrated tournaments the CGC will now focus on smaller quizzes and challenges across Caldari controlled space. 'We won't abandon the capsuleers just yet,' said Kaelikohani, 'They really are the best audience you can hope for and we wish to continue working with them for years to come.'

17/07/2007

Intaki Bank secures funding for Syndicate R&D program

POITOT, SYNDICATE - The Intaki Bank has secured funding for an extensive interstellar R&D program, its spokesman revealed during a delayed Quarterly Reports meeting today. The project will be run on behalf of parent body The Syndicate - which was recently granted licenses to key astromechanical patents - and while no official confirmation has been given, most analysts agree it will be almost certainly focused on starship

technology.

Intaki Bank CFO Mesybier Echard refused to comment on the nature of the research program, and when asked when he expected the investment to pay off he would only say that "it will take time - obviously we're hoping we'll see marketable results soon, but you can't rush these things". He was more willing to discuss the recently-awarded patent licenses, saying that, "the Empires have been trying to keep [the smaller factions] out of the market for decades. We've had the facilities and the expertise to perform this sort of research for a while, but the patent issue has prevented us from legally doing so."

When asked what had prompted the breakthrough, he answered, "As you no doubt know, the Khanid Kingdom has been lobbying for these licenses for many years, and we learnt earlier this year that they'd finally succeeded - although this wasn't made public knowledge at the time. Once word got out that the precedent had been set, it was really only a matter of time." Mr Echard declined to comment on exactly how The Syndicate became aware of the Khanid deal, but acknowledged it had been "politically convenient" that several smaller factions including The Syndicate, Mordu's Legion and the Thukker Tribe had all become privy to the information at around the same time.

The financial results announced during the meeting showed strong figures once again, and while Federal officials made their usual noises about cutting corners, substandard vetting procedures and a general lack of transparency, the Intaki Bank looks to be in good health. The only significant downturn on their balance sheet was from sales to loyalist Capsuleers, which have dropped off since the Serpentis stopped supplying The Syndicate with its notorious but popular biotech hardware. Syndicate representatives refused to be drawn on this issue, stating that, "it's not our place to comment on this matter", but an anonymous Serpentis representative was more forthcoming, claiming, "now just seemed like a good time to restructure the way our product is distributed into the channel. We're seeing healthy in-house returns, and various concerns made it prudent to consolidate our offerings at a single point-of-sale." She indicated it was "unlikely" that Serpentis products would be offered through third parties again in future, and when asked if the Sarpati family were worried about competition from the Intaki, obliquely commented, "the Corporation's original core competency was R&D".

23/07/2007

Independent Gaming Commission to host Alliance Tournament

Woratome Kikawa, Chief Executor of the newly-founded Independent Gaming Commission last week announced that the Commission will officially take over handling of capsuleer alliance tournaments.

'I'm happy to announce that the Tournament will continue, but it is not longer strictly tied to one empire. To collect the funding needed for the tournament we now instead have investors from all four. From the Caldari State, we welcome members of the Mercantile Club; from the Minmatar Republic we enjoy the expertise of the Leisure Group; the Gallentean Bank of Luminaire will provide us with financial backing; and the Amarr Certified News will cover all news from the Tournament this year. '

Mr Kikawa began his career with the Caldari Gaming Commission last year as a top executive, quickly landing the hosting contracts they needed to continue the tournament. His skill at negotiation and general business savvy had him quickly ascending the corporate ladder. When the CGC was found guilty of tax evasion and announced their decision not to host the Tournament, Kikawa began lobbying to find a team of people that would host the Tournament independently of one single empire.

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27/09/2007

CONCORD declares naming committee for the new regions.

In a surprise move at a press conference today CONCORD delegate Ashiro Nakuyama announced the beginning of a 'capsuleer outreach' program. Critics see this as a shrewd move by the powerful organization responsible for Empire security and stability which in the past has criticized much of the independent capsuleer community for being at the top of their most wanted lists.

The delegate went on to briefly explain the continued rogue drone threat and the sheer potential of a mass incursion from the new regions that was realised when, with what CONCORD is referring to as the Activation event, the gates to the new regions spontaneously opened. Mr Nakuyama explained that the capsuleer presence in these areas seems to have had a detrimental effect on the rogue drone population, in effect acting as a population control mechanism.

To reflect these efforts and in a olive branch to the capsuleer organizations he announced that CONCORD will be accepting applicants to the long awaited naming committee for the new regions.

To qualify an applicant must either be the executor or sponsored by an executor of an alliance which holds sovereignty in the region(s). Mr Nakuyama was at pains to explain that there were a limited number of seats which would be decided upon such factors as territory controlled, position of said territory and level of sovereignty achieved.

The full rules for the application process and resultant decision making can be found [here](#).

Questioned by the assembled press as to whether CONCORD had anything further to disclose about the activation event or the rogue drone threat Mr Nakuyama declined to make further comment.

15/11/2007

Outlook grim for The Bleak Lands

Netsalakka, The Bleak Lands - An official report by the Amarrian Ministry of Assessment yesterday revealed that The Bleak Lands has become the most dangerous sector of settled space in the Amarr Empire, a title previously held by the sparsely-settled region of Aridia. Long known to harbor pockets of Blood Raider loyalists, The Bleak Lands has seen a marked increase in the number of pirate raids in the last several months.

In particular, the number of miners and prospectors in space attacked and destroyed by pirates (a statistic closely tracked by the Ministry of Assessment) has risen sharply. Curiously, many of these attacks lack some of the more gruesome hallmarks (exsanguination, mutilation, etc) that have come to characterize Blood Raider attacks. This has led many to speculate that there is a new group of pirates plying the region. A contrary view points to a potential schism within the Blood Raiders organization, with members letting some of the more esoteric practices of the cult fall by the wayside in favor of simple piracy.

Whatever the case, the rise in hostile encounters with pirates has left many miners, haulers, and Holders in the area nervous. Santivar Khazhad, a prospector who has worked in The Bleak Lands for almost a decade and lucky survivor of a recent raid had this to say: "I've seen plenty o' pirates in my time. You don't harvest ores in unsafe space and not run into your fair share of despicable folk. But the last four expeditions I've been on have been busted up by raids that came in blazingly fast and with no warning. This last time had I not had the good sense to fit stabilizing arrays for my warp-drive, I and my crew would have bought it for sure. As it was we had several compartments on fire by the time we were safely away, and twelve good men lost their lives. Something needs to be done soon, or all legitimate activity in the area is going to come to a screeching halt."

This sentiment is echoed by Holder Lyrvan Kourmos, who holds sizable estates and facilities in the Erkinen system. "In these remote reaches of space, we depend on imported goods for our very livelihood. We are far from self-sufficient, and given the disruption caused to shipping by the increasingly bold activities of these pirates, our situation is becoming dangerously tenuous. The lack of necessary replacement parts for our equipment is becoming particularly dire, and threatens to shut our production down entirely."

Since the publication of the Ministry's report, the office of the Court Chamberlain has so far declined to comment publicly on the issue.

19/11/2007

Entire Colony of Minmatar Slaves Goes Missing

Sosala, The Bleak Lands - One of the largest slave breeding colonies in the Bleak Lands has mysteriously vanished with little explanation. The colony, established several decades ago on a habitable moon in Sosala, was home to over thirty thousand slaves of varying stock. The facility, which was well guarded, was attacked and destroyed last night, with the entire generation of Minmatar slaves vanishing without a trace.

The slave colony existed for the purpose of breeding, raising, and training new generations of slaves for the Amarr Empire. The vast majority of the slaves were of Minmatar stock, with many of the lines dating back to the initial invasion of Minmatar space by the Amarr Empire. The size of the colony justified building a significant defensive networks, which had until last night deterred even the largest Blood Raider pirate groups from attempting a raid.

Early this morning, the facility was attacked by an unidentified pirate organization. According to reports, all of the weaponry, training devices, and slave records were removed or destroyed. In addition, a large quantity of Vitoc from the colony's stores is unaccounted for. Most notably, however, nearly thirty thousand Minmatar slaves vanished from the installation. The remainder of the slaves, mostly of Eular and Ni-Kunni heritage, were left behind by the raiders.

Security data was inconclusive, as the camera and sensor devices were electronically jammed and then rapidly eliminated, along with the entirety of the security team. The remaining slaves, though unharmed by the raiders, reported only "shadowy shapes" who "checked if we were Minmatar, then shoved us back inside our quarters when we weren't."

Some Holders believe that this attack, on the heels of increased pirate activity in the region, is further evidence that the Empire needs to send in troops to protect the area. "Our very lifeblood is being drained away," said Holder Lyrvan Kourmos. "Every day these attacks grow worse and worse. If something isn't done soon, all the hard work the Navy put into ejecting the Blood Raiders from the area will be for naught. It will just fall into the hands of a new group of heretics."

Ever since a Navy battlestation in Sosala was destroyed several months ago by a terrorist assault, Holders of the Bleak Lands have been calling for a more robust and visible Navy presence in the area. Instead, they have seen a gradual downscaling of Navy installations. Despite the calls for military action, the Amarr Navy has remained silent on the issue.

27/11/2007

Imperial Court Remains Silent about Bleak Land Troubles

The Bleak Lands - Despite the numerous calls for military action against the increasing pirate forces in the Bleak Lands, there has yet to be any response by officials inside the Amarr Empire. In prior cases, such calls have come from capsuleers and other paramilitary forces, but these latest demands come from those Holders who count the Bleak Lands under their domains. In spite of this, all official organizations have kept silent.

"The silence is becoming tiring," remarked Holder Kamelleth Falduur. "First, we had to deal with the Blood Raiders. Then we had to deal with the Defiants. It's becoming a war zone, only our side has no troops."

The frustration with the lack of Navy action in the area has long simmered under the surface. "We thought when they drove the Blood Raiders from the area, that meant a change in policy," said Holder Lyrvan Kourmos. "But once they finished that, they only left token forces behind. It was so ineffectual, it couldn't even deal with Minmatar terrorists properly. After that debacle, they pulled out entirely. We have made numerous petitions to the Navy and the Court Chamberlain, but nothing."

Both the Amarr Navy and the Court Chamberlain have seemed to even refuse to acknowledge that there are complaints. Repeated requests for comment have been completely unanswered. Reporters have been turned away and there are rumors that even the Holders themselves are finding their normal channels of contact closed.

"My cousin is a Captain in the Navy," said one Holder on the condition of anonymity. "Normally, I can speak to him and have him transmit messages further up the command chain. But recently, he hasn't even been accepting communications. Not from me, not from anyone."

The situation is deteriorating to such a degree that some Holders are even discussing the possibility of holding a rally to gather popular support. These discussions are being dismissed by most of the Holders in the area, with Kourmos going as far as to proclaim it "sounds like some claptrap probably invented by some Gallente rabble rouser trying to embarrass the Empire." Despite that, he did say, "If I thought it would have any effect, I might consider it. But the Empire does not work that way and, hopefully, it never will."

Since the disappearance of 30000 slaves earlier in the month, several other Amarr installations have been attacked. While only a few have been slave holding facilities, reports of unusually high numbers of missing slaves continue to come in from across the Bleak Lands.

30/11/2007

Amarr Navy Patrols The Bleak Lands in Force

Sahtogas, The Bleak Lands - A massive military mobilization has been underway in The Bleak Lands. In just two days, the entirety of the Amarr 7th Fleet (under the command of Admiral Vanazir Saracen) has relocated from its bases in Domain to staging areas in The Bleak Lands. Since that time, Navy elements have been seen patrolling the region in force.

The move of an entire fleet, along with most of its logistics capacity, in such a short time has stunned observers. Equally stunning is the fact that neither the Chamber, the Chancellery, nor the Admiralty of the Amarr Navy had given any prior notification that the move was coming. Normally, the transfer of hundreds of ships and tens of thousands of men from one logistics area to another is a monumental undertaking, and the wheels of bureaucracy turn slowly.

The immediacy of the transfer and the speed with which it was carried out has concerned many observers of Amarrian politics, however. Some feel that by relocating an entire fleet from the home regions to the frontier the Chancellor has overstepped his bounds, especially in a time of Succession. Others attribute more sinister motives; While the beleaguered Holders in The Bleak Lands welcome the increased Navy presence, speculation abounds that the true reason for relocation was not to have the 7th Fleet in The Bleak Lands, but to have them out of Domain. Given Admiral Saracen's ties to the Tash-Murkon family, it is natural that such suspicions might arise.

When asked to comment publicly on the move, Admiral Saracen said only, "The people of this region have called and we have answered. It is the duty of the Navy to protect God and Empire. That is what we are doing, nothing more." Eager as always to back up words with actions, Admiral Saracen wasted no time in getting the forces under his command into the field. Already there have been several large skirmishes between Blood Raiders and Navy forces, and the Admiral has vowed to continue patrolling and fortifying The Bleak Lands until "the two-headed serpent of piracy and heresy is burned to ashes."

"God be praised," said Holder Kamelleth Falduur. "Finally the Light will shine once again into this dark place." Falduur, who runs several agricultural combines in the Bleak Lands had previously lamented the interdiction efforts of pirates in the region. "Without regular fertilizer deliveries, we were on the brink of complete crop failure. I don't think people realize just how close some of the more remote systems in the region might have been to starvation. But I am confident that Admiral Saracen will sort things out quickly."

To all appearances, the 7th Fleet is doing just that.

04/12/2007

Amarr 7th Fleet Fortifies Bases in The Bleak Lands

Sahtogas, The Bleak Lands - After a few hectic days of military operations in the region, the forces of the Amarrian 7th Fleet have begun construction efforts to consolidate and fortify their positions in The Bleak Lands. The Navy Logistics Base at Sahtogas in particular has seen a marked increase in the traffic of heavy industrial ships over the last few days. It would appear that the officers and crews of the Fleet, dubbed "The Saracens" after their charismatic Admiral, are serious about enforcing and maintaining Divine Law in the region

When asked about the fortification efforts Admiral Vanazir Saracen was characteristically direct. "Having established our logistical beach-head, we are taking the next natural step. We have brought the Empire back to the Bleak Lands, and now we are expanding our reach, as the Scriptures dictate." The strategic sense of the effort is unquestionable; Admiral Saracen has stated that his ultimate goal is to have no system in The Bleak Lands more than three jumps from a heavily fortified naval installation.

Most Holders in the region have greeted the news with unbridled enthusiasm. Kamelleth Falduur, a Holder openly critical of the bureaucracy's initial slowness to act, was ebullient in his support of Saracen's actions. "At long last The Bleak Lands will be tamed and return to the fold of civilized Amarr space. There is no reason why this region shouldn't be as safe and prosperous as the rest of the Imperial Domain. Admiral Saracen's efforts give hope to us all, God praise him."

But the situation has not been without its controversy. In order to fund and man the rapid construction projects, Admiral Saracen has taken the unusual step of instituting an Imperial tithe. Normally a power reserved to planetary and regional Viceroys, the move has caused dissent among a few Holders in the region. "I don't know who he thinks he is, but showing up with a contingent of Imperial Marines and loading my entire slave stock into a transport bound for some construction site God knows where is a galling abuse of power," said Veralan Naakhubis, a minor Holder from Kuomi. Several Holders have lodged formal complaints with the Chancellery, but as yet there has been no official response.

Most residents of the area dismiss such complaints out of hand however. Gastnik Froom, a hauler pilot native to the region echoed the general sentiment. "Listen to them, whining like Furriers. A month ago they were begging for a savior. Now they have one and they're still not happy. Ingrates. I was honored to lend my ship's service to the Admiral when he asked it. The Empire demands sacrifices of us all, and some of these mewling Holders would do well to remember that."

As men and material continue to flood into Amarr Navy logistical depots, it is clear that the Saracens are planning a long stay.

06/12/2007

Suprise Attack Catches 7th Fleet off Guard

The Bleak Lands - At 11:50 Standard EVE Time today, the following message was transmitted over several independent media frequencies by an individual identifying himself as Ode Goriad.

"You thought we were gone.
You were wrong."

Multiple sources within the Amarr Navy have confirmed that within minutes of the transmission, unidentified military vessels mounted a concerted attack upon 7th Fleet installations all across The Bleak Lands region. Attempts to mount a coordinated response were hampered by a scheduled downtime of the region's military communications network, leaving local units isolated and forcing them to defend as best they could with whatever vessels they had available.

When the communications arrays came back online, and the full scope of what was until that point believed to be a localized problem was made clear, the 7th Fleet immediately activated reserve units to reinforce their positions. Most reported however that the attacking forces had already dispersed by the time they arrived. At

1400 Admiral Saracen issued the following statement:

"At 12:00 today the terrorist organization known as The Defiants launched a series of scattered raids on our facilities across the region, which were swiftly beaten back by my indomitable Fleet. The physical damage was superficial, but the 7th Fleet does not suffer fools gladly. I have worked long and hard to bring this region back under Amarr Navy control and I will not permit these barbarians to destabilize the peace we have built. The 7th Fleet is mobilizing all its forces as I speak, and we will burn our enemies out from the holes they are hiding with the full force of our holy wrath."

Just a few days ago it seemed that there might finally be an end in sight to the troubles that have plagued The Bleak Lands. Today's events show that, once more, the region balances on the edge of a dangerous precipice.

06/12/2007

Saracens Push Ahead With Fortification Program

Myyhera, The Bleak Lands - In a news release earlier today, Admiral Saracen of the Amarr Navy 7th Fleet stated, "God's peace is settling in The Bleak Lands, as the 7th Fleet is progressing its fortifications apace and have secured all key systems. Our next major task is to upgrade all communication relays in the region to support Amarr Navy standards, which will be carried out today. After that completion we will have reached our main objectives for this phase of the operation."

The 7th Fleet's presence in the region has continued to ensure that supply and military convoys travel uninterrupted into the region, showing signs that The Bleak Lands is becoming liberated from pirate influence. Navy patrols become more common each passing day, and there has yet to be any more reported incidents of attacks on slave pens.

While initially thought to have been perpetrated by pirates or Blood Raiders, recent investigations into the raids have revealed none of the characteristics traditionally associated with such organizations. These reports have prompted the Admiral to order his personal staff to head up a detailed analysis into the true origins of these attacks.

The Bleak Lands communication relays are due to be taken offline as of 11:45 Standard EVE Time and should return to full operations shortly after.

18/12/2007

Bleak Lands situation still unstable

Haras - A variety of unaffiliated sources have reported that strikes continue to be made against Amarrian facilities in The Bleak Lands.

In the early hours of the morning, a 7th Fleet communications array in an isolated sector of Haras was destroyed. Reports from survivors have positively identified the attackers as the Minmatar organization called the Defiants.

The communications facility is one of several recently established by Admiral Saracen's 7th Fleet and was reportedly under guard by a detachment of Navy vessels. The Navy engaged in a brief but ferocious fire fight, leading to the eventual destruction of the communications facility. According to initial reports, the facility itself was the main target of the attack. The Defiants only turned their weapons on the Amarr Navy vessels after the facility had been destroyed. Witnesses have stated that the attackers sustained numerous casualties, with several ships retiring from the engagement heavily damaged. There are some concerns as to whether the communications tower was boarded during the firefight, but no confirmation of this has yet filtered in.

The 7th Fleet has refused to officially comment on the attack and have since ordered all non-command personnel to refrain from speaking with reporters.

Less than an hour following the destruction of the Naval facility, a supply depot belonging to House Torash on the far side of the system was attacked and destroyed. Representatives of House Torash have declined to comment, but it is widely suspected that the raid was conducted in order to loot local resources to fuel the Defiants escalating operations in the area.

18/12/2007

7th Fleet Defense Network Compromised.

Sosala - Reports are just filtering in of a large scale fleet assault on the Saracens central defense cortex in The Bleak Lands.

The region was beset with numerous small raids prior to the main attack focusing on targets of opportunity in what now looks like an attempt to draw away elements of the 7th Fleet, spreading their forces out thinly. This was followed by a seemingly large, direct fleet assault on the Saracens central defense cortex.

A typical Amarrian central defense cortex performs many functions but the primary one is in coordinating signal scrambling across regions, effectively masking the presence of Amarr Navy facilities from ship scanners.

The details of the attack are little understood at this time, what is certain however is a large number of cynosural field activations and a heavy ship count in the system, unconfirmed sightings of several Minmatar capital ship wrecks have been reported along with numerous other wrecks believing to belong to the Defiants.

What is certain however, is that the attack force seems to have been successful in their assault and the Amarr Navy central defense cortex appears to be non-operational in The Bleak Lands.

18/12/2007

New Region Names Announced.

Yulai - At a CONCORD press conference held earlier today, the official nomenclature of the recently opened regions - commonly called "the drone regions" by the general capsuleer populace - was announced. Speculation had been rife regarding the delays in announcing the names following the landmark decision by CONCORD to solicit the capsuleer community in the naming process.

Commander Nakuyama, the official in charge of the naming committee, used the conference as an opportunity to apologize for the delay. "As you know, CONCORD has stringent regulations regarding the demarcation and labeling of geographical space. All proposed names must be checked against our sanctioned database for suitability and uniqueness. In this case, the procedures took considerably longer than originally anticipated, as a few last minute changes were necessary to meet the requirements."

The commander went on to admit that CONCORD has been both surprised and impressed by the professional conduct of the capsuleers now resident in the region. "We look forward to instituting new programs with capsuleers," he commented in relation to CONCORD's often-criticized relationship with capsuleers, whose influence has been growing greatly as its population expands.

The press conference ended with the announcement of the new region names, which are as follows:

H3J8-U - Cobalt Edge
6HL8-L - Outer Passage
VU-WU2 - The Spire
7-KXBJ - Etherium Reach
87-1CW - Kalevala Expanse
LQ-OQN - Malpais
S-I6VU - Perrigen Falls
G5KW-3 - Oasa

19/12/2007

7th Fleet Appear Blindsided by Defiants

Sosala - For the past several weeks The Bleak Lands has been the victim of numerous raids which have targeted and disrupted trade routes and ambushed Amarr Navy patrols throughout the region. The Navy themselves have to date been quick to downplay the effectiveness of the attacks, and to assure the public that the re-appearance of the Defiants was contained and of minimal concern. A few days ago Lieutenant Joshua Epaphras, Capsuleer liason for the 7th Fleet, had this to say:

"The situation in The Bleak Lands is stabilizing and our infrastructure construction is keeping to schedule despite the recent efforts of antagonists. Thanks to Admiral Saracen's leadership we are once more making this region a place where we can confidently raise our families in order and purpose."

The Navy seems to have underestimated the resources and the capabilities of the Defiants however, as it now appears that these attacks were just a precursor to a much larger attack, personified in the strike against the Saracen central defense cortex located in Sosala. The details of this attack are still being confirmed, and the number of casualties and ships lost is unknown. Initial reports however appear to indicate that the 7th Fleet may have been blindsided by this attack but were doubtless quick to respond and the toll on the attackers seems to have been high. This could be a significant blow for the Empire's plans for the region, particularly as without a central defense cortex in place to co-ordinate signal scrambling across the region, many more of the Navy's facilities in the area may now risk becoming compromised and vulnerable to attack.

Captain Anath Shoshana, a local salvager, was drawn to the unusual Cynosural activity nearby and found herself an eye-witness to the attack.

"I was searching the area for useful wrecks when I detected three cyno fields activate less than 6AU from my position, all in close proximity. Curiosity got the better of me so I went in. What I found was some sort of Naval base under attack and surrounded by Minmatar ships, I figure they might have been these 'Defiants' I keep hearing about, you know, terrorists! I saw a wing of Nidhoggur's taking a pounding by a string of Revelations, there were fires breaking out all over the place and Amarr Navy ships swarming around like flies! It looked like at least half the dreadnoughts were going down when yet more Minnies swarming in to engage the Rev's and turning their guns from the station's defenses onto the garrison ships. I don't know what happened after that, the terrorists noticed me and I just ran for it!"

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30/01/2008

7th Fleet Scores Major Victory

Kurniainen, The Bleak Lands - Forces of the Amarrian 7th Fleet clashed with forces of the rogue Minmatar organization known as The Defiants during the early morning hours today. The engagement was part of ongoing interdiction efforts by the 7th Fleet to strike at the Defiants' logistics chain. 7th Fleet Captain Jezander Allad explained, "After we lost our defense cortex, we were put on the defensive. But rather than continue to keep our forces in a protective posture, we sought to strike an aggressive blow to the enemy to try to disrupt their operations in The Bleak Lands."

To that end, numerous small 7th Fleet scouting patrols have been scouring the region, making extensive use of cloaking technology. Knowing that the stargates were well protected by regional forces and Customs fleets, the goal of the 7th Fleet's patrols was to determine how the Defiants were bringing in supplies and new combatants. "We knew that attrition was taking its toll on their forces, and that they had to be re-supplying themselves somehow. We suspected capital ships, and this morning's engagement confirmed that suspicion."

When scouts reported cynosural activity in Kurniainen, a quick-response force entered the system. Once on scene, the force was able to pin both an enemy Nidhoggur and a Nomad in place long enough for heavy combat units to arrive. The ensuing firefight saw rapid escalation, as both sides brought more and more forces to bear in attempts to sway the outcome. Ultimately, the 7th Fleet carried the day. Confirmed enemy losses stand at two capital ships, one battleship, eight cruisers, and four frigate class hulls.

Admiral Vanazir Saracen was animated when discussing the engagement at a hasty press conference from his headquarters in Sahtogas. "This quick and decisive battle illustrated very clearly that these terrorist filth are no match for the Amarr Navy in open space. We expect this victory to disrupt their operations in the region for quite some time. Let this be a lesson to all those who would try to withstand the will of God - while the instruments are not yet decided, your fates are already sealed."

Saracen was also quick to credit the activities of allied capsuleers acting as auxiliaries in the area. Acknowledging the logistical difficulties of coordinating individual pod-pilots with Naval operations, he praised the efforts of those who sought to defend Naval facilities, allowing 7th Fleet forces to go on the offensive. "The Empire is blessed with some of the most skilled and dedicated pilots in the cluster. With their help, we have struck a decisive blow to these terrorists."

25/02/2008

CONCORD Report On Drone Region Operations Leaked

Yulai - The wall of secrecy that surrounds the CONCORD Inner Circle has been breached once again when a copy of an internal report was leaked to The Scope, as well as multiple other news agencies and public opinion groups in New Eden. In many cases the file itself has been uploaded to multiple public access servers for public download. From there the file made its way onto the public GalNet when capsuleer Mera Vahlsina, a recent antagonist of controversy involving the questionable retirement of CONCORD Commander Gispali Rhatal, relayed a link there to the general capsuleer population. The circulation of this report has sparked a diverse range of speculation about its authenticity and the motives of the purported source of the leak. The source of the leak had claimed to be a member of an administration support department under the Inner Circle, however there has been no success in verifying this claim given the level of anonymity the source has adhered to.

The report, produced by a division called the Code Aria Inquiry and titled Infested Region Progress Report, details an investigation conducted in the wake of the Infested Regions opening without warning over one year ago. Among the content of this report are details on the unauthorized gate activation incident, CONCORD taskforces assembled and sent into the new regions, a blacked out list of deceased and missing personnel and summaries of previous drone experiments that ended in disaster including an emphasis on the Orphyx incident over two decades ago. The Orphyx incident hailed a new era of Drone AI which ended in disaster following a malfunction resulting in the deaths of multiple people working on the project. Widely regarded in academic circles as the first documented instance of what have become known as Rogue Drones. The anonymous source within the Inner Circle states that the report had recently been released outside of the highest ranks of the Inner Circle of CONCORD, and that most details had been routinely censored for this reason. Of particular interest was the unknown source indicating that this lowering in classification was done at the urgent request of the Inner Circle in order to facilitate an audit on activity that was convened late last year. This is also evident in the report as an addendum points to this fact.

Worrying implications of the report's authenticity have been aired in a political debate session on Echelon Entertainment's current events channel when their own experts in CONCORD affairs revealed the following. "My own sources state that, as far as anyone is aware, there are currently no sanctioned activities beyond the secured empire borders involving the Drone Regions themselves. And in the past such sanctions have been extremely rare. The Inner Circle has clearly withheld this information from lower ranks and the representatives of the empires for quite some time. The mobilisation of CONCORD assets into the Infested Regions without Assembly approval and debriefing, as is required with operations into unsecured space, is a major breach of CONCORD's charter."

"Currently the CONCORD Assembly seems to be in a state of numbness and shock over the leaking of this report." Stated another CONCORD analyst working for The Scope in the wake of the report leak. "We should not expect this to last much longer, given their reaction thus far is more indicative of caution against over reaction. After all, neither the source of the report nor the report itself has been verified as genuine." However, the moment the report hit the public domains and began to spread, the Inner Circle was reported to have launched an investigation into the source of this leak. In regards to this action The Scope's analyst stated the following. "This is a curious reaction on the part of The Inner Circle, and personally speaking it reinforces my belief that the report is indeed a genuine document. They are looking for the source of a leak before determining if the leak and the report itself are of CONCORD origins. Call it a gut feeling if you will, but I think that the Inner Circle has just let the cat out of the bag. I would expect that the CONCORD Assembly representatives will be up in arms at the next Assembly session, if not already enraged behind closed doors. What remains to be seen from future reactions in the CONCORD Assembly is if there was authorization for this operation which is simply buried in a pact of secrecy between The Inner Circle and the Assembly representatives, or there is no authorization and The Inner Circle have acted alone."

26/02/2008

Major Empires Outraged. Amarr Representative Blasts The Inner Circle.

Yulai - In the wake of the Code Aria Inquiry report leak to various media services and public domains, the CONCORD Assembly has descended into a swirl of rumour and outrage. Amid the torrents of harsh words directed in all manners of directions, the Inner Circle have been reported to have launched an emergency investigation seeking to determine both the source of this leak and the authenticity of the report. Meanwhile on the floor of the Assembly itself the representatives of the four empires have begun to fall into step with each other, in what is turning into a rare showing of like minded thinking, and are demanding answers from the Inner Circle on the content of the report. Sounding the rallying call among the Assembly is the senior representative of the Amarr Empire, Lord Qumar, who has vehemently condemned the Inner Circle, confirming the speculation of the media CONCORD analysts that much of the information in the report has been withheld from the empires themselves.

"If the substance of this report is authentic and accurate," Stated Lord Qumar in a post-Assembly press conference, "then this is completely intolerable. The actions of the Inner Circle must be held to account. The very leaking of this report has all but shattered our confidence in the current state of security in the Inner Circle which, if nothing else, requires immediate attention. Ironically we also have this breach of security to thank for bringing this to light. The very details of the report, in which both the wider results of the investigation into the sporadic activation of the newly opened regions as well as information of CONCORD ships entering these regions with CONCORD assets has never been disclosed to us. The Inner Circle has denied all of us information relating to the safety of our borders, the security of our sovereign jumpgate network and the request for the use of CONCORD assets outside of the secured borders they are meant to serve within. Their blatant lack of regard for proper channels is an outrage of the highest order."

Not alone in his anger, one of the Caldari State lower representatives stated in a different interview. "CONCORD assets that have been devoted to the proposed excursion into the drone infested regions could have, and should have been put to much better use within the borders of the empires CONCORD was created to serve. Anything else, such as this, is an abhorrent waste of resources which none of the empires were consulted about."

Multiple CONCORD experts in the media have fixated on the possible connection between these developments and the more recent incidents in the last three months, as mentioned by capsuleer Mera Vahlsina who those events involved. Having poured over the leaked report several times, the tenuous connection of the date the report was lowered in classification and the mishandled retirement of a CONCORD Commander which was surrounded in rumour has been raised. Not to mention the recent information from Mera Vahlsina herself on the GalNet stating the closeness in date from her partner's departure on an unspecified CONCORD patrol and the publishing date of the leaked report.

"It is entirely possible" stated one expert, "that what we are witnessing is the crumbling foundations upon which a very large house of cards has been built."

Further to this speculation political analysts and The Scope, turning their attention to the finer points of this recent development, have begun ruminating over the levels of autonomy that currently exist within the Inner Circle. Armed with this incident, along with an infrequent history of security breaches and operational charter violations by CONCORD personnel, fears are being raised over just how much power the Inner Circle as well as other branches of CONCORD have at their disposal. The Scope's head political analyst for the Genesis region stated the following in a broadcast this morning.

"It is becoming increasingly clear that the Inner Circle have begun to exercise more power than they have available to them. One might speculate, and I must be clear given the situation that this is entirely a point of speculation, that the departments of CONCORD outside of the empire's Assembly itself have grown a little too big for their boots. And that they are evidently deluding themselves with regards to their scope of authority. We can only hope that this is not a typical and frequent occurrence within CONCORD."

26/03/2008

Several Theology Council Justices Declared Missing; Families Plea for Help

Avair - Several Theology Council members, among them Lords Falek Grange, Aulus Gord, and Victor Eliade, have been declared missing by relatives and close associates. All three were last seen departing a Council meeting earlier this week, and have not been seen or heard from since. Family members have issued an urgent request for anyone with knowledge of their whereabouts to come forward, and have offered a 5 million ISK reward for information leading to their direct recovery.

Heavy police activity is currently underway at the Council's headquarters in Avair and several other locations known to be frequented by the missing individuals. Access to personal offices and staff residences of the councilmen has been restricted, as Imperial Paladins at each of the sites are forcibly denying access by reporters and stating only that an official announcement from the Court Chamberlain is forthcoming.

In addition, numerous large patrols of Imperial Navy warships were recently spotted at the Sakht border system, in the Aridia Region of the Amarr Empire. It is unknown whether the increased military activity is indicative of a large-scale manhunt, or part of an unrelated operation. The office of the Imperial Chancellor refused to comment, citing operational security issues.

The justices, all highly trained capsuleers, were once vocal Reformists, calling for the Succession Trials to be eliminated in favor of a rotating cycle of rule for each of the chosen Heirs. After numerous clashes with Conformists, various royal ministries, and the Court Chamberlain himself, the men have lowered their profiles considerably in recent years.

Lord Falek Grange is best known for having served in the late Jamyl Sarum's royal court; both Lord Aulus Gord and Lord Victor Eliade are former Commanders in the Imperial Navy. Each is said to control vast estate holdings on several Amarr worlds.

31/03/2008

Assassination Attempt on Chamberlain Thwarted; Missing Theology Council Members Are Prime Suspects

Amarr - *Breaking News* The Court Chamberlain is today expected to announce a thwarted assassination attempt on his life, and implicate the missing Theology Council justices as being directly responsible for the act. A public address to the empire is expected by Chamberlain Karsoth later today.

Sources close to the chancellor confirmed that the conspiracy was spearheaded by Lord Falek Grange, and "coordinated in large part" under the direction of Lords Victor Eliade and Aulus Gord. Sophisticated, sensor-evading bomb producing materials were smuggled into the Emperor Family Academy Station through a network of individuals working directly for the three justices, thus implicating numerous Theology Council staff. As such, a "purge" of these individuals has been executed by Imperial Paladins, although the source would not elaborate further.

The Imperial Navy confirmed that search and destroy operations are underway, and that the presence of naval warships in the Sakht System was due to its importance as the last system the three fugitives were seen in. Believed to have crossed the border, the Navy has not ruled out the possibility that their escape was aided by Blood Raiders, but reiterated that the motivations of Grange, Eliade, and Victor have not been specifically tied to the cult-at least not yet.

Imperial forces, in particular Paladins under the command of the Ministry of Internal Order, have imposed draconian security measures in light of the assassinations of two emperors in recent memory. Sweeping reform enacted by Chamberlain Karsoth shortly after the late Emperor, Dorian II's death awarded the Paladins with additional search and seizure powers, which include prompt "guilt by holy witness" judgments if crimes are caught in the act by "ordained representatives of Amarr."

A full transcript of Chamberlain Karsoth's address will be available following his announcement.

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A full transcript of Chamberlain Karsoth's address will be available following his announcement.

01/04/2008

Text of Empire Address Delivered by Court Chamberlain Dochuta Karsoth; Accused Council Members Executed

Amarr - The Imperial Chancellor released the official transcript of the empire address implicating several Theology Council members in an assassination plot against Chamberlain Karsoth, in which he states that justices Grange, Eliade and Gord were all executed. Imperial Navy representatives confirmed that clones of the capsuleers were destroyed, and that their ships were "neutralized" beyond empire borders. The Imperial Chancellor's office released the full transcript of Chamberlain Karsoth's address, which was described by those in attendance as "his most impassioned and authoritative to date".

The following is the text released from the Chancellor.

Believers of the Church, Paladins of the Righteous, oh humble among those who seek the divine, welcome!

We are convened here today to discuss a matter of sinister consequence. A scourge has descended upon our realm; a blight which has threatened the core of our faith and the house I have sworn to protect.

I have prayed for strength; strength to bear the burden of being the sole protectorate of this throne; for never has the Demon had so great a temptation as the void which is before us now; the void that has remained since the holy ordained was taken from us.

To covet is evil; and mark my words, there are those who covet this throne. The Demon whispers to them, testing their faith night and day, tempting them with visions of power and worldly promises of lust and greed. Take the throne, he says. No need for Succession Trials. No need for Scriptures, for the rule of God, or the laws which He hath appointed.

It seems that we who preach these words, we who are charged with spreading the precious message of the Scriptures, are not immune to the Demon's ploy. It is with sadness and anger that I bring to you the news that some of us have failed the Test of Faith. Those who have been damned-those who are guilty of the most heinous crimes imaginable-they are none other than the corrupt souls of the Theology Council.

Blessed Amarrians, it is no secret that since the death of our beloved Emperor, there are those who have conspired to desecrate our Faith and defy the law of these Scriptures. These so-called Reformist heathens, motivated by political ambition, insult the sanctity of this church! They have renounced the Succession Trials; they dare to suggest that the Emperor's throne can be filled by the will of man, and not by holy edict!

I am a servant of the Lord! And I will not fail my test of faith! I am devoted to the law of Scripture, and no man has any right to disclaim it. If God wills a change to His law, then His word will be spoken through the next ordained Emperor of Amarr-no one else!

A short time ago, Paladins of the Ministry of Internal Order thwarted a plot to take my life. Yes, those demonic patrons saw me as an obstacle to their elaborate plans to install another heir-one held under the spell of their intent, an obedient dog who would forever be in their debt for placing him in power.

But no! I stood before them with the Scriptures in my hands, with my faith in my heart, and I sent them back to hell! God revealed this plot on my life, and granteth me the sword to smite them in His name!

Dearest servants of the Lord, we have lost one Emperor too many to the hands of murderers. As Chamberlain, I am compelled to send the message of God's wrath to all those who believe the Demon's false promises; that we will no longer afford would-be assassins the privilege of a fair trial; that if they are so careless with the precious life they have been given; that if they elect to commit such acts of deviance in the name of favor from idols; then we, as True Believers, will act as God's sword and pursue these hell minions with inspired resolve.

Humblest believers, it is thus that I inform you that the Holder Falek Grange, his loyal brigand Holder Aulus Gord,

and the members of his private court on the Theology Council have each been hunted down and destroyed. We are rid of the blight they brought to that Council, whose good name was marred by the evil acts of these men; who abused their cherished privilege as capsuleers to plot, to conspire, and to betray all that we hold sacred. Their deaths, and subsequent excommunication from this Church, saved not only my life, but those of the fellow Council members who opposed their Reformist ways.

Falek Grange was a traitor! A conspirator! And his memory will be one of deceit and mistrust. May his death, curse his soul, serve warning to those who hear the Demon's whisper. To act on his words is to be damned for all of time!

I am steadfast in my faith; it will be stronger tomorrow and every day thereafter until my journey to the gates of heaven. Amarr will have a Succession Trial; this is my solemn mission for all of you. No man shall stand before this altar and defy the laws that have held us for millennia; the very laws which God Himself bestowed upon us.

When the heirs are ready, when they make their peace with God and accept His divine plan, then we shall proceed with the laws of Succession. Until then, I will protect the sanctity of this throne with all of my might.

May his light guide us all in faith and reclaim, amen.

-- As spoken by Court Chamberlain Dochuta Karsoth, St. Kuria the Prophet Cathedral, 110 EST

02/05/2008

Caldari Stocks Plummet Following News of Constructions Revolt

Yulai - Caldari mega-corporation shares across the State have begun to freefall following word that Home Guard troops have been deployed to the Constructions Armor Forge facility on Piak III. This follows a spate of bad news for the State in recent weeks as investors continue to sell off Caldari assets and move to more secure investments, in particular Federation securities. Leading analysts are calling the situation at Piak "emblematic of the State's broader issues", citing the rampant inflation figures for the localized economies under mega-corporation control. Shares of Caldari Constructions stock, leading the downward spiral of the broader Caldari Funds Index, have already lost more than 30 percent of their value in heavy trading.

02/05/2008

Home Guard Dropships Reported Landing on Piak III

Piak - Home Guard dropships have landed at the Armor Forge manufacturing facility on Piak III, deploying mechanized infantry to counter what is now being called a "hostage situation". According to a statement released by Caldari Constructions, a rogue employee named Tibus Heth is blackmailing the corporation "at the expense of his own coworkers", and is threatening to kill those inside unless his demands are met. However, hundreds of laborers have gathered outside the security perimeter in apparent support of the man, and unconfirmed reports are circulating that only management-level Constructions employees are being held inside against their will inside the facility. No statement has been issued yet by Kaalakiota, the parent company of Home Guard, regarding the show of force onsite. The Constructions Armor Forge, by far the largest planetary asset of the corporation, is believed to be a primary supplier of industrial starship components and heavy equipment to several mega-corporations.

02/05/2008

Breaking News: Home Guard Troops Open Fire on Constructions Workers; Dozens Killed in Resulting Riot

Piak III - Home Guard troops opened fire and killed at least one Caldari Constructions worker at the Armor Forge facility on Piak III, inciting a riot that claimed the lives of dozens of employees. Lured outside by Constructions CEO Torkebaira Shutsu for alleged negotiations on behalf of the employees trapped inside, a Home Guard sniper shot the Constructions worker as he approached the executive in the open. Recorded footage depicts a man believed to be Tibus Heth braving the gunfire to rescue the fallen comrade as the enraged crowd rushed the security perimeter, inciting a stampede that left numerous victims crushed or electrocuted. Anonymous sources have provided credible evidence that Kaalakiota CEO Haatakan Oiritsuu herself issued the order to use deadly force on the Constructions employees to retake the facility; the mega-corporation is furiously denying those claims. Tibus Heth, believed to be responsible for leading the revolt, is still alive after retreating back into the Armor Forge with the wounded Constructions worker slung over his shoulder as Home Guard troops and MTACs faced the rioting Constructions workers. Both sides are currently at a standstill; the Armor Forge remains under control of Heth and his loyalists. The dropship of Caldari Constructions CEO Torkebaira Shutsu was seen departing the Armor Forge just moments ago as Home Guard troops secured the perimeter and established triage centers for the wounded.

02/05/2008

Breaking News: Worker Revolt Underway at Caldari Constructions Facilities

Piak - Reports are coming in from the Caldari State that three Caldari Constructions factories in the Piak, Aikantoh, and Litiura systems have been seized by rioting workers. Reports of halted production and shipping schedules from each of these sites have been verified by on-scene news agents. The Stateside news networks are following this story closely and we will continue to provide coverage as it becomes available.

02/05/2008

Tibus Heth Obtains Nationwide Broadcast Feed, Addresses Nation

Piak - Tibus Heth secured unauthorized airtime for the Caldari State's largest news broadcast hub to make his first public address since the Constructions Revolt. In a passionate, fiery speech, Heth asserted his ownership of the corporation and accused mega-corporate leadership and Federation influence as being the core root of the Caldari State's woes, and promised to make an example of Constructions to "restore the State's dignity".

The full transcript follows:

A young man died in my arms today...bright, capable, brave...everything that we should be, he was: A true Caldari patriot. He was killed by a single bullet, fired from the barrel of a mega-corporation's rifle-a bullet...that was intended for me.

The mega-corporations want me to tell you that his death was necessary; that he was guilty of committing a crime. They can go to hell, for I will not be compelled by anyone to insult that hero's memory. He spoke no last words, made no final request, cried no plea for mercy, nor whispered a prayer for forgiveness. His wound left him without the voice to speak in the final moments of his life. But I knew him well enough to know this:

That man gave his life so that I could live. And I swear to you that I'm going to do my best to live up to his example, by any means necessary.

His death serves as a warning to all those who are Caldari: The evil which took his life has killed many times before; it is piercing Caldari flesh and blood right this moment; and it will kill tomorrow and every day thereafter-unless you listen well to what I say now.

As of 1600 hours today, I became the Chief Executive Officer and majority shareholder of Caldari Constructions. The entire executive team of the previous regime has been removed from power. The men and women standing behind me have already been designated to fulfill the roles of those who have departed.

We have each sworn, on our very lives, to uphold the responsibility we have to the Caldari State. I don't give a damn about shareholders, because it's apparent that they don't give a damn about the workers who slave to put the fat into their bellies. In return for the life of luxury afforded to them by the proletariat armies of this State, they have returned the effort with this:

Look at it. All of you, put yourself into that armor, if you dare. What happened to us? Our wounds are self-inflicted. Have our leaders destroyed the Caldari soul, the Caldari conscience, the Caldari power that once was-and may yet still become?

It's true that I led a coup against the masters of this corporation. I led this coup not expecting to survive, but my intent was never to kill my brothers. We spared the life of every guard and worker in the Armor Forge-you can ask them yourself. And I swear...that Caldari man did not have to die! It was the greed of mega-corporations that killed him; the greed of sinister men that was killing Caldari Constructions. How could our leadership allow this to happen? What was it that subverted them, that turned them towards this path? Think of it: all of those gifted, talented individuals, the so-called elite, whom we charged with guiding us? From where-or from whom-did they learn this path?

It was learned from the same enemy they were supposed to protect us from. It was learned from the Gallenteans.

The Caldari people are the strongest souls of New Eden; no other nation has done so much with so little. An objective look back upon our history demonstrates that the Gallenteans, from the moment they contacted us, have been the bane of our existence. They and their righteousness, they and their criticism of our way of life, they and their insistence that their values are appropriate for us all...and still...still! This goes on today, just as it did a thousand years ago!

Is it not insulting that they can just dismiss the culture we've held dear to us for generations; to blatantly dismiss the values which have kept us alive in this cruel universe? Their self-indulgence in moral proclamations is, make no mistake about it, a superiority complex, a hateful arrogance that blinds them to the vulnerability of our human selves.

Every ambition we have that lies beyond our borders is an act of war. Every Gallentean ambition beyond their borders is 'the spread of ideals' and the 'initiative for peace'. We ask to shelter the livelihood of our workers by begging them for restraint in their trade policies. They accuse us of protectionism, of being enemies of free trade and free thinking. Nothing we do is acceptable to their standards, and no discourse or discussion is acceptable to their tastes.

I will not stand for this hypocrisy any longer! To the Federation, I say this: The notion that a man can be free does not exempt him from his obligations to his fellow man...the obligation to be decent, to be respectful of traditions that differ from your own, to acknowledge the possibility that your ideas can cause more harm than good.

You use the rhetoric of emancipation as a guise to veil your malicious intent to seize advantage for yourself, always at the expense of other races. The very freedoms that you proclaim are exactly what divides a nation, and what has divided the cultural brotherhood of our own race.

My promise, my solemn swear, is to adhere with the values that made us who we are, and not to the corruption of those whom I have replaced. My responsibility is to rid the scourge of Gallentean ideals from the ranks of our corporate leaders, and I will demand accountability for the failure of our State. I am you, Caldari, born among these masses, and a soldier, one of millions in your ranks, and now I am accepting my responsibility to right the course of Caldari Constructions. May its example inspire the courageous Caldari spirit, and illuminate the path for all those who dare to take action in the name of saving our race.

Effective immediately, the assets of mid-grade employees and up will be frozen and repossessed. This company will no longer reward failure. The days of entitlement strictly for caste and class merits are over. These men and women will have to earn what they've taken from this corporation. Here, talent means nothing unless you have the willpower to exploit it to its full potential. My measure of compensation will be based on work output, in whatever role you serve, and not the unproven potential of genetic competence.

Personally, I will not draw one single credit from the coffers of this corporation until I've earned the right to be called its CEO.

To those who call yourselves clients of Caldari Constructions: it is business as usual. Obligations will be met, orders will be filled, and debts will be collected. You will notice vast improvements in the production efficiency of this corporation. Understand that I am a fair man. Any attempts to subvert, deceive, or manipulate the operations of this company will be taken as a personal attack on those whom I am charged with protecting. Do not ever cross me. You will regret it.

To the rest of my fellow compatriots, you should demand nothing less of your own leaders, who are nothing without you and undeserving of your allegiance until they prove otherwise. They have failed to deliver us from the humiliation of Gallentean influence. They have made us inferior to a lesser race, ignoring the threat as if the illusion of wealth and prestige somehow shelters them from the reality of national failure.

According to the laws of the mega corporations, I have committed crimes here today. But none...none...are greater than those committed by the elite, who still dare to call themselves Caldari.

My name is Tibus Heth, and I am a Caldari patriot. The restoration of our State's dignity begins now.

08/05/2008

Republic Academic Appointed to Ambassador Post

Illuin - Republic Prime Minister Karin Midular today announced the appointment of renowned long time academic Keitan Yun as the nation's ambassador on the CONCORD Assembly. "Mr. Yun has served our nation well in the capacity of our universities," she said. "No man is better versed in our culture or history than him. He is a true Minmatar patriot, and will represent us well before the Assembly."

Despite his new responsibilities as an international diplomat, the enthusiastic Sebiestor will still retain his honorary fellowship with Republic University. "This is a great honor," he commented. "I've spent most of my life studying the history of this great Republic. I never imagined the day would come when I could be so close to the making of that history, and I sincerely thank the esteemed Prime Minister for the opportunity to serve."

Parliament Head Maleatu Shakor was uncharacteristically supportive of the prime minister's choice. "About time she picked someone worthy of the title," he commented. "Hopefully the man has the spine to stand up to her nonsensical politics and truly speak for Minmatar for once."

Ambassador Yun will make his first appearance before the CONCORD Assembly this Sunday in a closed-door session.

09/05/2008

Ethnic Violence, Vandalism Shocks Caldari Prime

Luminaire - Dozens of acts of vandalism and violence were committed overnight against Caldari expatriates on Caldari Prime. Security camera footage revealed numerous bands of Gallentean vandals engaged in hate crimes ranging from the physical assault of ethnic Caldarians to the torching of the last surviving Tikiona State archeological site on the planet.

The flames from the archeological site could be seen for miles. "This is an unspeakable tragedy," Dr. Hans Demato of the Science and Trade Institute proclaimed. "This place was sacred to us! These were our ancestors, the ones who founded the Caldari State! Who would do such a thing? Why?"

Anti-Caldari sentiment was especially evident at defaced memorials dedicated to Caldarians killed during the Federation bombardment of those same locations hundreds of years earlier. "Where were the police?" one terrified expatriate asked. "We're supposed to be under Federation protection here-how could they let this

happen?"

Municipal Federation authorities have released images of the vandals and are asking anyone with information to notify authorities immediately, also warning that any "vigilante justice" would be dealt with harshly. With the exception of the largest cities of Arcurio and Tovil, Caldarians and Gallenteans live in mostly isolated communities, with the former holding "expatriate" status and permanent work visas permitting them to remain on the planet. All property and land titles for Caldari Prime are owed by the Federation government or private enterprises.

10/05/2008

Ethnic Rioting Shakes Caldari Prime; Deaths Reported

Luminaire - Breaking News - At least a dozen deaths have been reported as reaction to the hate crimes and acts of vandalism against Caldari landmarks on Caldari Prime led to violence. Clashes between Caldarian expatriates and ethnic Gallenteans are underway in the major cities of Tovil and Arcurio as Federation riot police attempt to contain the violence. Reports of death and injury are filing in from industrial sites in the periphery of the city, where the riots are believed to have started. Eyewitness accounts describe enraged Caldari workers turning against Gallentean proprietors, who in turn are defending themselves with "all means at their disposal", including the use of deadly force. Municipal Federation police are urging citizens to "stay out of harm's way" by remaining at home or within the more secure central districts.

11/05/2008

Federation Police Use Deadly Force on Rioters; Death Count Soars

Luminaire - Update - Raging ethnic violence on Caldari Prime took a turn for the worse as Federation police opened fire on rioting Caldari expatriates. Although there are conflicting reports about the specific circumstances surrounding the incident, reliable sources claim the decision to use force was made following the shooting death of a Federation police officer. Camera drones on site are recording imagery of groups of young males attacking Federation establishments as owners return fire. Municipal police forces are erecting barricades around businesses and private property. Although local politicians have appealed for calm, the death toll is estimated to be in the hundreds, with at least twice as many casualties.

11/05/2008

Disgraced Minmatar Ambassador Evicted From First CONCORD Assembly Session

Yulai - Newly appointed Minmatar Ambassador Keitan Yun was banned from his first Assembly appearance following the delivery of his inaugural speech. The impassioned sermon was conducted behind a closed door session, during which he accused CONCORD of failing to "conquer the fundamental challenges of universal equality and human rights" and challenged them to explain the "hypocrisy" of allowing the Amarr Empire to hold a seat on the Assembly.

The insulted Amarrian ambassador responded with a fiery counter of his own, reminding the audience that Chamberlain Karsoth has continued the Minmatar goodwill programs enacted by the previous two Emperors, and that the woes of the Republic have nothing to do with CONCORD or Amarr, but are instead due to the nation's own fragmented nature and "corrupt, spineless leadership". The angry Assembly moderator apologized to the Amarrian ambassador and conceded that Keitan Yun's remarks were inappropriately "combative". Mr. Yun was then banned for the remainder of session and threatened with permanent expulsion if such behavior continued.

No comment was available from Minmatar Republic Prime Minister Karin Midular, who just appointed Mr. Yun to the diplomatic position late last week.

11/05/2008

Ethnic Violence Spreads Throughout Caldari State

Lonetrek - Numerous racially-motivated attacks against Gallentean expatriates residing in the Caldari State were reported last night as word of the ethnic violence on Caldari Prime spread. The sudden rise in incidents follows the use of lethal force by Federation municipal police forces to quell rioting in the major cities of Tovil and Arcurio. Reports of assaults, property damage, and hate crimes against Gallentean expatriates have been confirmed throughout territories held by the Lai Dai, Sukuuvestaa, Kaalakiota, and Wiyrkomi mega-corporations. Anonymous sources are also reporting that mega-corporate police forces are doing little to stop it, undoubtedly reciprocating the treatment of ethnic Caldari on Caldari Prime.

Millions of Gallenteans operate businesses within the State ranging from commodity importing to wealth management services, many of which are unpopular locally yet somehow manage to thrive in a sluggish State economy. The sudden escalation of hostilities is largely attributed to the dramatic takeover of the Caldari Constructions corporation by Tibus Heth, who blames the State's economic problems on Federation influence, and whose openly anti-Gallentean comments have fueled racial tensions.

12/05/2008

Breaking News: Ishukone CEO Pleads for Calm, Denounces Tibus Heth

Malkalen - Otro Gariushi, the hugely popular CEO of the Caldari mega-corporation Ishukone, secured nation-wide broadcast rights to make an emotional appeal for calm in the Caldari State, renouncing ethnic violence and calling Heth's actions "unnecessary, selfish, and unspeakably dangerous". The announcement follows escalating racial tensions between the Caldari State and Gallente Federation, whose expatriates have both been targets of

ethnic violence in recent days. Gariushi's influence seems to have worked, at least on Caldari Prime, where hostilities have ceased.

A full transcript of his speech is below:

Caldarians, I have come before you to deliver this message: Those of you who are attacking Gallenteans right now, you are enemies of this State. I take no pride in having to ask you this, but please...stop what you're doing... take a step back... and remember your humanity. You have anger-so do I. We've been reminded of our failure, as a nation, to live up to the expectation of the Caldari ideal. We've made mistakes-ones that we can correct-but this is not the way.

Our problems come from within. Not from outside of our borders, and not in the past that we're ashamed of. Tibus Heth showed you the extent of executive greed in our system of governance. He demonstrated that the elites of this nation have failed to create wealth in a way that benefits those who have labored the most to produce it. In the Caldari State, opportunities are created through the work of good men and women. Good people. Not animals. Good human beings. Not savages. We are people who take responsibility for our actions, and we are people who believe that others should be held accountable for theirs.

But Tibus Heth is wrong. He wants a scapegoat. He wants change through hate. He revealed just how fragile this...this concept we call 'civilization' is when you test the limits of people's patience. It's true that some people did some horrible things...evil people who purposely sought to insult us right at our core, to strike directly into our hearts. But to you on Caldari Prime, or anywhere else in this State, don't let yourself play into the hands of a tyrant. Don't let him lead you down this path, because I promise you, it will lead to disaster.

You know my past. You know I've never backed down from a fight. But for the sake of this generation, don't confuse rationality with cowardice. Heth's appeal to hatred is unnecessary, selfish, and unspeakably dangerous. Now, I'm promising all of you that we will find those responsible for these malicious acts on Caldari Prime and prosecute them to the full extent of the law. And then we'll find those who misled the finances of the mega-corporations for personal gain, and they will be held to account for their greed.

From the moment I took this post, I have governed Ishukone with the interests of its workers ahead of my own. I commend Tibus Heth for exposing the flaws of mega-corporate governance. But I condemn him for inciting us into anarchy. We are destined for greater things than this. Our path should have never led us here. There is a better way. But you must step back from what you're doing now, or else we'll lose everything that we have left of ourselves.

I'm asking each of you-in fact, I'm demanding it, in the name of this State-to be calm. Return to work, to school, to the tasks that we chose on our own accord. You looked to me for guidance once before; now I'm imploring you to trust me again. Follow me. Follow the example of Ishukone. We can make this State stronger...we can be united in purpose...but we will never, ever be united in hate.

14/05/2008

Malkalen Economic Summit Announced by Gariushi, Foiritan

Malkalen- In a clear sign of a national effort to reduce racial tensions, Ishukone Corporation CEO Otro Gariushi released a joint statement with Federation President Souro Foiritan announcing the commencement of an economic summit to be held tomorrow at the mega-corporation's headquarters in Malkalen. The show of solidarity follows an intense period of ethnic strife between the two nations and an appeal for calm from both leaders, especially in the volatile cities of Caldari Prime.

"This proposal is about hope and reconciliation," President Foiritan stated. "Our goal is to address real economic concerns as a means to promote healing between our nations."

The urgency of the summit and quick turnaround on arrangements reflects the severity of the crisis. In recent days, the death toll from rioting throughout both nations has soared, as expatriates have become targets for hate crimes. Economic distress, particularly in the Caldari State, has served as a catalyst in the heating of racial tensions. Without providing specific details, the Ishukone CEO spoke enthusiastically about the proposal. "Clearly, President Foiritan is serious about improving ties between our nations," he said. "Economic cooperation forms the core of our relationship, and this proposal is beneficial to us both. I'm truly looking forward to meeting their delegation, and I know that the spirit of this summit appeals to all Caldari."

Presenting the economic proposal on behalf of President Foiritan will be Federation Economic Minister Wadis Chene, who helped architect the spectacular growth of the Federation for the last five years. Admiral Alexander Noir, the popular recipient of the Aidonis award, will be delivering the Federation Delegation to Ishukone headquarters tomorrow.

Violence has decreased in both nations since Otro Gariushi's national address, in which he denounced Tibus Heth and pleaded for an end to racial tensions. "Our relationship should have never deteriorated to this point," Gariushi stated. "We're all better served through positive relations with our neighbors. As President Foiritan says, we will use tomorrow's historic summit as an opportunity to heal, and to dismiss the ideology of hate once and for all."

14/05/2008

Heth Responds to Malkalen Economic Summit Announcement

Piak - Tibus Heth, the firebrand CEO of Caldari Constructions widely held responsible for inciting racial tensions between the Caldari State and Gallente Federation, released a brief statement endorsing the surprise economic initiative between the Federation President and Ishukone CEO:

"I welcome Otro Gariushi's initiative to calm the situation on Caldari Prime, and praise his peaceful approach to managing our relationship with the Gallente Federation. I look forward to hearing the details of this agreement, and wish to contribute to the diplomatic process any way that I can to provide the best possible outcome for the Caldari people."

The abrupt turnaround in sentiment follows the renewed popularity of Ishukone corporation CEO Otro Gariushi, who has openly denounced Heth and his ideals.

15/05/2008

UPDATE: FEDERATION NYX RAMS ISHUKONE HEADQUARTERS STATION

Malkalen - ** Breaking News Update** A Nyx-class supercarrier that was part of the Malkalen Economic Summit delegation has collided with Ishukone Corporate Headquarters. The calamity occurred shortly after a general evacuation order was issued on the station during the summit. Preliminary estimates place the death toll in the "hundreds of thousands". Although unconfirmed at this time, the collision appears to have been deliberate. Eyewitnesses report that the supercarrier's escorts were engaged and destroyed shortly after the impact by Caldari Navy and Ishukone Watch warships. We are continuing to monitor this story will provide details as soon as they become available.

15/05/2008

Ishukone Corporation establishes disaster relief program

Malkalen - Still reeling from today's unprovoked atrocity, the Ishukone Corporation has released a statement announcing the formation of an emergency disaster relief program. The damage caused by the impact of the FNS Wandering Saint on the Ishukone Headquarters station has left many survivors trapped within the superstructure, and while repair and rescue crews are battling to rescue them, efforts are hampered by chemical fires, extensive power failures and the constant threat of further decompressions and detonations.

Jeanna Kishuo, an Ishukone official helping co-ordinate efforts from the nearby Ishukone Watch station revealed that "there's no proper chain of command right now - everyone's doing everything they can but we can't get access to the Corporation's general funds because there's nobody around who can authorize it." When asked what else could be done, she replied "get the news out to the capsuleers - we're bleeding here, and if they want to do any damn good tell them we need supplies hauled in yesterday! We're running out of critical hardware and people are dying right now because of it!"

Buy orders for the needed items, including antibiotics and hydrogen batteries, have been placed by Ishukone representative Jeanna Kishuo at Malkalen III - Ishukone Watch Assembly Plant using the remaining available funds. Ishukone has appealed to all loyal Caldari citizens to fill these orders as quickly as possible in order that further loss of life be avoided.

15/05/2008

UPDATE: LOCAL BROADCAST AUDIO CONFIRMS NYX COLLISION WAS DELIBERATE

MALKALEN - Logs from the Local subspace channel in the Malkalen System obtained by the media have confirmed that the Nyx supercarrier piloted by Admiral Alexander Noir of the Federation Navy was deliberately piloted into Ishukone Headquarters station. This attack occurred during an Economic Summit hosted by Ishukone CEO Otro Gariushi and included representatives from the Federation government. Partial transcripts of the local reveal Admiral Noir's final words, just before impact:

"I have an obligation to my beloved Federation to settle accounts with this hateful race, these cursed Caldarians. For my entire life, I have mourned for Hueromont, wishing, praying, willing for the day when I could strike back on behalf of those souls who perished. Fate has bestowed upon me this grand opportunity, this great day, to take vengeance for all those who gave their lives for the Federation, the true guardian of our precious Gallentean race . . . may you rest in peace now, brave souls of Hueromont, and you, kindred spirits of Nouvelle Rouvenor, knowing that I will take back what was stolen from you . . . Curse you, Caldari . . . may I take as many of you with me that I can!"

The Federation has not issued a statement as of this time. Search and rescue efforts are underway to reach survivors onboard, where numerous fires are still burning throughout. The scale of damage to the station is catastrophic, with the death count estimated to reach into the hundreds of thousands.

15/05/2008

BREAKING NEWS: EXPLOSIONS REPORTED, CONTACT WITH ISHUKONE HEADQUARTERS STATION LOST

Malkalen - ** This is a breaking news flash ** Eyewitnesses have reported a massive explosion at Ishukone Headquarters Station in Malkalen, the site of the economic summit between the Federation and Caldari State, where a general evacuation order was issued moments ago. Contact with the station, including reporters onboard, has been lost. Scope News has released recorded footage of the event taken from outside the station

before the explosion was reported. We are still trying to get information and will continue to provide coverage of this event.

15/05/2008

BREAKING NEWS: GENERAL EVACUATION ORDER ISSUED AT ISHUKONE HEADQUARTERS STATION

Malkalen - ** This is a breaking news flash ** Reports are coming in that an emergency evacuation is underway at Ishukone Headquarters Station, the site of the ongoing Malkalen Economic Summit. The exact emergency is unknown at this time. General evacuation orders require all personnel, military and civilian, to exit the station immediately. We will continue to provide coverage as information becomes available.

15/05/2008

Economic Summit Underway

Malkalen - To the enthusiastic applause of all in attendance, including the hundreds of reporters and camera drones present, Federation Economic Minister Wadis Chene and Ishukone CEO Otro Gariushi began the session with an embrace. The emotional welcoming was symbolic of the two nations' efforts to reduce racial tensions and strengthen economic ties. Also in attendance were various guests from Ishukone, all of whom expressed interest in meeting with Federation delegates in advance.

Following the handshakes, the summit commenced with a question and answer session with Otro Gariushi and Wadis Chene. Both officials expressed deep regret at the recent escalations in ethnic violence, conceded mutual blame for its origins, and accepted responsibility in taking the necessary steps to prevent it from happening again.

When asked directly if he was attempting to supersede Tibus Heth's aggressive 'power play' entrance into Caldari politics, Otro Gariushi answered that he "wasn't aware of any power contests in this part of the State", drawing a chuckle from the audience that quickly evolved into full-blown cheering from the Ishukone crowd. More seriously, he added that he planned to hold Tibus at his word to give the peace process a chance.

A gala reception began following the session. Formal negotiations will begin tomorrow, during which time details about the proposal will be released to media channels.

15/05/2008

Federation Delegation Arrives in Malkalen

Malkalen - For the first time since the end of the Gallente-Caldari War, a procession of Federation Navy warships entered Caldari Space, only this time flying a banner of peace. Met by Ishukone Watch ships at the Border Zone, civilian and military ships alike paused to watch the majestic Nyx-class super carrier and her escorts as it traveled to Malkalen.

"I've never seen one in person before," admitted one Caldari Navy officer, who preferred to remain anonymous. "That's one impressive looking ship. Not as impressive as one of our own Wyverns, of course. But impressive."

The Caldari Navy harbors a great deal of respect for Admiral Alexander Noir, the pilot of the Nyx and the last living veteran of the war. He has since become a spokesman for improving the relationship between the two nations, undoubtedly selected for this summit because of his years of advocating peace.

"We wouldn't let just anyone fly a capital ship into the heart of our space," stated Caldari Navy Fleet Admiral Morda Engsten. "Admiral Noir has done more to bridge our differences with the Federation than anyone else. We are honored to have him, as with the entire delegation."

Federation Economic Minister Wadis Chene and the members of her team left the carrier in a shuttle and docked at Ishukone Headquarters Station moments ago, where she was welcomed aboard by Otro Gariushi.

16/05/2008

ISHUKONE STATEMENT: OTRO GARIUSHI CONFIRMED DEAD

Malkalen - The Ishukone Corporation released a statement in which they confirmed that CEO Otro Gariushi was killed during the attack on its headquarters station in Malkalen. Also killed were Federation Economic Minister Wadis Chene and the entire Gallentean delegation. Although Chief Financial Officer Kinachi Hepimeki was declared the acting CEO, she has not been seen since the tragedy occurred. The statement recounts the sequence of events leading up to the catastrophe.

The transcript is available here:

"The Federation delegation arrived at Ishukone headquarters station shortly after 11:00 Local without incident. As per harbor control instructions, the Nyx and her escorts took position approximately 25 kilometers off-port from the main station hangar. To this point, all Federation ships followed the pre-arranged flight plan and complied with all border transit agreements issued by the Navy. At approximately 11:46 Local, Ishukone Watch and Caldari Navy escorts reported an unscheduled aspect change on the Nyx followed a sudden increase in speed. When the final course correction vector aligned with the station, we attempted to hail the Nyx pilot, which we know for certain was Admiral Alexander Noir. No response was received.

"At 11:48 local, a general evacuation order was issued directly by Otro Gariushi, and intercept orders were issued by the Watch. Numerous attempts to hail Admiral Noir went unanswered before he made his parting statements on the local channel. We estimate that between twenty and twenty-five thousand civilian and military personnel were evacuated from the station before impact, which we registered at exactly 11:52 local.

"We have ceased all search and rescue efforts. Recovery operations will continue for as long as it takes to bring closure to loved ones as best as we can. We have approximately 5,000 survivors in our custody, all of which remain in serious condition at Ishukone medical facilities. The death toll currently stands at 421,000, with at least that many more missing. Of the confirmed deaths, most were permanent station residents. Ship crews on shore rotation make up the bulk of those who remain unaccounted for.

"Otro Gariushi is dead. His clones were located in this station. Chief Financial Officer Kinachi Hepimeki is the acting CEO until the Board of Directors hold elections for an official replacement.

"We simply do not have the words to describe this tragedy. We will do everything we can for the families of victims, and we sincerely thank those capsuleers who have been donating to the relief effort."

19/05/2008

Federation President Affirms Ishukone's Account of Event, Denies Complicity in Malkalen Attack

Ladistier - Gallente Federation President Souro Foiritan today expressed his sincerest sympathies towards the families of victims in the Malkalen disaster and offered "the full resources of his nation" to assist to those in need. He also emphatically denied claims of Federation complicity in the attack, stating that Admiral Alexander Noir's actions were his own and that "no one suspected that he was capable of such a monstrous act". The delay in a formal response was attributed to an "exhaustive and ongoing investigation" into Noir's actions and a search for any clues that might have provided advanced warning of such an attack.

President Foiritan spoke cautiously about the post-collision battle that resulted in the destruction of the Nyx escorts, stating that "all loss of life in Malkalen that tragic day can be attributed directly to the actions of Noir alone," further adding that Ishukone's account of events in the moments leading up to the disaster were accurate.

Meanwhile, the streets of Caldari Prime remain eerily quiet since Otro Gariushi's appeal for calm in the days leading up to the Malkalen Economic Summit, and there have been no additional reports of violence against Gallente expatriates in Caldari space.

20/05/2008

Ytiri Warehouse CEO Steps Down, Appoints Heth As Acting Director

Elonaya - Ytiri Warehouse CEO Tantima Iwisoda today announced a surprise plan to step down from his position to award full control of company assets and strategic operations to Caldari Constructions. The move was unanimously approved by the Ytiri board of directors.

"By taking this step, we are embodying the ideal that will always be the legacy of Otro Gariushi: that the State's needs are greater than ourselves," Mr. Iwisoda stated. "We are a nation in crisis; the acquisition of wealth or political gain no longer has any virtue in this corporation. As a Caldarian and a Chief Executive Officer, my actions are a patriotic imperative. The atrocity committed by the Federation has demonstrated just how vulnerable we are, and the depths to which we have fallen. Mr Heth, the men and women of the Ytiri Corporation are at your command."

Although Ytiri is a comparatively small corporation, the willingness of its leadership to relinquish control of operations to Mr. Heth appears to be supported by the majority of Caldari citizens. Following the press statement, representatives acting under the banner name of "Provists"-the nickname for Mr. Heth's new "Caldari Providence Directorate" structure within the corporation-explained the working relationship between the two entities. Financial markets have responded positively to the new partnership thus far.

22/05/2008

Heth Announces Kaalakiota Takeover, Declares Quarantine of Gallentean Expatriates

Piak - Tibus Heth today addressed the Caldari State for the first time since the Malkalen disaster, during which he announced his effective takeover of operations for the Kaalakiota mega-corporation and declared an immediate quarantine of all Gallentean expatriates residing in Caldari space. Set against the backdrop of the damaged Ishukone Headquarters Station, his broadcast began with a national moment of silence on behalf of "all those whose lives were taken in Malkalen" and for Otro Gariushi, whom he mourned as a "true Caldari hero".

Emphasizing his belief that no excuse can relieve the Gallente Federation of direct responsibility in the catastrophe, Heth declared that all Gallentean expatriates are to be "quarantined and held for questioning until their innocence is proven". While not mentioning Admiral Noir by name, Heth hinted that if Noir was the most trustworthy man between both nations prior to Malkalen, then his "deceit" warrants such drastic matters as a pure "security precaution".

A statement issued by the Kaalakiota corporation board provists following the national address confirmed that CEO Haatakan Oiritsu has voluntarily stepped down from her post, giving Tibus Heth control over the Caldari State's largest mega-corporation. These powers authorize him to enact the quarantine program, whose methods will

likely include deployment of his growing numbers of Provists. Because the resignation of Ms. Oiritsuu was voluntary, the board of directors has the power to appoint any individual they see fit to the position of CEO.

Regardless of shareholder sentiment, public support for Tibus Heth is skyrocketing, especially in the wake of days of national mourning over Malkalen and the loss of Otro Gariushi. The death toll has risen past the 600,000 mark and is still climbing, making this the most grievous tragedy of empire space in modern times.

28/05/2008

Archangels "Annex" Skarkon From Minmatar Republic; Popular Vote Confirms

Skarkon - In the latest blow to Prime Minister Karin Midular's government, the Archangel cartel has declared "democratic sovereignty" of the Skarkon System, a transit hub separating the Republic border from unregulated space. CONCORD promptly dismissed the notion of any real transfer of sovereignty, calling the cartel's actions "politically motivated with zero legitimacy". While largely symbolic in nature, the Archangels have produced a petition containing over ten million voluntary signatures taken from the inhabitants of Skarkon II, the system's capital planet. This embarrassment follows local promises by Midular to clean up the system as part of a broader effort to reduce crime in the most dangerous parts of the Republic.

The Archangel's openly defiant reaction to her initiative, coupled with the apparent authenticity of the signatures, is a political nightmare for the prime minister. The cartel's influence in Skarkon has been growing for years, and has apparently gained enough popularity such that they are now the preferred governing authority of the system. Between this and the near-ousting of her ambassador appointee to the CONCORD Assembly, the embattled prime minister is facing the worst polls of her premiership, with an approval rating of less than 10%.

29/05/2008

Mega-Corporations Announce Partnership with Caldari Providence Directorate

Lonetrek - The Sukuuvestaa, Nugoeihuvi, Wyrkomi, Hyasyoda, CBD and Lai Dai mega-corporations today announced a breakthrough agreement with the newly formed Kaalakiota-Ytiri conglomerate. The new deal would give Tibus Heth's Caldari Providence Directorate direct access to most of the Caldari State's industrial base. While details remain sealed, mega-corporate executives have stressed that dire economic circumstances present a compelling need to align the State's interests. "Tibus Heth and Otro Gariushi stood for the same ideals," stated Wyrkomi CEO Kuruta Irio. "We have an obligation to restore pride to our workforce, and we will do so by placing the State's needs before ourselves. There is ample opportunity for every Caldarian to thrive by coordinating our collective efforts, and we intend to pursue that ambition to its fullest capacity."

Financial markets had mixed reaction to the news. While Heth's unifying appeal to nationalism appears politically motivated, there are considerable economic advantages to shifting mega-corporate relations from adversarial competitiveness to more of a strategic partnership. The potential benefits of this partnership are driving speculation in Caldari securities despite the racial tensions between the State and the Gallente Federation.

The Ishukone Corporation, still reeling from the Malkalen disaster, is the only mega-corporation that has not joined this partnership.

30/05/2008

REPORT: MINMATAR AMBASSADOR KEITAN YUN CONNECTED TO YULAI INCIDENT, SHOW OF FORCE WAS A THREAT TO CONCORD

Illuin - Scope News has obtained information indicating that the armada which appeared in Yulai is connected to disgraced Minmatar Republic Ambassador Keitan Yun. The anonymous source revealed that the timing of the fleet's appearance coincided almost directly with an alleged threat issued by Mr. Yun directly to CONCORD. The sudden show of force, which included Thukker Tribe warships, was apparently intended to back his claims. However, the precise nature of the threat itself is unknown, nor is it clear on whose behalf it was made.

Mr. Yun, appointed to the post of Minmatar Ambassador to the CONCORD Assembly by Prime Minister Karin Midular last month, caused an uproar with his vocal confrontation with his Amarrian counterpart during his inaugural address. CONCORD Chief of Staff Kivas Odaka would only confirm that Mr. Yun has become a "person of interest" in the ongoing investigation of today's events, and that his present whereabouts are unknown.

30/05/2008

REPORT: Yulai Escapes Violence As Mysterious Armada Departs

Yulai -The mystery armada whose threatening presence nearly touched off a deadly confrontation outside CONCORD Bureau Station in Yulai has left without incident. The sudden appearance of the fleet, their unknown origins, ability to jump capital ships into the most secure space in New Eden, and refusal to communicate has left the prestigious law enforcement agency scrambling for answers. CONCORD issued a terse statement clearly intended as a warning for would-be criminals that "respond and neutralize" capabilities are operating at maximum capacity. Full coverage of the event, including raw footage recorded onsite, can be found on the Scope News Network. A high quality feed is also available.

30/05/2008

BREAKING NEWS: Mystery Armada Containing Thukker Tribe Warships Surround CONCORD Bureau Station

Yulai - ***This is a breaking news story*** Scope News has confirmed that CONCORD Bureau Station has been

surrounded by a fleet composed entirely of Minmatar-designed warships, including at least a dozen Naglfar-class dreadnoughts with Republic Fleet markings. More surprisingly, the escorts of these capital ships are reported to be Thukker Tribe vessels. However, none of the ships are registered with NEOCOM broadcast tags, and all attempts to communicate with the intruders have failed. CONCORD and DED warships are locked in a standoff with the armada, but no shots have been fired. Reporters from the Scope News network are on scene and will continue to provide coverage of these events as they unfold.

30/05/2008

MIDULAR SPOKESMAN: "WE DON'T KNOW WHO THEY ARE"

Illuin - A spokesman for Minmatar Republic Prime Minister Karin Midular firmly denounced any involvement with the mystery fleet which threatened CONCORD Bureau Station in Yulai. "The location of every ship in the Republic Fleet at the time of the armada's incursion has been accounted for," he announced. "Although those ships were clearly of Minmatar design, we just don't know who they are or what their intentions were."

When asked about Ambassador Keitan Yun's alleged involvement with the mysterious fleet, he stated only that such claims have "very serious implications for Mr. Yun which are yet to be verified", and that "under no conceivable circumstances would Premier Midular authorize or endorse any threat against CONCORD."

Karin Midular is facing increased scrutiny following a string of embarrassing incidents which have weakened her premiership, most recently the "annexation" of the Skarkon System by the Angel Cartel.

30/05/2008

ISHUKONE BOARD CEDES STRATEGIC CONTROL TO HETH; MARKETS RESPOND POSITIVELY

Malkalen - The Ishukone Corporation Board of Directors agreed to grant strategic control of industrial operations to Tibus Heth, joining the rest of the mega-corporations in their partnership with the Caldari Providence Directorate. Ishukone employees, still mourning the loss of Otro Gariushi and the hundreds of thousands who also perished in the Malkalen disaster, overwhelmingly support the measure.

The board also announced that an active search is underway to appoint a new CEO. Chief Financial Officer Kinachi Hepimeki, considered the most qualified candidate, has reportedly resigned, citing personal reasons linked to the disaster. She and the late Mr. Gariushi are credited with running the most financially-sound mega-corporation in the Caldari State. Ralirashi Okimo, current head of the manufacturing division, is now considered the most likely replacement.

Markets are responding favorably to the news. Ishukone shares lost nearly 20% of their value following the Malkalen disaster, which forced the mega-corporation to cease industrial operations for a full week. Mr. Heth, known for his fiery anti-Gallentean rhetoric, has demonstrated considerable leadership qualities in corporate affairs that Caldari executives are keen to work with. The reinvigoration of workforce morale and subsequent revitalization of industrial efforts is largely attributed to Heth's alignment of mega-corporate interests under the Caldari Providence Directorate. Some analysts speculate that the beleaguered Caldari State economy may have already bottomed out, with local currencies stabilizing versus the ISK and State index shares rebounding slightly from all-time lows.

BREAKING NEWS: Unidentified Armada Detected In Yulai

Yulai - ***This is a breaking news story*** Scope News has learned that an armada of unknown origin has jumped into the Yulai System. CONCORD and DED warships have been scrambled to intercept. We will continue to provide coverage of these events as they unfold.

02/06/2008

VIOLENCE ON CALDARI PRIME CONTINUES AS GALLENTAAN EXPATRIATES FLEE CALDARI STATE

Luminaire - Racially motivated violence continues to plague Gallente-controlled Caldari Prime since Tibus Heth's mandate to quarantine Gallentean expatriates in Caldari Space, which has led to the unlawful incarceration and/or expulsion of hundreds of thousands thus far. The mandate is being enforced with renewed vigor following Heth's acquisition of the bulk of the Caldari State's industrial base. Clashes between the two ethnicities on Caldari Prime have been ongoing ever since, and Federation riot police are struggling to contain the violence.

Gallentean expatriates attempting to leave the State have been ordered to leave "donations" at border crossings before facing permanent exile. "We don't have anything left," reported one former expatriate, now safely within Federation space. "Those Provist thugs boarded the transport and made us sign it all away, right in front of our own families. Caldari Navy ships were right alongside of us, supervising the whole thing. What could we do?"

Millions of Federation expats remain unaccounted for as tension between the two nation-states worsens by the day. While obtaining information from the Caldari State has become increasingly difficult since Tibus Heth's rise to power, reports are circulating that drastic increases in production outputs across all industries have been underway since the Malkalen disaster.

03/06/2008

HETH DECLARES NATIONAL DRAFT, CITES GALLENTAAN THREAT

Piak - In response to an apparent threat by President Foiritan, the Caldari State moved closer to war with the Gallente Federation as Tibus Heth declared a national draft. Invoking the Malkalen disaster as evidence of the

need to "defend themselves", Heth instantiated a mandatory conscription of all "eligible men and women of age" for active military service on behalf of the Caldari Providence Directorate. The mobilization follows an apparent threat of martial law on Caldari Prime by President Foiritan, who has been pressuring Heth on behalf Gallentean expatriates attempting to leave the Caldari State safely.

Military analysts believe that the conscription could only utilize excess labor that would otherwise be dormant within the industrial base of the Caldari State. Although the mega-corporations each have their own active police forces, the precise extent of manpower and assets remains unknown.

03/06/2008

PRESIDENT FOIRITAN DECLARES MARTIAL LAW ON CALDARI PRIME

Luminaire - Stating that "all other options have failed", President Foiritan declared a state of martial law on Caldari Prime. The order sets an enforceable curfew on all Caldari expatriates, requiring them to stay in their homes within established "expatriate zones". Reports from the surface indicate that Federation municipal police have resorted to deadly force in "numerous" incidents already, with casualty numbers estimated to be "in the hundreds". Police are also actively blockading Caldari neighborhoods in the metropolis cities of Tovil and Arcurio, surrounding them with barriers and effectively isolating the entire Caldari population of the planet into segregated pockets.

"We have exhausted all other means of quelling the violence," President Foiritan stated. "Martial law is a last resort to protect those who want nothing to do with the bigotry plaguing our nations. But it appears there are some individuals who are determined to spread as much mayhem as possible, and I hold Tibus Heth directly responsible for inciting it. We have repeatedly stated that the Malkalen disaster was a rogue act. And though we may never know the reasons for Admiral Noir's actions, what we do now will define how our nations move forward. I implore all of you on Caldari Prime, and indeed everywhere in both nations, to reconsider any acts of aggression. Our wounds will heal, but it is going to take time."

04/06/2008

MIDULAR FINALLY ACKNOWLEDGES STARKMANIR NEWS

Illuin - Minmatar Republic Prime Minister Karin Midular released a statement thanking Eifyr & Co. and the Sisters of EVE for "sharing this breathtaking discovery with the universe" and called for a "cooperative effort with the Amarr Empire to secure their prompt release." Her comments caused an immediate firestorm in the Republic Parliament, especially among the Brutors, who have long opposed Midular's "appeasement" foreign policy doctrine with the Amarr Empire.

The late timing of her statement, which comes after Chamberlain Karsoth's near-immediate offer of assistance, has infuriated members from all four main parties. Many believe that the Amarr Empire, which makes no secret about its reliance on Minmatar slave labor, would do little to assist Midular with any kind of recovery effort despite Chamberlain Karsoth's pledge to the contrary.

Meanwhile, representatives for the Ammatar Consulate continue to deny any advanced knowledge of the Starkmanir's survival prior to their discovery by the Sisters of EVE.

04/06/2008

BREAKING NEWS: LARGE STARKMANIR SLAVE POPULATION DISCOVERED IN AMMATAR CONSULATE

Elgoi - The renowned Minmatar Republic biotech corporation Eifyr & Co. held a press conference today announcing the discovery of a large, "genetically pristine" population of Starkmanir slaves residing on the sixth planet of the Jarizza System. The Sisters of EVE, a charitable organization with an established humanitarian mission, apparently made the discovery "by accident" and reported the findings directly to Eifyr shortly after leaving the planet. The corporation confirmed the findings in a nationally broadcast press conference just moments ago. The survival of the Starkmanir Tribe, believed to have been extinct for hundreds of years, has shocked the Minmatar Republic.

"We have in our possession approximately one thousand unique samples taken from a population of slaves on the Ammatar world 'Halturzhan'," Eifyr spokesman Frelf Laer said. "We've completed genome sequencing on each of them. They're authentic. There's no lineage or association with the other tribes at all. We know they're Starkmanir because the sequences match those extracted from ancient burial sites."

When asked whether the Starkmanir population knew that, the spokesman answered "You'll have to ask the Sisters of EVE. They were the ones allowed onto the surface, allegedly to look into a viral outbreak that the Ammatar overlords couldn't control. This particular slave population specialized in agricultural labor, and I'm almost certain that none of them know anything about their own origins, or what their existence means to Minmatar."

The Sisters have referred all inquiries back to Eifyr, stating only that "They have all of the relevant facts. Our mission was and continues to be a mission of the human spirit, nothing more."

04/06/2008

CHAMBERLAIN KARSOOTH PLEDGES HELP TO PRESERVE STARKMANIR; AMMATAR CONSULATE CLAIMS NO ADVANCED KNOWLEDGE OF LOST TRIBE

Amarr - Court Chamberlain Dochuta Karsoth released a statement pledging "the full benevolence and assistance" of the Amarr Empire towards "preserving the remaining population of the Starkmanir Tribe, if in fact it is proven that such a population exists". Adding that the Empire will "bring its considerable expertise to bear" in the investigation to verify the findings, his announcement comes within minutes of Eifyr & Company's announcement of the discovery by the Sisters of EVE.

News of the Starkmanir's discovery has shocked the Minmatar Republic. Believed to have been fully exterminated during the Amarr occupation of Minmatar space hundreds of years ago, the Starkmanir's survival on the Ammatar planet of Halturzhan raises hope that other hidden populations may also exist. A spokesperson for the Ammatar Consulate stated that they are "unaware" of any such populations within their borders and "plead caution until the Empire completes their investigation, of which the Consulate has committed its full cooperation towards assisting."

05/06/2008

MALEATU SHAKOR LAUNCHES VOTE OF NO-CONFIDENCE; MEASURE PASSES REPUBLIC PARLIAMENT

Illuin - Brutor party leader Maleatu Shakor called an emergency parliament session in which he demanded a vote of no-confidence in Karin Midular's government. The parliament head delivered a fiery speech denouncing the beleaguered prime minister, citing the Archangel-Skarkon debacle, the futility of her appeasement doctrine with Amarr, and finally the Starkmanir discovery and her subsequent pledge for a "cooperative" recovery solution. The packed session quickly turned violent as parliament members confronted each other as they rushed to cast their vote. Although largely symbolic, the end tally showed overwhelming support for the no-confidence measure, which could prove to be the final nail in the political coffin of Karin Midular.

Shakor, a long-time rival of the prime minister, is considered a primary candidate to replace her in a general election. The capsuleer is known for being the most vocal hawk in the Minmatar Republic, demanding a "zero-tolerance" policy of slavery towards Amarr.

06/06/2008

REPORT: KARIN MIDULAR DISSOLVES PARLIAMENT, OUSTS SHAKOR AND YUN FROM GOVERNMENT

Illuin - The political crisis in the Minmatar Republic worsened as Prime Minister Karin Midular defiantly responded to Shakor's successful vote of no-confidence by dissolving parliament. The measure requires a call for new elections within two months, as mandated by Republic law. In addition, there are reports that Ambassador Keitan Yun has been relieved of his post and that Parliament Head Maleatu Shakor has been "expelled" from government. However, Karin Midular lacks the legal authority to dismiss an elected official unless evidence of a crime has been presented, which she has not yet claimed-at least not publically.

Mr. Yun has not been seen since the Yulai "incident", in which his apparent threat to CONCORD was supported by the sudden appearance of a menacing Minmatar-Thukker fleet in Yulai. Maleatu Shakor was last seen being escorted from session following the no-confidence vote against Midular.

Violence erupted on the parliament floor immediately after her announcement, forcing station security to quickly surround and then escort the prime minister from session.

06/06/2008

GOVERNMENT INACTION WITH STARKMANIR, DISSOLVED PARLIAMENT TRIGGERS RIOTS

Hek - Violence has struck the Minmatar Republic as the ripple effect from Karin Midular's decision to dissolve parliament spread throughout the nation. Protests against the lack of action to help the Starkmanir quickly escalated into a backlash against government officials, spurred on by fears of labor and supply shortages. Looting has been reported at numerous food silos, merchandise outlets and even government offices as riots flared in several major cities throughout the Minmatar Republic. In addition, spaceports in these cities are overwhelmed with congestion as those who can afford transportation attempt to leave the Republic for the Gallente Federation, which already accepts millions of Minmatar immigrants per year.

Officials from the Republic Fleet, the only government branch unaffected by the turmoil, are urging people to remain calm and to refrain from spreading panic while "government processes are allowed to work."

10/06/2008

BREAKING NEWS: CONCORD ANNOUNCES AUTHORIZATION OF EMERGENCY MILITIA WAR POWERS ACT

Yulai - The CONCORD Assembly, still reeling from the destruction of its headquarters station in Yulai, has announced the immediate authorization of the "Emergency Militia War Powers Act". This action follows an emergency meeting with all four session members, who petitioned for this section of the charter to be ratified following the drastic events of the day. Fleet Admiral Kasora Neko is reported to have represented the Minmatar Republic.

The War Powers provision of the CONCORD Charter authorizes the "immediate and unconditional formation of capsuleer militias among the nation-state members of the CONCORD Assembly for the purpose of waging

uncontested war within the boundaries of Empire space." According to Charter experts, the founders added the emergency provision as a means of absolving CONCORD of any obligation to interfere with combat between nation-states, an act that protects the DED more than anything else.

The militias sanctioned by the Emergency Militia War Powers Act are:

Gallente Federation: Federal Defense Union
Minmatar Republic: Tribal Liberation Force
Caldari State: State Protectorate
Amarr Empire: 24th Imperial Crusade

10/06/2008

REPORT: SECOND MINMATAR-THUKKER ARMADA INVADES AMARR EMPIRE

Kor-Azor Prime - Heavy fighting is underway in numerous locations throughout the Kor-Azor Region as a second titan-backed Minmatar-Thukker armada invaded the Amarr Empire. Multiple surface landings have been reported on planet Eclipticum, and Kor-Azor Family Bureau Headquarters Station has been stormed by elite mechanized troops. Kor-Azor's independent security forces are defending against the onslaught on both land and in space, but the Minmatar-Thukker forces are overwhelming them with sheer numbers.

Although the attack marks the first time in history that a foreign power has invaded sovereign Amarr territory, Imperial Navy warships have not yet moved to intercept them.

10/06/2008

REPORT: THIRD MINMATAR-THUKKER FLEET DETECTED IN DOMAIN REGION; FIERCE FIGHTING REPORTED OVER SARUM PRIME

Sarum Prime - In what eyewitnesses are describing as an "epic, violent clash between empires", the Imperial Navy has just engaged a third Minmatar-Thukker fleet over the third planet of the Sarum Prime system, 'Mekhios'. Multiple worlds within the Amarr Empire, in particular the Kor-Azor Region, have been attacked with orbital bombardments just prior to the surface landings of hundreds of thousands of Minmatar troops, who despite their uniform ethnicity cannot be confirmed to be Republic infantrymen.

The invaders are believed to be using Insorum in their bombardments, saturating ground targets with airborne variants of the Vitoc-neutralizing agent before commencing their assaults.

It is unclear why the Imperial Navy has chosen Sarum Prime to make its stand, where it appears the bulk of the Empire's warships are either onsite or en-route to the battle.

10/06/2008

REPORT: "MASS MURDERS" REPORTED AT MINMATAR REPUBLIC GOVERNMENT FACILITIES

Illuin - Scope News has just obtained confirmation of the mass-murder of hundreds of municipal and regional government officials and throughout the Minmatar Republic. The assassins, believed to be aligned with the same Minmatar-Thukker strike force invading the Amarr Empire, are allegedly leaving evidence of the victim's complicity with Amarrian intelligence services with each corpse. This "purge", as the attackers have allegedly described, was clearly timed to coincide with the invasion. Police detectives have remarked that the Minmatar-Thukker operation was "flawless", leaving "no opportunity for police forces to react."

The Republic Fleet still denies any involvement with the attackers, but has ordered all combat vessels to amass near the borders as a "precaution against any Amarrian counterstrike."

10/06/2008

REPORT: MINMATAR-THUKKER TASK FORCE ARE MINMATAR ELDERS

Illuin - Scope News has learned that the Minmatar-Thukker force which is responsible for igniting a war in New Eden are the Minmatar "Elders", the legendary ancient leaders of the original seven tribes. If true, this claim would validate the Republic's official denial of involvement with the Amarr invasion, and of the Republic Fleet's defensive posturing along the Amarrian border. Editor's Note: Under normal circumstances, Scope News would discredit this claim. However, given the Thukker Tribe's alignment with the attack force, the apparent mass-defection of millions of Ammatar civilians, their ancient affiliation as the Nefantar tribe, and the resurgence of the Starkmanir, we made a collective decision to publish this news with a "caution" disclaimer. These are extraordinary times, and on behalf everyone at this agency, we implore all of you to remain vigilant as these unprecedented events unfold.

10/06/2008

BREAKING NEWS: CALDARI NAVY TASK FORCE CROSSES FEDERATION BORDER, INVADES GALLENTA SPACE

Algogille - *** This is a breaking news story *** A Caldari Navy task force has just crossed the Federation border

in what is unmistakably a large-scale invasion of Gallente space. Numerous Federation Customs patrol ships have already been destroyed as Caldari ships continue to stream across using the Kassigainen stargate and at least two jump portals. This is a breaking news story that we will continue to update as information becomes available.

10/06/2008

BREAKING NEWS: CALDARI NAVY TASK FORCE LOCKS DOWN LUMINAIRE

Luminaire - *** This is a breaking news story *** The Gallente Federation capital system of Luminaire has been locked down from the inside by the Caldari Navy and an accompanying task force composed of thousands of ships. Witnesses describe sighting capital ships representing every mega-corporation and at least one Leviathan titan in the armada that smashed its way into the system. As hundreds of Federation Navy warships amassed outside the Luminaire stargates in Algogille and Pettinck, numerous distress calls could be heard on subspace comm channels monitored by Scope News.

Unconfirmed reports have surfaced that anti-ship mines have been deployed at all stargate entry points inside Luminaire, and that any attempt to run the blockade, no matter how many ships are sacrificed, is effectively impossible.

10/06/2008

BREAKING NEWS: CALDARI NAVY BOMBARDS CALDARI PRIME, DROPSHIPS LAND ON SURFACE

Luminaire - The Caldari Navy-led task force that has locked itself inside the Luminaire System is reportedly landing "hundreds of thousands" of dropships onto Caldari Prime following a systematic orbital bombardment of strategic defense emplacements all over the planet. The task force has achieved absolute space superiority in the system, as all Federation Navy and Customs warships inside the system have evidently been neutralized. However, despite its complete vulnerability, Gallente Prime is reporting clear space in its vicinity, with absolutely no sign of the invaders at this time.

Military analysts consulted by Scope News have stated that the Caldari Navy appears to have committed "every resource at their disposal" to this colossal endeavor, and as such has left its rearguard flanks completely exposed to Federation counterattack.

10/06/2008

REPORT: FEDERATION NAVY CONVERGING ON TIERIJEV AS CALDARI MECHANIZED INFANTRY ATTACKS TOVIL, ARCURIO

Luminaire - The Federation Navy has abandoned its attempts to break the Caldari Navy's blockade in Luminaire and is reportedly deploying "all spaceborne military assets" to the isolated Caldari system of Tierijev. This report follows confirmation that millions of Caldari troops supported by armor, MTACs, and gunships have launched frontal assaults on the two largest cities of Tovil and Arcurio. Although some pockets of Federation police and marines are fighting back, it appears that the vast majority of defenses in both of these cities was obliterated during the bombardment.

Civilian casualty reports remain varied, as the bulk of Caldari citizens remain largely isolated because of President Foiritan's efforts to quell civil unrest in the past several weeks.

10/06/2008

BREAKING NEWS: TIBUS HETH CONQUERS CALDARI PRIME, FOIRITAN CEDES CONTROL

Luminaire - Tibus Heth, the dictator whose mercurial rise to power has shocked New Eden, has just raised the flag of the Caldari State over the city of Arcurio on Caldari Prime, in the Gallente Federation capital system of Luminaire.

The historical act follows a conversation with President Foiritan, in which Tibus allegedly threatened to bomb Gallentean civilians from space, all of whom are segregated from former Caldarian expatriates by President Foiritan's own decree. Tibus also stated that this action ends nearly two hundred years of Federation "occupation", and that although the path to Gallente Prime was clear, he did not consider it as a "show of good faith".

Terms of the negotiated "truce" stipulate that Mr. Heth's sovereignty claim is for the planet of Caldari Prime alone, and not for the system of Luminaire. Although the bulk of Caldari Navy forces are expected to return immediately to Caldari territories, some "military assets" are going to remain over Caldari Prime, although the exact composition of this force is not known at this time.

10/06/2008

BREAKING NEWS: FOIRITAN ORDERS FEDERATION NAVY TO STAND DOWN

Ladistier - *** This is a breaking news story *** Scope News has learned that President Souro Foiritan has ordered the Federation Navy to call off its attack on Tierijev and issued a general order to "cease all hostile actions against the Caldari Navy". This shocking revelation is believed to have been issued following a direct

conversation with Caldari dictator Tibus Heth. This is a breaking news story that we will continue to update as information becomes available.

Posted 15:32 GMT

10/06/2008

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Posted 15:47 GMT

10/06/2008

REPORT: Caldari Naval forces withdraw to the Citadel; Federation Navy does not engage

Luminaire - Reports are coming in that the Caldari Navy has withdrawn the bulk of its forces from Gallente space. The Gallente Navy has refrained from halting the withdraw under the orders of President Foiritan. However, Federation Navy forces have tailed the Caldari task force back to the border and there have been moments where it appeared hostilities would reignite between the two sides.

The Caldari Navy appears to have withdrawn to the Citadel region along the border with the Gallente Federation. With the Federation Navy deploying along its own border with the State, both Navies remain on high alert.

Surprisingly a Caldari Navy force, including a Leviathan-class Titan, remains in orbit around Caldari Prime along with weapons platforms and other defensive measures. The Federation Navy has managed to clear the mining of the stargates into Luminaire but has purposefully kept its distance from Caldari Prime for reasons of its own.

10/06/2008

REPORT: IMPERIAL NAVY RETREATS OVER SARUM PRIME

Sarum Prime - The Imperial Navy has unexpectedly withdrawn all of its warships from the colossal fleet battle over the skies of Mekhios. In what was largely being described as a "brutal stalemate" between the two armadas, the fighting came to an abrupt halt as Imperial Navy warships disengaged en-masse and warped away from the Elder Fleet, which made no attempt to pursue the fleeing defenders. Military analysts can provide no explanation for the sudden departure, and are speculating that Grand Admiral Sundara has opted to abandon Domain and regroup in the Kor-Azor Region.

Fierce surface battles continue to rage across Mekhios as streams of Elder dropships ferry troops and armor to the surface.

Posted 16:05 GMT

10/06/2008

BREAKING NEWS: JAMYL SARUM SIGHTED OVER SARUM PRIME

Sarum Prime - *** This is a breaking news report *** Reports are flooding Amarrian comm channels that the royal heir Jamyl Sarum has arrived on the battlefield over Mekhios with an escort of just twelve battleships. Jamyl Sarum was killed five years ago in the Succession Trials following the death of Emperor Heideran. This is a breaking news story that we will continue to update as information becomes available.

Posted 16:25 GMT

10/06/2008

BREAKING NEWS: MASSIVE EXPLOSION DETECTED OVER MEKHIOS

Sarum Prime - *** This is a breaking news report *** A massive explosion has been detected over Mekhios. All news feeds covering the conflict have been incapacitated by the detonation, and no data will be available until these systems are restored. This is a breaking news story that we will continue to update as information becomes

available.

Posted 16:27 GMT

10/06/2008

BREAKING NEWS: ELDER FLEET OVER MEKHIOS DESTROYED

Sarum Prime - *** This is a breaking news report *** Scope News has obtained visual confirmation that the Elder fleet over Mekhios has been destroyed. Camera feeds restored following the potent detonation revealed thousands of wrecks littering a vast area of space over the planet, some of which has fallen into dangerously low orbit. Battles in major cities, most notably the capital of Xerah, have turned in favor of Amarrian defenders as Elder infantrymen are hunted down.

The presence of Jamyl Sarum just moments before the explosion has yet to be confirmed, and no trace of her or her escort ships was spotted near the wreckage.

Posted 16:39 GMT

10/06/2008

BREAKING NEWS: IMPERIAL NAVY EMERGES IN KOR-AZOR REGION WITH JAMYL SARUM, ELDER FLEETS RETREATING

Kor-Azor Prime - *** This is a breaking news report *** The Elder fleets operating in the Kor-Azor Region of the Amarr Empire and Derelik Region of the Ammatar Mandate are retreating towards Minmatar Republic borders. Imperial Navy forces are in pursuit and are engaging the attackers wherever they can be caught. The wrecks of dozens of capital-class Minmatar vessels have been spotted by Scope News camera drones thus far. The general retreat follows the appearance of Jamyl Sarum and the unexplained destruction of the third Elder strike force operating over the planet Mekhios.

The resurgence of the former heir, long believed dead, is confirmed to be among the pursuing Imperial vessels and appears to have inspired the Amarrian counterattack.

Posted 16:51 GMT

10/06/2008

BREAKING NEWS: CONCORD RESTORES COUNTERTHREAT CAPABILITY, ISSUES GENERAL WARNING TO CEASE HOSTILITIES

Yulai - *** This is a breaking news report *** CONCORD has restored NEOCOM broadcast capabilities and has issued a general warning to all the nation-states of New Eden to cease all "non-sanctioned" hostilities. The exact transcript has been obtained by Scope News:

TO THE MILITARY FORCES OF ALL NATION-STATE MEMBERS OF THE CONCORD BUREAU ASSEMBLY:

CEASE ALL NON-SANCTIONED COMBAT OPERATIONS IMMEDIATELY.

FAILURE TO COMPLY WITH THIS MANDATE IS PUNISHABLE WITH DEADLY FORCE. DED AND CONCORD COUNTERTHREAT DEPLOYMENT CAPABILITIES HAVE BEEN RESTORED.

REPEAT: CEASE ALL COMBAT OPERATIONS AND FALL BACK TO RECOGNIZED TERRITORIAL BOUNDARIES.

TRAVEL ADVISORY - THREAT LEVEL CRITICAL

MERCENARIES POSING AS MINMATAR REPUBLIC AND/OR THUKKER WARSHIPS HAVE BEEN SPOTTED NEAR THE MINMATAR/AMMATAR AND MINMATAR/AMARR BORDERS. THIS GROUP IS EXTREMELY DANGEROUS AND WILL ATTACK WITHOUT PROVOCATION. CAPABLE FORCES ARE ENCOURAGED TO ENGAGE WITH EXTREME PREJUDICE.

THESE MERCENARIES ARE CHARGED WITH CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY. EACH CONFIRMED KILL WILL BE COMPENSATED BY UP TO 10 MILLION CREDITS EACH, AND 100 MILLION IF CAPTAINS ARE BROUGHT IN ALIVE.

Posted 17:00 GMT

10/06/2008

REPORT: SARUM HALTS AT MINMATAR BORDER, CHAMBERLAIN KARSOTH DISAPPEARS

Ezzara - The Imperial Navy has halted its pursuit of the Minmatar Elders at the Vard stargate in the Ezzara system, heeding the warning broadcast on the NEOCOM just moments ago by CONCORD. Scope News has also learned that all stargates leading into Yulai have been reopened, and confirmed that CONCORD Bureau Station appears to have been destroyed.

Court Chamberlain Dochuta Karsoth was last seen shortly after the Elders' invasion of the Ammatar Mandate. The Ministry of Internal Order is reportedly "exhausting every measure" to locate him.

Posted 17:24 GMT

10/06/2008

REPORT: ELDER FLEET ALLOWED TO PASS THROUGH REPUBLIC SPACE UNCONTESTED

Vard - In an apparent snub of CONCORD's bounty offer, the Republic Fleet refused to attack Elder warships as they retreated through Minmatar space. Thousands of Elder warships passed through stargates and jump portals towards the general direction of the Great Wildlands while Republic Fleet warships continued to patrol the Amarr border. Most of the Elder warships displayed signs of extended battle damage.

Unconfirmed reports place the number of slaves rescued by the Elders in the "tens of millions", and that the entirety of the Starkmanir population in the Derelik Region was recovered.

Posted 17:53 GMT

12/06/2008

Chief Midular calls for Emergency Session of Parliament.

Pator - Sebiestor Tribal Chief Karin Midular today called upon the Minmatar Republic to hold an emergency session of parliament as soon as possible, stating that "while the populace remains in shock at these recent events, decisive action by the leaders of the people of Matar is long overdue".

The other tribal chiefs were quick to respond, silencing the usual flurry of arguing parliamentary members. The Emergency Session of Parliament is due to commence in two days time.

12/06/2008

President Foiritan addresses the Federation

Luminaire - "My fellow citizens, I come to you today with sorrow in my eyes and anger in my heart. We were knocked down but now we stand tall. Shoulder to shoulder. One people, one voice. We have been wronged and we will have justice.

I come here today as one of you, as your leader and as your servant. You came to me demanding the good life, and by Luminaire we've had it good! We have reached for the stars and held them in our grasp - nothing is beyond us, and you see our reach in every station gleaming in the deeps and in every child's beaming smile.

And now we have been brought low by two nests of serpents. The first is the one you know - Heth, and his army of barbarians. The Caldari people are an unhappy people, never content with their lot, always grasping for more, always biting the hand that feeds them. They coveted what we had here, and tried to take it by force, not realizing in their greed that what we have is not something that can be bought and sold.

No, what we have comes from what we are. We are a great and mighty people, and we can achieve whatever we set our minds to. That is the secret of our success, and it is that quality which will bring forth the avatar of our justice. You came to me demanding the good life before, and I delivered it. Now you come to me demanding justice, and so help me, you shall have justice.

The Caldari think that because we are cultured we are weak; they think that by striking us as we sleep, that makes them mighty. They will soon discover their error to their great cost, for they have woken the sleeping giant of the Federation and soon they shall feel its wrath! Even now the vanguard of our loyalist capsuleers are delivering crushing defeats to the Caldari war machine, while the patriotic men and women of our own Navy steel themselves for the coming conflict. It won't come today and it won't come tomorrow, as we are a patient people, slow to anger and slow to forgive, but when our hammer falls, our enemies will truly know the fate they have secured for themselves.

But I spoke of two nests of serpents, and the second is the one you do not know. I speak of the serpents within, those twisted individuals who share in the fruits of our successes with one hand, and seek to bring about our downfall with the other.

There are traitors in our midst.

You ask how our mighty fleet could fail to halt the Caldari war machine? It is not down to the soldiers on the front lines. They did their job. It is not down to the technicians and specialists who support the fleet. They did their job. It is not down to the armories who supply the ships' weapons, or the countless other industries supporting our fleet. They did their job.

No, the enormity of this failure falls on the shoulders of one man. Grand Admiral Advent Eturrer, Master of the Fleet, Guardian of Luminaire, First Defender of the Federation, Traitor. Traitor. Foremost military officer in the Federation, afforded every luxury, extended every trust, and it wasn't enough. When he was finally called upon to

do his duty, it wasn't enough, and he sold. Us. Out.

He has run to his bolt-hole like the rat he is, but we will find him. My word on this, we will find him, and we will see him atone for his crimes. But he is just the head of the serpent. He did not work alone in his conspiracy, and his is not the only conspiracy rotting within the Federation. Make no mistake, there are traitors in our midst. And we will find them. Every. Last. One.

By the emergency powers invested in me by the Senate, I am enacting laws to ensure that when the time is right, we are ready to strike back, against our enemies without and within, and that when we strike back, we strike back hard. We will leave no stone unturned, leave no opportunity untaken, leave no option unconsidered. The full force of the unbridled wrath of the Gallente Federation will be brought to bear on those who seek to harm us and our children, and when our avenging angel visits them they will know what it truly means to be mighty.

My fellow citizens, we will have justice."

13/06/2008

Heirs back Sarum, highlight obstacles

Ardishapur Prime - On behalf of himself and the other three remaining Heirs, Yonis Ardishapur today released a short statement declaring their support for Jamyl Sarum's immediate accession to the Imperial Throne. The text of the statement follows:

"On behalf of Yonis Ardishapur, Uriam Kador, Articio Kor-Azor and Catiz Tash-Murkon, we, the anointed Heirs of the Great Houses of the Empire, do hereby jointly and individually name and nominate Jamyl Sarum as our preferred heir to the Imperial Throne and pledge our undying fealty to her and her holy cause. In doing so we each waive our right to stand for Succession by Trial or other means.

"We commit to abiding by the judgement of the Honored Authorities in the matter of the Succession of Dorian II and petition them to discount our candidacy. In withdrawing ourselves in this way we indicate that we shall lend our Empress whatever support she may need and require of us in times to come, and that we will not directly intercede further in the Succession on behalf of ourselves or any other considered candidate. This does not remove or void the necessity of the selection of a new Chamberlain to officiate after the apparent abdication of Chamberlain Karsoth, or for the revered members of the Theology Council to validate Jamyl Sarum's legitimacy as a candidate."

15/06/2008

Kor-Azor to nominate new Chamberlain

Kor-Azor Prime - Sources close to the Kador family have revealed that, as his first official act since his recent encounter with one of the Speakers of Truths, Articio Kor-Azor is to nominate an interim Court Chamberlain in the next few days. His choice will reportedly have the blessing of the other Heirs and the Theology Council.

As general coordinator of the Imperial Succession the Chamberlain's role is a pivotal one, and with former Chamberlain Karsoth no longer present the selection of a replacement is a key step in the coronation of a new Emperor. Our Kador contact intimated that the debate over the correct protocol for appointing a Chamberlain in the absence of an Emperor was a protracted and acrimonious one. The arguments leaning heavily on the traditional appointment of the Chamberlain by the Emperor, and Articio's status as heir of the last Imperial family, finally convinced those advocating devolving the responsibility to the Theology Council to acquiesce.

It has been suggested that this appointment, in enabling the Succession to proceed, will allow the reign of Dorian II to finally come to a close. The new Emperor traditionally appoints their own Chamberlain shortly after the coronation, at which point the last vestiges of Dorian's reign will be laid to rest.

16/06/2008

Shakor asked to return as Midular calls emergency election

Pator - At an emergency session of parliament this evening, Sebiestor Tribal Chief Karin Midular called for emergency elections to be held no later than a week from today. Her directive came hard on the heels of a speech given by Keitan Yun, the Republic's former ambassador to CONCORD, in which the ambassador called for former Parliament Head Maleatu Shakor to return to Minmatar politics.

"The Gallente had a dream, and they called this dream democracy," said the Ambassador in his speech. "This dream was given to the Republic in its infancy and held to be the right and true way for a civilized society to govern. We now stand in the shattered remains of this dream with one unavoidable truth facing us: democracy has failed."

"It did not fail because of lack of good leaders. In my opinion, we had one of the best. It did not fail because of a fault in the system. The success of a democratic Federation has lasted long enough to bear this out. The Gallente are gripped by neither poverty nor disenchantment. They do not suffer our lack of identity and unity. No, democracy did not fail because we did not try. On these things we cannot be faulted."

"Democracy failed because it was not our dream. It was not for the Minmatar. We are a people not easily led, and brothers and sisters, on a precipice we now stand. If we continue to bicker and argue amongst ourselves without heed for our people's needs, we will fall. We need change. We need strength."

"There was once a Minmatar Nation that thrived before the Amarr came. I would see that Nation reborn, its tribes united. I would see us have a leader to give strength and solidarity to those united tribes. I would call upon Emissary Maleatu Shakor to return, to finish what he started. Now is the time to stand as who we are, true Minmatar."

As Ambassador Yun finished his speech, a few delegates rose to challenge his remarks. Their protestations continued for a few moments but were quickly quelled by the tribal chiefs. Sebiestor Chief Karin Midular then replaced Ambassador Yun on the podium.

"I was a champion of this dream, and I have lived it in every waking hour of my life as Prime Minister," she said. "It pains me beyond measure to admit its failure. But this pain is a relief, sharp and bright, for it heralds the true awakening of our purpose as a united people."

"We go now down a path that's new and uncharted, and yet its ancient direction is familiar to us. In this I have full faith that we will find success, provided we remember who we are and why we are on this path."

"So, as we transition from our dream to the waking world at last, it is my final task to start this new journey, to prepare the way for the great men and women who shall lead us to freedom at last. With the support of the chiefs of this Republic I call into immediate effect Article 341a of the Republic Charter and issue an emergency election of parliament, no later than a week from today."

Drastically reduced numbers were in attendance at the session, following the murders last week of several parliament members along with hundreds of other Minmatar government officials. Despite the small turnout, the proceedings were frequently marred by chaos, as several issues were vocally raised with the Republic's current situation since the June 6 dissolution of parliament. Few of their queries were answered, with tribal chiefs generally stepping up to quieten down their respective members.

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16/06/2008

Chamberlain Hemirin seeks Theology Council approval to coronate Sarum

Avair - In an extended hearing today, Chamberlain Hemirin petitioned the Theology Council to endorse his intention to declare Jamyl Sarum Empress-elect in light of the lack of challengers to the throne.

Hemirin, who only formally accepted the post of Chamberlain this morning, spoke at length to the Council on his reasoning behind the request, claiming that "single-handedly saving the Empire from being overrun by barbarians is surely Trial enough to demonstrate capability for the role", and asking "Sarum has the support of the commoners, the Holders and the Heirs - what council would seek to thwart the will of those they claim to serve?". Eyewitnesses report that the Justices of the council appeared unmoved by the Chamberlain's speech, with one describing them as "stone-faced".

Protocol dictates that on a topic like this the Council be given until the following evening to deliberate their decision, and after hearing Hemirin's plea they retired to one of the inner chambers of the court to confer. The debating chamber itself is considered inviolate but sources suggest that many members of the court have been taking breaks from the discussions to meet with various representatives of the four Heirs, with some reports indicating that the Heirs themselves have been negotiating with key Council members.

When pressed about this, a Kor-Azor functionary commented that her master was "simply seeking reassurance that the eventual decision will be in the best interests of the Empire" but refused to be drawn further. Many however suspect that the interest being taken is a rather more active one.

17/06/2008

Theology Council confirms Sarum nomination

Avair - Revealing the results of their extended discussion on the matter, the Theology Council has announced its acceptance of Chamberlain Hemirin's request to declare Jamyl Sarum Empress-elect and hold a coronation ceremony "as soon as is practicable".

After being ensconced in their chambers for nearly a day, the Council finally reconvened to announce its support of Hemirin's position. Acceding to the other Heirs' requests to be withdrawn from consideration, and accepting the legitimacy of Sarum's claim, it acknowledged that as the sole remaining candidate the only acceptable course of action was to declare her Empress-elect and proceed with the coronation. It declined to pass any comment on the circumstances of Sarum's return, stating simply that "there is no acceptable explanation of [her return] available to us at this time".

While Articio Kor-Azor, Catiz Tash-Murkon and Uriam Kador fielded questions and commended the Council on "a difficult decision handled expertly", the Justices of the Council filed out swiftly as soon as the announcement was completed, followed shortly after by Yonis Ardishapur, who elected to dispense with the customary speech following decisions of such magnitude. On being pressed for comment by members of the press, Ardishapur Family Chief Co-Ordinator Bedaliba Izon attempted to deflect questions but after further consideration and some deliberation agreed to make a short statement. He expressed his support of the individual men and women of the Theology Council, declaring that they had "the fortitude to make a very serious decision in an unfavorable and highly pressured environment, the wisdom to know which choice would be the best one for the ancient and glorious Empire, and the intelligence to make a decision following their heads rather than their hearts", and then swiftly exited the hall.

18/06/2008

Shakor Returns to Republic

Pator - Today saw the return of former Parliament Head Maleatu Shakor back to the halls of Minmatar government. Arriving at the head of a large naval force, the noted political figure was joined at the Pator border by a detachment of Republic Fleet warships which escorted him and his ships to Matar.

After being greeted by the tribal heads and a visibly elated Karin Midular at the capitol, Shakor announced that "the force accompanying me saved many of our people in the recent hard-fought liberation." He went on to add that "with the blessing of the chiefs of this Republic, we will now seek to integrate these brave warriors with the Republic Fleet, bolstering its strength as guardians of our nation."

When asked about the reason for his return, Shakor stated simply "because I was called."

19/06/2008

Shakor is named as presidential candidate, elections prepared.

Pator - Brutor Party Leader and Tribe Chief Wkumi Pol today announced that he would step aside as party leader to allow Maleatu Shakor to enter his bid for the premiership in the upcoming elections. In an address to the Republic Parliament, Wkumi Pol stated that "the Minmatar people need a leader who can lead us away from the wreckage of democracy and guide us through dangerous times". Mr. Pol further ensured that Mr. Shakor "has the full support and endorsement of the Brutor Tribe" for the election.

All Republic parliament heads soon followed suit, declaring unity in the cause for Maleatu Shakor's premiership. Sebiestor Party Chief of Staff Nobor Gaban, speaking on behalf of the incumbent Karin Midular, stated that his tribe was "committed to the betterment of the Minmatar people", also adding that no candidate would be submitted to compete with Shakor for the premiership.

The Minmatar Republic, still reeling from the events which saw the liberation of millions of slaves in the Amarr Empire at the cost of nearly as many lives, is making headway on preparation for the elections. While complying lawfully with the democratic process, political analysts note that these measures could mark the beginning of a complete transformation of the Republic as it is known today.

24/06/2008

Election underway in Minmatar Republic

Election booths opened today across the Republic as citizens began to vote for their new parliament and prime minister. With all the tribal parties rallying behind Maleatu Shakor's bid for premiership, the outcome seems foretold. This has not dimmed the resolve of the populace to go out and vote, with vast numbers already queueing up at public voting booths to show their support.

No opponents have stepped forward to run against Shakor, making this the first uncontested election in the history of the Minmatar Republic. Public support for the lone candidate is high, although dissenting voices have been heard from several democracy activist groups, who have been vocal in their opposition to the arrangement.

"It's ridiculous," said Sastia Langon, spokesperson for the Minmatar Process League. "It's a subversion of all that we've been laboring to build in this great nation. It's a step backwards for everyone. Who's to say there aren't opponents willing to step up? Who's to say they haven't been intimidated into not running?"

Langon's comments, as with all other public commentary on the issue, have gone entirely unheeded by the extant power structures within the Republic as they gear up for what appears to be not only a regime change but, in the words of one analyst, "a complete restructuring of the government, from the ground up."

Signs and banners are visible everywhere, carrying slogans of support for Shakor. Rallies and spontaneous celebrations have been commonplace in all of the Republic's largest cities ever since liberated Minmatar began to pour into the spaceports.

"There's a mixture of jubilation and hope now," said assembly technician Arnatt Kimkar, who yesterday was reunited with his twenty-two year old son Markus after eleven years apart. "For the first time, it feels like something could happen. You know, something real."

01/07/2008

Maleatu Shakor elected Prime Minister of Minmatar Republic

The final ballots have been counted in the Minmatar Republic elections, with lone candidate Maleatu Shakor winning by default.

At his inaugural speech this afternoon, Prime Minister Shakor said:

"Sons and daughters of Matar, make no mistake about it. Now is a moment that tomorrow's people will look back on for inspiration. Now is a moment where we do what should have been done long ago. The tone of the future will be set by our actions today. We will submit no more, to neither despot nor nation. Let it be known from this day forth that we are a race of warriors, not slaves, and that we will fight to the last drop of blood for what we hold dear."

Shakor also stressed the importance of clan unity. Flanked by the Chiefs of the Minmatar tribes as he spoke, he made repeated mention of the tribes' diverse cultures and capabilities coming together under the umbrella of a unified Minmatar nation. He finished his speech to thunderous applause and a standing ovation from the thousands in attendance.

The reasons for the voter turnout - the lowest recorded in the Republic in thirty years - are widely disputed. Some sources claim it is due to a grassroots movement of democracy advocates who disapprove of Shakor's methods in coming to power, but others dismiss such notions, explaining the numbers by saying that in a one-candidate race there is simply little incentive to vote.

Regardless of the turnout and what it may mean, social elements within the Republic appear to widely favor Shakor. Several of the largest organizations and special interests groups in the nation have been quick to declare

their support of him.

Maleatu Shakor, 62, steps up as Prime Minister of the Minmatar Republic after nine years of service as the head of the Republic Parliament. Prior to that, he spent fourteen years serving various administrative posts within the Parliament, the Republic Justice Department and the Brutor Tribe. In his younger years Shakor was a revolutionary of some note, rumored to have been responsible for a number of coups against regional holders in several areas of Ammatar space. He is unmarried and has no children.

08/09/2008

Independent report will show progress from Heth reforms

An independent audit of Caldari State Leader Tibus Heth's reforms will provide solid evidence of improvements in workplaces across the entire nation, according to Dr. Heyata Saari, Assistant Auditor General in charge of the State Independent Audit Authority's Bureau of Human Resource Development.

Originally due to be finished ninety days after the first major reforms were put in place, the research is purportedly running ahead of schedule and will be delivered earlier than expected. Dr. Saari held an advance viewing of some report details in New Caldari last evening, where she explained that the research had been focused on the widespread industrial reorganization undertaken by Heth's government, as well as various individual programs and reforms.

Protectorate Director Janus Bravour was in attendance at the forum and delivered a short address. Thanking the Asst. Auditor General and her team for their hard work, he then outlined their assessment of the Self-Education Initiative, a State-wide education reform that has met with considerable success.

"Education and training are vital to the prosperity of a nation," said Mr Bravour. "Talent and dedication should be rewarded. A bit of praise is one thing, but does it help people put food on the table day after day? People want to believe that their hard work will pay off, that they'll get that promotion, the raise, or even just a good recommendation when a new job opens up. Our reforms ensure that these things will take place."

The report stated that approximately 30,000 Caldari citizens occupying various positions within dozens of private-sector corporations had already been accepted and enrolled for further education and training, with a predicted total intake of over 50,000 by the end of the year. A separate study of over 2,000 graduates from six different 3-month courses revealed that more than half of them were able to successfully negotiate an increase in pay or benefits.

Dr. Saari said the final version of the report would be delivered shortly, once all submissions had been received.

10/09/2008

Shakor to be named Sanmatar

Pator - Maleatu Shakor has been awarded the newly resurrected title of "Sanmatar", the Minmatar Republic government announced today.

The title is used by some Ammatar on their lands, where it means "true home". Another meaning is "true Matar", an honoured position of the Minmatar Empire, the government's release says.

The Sanmatar was the de-facto head of state, acting as a mediator for the Council of Tribes. This position brings a costly honour for its bearer, who must renounce all ties to their former tribe in order to maintain objectivity, an act usually considered a harsh criminal punishment.

The ceremony is due to take place tomorrow, where Maeletu Shakor is expected to address the nation after a period of relative silence from the government.

11/09/2008

Sanmatar Inaugurated; Declares New Vision for Minmatar

Pator - The ceremony to officially grant the title of "Sanmatar" to Prime Minister Maleatu Shakor took place this morning on Pator. The Sanmatar, which is now the formal title of office, thanked the assembled dignitaries for the honor and stated that this was simply the first step towards creating a new system of government for the Minmatar people.

Sanmatar Shakor then went on to outline his vision for this new government with the formation of a council of tribal heads to replace the parliament as the decision making body for the Minmatar Republic, a return to a state where a tribe has full control over its internal affairs and a reunification of all seven Minmatar tribes under one nation.

He then went on to say "we're not a people that are easily led and the road to this end will be long and hard" but added that "in the end, we will be able to stand and say, we have a Minmatar government, ruling a Minmatar society, peopled by all tribes of the Minmatar. That prize is worth any hardship".

18/09/2008

Audit of Heth reforms released

The release today of the State Independent Audit Bureau's 90-day audit has painted a cautiously positive view of State Leader Tibus Heth's reforms. Delivering the report at a crowded press release, Assistant Auditor General Dr. Heyata Saari said the paper offered a comprehensive overview of reforms undertaken by the Heth government.

Dr. Saari once again stated that the focus of her team's research had been on workplace reform and reorganization. Among the many new programs reviewed, one highlight for the Heth government was the evident success of their Job Choices program, which saw widespread participation across key industries and had received glowing feedback from the general populace. The paper revealed that over one third of those eligible had opted in, with as much as 40% participation in many areas.

Offering paid training and increased chances of relocation for veterans of the workforce, the program allows long-serving citizens to change jobs late in their career without the usual hassles involved. A majority of those surveyed said the flexibility of both training and positions available had been the reason for their enrolment.

The Job Choices program wasn't the only good news for the Heth administration, however. Their Workforce Modernisation program had seen similar numbers of participation and was proving equally popular amongst citizens.

Considered to be the larger sibling of their more selective Self Education Initiative, the WMP allocates resources and funding to workers through their corporate sponsors rather than on an individual basis. All of the "Big 8" MegaCorps opted in at least partially, lending considerable momentum to the program from the beginning.

The program was a two-pronged attack aimed at inequality and inefficiency in the workplace. One of the single largest outlays was the funding for the automation of over fifty million jobs in the last three months. According to surveys taken from the report, this alone saw a drastic reduction of injury and dissatisfaction in affected workplaces. Workers in outmoded industries or those recently automated were offered paid training to upgrade their skills and advance elsewhere in the workforce.

From manufacturing and agriculture through to the entertainment industry, key figures have come forward to support early signs from the report that point to a happier, more productive workforce. Although the final cost of the reform remains unclear, Dr. Saari did stress that if current spending and enrolment continued it would stand as the most expensive workplace reform in Caldari State history.

Various State officials are set to attend further discussions in the coming days, where they will elaborate on Dr. Saari's report and field questions from the press.

19/09/2008

Federation split over results of independent audit

A tense political showdown was sparked inside the Federation Senate today following the recent release of an independent audit into Tibus Heth's reforms.

Seizing on the absence of President Souro Foiritan, opposition members of the Senate took to questioning his deputies on matters normally handled by their superior. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Head Aulmont Meis had to repeatedly deny making any official comment on the Saari Report, stating that the government needed more time to properly assess all the information.

Her refusal to speak in the President's stead was met with derision from her opponents. Influential Mannar and Jin-Mei Senators demanded either an official response or the early return of the President, who left Villore last evening to meet representatives of the Minmatar government in Sinq Laison. Senator Mei retorted that their demands for an immediate statement were "completely irresponsible."

Reactions from inside the Federation have been mixed following the release of the report. Large sections of the Intaki population as well as their powerful lobby groups urged President Foiritan to encourage what they saw as a positive move. "There are some things we can agree with the Caldari State on," said Intaki activist Kirae Eillen. "Only through dialogue that encourages positive changes can we hope for true progress on anything else."

Elsewhere in the Federation experts lined up to question the interpretation - what many called outright spin - the State had put on the figures. Whilst agreeing more or less with the numbers presented, the experts claimed they frequently didn't tell the whole story or had been distorted. Professor Heloi Gachall at the University of Caille questioned the presentation of many programs. "It's not up for debate that the enrolment numbers in many programs are quite high...but that alone doesn't prove they've been a success. The report offers no insight into just how much the average Caldari will benefit, contrary to many claims made by State officials."

It is expected that the official response to the figures from the report will focus on remarks made by Prof. Gachall and others. "There is much yet to be seen," she said. "I agree that any statement one way or the other would be premature at this point."

21/09/2008

Independent audit receives mixed reception outside the State

Reactions across the cluster were mixed following the release of an independent audit into the recent workplace reforms in the Caldari State.

Claiming to have seen the results of the reforms better than any others outside the State, the Khanid Kingdom and Amarr Empire both offered their support of the changes. Carthum Conglomerate spokesperson Maktina Obasa said the corporation had benefitted from the flow-on effects of success inside the State. Partly owned by the Caldari mega corporation Lai Dai, Ms Obasa said that Carthum stood to profit from the improved efficiency of its partner corporation.

Khanid Innovations Chief Researcher Ohulainen Pesabato was similarly impressed. "The many reforms encouraging scientific innovation and development are to be applauded," she said. "We were greatly pleased to see the Caldari State continuing to build upon the strength of its scientific community. As always, we look forward to further collaboration and the building of beneficial friendships between their scientists and ours."

Meanwhile back inside State borders, Protectorate Director Suvasemi Aikinen was busy defending the reforms from Minmatar and Gallente detractors, whose most repeated claim was that the corporate elite were as corrupt as ever. Standing in for an ill COO Janus Bravour as he answered the press, Mr Aikinen shot back in emphatic refusal of their claims.

"I'm aware of the statements and find them utterly ridiculous. From day one we've been meeting this challenge head on. We began by immediately redistributing assets to those who truly earned them and have followed this up by granting increased oversight of the mega corporations through the Caldari Business Tribunal. Corporate executives and those in upper management are more accountable and under more scrutiny than ever before ... in line with their subordinates."

When asked why these reforms and others had been left out of the report, Mr Aikinen said it was due to them being "notoriously difficult to measure," adding that the Federation "knew this all too well and...evidently preferred political point scoring to substantive debate."

Despite the brief appearance of Protectorate Directors Bravour and Aikinen, official comments on the report from the State have been largely relegated to lower-level officials. Mr Aikinen explained the move, claiming that "those involved directly in daily operations of corporations were some of the best placed to understand and elaborate" on the reforms and how they benefitted workers.

23/09/2008

Coronation date officially confirmed by Court Chamberlain

Hedion - Jamyl Sarum will be coronated Empress Jamyl I in three days' time, Chamberlain Hemirin confirmed today. It has been known for several weeks that the coronation would take place imminently, but the precise date has been kept secret.

At a packed press conference this evening, Hemirin cited "unresolved security issues" as the reason for keeping the coronation date from the press for so long. Hemirin asserted also that although attendance at the coronation event itself was strictly by invitation, anyone wishing to join in the planned post-coronation festivities had "more than enough time" to travel to the Amarr system and that additional transport capacity had been made available to cope with expected demand.

While Chamberlain Hemirin's message has been one of measured control, inside sources on Mekhios claim that negotiations covering protocol, attendance, and scheduling have repeatedly failed to reach consensus. A spokesman for the Chamberlain's office has denied any political concerns, calling such claims "scurrilous falsehoods."

It seems clear that Friday will be a turning point in Amarr's recent history. The coronation speech will be Jamyl's first formal address to her new empire, and analysts agree that she is unlikely to waste the opportunity to make a dramatic first turn.

23/09/2008

Caldari citizens speak out about reforms

Following the reactions from nations across the cluster, the Caldari people have spoken out in overwhelming support of the Heth reforms, claiming outsiders aren't in any position to judge their success.

Yesterday Echelon Entertainment hosted a day-long forum, inviting people working in various occupations to attend and offer their opinion of the changes. Excerpts from the forum were screened on Caldari networks throughout today. The comments coming from State citizenry were for the most part positive and hopeful.

"A year ago we had no real way to move into management positions," said assembly line worker and father of

two Utreki Makkolen. "Nowadays I'm studying four nights a week to become a foreman, along with plenty of others. Raising a family is meant to be a challenge, it's meant to be an achievement, but these new opportunities make it that little bit easier. This can make all the difference for some of us."

Perhaps the most pleasing comments for the Heth government were those made by Oduma Akkadan, a senior executive in charge of over 100,000 staff employed by his corporation, a Kaalakiota Corporation subsidiary.

"I oversaw a rise of 12% rise in our department's profits this last quarter and was rewarded accordingly," he said. "Contrary to popular belief outside the State, the Heth administration is not about hurting those of us at the top without reason. There is a difference between holding managerial staff accountable and simply hounding them...it would be hypocrisy for only some of us who work hard to be rewarded. I welcome the changes and believe they are long overdue...we are all better off for having them."

The integration of the Young Provists program into Crèches across the State was the most salient point of concern for Caldari citizens, who expressed a desire for another independent review focused more closely on their performance.

Offering free or low-cost holidays to young adults, the purpose of the program as described by the official press release is to "invest in future generations by instilling a sense of duty and self-reliance." The weekend retreats focus on community-minded projects and team building exercises, as well as light vocational training. Participation so far has been significant, with one in three families participating according to Dr. Saari's report.

"My children seem to love the camps," said Administrative Assistant Suresen Takin. "I've no doubt they're learning vital skills that will benefit them later on. My only concern is the impact this time out from their family and school work has over the long term. As the program matures, some studies into that would be very welcome."

Other parents said they had decided against letting their children attend at all. "If I let my children go to these weekend camps I'd never see them," said one mother.

State officials said they appreciated the feedback from the forum and were monitoring the progress of all reforms carefully. "There is certainly a balance that needs to be struck," said the Lonetrek Regional Manager of the Young Provist program, Aremi Litaanen. "We're listening closely and working tremendously hard to find and maintain it."

25/09/2008

Coronation delayed

Hedion - The Coronation of Jamyl Sarum as Empress Jamyl I that was due to be held tomorrow has been postponed one week, Chamberlain Hemirin announced today. The Chamberlain did not explain the change, but did note that the future Empress had approved it.

Speculation on the event is rife throughout the Empire. Some point to several inauspicious events such as the recent disappearance of several Speakers of Truth enroute to the coronation; and an outbreak of Phyrezi fever, a short-lived but virulent and easily transmitted virus, which is spreading rapidly throughout Uriam Kador's domain.

Others point to rumors of an assassination plot against the Empress, though no clear evidence of such a plot has yet been presented in any open court. The Sarum Family has been operating an extremely strict security procedure in the weeks leading up to the ceremony, but Security Commander Pareh Mere claims that this is merely a normal precaution.

While no firm reason has come forward for this change, the general mood in the Empire remains optimistic and its people seem patient.

03/10/2008

Coronation of Empress Jamyl Launches New Era for the Amarr Empire

Amarr - Jamyl Sarum, the resurgent heir to the Sarum royal family, was today crowned Empress of the Amarr Empire. In a ceremony that began with her arrival amidst a huge assembly of Imperial Navy warships, interim Court Chamberlain Hemirin placed the sacred crown upon Her Majesty, declaring her the "Holy Ordained Empress of Creation".

Delivering a powerful opening speech, Empress Jamyl boldly announced the start of a new Reclaiming, calling on all those of faith to "stand by her side" as the Empire recovered from "the excesses of a misguided path". Seemingly mindful of those questioning the merit of her rule, she ended her address with a forceful demand for loyalty, possibly directed at the remaining heirs, with a vow to return "what others give to the Empire [sic]".

If there were any doubts about the legitimacy of her ascension, no such sentiment was present among the thousands of Holders and clergy present for the historic occasion. The spectacular coronation was held within the massive vaulted chambers of St. Kuria the Prophet Cathedral in Amarr, which has also witnessed the mourning of Emperor Heideran; the coronation and funeral of Emperor Dorian II; and the proxy rule of Chamberlain Dochuta Karsoth, who is believed to have fled during the Minmatar Elder's invasion of Amarr earlier this year.

Despite official claims to the contrary, the Imperial Navy appears to have brought a significant portion of its vaunted Imperial Domain Fleet to the coronation. This unprecedented maneuver was part of a series of massive security precautions that included the complete shutdown of the Amarr System for the coronation, forbidding all access to travelers except for those receiving a direct invitation from the Court Chamberlain.

Speculation remains that the coronation's earlier delay was due to the epic logistical challenge of recalling the Domain Fleet from deployment elsewhere in the Empire without exposing the flanks of the remaining Imperial fleets operating close to low-sec borders, which would be considered a risky tactic even during peacetime. The Ministry of War has forbidden new agencies from delivering any footage of the actual event until a later date.

As to be expected, the Empress received a cool welcome from the governments of both the Gallente Federation and Caldari State, with emissaries passing along well-wishes to be followed by formal addresses from chiefs of state later on. However, a spokesperson for the Minmatar Republic outright decried her decree of reclaiming as a "blatant insult and a disappointing start for the so-called 'empress'."

Empress Jamyl remains hugely popular with the general population of Amarr and the Imperial Navy to a degree that borders on deific. Long believed dead, her sudden "resurrection" was received with predictable skepticism among the orthodox practitioners of the Amarr faith, versus enthusiastic approval with the Reformist movement in the Empire. However, the circumstances surrounding her timely arrival during the legendary Battle of Mekhios remain unclear, especially as to how she was able to repel or otherwise inspire the Imperial Navy to counter such a large Minmatar attack force.

04/10/2008

Empress Jamyl I begins reign

Amarr – In her first acts as the reigning leader of the Amarr Empire, Empress Jamyl I issued several proclamations today, the highlights of which included the confirmation of a new Sarum heir and the appointment of a new Court Chamberlain.

In a move that surprised few, Jamyl confirmed that her nephew, Merimeth Sarum, had been nominated and accepted as the new Heir of the Sarum Family. International opinion seems divided on the young Heir who has been kept in wings of the Sarum Family for some time, which had for several years displayed an unexplained reluctance to replace the assumed-deceased Jamyl. Speaking briefly after the ceremony, Merimeth remarked that he was "honored to accept the responsibility, and impatient to begin [his] duties."

Slightly more controversially, long-serving Sarum House Steward Pomik Haromi was sworn in as the new Court Chamberlain, replacing Chamberlain Hemirin who had briefly occupied the position to help lay the late Emperor Dorian II's legacy to rest. While highly experienced in administrative matters, Pomik has elected to stay largely removed from Court politics during his career, and several self-declared contenders for the position have quietly questioned his ability to properly discharge the responsibility.

Further changes are on their way: a reorganization of the Privy Council was announced but not detailed, and while interpretations vary it seems that Jamyl's coronation speech hints at larger revelations to come. In particular, the cryptic promise to reward those who help the Empire has triggered a great deal of discussion, with some suggesting it is directed at neighbouring nations, while others claim it's a direct challenge to the surviving Heirs. There is little consensus on this issue yet, but while most Court noteables have refused to comment on the matter, rumours abound that several clandestine schemes are already in motion.

25/10/2008

Report shows large gain in Republic repatriation

Pator - The Republic Government today released the latest report on immigration figures which continued to show a dramatic decline in emigration from the Republic, coupled with a steady rise in Minmatar returning to the Republic from the Federation.

Although experts in the field predicted a continuing drop in emigration numbers due to the positive industrial news, continuing unity from the government and the growing optimism of the general populace saw a surprising gain in immigration from the Federation.

"A closer study of the numbers," stated Professor Kell Baraim, dean of Economics at the Republic University, "shows that the vast majority of those returning are first generation immigrants, the ones who have been in the Federation shortest. It remains to be seen whether this is a sustainable trend or simply a short term reaction to the current upswing of confidence in the Republic and its environs."

28/10/2008

Boundless Creation plays host to delegation from Thukker Mix

Hagilur - Executives of Boundless Creation today laid out the welcome mat at Hagilur as they hosted a delegation from one of the Thukker Tribe's largest recognized corporations, Thukker Mix.

Thukker Mix are perhaps best known for their cutting-edge ship designs, many based on standard Republic ship hulls, which have risen to prominence amongst the capsuleer elite. The Mix have also created a number of lesser known innovations that have found their way to the mass market.

Boundless Creations spokesperson Wyum Ril stated: "We have been involved in dialogue behind the scenes with Thukker Mix for some time and are now ready to take the next step into what we hope will be a prosperous relationship between our two groups. We'd like to give a warm welcome to our friends from Thukker Mix, and we thank the government for its continuing support of our efforts."

In the wake of the Elder War (the name given to the recent conflict by the Republic's citizenry), the stance towards the Republic's Thukker kin has started to shift substantially. The old government once pursued a policy of actively distancing itself from the Thukkers, who were widely regarded as scoundrels and vagabonds. This policy has been reversed by the new administration, with Sanmatar Shakor issuing his personal congratulations to Boundless Creation for what he refers to as a "move towards the future."

31/10/2008

Sanmatar Shakor announces Thukker Tribe visit.

Pator - Sanmatar Shakor and the Republic Tribal Chiefs will host a meeting with Ennar Aeboul, Chief of the Thukker Tribe, it was announced at a press conference today.

Shakor was short on details, stating that the goal was to "promote goodwill between the tribes of the Republic and our Thukker brethren after a long period of misunderstanding between our people," and that he hoped Chief Aeboul's visit would be productive for both factions.

When asked about the Thukker Chief's arrival date on Matar, Shakor surprised the assembled press by saying that he had arrived this morning, adding "I hope the nation will join me in showing Chief Aeboul our warmest welcome. It has been far too long."

This move comes after a general upswing in relations between the Thukkers and the Republic, following their near non-existence before the Minmatar invasion of Amarr.

07/11/2008

Unannounced Military Training Exercise Detected in Tash-Murkon Region

Tash-Murkon - Approximately 200 Amarrian warships were detected moving through the Tash-Murkon Region earlier today in what is being described by analysts as a training exercise by the Imperial Fleet. Although no official statement has been released by the Ministry of War, the movement of such a large number of purely Amarr-class vessels "could be nothing else" according to military strategists familiar with Imperial Navy operations.

The Tash-Murkon family spokesman expressed concern over the developments. "We have not been informed of any exercises by the Ministry of War," he said. "We would like to think they would have the courtesy to inform us before moving such a large number of ships through our space."

07/11/2008

Report: Republic Fleet Fortifying Border Systems

Molden Heath - The Republic Fleet is reported to be shifting naval forces to border systems with the Amarr Empire. This movement is believed to be in response to unannounced military exercises by Imperial Navy forces in the Tash-Murkon Region. Although no official statement has been issued by the Ministry of War, the Republic Fleet appears to be gearing for a direct assault on its sovereignty.

Analysts report that the redeployment of naval assets to key strategic points is standard operating procedure for this kind of development.

08/11/2008

REPORT: KADOR FLEET LAUNCHES INVASION OF GALLENTA FEDERATION IN SOLITUDE - HEAVY CASUALTIES REPORTED AS FIGHTING IS UNDERWAY

Ratillose - Amarrian Heir Uriam Kador has launched a personal invasion of the Gallente Federation. The unprovoked attack follows a series of misdirection actions by the Kador fleet in the last 24 hours. Heavy fighting is underway in the Ratillose System on the Federation side of the border, which is home to at least two Federation Navy bases. This is a breaking news story. We will continue to update this story as more information becomes available.

08/11/2008

IMPERIAL FLEET SPOKESPERSON: 'WE HAVE NOT SANCTIONED THIS ATTACK'

Amarr - The Imperial Navy issued an emergency press release explicitly stating that the Kador invasion was not

sanctioned by the Ministry of War and that all military actions by his forces should be considered rogue and not representative of the Amarr Empire. Meanwhile, heavy fighting continues as the Federation is reported to have launched a massive counterattack to support forces in Ratillose. This is a breaking news story. We will continue to update this story as more information becomes available.

08/11/2008

REPORT: MASSIVE FEDERATION COUNTERATTACK UNDERWAY - KADOR FLEET ESTIMATED TO BE OUTNUMBERED 4:1, SUSTAINING MASSIVE LOSSES

Ratillose - Forces loyal to Amarr Heir Uriam Kador are being routed in what is being described as an "epic" counterattack by Federation Navy forces, and are reportedly outnumbered by a factor of almost 4:1. The military action follows an unprovoked invasion of the Gallente Federation just under an hour ago and emphatically described as "unsanctioned" by the Amarr Ministry of War. Scope News has confirmed that no Imperial reinforcements have arrived to support Kador's fleet. We will continue to update this story as more information becomes available.

08/11/2008

FEDERATION NAVY GRAND ADMIRAL: 'THEY WILL NOT BE ALLOWED SAFE PASSAGE BACK'

Ratillose -Remnants of the forces loyal to Amarr Heir Uriam Kador responsible for launching an unprovoked invasion of the Gallente Federation have been spotted retreating into Aridia. Federation Grand Admiral Anteson Ranchel has issued a statement condemning the attack, vowing that Kador's forces "will not be allowed safe passage back". It is unknown at this time if Federation warships will pursue the invaders into Amarr space.

08/11/2008

Federation Navy Crushes Kador Invasion

Luminaire - In an emergency press conference, the Federation government announced a "decisive victory" against forces loyal to House Kador of the Amarr Empire.

Spokespersons for the Federation Navy and the Foiritan Administration told reporters that Kador forces had launched an "unprovoked attack" on Federation assets in the border region of Solitude.

Heir Uriam Kador has previously been characterized as friendly to the Federation. He visited the Federation on several occasions during the interregnum between the reigns of Emperor Heideran and Empress Jamyl I, and was linked romantically to a Gallente broadcast star.

The Federation counterattack was swift and brutal. Remaining Kador forces were described as heavily damaged retreating in "complete disarray." The engagement represents the first major military action for the Federation Navy since the fall of Caldari Prime. Analysts have cited a rapid buildup of conventional Navy crew and assets to serve alongside capsuleer militias. The Navy spokesperson said that "the human element, as always, was key to our success and our continued freedom."

The Navy was previously well-known for using drone fleets to avoid risking human crews.

Moreover, the last six months have seen a massive retrofitting of the Federation's industrial base to focus on defense. Private and government investments have bolstered existing military suppliers while converting a substantial portion of the civilian industrial base to serve the Federation war machine.

Neither the Imperial Ministry of War nor representatives of the Kador family have returned requests for comment.

08/11/2008

Imperial Fleet spotted in Aridia

Aridia - An unidentified Imperial Navy fleet, apparently incorporating much of the Amarrian fleet exercising in Tash-Murkon yesterday, has resurfaced unannounced in the Aridia region. The Ministry of War has still not released any statement explaining these unannounced manoeuvres.

While it has long been Naval policy to maintain a press blackout during scheduled exercises, it is also customary for affected parties to be notified in advance. Statements from the Tash-Murkon Family yesterday suggest that these protocols have not been observed, and while the Ministry has given no official comment, anonymous sources indicate that there is some confusion internally. Attempts to solicit comments from other Imperial Families, who maintain their own standing navies and are usually well-informed of Fleet movements, have so far yielded no conclusive information.

08/11/2008

BREAKING REPORT: AMARRIAN WARSHIPS CROSS FEDERATION BORDER IN SOLITUDE

Aridia - An Amarrian war fleet has just been sighted entering sovereign Federation space through the border region of Aridia. The action represents the most significant military action in the history of the cold war between

the Amarr Empire and Gallente Federation. This is a breaking news story. We will continue to update this story as more information becomes available.

08/11/2008

BREAKING REPORT: WARSHIPS REPORTEDLY ACTING ON ORDERS FROM AMARR HEIR URIAM KADOR

Solitude - The Amarr war fleet which crossed the Federation border in Solitude is reportedly acting under the direct command of Amarrian Heir Uriam Kador. Spokespersons for the Heir are unavailable for comment as of this time. Federation warships have been sighted moving towards the Gallente system of Ratillose. This is a breaking news story. We will continue to update this story as more information becomes available.

08/11/2008

REPORT: KADOR FLEET LAUNCHES INVASION OF GALLENTE FEDERATION IN SOLITUDE - HEAVY CASUALTIES REPORTED AS FIGHTING IS UNDERWAY

Ratillose - Amarrian Heir Uriam Kador has launched a personal invasion of the Gallente Federation. The unprovoked attack follows a series of misdirection actions by the Kador fleet in the last 24 hours. Heavy fighting is underway in the Ratillose System on the Federation side of the border, which is home to at least two Federation Navy bases. This is a breaking news story. We will continue to update this story as more information becomes available.

13/11/2008

Minmatar Republic and Thukker Tribe announce open border policy.

Pator - The Minmatar Republic and the Thukker Tribe have formed an open border policy, Sanmatar Maleatu Shakor and Thukker Chief Einnar Aeboul jointly announced at a press conference today.

The agreement, coming after a week of talks between the two leaders, will allow Minmatar and Thukker citizens to travel freely between their respective territories. The agreement, notably, also extends to the Starkmanir and Nefantar tribes currently sheltered in Thukker territory.

"With this historic agreement, we open the door for peoples of all tribes to finally return home," Shakor announced. "We have already enacted several plans to allow us to cope with the influx of people, and I urge all Republic citizens to welcome our long-lost kin." Shakor went on to say that he hoped this would be only the first step in a growing relationship between the Minmatar Republic and the Thukker Tribe.

Chief Aeboul also welcomed the agreement, but tempered his approval by saying that "while this is indeed a historic occasion for the Minmatar people, the Thukker tribe still values its independence and way of life. I can assure everyone that we will not be relinquishing our sovereignty." He also stated his tribe would welcome immigrants from the Republic, and finished by reminding those in attendance that while the Thukker life is a hard one, it is also exceptionally rewarding.

The agreement comes after several years of growing discord between the Republic and Thukker tribe. While Chief Aeboul made some strong remarks about his tribe's independent status, Sanmatar Shakor has made it clear he wishes a joint tribal government for all Minmatar, and several pundits have claimed this agreement is just the first step in his grand scheme to further that goal. Official sources have neither moved to confirm nor deny these claims.

14/11/2008

Empress Jamyl reprimands Heir Kador, confiscates fleet

Amarr - Empress Jamyl I made a short address to the Empire today, chastising Imperial Heir Uriam Kador for his abortive military incursion into Gallente space and announcing the full integration of the remains of the Kador Family home fleet into the Imperial Navy.

Speaking via public address systems from the Emperor Family station in Amarr, the Empress said "I made a promise that I would respond in kind to actions affecting the wellbeing of our great and holy Empire, be they good or ill. The failure of Uriam's private military adventure has caused the Empire significant inconvenience at home and abroad. As such I will be imposing commensurate inconvenience upon him. All Kador-aligned military forces and assets will be turned over to the Ministry of War for reassignment, and Heir Uriam will in the future be expected and required to conduct himself in a manner which the Ministry of Internal Order deems acceptable."

The Empress also extended the Empire's condolences to the families of innocents killed and injured by Heir Kador's actions, her disregard of their race or allegiance an acknowledgement of the gravity of the political situation with the Gallente. Mention was made in passing of Emperor Heideran VII's proclamation prohibiting the Heir Families from maintaining standing military forces, which has not been enforced for many years.

While some outsiders have questioned Empress Jamyl's firmness in this matter, sources more familiar with Imperial politics have expressed a measure of shock at the perceived severity of the sanctions imposed. It is believed that this is the first time the Ministry of Internal Order has ever been given clearance to have any overt

involvement with Heirs or their families. The rumored integration of the remaining Kador naval assets with the disgraced 7th Fleet, still currently based in the Aridia region, has caused many eyebrows to be raised in military circles.

14/11/2008

President Foiritan addresses Gallente Federation.

Luminaire - President Foiritan addressed the Gallente Federation today in the aftermath of the invasion of Federation territory, apparently by military forces belonging to the Amarr Kador Family.

"An enemy chose to attack our Federation with the presumption that we were weak," the President began, taking his time. "That mistake cost them dearly. The Federation Navy met the invading fleets with such force that they were wholly routed and destroyed. "

"No quarter was given to the invaders who attacked our people; those few who survived now await trial for their crimes." The President went on to say that while the motivation and circumstances of the attack were still unclear, Federation military intelligence is currently considering what action to take next.

The President wrapped up his speech saying, "This sends a strong message out to all those who might think the Federation easy prey. While we hold our values dear, we will protect those values with terrible force, and if necessary with our lives. Long live the Federation."

21/11/2008

Breaking News: Gallente navy vessels seen entering Aridia

Aridia - Breaking news at this hour: A number of Federation Navy ships have reportedly been spotted crossing into Amarr territory from Gallente space. Neither the Amarr government nor Amarr Navy High Command have commented on the situation, though it is rumored that Amarr Navy vessels have been scrambled to monitor the incursive squadron.

More on this situation as it develops.

21/11/2008

Breaking News: Unauthorized Gallente presence confirmed in Amarr space

Aridia - Earlier reports that a fleet of Federation Navy vessels had crossed over the Gallente-Amarr border into Aridia have now been confirmed by several independent sources. Amarr Navy scout squadrons have reportedly been scrambled and are conducting long-range reconnaissance, but have made no move to engage yet. The Gallente vessels have failed to respond to all hails directed towards them, and top sources within the Federation Navy have reportedly disavowed any knowledge of their actions. The fleet, variously reported to number between sixty and one hundred unmarked vessels of diverse class and specification, was last spotted in the Noranim system in Genesis.

More on the situation as it develops.

21/11/2008

Breaking News: Reports of heavy fighting in Kador Prime

Kador Prime - Reports have just come in about ongoing heavy fighting in the Kador Prime system, apparently concentrated around the Kador Family Bureau station at the system's first planet. Combat has also been reported at several other points in the system, but these reports remain unconfirmed still.

Several feeds from eyewitnesses at the station appear to show Gallente forces clashing with ships aligned to the Kador Family. Amarr Navy fleets have been sighted not three systems away, but appear to thus far be making no move to assist the embattled Kador forces in Kador Prime.

21/11/2008

President Foiritan announces capture of renegade Admiral

Luminaire - President Foiritan addressed the Gallente Federation today in the wake of the Federation Navy's first instance of direct military action within the Amarr Empire's borders in over three decades.

"In response to intelligence received yesterday, this morning I authorized our military forces to cross the border into the Amarr Empire and conduct a forced extraction of the traitor, former Grand Admiral of the Navy, Anvent Eturrer," said the President, speaking to an assembled crowd of thousands.

"The force encountered some resistance, which it summarily overcame. I am glad to report to you that the promise I made five months ago has been fulfilled. We have found the traitor and we hold him in our talons. Anvent Eturrer is now being kept at a secret maximum security facility where he awaits trial for his crimes against the Federation."

Though no date has been set for the trial, nor it decided what exact form the proceedings will take, the President went to great lengths to assure the nation of Eturrer's fate.

"I promised you he would atone for his crimes... that he would stand judgment, be made to pay for what he cost this Federation. Citizens of the Federation, I promise you this -- he will pay."

"With this extraction effected, and the Kador forces that chose to strike out against us dissolved, we are satisfied that no further action will be needed against the Amarr Empire at this time," the President also said.

Amarr authorities have so far remained silent about the situation. According to Gallente officials no high-level communication has taken place between the two governments, and no apparent mobilization has taken place among the Amarr armed forces.

21/11/2008

Fighting in Kador Prime ceases

Kador Prime - The heavy fighting that just moments ago was occurring in Kador Prime seems to have ceased, all reports coming in indicate that the Federation Navy vessels that were involved in the combat have left the system.

We have no further sightings of the Federation Navy fleet and we have no further information at this time.

28/11/2008

Empress Jamyl places Ammatar Mandate under Ardishapur vassalage

Amarr - Amarr Empress Jamyl I this morning released a statement declaring that, as of noon tomorrow, she would be handing executive oversight of the Ammatar Mandate to Ardishapur Family heir Yonis Ardishapur. The announcement comes after several months of speculation on the empress's intentions for the Five Heirs and how they will fit into her much-vaunted plan for the restoration of the Reclaiming.

The empress's decree states that Lord Ardishapur, "pursuant to Imperial directive, shall henceforth carry ultimate responsibility for the fates and fortunes of the Ammatar Mandate, its bordered districts and outlying holdings, its economic and military resources and the souls of its faithful servants."

While the heir himself has yet to comment on the announcement, House Ardishapur did release a statement shortly after the empress's, which asserted that Ardishapur would "treat this worthy assignment as seriously as any other task bestowed by the anointed ruler of God's Empire." The statement contained no information on what policy directions the heir intends to take with the Ammatar Mandate.

Ammatar has been beset by turmoil and uncertainty ever since the Elder War earlier this year, when its lucrative tsula plantations - the Mandate's largest export crop and arguably the backbone of its economy - were systematically destroyed by Chamberlain Karsoth's forces in retaliation for the Mandate government's harboring of Starkmanir Minmatar tribesmen. While several of these plantations are in the process of being restored, the lack of strong centralized authority at home has caused efforts to flounder with little funding. Foreign private interests, primarily Khanid and Caldari, have offered outreach agreements, but the Consulate's interim government has thus far denied all offers under strict orders from the Imperial Throne.

Lord Ardishapur is expected to announce his new Consulate governor within a week.

21/12/2008

Royal Khanid Navy releases statement on Blood Raider attacks

Royal Khanid Navy Grand Admiral Zidaes Khanid this morning released a statement claiming that Khanid Kingdom forces yesterday attacked thirty-three separate Blood Raider Covenant targets – ranging from unmanned installations to fully-defended outposts – in what the release terms “an effort to strike a blow against the spreading blight of willful heresy.”

The Admiral's statement went on to detail the statistics of yesterday's conflicts, some of which are reportedly still raging. Among the largest were a one-hundred-battleship-strong attack on a major Covenant outpost in an undisclosed location, where the report states that over twenty thousand Khanid soldiers were killed, and a three-pronged attack on a critical Covenant arms production facility which resulted in the destruction of the facility and the deaths of over fifty-five thousand people, the Khanid's and the Covenant's alike.

Questioned about the swift and ferocious nature of the attacks, Admiral Zidaes responded: “The Blood Raiders have been a thorn in our side for years, and we felt that now was the time to make a coordinated effort to strike back and weaken them. Our intel had indicated to us that certain weaknesses were developing, and now was the right time to exploit them.”

Overall, approximately a hundred thousand Khanid are believed to have lost their lives in yesterday's attacks, and several thousand more are missing in action or believed captured by Blood Raider forces. Battles still rage at

a number of sites, and auxiliary forces are being sent in for support and rescue operations. It is unclear at this stage precisely how great an effect the attacks have had on the Covenant's operations.

21/12/2008

Khanid forces mounting large-scale attacks against Blood Raider targets

Reports are coming in that today has seen a major coordinated strike by the Khanid Kingdom against Blood Raider holdings in several separate locations around New Eden. Damage reports are difficult to come by at this point, but at least three deep-space outposts and several dozen planetside installations have been confirmed as infiltrated or destroyed by Khanid forces in the last six hours.

Believed to be the largest single offensive ever mounted by an independent nation against a criminal organization, the series of attacks has prompted speculation in channels of public discourse as well as among those few media outlets who have had facts to report. According to an unnamed source with all of these outlets, the Royal Khanid Navy has committed several battle fleets' worth of ships and personnel to the endeavor, including a large portion of their special forces.

More on the situation as it comes in.

23/12/2008

Amarr Empire announces capture of former Chamberlain

The Imperial Throne this morning released a statement which claims Dochuta Karsoth, former Chamberlain of the Amarr Empire, has been apprehended.

According to the release, Karsoth, who defected from the Empire during the Elder invasion earlier this year, had been sheltered by Blood Raider allies in the time since. He was captured by elite Khanid squadrons during the aftermath of one of the Khanid's attacks on Blood Raider holdings last Sunday. The building where the former chamberlain was being sheltered, a Blood Raider arms facility on a moon in the Anath system, was captured in the attack, and Karsoth himself apprehended elsewhere on the moon approximately 17 hours later.

The statement went on to express the Empress's gratitude to King Khanid II. "He [Khanid] has done Amarr a great service," it read. "Long shall be remembered this favor rendered at such a time of need, and generous in turn shall be the hand of Amarr."

It is unknown at this time whether Royal Khanid Navy High Command had foreknowledge of the former chancellor's whereabouts, but there is a good deal of speculation among experts that Sunday's attacks may have been at least partially motivated by such information. Neither the Royal Khanid Navy nor the Royal Palace on Khanid have commented on these allegations thus far.

The announcement of Karsoth's capture, meanwhile, has been met with mostly silent approval by the people of the Empire. "It should be no surprise that people aren't dancing in the streets," said Pyros Ram-Sotat, a popular director of Imperial indoctrination holoreels and frequent commentator on national affairs, in an interview this afternoon. "This man basically ran roughshod over the Empire, sullied its good name and left it wide open to defeat and humiliation. We don't want to be reminded of him. We just want to see him gone."

The Imperial Throne has announced that the Empress will give a special nationwide address on the afternoon of the 25th, where she is widely expected to make a comment on the matter.

25/12/2008

EMPRESS JAMYL I MAKES HISTORIC EMANCIPATION ANNOUNCEMENT

DAM-TORSAD – Empress Jamyl I this afternoon made a special nationwide address to the people of the Empire wherein it was announced that, in a historic turning point for Amarr, a significant portion of the Empire's slaves are being "emancipated from their obligations to our nation and our Lord."

"Out there on the event horizon, a new age races toward us," said the Empress in her announcement, "and it is approaching fast. The Lord in his infinite grace has instructed me that the chains that fetter us will no longer be necessary in this new age of light and reason, neither the chains of hatred that restrain our minds nor the chains of indenture that restrain those less fortunate than ourselves."

According to the Empress's announcement, the emancipation extends to every Minmatar slave of ninth generation and up, along with Minmatar academics and religious figures. It is unclear at this time exactly how many slaves are being set free in total, but all experts thus polled so far agree that the number will reach into the hundreds of millions.

"That's going to be between six and seven hundred million slaves," said Betancour Soraine, a senior analyst at the Federal Readjustment for Extraditions and Escapees program on Gallente Prime. "Who knows what crises that's going to cause for the Empire? How they intend to replenish that kind of work force is beyond me. And, I mean, these aren't glaive-collared factory drones, these are educated people, these are specialists. This is a

brain trust we're talking about here.”

Others, meanwhile, seem to disagree. “There’s no real loss here,” said Jakunda Mishar, a senior operative at the independent Agency for Indenturee Rehabilitation in Dam-Torsad. “Academics are easily replaced, and most of truly indispensable ones will end up staying anyway. Besides, if you’re ninth-generation, you, your parents and all the ancestors you know of will have known nothing but the Empire. The Republic is a distant and frightening dream to these people. Where do you think they’re going to go?”

The announcement has caused turmoil in parts of the Empire, most notably in areas with significant slave populations. Small-scale rioting broke out earlier today on some of the Empire’s largest slave colonies, but Holders had been notified in advance of the Empress’s decree and were prepared with additional security measures which mostly sufficed to bring matters under control before they escalated.

Similarly, areas with high-generation slave populations were witness to massive celebrations as newly emancipated Minmatar took to the streets in large numbers. In several of these areas, makeshift statues and other artwork depicting Empress Jamyl I have been erected or otherwise brought into being, and her name is widely sung and chanted among the multitudes.

No comment has yet been forthcoming from any of the other nations of New Eden, save for a short announcement from King Khanid II this afternoon, wherein he commended the Empress for “making major strides toward a stronger Empire.”



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10/03/2009

All Contact With Seyllin Lost

METSEREL – All communications with the planet Seyllin I have ceased. Automated efforts to restart fluid router transmissions have failed, and distress signals emanating from the system have gone silent.

SCOPE is unable to obtain any additional information at this time.

10/03/2009

First Contact: Serpents Mayday Received from Seyllin

SEYLLIN – A distress call from a Serpents freighter stranded in Seyllin has reached the blockades surrounding the system. According to sources, a mechanical failure dropped the vessel out of warp before it could reach the nearest stargate. After a partial repair of the drive, its captain attempted to return to Seyllin I rather than warp out of the system. In a voice transcript of the distress call, the Serpents captain states "To anyone who's listening, Seyllin's not there anymore. You hear me? Seyllin-one is gone, do not attempt to approach..."

The transmission stops after that. No additional information is available as CONCORD and the Federation Navy continue to maintain a blockade of the system.

10/03/2009

CONCORD to Drop Blockade on Seyllin

METSEREL - CONCORD and Federation Navy authorities have announced that the blockade of the Seyllin System has been dropped, allowing starship traffic to enter the system. Starships are warned not to travel to Seyllin I "due to circumstances related to the ongoing crisis."

President Foiritan is expected to make an announcement within the hour.

10/03/2009

President Foiritan Addresses Nation, Confirms the Loss of Seyllin I

LUMINAIRE - President Foiritan has just issued an internationally broadcast address to New Eden. The transcript is as follows:

"Citizens of the Federation, fellow souls of New Eden.

"It is with unspeakable regret and sorrow that I must deliver to you the news that we had hoped to never hear. Though we may have hoped that we could have prepared ourselves for this moment, I believe I speak on behalf of us all in saying that this catastrophe is the realization of our worst nightmares.

"By my order, all rescue efforts have been suspended, and no recovery efforts will be permitted. It is true that the main-sequence anomaly of Seyllin has caused the effective destruction of the planet.

"The decision to withhold that information and detain the reporters who sought to deliver such news was my own. Given the limited amount of time we had to pull people out, maintaining as orderly an evacuation as possible was given the highest priority.

"It is a small consolation that we were able to save some people. But it will haunt me for the rest of my days that we could not save them all.

"Scientists are still struggling to understand exactly what has happened. My instincts tell me that any explanation will provide little comfort.

"I would like to thank all those who offered their assistance in our time of need.

"As we have more information, we will share it. But if you'll please join me in a moment of silence for the half billion souls who just perished, I would be most grateful."

10/03/2009

SCOPE Establishes Live Feed from Orbit of Seyllin Remains

SEYLLIN - SCOPE News has established a live feed of the remnants of Seyllin I. The hellish scene confirms that a plasma wave passed through the area, and that the planet's remains are coalescing back into sphere. Massive fragments are still orbiting the world, and capsuller traffic has been sighted inspecting the remains.

CONCORD maintains that the area surrounding the planet is extremely dangerous, and should be approached with caution.

10/03/2009

Ishukone Watch Offers Assistance To Federation Government

MALKALEN – Mens Reppola, Ishukone Watch CEO, spoke to reporters at Ishukone's Malkalen headquarters, telling them that he had spoken to President Foiritan and offered any assistance he could render. "This is not a Federation problem, this is an international tragedy," said Reppola. "While Ishukone has no assets in the Thoulde constellation itself, our facilities elsewhere in Essence and Sinq Laison have been ordered to accept secondary casualties and refugees in the coming hours and days."

10/03/2009

Seyllin: Panic Grips Planetside Installations, Rescue Operations Disrupted

SEYLLIN – Mass panic has all but halted rescue operations following an unofficial warning of a possible world-shattering plasma wave approaching the planet. Several spaceports have been forced to turn away approaching dropships as the boarding gantries have been overrun with panicked residents fighting for space aboard the next transport.

SCOPE News has maintained contact with several reporters trapped in the cities of Southern Cross and Valimor. They have sent word that many residents within the vast underground caverns have made no attempt to leave, peacefully enjoying what could possibly be their final moments alive. Despite the lack of power in many parts of the cities, they report that there is an eerie calm in the deepest levels, forged perhaps from the resignation that there is little chance of escape.

The unofficial rescue count currently stands at 843,000 residents. CONCORD and the Federation Navy have ceased cooperating with news agencies at this time.

10/03/2009

CONCORD Lashes Out Against SCOPE News

YULAI – CONCORD blasted the SCOPE News corporation, calling Chief Editor Lars Kiormen's last report on the crisis in Seyllin "impetuous, inflammatory, and irresponsible." The harsh reaction follows Mr. Kiormen's report that a potentially world-shattering solar mass was heading towards the planet, plus an emotional farewell to SCOPE reporters trapped on Seyllin I. CONCORD angrily dismissed the report as a "shocking, selfish attempt to exploit sensationalism during a time when composure and calm are needed most."

CONCORD adamantly denies the unlawful detention of any SCOPE personnel, "or the fictitious existence of any timers or countdowns for Seyllin."

10/03/2009

Scientists Rush to Analyze Mass in Seyllin

BOURYNES - Scientists are rushing to collect data about the superheated mass heading toward Seyllin. Despite limited information, several theories have emerged, ranging from a massive vessel heading toward the planet to a gravitational distortion in the system; no consensus has been reached to completely explain the phenomenon, however.

University of Caille scientists have urged anyone to contact them immediately with any data related to these events, including any information from systems affected by similar phenomena early today.

10/03/2009

Marines Open Fire on Refugees

We have unconfirmed reports that Federation Navy Marines have opened fire on a crowd of refugees who were "rushing the dropships".

Despite this heavy-handed approach, hundreds of thousands of refugees are still pouring into the evacuation centers in a desperate bid to escape Seyllin.

10/03/2009

Heroism Among Outrage as Seyllin Prisoners Evacuated

SEYLLIN – Throngs of people at the evacuation points were outraged to hear that the prison population of Metal City was being evacuated amidst security fears following several escapes reported. The facility was reported to have taken heavy damage and already suffered the escape of several high security prisoners.

Military transport ships aiding the evacuation were recently diverted to the scene to secure the prisoners and evacuate them to prevent further escape attempts. Word of this has sparked a wave of anger and unrest among those still waiting to be lifted from the planet surface. News of the superheated mass heading for the planet has contributed to crowd panic, with riots reported at the evacuation points.

However, early reports from the prison evacuation detail indicate that lower-security prisoners have offered to assist with the evacuation effort of their fellow inmates, as well as providing additional manpower to dig survivors out of the damaged areas of the prison.

10/03/2009

Shakor: Thukker Caravan Was Destroyed

ILLUIN – Sanmatar Maleatu Shakor confirmed that the Thukker caravan reported missing in the Great Wildlands has been destroyed. While declining to provide specific numbers, Shakor stated that a "significant and tragic loss of life was incurred" and that "they perished as a direct result of an anomalous solar event similar in scale and power to those described in Seyllin and the Syndicate region."

Shakor's announcement brings the total number of reported near-simultaneous mass-sequence anomalies in the last few hours to four, stoking popular fears that a widespread celestial armageddon is underway.

10/03/2009

God's Righteousness Conclave Releases New Statement

God's Righteousness Conclave, an Amarrian fundamentalist group, released a follow-up statement moments ago. "We warned of the dangers of associating with heretics, and yet thousands responded to help.

God's warning against iniquity and sin was not heeded, and the consequences shall now be paid. While we mourn any loss of life, those lost in the Seyllin system shall serve as a stark reminder to both the glory and power of God. It is through that sole path of purity that heresy and its support are punished."

Amar government officials would not comment directly on the group's statement, directing reporters to Empress Jamyl's previous statements regarding the situation in Seyllin.

10/03/2009

Special Report: Sisters of EVE Warn of Possible Wormhole Formation Throughout Cluster

SYSTEM X70-MU – The Sisters of EVE have released an unprecedented general warning to "all space faring travelers of New Eden" that they are forecasting the imminent formation of multiple wormholes throughout the cluster. The claim from the reclusive humanitarian organization comes amidst one of the most deadly natural catastrophes in modern history, as Seyllin and at least three other systems have been devastated by a main-sequence anomaly within the last several hours.

The highly technical warning states that "multiple instances of defect-mediated turbulence in the fabric of spacetime have been detected in various locations throughout the cluster," and that the sightings "coincide with the erratic behavior of multiple star systems, many of which are unreported, all throughout New Eden."

The statement adds that "such intense topological turbulence has every potential to collapse into pairs of defects, and that the resulting point-defect turbulence would be readily detectable using existing starship scanning technology."

Addressing CONCORD directly, the Sisters are strongly advising that "travel warnings be issued with immediate effect warning spacecraft to avoid them all costs, as there is theoretically no limit to the distance separating pairs of defects, or any reliable means of predicting how long such pairs will remain stable."

If true, the Sisters of EVE will have foreseen the appearance of the first naturally occurring wormholes since the collapse of the EVE gate more than fifteen thousand years ago.

10/03/2009

Seyllin Corporate Facilities Remain Open

SEYLLIN - While forces rapidly evacuate the Seyllin systems, both Roden Shipyards and CreoDron announced in a joint statement that their facilities would remain open to new docking for as long as station managers deemed it safe. Neither CONCORD nor Federation Navy officials would comment on the safety of the stations from the plasma event threatening Seyllin I.

"We are still accepting as many ships as our docking bays can hold. For those ships that can't get out-system for whatever reason," the statement read, "we are here to provide a safe haven. Our facilities, like many others, are crowded and strained, but we are ready to go the extra mile in order to save lives."

The stations' defenses can be considerably hardened, but doing so requires all docking bays sealed and shield integrity boosted, preventing inbound and outbound traffic from passing through. As the extent of the damage potential from the system event is not known at this time, station officials could not comment on the extent of potential damage to the station.

10/03/2009

Dropship collision on Seyllin

SEYLLIN 1040 - Two Federation Navy dropships carrying survivors from Seyllin have collided on take-off, with the resulting wreckage killing an estimated 4000 people. The dropships were both reported to be carrying well over the two hundred permitted personnel for such vessels.

Armed Marines have placed a cordon around the loading bays in an attempt to limit the amount of refugees being allowed to board.

10/03/2009

Seyllin I Distress Call Warns of Nuclear Attack

SEYLLIN 0944 - In what looks like an alarming confirmation of earlier suspicions, military authorities just moments ago received a warning of a potential nuclear attack underway in Seyllin. The warning came as a delayed-release emergency signal from the only ground-level security installation on the planet. Specifically designed to withstand the effects of a nuclear blast, the emergency probe escaped into orbit just barely, transmitting its message to regional listening posts before disappearing off radar.

Military officials have refused to confirm the attack, stating that various questions remain. "We firstly ask that people remain calm during this time. We are seeking answers through multiple lines of investigation and will be able to more fully report on the situation in a very short amount of time," said the Federation Navy's Emergency Services Manager, Elette Decaix. She added that the distress call alone was not conclusive enough to confirm a nuclear attack. "The distress call was part of an autonomous early-warning system. The system appears to have activated as designed, but there are any number of other environmental events that may have triggered the probe launch."

10/03/2009

Report: Thukker Caravan Reported Missing in Great Wildlands

SYSTEM SL-YBS 0952 - SCOPE News has learned that a Thukker caravan has been reported missing in the Great Wildlands region. The elusive tribe consulted with the Republic's Sanmatar Maleatu Shakor a short time ago, stating in confidence that the caravan's last checkpoint was a transit waypoint through the SL-YBS system.

Known for their nomadic culture, Thukker caravans typically consist of hundreds of vessels. Though home to large numbers of civilian tribesmen, they are generally well-armed and entirely self-sufficient, rarely if ever seeking port in stations.

10/03/2009

Panic in Oursulaert

OURSULAERT 1002 - Security forces and medical first responders aboard the Federation Navy Testing Facilities in orbit around Oursulaert III have responded to reports of a deadly stampede in the commercial docking bays.

Eyewitness reports indicate that the panic was sparked by the news of communications failures in the Seyllin system. Passengers waiting in the commercial transportation terminal attempted to storm a waiting vessel in order to secure passage out of the system. A report from the transportation provider indicates that the vessel is currently locked down and secure, a significant number of passengers have been injured during the stampede, and the mob is currently refusing to peacefully disperse back into the terminal.

10/03/2009

Scientists: Solar Radiological Pulse Event to Blame for Seyllin Catastrophe

BOURYNES 1003 - An emergency conference of scientists arranged by University of Caille has concluded that a "solar radiological pulse" originating from the blue sun of the Seyllin system is to blame for the ongoing catastrophe on its innermost planet. They ruled out the possibility of a military attack - including a potential nuclear strike - based on the size and scale of the devastation, stating that "no arsenal in the possession of any nation-state in the cluster is capable of delivering such widespread and deep devastation in such a short period of time."

More ominously, the conference reported that the possibility of a supernova still cannot be ruled out, despite the fact that the local Seyllin sun (a powerful O-class star) was not expected to do so for at least another million years. The symptoms of Seyllin I appear consistent with a post-main sequence event, as the planet has been doused in massive bursts of ultraviolet energy and high-energy particles such as x- and gamma rays. Those deep beneath the surface or on the night-side of the planet might be spared the brunt of any thermal effect, but radiological damage would be felt across the entire world.

The scientists warned that for any installation or outpost on the surface of the side directly facing a radiological pulse of that magnitude, the probability of survival is zero.

10/03/2009

ORE Confirms Survey Expedition Team is Lost

SYSTEM 3HQC-6 1007 - Outer Ring Excavations (ORE) has confirmed that the deep core survey expedition operating on the planet 3HQC-6 I has been lost. The mining corporation suspended rescue efforts after being warned by the team not to approach the planet. The deep core surveyors, who were below the surface when contact was first lost, reestablished a temporary link before going offline for good.

An anonymous ORE employee with the corporate HQ in 4C-B7X stated that the last transmission sent by the team predicted "they would all be dead within minutes" and that they believed a "possible nuclear strike or other radiological pulse weapon" had detonated above their location. The team's final moments are being described as eerily reminiscent of the fate suffered by victims in Seyllin, who reported a nearly identical event at almost the same time. ORE reported that the planet is "shimmering with radioactivity" and that the daytime surface temperature of the world is "several times hotter than usual."

ORE officials stated that they are in contact with the Gallente Federation and are sharing information with the scientist consortium in Bourynes.

10/03/2009

Federation Navy, CONCORD Warships Arrive at Seyllin I

SEYLLIN 1008 - CONCORD has confirmed that "a natural disaster of unprecedented scale and consequence has occurred" and that a joint press conference with President Foiritan will be announced shortly. Dreadnoughts, carriers, and freighters have arrived by the hundreds at the stricken planet -- with even more en route -- to begin one of the largest mass rescue efforts in modern history.

A Navy spokesman stated that capital ships are ferrying dropship squadrons to be used in surface runs to evacuate the wounded, whereas freighters will provide fuel, supplies, and orbital triage centers. Stabilized patients will be transported from freighters to intensive care units throughout the Federation using "any and every means possible."

10/03/2009

SPECIAL REPORT: CONCORD-Federation Joint News Conference Transcript Issued

LUMINAIRE 1014 - A joint press conference has been concluded just moments ago with President Souro Foiritan (present) and CONCORD Chief of Staff Kivas Odaka (virtual). The following is a transcript of the opening remarks by Federation President Souro Foiritan:

"Ladies and gentlemen, members of CONCORD, fellow citizens listening throughout New Eden, thank you for your attention. At 08:41 EVE Standard, a weather monitoring outpost on Seyllin I reported a service outage of its Cassandra satellite system. At 08:49 EST, fluid router communications at the primary underground cities of Southern Cross, Metal City, Valimor, and Loadcore were suspended following a self-imposed preventive shutdown. At 08:59 EST, contact with Southern Cross was reestablished, at which point it was confirmed that a radiological pulse event had disabled the communications systems of the entire planet. In addition, global electrical grids have been incapacitated, and the combined thermal and radioactive energy of the pulse has damaged or destroyed any equipment operating above a surface depth of 20 meters.

"The source of this pulse was the local sun. It was not an attack by any sovereign nation. The cause of this solar activity is not known, but appears to be a singular event. We do not anticipate any subsequent bursts at this time. However, given the extent of damage to vital structures and the high levels of radiation saturating the planet, I have issued an executive order to evacuate citizens from the planet. This is to provide medical assistance for those in need, to deliver search and rescue crews to critical sites, and to provide engineers with time to assess the situation and recommend an action plan for restoring vital services.

"I have appointed Grand Admiral Anteson Ranchel to oversee this operation, and I have absolute confidence in his abilities. Federation authorities reporting to him are coordinating with planetside emergency management personnel to provide an orderly and safe evacuation. Citizens are advised to leave physical possessions behind and head towards the nearest spaceports in the cities of Southern Cross and Valimor. With the assistance of CONCORD, Federation dropships will be available for transport at all times. Most of the primary intercity magrail lines linking these locations with Loadcore and Metal City are still operating on backup power. Citizens are advised to use these lines to reach Southern Cross and Valimor.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the toll in human life and injury from this tragedy will be too great to comprehend. Everything that we know about ourselves will be tested. Some of you will have to make some cruel choices, as you will encounter circumstances for which there are no right answers. I ask you to make way for those who can be saved, and to put your best foot forward for the safety and well-being of your fellow man. Thank you.

10/03/2009

Gallente Mining Stocks Tumble As Seyllin Crisis Unfolds

LUMINAIRE 1022 - Share prices in the Gallente mining sector have tumbled dramatically as the situation on the planet Seyllin I is developing into a full-blown crisis. Although virtually no details of the incident are available yet, the market turbulence is expected to increase.

A news bulletin just released by the Garoun Investment Bank says: "Seyllin is a very important system for the Gallente industry. It is clear that some sort of crisis situation is rapidly developing there. Although we cannot yet estimate its severity, we expect the volatility to spread across other market sectors in the Federation".

10/03/2009

Orbital Triage Centers Established, Rescue Operations Underway

SEYLLIN - Freighters converted into medical wards have established orbits over the night side of Seyllin I and are accepting injured survivors. The overwhelming number of cases are severe burns and trauma caused by secondary splash-effect damage from local structures after the original event. As promised by President Foiritan, dropships have been returning full loads of people onto these floating hospitals nonstop, pausing only to take on fuel and returning immediately to the surface.

The lack of atmosphere limits the number of landing sites to recover passengers, thus restricting the rate of retrieval. Engineers have reported that there are a total of 37 spaceports between the cities of Southern Cross and Valimor, each with up to 20 hex-pads to accommodate vertical landings. Each pad is equipped with pressurized boarding gantries in case the spaceport's protective shield dome is retracted, which seems likely to be the case in this situation. In stripped configurations, the largest dropships can accommodate up to 500 passengers.

Southern Cross and Valimor have populations of 80 million and 110 million, respectively.

10/03/2009

Report: Serpentis and ORE Send Assistance to Seyllin

SEYLLIN 1035 - After a brief confrontation with Federation Navy warships, unarmed Serpentis vessels were in the last hour allowed to pass through to Seyllin I. The pirate faction, a longtime rival of the Federation, has delivered medical equipment and personnel to help assist victims rescued from the planet. In addition, they have brought specialized excavation equipment provided by ORE which can be used to "create new access points for dropships or clear major obstacles to rescue operations," according to a company spokesperson.

As a sure sign of the extraordinary and dire situation on Seyllin I, President Foiritan thanked the cartel but warned that "such actions, though noble, do not exonerate the criminal organization from past misdeeds." Serpentis CEO Salvador Sarpati remarked that "the sentiment is mutual, and in the interest of saving those trapped beneath the surface of Seyllin, our differences have been temporarily set aside."

Separately, ORE stated that using Serpentis to dispatch the equipment was the fastest way to get it to Seyllin, and that the loss of their survey team in Outer Ring makes their own participation in the Seyllin rescue effort "deeply personal to them."

10/03/2009

Federation Navy Rushes Ships to Border Zone; Caldari Navy Responds in Kind

CARROU 0912 - President Foiritan has authorized the immediate mobilization of "Tripwire" defenses along the constellation border separating the Gallente Federation and the Caldari State, escalating tensions between the two warring nations. The act follows the sudden and mysterious loss of contact with the planet Seyllin I. Although the measure is being called "precautionary" by Federation officials, many view the act as reckless given the dangers inherent to such large war fleets operating in proximity to each other.

Analysts have stated that the lack of communication with Seyllin I means an attack on the planet cannot be ruled out, as fluid router hubs are typically the first targets of any orbital bombardment or commando-style operation.

The Caldari Navy has responded in kind, mobilizing its forces along its border in what appears to be a purely defensive posture. State Executor Tibus Heth is expected to issue a statement to address these developments within the hour.

10/03/2009

Heth: No Military Operations in the Vicinity of Seyllin

NEW CALDARI 0920 - Caldari State Executor Tibus Heth has issued a message directed at President Foiritan, intended to diffuse escalating tensions along the border zone. In the address, he states that they are not responsible for instigating the crisis in Seyllin, but will defend themselves if provoked. The full statement is as follows:

"The Caldari State does not ever discuss the deployment of forces necessary to defend our interests. However, I

feel that the current situation warrants an exception to the rule. As of now there are no military operations in the vicinity of the Seyllin System, or in fact the entire constellation of Thoulde. Although we regret the aggressive posturing by President Foiritan in the border zone, I believe that his actions stem from a lack of information regarding the fate of the planet Seyllin I, and are therefore tolerable-for now. "However, we are always vigilant. I have therefore ordered our armed forces to mobilize and prepare to defend the sovereign territory of Caldari State. They will not attack unless provoked. At the same time, I offer our assistance to the Gallente Federation in determining not only the cause of the communications disruption in Seyllin, but in providing the technical means of ensuring it does not happen again. Such is the least we can do, considering the bond we share in Luminaire. We mean no ill will towards these or other citizens of the Federation, and wish a speedy and safe resolution can be found in these trying times. Thank you."

10/03/2009

BREAKING NEWS: Seyllin Communications Restored, Emergency Channels Flooded with Planetary Distress Calls

SEYLLIN 0936 - Fluid router traffic restored with Seyllin I has opened to a flood of distress signals originating from all four primary cities of the Federation planet. It is believed that the communications system was restarted autonomously following a self-imposed shutdown to protect itself from an external threat. Emergency channels have since been overwhelmed with distress calls, many with specific requests for an evacuation from the planet itself. There is no official word on the cause of this calamity or the extent of damage incurred. CONCORD and Federation vessels are reported to be scrambling towards the planet at this time.

This is a breaking news story. More information will be provided when available.

10/03/2009

Report: Seyllin Fluid Routers Located Kilometers Beneath Surface

LUMINAIRE 0909 - The FTL communications link between Seyllin I and the Federation is located several kilometers beneath the surface of the barren mining world, stated engineers familiar with the planet. Four main subterranean cities linked by underground magrails hold the bulk of the planet's population, whose residents mostly support mining operations. Access points to the surface are limited due to extreme daytime surface temperatures, but robust thermal shielding methods allow for spaceport access and limited space elevator operations. Most of the power generation for the planet is conducted through geothermal or aneutronic fusion means, as some excavation sites have reached depths of more than 100 kilometers below the surface.

The economic value of Seyllin to the Federation is significant, accounting for a quarter of all raw ore production in the Thoulde Constellation, and making up a significant fraction of the Federation's supply of key heavy metals. It is unknown if the communications outage is associated with the earlier reported loss of the planet's Cassandra weather monitoring system.

10/03/2009

Breaking News: All Contact Lost With Seyllin

LUMINAIRE 0901 - Federal Administration has reported that all contact with the planet Seyllin I has been lost. Attempts to restore communications are ongoing, but SCOPE has learned that the Federation Navy has diverted a task force towards the area, and that CONCORD has offered "the full scope and breadth of its capabilities" in assisting them.

This is a breaking news story. More information will be posted as it becomes available.

10/03/2009

Weather Satellite Glitch Causes Travel Disruption

SEYLLIN 0843 - A disruption in solar weather monitoring services has forced travel delays in the Seyllin system. The satellite network known as "Cassandra" is reported to have dropped offline shortly after 0840 local time, temporarily locking out traffic attempting to enter the system.

Researchers at the base monitoring facility on Seyllin I are attributing the incident to a communications glitch, and expect service to be restored shortly.

10/03/2009

CONCORD Confirms "Topological Defects" are Wormholes, Imposes "Unenforceable Travel Ban" From Portals in Regulated Space

YULAI - CONCORD has just confirmed that the "topological defects" predicted earlier by the Sisters of EVE have begun appearing throughout the New Eden cluster. The wormholes are reported to be structurally stable enough to traverse, although they cannot predict the duration that they will remain open.

In addition, CONCORD has stated that they can only protect those who enter or leave from portals within hisec space, and have thus declared an "unenforceable travel ban" in an attempt to discourage pilots from entering.

Rumors have begun circulating that probes sent through wormholes can maintain contact with their deployment platform, but cannot determine their location on the far side.

10/03/2009

Federation, CONCORD Ships Pulling Back from Seyllin I; Stargates Blockaded

SEYLLIN – In an apparent confirmation of New Eden's worst fears, the flotilla of rescue ships above Seyllin I has left orbit and are pushing towards the system's stargates. SCOPE News vessels attempting to defy system-wide evacuation orders were fired upon by Federation Navy warships. Before leaving the Seyllin System, SCOPE was able to confirm that no dropships remained at any of the spaceports.

CONCORD warships have blockaded the entry points into Seyllin from the Aporulie, Ane, and Metserel Systems. SCOPE News will be unable to report on events on the far side until the blockade is lifted.

10/03/2009

Report: Communications Lost with ORE Survey Team in Outer Ring

3HQC-6 0855 - Fluid router traffic linking a remote ORE expedition in Outer Ring with its headquarters in the Heart Constellation has been severed following reports of an emergency. Although ORE was unavailable for official comment, SCOPE has learned that the mining corporation dispatched a small task force to the Sword Constellation to investigate.

The lost expedition is believed to be prospecting on 3HQC-6 I, the system's innermost planet. Establishing fluid router communications is standard operating procedure for any remote mining or surveying operation, and disruption of established links is most commonly caused by equipment failures or accidents.

The expedition is believed to have been performing deep core surveys on the planet's interior when the emergency was sounded.

10/03/2009

CreoDron Discovers Wormhole, Refutes CONCORD Advisory

Following on the heels of the travel ban established by CONCORD, Creodron's lead Astrophysicist Lianda Burreau announced the discovery of a "stable wormhole" in an undisclosed system.

Speaking to The Scope from an undisclosed location, Prof. Burreau has staked a claim on the safety of the wormhole, stating that she is so confident of the "needless overstatement" in CONCORD's travel warnings that she will travel through to the other side herself. She added that the excursion would not be pursued recklessly, and that long-range autonomous scout drones had already been deployed ahead of her to warn of any unforeseen risks.

Prof. Burreau is understood to have the complete confidence of CreoDrone CEO Roni Darieux and the Board of Directors. No comment has been forthcoming from Federation officials, as they, the scientists, and millions of citizens alike wait to hear back from the scout drone expedition.

10/03/2009

Creodron Scout Drones Transmit Initial Findings

CreoDron scout drones, sent through a "stable wormhole" discovered by CreoDron astrophysicists, transmitted the first images from the other side of the wormhole.

The first pieces of data received included five blurry image captures. The images clearly depict another system unlike any seen before, with darkened, empty planets set against an unfamiliar, crimson nebula.

Prof. Burreau, the woman responsible for the wormhole's discovery, conducted a brief conference from an undisclosed location thought to be near the site of the wormhole.

"Despite the strange nebulae, we believe what we are seeing here is a system not unlike those familiar to us in New Eden, although it is far, far away. Initial data gathered from intracluster medium analysis on the other side has led us to strongly consider the possibility that this system resides in a galaxy other than our own.

"Aside from that, everything about this system appears to be typical of our own. We are encouraged by early signs. The planets are in heliocentric orbit, which suggests that the environment there should remain similar to ours, although some abnormalities in the readings suggest a level of volatility in this system's local electromagnetic fields."

Prof. Burreau remained resolute that a manned excursion into the unknown system would proceed, despite the risks. "We must not fear the unknown, we must understand it," she said before calling the conference to an end and excusing her team to prepare.

10/03/2009

Signs of unknown civilizations found by CreoDron scout drones

CreoDron scout drones have identified "non-natural deadspace signatures" while currently exploring an unknown system on the other side of a wormhole, suggesting they were designed by intelligent lifeforms.

This startling news was delivered moments ago by Prof. Lianda Burreau, this time via a local fluid router broadcast in the Balrille system. This system is in the process of being heavily locked down by local Federation Navy pilots.

Although the news cannot be confirmed at this time, dozens of eyewitness reports from Balrille all relate the same story. Those present to hear her communication claim that Prof. Burreau seemed "hurried" with the news. "She just opened up in local comms before I could make sense of what she was saying. Something about discovering signatures, that she was going, and that she would transmit from the other side," said one anonymous witness. "She seemed defiant, more than anything. I think people were trying to stop her," stated another.

10/03/2009

Federation Held In The Grip of Recent Events

Luminaire - People from all across the Federation are expressing their sympathy and support to the families of victims of the Seyllin disaster. Many families are also complaining that the media attention had instead turned to recent discoveries by CreoDron instead of focusing on the world-shaking tragedy.

According to Gallente authorities, the amount of donations to families of the victims has surpassed any previous relief drives by an extensive margin. Federation citizens also formed large queues in front of the banks in order to contribute as much as they can.

"I had some distant relatives in Seyllin's Metal City," said Orla Meale, an orbital assembly worker, as she exited the branch of a local bank. "We were never close, but now I can't stop thinking about them. I have donated all my savings to help the victims' families, and a lot of my friends have done the same."

Emerging from this disaster is the news of CreoDron's expedition. Hundreds of thousands of people gathered on the streets of Gallente cities, watching the holoivid systems broadcast real-time news on the expedition's progress.

"It is a travesty," shouted an outraged woman outside the bank. "Our friends and relatives have died, and yet the media act as if nothing has happened!"

Compared to the nationwide interest in the CreoDron expedition, these complaints are far and few between. Mark Ufford, a teenager eagerly watching the holoivid broadcast, told The Scope team, "Don't think I'm not sorry for those who died today - I really am. But what we are seeing now can change our lives forever."

10/03/2009

Federation Navy Detachment Locks Down Barille Constellation

The Federation Navy has ordered a reserve detachment, destined for Seyllin, to seize control of the CreoDron site and all key system-wide infrastructures across the Barille constellation, including the receiving station for the scout drones. Eager to pre-empt negative speculation, military spokespeople have already pressed their case to local media that all measures currently underway are precautionary and "designed to limit any further loss of life and property."

When questioned about the location of Prof. Lianda Burreau's research team, military officials revealed that she had left through the wormhole "long ago." They stressed that the professor "had in no way been threatened or coerced" and that she "entered the wormhole out of her own accord." They added that her decision to enter the system risked not only her life, but potentially that of "many other innocent and law-abiding citizens."

The Federation Navy issued a statement warning interstellar travelers to continue avoiding any system disturbances and has encouraged starship captains to report any unusual sightings.

10/03/2009

Navy reports loss of contact with CreoDron team

Only moments after seizing a CreoDron facility somewhere in the Barille constellation, Federation Navy officials have reported to local media that contact with the CreoDron team cannot be established. The Navy is claiming to have only just recently located the site of the wormhole, which they believe Prof. Burreau and her team have entered, aiming to explore the other side.

"Immediately upon securing the facility, we set about establishing a priority commlink with Professor Burreau," stated one military official. "We have not yet been able to make contact with her team, nor the drones that

initially entered the system. For now, the best we can do is wait and hope."

11/03/2009

Expeditions underway across New Eden, rumors abound

Following in the footsteps of others such as CreoDron, numerous organizations across New Eden have begun to prepare themselves for expeditions of their own. From small, private endeavors to larger entities such as the Imperial Navy, people are mobilizing exploratory squads en masse, all in the hope of finding some answers to today's extraordinary events.

Various rumors of hostile encounters on the other side have been filtering down from the capsuleer class already, almost as often as whispers of rare new resources have surfaced. Reactions to these claims have been mixed so far, with nobody yet willing to state any definitive facts in a politically-charged public arena. Some have brushed the talk of hostility aside as a mistaken case of capsuleer piracy. Others have charged the capsuleer class with conspiring against the baseline populations and lying about the threat as they try to monopolize resources that they, above all others, would have the easiest time accessing. None of the empires have confirmed or denied these claims, preferring instead to focus on their own expeditions and defensive deployments.

With talk of strategic resources and potential threats flying around FTL comms, the Empire navies appear to have decided to maintain their current state of alert. Prepared now after the events of Seyllin, they stand more ready to guard against any number of unforeseen eventualities. In amidst a chaotic mixture of rumor and fact, the growing sentiment seems to be that the capsuleers of New Eden, with their immense resources and access to cloning technology, will be the best hope for some answers in the near future. Until that time, each of the Empires seems content to simply brace themselves for the unknown.

Initial ardishapur speaking engagements "doing well" reported by ISD Caleb Kang 26.04.2009 15:01:28

As Yonis Ardishapur's speaking tour continues through the Empire, initial reports indicate the events are gaining in success. Held mainly in churches and other areas of religious gathering, the Heir has attracted sizable crowds. While many of the venues can hold several thousand safely, seats have been taken quickly, leading to some being turned away at the door. In addition to those in attendance, tens of thousands have watched broadcasts of the engagements.

Commenting on the popularity of the events, a factory worker from Romi stated, "It's not every day you get to see an Heir in person. The nearest I'd ever seen before was Lord Kador's vehicle passing by during a parade. And he makes perfect sense, too! I never thought the royalty were so much in touch with the common faith."

The Royal Heir's celebrity is only one factor in the popularity of the events, however. "He speaks of times of glory and how to regain what we've given up, and his suggestions are remarkably apposite," remarked one Holder. "It would be wise of us to give him credence."

The initial positive reaction to the events has encouraged Ardishapur, who recently announced plans to expand the tour to larger venues, along with broadcast deals that would project his speeches into less-inhabited areas.

Secondary explosions lead to further loss of life reported by ISD Haruziel Tormau 2010.05.04 15:54:02

Pashanai - A series of secondary explosions has rocked the shattered hulk of the Ministry of War station in Pashanai. Given the extensive and ongoing rescue and recovery operations taking place, this new series of blasts is sure to add to the death toll, especially among responders and aid workers.

It is unclear as yet what caused these secondary blasts. While some theorize that they are the result of charges placed by the original terrorists with the express purpose of targeting first responders, the Bloody Hand of Matar has not yet claimed credit. Further, there is some indication that these smaller explosions may be the delayed result of damage to the station's power-generation infrastructure.

Rescue crews are redoubling their efforts to free aid workers who have become trapped. Ministry of War officials have brought in an investigative crew in an attempt to determine the cause of the blasts, though serious forensic work may be forced to wait until the bulk of critical rescue operations are complete.

Boundless creation marketing holo banned reported by ISD Gaspard Sorelo 24.04.2009 11:50:59

Hagilur – A review panel at the Republic Justice Department has ordered a ban on the latest marketing holoreel produced by Boundless Creation after fierce opposition from a Minmatar-Gallente based pressure group. The group, named "Reconcile," is a pro-peace movement seeking to move the major governments of New Eden toward a peaceful end to current hostilities.

Reconcile filed a petition with the Republic Justice Department several days ago, stating that the upcoming Boundless Creation marketing holoreel was “needlessly antagonistic and totally lacking in any measure of class.”

The disputed holoreel contains publically sourced footage of the recent capture of the last Curatores Veritatis Alliance outpost in AY-YCU in the Providence region, where an all-Minmatar starship taskforce was assembled by the alliances Against ALL Authorities and Ushra’Khan, as well as several other capsuleer organizations.

A Reconcile spokesman stated the following after the hearing today: “We are very happy with the ruling and feel that something worthwhile has been achieved here today. As our first major move into any high-profile lobbying, we are understandably excited with the results, and the prospects of future success.”

Aardishapur holding public court during engagements in own domains reported by ISD Caleb Kang 2010.05.05 09:57:17

Sasta – In an unusual move, Lord Yonis Ardishapur has begun holding public court while touring his domains. Following his speaking engagements, the Heir has been opening his ears to the grievances of his underlings.

During a recent speaking engagement in the Ammatar system of Sasta, Lord Ardishapur held a public court, encouraging all members of society to bring their problems before him. While it is common for the Heirs to hold Royal Courts and hear the grievances of Holders under their rule, it is highly unusual for commoners to be granted equal standing.

His subjects' reactions have mostly been positive. “Lord Ardishapur's words made me realize the error of my grievance,” said Arro Hakim, a Ni-Kunni merchant who had long been attempting to escape a contract made with a Dabka holder. “I made the agreement in good faith and, while it may have ended up worse for me, it is my responsibility to bear, no one else's. I've had scripture quoted at me before, but this time it honestly made a new kind of sense.”

Ducia foundry team target of mysterious attack reported by ISD Ria Nicaea 07.05.2009 00:30:51

X-70MU - Following up on an anonymous report, The Scope has obtained classified sensor data from a Sisters of Eve search vessel sent deep into w-space. The operation was undertaken at the request of Ducia Foundry for the recovery of a team which was reported missing earlier in the week. The leaked sensor data reveals damage visible on recovered ships and outpost structures which is minimal and does not follow known Sleepers attack patterns. All members of the missing team are as yet unaccounted for after a thorough search of the mining outpost. Ducia Foundry spokesman Youd Rassosa has declined to comment at this time.

Ardishapur refutes claims he has overstepped bounds of power reported by ISD Caleb Kang 10.05.2009 10:05:57

The popularity of Lord Ardishapur's speaking engagements have continued to rise, with events now selling out stadium-sized venues and being broadcast to millions system-wide. The engagements have not been without some controversy, however, as some claim the Heir has overstepped the traditional bounds of his power.

The claims began after an incident in Dantan, where two long-feuding Holders approached the Royal Heir for advice to resolve their dispute. According to one of the Holders, they “have been unable to find satisfaction in other public courts.” Lord Ardishapur agreed to hear them and listened as each man listed his grievances with his neighbor.

Once they had finished, the Heir prefaced his opinions by the reminder that, “Any words I say here are merely a suggestion, as it is beyond my power to bind your actions. Only Lord Kador, your liege-lord, holds that authority.” The Royal Heir then laid out his understanding of their grievance and offered several suggestions, including a complicated, large-scale swap of territory that the Heir claimed “would resolve many of your issues.”

Several high ranking Amarr officials have claimed that such an act undermines the authority of Lord Kador and the Theology Council, before whom the two Holders have argued many times. The Holders dispute this contention, one claiming, “Had I thought poorly of Lord Ardishapur, I could simply ignore his suggestions.”

Lord Ardishapur himself says there was no harm intended with his actions. “These are his subjects alone and I have no hold over them. I would never attempt to usurp the rightful power of the Heirs.”

For his part, Lord Kador appears to be pleased that the dispute has been resolved, claiming, “If only Lord Ardishapur had been here before, hundreds of hours may have not been wasted on those two.”

26/05/2009 Khanid 1st Fleet crosses Imperial border, meets Amarr Navy

Moments ago, the Khanid Royal 1st Fleet crossed into the Tash-Murkon Region of the Amarr Empire. The Fleet

was immediately met by the Amarr Navy. The Amarr Navy ships took up escort positions around the Khanid 1st Fleet and the two fleets tandem warped away. Current reports have the two fleets traveling toward Tash-Murkon Prime.

The presence of the Khanid 1st Fleet in Imperial space marks the first time Khanid warships have entered Imperial sovereign territory in centuries. Neither the Amarr Empire nor the Khanid Kingdom had any comment to make regarding the unprecedented border-crossing.

The 1st Fleet is the traditional honor guard of King Khanid II. Since it normally leaves Khanid Prime only when King Khanid II does so - a scenario that has become increasingly rare in recent centuries - the 1st Fleet is today a largely ceremonial posting.

26/05/2009

King Khanid II arrives in Tash-Murkon Prime, met by Catiz Tash-Murkon

Tash-Murkon Prime - King Khanid II arrived in Tash-Murkon Prime earlier today along with the Khanid Royal 1st Fleet and an honor guard of Imperial Navy warships. News of the arrival came hours after the 1st Fleet unexpectedly crossed into Imperial space and was met by an Amarr Navy escort force.

King Khanid was met in person by Lady Catiz Tash-Murkon, Royal Heir of the Tash-Murkon Family. Both King and Heir were accompanied by throngs of dignitaries and officials. The two groups quickly retired to private quarters without addressing the media.

A representative of the Tash-Murkon Family released a brief statement, saying only that "the arrival of King Khanid II was anticipated" and that the meeting between Catiz Tash-Murkon and King Khanid "marks the beginning of a new era for the Amarr Empire." The Tash-Murkon Family has been engaging in extended diplomatic negotiations - mostly centered around trade agreements - with the Kingdom and its corporations over the past several months.

The 1st Fleet remains in Tash-Murkon Prime, while their Amarr Navy escort has returned to its normal duties patrolling the Tash-Murkon/Khanid border.

28/05/2009

CONCORD Issues Additional Agent Licenses Due to Professional and Corporate Demands

Yulai – CONCORD authorities responsible for licensing and auditing the activities of station agents have agreed to issue an additional 23 licenses for highly-qualified agents, as a result of lobbying from the Association of Market and Contract Brokers (AMCB) and major empire corporations. The AMCB negotiators had pointed to a considerable increase in the demand for agents in a number of key hubs and lobbied very hard to relieve the pressures on the agents it represents, mainly Gallente and Minmatar professionals.

Originally a professional body for market brokers dealing with negotiations with the SCC over terms and conditions, the AMCB had expanded to represent contract brokers, recently changing its name to reflect this. Following some high-profile cases of station agents making severe errors or engaging in criminality, the pressure on agents to conform to CONCORD regulations while serving the needs of corporations and pilots increased considerably. Coming from a wide range of corporate backgrounds, many agents were unable to agree on how to put their concerns to CONCORD until Julius Scarpacchio, President of the AMCB, suggested to an Intaki acquaintance working as an agent that his organization was well-placed to represent agents' interests.

Initially representing a bloc of Gallente agents, the AMCB was soon able to prove its value by negotiating a comprehensive package of compensation for agents who were forced to move locations due to CONCORD re-organization of routes and stations. Joined by more Gallente and many Minmatar agents, the AMCB then embarked on a six-month period of negotiation with CONCORD on behalf of agents in major hubs.

Parallel pressure was also exerted on CONCORD by a number of Caldari State and Amarr Empire corporations, whose agents were not represented by the AMCB. CONCORD insiders have indicated, however, that the State and Empire corporations preferred to allow the high-profile lobbying to be done by the AMCB, possibly to capitalize on the perception that this was primarily an issue of maintaining agent integrity and professional welfare. The process of lobbying by corporations and the AMCB culminated in an agreement to issue 23 high-level agent licenses for positions in various empire hubs.

Julius Scarpacchio commented on the agreement, "It has been a long road and at times a hard battle but I am pleased to say that the needs of our agent members have been recognized and CONCORD has acted on them." Asked if a further name change would be forthcoming for the AMCB, Scarpacchio indicated that it was quite likely but would be a matter for the membership's consideration. CONCORD issued a statement through its public relations office stating that, "Agreement has been reached with the empires, corporations and professionals on further high-level agent licenses, to the number of 23, which we believe will benefit agents, their employers and pilot contractors."

01/06/2009

King Khanid II departs Tash-Murkon Prime, arrives in Amarr

Amarr - Following several days of closed door meetings with Lady Catiz Tash-Murkon, King Khanid II departed Tash-Murkon Prime along with the Khanid Royal 1st Fleet early this morning. The 1st Fleet immediately traveled the short distance to the Amarr system, where it proceeded to Amarr Prime.

After roughly three hours of maintaining an orbit around the planet, several atmospheric transports were observed departing the flagship of King Khanid II and descending to the planet below. The transports landed in the Imperial city of Dam-Torsad a short time later.

According to reports, the Khanid delegation is awaiting the arrival of an Imperial party before it disembarks.

02/06/2009

Empress Jamyl I meets with King Khanid II

Amarr - In a historic first, Empress Jamyl I met with King Khanid II in the Imperial city of Dam-Torsad today. Flanked by Imperial Paladins, the Empress greeted Khanid II and welcomed him back to Amarr Prime.

Mimicking what transpired several days ago on Tash-Murkon, the Empress swiftly retired to private council with Khanid II, where they have remained since. Once again, neither side has issued any comment about the meeting.

The meeting between the two heads of state is historic for several reasons. It marks the first face-to-face meeting between Khanid II and an Imperial ruler since early in the reign of Doriam II. Additionally, Khanid II has not set foot on Amarr Prime since the Kingdom split from the Amarr Empire over 300 years ago.

03/06/2009

Royal Heirs called to Amarr Prime; Privy Council to hold emergency session

Amarr - The five Royal Heirs of the Amarr Empire have been recalled to Amarr Prime for an emergency meeting of the Privy Council. The order comes after days of meetings between Empress Jamyl I and King Khanid II that have fueled rampant speculation throughout the cluster.

All five Heirs have already arrived at Dam-Torsad to attend the meeting. Catiz Tash-Murkon was the first to arrive, followed shortly after by Merimeth Sarum, then Aritcio Kor-Azor and Uriam Kador, with Yonis Ardishapur arriving several hours later from the Ammatar Mandate.

A full meeting of the extended Privy Council - which also includes representatives from the Civil Service, Theology Council, Ministry of Internal Order, Imperial Chancellery, Ministry of War, and Imperial Navy - last occurred prior to the coronation of Empress Jamyl I.

06/06/2009

Yonis Ardishapur departs Privy Council meeting

Amarr - Royal Heir Yonis Ardishapur abruptly departed the emergency meeting of the Privy Council early today. The meeting, which has stretched over several days, was convened after extended meetings between Empress Jamyl I and King Khanid II.

In his place Lord Ardishapur left his nephew, Arim Ardishapur. According to an official statement by the Ardishapur Family, the Royal Heir left to attend to "vital matters inside his domains" that could not be delayed. The statement also declared that Arim Ardishapur "speaks with the full authority of the Ardishapur Family" and claimed that "the Empress has given full permission for Lord Ardishapur to leave the meeting."

07/06/2009

Khanid Kingdom granted Privy Council seat

Amarr - In a stunning move, Empress Jamyl I has announced that the Khanid Kingdom has been granted a full seat on the Privy Council. The announcement came after days of meetings between the current members of the Privy Council in the Imperial city of Dam-Torsad.

The entire Privy Council - including a returned Yonis Ardishapur - stood along with Jamyl I and Khanid II on the steps of the Imperial palace at Dam-Torsad as the Empress made the announcement.

"Faithful of Amarr, it has been our pleasure to welcome our noble brother Khanid home to Amarr Prime. It is now our pleasure to welcome his majesty and all the people of the Khanid Kingdom back into the embrace of Holy Amarr. Our noble brother has long stood sentinel over the outer marches of God's domain and we know that the requirements of his faith have oft-times made it a painful vigil. Now his patience is rewarded, and a true and faithful son of Amarr stands once more before the people.

"Our noble brother has acted according to God's will. He engineered the capture of the greatest traitor in our

Empire's history, the heretic Karsoth. He has affirmed his belief most firm in the Word of God and the holy burden of our Empire. It is God's divine command that we today confirm the status of Kingdom of the Empire on the territories our noble and majestic brother shall continue to rule in the name of Holy Amarr.

"In acknowledgment of our noble brother's service and with his glad acceptance, we today make of him a Privy Councilor and confirm that his seat in our council shall be House Khanid's in perpetuity. Let all subjects of the Holy Empire of Amarr know that this man has our trust and our faith, as he has given his trust and faith to us. Let it also be known, by the people, by our friends, and, yes, by our enemies, that today Holy Amarr stands united in our faith and our holy mission. In the name of God, we declare this and shall see it done."

While acknowledging the rightful reign of Jamyl I as Empress of Amarr, the Khanid Kingdom will remain an independent nation. It will continue to field its own navy, but will enjoy a pact of mutual protection with the Amarr Empire. Khanid II will officially hold the Privy Council seat but will be allowed to name a proxy when he is unable to attend.

15/06/2009

Tibus Heth Awards Caldari Militia with National Distinction

New Caldari - Following the fall of the last Federation stronghold in contestable Isecc space two weeks ago, Caldari State Executor Tibus Heth issued a nationwide address commending the State Protectorate Militia for their "momentous achievement" and promised to award each pilot with the Distinguished Blade, a national medal of recognition from the Caldari State. Heth noted that their achievement marked "an inflection point in history" that "established the legacy of the capsuleer for time immemorial," further adding that their challenge is to continue holding on to those conquered territories.

Meanwhile, the Federation government has given no official reply. Sources report that President Foiritan has held multiple high-level sessions with cabinet members and national security officials attempting to formulate a response to these events and lobby for additional support from capsuleers. According to unnamed insiders the beleaguered president is facing "arguably the most difficult period of his time in office."

A spokesperson from the Caldari Provide Directorate stated that pilots can expect to receive their State-issued Distinguished Blade medal on June 23rd.

The full transcript of Tibus Heth's address is below:

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Patriots of the Caldari State,

As a civilization, we have reached an inflection point in our history. Just as our forefathers struggled to liberate themselves from Gallentean tyranny, our immortal warriors today continue the fight for Caldari providence among these stars.

With their help, we have expanded the frontiers of our great nation, driving away a cruel and cowardly enemy attempting to force its will upon a peace-loving people. Mark my words, frontier settlements will benefit from the liberation of their worlds from Federation hands. Indeed, we will unlock the true potential of these regions by lifting those who earn the right to lead and prosper.

Honored patriots, we have achieved true greatness in such a short time. Our challenge now is to maintain this momentum. Our brave capsuleers will face a bitter enemy eager to enact reprisals against our liberated worlds. We must stay vigilant, for we know not when or where they will strike. Yet it serves us well to honor their momentous achievement-the complete dominance of Federation naval forces in the warzone systems of Essence, Verge Vendor, Placid, The Citadel, and Black Rise-for it has established the legacy of the capsuleer for time immemorial.

It is thus that I present our immortal warriors of the State Protectorate Militia with The Distinguished Blade, awarded for unity in bravery and valor towards the fulfillment of national military objectives. This distinction serves notice to all that there is no greater power in New Eden than combined empyrean might, and we are honored to have you with us.

Thank you, brave capsuleers, and long live the Caldari State!

11/08/2009

Heth Auctioning Development Rights of Conquered Federation Systems to Caldari Mega-corporations

New Caldari - SCOPE News has acquired a dated top secret memorandum issued from the Caldari Providence Directorate to all Caldari mega-corporations, stating that the "development and exploration rights" for all Federation systems occupied by Caldari militias are to be auctioned off to the highest bidders. Although issued

nearly a month ago, the auction-which has been ongoing in complete secrecy-ends on August 21st, YC111.

The memo specifies that winning bids are effectively entering a three-party agreement with the State and with all other mega-corporations; this agreement honors the rights of the bidder to hold title over all "resources, property, and opportunities" developed within the system. The deal is binding irrespective of sovereignty changes. However, the CPD makes it clear that no additional national resources are to be allocated to protect mega-corporate activities from Federation militia counterattacks "unless directed as part of strategic Caldari naval operations in the vicinity."

The language of the memo suggests that the winning mega-corporations, most of which own separate military security corporations, would be free to operate in contested Federation systems on their own accord, and more importantly, would be legally authorized to use as much force as they can bring to bear to secure their interests.

As of the time of this publication, all contestable Federation systems remain under strict Caldari control, which was unilaterally established in May and has remained virtually unchallenged ever since. The memo, entitled "Caldari Providence Appropriations and Development Rights Issue," states that money procured from the bidding process will be used to "support the Caldari Navy and repay national obligations."

The CPD and mega-corporations are not answering questions about the memo at this time. The Federation is expected to release a statement regarding this development within the next 24 hours.

12/08/2009

Foiritan to Invoke Wartime Powers Act to Nationalize Federation Arms Manufacturers; Senate Calls Emergency Session

Ladistier - In what is clearly a response to Tibus Heth's auction of captured Federation systems, President Foiritan has issued an executive mandate to seize control of the nation's arms manufacturers. For the first time since the Caldari-Gallente War, this extraordinary decree invokes the Hueromont Act, which grants the president sweeping emergency powers in the event of national crisis. The Senate has decried Foiritan's act, calling it an "impeachable offense," and a session is underway to formulate a response.

The nationalization of Federation arms manufacturers-which includes behemoths CreoDron and Duvolle Laboratories-would give the President's office the legal authority to direct manufacturing and production operations without corporate consent, and thus to bypass any Senate approval for the measure.

The decades-old Hueromont Act was passed to mobilize Federation resources in the event of an emergency. It states that "such authority may be invoked directly, without approval from the senate, in times of extreme national duress such as war or natural disaster, for the express purpose of galvanizing the nation's resources toward relieving the imminent threat as quickly as possible."

Foiritan's invocation of the act implies that the Federation is in an official state of emergency, as the Caldari militia has controlled several lowsec Federation systems since May. The Presidential Office issued a brief statement that, by its interpretation, Foiritan's action was legal, "reflect[ing] the actions of a president who is determined to protect the nation from further harm by relying less on uncontrollable factors and asserting more control for the better good of its citizens."

Federal Intelligence Office Director Mentas Blaque has been assigned to enforce the directive, meaning it will likely be executed by the Black Eagles, the paramilitary arm of the FIO that has grown substantially in scope under Blaque's direction. It is unclear exactly how much power the director can wield to enforce the presidential mandate. Meetings between corporations and FIO officials are already underway, although SCOPE has agreed to honor a temporary request to refrain from listing exactly which specific corporations are "engaged in dialogue."

This is a SCOPE breaking news story. More coverage will follow as details emerge.

13/08/2009

Breaking News: Roden Shipyards Refuses to Comply with Executive Order; Standoff between Federal Agents and Corporation Forces Underway

Alentene - A tense standoff between the security forces of Roden Shipyards and the Federation government is underway at the corporation's headquarters in Alentene. SCOPE has learned that the altercation began shortly after Federal Intelligence Office (FIO) agents arrived to enforce President Foiritan's executive mandate to nationalize arms manufacturers.

Government officials have closed access to the scene by reporters. Sources report that Jacus Roden, the retired founder of Roden Shipyards, personally refused to allow federal agents to enter the facility. A brief statement released by the corporation reads as follows:

"Our position is that the president has no legal authority to commandeer the operations of this firm. The Federation government is therefore trespassing on private property. We have no intentions of escalating this matter further, but we refuse to yield ground on the issue."

Momentum is gathering in the senate to proceed with an impeachment hearing-the first for a president in decades. Lawmakers worked through the night lobbying for votes, as fresh polls show that President Souro Foiritan's popularity has dropped to a record low, with just 26% of respondents viewing the president's performance favorably.

Jacus Roden, known to be a capsuleer, is the largest single shareholder of the corporation bearing his name. He retired more than twenty years ago, but not before installing his granddaughter Miloise Roden as CEO. She has since extended the company lines of business into "super-capital" ventures that include terraforming operations and the construction of advanced warships for the Federation Navy.

This is a SCOPE breaking news story. More coverage will follow as details emerge.

13/08/2009

Breaking News: Federation Corporations Refute Nationalization Mandate; Senate Approves Impeachment Hearings for President Foiritan

Villore - Following the defiant example of Roden Shipyards, Federation arms manufacturers have collectively refuted President Foiritan's nationalization mandate. A hastily arranged charter has been signed by twelve of the largest Gallentean corporations and delivered to the Presidential Office in Ladistier. According to sources, the charter states their explicit refusal to comply with the Hueromont Act and boldly demands that government troops leave corporate properties "with immediate effect."

In what many see as a surprising move, Federal Intelligence Office (FIO) Director Mentas Blaque has ordered federal agents to "belay prior enforcement directives and stand down." It is unknown if his actions represent direct insubordination, or if the order was issued by the president. The FIO refuses to comment.

In what many are calling the death throes of the Foiritan presidency, the Federation Senate voted by a two-to-one margin to begin impeachment hearings as early as next week. This is the latest in a series of national misfortunes for the beleaguered president, whose popularity since the outset of the Emyrean War has plummeted.

While confrontations between government and corporations have yet to turn violent, reports of civil unrest are trickling in from throughout the Gallente Federation. Populist groups are largely divided between the president's actions and the hawkish measures needed to rescue frontier Federation settlements from Caldari occupation. Libertarian groups decry the president's actions as a "totalitarian" attempt to take sovereign rights away from corporations, but have traditionally sided against pro-business causes.

As of now, the president has not officially responded to the corporation charter or the senate impeachment hearings.

This is a SCOPE breaking news story. More coverage will follow as details emerge.

15/08/2009

Breaking News: President Foiritan to Resign, Call for New Elections in November

Ladistier - SCOPE News has learned that Souro Foiritan, president of the Gallente Federation for the past six years, has tendered his resignation to the Senate. He is expected to address the nation later today, during which time he is expected to announce new elections to take place in November.

His resignation comes during a tumultuous period for the nation. Yesterday, the senate voted in favor of moving forward with wartime impeachment hearings, the first for a president in decades. A rapid succession of national misfortunes -- the loss of Federation systems to Caldari militias, Heth's brazen auction of these systems as spoils of war, and Foiritan's decision to nationalize the arms manufacturers in response -- proved to be too much adversity for the administration to overcome.

Once considered the most popular president in Federation history, Foiritan has fallen dramatically from political stardom. His descent is generally regarded to have been marked by two key betrayals: that of Admiral Alexander Noir, whose singular act of terrorism helped spark the Emyrean War, and Grand Admiral Advent Eturrer, who was convicted of selling vital military secrets to the Caldari.

"That both betrayals came from within the Federation Navy seems fitting for the issues facing the nation today," said Vercoure Dilloux, professor of political science at the University of Caille. "The legacy of President Foiritan, despite his administration's grand accomplishments in economics, culture, and technology, will likely be shaped by the decline of its armed forces and his failure to enlist capsuleers more directly in the defense of the nation."

The Scope will cover the presidential address later today.

15/08/2009

Breaking News: President Foiritan to End Term Early, Admits "Regrets"

Ladistier - President Foiritan addressed the nation earlier today, formally announcing his resignation and calling for new elections. Because Foiritan's term is ending prematurely, the elections must be held in November, and he himself is ineligible to be a candidate. The president's speech was personal and conciliatory, revealing a softer side to the man who infuriated the nation days ago with his bid to seize control of the nation's arms manufacturers. The president admitted that his decision to invoke executive powers on the matter was "wrong," but emphasized that it seemed like the best solution to quickly mobilize the nation's defenses against the Caldari onslaught in frontier systems.

The full transcript is below:

"Honored members of the Senate, fellow citizens of the Federation, friends and well-wishers throughout New Eden:

"The time has come for me to step down as president.

"I have served this great nation as best as I could. If I could somehow express what the Gallente Federation and its people mean to me, I would do so. But I can't. There are no words. Nor can I describe how difficult some of the decisions were that we've faced, not just in the last year, but every day since I took this office.

"Any leader who serves for any amount of time will admit regrets. Let it be known that I certainly have my own. I say that despite the great accomplishments of the past six years-the ones that we achieved together. We have become the wealthiest nation in New Eden. We are pioneers in the reformation of worlds. We have created a better life for billions of people. And yet I am burdened by what we did not achieve, and the goals that we fell short of.

"This November, you will elect someone to continue where I have left off. I will not endorse any candidate who runs for this office, but I will fully support whoever wins your final vote. I give you my word that our government will transition smoothly over to your next elected leader, and we will do everything in our power to ensure that the voting process is fair.

"I have learned much of myself these last years. Indeed, we have learned much from each other. The greatest advice I can offer to the next leader is to empathize with the nations of New Eden. Know that no matter how deep our convictions to liberty and prosperity, it is a sad truth that they are not universally cherished nor admired. We have become the envy and scorn of many. We became the victims of our own success. And we have paid dearly for our complacency.

"But despite all that has happened, we must never back down from who we are. No matter what happens, we can't lose faith in the Gallentean beliefs that have carried us so well for so long. The tragic events of the past year shocked us all, but they don't have to rob us of our soul.

"As a nation, we have strayed from the path. I bear the responsibility for allowing it to happen. And I know in my heart that the Federation's interests are best served by stepping aside, so that the next president can set us right once more.

"The senate has accepted my resignation, which is effective this November. Until then, I will continue to operate the government in its full capacity. In addition, I have retracted my executive invocation of the Hueromont Act. In light of the situation with our frontier worlds, I felt this to be the best course of action to help our citizens. I realize now this was wrong, and that I should have instead worked directly with the senate and corporations towards a solution.

"The urgency of these times cannot be overstated. No matter what our differences, we must work together to overcome the challenges we face. For united-even now, in the final days of this presidency-we can, and we must, persevere.

"Thank you."

17/08/2009

Jacus Roden to Announce Candidacy for President

Algogille - Jacus Roden, the founder of Roden Shipyards, has officially filed his candidacy for the Federation presidency. The news follows an explosive week in Gallente politics, during which Roden Shipyards openly defied a national decree, the latest in a string of failures that ultimately resulted in President Foiritan's resignation. Roden, who ranks amongst the Federations richest individuals, has been retired for years, and is the first candidate to file all the requisite paperwork with the Federation Administration.

While emerging as a folk hero in the face of last week's defiant standoff, some senators are already questioning the reclusive man's qualifications. Roden's early career was mired in scandal, as he was charged by Federal prosecutors with felony counts of theft and racketeering. Although the courts eventually dropped charges against him, the damage to his reputation remains.

Since handing the corporation to his granddaughter, Roden Shipyards has grown into an industrial giant, producing nearly all of the Federal Navy's warships. In addition, the corporation has long-standing strategic partnerships with Allotek Industries and Duvolle Laboratories. It is rumored that Jacus Roden is the man who founded these relationships, but went to great lengths to keep his name out of the public spotlight.

Although Mr. Roden has filed for candidacy, he has yet to make any public appearance or announcement. While not unusual considering the reclusiveness of the man himself, filings with the Federal Administration are usually followed by the fanfare of a presidential run and the launch of a national political campaign. Jacus Roden will have to emerge to address the public at some point, as the Gallente public is anxious to learn more about him.

20/08/2009

Breaking News: Ishukone Wins Development Rights to Intaki System

New Caldari - The SCOPE has learned that the Ishukone Corporation has bid for and won the rights to develop the Intaki System. It was revealed last week that Tibus Heth authorized an auction amongst the Caldari megacorporations for the development rights to recently conquered Federation systems. The terms of the Intaki acquisition are unknown.

The Caldari Providence Directorate released a brief statement officially acknowledging the auction and announced that they would disclose the winning bids and systems after bidding concludes this Friday.

A spokesperson for Ishukone confirmed that the Intaki System was the only acquisition for the mega-corporation in the auction.

This is a breaking news story. The SCOPE will continue to report any developments.

21/08/2009

Providence Directorate announces Gallente auction winners

New Caldari - The Caldari Providence Directorate has today announced the winning bids for their recent auction of Gallente space. Big winners include Kaalakiota and Sukuuvestaa, while Ishukone makes do with just a single solitary system. The winning corporations are now authorized to exploit these systems to the fullest for as long as they remain in Caldari hands.

As expected, the wealth and reach of the megacorporations has driven smaller corps entirely out of the running. The "blind auction" format seems to have made it difficult for even comparatively wealthy sub-megas - such as perennially successful Ytiri - to gain any kind of foothold. All eight megacorps had at least one successful bid, with Suvee leading the charge and claiming fourteen systems. Meanwhile, in a move many are describing as "baffling", Ishukone has laid claim to a single system - Intaki, generally considered to be the least promising prospect in the auction due to its comparative lack of mineral wealth and vast native population. Sources believe that this was the only bid Ishukone made, and several question where the financially struggling megacorp managed to find the money.

Political analysts are in agreement that a large degree of politicking has taken place behind the scenes, with many pointing out that the coherent clustering of both individual corporations and ideological blocs is not something that would occur without extensive horse-trading. There is much disagreement over what the long-term consequences of the auction will be, but there are signs that the megacorps are already moving assets into place to begin exploitation as soon as possible.

The full results follow :-

Sukuuvestaa Corporation [14 Systems]:

- Abune
- Costolle
- Deven
- Fliet
- Heydieles
- Indregulle
- Ladistier
- Loes
- Menmaniel
- Muetralle
- Murethand
- Old Man Star
- Ouelletta
- Vifrevaert

CBD Corporation [6 Systems]:

- Covryn
- Dastryns
- Harroule
- Hevrice
- Jovainnon
- Ostingele

Nugoeihuvi Corporation [2 Systems]:

- Iges
- Uphallant

Hyasyoda Corporation [4 Systems]:

- Agoze
- Annancale
- Brarel
- Vey

Ishukone Corporation [1 System]:

- Intaki

Kaalakiota Corporation [8 Systems]:

- Alamel
- Alparena
- Arderonne
- Athounon
- Mantenault
- Mercomesier
- Odamia
- Reschard

Lai Dai Corporation [4 Systems]:

- Aldranette
- Anchauttes
- Esesier
- Evaulon

Wiyrkomi Corporation [8 Systems]:

- Aslavoinon
- Aubenall
- Eugales
- Fraire
- Moclinamaud
- Oicx
- Renarelle
- Vllillirier

**Mandate recovery from elder invasion continues as shipyards are rebuilt
reported by ISD Nestor Pelagius 14.09.2009 16:28:23**

Sasta, Derelik – In an announcement that further signals Royal Heir Yonis Ardishapur's determination that the Ammatar Mandate be a major contributor to the strategic goals of the Amarr Empire, the Ammatar Fleet has declared five major shipyards in and around the Sasta system as once more fully operational, ready to supply and refit the ships of the combined Ammatar and Ardishapur fleet forces.

In remarks transmitted from Fleet HQ in Sasta, Grand Admiral Hastar Jibril of the Ammatar Fleet expressed his "deep satisfaction that the reconstruction of these essential shipyards has been carried out on time thanks to the unstinting work of the Ammatar people." Since his appointment, Grand Admiral Jibril has been overseeing the integration of the Ammatar Fleet and those units of the Ardishapur forces assigned to his command. The reconstruction of these shipyards, all heavily damaged by Minmatar-Thukker strike forces during the Elder Invasion, was a major priority for the Grand Admiral as they will allow the necessary refitting and retasking of the Fleet's disparate units to proceed quickly.

In a related development, the Ammatar Fleet has announced that it intends to refit a line of 'Yonis variant' Abaddons for use on extended patrols of the Minmatar border. Usually reserved for important garrisons or major taskforces, the Abaddon-class has not been favoured by Amarr commanders as a patrol vessel due to its high energy requirements and large crew complement. It is speculated by naval architecture experts that the 'Yonis variant' will feature additional power plants and possibly reduced crew and firepower requirements to make it practical for prestige patrol duties.

**Nefantar defector presses court case against urban management
reported by ISD Katerina Markova 18.09.2009 14:52:07**

Trytedald - The Vherokior tribal court has agreed to hear the case of Oguko Hagori, a former Mandate industrialist who fled to the Republic during the Elder War last year. Hagori is suing Urban Management for control of land his family once controlled on Trytedald III. His case is one of many being pursued by Nefantar immigrants in the wake of the Elder War, as most such lands were confiscated by the Republic government during the Minmatar Rebellion and made available for public use.

Hagori is the first such plaintiff that has managed to get his case seen by a high tribal court - a result of three previous appeals - and it is expected to set significant legal precedent in the Republic. His record in the Mandate, as a quiet supporter of stronger Mandate autonomy and a proponent of abolition, is believed to give him a better-than-average chance of winning his case with the Vherokior court. However, Urban Management is so far undefeated through the hundreds of court cases they have had on this very issue, and most legal analysts seem to agree that Hagori faces an uphill battle.

"Obviously, it's a difficult situation, because the land has not simply been left fallow - handing it over would displace homes and businesses that have been there for over a century, something that courts seem very unwilling to do," said Rian Elselfur, one such analyst, speaking on a recent Scope broadcast. "The point of view from the court in previous cases seems to be that the land was abandoned, for whatever reason, and therefore it became the property of the Republic negating all previous owners' claims. Revelations about the role of the Nefantar in the Rebellion notwithstanding, this would be a simple case, but that makes the issue considerably more muddled."

**Republic justice accepts thukker demand for krullefor
reported by ISD Sheliak Mesarthim 18.09.2009 11:27:10**

Pator - The Minmatar Republic will not ask the Thukker tribe to release the apprehended fugitive crime lord Baliggan Krullefor. This decision was reached in a special meeting yesterday between the Republic's most senior judges and several members of Sanmatar Shakor's government.

The emergency session was held in response to an announcement from Thukker Mix claiming their refusal to extradite Krullefor to Republic authorities. Following the conclusion of the meeting, representatives of this assembly declared that the Thukker demands for Krullefor would not be challenged by the Republic.

Public reaction to the announcement has been mixed. "It's a shame to see tribal relations deteriorate like this," says Yuce Velkhamme, a Vherokior merchant on Matar.

In Molden Heath, where the Krullefor Family was based, there are others eager to comment on the fate of Baliggan Krullefor. Magellek Fruterol, a miner in the Weld system, said, "It's an outrage. A man who has done so much evil in the Republic will not rot in our jail."

"I don't trust the Thukkers for a second, said Gothi Hurjafren, a clerk in the Skarkon system. "I wouldn't be surprised if the Thukkers organized the whole thing."

Thukker Mix stated that Krullefor will serve time for his offenses under Thukker tribal law, and that his 19 years in Republic prison will be taken into account in his sentencing.

**In the wake of jarek, religion continues to be contentious issue
reported by ISD Katerina Markova 20.09.2009 18:36:44**

Pator - The murder of Abel Jarek several weeks ago in what seems to be a religiously-motivated attack has highlighted growing tensions over the Amarr faith gaining a foothold in the Republic. According to a survey by the Republic University, most Nefantar and a significant portion of other recent immigrants from the Mandate and the Empire are choosing to keep their Amarrian religious beliefs. While this segment of the population remains a tiny minority, according to the survey such a minority was, just a few years ago, "so small as to be nearly nonexistent."

Nowhere is this clash of cultures more evident than on Matar. Though Jarek's Salvation township was the most obvious of the new Amarr religious communities, it was not the only one. In the low-rent districts where many immigrants have settled, makeshift "churches" have been established in backrooms and empty warehouses, often advertised only by word of mouth.

Even before Jarek's death, many within the immigrant communities feared similar attacks. "Many people do not understand that the word of God is universal," said Dovirch Brettirdur, pastor of one of these small churches. "They see our faith as brainwashing, or an attempt by the Amarr to infiltrate the Republic, when nothing could be further from the truth. We only want to make his light available to those who seek it."

Unfortunately, for many outside these communities, it is impossible to separate the Amarr faith from the Amarr Empire and its history with the Republic. Perhaps most ironically, some of the strongest critics of this minority

have been other recent immigrants, many of whom were enslaved until recently. The fact that many of these people often live in the same or nearby neighborhoods only intensifies the problem. While Republic government authorities as high as Sanmatar Shakor have said they are committed to ensuring the safety of all Minmatar citizens, regardless of tribe or religion, many of the people in these communities remain skeptical about the commitment of those charged with protecting those rights, noting that Jarek's murderers still remain at large.

Ammatar mandate food production restored to pre-invasion levels reported by ISD Nestor Pelagius 23.09.2009 18:54:13

Tanoo, Derelik – Officials of the Amarr Trade Registry monitoring the Ammatar Mandate have declared that food production within the Derelik region has returned to pre-invasion levels with a consequent reduction in food imports from other regions of the Amarr Empire. Since the Elder Invasion, the Mandate has been highly dependent on food imports and has barely managed to stave off famine in some areas.

The Elder Invasion of YC110 caused widespread damage to many agricultural plantations within the Ammatar Mandate, despite the invasion forces limiting their strikes to military infrastructure and strategic installations which posed a threat to their primary goal of recovering slaves. As slaves were seized by the Minmatar-Thukker forces, the holdings on which they worked were often heavily damaged during the initial assaults. Further incidental damage, up to and including the burning of some plantations, is associated with rioting and sporadic clashes with Amarr troops during the invasion and in its immediate aftermath.

Adreyi Ezion, the Chief Financial Officer of the Ardishapur Family and the architect of much of the Mandate's reconstruction, welcomed the assesement of the Amarr Trade Registry and stated that the ultimate goal of the Ardishapur administration was to make the Ammatar Mandate self-sufficient in food staples and, eventually, an export partner with the rest of the Amarr Empire.

Ammatar fleet launches first 'yonis variant' abaddon from sasta shipyards reported by ISD Nestor Pelagius 04.10.2009 10:58:58

Sasta, Derelik – The Ammatar Fleet has launched its first 'Yonis variant' Abaddon-class battleship from a military shipyard in Sasta, the Fleet HQ system. The launch is the first of an unspecified number of Abaddon-class battleships from the Ardishapur house fleet that are being refitted for duties with the Ammatar Fleet.

Designed for extended 'prestige patrol' duties on the Minmatar border, the 'Yonis variant,' named after Royal Heir Yonis Ardishapur, is understood to have modified energy plants and does not carry the energy-hungry and crew-intensive tachyon beam batteries often seen on Imperial Navy Abaddon variants. The decision of the Ammatar Fleet to deploy the formidable Abaddon-class on the border with the Minmatar Republic is regarded by observers as yet another signal from Royal Heir Yonis Ardishapur that he considers it vital that the Mandate be a major contributor to the strategic goals of the Amarr Empire.

Tribal court decides for urban management reported by ISD Katerina Markova 09.10.2009 12:52:04

Trytedald - Today, in a split decision, the Vherokior tribal court sided with Urban Management in the case of Hagori v. Urban Management, effectively ending Oguko Hagori's attempt to reclaim lands on Trytedald III. Previously owned by his family prior to the Minmatar Rebellion, the land had been confiscated by the Republic government and had been returned to public use.

As many had suspected, the decision in the case hinged on whether or not the the land was considered abandoned. The Vherokior court pointed to the lack of any claim by Hagori's family since the Rebellion, citing it as evidence that the family had relinquished their claims. While Hagori maintained that the de facto state of war between the Mandate and the Republic made such claims, even if they had been filed, unlikely to be acknowledged, the court decided that the fact there was not even an attempt to do so was in effect a relinquishment of the family's right to the land.

At the moment, what that means for the many other similar lawsuits is unclear; however, most legal scholars agree that the decision raises the bar for further attempts by Nefantar immigrants to reclaim previously held property in the Republic. Nefantar tribal leaders have so far been silent, a move seen by many parliamentary insiders as an attempt to avoid such a hot-button issue with the pending tribal assembly closing in.

Yonis ardishapur appoints ammatar civil servant as mandate governor reported by ISD Nestor Pelagius 14.10.2009 15:03:42

Tanoo, Derelik – In a surprising move, Royal Heir Yonis Ardishapur has appointed Ekroz Salaf, an ethnic Ammatar, as Governor of the Ammatar Mandate. Governor Salaf is a career imperial civil servant who most recently held the position of District Collector for the Ministry of Assessment in Parud constellation, Domain region.

The appointment of a new governor has been the subject of intense speculation since Yonis Ardishapur was given the Mandate to rule as a personal fief by Empress Jamyl I. The policy of granting True Amarr Holders key

planetary and system fiefs, together with a purge of the Ammatar nobility, had raised fears that the Ammatar people were being relegated to an entirely subservient position in the new order. Political scientists at the Ammatar Consular University in Tanoo suggest that the appointment of Governor Salaf will do much to allay concerns among the Ammatar populace.

House Ardishapur officials have confirmed that Yonis Ardishapur took a critical role in overseeing the search for the new governor, requiring that the personal histories of all candidates be presented for his personal review. Ekroz Salaf has been an official in the imperial civil service for 37 years and began his career as a liaison between the Ministry of Assessment and the Nefantar Miner Association in Derelik. His official biographical notes state that his talent for logistical administration was recognized by a Ministry review board that appointed him System Assessor in Tanoo in YC80. In YC87, Salaf was promoted to the rank of District Collector for San Matar before transferring to his posting in Domain in YC98. Governor Salaf will officially take up his duties in the next few weeks.

New ammatar fleet security taskforce begins patrol of republic border reported by ISD Nestor Pelagius | 18.10.2009 17:06:35

Sasta, Derelik – The Ammatar Fleet has announced that the newly formed 5th Derelik Border Security Task Force is to begin a 6-month tour of duty patrolling the Ammatar Mandate border with the Minmatar Republic this week. Comprised of a core of three 'Yonis variant' Abaddon-class battleships and numerous Apocalypse- and Armageddon-class battleships, the task force is charged with "maintaining the integrity of the borders of the Amarr Empire and destroying all threats to the security of the Ammatar Mandate."

In other developments, it has emerged that several penal regiments are currently being raised within the Ammatar Mandate. Sources within the Ammatar Consulate indicate that dishonored men and officers of the Ammatar Fleet and Ammatar planetary defense forces are being offered the choice of service in penal regiments as an alternative to permanent slavery as punishment for their failings during the Elder Invasion.

It is also reported that failed defectors and the families of defectors who have come under suspicion are also being offered the chance to serve in penal units rather than being convicted of collusion with defectors and entering formal slavery. The appeal of these offers lies in the fact that formal enslavement would in most cases lead to the dependents and descendants of the enslaved joining them in slavery. Ardishapur authorities have declared their "hope that the mercy of Lord Ardishapur will lead to the redemption of these lost souls."

Many starkmanir refugees finding new life difficult reported by ISD Katerina Markova 20.10.2009 15:49:16

Rens - The transition to life as free citizens is proving to be difficult for many Starkmanir, despite the success of some individuals. Many Starkmanir tribesmen have emigrated to Rens, hoping to take advantage of the system's booming economy. However, Starkmanir immigrants have since found themselves homeless or herded into refugee camps.

"We've seen an inordinate amount of refugees suffering from substance abuse problems or mental illness," said Alusane Irhi, one of the many Sisters of EVE workers helping at the refugee camps. "The shift from slavery to freedom is always difficult; we have not seen troubles on this scale since the Rebellion."

Some Starkmanir are even questioning the worth of their move to the Republic, especially in the wake of Empress Jamyl I's Emancipation Decree. "Nearly everyone who was left behind was freed by the Empress," said Uidvard Eiren, a leading voice among Rens' Starkmanir population. "Many Starkmanir here are even considering going back to the Mandate. At least in the Mandate, social structures were largely intact, but the pace of the migration here has destroyed much of that support network."

Eiren notes that there is a danger that the Republic's leaders must not ignore. "If the Republic does not allow the Starkmanir the same opportunities as the other tribes, it will make the sacrifice of those who died in the Elder War meaningless. That cannot be allowed to happen."

Starkmanir, nefantar face uphill battle in minmatar politics reported by ISD Katerina Markova 05.10.2009 18:41:34

Pator - As the Starkmanir and Nefantar search for tribal leaders to represent them at the upcoming tribal assembly, many within the two tribes are expressing worry over whether the two tribes will be able to find an equal voice at the table. With much smaller populations in the Republic than the other five tribes, they worry that they will be simply drowned out.

"It isn't some sort of conspiracy or malice that we suspect," said Elettan Skias, a leader among the Starkmanir refugees in the Pator system. "It is only natural though, given our small population, that the concerns of the larger tribes will be addressed before ours. Unfortunately, that is making it very hard to raise the hopes of my tribe that real progress for us will come out of this."

Some among the Nefantar tribe, however, seem to suspect a more deliberate effort to shut them out of the

political process. Agrik Tolenni, a Nefantar trader who left a profitable business in the Mandate to return to the Republic during the Elder War, told us that he and many other leaders of the Nefantar community have been shut out of many parts of the assembly's planning process. "Those of us who came here, most of us gave up everything we owned to return to our homeland. Many within the other tribes seem to have forgotten that though, and still see us as traitors or worse."

Sanmatar Shakor has tried to allay such fears, declaring that all tribes should have equal say at the assembly. As preparations for the assembly continue, however, it remains to be seen whether other tribal leaders and members of the bureaucracy will follow his lead.

Penal brigade drawn from ammatar mandate sent to support 24th imperial crusade reported by ISD Nestor Pelagius 23.10.2009 19:12:01

Sasta, Derelik – A freshly assembled penal brigade drawn from the Ammatar Mandate has been given orders sending it to support the efforts of the 24th Imperial Crusade. Grand Admiral Hastar Jibril of the Ammatar Fleet has posted orders transferring transport units of the Ammatar Fleet to temporary secondment with the 24th Imperial Crusade, and it is understood these will carry three full regiments of penal troopers to the Bleak Lands to serve as ground support for the 24th Imperial Crusade fleets.

The 1st Mandate Redemptionist Brigade is comprised of the 1st and 2nd Tanoo Redemptionist Regiments and the 1st Sasta Redemptionist Regiment. These regiments have been assembled using dishonored Ammatar Fleet personnel together with many civilians suspected or convicted of support for defectors and offered service in penal battalions in lieu of the harsher punishment of full slavery. The brigade is primarily a logistics and engineering formation. The 1st and 2nd Tanoo comprise logistical troops along with the 1st Sasta, which possesses a high proportion of former Ammatar Fleet personnel, providing combat experience.

Initial reaction to gariooss's presidential campaign mixed reported by ISD Caleb Kang 27.10.2009 19:26:01

Reactions to Senator Vilard Gariooss's Presidential bid have proven to be mixed, with supporters citing his positive reputation in the senate, commitment to peace, and background in economics, while detractors point to his low profile in Federation politics, opposition to the war, and inconsistent voting history on non-economic policies.

"Senator Gariooss has long been popular with his constituents," said Kep Ekateemi, political analyst for the University of Caille. "He has been a stable hand in the government for over a decade. He is widely respected by his peers. He is known as an intelligent man, but one who is humble at the same time. And while he has not been at the center of any high-profile bills or movements, he has worked diligently behind the scenes to improve the well being of the Gallente people. He has chosen to make the war a central theme of his campaign, obviously focused on ending it. Anyone who knows the man would have predicted this; he is a great conciliator, wishing nothing more than for everyone to live in peace for the benefit of all. The Federation could use a man of his learning and compassion in these troubled times."

Stiff opposition to the Senator is rare, though political commentator Rourke L'feene has been among the most vocal in decrying his anti-war rhetoric. "The fact is, the Caldari State is run by a war mongering dictator who wants to see the Federation burned. They will not respond to peaceful overtures and putting someone as weak-willed as Vilard Gariooss into power will be a death kneel for our great nation."

Many common people have responded with apathy to Senator Gariooss's campaign, however. "I've never heard of him before now," said Lamia Ire, a student at the Center for Advanced Studies. "I know he's against the war, which I agree with, but I think he may be a little extreme in it. I'd really need to know more."

Governor celes aguard confirms rumors of presidential candidacy reported by ISD Sheliak Mesarthim 27.10.2009 19:51:14

Mies - A new candidate confirmed her bid for the upcoming Federation presidential elections. Celes Aguard, Governor of the Mies system, announced her candidacy, promising to turn the tide of the war, Aguard pledged to "empower and strengthen outlying systems" and to "eradicate the factors that have turned our great Navy into a slow, lumbering beast."

The announcement was made at a press conference held at Aguard's residence, confirming a rumor that had been circulating Gallente political circles for the better part of the year. Governor Aguard is recognized as a driving force in the development of the Mies system. and her work in infrastructure development has can be felt throughout the Essence region. This candidacy comes in the middle of her second term as governor, having triumphed in the last election through a landslide victory.

Republic university amarr research grant under scrutiny reported by ISD Katerina Markova 27.10.2009 19:00:17

Hulm - Senior faculty members at Republic University have asked the school's Board of Trustees to reconsider a

grant awarded to Velys Gorra, an associate professor of history and anthropology. The request, signed by over 100 faculty members, raises objections to Gorra's work, which deals with the influence of the Amarr on Minmatar culture, and other controversial papers from her academic career.

Prof. Lillaka Uithmil, the organizer of the protest, views the research grant as particularly insensitive to the true needs of the Republic. "For a public university, our job is to pursue research that is in the public interest," she said. "Prof. Gorra is a known supporter of pro-Amarr studies in public education. This is not something that needs to be funded at this sensitive time for our Republic."

Prof. Gorra defended her work, saying that she is not "pro-Amarr" as her detractors claim. "My research is conducted in order to uncover facts, not push an agenda. I have never argued for a 'pro-Amarr' curriculum, merely one that acknowledges such a big part of our history. Ignoring our past will not make it go away."

The Board of Trustees has so far declined to comment.

Ardishapur orders reconstruction funds and redemptionist brigade to ezzara reported by ISD Nestor Pelagius 29.10.2009 19:01:33

Ardishapur Prime – Royal Heir Yonis Ardishapur has personally ordered a massive injection of funds to be made available to the 24th Imperial Crusade for the purposes of reconstruction in the war-torn Ezzara system. Ezzara has been the scene of bitter fighting between the 24th Imperial Crusade and the Tribal Liberation Force since the beginning of the conflict in YC110. The system has changed hands several times and its infrastructure is significantly degraded.

In addition to the funds, the Ammatar Fleet has confirmed that at the order of the Heir, the 1st Mandate Redemptionist Brigade is to take up duties assisting in the reconstruction of vital infrastructure in Ezzara. Primarily a logistical and engineering brigade, the 1st Redemptionist is composed of three regiments of penal troopers drawn from the ranks of dishonored Ammatar Mandate forces and civilians convicted of aid or sympathy for defectors.

Political pressure intensifies on republic university trustees reported by ISD Katerina Markova 30.10.2009 18:59:17

Hulm - Fenn Khuhurit, a prominent Sebiestor MP, added his voice to those questioning a research grant awarded to Prof. Velys Gorra by Republic University. Khuhurit remarked on this issue during an interview with Sebiestor Tribal Broadcasting.

"There's quite clearly a disconnect between the University's charter and this kind of apologist nonsense. How is this kind of spending at all in the public interest? Research money should be going towards progressing Minmatar achievements, not extolling Amarr ones."

Though he is the first MP to comment on the issue since the controversy began last week, several other officials have come out in support of his position. Some have threatened to conduct parliamentary hearings on the issue.

The Board of Trustees released a statement today, saying that research grants were given "on the recommendation of University administration and faculty representatives," and claimed that the grant had seen "almost unanimous" approval. Prof. Lillaka Uithmil, leading the opposition to the grant, called the statement a "dodge." "Research grants should not be based on popularity contests, but on the social benefits they provide to the Minmatar Republic," she said. "Clearly there was a lack of consideration for the wider impact of such a grant on the trustees' part."

New governor takes up duties in ammatar mandate reported by ISD Nestor Pelagius 04.11.2009 18:40:07

Tanoo, Derelik – Governor Ekroz Salaf arrived in Tanoo system yesterday to take up his duties as plenipotentiary of Royal Heir Yonis Ardishapur in the Ammatar Mandate. Ammatar Consulate officials have stated that Governor Salaf will spend a few days familiarizing himself with the latest Mandate developments before embarking on a tour of inspection across Derelik region.

As head of the Ammatar Consulate, Governor Salaf will run the civil administration of the Mandate on behalf of House Ardishapur. The Ammatar Fleet, under Grand Admiral Hastar Jibril, will continue to report directly to Heir Ardishapur although the Governor will have the authority to directly request Ammatar Fleet deployments as necessary. The Ardishapur reorganization of the civil and military branches of the Mandate recasts each as separate centers of power answering to Yonis Ardishapur as Holder of Derelik region.

Morale among the Ammatar populace has risen considerably in the weeks since the announcement of Governor Salaf's appointment. As an ethnic Ammatar, his selection has allayed rising fears that the Ardishapur regime intended to permanently relegate the Ammatar people to a subservient role in the region. His years spent as a senior official at the Ministry of Assessment in Domain region have also attracted comment. Observers of imperial politics agree that the choice of Ekroz Salaf was a shrewd move by Yonis Ardishapur, given that the

Governor represents an Ammatar figurehead untainted by the failings of the previous regime and of proven loyalty to the Amarr Empire.

**Life after emancipation: the road home
reported by ISD Ria Nicaea 08.11.2009 17:12:23**

Bittanshal – In the months following Empress Jamyl's emancipation announcement, millions of released slaves have made their way to the welcoming arms of the Minmatar Republic. Millions more still remain within the Amarr Empire, however, hindered by the fear of leaving behind everything that they have ever known.

Onyeka Djekatro was a twelfth-generation slave maintaining production line equipment for the Inherent Implants factory in Bittanshal. When the emancipation order was issued, the corporation released Onyeka's entire family, forcing them to fend for themselves. "It was before the Sisters [of EVE] started their work. We couldn't afford to leave," Inevne Djekatro, her mother, explains. "We were told to leave the workers' housing, but where are we going to go if there's nowhere else?" With nowhere to go, the family was forced to take menial service jobs on the station in order to pay for lodging and food.

"We thought life would get better at first," says Onyeka, "But it only got worse. We saved what we could, but it was months before we had enough for a place on a shuttle." At the expense of reduced power to the family of eight's single room apartment, they saved enough to send Onyeka to the Republic to begin a new life.

For the nineteen-year-old woman, the prospect was both exciting and terrifying. Her family served Inherent Implants since the installation's inception. Onyeka was born on the station, and though some family members were sold to other Holders, she has never left the station's vicinity. "I sometimes didn't want to go," she admits. "But [my family] decided I would have the best chance. I have good skills and some training. Maybe it won't be so bad."

**Orthodox amarr faith increasingly supplanting ammatar church
reported by ISD Nestor Pelagius 2009.10.11 20:08:59**

Tanoo, Derelik – Officials of the Theology Council working in the Ammatar Mandate have released details of a formal 'Survey of Faith' carried out in Derelik during the last three months, the main finding of which is that the Ammatar Church is being steadily supplanted by the orthodox Imperial codification of the Amarr faith. While the Ardishapur regime in the Mandate has taken no steps against the Ammatar Church, and indeed has expressly re-affirmed it as a valid sect of the Amarrian faith, the Imperial rite of faith was declared the official religious doctrine of the Mandate by Royal Heir Yonis Ardishapur on receipt of the Mandate as his personal fief.

Iris Selantar, a former lay preacher of the Ammatar Church now observing the Imperial rite, explained her decision to leave the traditional Ammatar sect for the orthodox church. "The invasion taught us many things – the incompetence of our nobles, the failures of our fleet and the spiritual poverty of so many Ammatar. I believe the destiny of the Ammatar people, and all Minmatar, lies in the holy embrace of Amarr and I feel that worshipping with the mother church of the Empire brings me closer to Amarr."

Subdeacon Ottoko Razirshz of the Theology Council mission in the Mandate confirmed that such feelings were typical of those Ammatar surveyed by his officials. "The Ammatar Church is a loyal and faithful branch of the great Amarr holy family," stated Subdeacon Razirshz. "However, it is clear that observance of the Imperial rite is growing in the Mandate. The Theology Council views this as in line with the goal of transforming the Mandate into a core domain of the Amarr Empire."

**Life after emancipation: refuge and resettlement
reported by ISD Ria Nicaea 13.11.2009 17:05:23**

Rens - While known primarily as Heimatar's largest market hub, Rens also serves as home to the Republic's main immigration facility. The system's close proximity to the Minmatar-Amarr border and its location along the main hisec routes make Rens an ideal harboring point for refugees. As a result, some stations throughout the solar system have difficulties in supporting the influx of immigrants. "One of the problems we encountered early on was that Holders who opted to send their former slaves to the Republic were reluctant to pay for passage further than was absolutely necessary," stated Immigration and Resettlement Officer Rais Ephrintak. "Oftentimes, ships would simply leave entire families there without any support. The stations in Rens simply weren't designed to handle such a mass influx of people."

Eventually, the Sisters of EVE offered offices and temporary housing space in their stations orbiting the moons of Rens VII. "It really was the best windfall we could have hoped for, under the circumstances," Ephrintak enthused. "Just having the stations to work from has made integrating the refugees much easier."

For the former slaves, the assistance is gratefully accepted. Onyeka Djekatro found herself welcomed like a "long-lost sister," and has received more help than she had expected. "There were many tests," she says. "They wanted to see where my skills are, and there's so much to write! They want to know everything and more." In addition to basic aptitude examinations, all arrivals are given a basic medical scan and inoculations. Interviews are conducted in order to arrange suitable work placement and provide emotional support, if necessary.

**Retired naval officer daren fasio announces candidacy
reported by ISD Haruziel Tormau 14.11.2009 15:56:03**

Dodixie - At a press conference outside his home, retired Federation Navy Rear Admiral Daren Fasio announced his entry into the upcoming Gallente presidential election. The 61 year old retiree, an ethnic Mannar and an unabashed hawk, was openly critical of the previous administration's conduct in the ongoing militia war with the Caldari. "By failing to fully and immediately mobilize the substantial economic and industrial power of this great Federation, President Foiritan has led our nation into a fool's war." Fasio elaborated, stating that "It's not that we can't beat the Caldari, it's that we refuse to try to our fullest potential. "

Fasio was equally critical of several of the other candidates, particularly Senator Vilard Garioss, whose pro-reconciliation agenda Fasio labeled a "platform of surrender." Fasio also criticized industrialist candidate Jacus Roden for refusing to comply with President Foiritan's invocation of the Heuromont Act. "If Roden cared less about his quarterly profits and more about the good of the nation, he'd have been eager to comply with the act. How can we ask our ordinary citizens to make sacrifices for the good of the Federation if our prominent leaders will not?"

If elected, Mr. Fasio has pledged to take a number of steps designed to put the Gallente Federation in a more aggressive stance. His plans include a renewal of the invocation of the Heuromont Act, the institution of a national draft, increased conversion of civilian manufacturing to military production, and a program of civilian rationing for critical war materiel. "War is hard, and if we mean to fight it, we should all be doing our part. It's not too late to reverse the course, but if we continue to fight with one hand tied behind our backs, we will surely suffer further defeats."

**Senate debates issue of voting in occupied territories
reported by ISD Caleb Kang 15.11.2009 12:23:23**

Villore - As the Federation presidential elections draw closer, the issue of voting rights for citizens of occupied systems has been raised by the Senate. Debate over the issue consumed much of the Senate's deliberations today.

Senators from occupied space, led by a coalition of senators from the Placid region, have strongly pressed that elections still be held as normal in the occupied systems, despite the logistical difficulties. According to the senators, their constituents are highly invested in the upcoming election, which will dictate the future face of Federation politics and its stance toward the ongoing war with the Caldari State. The senators proposed several methods of holding the elections in the occupied systems, such as requesting the neutral assistance of the Servant Sisters of EVE, holding secret balloting, and other covert methods.

Political experts, invited to the Senate assembly to weigh in on the subject, raised numerous issues with the prospect, leading to the formation of a strong opposition to any plans. "The task of collecting, tallying, and verifying votes would be nigh-impossible with the continued communications blockade enforced by the Caldari State on occupied systems," noted veteran election organizer Fitale Jean. "That is to say nothing of ensuring that voters are aware of who they're voting for and the high possibility of fraud."

Despite the experts' recommendations, the legality of an election where a portion of the populace was denied the right to vote remains murky. The Senate broke session without coming to a conclusion, but the debate is expected to resume in the following days.

**Off-duty military personnel hold pro-fasio rally
reported by ISD Haruziel Tormau 15.11.2009 14:50:45**

Duripant - Hundreds of off-duty Naval personnel and Federal Navy Academy cadets turned out for a rally to support Mannar presidential candidate Daren Fasio. A retired Rear Admiral, Fasio has received the enthusiastic endorsement of a large segment of military personnel from all of the armed services.

Commander Kevet Rivasse, an Academy astrogation instructor who served as an ensign under Fasio, said, "I have the utmost respect for the man and all he stands for. I know from personal experience that he is capable of making the difficult command decisions, and he isn't afraid to tell it like it is."

An equally ringing endorsement was given by Cadet Calvine Fouchard. "Politicians got us into this war. It's going to take someone with real military experience to get us out of it. "

Cadet Whelan Jao, president of one of the academy's several pro-Fasio student organizations, has been active in getting the Fasio message heard. "Any time we have leave or downtime between classes, we're out there spreading the word. Be it GalNet or good old-fashioned door-to-door interactions, we want people to understand the threats facing the Federation and that Admiral Fasio's plan is the best way to use our chief strengths as a nation: our dynamic economy and our strong tradition of public service."

Concerns have arisen that public endorsements on the part of Academy faculty amount to the political indoctrination of the cadets. Academy spokesman Gerart Oulallen sought to address that issue directly, saying,

"While the Academy itself does not officially endorse any particular candidate, our faculty, staff, and students are encouraged to participate in the political process. Everyone here has sworn an oath to protect our nation's free, democratic ideals. To forbid the teachers or cadets to voice their views would be counter to everything the Federation stands for."

**Life after emancipation: adaptation and adjustment
reported by ISD Ria Nicaea 16.11.2009 13:42:19**

Dumkirinur - The immigration facilities in Rens serve only as a filter to assist former slaves toward integration with Minmatar society. Unless complications arise, such as medical issues or an extreme unwillingness to incorporate, the new arrivals are moved within the first week to housing programs, where they receive further support and work placements or education.

"The numbers of trained and educated refugees we've been seeing are surprisingly high," reports Tjaard Mtaki, one of the career advisors employed by the integration facilities. "All of those immigrants who served on stations and ships have a high level of education in fields such as mathematics and physics. We've seen expert mechanics and engineers who can't read or write a word, but they can accurately explain the finer points of essential systems maintenance. We're finding the gaps in their education and helping to fill them."

For younger refugees like Onyeka Djekatro, the changes can be intimidating. She has been offered a place at the Republic Military School, helping to maintain the station's vast essential systems. "It's so different. I have no one to tell me what I should be doing. I go to classes every day. They tell us what we can expect from living here, but sometimes it doesn't seem real."

Onyeka is far from being the only former slave who has reported difficulty in adapting to their new liberty. Many freed slaves have admitted to feelings of apprehension when venturing beyond the confines of their quarters, and groups residing in the same housing clusters have begun to band together in small pseudo-family units. "We look out for our own," said one woman, who refused to be named.

**Senate votes to deny votes to occupied systems
reported by ISD Caleb Kang 17.11.2009 08:19:24**

Villore - The Federation Senate passed special legislation today to deny occupied systems the right to vote in Federation elections. The bill, which is expected to be signed into law by President Souro Foiritan later in the week, passed with little opposition, the only dissenting votes coming from senators from Placid and Solitude.

The bill applies to any Federation territory occupied by a foreign power, which currently includes much of Placid, including population centers such as Intaki Prime.

Presidential candidate Senator Vilard Garioss, who voted for the bill, said, "[This bill] cleared up a potentially messy legal issue [that could have] potentially invalidated the results of the upcoming election." Other candidates have yet to comment publicly on the issue.

Senator Jolie Maurice of Reschard denounced the bill, saying, "The people who must suffer under Caldari occupation are the ones who will be affected the most by the election. We should have looked for solutions to their inability to vote, rather than passing a law that essentially tells them they don't count."

**Life after emancipation: citizenship
reported by ISD Ria Nicaea 20.11.2009 10:12:28**

Dumkirinur - For emancipated slaves, entering the Minmatar Republic and integrating with its culture is a long and slow process. Entire families have been uprooted as a result of Empress Jamyli's emancipation proclamation last year, and many former slaves have been split apart by the difficulties of leaving the Amarr Empire. Millions of refugees now struggle to find each other again and reclaim an identity they barely knew before their emancipation.

"Sometimes I just can't deal with it," says Onyeka Djekatro, recently freed slave who returned to the Republic. "There are so many people and so much to take in. Your mind just closes."

Counselors attending to the new citizens' needs have noted a high percentage of depression and various anxiety disorders in the former slaves. "We've made a concerted effort to reduce the levels of stress [the returning Minmatar] may experience," one counselor explained, describing the support network which has been made available. "The hardest part is to get them to take advantage of it. They're so accustomed to being ordered around by their Holders."

In the two months since her entry to the Republic, Onyeka has settled into the routine of her work at the Republic Military School, including supplemental education and cultural introduction sessions and visits to the station's Amarr worship center. She has made a few friends, and together they have adjusted to a more relaxed social life. "I still live on a schedule," she smiles. "It's not easy to simply break habits." Now that her family has benefited from the free transportation provided by the Sisters of EVE, Onyeka says they feel whole again,

despite the new surroundings, and each family member looks forward to their new life as citizens of the Minmatar Republic.

**Governor aguard draws record numbers to broadcast debate
reported by ISD Sheliak Mesarthim 24.11.2009 17:44:56**

Olide - In an event hosted by the Center for Advanced Studies last week, presidential candidate Celes Aguard attracted the eyes and ears of nearly 19% of the Gallente Federation's estimated daily total audience. In the Everyshore region, the percentage was even higher, with almost 35% of the regional audience having followed the show. The percentages exceed most other programming within the Federation, where it's rare even for the most popular entertainment channels to attract such numbers.

The show, "CAS Profile of Influence," is produced and administrated by students of the Center of Advanced Studies. The program has been known to hold interviews of many high profile people, from corporate directors and CEOs to famous scientists and politicians. The Aguard interview was not the first time a presidential candidate appeared on the show, but Aguard's rising popularity in the region, together with the show's recent syndication over the Egonics network, contributed to the show's success. In addition to having broken the regional viewer record, the show also set a new record for audience for a student program.

In the interview, Aguard spoke about her mixed Gallente/Jin-Mei heritage and career in Mies, as well as her plans to support fringe economies, as well as her controversial criticism of CONCORD. Post-show polls at the CAS show an increase in support for Aguard and her policies, placing her behind Jacus Roden, but ahead of Vilard Garioss in the race for the presidency.

**Political analysts question aguard's chances following no-vote bill
reported by ISD Sheliak Mesarthim 27.11.2009 18:13:17**

Following the passing of the bill to deny votes in occupied Federal systems, several political analysts in the cluster agree that presidential candidate Celes Aguard may have lost one of her largest voter blocs.

"Aguard's pledge of support for frontier settlements and low-security regions, as well as her wish for a total military effort to reclaim the lost systems gave her a strong base of support in Placid and Verge Vendor," says Arroch Dermani, an expert at Gallente politics working for Amarr Certified News. "The disenfranchisement of those territories has denied the Aguard camp one of its strongest cards."

"This has strengthened Jacus Roden position as a top candidate, followed by Garioss. Aguard still places high in Everyshore polls, but with the loss of these potential votes her chances of winning the presidency are slim," comments Felisenne Olvenari, Professor of Political Sciences at the University of Caille in Aporulie.

The Scope's own Remi Eyeleranne said in his news segment Eye on the Election: "Celes [Aguard] now has to fight an uphill battle where most of her opponents have the higher ground." And the passing of the bill prompted him to move Aguard down from her position in his "Election Prognosis" after having been one of the front runners for many weeks.

Aguard herself was an outspoken opponent of the bill, and called Senator Vilard Garioss - supporter of the bill and one of her opponents in the race for president - "a villain who ravages our constitution with no thought of the implications for the people of the Federation."

**Presidential candidate aguard holds political rally for jin-mei
reported by ISD Sheliak Mesarthim 30.11.2009 19:00:55**

Lirsautton - Celes Aguard, Governor of the Mies system and candidate in the upcoming Gallente Federation presidential election, attracted a crowd numbering in the thousands for a political rally at the planet Chakaux in the Lirsautton system yesterday. Aguard spoke at length of her Jin-Mei heritage and the promise to sponsor the development of "fringe worlds and minority communities," gaining positive reactions from those assembled.

"When frontier settlements starve under Caldari blockades, and riots and panic spreads among those who feel they are voiceless, all our leaders can say is 'toughen up,'" said Aguard in her speech. "Fear is a powerful motivator, but it has failed to quell the governmental apathy toward the minorities of the Federation."

Many of Aguard's supporters agreed with this sentiment. "I am a strong supporter for maintaining the independent cultures of groups such as the Jin-Mei, Mannar and Intaki," says Cephon Langlier, a civil rights lawyer in Lirsautton who attended the rally. "I would be ecstatic to see a president who gives more than token support to the minority cultures of the Federation."

Governor Aguard is expected to follow her tour of the Everyshore region with several rallies and debates in the Essence region next month.

**Fasio withdraws candidacy, endorses aguard
reported by ISD Haruziel Tormau 30.11.2009 18:45:58**

Dodixie - Amid slipping poll numbers, presidential contender and retired Rear-Admiral Daren Fasio has announced his withdrawal from the race. Addressing a disappointed but supportive crowd at a press conference this morning, Mr. Fasio took the opportunity to endorse Governor Celes Aguard's candidacy, saying, "though Governor Aguard and I have disagreed on several issues, I feel strongly that she is an able candidate for the presidency. Further, she has the best interests of the Federation at heart, and I believe she has the political will to do what is necessary to preserve and defend this great nation."

While extremely popular among both serving and retired military personnel, Fasio's candidacy has been plagued since the beginning by a message that many have viewed as extreme. Fasio's stated intention of instituting a draft and putting the Federation's economy on a war-footing has won him few friends in the business community.

Fasio's campaign was also hurt by his own demeanor, described by many as "overly impersonal." Zalawi Marguva, a political analyst for The Scope contrasted candidates Aguard and Fasio after a recent debate, saying, "The way these two address crowds publicly is very different. Governor Aguard delivers rousing political speeches designed to fire peoples' ardor. Admiral Fasio delivers dry, fact-filled briefings designed to inform peoples' decisions."

Given the similarities between their platforms, Fasio's withdrawal would naturally lend to a bump in Governor Aguard's numbers. His endorsement was symbolic however, and Governor Aguard thanked Mr. Fasio graciously, saying "Admiral Fasio's spirit of service, both in and out of uniform, should be an example for us all. He has been an honorable and worthy adversary."

**03/12/2009
Caldari Leaders Wary of New Federation President**

New Caldari - State Executor Tibus Heth took time today to speak to the press on the recent Gallente elections. He said that "any attempt to intrude upon the sovereign territory of the Caldari State will be met with an immediate and overwhelming response" by Caldari forces. His statement was seen as a warning to the new Federation administration against attempts to retake Caldari Prime and the Gallente border systems occupied by the State, something which Jacus Roden mentioned several times during his campaign. Caldari Navy forces in the occupied territories have been at an elevated state of alert since Tuesday's elections.

Elsewhere in the State, public reaction has been muted. Most corporations have followed the lead of Ishukone, which released a statement saying that the company hoped that the new Federation administration would "recognize the need to stabilize the cluster-wide economic and political situation," avoiding any comment on specific Federation policy.

Such caution is not unexpected, according to political analyst Ylle Audre, due to the business interests that many of the megacorporations and their subsidiaries still maintain in the Federation despite the ongoing border hostilities.

"Roden is probably the closest you can come to a Caldari CEO outside of the State itself, and despite his Caldari Prime comments during the campaign, I think many Caldari CEOs see him as someone they may be able to deal with," says Audre. "Whether or not they can -- or if Heth and the Provists will allow them to do so -- remains to be seen, of course."

**03/12/2009
Roden Wins Gallente Presidential Election with Convincing Majority**

Having secured a convincing majority of 58.7% of all votes cast in the December 1st election and easily gaining the required number of districts, Jacus Roden is now President-elect of the Gallente Federation. With votes from all participating districts checked and tallied by the morning after polling day, the Federal Elections Commission was able to declare Roden the outright winner in its formal communication of results to the Gallente Senate.

President-elect Roden ran on a broad-based and relatively simple platform that included pledges to root out corruption in government, improve strained relations with the Minmatar Republic, reform the Gallente Navy, and include capsuleers more closely in the war effort. His most pointed campaign pledge, however, was his promise to recover Caldari Prime and restore Federation control throughout the Luminaire system. Polling evidence suggests that many citizens consider the Luminaire situation to be an "open wound," citing corrupt and incompetent political and military leadership. His comfortable majority indicates the success of his campaign in playing to these concerns among the electorate.

Roden's closest challenger for the presidency was Governor Celes Aguard of the Mies system, who polled 31.2% of the vote. Governor Aguard personally transmitted her concession to Jacus Roden this morning and pledged her support for "all policies of the Presidency that uphold the interests of the entire Federation." Some analysts believe that the votes of many frontier worlds excluded from the election process due to the "No Vote" law may have significantly increased Aguard's share of the vote and denied Roden an outright majority. Others have

noted that the endorsement of her campaign by Admiral Darien Fasio appears to have had a negative effect on Governor Aguard's poll ratings, suggesting that Fasio's hardline militarist image resonated poorly with some sections of the governor's electoral base.

The other significant challenger, after Fasio's withdrawal from the race, was Senator Vilard Garioss of the Nexus constellation. Senator Garioss polled 8.8% of the vote. According to polls and focus groups, Garioss's campaign never quite recovered from what many citizens perceived as a confused and "overly academic" platform. Senator Garioss issued a brief statement conceding defeat shortly after Governor Aguard made her concession.

The remaining 1.3% of votes cast were accounted for by votes for protest candidates and spoiled ballots.

President-elect Roden will assume office at his inauguration before the Gallente Senate, following the formal relinquishment of power by President Souro Foiritan.

03/12/2009

Republic Greets Roden Election With Optimism

Pator - The Minmatar government and its people welcomed news of Jacus Roden's election as the new Federation president, with Sanmatar Maleatu Shakor being one of the first to congratulate the president-elect on his victory. Shakor announced that he was looking forward to a "productive relationship" with the new Federation administration. "President-elect Roden and I agree that our nations must cooperate in order to survive and prosper in these trying times. A threat to either nation is a threat to both -- and we must treat them as such. "

Other Minmatar leaders echoed Shakor's statements, but public response has been largely indifferent. "Foiritan, Roden, whoever...it doesn't make a difference to me," said Jandh Rehsmerold, a factory worker on Kulheim. "Their candidates are basically complete strangers. How are you supposed to make a good decision who to vote for? At least here in the Republic, they are members of our tribe."

Still, many in the Republic echoed the Sanmatar's hope for the future. "I don't know that much about Roden," admitted Ranniko Viftuin, a farmhand on Pator. "I do know that I have a lot of family that still lives in the Federation, though, and I want them to be safe. If Roden is the man that can do that, then I'm all for him."

04/12/2009

Amarr Empire Formally Congratulates Roden, Rebukes Outgoing President

Amarr – In a statement released through the Amarr Certified News agency, the Amarr Court Chamberlain Pomik Haromi formally congratulated President-elect Jacus Roden on his impending "assumption of power" and expressed the hope that the new Federation government will "respect the sovereignty of the Amarr Empire". The chamberlain's statement also welcomed the "fall from grace of the arrogant Souro Foiritan" and rebuked the government of the outgoing Gallente president for what he described as its "peerless record of meddling in matters that did not concern it. "

Experienced analysts of Amarrian diplomacy have interpreted the court chamberlain's statement as a remarkably positive welcome for President-elect Roden. For the statement to be issued by the chamberlain himself, rather than his office or a lesser ministry, would typically indicate that Empress Jamyl I was speaking to Jacus Roden through the chamberlain. The reference to the Empire's sovereignty can be considered a coded sign that the Amarr Empire would be prepared to respect the sovereignty of the Gallente Federation.

Of particular note, according to Professor Ifor Sellay of the Caille University Center for International and Diplomatic Studies, is the care with which the strident criticisms of the Gallente government are focused very precisely on the outgoing Foiritan regime. Professor Sellay suggests that this reference indicates the Amarr Empire is adopting a cautious policy of assessing the new President before reaching any firm conclusions.

The Office of the President has issued a brief statement welcoming "the recognition by the Amarr Empire of another demonstration of the Gallente Federation's long tradition of peaceful transfer of power."

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18/01/2010

President Roden Assumes Office

President Jacus Roden formally assumed office earlier today at his inauguration before the Gallente Senate. Shortly beforehand, incumbent President Souro Foiritan made a brief, formal statement to the Senate. Executive power rested briefly with the Senate before Chief Justice Broyal Alserette of the Federation Supreme Court swore in Jacus Roden as the new President of the Federation.

To a standing ovation, President Roden then took the rostrum and stood quietly for a moment before motioning for silence and giving a speech in which he reaffirmed his election pledges. President Roden stated that it was the policy of his government to "restore Federation control over the space and planets of the Luminaire system and to all Federation systems and worlds occupied by Caldari State naval and militia forces," and noted that capsuleer forces of the Federal Defence Union had liberated several Gallente systems since the election. His wide-ranging speech took in aspects of policy such as corruption - another theme of Roden's campaign - industrial policy, and the importance of the capsuleer class to the economy and security of the Federation. President Roden is himself a capsuleer.

President Roden finished his speech with a pledge "to return the Gallente Federation to the greatness that has been its undoubted destiny from the moment our peoples united to realize the historic project of universal freedom." As he stepped back from the podium, the Senate once more erupted in a standing ovation, which the President acknowledged before leaving.

04/03/2010

Intaki Assembly Requests FDU Ceasefire

Intaki - In a brief press conference directed primarily at FDU and independent capsuleers, the Intaki Assembly today requested that all loyalist captains cease hostilities against Ishukone and Mordu's Legion vessels in Intaki space.

The Intaki spokesman stated that vessels belonging to the Ishukone Corporation and Mordu's Legion are "present in Intaki at the specific and un-coerced request of the Assembly," adding that "any captains detaining or destroying such vessels are acting directly against the interests of the Intaki people as determined by this Assembly, and further are viewed as committing acts of piracy."

She did clarify that, "Ishukone corporation is permitted to operate only civilian vessels in the system, and Ishukone Watch is explicitly excluded from entry under the terms of the Agreement." Mordu's Legion, however, has been afforded complete military access, subject to command oversight from the civilian Assembly.

04/03/2010

Federal Navy Turned Back at Intaki Stargate

Intaki - The Federation Navy relief force assigned to re-establish control of the Intaki system was denied access to the Intaki stargate in Agoze earlier today. Representatives of the Intaki System Command reportedly informed Admiral Gouenette, who is commanding the force, that the Navy had no jurisdiction in Intaki, and that their presence was "neither required nor welcomed."

After the liberation of Intaki and other systems by Federal Defence Union pilots last week, the Federation Navy rapidly mobilized units to systematically restore military command to the affected areas. However, Intaki leadership has rejected the protection that the navy offered to provide, preferring instead to rely on their newfound Caldari associates.

The future of Intaki has been a subject of much speculation since the arrival of Ishukone and Mordu's Legion vessels several months ago. While many citizens have assumed that the liberation of the system would see a return to the previous status quo, signatories to the Federal Charter retain the legal right to determine various aspects of the Assembly of their original territories. This includes the "Shipping and Security" franchise, which regulates commercial shipping and which is traditionally assigned to FedMart and the Federation Navy and Customs.

Sources within the Intaki Assembly assert that the deal with Ishukone and Mordu's Legion was made in good faith and in the interests of the Intaki people. On condition of anonymity, a senior official said, "The Ishukone Agreement represented, and continues to represent, the best option for the long-term safety and security of our society." Federal officials have refused to comment on what they describe as "an internal Intaki matter."

11/03/2010

Caldari Analysts Predict Economic Upheaval

Jita - The consensus among analysts at an economics conference this week is that the Caldari State has a rough ride ahead, with recent gains by the Gallente militia forces throwing a wrench in the works for many

megacorporations.

Soon after the Caldari militia completed its conquest of the systems making up the Federal Defense Cordon last year, the Caldari Providence Directorate auctioned off development rights to the affected constellations. The megacorporations involved in the bidding believed the high prices were justified by the acquisition of highly valuable assets, but the recent push by the Federal Defense Union and allied capsuleer corporations has driven them out of many systems.

This week's Economic Sustainability and Co-operation Conference was hastily reorganized to focus on this issue, with most delegates agreeing that the impact will likely be significant. Yarin Mesla, an analyst for Expert Housing, said, "The megas are keeping their numbers very close to their chest, but it's hard to see how this can be good for any of them. We all know the rough magnitude of the winning bids, and they can't possibly have made back their investments already." Others were quick to point out the political implications. Mercantile Club analyst Ridd Gerin said, "It's hard not to look at the list of six remaining auctioned systems and notice that five of them belong to SuVee. Sure, they've probably taken a hit, but if they can hold onto what they have left, it will still shift power in the State slightly in favor of the Practical faction."

Others were a little more guarded in their comments. An anonymous delegate from Lai Dai would only say that, "[The Gallente militia] have taken back some systems, sure, but it remains to be seen if they can hold onto them."

Zero-g appoints third coo in 18 months reported by ISD Katerina Markova 23.03.2010 16:26:54

Aunenen - The Zero-G Research Firm board voted today to replace the company's COO for the second time in a year and a half after the company posted multi-billion ISK losses for the fourth quarter in a row. The Kaalakiota subsidiary has been dogged by production problems over the last year, despite a promising showing at last fall's Black Rise Development Conference.

The next-generation habitat presented at that conference, initially expected to go into production this summer, has been pushed off until at least early YC 113 due to continuing delays at component factories.

Many business analysts expected the change, citing not only Zero-G's business troubles but also rumors that outgoing COO Ishuhara Kappunen was regularly butting heads with Zero-G's suppliers and business partners. "Zero-G's stock has taken a pummeling since the announcement of the production delays," said Taimo Poraila, an analyst at Modern Finances, on today's "Games of State." "The board had to do something to reassure investors, and Kappunen was an obvious target."

Both Kappunen and his predecessor, Hetsen Appas, were previously high-ranking members of the Caldari Providence Directorate prior to being appointed COO, and Zero-G CEO Nanata Yansen is a prominent ally of Tibus Heth. This relationship has given some ammunition to the Directorate's critics, who have pointed to the problems at Zero-G as a case for Provist mismanagement. So far, however, the general public seems to be taking this as an isolated case, and confidence in Directorate leadership remains high.

25/03/2010 BREAKING: Ministry of War office in Pashanai rocked by massive blast

Pashanai - Pandemonium has erupted at the Ministry of War's Bureau Offices in the Pashanai system in the past hour. Conflicting reports are still coming in, but several Scope sources have confirmed that a powerful explosion has torn through a number of the station's levels, taking lives and destroying crucial infrastructure. It is unknown at this point what the death toll is, though it is believed to number in the thousands. The Amarr Navy has been placed on high alert and is deploying relief vessels at this time.

More on the situation as it develops.

25/03/2010 BREAKING: Explosion cause unclear, Amarr Navy redeployment

Pashanai - The Scope is still attempting to get news on the explosion that apparently ripped through the Ministry of War's Bureau Offices in the Pashanai system. Reports are coming in, but the explosion's cause and the extent of damage remain unclear.

What is clear is that the Amarr Navy has begun a massive re-deployment along its border with the Minmatar Republic. We have no comment from the Navy at this time.

25/03/2010 BREAKING: Theology Council Head potentially among Pashanai dead

Pashanai - The first casualties from the site of the Pashanai incident have been confirmed in excess of 4300, according to numbers just released by Amarr Navy High Command. Containment and relief operations are

underway at the scene, with several station sectors still either on fire or suffering dangerous gas leaks.

It has also been reported that Mervan Moritok, the head of the Theology Council, may have been among those on the station at the time the explosion took place. Attempts to confirm this with the Empire are underway.

We will have more on the situation as it develops.

25/03/2010

President Roden Sends Condolences to Empress; Urges Caution

Villoré - President Jacus Roden has officially transmitted condolences to Empress Jamyl I following the deaths of several thousand people - including Theology Council head Mervan Moritok - in a devastating explosion at the Amarr Ministry of War station in Pashanai system. Although the explosion was initially believed to be an accident, the Amarr Ministry of Internal Order are now investigating it as an act of terrorism.

In a statement on behalf of the Gallente Federation government, the President's office said, "The explosion and the thousands of deaths and injuries are a tragedy for the entire New Eden cluster. We note with regret the death of High Deacon Mervan Moritok and offer the condolences of the Gallente Federation for his and other deaths resulting from this terrible event."

Commenting on public statements of Amarr security officials suggesting the station explosion was a deliberate act of terrorism rather than a tragic accident, the release urged caution: "The Gallente Federation stands ready to offer any and all assistance that may be required both for rescue workers and investigators. If this tragic event is confirmed to be an act of terrorism we respectfully urge caution so that the true perpetrators may be punished without any further unnecessary loss of life to innocents."

The President's office confirmed that Federation Navy units have been put on stand-by along the border with the Amarr Empire to serve as an aid and security task-force should any assistance be requested.

25/03/2010

Trade on Ammatar-Minmatar Border Halts as Authorities Impose Order

Pashanai - In response to heightened terror alerts across the Amarr Empire following the Pashanai attack, Amarr Customs has mobilized to lock down civilian travel on many heavily trafficked transit routes. At checkpoints along the Ammatar-Minmatar border, the sudden density of traffic and limited customs presence has resulted in complete curtailment of trade and transit vessels.

Jaikhan Dhomn, a Thukker merchant employed at the Trust Partners Trading Post in Tanoo, was planning to cross the border with his family when he learned of the security lockdown. "Everyone is afraid and angry after this [attack]. The Amarr fear us for what the Bloody Hand did, and we fear the Amarr for what they will do in return," he said.

Capsuleer traffic remains unimpeded across the Empire. Amarr Customs Commander Bachain Zhaide commented, "Everything that happens to a capsuleer ship, every ounce of goods moved on or off it, is logged in meticulous detail by CONCORD. Amarr Customs has directives not to interrupt capsuleer traffic beyond standard procedure. We barely have enough manpower as it is, so if CONCORD keeps track of the capsuleers, we have more resources to dedicate to keeping everyone else safe."

Amarr Customs has given no indication of when it expects the lockdown to end.

25/03/2010

BREAKING: Bloody Hands of Matar claims responsibility for Pashanai explosion

Pashanai - The Bloody Hands of Matar, one of the most notorious terrorist organizations in New Eden, has come forward to claim responsibility for the massive explosion on a Ministry of War station at Pashanai III earlier today which claimed the lives of just under 5600 people and destroyed several billion ISK's worth of infrastructure.

In a prepared video statement released to several media outlets simultaneously, an unidentified man with a black cloth across his face speaks in a distorted voice, explaining intricate technical details of the operation that experts have now confirmed indicate a reliable level of involvement. The man then proceeds to direct scathing political rhetoric toward the Empire and the Ammatar Mandate, starkly berating them for their "centuries of unlawful subjugation and violence."

The Minmatar Republic has moved swiftly to denounce the attack. In a nationally broadcast statement just minutes ago, Sanmatar Maleatu Shakor expressed his condolences to the innocent people of Amarr, caught up in this brutal attack unawares, and pledged to assist with relief efforts in any measure the Empire requested.

The attack represents by orders of magnitude the biggest act of terrorism ever perpetrated by the Bloody Hands of Matar. The organization has kept largely out of the limelight since assassinating an Ammatar consulate ambassador just under three years ago. Their numbers, resources and the extent of their operational capacity

are unknown at this point.

25/03/2010

Slave rescue corps first responders

Pashanai - Following the massive explosion that tore through the Ministry of War station, dozens of first response teams have been deployed to search for survivors. These teams, each numbering nine slaves strong and commanded by an Amarrian overseer, are typical rescue corps employed by the Empire during times of possible danger.

"The rescue teams shall enter through several points," explained Captain Jamar Dinn, the Ministry official commanding the effort. "Most will enter through hull breaches and continue from there, while others will begin from docking points and move toward the most damaged areas."

On the use of slave labor, Captain Dinn said, "These teams are used to working orderly and efficiently even under extreme stress. In addition, individual members are employed under a special merit system whereby their performance and rescue numbers directly influence the personal liberties of themselves and their families. As such, they are ideal for these circumstances, as they are unlikely to be discouraged by any amount of death and destruction. Their efforts allow the Navy and other vital forces to remain on high alert for the duration of the rescue."

Officials anticipate that once the areas have been swept by the slave teams and the risk of further detonations or structural collapses has been mitigated, Naval teams shall move in as a compliment.

25/03/2010

Amarr Construction sends specialists to ailing station.

Nererut - At a hastily-organized press conference today, Amarr Construction Assembly Manager Terma Tesh declared that a team comprised of their best structural engineers, site workers and nanite technicians had already departed for Pashanai. The team will work to stabilize the station structurally and attempt to keep essential services running in support of rescue and evacuation efforts. When pressed on the matter of security, Tesh revealed no Minmatar workers were selected for the specialist team.

25/03/2010

BREAKING: Mervan Moritok confirmed casualty,

Pashanai - Mervan Moritok, head of the Theology Council, has been confirmed as one of the roughly six thousand casualties of the Pashanai explosion. Habi Ghamri, Commander of Security at the Amarrian Ministry of Internal Order, has furthermore gone on record to state the explosion was not, as previously believed, caused by an accidental gas leak, but rather represented an orchestrated act of terrorism.

"This was no accident. It is an empire-wide criminal investigation at this point and will continue as such until we have apprehended those responsible," he said. "A clearer picture is emerging of the details on the site. We're confident we'll have some solid leads in the very near future."

When asked if the Empire believed the attack to have been politically motivated, Ghamri said, "At this stage the most we can do is speculate, but we aren't ruling out the possibility."

25/03/2010

Yonis Ardishapur addresses badly shaken Empire, sends personal fleet to assist with relief efforts

Ardishapur Prime - Royal Heir Yonis Ardishapur has just addressed the Amarr Empire in a widely telecast speech. Speaking from the steps of his palace on Ardishapur Prime, the heir outlined several strategies for dealing with the aftermath, offered words of comfort to those affected, and pledged to use his personal resources to ensure the tragedy was dealt with as completely as possible.

"You can never prepare for a day like this," he said, "when the cruelty and evil of the world for one terrible moment reveal themselves in the heart of your home. A great blow has been dealt us this day, but to the brave and loyal souls of the Empire I say: you have faced worse before, and you have prevailed. You now stand faced with this, and now too will you prevail. As God is my witness, we shall weather this storm."

"And make no mistake either that a great man has fallen today. His decades of contribution to the well-being of our nation will pass safe into the realm of history. But let us not forget the other thousands who rejoined our Lord today. Let their sacrifice, and all the pain it's caused us, be the bedrock from which we launch our retribution against those who would harm us. And let no man, woman or child in New Eden think that the Empire will ever let itself be cowed by brutality. Not now, not forever. Amarr Victor."

Several detachments from Ardishapur's personal fleet have been scrambled and are en route to Pashanai bearing medical supplies and personnel. The casualty figures appear to have leveled off by this point, with the latest reported total standing at 5563.

**Senior caldari funds unlimited personnel resign
reported by ISD Katerina Markova 26.03.2010 12:05:30**

Litiura - Four highly placed members of Caldari Funds Unlimited's executive staff resigned today, as reports continue to trickle out of the Caldari Business Tribunal regarding its ongoing investigation of the State's largest independent bank. The Tribunal has now confirmed that it has opened an investigation into the corporation's finances, and details are emerging as to the exact nature of the irregularities being looked into.

The four CFU executives, Sirotova Fukikaga, Tsurkuma Siainki, Orpakku Konken and Tatkashin Pukuwakai, were all junior vice-presidents in the corporation's investment banking and retirement account divisions. No reason has yet been given by either the executives or Caldari Funds Unlimited for the resignations, but there are reports that at least two of the four have been taken into custody by the Home Guard.

Meanwhile, sources within the Tribunal have told the Scope that investigators believe Caldari Funds Unlimited may have misreported thousands of financial transactions to the House of Records, a violation of Caldari banking regulations. As a result, CBT officials believe CFU may have far less ISK reserves than it was reporting to the House of Records and Tribunal, possibly even below the minimum demanded to secure its deposits and maintain its other operations. If this is true, it would constitute a major violation of Caldari law.

In addition, Caldari Funds Unlimited CEO Jaan Omura is apparently under personal investigation, due to alleged contact with individuals linked to the Gallente Federal Intelligence Office. Though the Tribunal has officially denied that this is the case, the Scope has it from reliable sources that both the Caldari Navy and Corporate Police Force have been contacted for assistance with the investigation. Neither CFU nor Omura herself have been available for comment.

26/03/2010

Jamyl Sarum meant to have been on Pashanai station at time of explosion, cancelled briefly before incident

Pashanai - New information has come to light on the explosion that occurred yesterday at a Ministry of War station in Pashanai. According to station manifests, Empress Jamyl Sarum was scheduled to make a short stop at the station at the time the explosion happened.

Sarum was making a diplomatic tour of the outlying areas in commemoration of St. Kuria's Day, a little-known Amarr religious holiday observed annually by the Holders and the religious establishment, though it is generally not celebrated outside of these circles. By tradition, the emperor spends this day meeting with religious figureheads and observing rites with them.

Approximately twenty minutes before the explosion took place, Empress Sarum's office cancelled her meeting at the station. She was to have met with Theology Council Arch Deacon Mervan Moritok, who was present at the station and died in the blast. Representatives of her office could not be reached for official comment, but a highly-placed source within the Empire has gone on record saying, "Diplomatic tours [such as the St. Kuria's Day one] are very difficult logistical undertakings, and scheduling conflicts often arise with very little warning."

The explosion at Pashanai, an act of the Minmatar revolutionary organization the Bloody Hands of Matar, claimed the lives of 5,563 people.

**Khanid innovation, modern finances buy stake in samarkand financial
reported by ISD Katerina Markova 28.03.2010 12:51:57**

Khanid Prime - Khanid Innovation and Modern Finances have announced that they now own a controlling stake in the Khanid Kingdom's largest investment bank, Samarkand Financial. The move, which is the culmination of two months of negotiations, gives Modern Finances an even stronger presence in the Khanid Kingdom and secures a strong financial partner for Khanid Innovation, one of today's most powerful Khanid corporations.

Samarkand Financial has been a large player in the Khanid financial sector for over three decades now, but until recently has had little presence outside the Kingdom. Last year marked its biggest departure from that strategy when the company helped to finance the stock purchase that propelled Mens Reppola to the CEO position at Ishukone in April. It was that purchase that brought the company to the attention of Modern Finances.

"Modern Finances has always looked to the Khanid Kingdom as a growth market," said CEO Alasunda Yeki. "This partnership with Khanid Innovation and Samarkand Financial ensures that we will have a strong presence in the Kingdom for the long term."

Khanid Innovation CEO Ganortchar Asabona said that the deal is part of a larger strategy for the company. "Khanid Innovation has been a leader in the technology sector since our founding, but our goals have always been to become a leader in innovation cluster-wise. This partnership is another step toward that goal."

The two CEOs made it clear they had no intention to upset the current leadership of Samarkand Financial, saying that they would be keeping the executive board intact. "We bought the company because of its success and we

see no reason to change up a winning team," explained Yeki.

29/03/2010

Station Vacancies on the Rise at Pashanai Blast Site

Pashanai - Commercial and residential station vacancies have risen sharply since the Bloody Hands of Matar attack on the Ministry of War Bureau Offices station at Pashani III. Businesses across the system continue to cancel rental agreements, while some homes have simply been abandoned.

Kadeyn Osirani, a rental agent at the local Amarr Certified News Development Studio, said several reasons, from changing plans to "unsafe conditions," have been given for the termination. The development studio orbits less than 550 kilometers from the site of the attack and has been the location hardest hit by the exodus of tenants thus far.

"People are frightened," Kadeyn explained. "They feel this kind of thing shouldn't have been allowed to happen, not again. The attack was a harsh reminder of Malkalen and Yulai."

One renter, who refused to identify himself to The Scope, said he was born on the station and had never considered leaving it until now. "You don't know where or when the next attack might be," he said.

Analysts across Pashanai agree that this trend will reverse itself in due course and noted that the majority of residents are staying put, though stations will experience the effects of lost rental revenue for some time.

Kaalakiota corporate bank may devalue scrip reported by ISD Katerina Markova 30.03.2010 12:55:06

Nonni - As Kaalakiota's corporate currency board meets for the third straight day, rumors continue to circulate that the company is considering a significant devaluation of their corporate scrip. Sources within the company's central bank say that the board is considering this step due to a sudden spike in Kaalakiota scrip-to-ISK transfers, which corporate economists are blaming on black market currency exchanges in the Intaki Syndicate.

No megacorporation has considered such a step in nearly two decades, since Ishukone took a similar step in YC 93 to mediate an ISK shortage. The rumors have only compounded the problem, as many Kaalakiota citizens have begun exchanging their scrip for ISK at the bank limit in anticipation of the move, further sapping the company's reserves.

Serge LaFleur, an economist at the University of Caille, says the move could have far-reaching implications for Kaalakiota and the rest of the Caldari economy. "This is usually seen as a sign of desperation, due to the panic it can set off in the general populace," he explained. "If Kaalakiota is short enough on ISK that it's considering such a move, the worry is always there that it won't be enough, and the company may have to turn to Caldari Funds Unlimited for a loan to keep the company from defaulting on financial obligations."

CBT investigating caldari funds unlimited, according to reports reported by ISD Katerina Markova 31.03.2010 12:51:50

Maurasi - Sources within the Caldari Business Tribunal tell the Scope that the CBT has opened an investigation into financial malfeasance at Caldari Funds Unlimited, the largest independent financial institution in the State. While the exact nature of the investigation was not disclosed, the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, claimed that the investigation was looking at decisions made "at the highest level."

The repercussions of such an investigation could be enormous, according to Meungette Dosille, professor of Caldari Studies at the University of Caille. "Caldari Funds Unlimited isn't just any financial institution," she explained. "CFU is the largest retirement fund manager in the State, as well as the closest thing the Caldari have to a national central bank. If something is rotten there, it could damage every one of the Big Eight and cripple the entire State."

Even if the allegations prove false, according to Dosille, the fallout could end up causing significant turmoil within the State. The last time anything like this happened was in the Seaguard Financial Incident more than 80 years ago. The Tribunal investigation found that a CFU competitor had engineered a propaganda and corporate espionage campaign to throw doubt on its stability. The worries triggered riots all over the State, and the end result was that the CEP approved "extreme sanction" against Seaguard Financial. Within a year, the megacorporations had dismantled the company, financially and militarily.

Caldari stock markets have already begun to feel the effects of the rumors, as financial stocks have fallen nearly 10% over the last three days. Analysts with the Garoun Investment Bank tell the Scope that if speculation is allowed to continue, they could see as much as a 50% drop from last year's highs.

**Tibus heth creates state loyalty tribunal
reported by ISD Katerina Markova 02.04.2010 15:53:26**

Nonni - State Executor Tibus Heth has ordered the creation of the "State Loyalty Tribunal," an independent committee tasked with investigating national security threats within the highest ranks of Caldari corporate and political power. "Recent events have made it clear that our enemies seek to subvert the State at every level," said Heth. "The State Loyalty Tribunal will bring an end to this and prevent further infiltration."

Asiaineras Isuki, commander of the Home Guard's Surveillance Division, has been appointed to fill the chairman's seat for the new Tribunal. The other members of the committee have not yet been announced, but insiders tell the Scope that they will likely be selected from the ranks of the Caldari Providence Directorate and Patriot-bloc megacorporate security forces.

So far, Lai Dai and Wiyrkomi have pledged to cooperate with the new body, but the other megacorporations have so far declined to comment publicly. Privately, sources at Hyasyoda and Nugoeihuvi have told the Scope that they perceive this as yet another attempt by Heth to encroach upon corporate sovereignty, and that they are preparing legal challenges should the State Loyalty Tribunal target their employees.'

**Republic university scholar causes controversy over pashanai attack
reported by ISD Gaspard Sorelo 02.04.2010 09:18:31**

Hulm - A senior scholar at the Republic University upset many Amarr citizens today over his comments regarding the attack in the Pashanai system a week ago. Erglan Vros, a Krusual professor of social studies at the Republic University, made the controversial remarks during an interview to The Wider Social Review, a respected Gallente-based political analysis journal.

When asked by TWSR on last week's events in the Amarr Empire and their effects on the Minmatar Republic's future, Vros stated that he foresees little to no impact on the current political situation as the seven Minmatar tribes work toward a common government.

"The loss of life may be tragic," said Vros, "but I don't see how the bombing in Amarr will disrupt the reunification process. We are forging ahead with creating a new future for the Minmatar people. Our focus is on our new government, not the problems of the Empire."

When asked to expand upon this comment, Vros continued with the controversial statement, "Given the social factors at play between the Amarr and the Minmatar, it is clear how violent organizations such as the Bloody Hand will continue to spawn. If the Amarr want to look at who brought about such actions, then they should look to themselves."

Since their publication earlier today, Erglan Vros's remarks have been met with outrage among many in the Amarr Empire, including prominent Holders and theological scholars. The Republic University has yet to issue comment on the situation.

**Kaalakiota currency board devalues scrip by 2%
reported by ISD Katerina Markova 03.04.2010 12:52:26**

Nonni - The Kaalakiota corporate bank's currency board voted to devalue Kaalakiota corporate scrip by 2% today, causing panic in several major Kaalakiota enclaves and making clear the ongoing troubles in the Caldari State. While the company's stock has declined nearly 10% in the last week, the board's action appears to have halted the decline for now.

The currency board stated that the change was made to rebalance the corporation's ISK holdings, blaming illegal currency exchanges in the Intaki Syndicate for destabilizing the amount of Kaalakiota scrip in circulation. Despite the financial turmoil, however, the currency board assured the company's investors that no further measures would need to be taken in order to secure the company's ISK holdings. This action has reduced fears that Kaalakiota would need to take significant ISK loans from one of the major independent banks in order to shore up its reserves, which has become a larger worry in light of Caldari Funds Unlimited's ongoing troubles with the CBT.

While the 2% devaluation was significant, many analysts had expected it to be larger, as much as 6% by some estimates. As a result, many investors breathed a sigh of relief even as the other megacorporations expressed concern that Kaalakiota was overextended and urged the company to take a more conservative posture.

Meanwhile, the mood in many of Kaalakiota's major enclaves has been extremely tense, as Home Guard troops have been deployed in force. This troop movement came after at least twelve clashes between corporate police and citizens trying to exchange their Kaalakiota scrip for ISK on various colonies throughout the State, including New Caldari Prime. No serious injuries have been reported, however, and Home Guard commanders have told the Scope that the situation is expected to return to normal within the week.

**Crielere inquiry announced by the caldari providence directorate
reported by ISD Kohm Akino 06.04.2010 13:47:58**

New Caldari -The Caldari Providence Directorate announced an inquiry into the Crielere project today, amid rumors that evidence of "anti-Caldari" activities has been unearthed.

Nugoeihuvi recently began research for a documentary about the Crielere Project, and it is understood that the CPD became interested in the project after a researcher leaked information concerning a private deal between Jacus Roden and an unconfirmed Caldari megacorporation.

The Crielere Project was a joint Caldari and Gallente research project that ended in YC 106 following significant scientific breakthroughs, including the potential of morphite in manufacturing processes. The project ended in controversy after numerous thefts, espionage scandals, and the deaths of the head scientists.

**Reppola, osmon meeting with suvee leadership
reported by ISD Katerina Markova 07.04.2010 13:36:03**

Saisio - Sukuuvestaa news networks are reporting that the company's executive board met with Ishukone CEO Mens Reppola and Hyasyoda CEO Ahtonen Osmon today at the company's Saisio headquarters. The meeting appears to have been planned in secret, or at least called on short notice, as Saisio traffic control was alerted of the two CEOs' arrival only minutes before Reppola's Chimera-class carrier jumped into the system.

Such a high level meeting between the leader of the State's Liberal political bloc and the leader of the Practical bloc's largest megacorporation has set off a torrent of rumors throughout the newsnets. The fact that all three corporations are downplaying the meeting, saying only that the summit was convened to discuss "broad-based collaborations involving a wide range of corporate ventures" has only fueled the fire.

On today's "Games of State," host Shiomiken Savalenta suggested that this was a deliberate attempt on the part of the Liberal bloc to flex its muscle. "Mens Reppola has been CEO of Ishukone for almost a year now, and the company has made great strides toward recovering from the death of [Otro] Gariushi."

Her guest, political analyst Taya Otnen, suggested that the move was more showmanship than substance. "It's important not to make more of this than it really is. Ishukone has recovered somewhat but I can't see SuVee or even the Liberal bloc openly opposing Tibus Heth right now. Reppola and Osmon are playing a dangerous game here, and I can't see [Sukuuvesta CEO] Onita wanting to rock the boat too much."

**Ishukone negotiates terms with federation regulators
reported by ISD Katerina Markova 12.04.2010 16:23:18**

Algogille - Trade negotiators from Ishukone Corporation arrived in Algogille today, where they plan to meet with Federal Administration representatives in order to discuss a relaxation of Federation restrictions put in place shortly after the invasion of Caldari Prime. According to Ishukone, the corporation was invited to meet with the Federal Administration by the president's office last month.

While President Roden has taken a hard line against the Caldari occupation of Caldari Prime, he has made some indications since his election that he would be open to a reconciliation with Caldari business interests, in contrast to his predecessor. This stance has caused some concern among hawks in the Senate, but the reluctance of most Caldari interests to open negotiations with the Federation has seemingly made the point moot until now.

Ishukone's move has caused a wide range of reactions on both sides of the border. According to highly placed sources at the Caldari Providence Directorate, both Executor Tibus Heth and Provist director Suvasemi Aikinen were furious at the news, while the Federal Defense Union released a statement calling any relaxation of the Foiritan administration restrictions "inadvisable" and "a significant threat to national security." Meanwhile, the Federal Chamber of Commerce released a statement saying that a more welcoming business environment in the Federation would "be beneficial to both consumers and the Federation." In the State, several other megacorporations are said to be watching the results of Ishukone's negotiations carefully in order to determine whether they will follow suit.

Negotiations are expected to take several weeks, and both Ishukone and the Federal Administration are playing down the summit, saying that these talks are the opening step of a longer negotiating process. Both parties, however, emphasized that they are optimistic about the results.

**13/04/2010
Ardishapur to begin empire-wide speaking tour**

The Ardishapur Family announced that Yonis Ardishapur will tour the Empire over the coming weeks. The royal heir, whose recent success within the Ammatar Mandate has led to high popularity in that domain, is planning on speaking engagements in a variety of venues and locations.

Coming on the heels of his actions following the terrorist bombing that claimed the life of High Deacon Mervan

Moritok, the heir expressed a desire to "connect with the true people of Amarr and revitalize their faith and loyalty." After discussion with his advisers, it was decided that the speaking tour will allow the Heir to reach the broadest audience.

Over thirty dates have already been announced, with Ardishapur making up to three appearances on the same day in some cases. Demand is likely to be high, as admission is to be free of charge.

The heir has dismissed worries that the extensive tour will affect his governance of House Ardishapur's domains, including the extensive Ammatar Mandate. "I have many capable administrators and governors ruling the family lands. [Heir-Designate] Arim Ardishapur will be overseeing things in my stead."

**Mentas blaque announces senate resignation
reported by ISD Haruziel Tormau 14.04.2010 17:22:02**

Villore - After a long and distinguished career, Senator Mentas Blaque announced today that he would be stepping down from his elected position in the Gallente Senate effective immediately. With over two years remaining in his current term, Senator Blaque's early departure will trigger a special election within his home district to name a successor.

Of greater importance is the loss of Blaque's leadership role as the Head of Senate. For years, Mentas Blaque has had a direct hand in shaping Gallente policy, and has used this influence in advancing his political agenda. An internal election will be held over the next few days, in which the Senate will promote one of its current members to the vacant position.

In his surprise announcement made from the Senate floor at the conclusion of this afternoon's session, Senator Blaque stated that this move is far from a total departure from public life. Indeed, Mentas Blaque will continue to serve as head of the Federal Intelligence Office, an appointment that was re-confirmed by President Jacus Roden. Given the recent acrimony caused by Blaque's unique position in both the legislative and executive branches of government, this move is seen as a way to appease his harshest critics. Some political experts have suggested that this was a back-room deal brokered by President Roden. If true, this move could indicate that Roden has been able to deliver what several attempts at internal Senate censure could not.

More jaded political commentators continue to criticize Blaque however, going so far as to imply that this move allows him to concentrate his energies in the FIO, where he can act without the intervention of the Federation Senate.

**CPD press conference: 'nothing to hide, nothing to fear'
reported by ISD Kohm Akino 15.04.2010 12:56:56**

New Caldari - The Caldari Providence Directorate held a press conference today in an effort to allay fears about its inquiry into the Crielere Project. The inquiry has drawn criticism from members of the public following the detainment of several individuals.

The total number of citizens questioned in the inquiry is unknown thus far, although a CPD spokesman described the inquiry as "comprehensive, concentrated and complete." Former employees on the project, including scientists, laboratory technicians, engineers, and administration staff have been called on to provide witness statements.

According to Metsama Ovai, the CPD spokesperson for this project, "These citizens are not interned. In a few cases, we have given accommodation to some citizens while we conclude our enquiries. A few key witnesses have volunteered to stay on station."

Playing down allegations that this investigation was an inquisition to root out opponents of Heth, the spokesman concluded, "The inquiry is not about who is pro-Heth and who is anti-Heth. It is about finding out the truth about the Crielere Project. If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear."

**Provists call for quafe to lose state corporation status
reported by ISD Sharae Kalani 16.04.2010 20:53:35**

New Caldari - Quafe Company shares dropped today on the major Caldari exchanges following a petition to the Chief Executive Panel by the Caldari Providence Directorate to revoke the Gallente firm's State-granted corporate status.

Citing Quafe's ties to the Federation and its government, the Directorate's petition states Quafe's unique status as the only non-Caldari corporation with domestic corporate sovereignty and its attendant rights pose an "insidious economic and political threat to the stability of the Caldari State."

The CEP tabled consideration of the petition after initial discussions failed to reach a consensus. Sukuuvestaa Corporation in particular seemed opposed. "Quafe is an integral part of the State's economy," said Sirotova Uesi, CFO for the megacorporation. "Gallente or not, suddenly revoking their status could have undesirable

consequences."

Agencourt Ambrulle, Chief Coordinator of Public Relations for Quafe, disagrees with Ms. Uesi's comments. "We currently employ millions of hard-working Caldari citizens [in the State], none of whom would be pleased with, for example, wage loss due to State injunction."

In regards to the CPD's position that Quafe is a liability, Ambrulle stated, "Quafe is not an organ of the Federal government, nor do we act on its behalf."

Nominations begin for head of senate reported by ISD Haruziel Tormau 16.04.2010 12:54:11

Villore - Today's lively Senate session was given over entirely to the internal process of naming and winnowing down candidates for the vacant Head of Senate position. Early debate has identified three potential front-runners for the position.

Vance Opheron, who currently serves as chairman of the Senate Defense Committee, was quickly nominated and seconded by a large contingent of senators who feel his experience on military matters would serve the nation well. In light of the ongoing armed conflict with the Caldari State, this sentiment appears popular. Remnants of the earlier Naval Review scandal surround Opheron, but his position in that matter has since been largely vindicated.

Also nominated was Aulmont Meis, head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. A career diplomat, Meis is seen as a moderate voice within the government. Though some charge that she was too closely associated with former President Souro Foiritan's policies, Meis herself categorically denies this claim. Her voting record shows several key issues in which she did not back Foiritan initiatives, but her harshest critics remain dubious of her legislative independence.

Rounding out the leading candidates is Suvio Bellaron. Viewed as something of an "elder statesman," the conservative Bellaron was one of Mentas Blaque's most stern critics during Blaque's tenure as the Head of Senate. Bellaron was a co-sponsor of the unsuccessful bill that would have forced Blaque to resign one of his two positions.

Several other candidates have been nominated and seconded, but as yet none of them have the backing enjoyed by the three front-runners. The final vote for Head of Senate will take place in three days.

16/04/2010 Ardishapur focuses on "roots of the faith" and "embracing new races into the traditional fold"

Amarr Prime – The first of Yonis Ardishapur's speaking engagements was held today in Dam-Torsad on Amarr Prime. Speaking before a crowd of just under a thousand for little over an hour, the heir has focused mainly on his views on religion, the Empire, and the roles of all peoples in its future.

Ardishapur called on all those attending the event to "remember where you came from. Be you a freed slave, a descendant of slaves, a merchant, a Navy officer, a Holder, or even royalty, it is paramount to remember the roots of the faith. All men are created to serve God and do His will. It is not merely time served that shall be rewarded, but the conviction and faith with which you serve."

Additionally, Ardishapur made clear his views on the other races of the cluster. "All people must one day be brought into God's embrace, through their own choice or through our guiding hand. Embrace those who would learn, defeat those who would make mockery of God's way. Through the penance of deeds, the sins of forefathers may eventually be washed away. This is the Amarr way and it is the future, if the Empire is to thrive."

The heir closed his speech thanking those for attending and promising that he would "never forget the sacrifices made by the true faithful in times of falsehood."

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**Aulmont meis named head of senate
reported by ISD Haruziel Tormau 19.04.2010 10:02:38**

Villore - In a close vote, Senator Aulmont Meis was named as Mentas Blaque's successor to the coveted position of the Head of Senate. Formerly head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Meis has nearly four decades of experience within the assembly.

A graduate of the University of Caille, Meis went on to graduate studies in international relations at the prestigious Hedion University in the Amarr Empire. Mr Meis returned to Caille to pursue his doctorate in diplomatic studies. After serving in the Administration's diplomatic corps for 12 years, during which his experience in negotiating with the Amarr was particularly useful, Meis served a term as one of the Gallente Federation's special envoys to the CONCORD Assembly. This distinguished diplomatic career led to an easy election to an open Senate seat in his home district of Dodenvale, as well as a junior position within the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee.

Since that time, Meis has continued to be an active voice in the Senate. Though some critics allege that he is too willing to negotiate, his voting record indicates his capabilities with taking a hard line against other nations when the situation warrants. Very much a consensus-builder, Meis exhibits none of Mentas Blaque's contentiousness.

With Meis taking on his new role as the Head of Senate, his old position as head of the Foreign Relations Committee will be filled by Renvieve Jolousse, the next most senior member of that committee.

Aulmont Meis will be sworn in during a special ceremony tomorrow morning. President Jacus Roden and a number of other key government officials are expected to be in attendance.

**Crielere project scientist detained by provists
reported by ISD Kohm Akino 21.04.2010 12:54:08**

Kaaputinen - Dr. Tamo Kintonnen, one of the leading research project managers for the Hyasyoda Corporation, has been detained for questioning by Provists at a CBD Sell Division station in Kaaputinen. It is understood that Kintonnen had prepaid for passage on an unidentified ship to Penirgman system in the Domain region.

Kintonnen worked on the Crielere Project as part of a Hyasyoda team concerned with cloaking technology. Although divorced now, he was married at the time to Dr. Sycia Tillbeaux, a Gallente scientist, and they appeared in a joint Federation- and State-funded advertisement promoting the project's diversity. A former colleague of Kintonnen's commented, "Tamo told me how upset he was about the inquiry [into the Crielere Project]. He felt that it was reopening old wounds on both a personal and professional level. I'm not surprised he tried to leave the State before the inquiry reached him."

Hyasyoda Corporation released the following statement about Kintonnen's detainment: "Dr. Kintonnen was on leave when he was abducted by the Provists. There are no restrictions on Hyasyoda employees travelling to the Amarr Empire, and we are content that Dr. Kintonnen was not in possession of any scientific documents. We object most strongly to his incarceration and demand that he is released immediately."

**Senate proposes easing restrictions on quafe corporation
reported by ISD Sharae Kalani 23.04.2010 09:52:58**

Villore - Citing economic concerns, Senator Faron Shu confirmed to the Scope today his intention to introduce legislation that eases restrictions against Quafe Corporation trading and other operations in the Federation.

This announcement comes in the wake of rumors concerning meetings between Quafe Company officials and representatives of both the Federation Senate and the Minmatar Parliament. Sources indicate a similar motion has been brought forward in the Republic.

Speaking outside his office, Senator Shu described a desire to encourage the Gallente firm to increase focus on its business dealings in the Federation and associated territories. "Support for our largest domestic firm during times of economic instability will benefit all Federation citizens," he said. The new legislation, which will be introduced early next week, also includes similar concessions for a number of other Gallente corporations.

Quafe officials could not be reached for comment.

**CEP approves stricter controls on quafe holdings
reported by ISD Sharae Kalani 27.04.2010 11:20:15**

New Caldari - The Chief Executive Panel met again today to discuss the Caldari Providence Directorate's petition to revoke Quafe Company's corporate status. The panel concluded to postpone further consideration until a future, as yet unspecified, date, but a motion was approved to implement stricter auditing of Quafe operations within State borders.

Quafe Company is one of the largest corporations in New Eden and is allowed to operate in the State as a domestic company, subject to the same laws, regulations, and protections as Caldari corporations. The company has a history of cooperating with Caldari business regulations, and thus far no evidence of criminal intent has been presented.

Ikane Hadonei, a member of Wyrkomi Corporation's CEP delegation, said, "Approving the petition's motion at this time seems like a misappropriation of resources. However, if Quafe does pose a problem, these additional audit measures will ensure we'll have adequate time to respond."

The House of Records has already begun implementing the new controls, but a spokesperson indicated the additional data would not "immediately paint a clearer picture" of the Gallente firm. Quafe officials, meanwhile, appear content with the decision. "We have no objections and would be happy to assist the State," Agencourt Ambrulle said, adding, "There is no question the audit will have a favorable outcome for Quafe."

**Crielere project scientist released
reported by ISD Kohm Akino 28.04.2010 15:33:26**

New Caldari - Dr. Tamo Kintonnen, research scientist for Hyasyoda, has been released by Provist investigators after a week of what has been described as "intensive interviews."

The Press Office of Hyasyoda released the following statement about the scientist's detainment:

"We have made a formal complaint to the CPD over this matter. Hyasyoda employees and their professional intellectual property belong to the Corporation. It is against the founding principles of the State for an outside agency to interfere with individual corporations' employees, and we question the legality of this inquiry."

The Caldari Providence Directorate refused to comment on the ongoing Crielere inquiry.

**CBT investigators arrest caldari funds unlimited ceo
reported by ISD Katerina Markova 05.04.2010 19:52:06**

Litiura - Caldari Funds Unlimited CEO Jaan Omura was taken into custody this morning by investigators from the Caldari Business Tribunal on charges of treason, espionage, fraud, and embezzlement. The arrests accompanied a continuing investigation into financial malfeasance at the State's largest independent bank.

A Tribunal release laid out the charges against Omura, which stem from a series of "unusual financial transactions" between accounts registered to Omura at Caldari Funds Unlimited, the State and Region Bank, the Garoun Investment Bank, and a number of other smaller financial institutions in the State, Federation, and the Intaki Syndicate. In addition, the Tribunal also stated that Omura had been documented meeting with known Gallente agents on at least four separate occasions, and that her personal clearances had been used to access a number of low-level House of Records databases.

Reaction from the Caldari megacorporations has generally been in the form of shock. Indications appear to be that few people outside the CBT saw this investigation and the subsequent arrests coming before rumors began to leak out earlier this month. Both Kaalakiota and the Directorate have declined to comment, but Wyrkomi CEO Kuruta Irio demanded that the Tribunal hand over their initial findings to the Chief Executive Panel immediately. Nugoeihuvi CEO Morimo Yagala released a statement saying that the charges were "extremely troubling" and demanded a "thorough and expedient" investigation in order to allay the fears of the market.

Omura released a statement through her lawyer denying all charges, saying that she was not involved in any criminal acts at the financial giant, nor was she aware that any of the people she had met with were connected to Gallente intelligence. She blamed the charges on "political pressure to create a scapegoat" and called for an internal review of the Tribunal investigation.

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Sansha invasion underway reported by ISD Zachary Zain 13.05.2010 03:09:55

New Eden – Over the last two days, Sansha incursions have been reported in multiple systems across New Eden. On 12.05.112, four more raids took place, with True Slave transports apparently abducting people from the planets below.

Niarja, Balle, Tama and Kamela systems were attacked by Sansha's Nation today. Sansha's Nation fielded an estimated 50 vessels in Niarja, mostly of Sansha custom design, but brought in carriers similar to the Amarr Archon in Tama and Kamela. The fleets appear to have entered the target systems through extremely unstable wormholes that seem to be under Nation control; capsuleers report that they are blocked to non-Sansha ships and seem to close if the Sansha forces are destroyed, or when they achieve their goal and depart.

Sansha Nightmare engages capsuleer resistanceNiarja VII was the first of the attacks where it was confirmed that the Sansha had abducted approximately 50,000 citizens from the planet's surface. Imiarr Timshae, one of the many capsuleers who came to the system's defence, said "...The speed at which capsuleers arrived was admirable, but being on the scene there were simply not enough. Too many pilots were concerned with destroying the battleship-class attackers and the transports slipped through." The Sansha fleets abducted an estimated 100,000 in Tama and another 50,000 in Kamela, bringing the total count of people taken to at least 200,000. Sansha have been alleged to implant captives to create more True Slaves, but their intentions for these captives are as yet unknown.

Tama appears to be the first verified system in the current set of raids where an Archon-class carrier was deployed by Nation forces with a full support fleet of battleships, battlecruisers, cruisers and frigates. Again capsuleers of all races banded together to defend the system from the common enemy. Pilots on the scene report that a Scorpion pilot from the Caldari Navy successfully hacked into at least one of the Nightmare battleships, causing it and some of its fellows to turn on the carrier. Gallente pilots in the fleet then allegedly turned on the Scorpion pilot, possibly trying to obtain the unknown technology he used to accomplish this feat.

Another Nation Archon and support fleet were deployed in Kamela, but beaten back swiftly by a combined defence. Once the Sansha fleet had been routed, an Imperial Navy commander gave orders for all allied pilots to open fire on the Minmatar who only moments before they had considered fleet mates. "This is Admiral Ihsam Dasirel of the Amarr Navy High Command elite taskforce. All faithful squadrons are hereby instructed to engage all Minmatar Republic ships."

Julianus Soter, founder of the Synenose Accord, whose channel SYNEpublic has become an unofficial central point of coordination for the capsuleer defence fleets, believes he may have some insight into the Sansha. "We have suspicions that these attacks are somehow related to the system the Ducia Foundry attack reported several days ago... The system with the locus signature of J235456" and is asking all pilots to be on the lookout for a wormhole that may lead to this system.

Mr Soter is also believed to be in possession of a series of leaked DED documents. These documents, known as the ISHAEKA Leaks, were published with the message "CONCORD is hiding something from you. Look further. Spread the truth." and contain information on a CONCORD investigation into directed transmissions from Stain into Gallente Federation space. Following public statements from the Synenose Accord on the Inter-galactic Summit, further ISHAEKA documents were leaked that seemed to indicate that the Synenose Accord has been placed under CONCORD surveillance. Further, a statement in ISHAEKA-0018 alleging the agreement of a media blackout with CONCORD's news outlets has been denied by the Interstellar Correspondents' Vice Admiral, Serathu Ashke.

One message has appeared at least twice in communications with the Sansha. Slave 32152 has twice referred to "a mistake" that is being corrected. "Capsuleers are the heirs to a mistake, and we are the correction." While the

most obvious reference would seem to refer to the four Empires attacking and nearly exterminating the Nation years ago, capsuleers have postulated that capsule technology itself might be the error to which the Sansha refer.

Pilots deployed in systems around the Minmatar Republic after the attack in Kamela, attempting to anticipate the next target, but no further attacks have occurred at the time of writing. Six systems - Kaaputinen, Frarn, Renyn, Ashab, Eystur and Urlen - were reported by capsuleers as having been attacked on the 11th, with another four systems - Niarja, Balle, Tama and Kamela - being invaded on the 12th, when over 200,000 people were abducted in a continuing series of apparently unprovoked attacks by the Sansha. A possible seventh attack on the 11.05.112 in the 3-CE1R of the Jovian Empire, remains unconfirmed.

Sansha incursions on the increase reported by ISD Zachary Zain | 2010.05.16 07:57:57

Intaki, Placid - In the latest (at the time of writing, 15.05.112) of the incursions by the Sansha "Harvest Fleet," two Chimera-class vessels and support fleet were destroyed with the help of a Nyx and Aeon from Cry Havoc.

11.05.112 Kaaputinen – First recorded incursion into capsuleer space. This was followed by incursions in Frarn, Renyn, Ashab, Eystur and Urlen.

12.05.112 Balle - No information currently held.

Niarja - Approximately 50,000 citizens abducted.

Tama – Archon-class carrier deployed by Nation forces – Estimated 100,000 citizens abducted.

Kamela - Imperial Navy commander gave orders for all allied pilots to open fire on the Minmatar who only moments before they had considered fleet mates.

13.05.112 Incursions took place in Auga, Penirgman, Gyng, Abudhan and:

Umokka – Evidence of Sansha communications scrambling technology. Colony on planet 2 in the system totally wiped out – Estimated 150,000 citizens abducted.

Sansha's Nation forces are engaged 14.05.112 Intaki – Confirmed deployment of 2 carriers by Nation forces.

Penirgman - No dropships, believed by many capsuleers to be a diversionary attack whilst Nation forces prepared to invade Teonsude system.

Teonsude – Estimated 150,000 citizens abducted.

Arnon – CONCORD pilot had ship destroyed by capsuleers after the vessel's commanding officer Sutola Endoma who told the pilots "Any conversation regarding the situation that may or may not have happened in Arnon is strictly forbidden." Endoma also refused to vacate the system when ordered to by the Federal Navy.

Hek – Estimated 25,000 citizens abducted with no CONCORD presence recorded at the scene.

Vevelonel – Two capital class vessels in hostile fleet.

15.05.11 Odatrik – Estimated 25,000 citizens abducted.

Tama – Slave Tama01 appeared for the first time, piloting a Wyvern-class supercarrier that was destroyed by forces from Cry Havoc, Rote Kapelle and Advocated Destruction amongst others. Many have pointed out the correlation between the Nation's first use of a Caldari-originating capitals and supercapitals and extraordinarily rapid elevation of the slaves from Tama to capsuleer status. Taken from the planet raided in Tama only a few days previously, the True Slave capsuleer Tama Slave01 returned to the system and talked to capsuleers in local, stating "Master has allowed me to return, to speak. We plan to uplift humanity. To correct the mistake that is the capsuleers."

Melichor Duraldi asked Tama Slave01 "...By what means do you create your wormholes?" to which Slave Tama01 replied "That is not for you to know", which makes many capsuleers believe that they do indeed have the technology to either create or control wormholes.

Intaki – The latest incursion (at the time of writing which included two capital vessels was repelled various capsuleers, including a Nyx and Aeon from Cry Havoc.

The Intaki incursion happened in the small hours of the morning of the 15th. While capsuleers have many theories on means to predict the time and place of the next incursion, no-one has yet publically announced any successful insight, save that target planets to date have all been temperate in climate.

When the next raid is due, if there is a next one, no-one knows, but capsuleers and naval forces remain vigilant.

**Umokka raided by sansha's nation, abductions escalate
reported by ISD Najax Lergazin | 2010.05.16 07:25:40**

Umokka, Lonetrek - In the evening of 112.05.13, a Sansha's Nation raiding fleet attacked Umokka II and VIII simultaneously. During the raid, which lasted no more than thirty minutes, an estimated 50,000 citizens were abducted from planet VIII, while the Sansha claimed that Ummoka II was "completely harvested," and some 100,000 people have been reported missing.

Sansha Vessel Orbiting Umokka VIII According to Yoshitaka Moromuo, who was leading Ishuk-Raata Enforcement Division's response fleet, the Nation vessels entered Umokka through a wormhole that opened in close proximity to Umokka VIII. After few minutes hostile battleships were also reported orbiting Umokka II.

Capsuleer defence forces made it to the scene fairly swiftly and were called to the defence of planet VIII by Sutola Endoma of CONCORD, while Koja Tsutariba of the Caldari Navy worked with forces defending planet II.

After defenders moved to reinforce Umokka VIII, an unknown vessel ambushed Koja Tsutariba and outgoing transmissions from his vessel were jammed. The remnants of the so-called "Harvest Fleet" were reinforced by further Nation battleships and an Archon-class carrier. Yoshitaka Moromuo said "How they managed to enter high-security space with it is beyond me."

While numerous pilots present at the fray confirmed that they had both seen and fired upon Sansha vessels, CONCORD official Sutoma Endoma (speaking in apparent defiance of a CONCORD media blackout) dismissed the event as just a capsuleer engagement and declined to confirm any reports of abductions from Umokka. "Reports of landing parties and the abduction of citizens cannot be confirmed at this time."

**Capsuleer conference to address sansha harvests
reported by ISD Clarity Brown | 2010.05.17 19:11:00**

Yulai, Genesis - At 04:30 on 18.05.112, a conference will begin in "The Summit" virtual reality channel. The conference, formally titled "The Strategic Accord on Re-Emerging Powers" aims to formulate a united strategic posture for capsuleers of all Empires that can be deployed against both the current Sansha raids and possible future Sleeper threats.

The conference will be hosted by Abbess Ashar KorAzor of the Order of the Blessed Sisters of Amarr, in partnership with Julianus Soter (founder of the Synenose Accord [SYNE] and current CEO of Moira. corporation) and Justin Vallar, the current CEO of SYNE.

The conference currently has 4 chairpersons chosen to represent each of the four main cultural blocs of New Eden: Graelyn, former Admiral of Aegis Militia for the Amarr; Dex Nederland of Lai Dai Infinity Systems for the Caldari; Kaleigh Doyle of Murder Dolls for the Gallente and Evanda Char of Re-Awakened Technologies Inc for the Minmatar.

Abbess KorAzor has invited any and all capsuleers involved in fighting the recent Sansha raids to attend, along with military and scientific personnel from the Empires of New Eden, members of the press and other enemies of Sansha's Nation. Sansha representatives are not expected to be permitted to speak at the conference.

The Strategic Accord on Re-Emerging Powers conference, which starts at 04:30 on 18.05.112, will run in The Summit channel for the coming week, with topic announcements and summaries being published on the Intergalactic Summit periodically.

Sansha kuvakei's resurrection: truth or trickery? **reported by ISD Caleb Kang | 2010.06.03 21:51:32**

Yulai - Sansha's Nation continues to assault settlements of all four empires, with the total number of abductions rising into the millions. The sudden intensity and frequency of the attacks has fueled rampant theories about their motives and the nature of their resurgence. Most distressing to some is the possible revival of Sansha Kuvakei.

The founder of the Nation, Kuvakei has long been assumed dead, killed during the invasion by a coalition of the empires under the then-nascent CONCORD. While his corpse was never discovered, the likelihood of his survival was considered "near zero."

However, the appearance of a man identifying himself as "Master Kuvakei" on the Intergalactic Summit has whipped up a frenzy of speculation. The speaker, while not directly using the name Sansha Kuvakei, appears similar to historical images of Sansha and refers to the Nation as "my Nation" in his brief, two-line statement. Additionally, many of the attacking Sansha pilots have spoken of their Master Kuvakei in the present tense. Some experts remain skeptical, however, that it could truly be Sansha Kuvakei.

Aralin Jick, an expert on the Nation with the Ministry of Internal Order, believes it is all a smokescreen. "The Nation uses command interfaces to control their True Slaves, who are programmed to follow the orders of Sansha Kuvakei," he explained. "The True Slaves may believe they are receiving orders from Sansha, but in reality it's little more than some taskmaster doing an impersonation. "

Despite Jick's skepticism, many citizens across New Eden are concerned. A CONCORD official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, believes Master Kuvakei is the actual Sansha. "Anyone saying it's not Sansha is deluding themselves. I know many people say it's impossible he could have survived this long, but it's not unheard of in this day and age."

Imperial fleets on high alert following evidence of sansha capital fleet in jove space **reported by ISD Sheliak Mesarthim | 2010.06.26 21:31:24**

Amarr - In reaction to the data acquired by capsuleer Mouse Nell, indicating a major Sansha military presence within the borders of the Jove Empire, the Amarr Empire has set all its military forces to a state of high alert. This marks the first time the entirety of the Empire's main capital force - The Imperial Domain Fleet - has been mobilized since the invasion in YC110.

In addition to the activation of the Imperial fleets, Amarr Certified News reports that the regional forces of the Royal Houses have mobilized similarly, and that representatives of the fleets of the various Houses have been in meetings with the Ministry of War. In response to the news, Court Chamberlain Pomik Haromi spoke on behalf of the Empress in announcing a special delegation to be sent to the CONCORD Assembly. The delegation, headed by Minister of War Perimum Aryn, was said by the Chamberlain to "speak for the interests of Amarr and the people of the Empire, and will stand with unwavering faith in matters of war."

Honored composer to commemorate empress **reported by ISD Ria Nicaea | 2010.06.29 13:48:35**

Amarr Prime - Renowned composer Khitian Maritak, whose numerous canticles earned her the coveted Theology Council title "The Holy Inspired" and whose recent historical opera, "The Trials of Jiustan and Daro," won acclaim across the cluster, has announced the her latest creation, a choral titled "Sarum Symphony."

Jamyl Sarum's mysterious and explosive return to power two years ago signalled the beginning of a new era for the Amarr Empire. This symphonic piece is to be performed in the Grand Nave of the Basilica of Saint Nhyron on Mekhios by the imperial choir Voices of the Sefrim, and will be directed by Maritak herself. The composer created the choral over the course of seven exhaustive months to commemorate the event. The Khanid-born Maritak has declared the piece to be her "magnum opus."

Criticism has been levelled for the composer's choice of venue: Saint Nhyron was a notoriously outspoken opponent of the Sarum family during the last Ardishapur reign, though no ill will has existed between the houses in recent centuries. Maritak insists that her selection of the building is purely artistic, that the "Sarum Symphony" was written specifically for performance in the basilica in order to utilize the church's striking acoustic properties, and that the contentious history has no bearing on the choice.

The symphony's debut performance will be held on Lightbringer's Eve, a planetary holiday celebrating the first day of springtime. Invitation to the event is limited to members of the Theology Council, the Privy Council, heirs, and the Empress herself. A live broadcast will be held across the Empire by the ACN for the benefit of all Amarr citizens. Security for the event is expected to be tight in light of the recent attack by the Bloody Hands of Matar and the ongoing Sansha threat.

**Luminaire's market affected by nation raids
reported by ISD Khepri Shaleigh | 2010.07.01 12:53:21**

Luminaire - Retailers in Luminaire blame recent Sansha raids for sharply declining sales this week across almost all sectors. As the Sansha attacks have increased a new poll finds that people have cut back their shopping time. Some have also stopped buying altogether. Eighty percent of those polled in a recent Garoun Investment Bank study say they are "somewhat concerned" about Sansha incursions. A majority of those asked said they have stopped buying luxury items and no longer eat out. Of the remaining Twenty percent, a clear majority stated confidence in the Federation Navy as the reason they are not concerned.

"Lack of confidence is always a major factor in sales," said Mattiu Lamont of the Fraise Institute, a research group that monitors market trends in the Federation on behalf of the Garoun Investment Bank. "People are scared, and nothing can hurt an economy more than fear."

Asked if he felt this would be a long-term trend, Allyx Godrieu, an adjunct professor at the University of Caille, said, "If you buy into the fear and panic syndrome, you are accepting that business will decline, and that will affect sales." Pointing to another study by a consumer advocacy group, he said, "Arms sales are up, travel companies and transportation companies are booming. Business adapts and some people will see opportunity when others panic. This is just a small bump in the road."

**Sansha sympathizers arrests sparks legal debate
reported by ISD Khepri Shaleigh | 2010.07.05 04:13:24**

New Caldari - A State appeals court yesterday backed the Provist's power to indefinitely detain a citizen captured on State soil without any criminal charges being laid. The ruling came at the hearing of 6 men arrested last week, who officials said were involved in a plot to lure Caldari citizens into space where they were to be offered to Sansha's Nation.

A host of civil liberties groups weighed in on the accused men's behalf, calling on the State to supply evidence and charges. The presiding judge disagreed, though, stating that such authority is vital during this time to protect the State from Sansha incursions. The men, four Gallente and two Caldari, will continue to be held without charges.

Rikko Sattonnen, chief counsel for the Caldari Legal Foundation, said the ruling "gave the Provists the needed flexibility in dealing with war criminals. You can't treat them as though they are just another criminal defendant." Adivaan Kouver, senior associate at Citizen's Rights First, said the ruling "could lead to the Provists being allowed to hold anyone who, for example, accessed what they consider the wrong kind of reading from a database."

Laak Katomi, a Provist Spokesman, gave no evidence and few details, saying only: "All of the State's security agencies are actively working to protect the Caldari people from the Sansha threat."

**False media report sets off panic
reported by ISD Khepri Shaleigh | 2010.07.08 06:14:41**

Pator – A story carried by The Scope news service and relayed by various media outlets throughout the cluster sparked panic today on Pator. The story, which turned out to be fraudulent, gave explicit details about a Sansha fleet on its way to invade the Minmatar homeworld. The local stock market on the planet took a steep dive following the false news story. Some areas saw mass looting in their retail districts, while fires broke out in some residential districts in major metropolitan areas. The confusion did not dissipate when officials confirmed the news stories to be rumors.

By far the worst incident was in Liberton, a relocation camp for recently freed slaves, where local media reported Sansha dropships would be landing at their location. Approximately one million refugees evacuated their settlement camp in response to the reports. Camera drones showed large crowds of refugees heading toward the bridge leading out of camp when they suddenly surged forward. During the crush, iron railings on the bridge gave way, and hundreds of people fell into the water. Many victims, mostly women, children or elderly, were crushed or drowned.

Officials had suggested that someone in the crowd triggered the stampede by saying they had seen a Sansha dropship. Survivors later confirmed this report.

The Liberton story has been traced to a Scope employee who has now disappeared. According to investigators, this man is also the source of the original story that went over the news services in the early hours of the day. The Scope has issued a public apology and has vowed to help officials in their search for the missing reporter.

Former ammatar elite speak about defecting to the republic reported by ISD Caleb Kang | 2010.07.12 14:41:22

The invasion of the Ammatar Mandate by the Minmatar elders, an event which took place two years ago in YC110, is perhaps best known today for having allowed millions to reclaim their heritage as part of the Nefantar Tribe. Among those millions were thousands of the Mandate's elite; former overseers, planetary governors, and Holders in all but name.

The most difficult thing for those involved was making the move. "My family had been given a special station in the Mandate," said Rafin Chorda, a slave owner who defected along with his household and a large number of slaves. "An Amarrian would have never called us a Holder, but that's what we were. We had wealth, power, and status. I could have lived an opulent life, as could my children, and their children, and so on for generations. But it would have always been under the shadow of the Empire. I couldn't stomach it."

The sentiment is shared by many. "I was a leading member of the Mandate," said Ramius Throten, a former district governor. "But to the Empire, I was nothing. I had to bow my head to the lowest Holder, one whose only holdings were worthless patches of dirt in some dead-end low-sec system. It was a demeaning life, no matter how much power I supposedly held. The Republic is the true home of my people; I had to return there when given the chance."

Despite good reasons to defect, the decision was not easy for some. "It weighed heavily on me for months," said Omad Durgen, a former Vice-Admiral in the Ammatar Fleet. "I gave up much for an uncertain future. But what price is too great for a man's freedom? I was not called a slave, but I was one, no matter how hard I tried to pretend otherwise. Now I am free. I have come to terms."

Lists of sansha abductees increasingly inaccurate reported by ISD Caleb Kang | 2010.07.13 13:47:41

Yulai - As Sansha's Nation continues its raids into Empire space, the number of those abducted rises. While official numbers report over two million missing, the stark reality is that many of those abducted remain simply a number on a ledger.

"Approximately one million are reported missing from Schmaeel," stated a Kor-Azor family official tasked with keeping track of the raids. "However, we have a list of names numbering barely half that many. We know the numbers are right, but we do not know the full identities of those missing."

The Amarr Empire isn't alone in having these problems, as large numbers of missing civilians from colonies in the Republic, Federation, and State also remain unidentified. According to recent reports, nearly thirty percent of the colonists abducted by Sansha's Nation remain unidentified by their empires.

"It's a simple matter of logistics," said Sister Amia Kathis of the Servant Sisters of EVE. "Many of the colonies being assaulted by the Nation are remote and poorly defended. Census reports may be years or even decades old. Say a new colonist arrives days before the Nation attacks. Who will miss them? Who will report them missing? What records will state they were ever there?"

Kathis is one of many in the SSoE who is trying to uncover the identities of those missing. "We owe it to those poor people to figure out who they are. Imagine suddenly vanishing from existence and no one caring. It's a terrifying thought." According to Kathis, efforts have been stymied by the empires' reluctance to allow outsiders access to census records.

Among the four empires, the Caldari State has been the most diligent about identifying its missing citizens. Currently, nearly 90% of those taken from Caldari worlds have been identified. Asked for an explanation, PR representative Yukuro Shiba of NOH said, "All colonists are employees of a corporation. Discovering who is missing is a simple task of cross-checking corporate rosters."

Calls for return of coalition of empires go unanswered reported by ISD Caleb Kang | 2010.07.14 16:12:49

As Sansha's Nation continues its renewed offensive against the citizens of New Eden, many have called for the four empires to band together, as in centuries past, and destroy the threat as one. These calls, however, appear to have so far fallen on deaf ears.

"Sansha's Nation was a threat over a century ago," said Professor Fontine Mereux of the University of Caille, a leading expert on the history of CONCORD. "But in the cluster's darkest hour, all of the empires banded together to smash them. Sansha's Nation is now resurgent. For too long they've been allowed to fester in Stain. It's time that the four empires band together once more to wipe it out."

Thousands of others have raised similar calls to arms, believing that the only way to counter the Nation's threat

is through cooperation between the four empires, but years of mistrust and fighting between the empires has made that path appear unlikely.

"If it wasn't Sansha's Nation doing it, it'd be the Amarr," stated Jorel Yat, a high-ranking Vherokior tribesman. "I say the Republic should focus on stopping the Nation from attacking us and let the others worry about their own citizens. Make us a less appealing target and we'll be left alone."

Gugiere Ladux, a Gallente politician, said, "I heard the Caldari Navy managed to hack an invading force and turn the Nation's agents against each other. If they really wanted to help, why haven't they turned this technique over to the rest of the cluster? If we sent our Navy into Stain, what's to stop the Caldari from hacking the Sansha to kill us first?"

The effort has not been aided by CONCORD, who continue to insist publicly that the Nation is not a threat. "At the present time, CONCORD does not require additional empire-provided manpower to deal with pirate incursions," a short statement from the CONCORD Assembly read.

Many nefantar elite find adapting to republic life difficult reported by ISD Caleb Kang | 2010.07.15 13:23:54

Following the Elder Invasion over two years ago, thousands of the Ammatar Mandate's former elite defected to the Minmatar Republic. For many of them, the road to reintegration into the Minmatar tribal system has been lined with hardship.

Stripped of their former power and coming to a nation that views them with centuries of built-up suspicion and hatred, the Elite have been faced with challenges that many of them have not been able to overcome. "I oversaw an entire planet in the Mandate," said Ramius Throten, a former Mandate district governor. "I did what I could to assist my fellow Minmatar. I made sure the slaves kept in my district were well treated. I turned a blind eye to raiders whenever I could, which wasn't often enough for some. Despite my efforts, I have been ostracized in the Republic."

Throten is one of many who has been soured by the prejudice he has faced. Though he spent over a year living in the Republic, he has recently immigrated to the Gallente Federation. "In the Empire, I was derisively called 'minnie' and treated as inferior to any Amarrian. In the Republic, I was called slaver and always viewed as a traitor to my people, even though I'd come back." He added, "I had everything and now I have nothing. There are days I wish I had never defected. At least in the Federation, I can live in relative peace."

While some have taken Throten's path and left for the Federation, others have stuck with the Republic. "I can't run back to the Mandate," said Sadamang Suh, a former Ammatar Consulate official. "My family and I left most of our belongings behind. We had so little time to evacuate. We are penniless, so we cannot leave. I have a janitorial job with Eifyr and Co. It's better than nothing. Things will get better. They can't get any worse."

Aftermath of nation attacks "eerie" and "disturbing" reported by ISD Caleb Kang | 2010.07.16 16:41:02 | NEW

Ation - Nearly 750,000 Federation citizens were abducted from the Ation system by Sansha's Nation in a recent raid. Much like in previous raids the Nation left the attacked sites nearly devoid of human life, carrying off everyone from the newly born to the elderly.

Estigone, a settlement of nearly 200,000, was one of the main sites of the Sansha attack. Before the attack it was a bustling industrial community in growth, centered around several factories belonging to Aliastra. Now it lies deserted, with nearly every one of its citizens taken during the Nation raid.

Across the settlement, evidence of its previous inhabitants is easy to come by. Half-eaten dinners sit rotting on tables. Holoplayers loop their reels unceasingly. Computer screens display incomplete messages. Unfiled reports sit on office desks. Family pets claw at cages and gnaw at restraints.

Perhaps most baffling is the lack of evidence for any resistance. Though Estigone had an organized and armed police force, there is little indication that they mustered any opposition to the Nation's raiders. Weapons remain unfired in their lockers, the safeties still on. While there are some small signs of conflict, such as blaster holes and scattered debris from small explosions, much of the city is undamaged.

"It's almost as if everyone just got up and peacefully walked into the Sansha dropships," said Therion Niemann, a representative of the Sisters of EVE who was dispatched to search for survivors. "I've seen some disturbing battle sites before, but nothing has been quite so eerie as this."

Nefantar elite make best of their situation

reported by ISD Caleb Kang | 2010.07.18 13:27:59

While many of the ex-Ammatar elite who returned to the Republic following the Elder War have found the transition difficult, there are a good many who have retained the optimism that led them to defecting in the first place.

Omad Durgen was a Vice-Admiral in the Ammatar Fleet before the Elder Invasion. He and a group of loyal officers commandeered a ship and defected to the Republic, even aiding the Elders for a brief time before the ship sustained too much damage to continue. "It was glorious," Durgen said. "We all thought we'd come to the Republic as heroes. The wayward sons, returning with the heads of our enemies held high. It wasn't to be so."

Durgen, like many others, found that the long-held beliefs and hatreds that had developed in the Republic were difficult to overcome. "It didn't matter that I had defected. All that mattered was that, at one time, I had fought the Minmatar on the side of the Empire. I was a murderer, a butcher, a race-traitor," he said. "I hoped to enlist in the Republic Fleet, but they would not have me. I was a security risk, they said. A potential spy for the Empire. "

Durgen has been able to find work, as a low-grade security operative for the Minmatar Mining Corporation. "It's respectable," he said. "It doesn't pay well and I'm constantly being watched by my superiors. Many of my co-workers hate me for the crimes they believe I committed against the Republic, but I will win them over eventually. It will take hard work. I never expected this to be easy."

Former nefantar holders attempting to become tribal leaders

reported by ISD Caleb Kang | 2010.07.21 15:51:05

The vast majority of Ammatar who returned to the Republic to reform the Nefantar Tribe were commoners in the Mandate. They are now coalescing into the new tribal leadership. Among those former Elite who defected, however, are some who believe they should lead the tribe's rebirth.

"I was more or less a Holder in the Mandate," said Rafin Chorda, who was the owner of a large number of slaves during his time in the Mandate. "I know how to organize the masses, how to keep proper account of funds and manpower. I have experience in diplomacy and business negotiations. I've had to face down Amarrian Holders and Caldari businessmen. I am the right man to lead the Nefantar people."

Many of his fellow Nefantar are distrustful of Chorda, however. "He owned slaves," said Domash Kroil, a political opponent. "How can he face the leaders of other tribes? How can they not look down on him? The Nefantar would never achieve anything with men like Chorda in charge. We would forever be burdened by the dark treachery that those like him perpetrated against the Minmatar people."

Chorda is dismissive of such claims. "I was a kind and just master. I was less a master and more of a caretaker. I rescued abused slaves and rehabilitated them. I gave them proper care and attention. When the time came, I freed them with the help of the Elders."

Opinions from Chorda's former slaves are mixed. "He wasn't the best master I ever had," said one former slave of Krusual descent. "But he wasn't the worst, either. Can't say it'd be easy to deal with him on even terms now. Doubt I'd be too fair with him."

Despite people's generally low opinions of him, Chorda remains confident he can rise to the top of the Tribe's ranks. "I have enough supporters," he said, "who know that I will provide the best leadership the Nefantar can ask for. Some will always doubt me, but after I show my talents, many doubters will quickly come to realize how wrong they were."

Thukker political integration sees difficulties and delays

reported by ISD Gaspard Sorelo | 2010.07.29 17:34:26

Pator – Sanmatar Maleatu Shakor publicly expressed frustration after yet another in a series of delays plagued negotiations with Thukker tribal leaders. For months the Sanmatar's staff has been moving forward in trying to assemble a new Council to represent the seven Minmatar Tribes. "It was my fervent hope that this process would go more smoothly," said Shakor, "but dealing with representatives of the Thukker tribe in particular has imposed a number of difficulties."

Amongst the problems that the Sanmatar's staff have had to deal with is a lag in communications. While FTL transmission technology makes interstellar communication relatively simple, the demands on the time of a Thukker caravan master are many. Be it in dealing with coordinating fleet movements, overseeing the maintenance of generations-old vessels, or engaging in protracted commercial negotiations that impact the livelihood of their entire caravan, Thukker tribal leaders take a very active role in the day-to-day administration of caravan affairs.

A further difficulty is in simply identifying who amongst the Thukker chieftains is best suited to speak for the Tribe as a whole. Over the last several months Trust Partners CEO Einnar Aeboul has emerged as the leading voice for the tribe, but internal support for him is far from universal. As masters of their own fleets, Thukker leaders tend towards fierce independence. Issuing a sharp retort to Sanmatar Shakor's expression of frustration, caravan master Jagnus Drur hotly replied, "the Brutor may bow to the rule of a single strong man, but we Thukker are masters of our own destinies."

While some progress has been made, staff members within the Shakor administration expressed little confidence that a final agreement on the final form of the Tribal Council would be forthcoming in the near term.

Settled thukker deal with tribal identity crisis

reported by ISD Haruziel Tormau | 2010.08.31 17:17:44

Rens - As Thukker tribesmen integrate into Minmatar society in greater numbers, many are giving up their nomadic roots and settling down. This has raised questions within the tribal community as to what it truly means to be a Thukker.

Hugh Gunnur, a Thukker by birth, has relocated his family to Symhafen, a metropolis on the bustling planet of Rens. He sees the move as worthwhile. "My family have been maintenance techs on the station in EO2-IK for four generations. We were never part of a caravan, and aside from one of my great-uncles, no one in my family lived a nomadic lifestyle." He further indicated that living on Rens was a significant improvement over station life. "I never have to worry about leaking atmosphere here."

But even Gunnur admits he is concerned about maintaining his tribal identity. Many traditions developed and passed down by space-faring Thukkers are difficult or impossible in planet-bound life. For instance, many Thukker feel the Voluval ceremony, central to the personal identity of most Minmatar, should be administered only in space. Some extreme interpretations require the ritual to be performed in vac-suits, so strong is the Thukker affinity for the void.

"My son's almost old enough, but I can't afford to book passage on a ship for him to undergo Voluval properly," lamented Gunnur. "Does that mean he's not really a Thukker?" Gunnur admits he doesn't know, and that the subject is a sore one within his household.

Worse, planet-bound Thukker find themselves increasingly estranged from the politics of their space-faring brethren. Many have expressed concern that nomadic caravan masters no longer represent their needs. Some have even considered the drastic step of adopting into other, more sedentary tribes like the Vherokior.

Regardless of the outcome, the Thukker tribe as a whole will continue to struggle with its identity and place in modern Minmatar society.

Media watch-group outraged

reported by ISD Khepri Shaleigh | 2010.09.01 17:39:43

PATOR - The Minmatar People's Theatre announced their new season today, drawing fire from media watchgroups outraged at the inclusion of what they call a "rascist" play. The MPT, who were the last group to receive funding from the now-defunct parliament, will stage a version of the 600-year-old 'Plantation' by Ammatar author Dekkameron. Though the play is considered by many a classic, at least one of the groups, Equality in Action, plans to protest the show. "There is no redeeming social value in this play whatsoever, and it is disgusting that government money would go towards perpetuating racist stereotypes" said Keinnan Bakkia the group's spokesman.

Sarum symphony a glorious triumph

reported by ISD Ria Nicaea | 2010.09.02 09:55:11

Mekhios - From the hushed and pensive opening notes to the stirring triumphal finale, Khitian Maritak's choral Sarum Symphony held listeners entranced for the entirety of its three-hour length. "I wanted to express [the Empress'] rise to power as the journey of her lifetime, to make the audience feel her experience," the honored composer stated later in an open interview. Home viewers may not have received quite as powerful an experience as the attendees, but the program has been recorded to produce the closest possible facsimile and will be available next month for purchase.

Featuring the vocal talents of soloists Ameyn Jural and Louwi Kil, the Symphony presented an immersive experience incorporating subtle lighting to enhance moods and utilizing to their fullest extent the unusual acoustical properties of St Nhyron's Basilica. The extensive twelfth movement, expressing the climactic battle above Mekhios, has already been called a "marvel" of precision composition, with singers representing both the Sarum fleet and the Minmatar Elder fleet passing around and amongst the audience in a recreation of the chaos and unpredictability of the fight, and culminating with the Elder fleet singers faltering and scattering from the

Sarum singers' concentrated sound. Members of the audience flinched from the blinding golden light which was projected from behind soloist Kil, filling the Grand Nave with radiance recalling the Empress's finishing blow to the Elder fleet titan.

Impressions from the audience have ranged from "moving" to "breathtaking." Privy Council member Arem Mecshilad enthused, "I have never heard -- experienced -- something so powerful. The five minutes of total darkness with the single soloist [Jural] representing Jamyl's lost years was especially poignant." No reaction has yet been issued by the Empress, though she and her retinue were in attendance in full formal regalia.

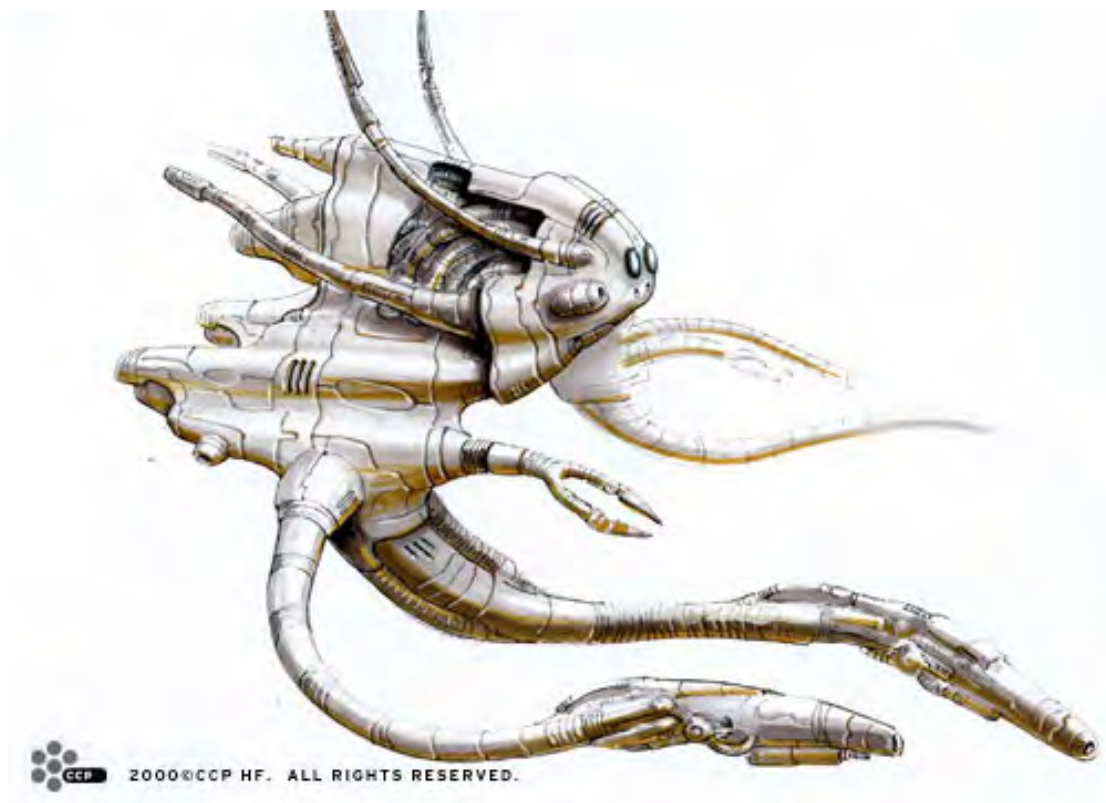
Composer Maritak appeared unconcerned by the lack of comment. "The Symphony was written of her, yes, but not for her. She was there, she does not need to experience it the way her people do." Added Maritak, "this is the story of a remarkable woman who has had the Lord's hand upon her shoulder, and we must all remember that."

Politician defends funding decision

reported by ISD Khepri Shaleigh | 2010.09.03 09:51:54 | NEW

PATOR - Wentach Mennar, an ex-member of parliament for the Representative Party, issued a statement today defending the decision to award grant money to the Minmatar People's Theatre for their staging of 600-year-old play 'Plantation.'

"Grants are made on the basis of the applicant, not on the merits of the project. The MPT has been providing quality theatre here in the capital for over 15 years," said Mennar. "The fact so many people are talking about the play should be proof this troupe knows what they are doing." Equality in Action, a media watch group protesting the staging of the play, responded by saying they found nothing funny about "cashing in on racism to fill seats."



**Writers union backs mpt
reported by ISD Khepri Shaleigh | 2010.09.06 09:57:43**

HEK - The Matari Writers Association, a union representing writers of theatre and holovid pieces, today backed the MPT's decision to produce the highly controversial play 'Plantation.' "While we do not normally condone the adaptation of works outside of their intended millieu, we also do not condone repression of freedom of any kind. We find the actions of those upset with the MPT's decision to stage this play to be reprehensible," said Koto Rydd, the group's spokesman.

The play, written 600 years ago by Ammatar author Dekkameron, explores the issues of power among the powerless. Set on an Ammarian plantation, the play focuses not on the cruelty of slavery but the cruelty amongst slaves. The Ammarian slave holders, rather than being the antagonists, are portrayed as benign individuals whose good intentions are abused by those slaves who seek power over their own kind. Rydd explained "The play is not about slavery, it is about power. The juxtaposition between slave and slaveholder, which shows the latter to be basically powerless against a small group of slaves that effectively run the plantation, is a brilliant literary device that Dekkameron uses to great effect."

**Mass suicide on mining colony
2010.09.07 10:14:30**

GERERIQUE – An Astral Mining ore hauler made a grisly discovery yesterday when docking for its regularly scheduled pickup. After the vessel had proved unable to reach anyone on the colony for over an hour, some of the crew were sent to investigate. They found every man, woman, and child on the colony dead, seemingly by their own hand. According to Lenz Kaaloaka, a Sisters of Eve Agent who was one of the first on the scene: "We're not sure exactly how it was done, but it does appear as though they did it themselves."

Kaaloaka cited notes found on the scene, as well as mails discovered to have been sent shortly before the hauler arrived. "They took the time to say goodbye to loved ones and generally described a state of despair, but didn't give specific reasons. We don't know what to make of it yet."

**Plantation director receives death threats
2010.09.10 10:00:05**

PATOR - Protestors upset with the planned staging of controversial 6-centuries-old play 'Plantation' picketed the box office of the Minmatar People's Theatre today. As the office opened and season passes went on sale, protestors carried signs and chanted slogans portraying the MPT as slave-holders.

"This is ridiculous" said the show's director, Jaken Lagos. "I'm receiving death threats over this. The setting is updated to modern day Pator, and all the characters are now Minmatar, so how it can be racist?"

"People should see the play before they judge," he added.

Equality in Action has claimed no knowledge of death threats but vowed to continue pressuring the MPT to cancel the production.

**Cultural friction turns minmatar refugee ghettos into battlegrounds
reported by ISD Sheliak Mesarthim | 2010.09.14 09:52:27**

Rens - Organized crime and culturally motivated violence have become staples of life in the housing shanties dotting Rens and other systems taking in Minmatar refugees. The Sisters of EVE have admitted to difficulties maintaining order in the temporary settlements, and hope to launch joint efforts with help from the tribes and local law enforcement.

The mixture of Minmatar who still adhere to the Amarrian faith and Minmatar who possess staunch anti-Amarr sentiments has become a problem. Aggressive tendencies are evident on both sides, with members of the faithful minority sometimes coming into violent conflict with the anti-theists. "Escalation comes rapidly in these enclosed areas," said SOE security spokesman Soger Neyd. "By the time police forces can mount a response, it is often too late."

The Sisters of EVE admit that refugee housing has proved to be inadequate, but the organization blames the Minmatar tribal governments for the difficulty in relocating repatriated slaves. The Starkmanir and Nefantar, in particular, have had great difficulties navigating Republic bureaucracy due to the lack of tribal structure. Many refugee camps have also been pressed to accommodate Republic citizens fleeing the warfare that rages in the low-security parts of the Heimatar and Metropolis regions - especially in systems such as Siseide and Lantorn, which saw extended occupation by 24th Imperial Crusade forces before their liberation early this year.

In debating a solution to the hostilities, the Sisters of EVE have been supportive of plans to segregate refugees

depending on culture. This solution has generally been met with resistance from the Republic government, while the refugees themselves are supportive of the plan. "We are already segregated," commented Olaufin Jastl, a Starkmanir religious sage. "The difference here would be that I could meet my parishioners in streets and markets instead of bulkheads and secret shelters."

Sages like Olaufin Jastl are a holdover from the Starkmanir slave society on the planet Halturzhan. Since they are clerics of the Amarr faith, their services have grown to become focal points for faithful Minmatar in these refugee societies. As a result, they are often targets of religiously motivated violence.

"Our brothers are afraid," said Sage Jastl. "They think they have to throw away their faith for the tribes to accept them, and that they need to punish us to gain their affection. I love my tribe, and the Starkmanir accept me as I am. We know that we are together, because we stand with God."

But not all Starkmanir stand on the faithful side. Alep Yivanikh is a Starkmanir who has decided not to stand with the sages. "I think the society we had on Halturzhan was designed to keep us in check. It's nice that some have decided to maintain our culture from back then, but we're in the Republic now. If we want to be taken seriously we'll have to find a more modern way of life and focus on other parts of our culture instead."

Intertribal tensions plague resettled thukker reported by ISD Haruziel Tormau | 2010.09.15 19:39:38

Ryddinjorn - Ethnic violence broke out today in the normally quiet town of Hrangsdor, as the predominantly Brutor community reacted to the presence of resettled Thukker members of the Fuldis caravan.

Formerly nomadic, nearly half of the members of the Fuldis caravan opted to form a permanent settlement last fall, choosing Ryddinjorn as their new home. Since that time, the lukewarm welcome has turned to outright suspicion, culminating in today's outbreak of widespread vandalism and protests.

Many residents are suspicious of the Thukkers' motives for settling down. "Everyone knows that the Thukker will adopt anyone," said Amadou Zoreya, a local Brutor man. "They come here, fill our kids' heads full of wild stories about deep space, and lure them into their caravans. It's not right."

These Thukker maintain that their nomadic days are behind them, however. "We just want to fit in," said Emmen Ulfsson, one of the resettled Thukker. "We want to live our lives and prosper just like everyone else."

But the cultural divisions go deeper. During the Amarr occupation, the pragmatic Thukker viewed mobility as the best defense against enslavement. But to proud Brutor tribesmen, this same mobility was viewed as tantamount to cowardice. Raelan Kahoku, a Hrangsdor Brutor elder said simply, "I would rather die fighting than flee into space," and it seems this sentiment is widely shared.

Authorities have brought the situation in Hrangsdor under control, but the violence has left many Thukker once again contemplating relocation. Lamented Ulfsson, "Maybe our nomadic days aren't quite over yet."

Mystery cargo seized 2010.09.17 09:51:03

WERAROIX - A routine ore hauler customs check yesterday uncovered a cargo that officials are still at a loss to explain. The ship was carrying supplies to be traded at Yvaeroure, where they were to make their next pick up. Among those supplies was a container of individually wrapped pills, unidentified except for the word 'Liberty' etched into each one.

Upon analysis of the pills it was discovered that each one contained a small cluster of nanobots, the function of which is still unknown. The crew was held for questioning, but none of them, nor anyone on the colony in Yvaeroure, has claimed any knowledge of how the cargo came to be on the ship, or what the pills' purpose is.

'Liberty' pill identified 2010.09.21 09:52:08

LUMINAIRE – Gallente Customs officials have solved part of the mystery surrounding the 'Liberty' pills seized last week in the Weraroix system. The nanobots each pill contained appear to have been designed to make their way to strategic parts of the body, including the lungs, where they instigate general hypoxia and eventually lead the subject to quietly expire from oxygen deprivation.

Preview marred by protest - violence **2010.09.22 09:57:56**

PATOR - Social activists opposed to the newest production of controversial 600-year-old play 'Plantation' at the Minmatar People's Theatre on Pator launched a highly visible complaint last night. About an hour before the curtain went up on the preview, the protestors appeared at the front entrance. As a result, the performance started slightly behind schedule.

The protest remained peaceful until the curtain closed. As the crowd exited the theatre, the protest shifted gears and became violent. The minimal police force present was briefly overwhelmed, but quickly regained control of the crowd. "This production is not racist, it's traitorous," exclaimed one protester as he was arrested.

Wentach Mennar, an ex-member of parliament for the Representative Party, said "It was a good show. An important show. We have been without a parliament for over a year and it is good that someone is asking these questions. People are becoming impatient."

The Sisters Of Eve have since confirmed the 'Liberty' pill to be behind the mass suicide at Gererique. "We found a similar package containing some extra pills, and autopsies then revealed all the people died in the same manner. We are now relatively certain of the how, we just still don't understand the why," said SSOE agent Lenz Kaaloaka.

Gallente Health and Safety officials have called for anyone with any knowledge of the pill or its manufacturers to come forward.

Massive raid lands pharmaceutical company ceo in jail **2010.09.23 09:52:13**

HARNER – A cross-agency Gallente law enforcement task force conducted an early-morning raid on a small, unlicensed and unregistered pharmaceutical company following a week-long sting operation. Acting on information received from an informant, agents posed as mining colony directors attempting to purchase the so-called 'Liberty' pill.

Once put in touch with company head Pierre Allendreau, authorities quickly moved to shut down the manufacturer. On-site they found over five million 'Liberty' pills, after which they swiftly arrested Allendreau, charging him with over 50 infractions. Six other employees were arrested and then released without charges. Officials say they have not ruled out the possibility of criminal charges being laid on employees and middle men, as well as prospective buyers.

Theatre bombed **2010.09.24 09:51:23**

PATOR - The Minmatar People's Theatre's main stage was bombed this morning, only a few short hours after the opening night of controversial play 'Plantation.' The theatre was empty and there were no injuries.

A group calling themselves Free Our Families has claimed responsibility with a statement issued to press. "The Amarrian slave holders in this play are cast as thinly disguised caricatures of Shakor and the other tribal chiefs. This goes beyond racism. If the MPT will not shut down this parliament-funded propaganda, we will shut it down for them."

A tearful Jaken Lagos, the show's director, said "We weren't trying to make a political statement about slavery or Shakor or anything else. We were just trying to make beautiful art." The play's sets, costumes and props were destroyed in the blast. The MPT has said it will not restage 'Plantation.'

Starkmanir religious leader killed in violent riot **reported by ISD Sheliak Mesarthim | 2010.09.28 16:03:49**

Abudban - A Brutor Tribe-owned Minmatar refugee settlement in Abudban endured a violent riot last night, during which visiting Starkmanir Sage Uldas Dreeter was killed by anti-theists who were protesting his public services. The Brutor Tribe has deployed a number of riot police units to the refugee outpost and is in the process of relaying the different groups to segregated habitation modules.

As a cleric of the Amarr faith, Uldas Dreeter had been touring the Republic for several months. He had visited many refugee communities and was one of the most widely known religious figures in the Starkmanir tribe. His visit to Abudban yesterday was one of the last he had scheduled on his tour, after which he would have returned to his home on Rens III. Amarrian faithful throughout the Republic gave Dreeter a moment of silence out of respect for his work.

"He was one of our best bets for uniting the tribe," said Fredivar Parch, a member of Dreeter's tour staff.

Culturally motivated violence toward Minmatar adhering to the Amarr faith continues to ravage refugee settlements in the region. The Brutor Tribe has stated it will only implement complete segregation in the most extreme cases, calling the current process "a method of acclimatization." The Sisters of EVE have decried the statement, saying it implies the Republic is trying to punish or eradicate faithful Minmatar. The Brutor Tribe has fiercely denied this accusation, instead blaming government-defined guidelines on refugee processing.

Paramilitary organization pledges to protect starkmanir sages reported by ISD Sheliak Mesarthim | 2010.10.01 09:53:16

Frarn - A group calling themselves the Starkman Milisi announced earlier today that they intend to provide free security for those Starkmanir sages who request it. This comes in response to the recent killing of Sage Uldas Dreeter in Abudban at the hands of Minmatar opposing the Amarr faith.

"We may be the child brother of the Tribes, and people in our tribe may have beliefs that some find strange, but that does not mean we have to turn the other cheek. We have little in the way of culture, but we do have a way of life worth protecting, a way of life worth dying for," said Milisi spokesman Jeoran Setul in the announcement. "Some of our tribe have decided to keep their beliefs despite living in an environment hostile to those beliefs, and we admire them for it and stand by their side, because they are our brothers. We are the Minmatar, we are the Tribe, and we are the Republic. Those who attack us are enemies of everything we are."

Soger Neyd, representing the security forces of the Servant Sisters of EVE's refugee camps in the region, spoke in support of the Milisi. "Though I fear this can lead to further escalation if left unchecked, I absolutely applaud this effort to protect the freedoms of a relatively small religious group."

The Milisi has received statements of support from other Tribes in the Republic, especially the Brutor Tribe which has pledged to actively support the Milisi efforts with hardware and training. The Starkman Milisi consists mainly of ethnic Starkmanir who served in the Tribe's various regional militias and police forces during their life in the Ammatar Mandate, and claims modern military training over the past two years.

Colony directors defend suicide pill maker 2010.10.05 16:26:47

LUMINAIRE - The trial of Pierre Allendreau, the man accused of manufacturing and distributing the suicide pill 'Liberty,' saw an unusual turn of events today, when those the prosecution are painting as the case's victims rose to the defense of the accused.

"He wasn't out to make a buck. He sold basically at cost, and would make as many as requested. We would have paid a lot more," said Hebark Tooten, director of a mining colony in Postouvin. Another director from the same system, Freid Lefebre, said, "He was the only one protecting us from being victims. If Sansha comes for us – any of us – CONCORD can't protect us, the Empires combined can't protect us... who are we supposed to rely on? The capsuleers? They're just as likely to kill us even if they do manage to stop a Sansha raid. What other options do we have?"

The prosecution asked for a short recess, which the judge denied. The string of witnesses speaking out in the accused's defense continued. Said Gael Sorchine, director of still another colony that had contacted Allendreau to purchase the suicide pill: "The Nation promises the death of liberty, the capsuleers promise death. If we are the victims in this case, it is not Mr. Allendreau that made us so."

Multiple sansha attacks reported; low security population left devastated 2010.11.27 22:44:23

BREAKING NEWS: Yulai - CONCORD has reported to media outlets across the cluster that Sansha's Nation has just undertaken three separate attacks in the systems of Leran, Uedama and Esecama. In a separate press release, local authorities in Pashanai reported that the entire population of neighboring Leran IV had been taken captive aboard Sansha dropships.

Capsuleer resistance was reported to be heavy in both high security systems, but eyewitness accounts from Leran claim that there was little resistance in the dangers of low security space. One pilot claimed in an anonymous report that Sansha's Nation had deployed two Chimera-class carriers to the field, and were being assisted by a group of Sansha loyalist capsuleers, who had an Archon-class carrier of their own.

Over the course of the next two hours, unopposed dropships devastated the local population. At this moment only a few hundred survivors have been discovered from a population originally exceeding one million people.

The attacks in Leran were quickly followed by invasions of Uedama and Esescama. The SSoE has placed an initial estimate on abductees at 4,000,000 citizens in Uedama, but claims that these figures are based on data still being compiled. Sister Renori, one of the SSoE local representatives for the Uedama system, stated that these attacks were some of the most savage yet.

Capsuleers from the battle at Uedama were reporting Nation battleship squadrons numbering in the hundreds, easily matching the 350 pilots assembled to meet the Sansha threat. SSoE reports listed casualties from two planets, Uedama II and VII, with the former being the most heavily hit. Capsuleers who followed from Leran stated that after the Sansha had completed their attack there they relocated to Uedama VII to support the invasion, increasing the count of abductees marginally.

More information is still being acquired on the Esescama attack, as well as the full extent of the damage dealt to the populations of Uedama and Leran. National leaders and local politicians are expected to address their respective constituents as soon as the immediate humanitarian crisis is over.



Saccade



Arkhan walked nonchalantly into the alley. It was a cul-de-sac, with dilapidated buildings on either side. Aside from the scattered junk and debris, the only thing of note was a door into one of the buildings. Its wood was rotten and scorched, and it looked as if it might tear off the hinges when opened.

Arkhan stood in front of it, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. There was the constant odour of the city, a mixture of burnt fuel and rotting waste. A slaughterhouse nearby added the unmistakable stench of its profession, as did a cyberimplant factory. The mixed smell of blood and silicone made Arkhan feel nauseous. He yanked the door open and strode in.

The building had been vacated eons ago, and not even the homeless had wanted to claim it. Dust had settled on most surfaces, but the floor was so dirty and matted with ancient filth that you couldn't even see whether anyone had walked on it recently.

Eight steps took him to another room in the house, and another eight to the right took him to an inside wall. He didn't knock, or stamp, or cough. He closed his eyes again, stood very still and waited. If he listened closely, he thought he might hear the high-pitched hum of unseen monitoring engines. Or maybe it was just his nerves, twanging.

Soundlessly, a section of the wall swung inwards, revealing a small room about the size of a broom cabinet. For a moment Arkhan wondered if this had all been a practical joke; if he would walk inside and find taped to the inside of the hidden door a paper with "Gotcha!" scrawled on it. A part of him desperately wanted to run, to take off and never look back. But a deeper part of him, the one that overrode even the flight instinct, knew that if he ran he'd be murdered. And besides, he had no life left here. No money, no job nor hope of one, no home, no family. If he stayed and somehow managed to avoid their agents, he'd still be dead within winter.

He had been offered a job, and he needed to accept the offer.

He stepped inside. The door closed behind him without a sound. There was total darkness.

His innards felt like they were being lifted, and he reasoned that the chamber must be an elevator heading downwards. After an indeterminate amount of time, the ride stopped and the door opened again.

In front of Arkhan stood a man, neatly dressed. The man's hair was cut short, and his face was beardless. He had a neutral expression for the most part, with the slightest hint of a smile. The man extended his hand, which Arkhan shook.

"You do realize that if this goes wrong, we'll just have to kill you," the man said.

"Oh, I plan to make a run for it," Arkhan replied.

The two men stood for a moment, regarding each other with growing amusement. Despite knowing that this

man would likely be his executioner if it came to that, Arkhan found himself liking him.

"Name's Melak," the man said. "Come on, I'll show you the place." He turned and walked off, Arkhan following.

They passed through a series of small corridors, dimly lit. There was no visible air conditioning, yet the air didn't have the feel of stilled death common to enclosed, rarely used spaces. They eventually reached a door, which opened automatically and flooded them with the aroma of exotic flora, the smell of earth, and the stench of sweat.

Beyond lay a vast greenhouse, big enough to hold a spaceship. Lamps were set into the walls and ceiling, their light bright enough to make it feel like high noon in summer. On the walls hung huge white placards with writing Arkhan couldn't read from the distance; all he could make out were the numbers "10" and "50".

As Arkhan began to follow Melak through the main path in the greenhouse, he saw people hard at work harvesting all sorts of plants. Most of them wore light clothing, often nothing but thin white cotton pants and either t-shirts or bras. The men had shaven heads and more often than not had handkerchiefs bound around their foreheads; the women were apparently allowed long hair, but kept it tightly braided.

"What do you think?" Melak asked.

"Impressive," was all Arkhan could think of to say. "How many people do you have here?"

"It varies. This greenhouse, around two hundred, two hundred ten. There's several other houses in this area, but their sizes vary according to what we grow. Some need to be small and have just a couple dozen people nursing the plants, others are even bigger than this."

They walked slowly through the main path in the greenhouse. Arkhan saw that most people did not have any kinds of fetters. A few who appeared extremely fit had ankle chains, but that was about it.

"Are these people prisoners?" Arkhan asked.

"Not at all," Melak replied. "They're free to run and get shot any time they like."

Arkhan laughed. "Good, good," he said. He was doing his best to keep down the nervousness that gripped him, and he suspected Melak's gallows' humour was an attempt to put him more at ease, let him laugh things out. A small gesture, but at the moment he felt quite grateful for it. "Still," he said, "can you trust them with this? I can't imagine they're happy about working the soil, not if they're kept here against their will. And you're certainly not going to release them any time soon, I expect."

"There's no such thing as trust," Melak said. "There's only hope and expectation, and your place in life is decided by which one of these applies to you." He turned to one of the prisoners, who was picking thin leaves off a tall plant and putting them in a large wicker basket. "You there!" Melak yelled to him. "Are you happy here?"

The prisoner looked up and put down his basket. "No, sir!" he said.

"Would you escape if you got the chance?"

The prisoner grinned, or at least showed his teeth. "Yes, sir!"

"And if you caught one of the guards unawares, no one else around and no cameras or motion detectors, what would you do?"

"I'd offer him a smoke, sir!"

Melak raised his eyebrows. "Really, now?"

"And then I'd beat his brains in, sir!"

"Good man. Good man. As you were."

The prisoner went back to picking leaves, shooing a horde of little flies off the leaves in his baskets. They lifted for a moment, then settled right back in the same place.

"Did I just see that?" Arkhan asked as they resumed their walk through the greenhouse. "Did he just tell you that he would kill a guard and escape?"

"How do you propose a drug-making plant using slave labour could be made to work? Torture and force?" Melak asked in return. "Any given moment there's ten times more prisoners here than guards. If there's a problem, the doors seal and nobody gets out, which means the guards are practically dead. If the cameras indicate the plants are in danger, we flood the area with somnambulants, although we try not to do it too much because it's bad for

the health and it affects the guards as well. What we don't do is beat people up."

"No physical punishment?" Arkhan asked in astonishment.

"Only for open revolt, which carries a death sentence. Other than that, no."

"Why not use high-tech chips, then? Pain implants, for instance. Or those mind torture things the Caldari supposedly use. Those things'd make it impossible to plan a rebellion."

Melak shook his head. "Not worth it. High-tech is expensive and unreliable. We only really have one proper piece of electric wizardry here, and it's not used for crowd control." He thought for a moment. "Well, not primarily, anyway."

"What is it?"

"Face scanning," Melak said. "That aside, we've got a policy here to keep things as simple and failsafe as we can. You noticed how high the ceiling is?"

"Sure."

"That's not by accident. When we built this place, we made sure it wouldn't feel claustrophobic. You feel walled in, you start thinking about breaking out." Melak waved away some flies that kept trying to settle in his sweaty hair. "Damn things. Anyway, the prisoners get decent food, full freedom of expression like you just saw, and time for themselves. We've got a library, some exercise equipment, and I'm pretty sure the ball court is still operational, though we need to have it looked over a bit. We want people to last here, Arkhan."

Arkhan nodded and was about to comment on it when something occurred to him. "You know my name," he said.

"Of course. Did you think we wouldn't?"

Arkhan felt flummoxed. "No, of course not. You would. It's just, it's-..."

"It's fucking unnerving, is what it is," Melak said. "You show up, don't introduce yourself or tell us anything about you, and then it turns out we know everything anyway."

"Precisely," Arkhan said.

"It'll help to think of it this way: You've been screened already, and you've passed. The reason I'm even talking to you is because I know you won't fail us. Same reason why you're allowed to see all this, same reason why you can ask me just about any question and get an honest answer." He clamped a hand on Arkhan's shoulder. "We know you; it's only fair you get to know us. After all, we're offering you a lifetime job in our assembly unit. Barring the occasional R&R, this place will be your home for a long time." Melak swung at the flies again, but they only buzzed away for a second.

"I've got a question, then," Arkhan said.

"Shoot."

"Why don't you use pesticides, if those flies annoy you all so much?"

To Arkhan's surprise, Melak laughed out loud. He turned to Arkhan and said, "That's actually one of the few things I can't tell you. Not yet, at least. Let's just say that they have their uses, like everything else here."

Despite the man's reticence, Arkhan felt relieved. He had been amazed by Melak's candidness, but the fact that something was kept from him felt comforting. It made all the other revelations seem honest.

They were nearing the exit of the greenhouse. Arkhan felt there was something he had to be sure on. "So there isn't any torture at all? No violence, no punishment?"

"Are you thinking about escaping?" Melak asked.

"No," Arkhan said. He was silent for a moment, then said, "Yes."

The two men walked on in silence. Eventually, Arkhan added, "I'm never leaving this place alive, am I?"

"Not permanently, I'm afraid," Melak said. "If you do well you'll get the occasional paid vacation, but you'll never work for anyone else, and if you talk, you die. But you knew that."

"Yes," Arkhan said. "Yes, I did." He slowed his pace, kicked a bit at the dirt. "There is really no punishment here?"

Melak regarded him for a moment, then said, "Come on." Instead of heading for the exit, he walked in among the plants. Arkhan followed.

A minute later, they came to a small clearing. While other parts of the greenhouse had been filled with the susurrus of working people, there was no sound here but the buzzing of the flies. Yet there were humans here, too. Arkhan saw them pick the leaves off various plants and put them in their wicker baskets. And he saw them walk around in the familiar light clothing everyone else had worn. What he did not see was their faces.

Every one of them was wearing a white plaster mask. The masks were badly cast, as if gauze had simply been wrapped around the poor people's faces, soaked in whitewash and left to harden. The masks had ragged holes for the eyes, nose and mouth, but otherwise seemed very much a permanent part of their wearers' faces.

Eventually, Arkhan turned to Melak, and even though they were quite out of earshot, he asked in a whisper, "Who are they?"

Not looking at him, Melak responded, "They are ghosts."

"That's the punishment?" Arkhan asked. "That's what happens if you revolt? What have you done to these people?"

Melak ignored the last question. "No. Like I said, if you revolt, you're dead. Simple as that. These people were chosen for a different purpose."

"What purpose?" Arkhan asked, but received no answer. His employer turned and headed towards the greenhouse exit.

This room was far smaller and had a more clinical air. There were assembly lines and conveyor belts all over the place, along with all sorts of mechanical equipment. Arkhan noticed that most of the equipment was ancient in style and design; it was efficient, to be sure, but looked quite dissimilar to the modern high-tech implant factories in the neighbourhood.

Melak glanced his way, and noticed his expression. "You look disappointed," he says.

"For some reason I always expected drug making to be glamorous," Arkhan said. "Same way we idolize all sorts of crime, I suppose."

Melak nodded. "And the end of the day, all it turns out to be is people trying to make a living, same as everyone else."

Arkhan nodded back.

"Sturdiness," Melak went on, "dependability, low maintenance, simplicity. Those are the mottoes. Equipment that seldom breaks, and that we can repair by ourselves when it does. This is where you'll be working." He walked over to an inoperational assembly line. "Boosters with imperfections need to be weeded out. It's incredibly monotonous work, so we only set people on two-hour shifts, but everyone pitches in. Then there's ferrying stock around, regular maintenance, so on and so forth. Also, test inspections must be made at random from all our supply lines, and the mechanisms need to be tuned and altered according to the types of orders that come in. We need someone with mechanical aptitude and a sharp eye. Someone like you."

"Why can't you use the slaves for this?" Arkhan asked. "Seems like you've already got a prime workforce."

"Sometimes we do," Melak said. "We have a rough hierarchy here, kind of a caste system. Maybe you start out as a worker in the fields, but if you do well you'll be promoted to an overseer. If you show an aptitude for numbers, we'll move you to stock, and if you have ingenuity or any kind of natural talent, then yeah, you'll go over to assembly. But that's fairly rare, so we need to bring in outsiders as well."

"And those who don't do well ... the masks?" Arkhan asked.

"In a manner of speaking." Melak replied. "You remember the placards? Big white things hanging from the ceilings?"

"Sure. Couldn't read them, except for a couple of numbers."

"They're lists of names. If you make the list, you won't get picked," Melak said.

"For the masks."

"Right."

"And to make the list ...?" Arkhan asked.

"Do good work. Think up improvements. Let us know of any trouble brewing. Brings you to the top fifty list."

Arkhan was amazed. "You've turned these people against one another for the sole reward of avoiding undeserved punishment?"

"Precisely. You snitch on a rebellion plot, you make the top ten list. Anyone touches you while you're on that list, they're judged as accomplices to the rebellion and will be killed. Of course," Melak added with a wry grin, "anyone will eventually drop off the list, so it's in their own best interest to keep thinking up new ideas." Melak pointed to the assembly lines. "You get any ideas of your own, please share. We've got other incentives for non-prisoners."

Arkhan walked slowly around the pieces of machinery. Each one was taller than he was, and they were all kept immaculately clean. There were several steel barrels stacked near one machine, and Arkhan pulled the lid off one. It was full of boosters.

"Feel tempted?" Melak asked.

"Not hardly," Arkhan said.

"You sure?"

Arkhan picked up a handful of boosters and let them sift through his grasp, back onto the pile. "You're making combat boosters, not the regular stuff. These things are bought only by pod pilots, and even they are wary of them." He fished out another handful, let it trickle into the barrel. "There's nobody I know on the streets who does these."

Melak walked over to him and leaned on one of the barrels. "How do you know that isn't due to their availability?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, these are just improved versions of drugs that people have already been doing for a while. Maybe the reason they haven't been adopted by the druggie community is that they simply haven't gotten into proper circulation yet. Capsuleers have kept them to themselves."

Sighing, Arkhan pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed his eyes. "Look, combat boosters give pod pilots special abilities to control their ships and that's it. Anyone else who's stupid enough to take one won't get high, they'll go nuts. These things aren't meant for normal people."

Melak stepped close to him. When he spoke, it was in a low tone of voice. "Except that not everyone is normal."

"What do you mean?"

"Eighty percent of regular joes who take the pod pilot boosters get incredibly messed up and can't use them as drugs. But there's ten percent who can, who merely get high."

Arkhan blinked. "News to me."

"That's how it is."

"What about the remaining ten percent?" Arkhan asked. He was beginning to feel increasingly nervous.

"Come on," Melak said and walked away, into the drug installation. Arkhan followed.

They walked past pipes and assembly lines, past vast metal compression tanks that steamed quietly and had several valves on the side, past large monitors with dozens of inset gauges that ticked rapidly back and forth. They walked over metal grilles, and in the darkness below Arkhan spotted a white powdery residue covering various pieces of sludgy debris, like half-dried chunks of old paint.

Along the way, Melak said, "Remember how I said that we rewarded low-tech solutions? Guy who thought up this one, as low-tech as it gets and relying only on local materials, easily available, he made his way to the top ten list for a long time."

"What solution?" Arkhan asked. "And what about those last ten percent?"

"They die."

"Oh."

"Usually from massive haemorrhaging, though it varies from drug to drug."

Arkhan tried to swallow, but his throat felt like it had constricted. "Charming."

"The boosters work on the parts of your brain and body specifically used to control ships," Melak said. "If you aren't using them to control ships, the body rids itself of the effect in other ways." He walked Arkhan over to a large room with metal walls on all sides. There was a soft hum from inside the room, irregular but constant, that reminded Arkhan of buzz saws.

They stood in front of a door to the room. It was a steel door with bolts circumnavigating it. It looked as if it could stop a tank.

"You will understand," Melak said, "that someone who's part of that ten percent who get addicted, they cannot work here. It is crucial - absolutely vital, in fact - to your future here that you have a violent, adverse reaction to taking boosters."

With an ugly suspicion dawning, Arkhan said, "How do you know that I wouldn't fake it? Toss myself around, scream and yell, bang my head..."

"That's not a concern," Melak said.

Knowing what was coming, Arkhan still tried to stall for time. "You sure? Because I'm sure a person could be very persuasive."

"Not a concern. It's time, Arkhan. This is what you're here for. I know you won't fail me now." He walked to two small pipes running alongside a wall and followed them until he came to a sink. There, he picked up an empty glass and filled it with water from the faucet. When he returned to Arkhan he proffered the glass, and some small white object Arkhan hadn't seen him hold before. It was a pill.

"No," Arkhan said. "No, no, no."

"Terms of the trade," Melak said.

"What if I die?"

"Better you do it here in the factory. Less trouble to clean things up."

"That's not what I meant, Melak," Arkhan said.

"Let me put it this way," Melak said, still holding the glass and pill out to him. "If you don't swallow this Drop, the chances of you dying are one hundred percent."

Arkhan stared hard at him, then at the Drop. It looked perfectly innocuous, as pills do. He knew what Melak was saying was true. He knew it. And the faint illusion of choice was a lot more than he might have expected from someone in Melak's position. But still...

Booster trips were the worst. They varied from type to type, and Arkhan had never experienced any, but he knew people who had. Sad wrecks who'd been reduced to anything they could find. These were people who'd go into a general store and come out with nail polish dissolvent and spraycan glue. They'd find sick friends and convince them to procure some outlandish stuff from their doctors. One guy had been abusing epilepsy pills to the point where, if he tried decreasing his dosage, he would actually get an epileptic fit. And each of them who'd somehow happened upon a booster - it was always a single pill, no more - and tried it, each and every one of them swore they'd never do it again. Said there was nothing good about them. This from people who thought paint thinner was a luxury.

It occurred to Arkhan that right now, in this place, living was a luxury, too.

"Fine, fine, all right. Here we go," he said, took the pill and gulped it down with the glass of water.

"Well done," Melak said.

"Go to hell," Arkhan said. "Now what?"

Melak reached out and picked up something that was hanging from a hook on the wall. He handed it to Arkhan with a grin, the first time he'd shown any kind of expression since they met. "Glad you asked. This is the final test. Like I said, it's as low-tech as they get, it relies entirely on local materials, and it can't be faked. If you pass, you'll be employed here. If you fail, you will be killed."

Arkhan looked at the thing. It was a fly swatter. One side of its head was decorated with a caricature of a fedo,

its cartoon face smiling wide.

Arkhan looked back up, and something inside of him gave way. "You're insane," he said, his voice somewhere between the tremble of fear and the cackling giggle of the mad. "You are! You do realize that. You're clinically insane."

Stepping around him, Melak reached for the door handle. He said nothing, just smiled, and slowly opened the door.

"In any proper society," Arkhan said, the stress overwhelming him now, "they would have recognized you for what you are, and hung your gibbering, scrawny, louse-infested body in a cage over the castle gates to entertain the peasants."

Melak laughed. "I'm glad you're finally breaking out of your shell," he said, and ushered Arkhan into the room. Apart from a small red circle in the middle of the floor, and a couple of grilles in the bottom part of one wall, there was nothing there.

"What do I do with this?" Arkhan asked and raised the swatter.

"Break somebody else's shell," Melak replied, and closed the door.

It was pitch black for a moment. Then, red lights came on. There was the sound of bolts sliding into place. The buzzing noise was louder in here

"What do I do?!" Arkhan yelled. There was no answer.

Now there was a slight swishing noise. Arkhan looked around, then down. His hand, the one holding the fly swatter, was trembling. He didn't even feel it. He placed his other hand over it, to still it, but as soon as he let go, the hand began trembling again. He began to feel angry at that hand. It was supposed to stay still unless told otherwise. He grabbed it again, harder this time, then let go.

Swish swish. It wouldn't stop.

The red circle in the middle of the floor was hard to make out, in the red lights. He gingerly stepped into it.

Nothing happened.

He was becoming very annoyed now. And the insistent buzz was giving him a headache.

He stepped out of the circle, and back in. He stamped. He hopped. Now both his hands were trembling, and he was really becoming quite goddamn furious.

He was just about to go pound on the door and give Melak a piece of his mind when there was a hiss, and a large panel on the wall slid to the side. Behind it was a pane of glass, and behind that were ... thousands of flies, tens of thousands of the ones he'd seen all over the greenhouse, swarming over one another, zooming around in agitation in that enclosed space. Their wings beat against the glass panel like a distant storm.

Arkhan gulped, his throat dry like never before. The flies disgusted him; their writhing mass felt like black, tarry poison. He started swinging the fly swatter back and forth, grinding his teeth in hatred. His vision began to blur at the edges, and the focus of his gaze shifted faster and faster to each individual fly; he felt like he could count them all before killing them, every last one. His throat released a low, throaty sound that was somewhere between a hum and a growl, and he saw nothing but death.

The glass panel slid aside, and the storm enveloped him.

Melak stood in front of the door. He reached out and slowly opened it.

Inside, on his knees, was the twitching form of Arkhan.

The walls were black and covered with meaty little bumps and blotches. Silvery wings floated around on little currents of air like tiny clouds.

Arkhan was covered with bug blood and tiny flecks of bug entrails. His breath came in short, ragged gasps, and sweat dripped from his brow onto the mound of fly corpses that covered the floor.

"The Drop work?" Melak asked, standing in the doorway.

Arkhan raised his head, staring out into nothing. A shiver ran through his body. He grimaced, keeled over and vomited prodigiously, the raspy sounds echoing off the walls.

After Arkhan had stopped retching, Melak waved a hand to some unseen person. Soapy water began to flow down the wall panels, rinsing them clean. When it reached the floor, it washed away the mound of fly husks, and the chunky bits from Arkhan's stomach, down into the small grilles.

When the floor had been flushed of most of its contents, Melak walked into the room. His shoes squelched in the sticky mess.

He gently removed the fly swatter still dangling from Arkhan's hands. They were trailing little tendrils of blood.

"Welcome to work," he said.

The Spirit of Crielere



Even from afar the partially built space complex showed all the signs of being a place of science. The circular shape representing eternity was a good omen to Ariko Cumin. The perfect symbol. Maybe the punishment her father had intended for her by sending her here would turn out to be a blessing in disguise. Ariko felt her spirit lift, for the first time in weeks. Maybe this wouldn't hurt her career as much as she'd feared.

The powerful cruiser she was traveling on made slight adjustments to its direction vectors as it entered the docking procedure, sliding majestically towards the station that already loomed large despite being only half finished. Other ships were cruising around the station, some waiting to dock, others outward bounds. Ariko noticed that many of the ships were Gallentean and despite herself she gave a shudder; like all Caldari children she had meticulously studied the war between her own people and the Gallenteans. The ninety years since the war ended had done little to ease the apprehension any Caldari felt in the presence of a Gallentean, even for those, like Ariko, that had never experienced the war personally. The war stories were all-too vivid in her mind to be at ease and she felt her small fists bunch. As the ship eased into its berth, groaning to a halt as the docking arms grabbed it and embraced, Ariko had to utter a few mind mantras under her breath to calm her nerves. She should be calm when entering her new place of work, duty dictated it.

The station had that unique smell that only new stations have before the ventilation filters start cluttering up and the lingering odor of humanity overrides everything else. Crielere, Ariko thought, smelled like freshly polished, brand new hover car. There was no one to greet her. She was just one of the many employees flocking to the station; engineers, technicians, scientists and common workmen, numbering in the thousands. The place was a total chaos and it took Ariko several hours to sort out the locations of her workplace and living quarters. By the time she entered the room assigned to her she was exhausted.

Lying down on the narrow bed to rest, she reflected on the events which brought her here. The total anarchy she'd met on the hallways didn't improve her view of the place and, as so often in the last few weeks, she got that nagging feeling that she'd made a mistake. As if that didn't bother her enough, it also meant that her father had been right and she wrong. She cringed at the thought. Only a few months earlier she had been the most promising physics student the School of Applied Knowledge had seen in ages, sure of a bright future at Wyrkomi, her foster corporation. And now here she was, stuck somewhere on the outskirts of civilized space, participating in some mad scheme hatched by two crazed scientist she knew next to nothing about.

She had been so sure she wanted to belong to something big, something grand. Something else than the dead-end job her father had. And yet her conscience troubled her now that she had broken free of the silk-bonds that Caldari society bound. She knew she should be repaying her corporation, her family, for the sacrifices they'd made on her behalf. But she feared the lifelong commitment demanded once she'd become an employee of Wyrkomi, her ambition pleaded for more. Thinking of her ambition she recalled the words of her father the day she stood up to him. 'A child is irresponsible in its desires, it learns responsibility through duty. Are you a child, Ariko?' Her mind cursing the desires of her heart, she drifted into a fitful slumber.

Ariko woke with a start. Somewhere in the distance a horn was sounding, its muted cries bearing on in dissonance. Rubbing her eyes it took her a few moments to gather her senses. The horn stopped for awhile, then started blasting again. It was 7 am, time for work.

Ariko's incredible academic success made her a privileged recruit for the Crielere project. Despite her young age and lack of work experience she had been assigned as a junior assistant to the two pioneers responsible for the whole project, Henric Touvolle and Taromi Umailen. The two held some administrative duties due to their status, yet they insisted upon working in a lab, allowing them to get their hands dirty with the common research worker. The lab was located in the only part of the station completely finished and Ariko was pleasantly surprised to discover that it was fully equipped with the latest gadgets and science equipment. . The lab was actually divided into several rooms. The anteroom, which Ariko's workbench was located in, was the largest and served as the main research area. The wall leading back to the station's corridor had only the one entrance door, but the other three walls had several doors each, leading to conference rooms and offices as well as restrooms and a kitchen. There was even a small greenhouse at the back, breaching the hull of the station to reach some sunlight. It wasn't utilized to produce food or oxygen rich plants, though, the main greenhouse section several levels down took care of that. Instead it was used by the biochemists in their research. The chief scientists had their own spacious offices in the back, though Ariko soon found out they seldom used them, preferring to work in the main area with the rest of the staff. A slender Gallente boy met her as she entered the lab and shyly introduced himself as Gunaris the apprentice. He showed her the workstation she was assigned to and left her there. For some reason Ariko felt really self-conscious around him, but in a pleasant sort of way. She scolded herself for her feelings; they were totally inappropriate, after all, he was a Gallentean! She had long since laughed off the boogey stories she heard in her youth that Gallenteans had black hearts and poisonous fangs, yet she had always been uneasy fraternizing with them. But here she was going all gooey over a Gallentean boy!

Ariko caught herself staring at the boy from across the room. Furious at herself, she turned her back and set about familiarizing herself with the computer systems and equipment at her desk, some of which was of Gallentean design and thus unfamiliar to her. She was wrapped up in trying to get a simple tachyonphotometer to work when she noticed two men enter in a hurry, each carrying wads of paper and looking more than a little flustered. She recognized them as Touvolle and Umailen. She had seen holoreels of them in the news, but knew little about them personally. She knew that they had met during the war, Touvolle working as a researcher in a biological warfare unit and Umailen as a military engineer. But the details of their first meeting or why they became these great philanthropic scientists were unknown to her. She had been brought up not to jump to conclusions when there was insufficient data to support an educated opinion, but she couldn't help but feel some indignity towards the pair; wasting their brilliant minds on dreamy delusions.

While Ariko knew relations between the State and the Federation were improving she nevertheless felt a little resentful towards Umailen, befriending a Gallentean was so totally alien to what she had been taught. But then she remembered her own feelings when meeting Gunaris and shook her head in confusion. 'My first day here at Crielere and already everything is so much more complicated than home,' she thought, for the briefest second pining for the comfortable routine and stability that State citizens enjoyed.

She was hoping to get the chance to chat a little bit with the two scientists, but when she approached them a plump, red-faced woman of Mannar ancestry intercepted her, blocking her path to the venerated pair.

"Get back to your workbench," the woman snapped. Taken aback, Ariko retreated to her workstation, quite bewildered. Out of the corner of her eye she watched the woman fawn around the scientists. Gunaris sidled up to her, also watching the woman.

"Don't take too much heed of Medila," he whispered, "she's the personal assistant to Touvolle and Umailen and she's, well, very protective of them, to say the least. I'd advice you to stay out of her way as much as possible. You don't want her badmouthing you to the bosses."

"Why do they let such an obnoxious person be their assistant? Don't they see her behavior can impend the work we're doing in all sorts of ways?" Ariko asked, still bristling from the way she had been treated.

"It wasn't their choice. The Federation Senate appointed her when they accepted the funding of the project. She's a Senate crony through and through. You'll soon discover that politics play just as large a role here on Crielere as real science. Everyone seems to be looking for an opportunity to stab each other in the back."

"Are you?" Ariko shot back before she could catch herself. Gunaris blushed, then smiled shyly.

"No, I was only talking about the Big Guns, that's what we call those that call the shots around here."

"You mean Umailen and Touvolle?"

"No, the money men. Men like Otro Gariushi, Pier Ancru and Jacus Roden. Umailen and Touvolle provide the vision, they provide the wealth."

"But isn't the Crielere project supposed to benefit everybody equally?" Ariko asked, somewhat confused.

"In theory yes," Gunaris replied, sounding a little sad. "It's a complicated matter, some discoveries will become public right away, other only after some time. I don't know the details all that well, it's not something I'm all that interested in."

By now, the over-protective Medila had herded the two scientists into an adjoining office, teaming them up with people Gunaris described as 'those on her good side'.

"You're not on her good side?" Ariko inquired. Gunaris shrugged.

"I don't think she even knows I exist," he said. Ariko could see that he was quite content with this arrangement.

"Well, I'm supposed to be a junior assistant to them, how can I do my job if I can't even talk to them?"

"You've been misinformed," Gunaris replied, sounding apologetic. "That title doesn't mean anything else than you work in this lab. Getting access to them is quite another thing." Ariko stood quiet for awhile pondering this. Gunaris found the silence awkward and soon excused himself so he could carry on his work.

Her mind still in turmoil, Ariko sat at her console and started to browse reports and documents concerning the research taking place in the lab. If she was in doubt about the wisdom of coming here before, she was doubly so now after her conversation with Gunaris. She had been quite exhilarated that morning to be a participant in something so grand, she now felt she was a mere sidekick. 'If that's the case,' she thought sourly, 'I could have just as well have stayed home and behaved properly.' For the briefest moments she wondered whether she could just return home, begging her father for forgiveness. But she banished such thoughts from her mind as soon as they surfaced; she was not a quitter.

Returning to the reports she was soon totally engrossed in them. As more and more of the Crielere project was revealed to her, the more excited she got. What dreams Umailen and Touvolle had! And yet, it all sounded so simple, so elegant and so plausible. These guys were way ahead of anything being done in the State, Ariko realized. In fact, she now pitied her fellow science students back home, toiling in darkness on trivial research projects. She might not be on the straight and narrow career-path needed to reach prominence within the State, but she now understood she was in a unique position to actually make a difference; to make her mark on the world.

But for her to do so she would have to get past that pesky Medila. She would just have to show that old sow! The grim-looking Mannar woman might be headstrong and vengeful like all her kind, but Ariko was resolved to show her what Deteis were truly made of. Feeling all fired up Ariko wanted to storm into the conference room and confront Medila then and there, but if her strict upbringing had taught her anything it was the merits of self-restraint. Patience was the keyword here; she would bide her time, learn more about the work schedule of the scientists and their daily routines. Then she'd make her move.

Soon, Ariko had settled into the routine of her work, which mainly consisted of double checking test results of others and filing them appropriately. It was a menial job that required little thought. As she suspected, Medila kept the two pioneers isolated from all but those she deemed favorable, i.e. those she could dominate and bring under her forceful will. The research progress was painfully slow. Medila was largely to blame, but there were other distractions. There seemed to be an endless stream of bureaucrats and officials visiting, all needing time and effort to deal with. And the station itself was only half built yet. Even though the lab was in perfect working order the same could not be said of most other facilities on the station. Routine things such as just getting something to eat could be an adventure in itself.

Ariko was one of dozen or so junior assistance working in the lab. It was a mixed crew. Every member race of the Federation seemed to have a representative, the stubborn Mannars, the elegant Intakis, the materialistic Jitai and of course numerous Gallenteans. The Caldari had representatives of their own, including one other Deteis. He was a middle-aged man named Wobanen with a carefully combed hair and distant demeanor. Ariko tried to strike up a conversation with him on several occasions, but never got more than grunts and curt retorts from him, so she gave up trying to befriend him.

Instead, she found herself drifting closer to Gunaris. The two were of similar age, whereas most of the others were older. They were also the only ones lacking work experience; Ariko having only just graduated and Gunaris still working on his final thesis. He was studying mathematics at Caille University, but was offered an internship at the lab after winning a mathematical competition sponsored by the Quafe Company. He was touted as a mathematical genius and though she was skeptical at first, considering herself to be a more than a competent mathematician on her own, she soon discovered that her talents paled next to Gunaris's. Moreover, while Ariko regarded mathematics simply as a necessity giving her choice of career, Gunaris was refreshingly enthusiastic about the field; it was almost like he revered or loved numbers the way he talked about them. Ariko couldn't help but share in his contagious enthusiasm and let herself be drawn into his world of numbers as he, with a dreamy stare, started talking. Theories and functions formerly so dense and boring sounded simplicity itself coming from Gunaris, and interesting too! As the days passed Ariko discovered that her little talks with Gunaris kept the tiresome monotony of work from making her go crazy. One time he tried to explain to her the work he was doing, but she had difficulty comprehending it. Apparently, there were places in space where earlier macroscopic phenomenon left microscopic residues resulting in dense clouds of plasma particles and charged microscopic dust which blocked electromagnetic radiation. Space ships inside these clouds could get no bearings from cosmic background radiation or known pulsars and were thus unable to warp out again. Gunaris was working on an algorithm, which, when coupled with a common sensor array, would filter out much of this

interference. Along with complex multilateration based on nearby gravity wells, it would allow for an accurate location lockdown for ships inside such clouds, allowing them to warp out. She'd gotten a headache after listening to him for awhile, and he didn't broach the subject again.

Ariko was unable to completely shrug off feelings of discomfort when talking with Gallenteans, so she was glad her relationship with Gunaris never developed beyond the chit chat phase. But there were times when she cursed her inhibitions and wished for more.

Ariko used every opportunity to get familiar with the complex political situation on the station. As she had discovered on her first day at work the philanthropic vision of Umailen and Touvolle was only the tip of the iceberg. The Crielere project was the largest undertaking the Gallente Federation and the Caldari State had jointly embarked upon since the end of the war. The funding was divided between the Federation Senate, spurred on by president Souro Foiritan, independent Gallentean moneymen and the Caldari mega-corporations, notably Ishukone and Kalaakiota. The intense public interest in the project coupled with the expectations of what would be accomplished put immense pressure on everyone involved. The share scale of it was also far beyond anything Ariko had imagined. The Crielere station would be a high-tech jewel the likes of which the world had never witnessed, but it was becoming ever more obvious that the construction process was not going well, delay upon delay already had the fund raisers squirming. But the whole management structure, faulty as it was, was strictly regulated and interference from the leaders of the corporations and federal agencies was forbidden. The clause had been inserted as one of the amendments demanded by the Senate before they agreed on funding the project; fearing undue influence by the Caldari mega-corporations.

But the main reason was something that Ariko could well identify with; the Gallenteans and the Caldari simply didn't get along all that well. Apart from daily confrontations between construction workers from either race that often escalated into fisticuffs or even worse, the two races had radically different views on work procedures and methods. It was obvious that the whole construction process was an administration nightmare, lacking all coherency due to lack of direction from above and many feared the station would never be finished, never being able to fulfill its promises. Failure loomed high on the horizon and morale was low. Ariko was hard put to keep her concentration while at work. A distressful call from her mother begging her to come home and plead for her father's forgiveness didn't help her state of mind. Maybe it was the ingrained xenophobia in her, but to Ariko it was obvious that the Federation Senate was largely to blame for this mess. And with Medila the top Senate official on the station Ariko felt it was only the patriotic thing to do to undermine her authority. That this would increase her chances for getting access to the scientists was only an added bonus.

A plan was needed, but Ariko was desperately short of options. Then aid came in the guise of a job offer. It wasn't a normal job offer in any normal sense of the word. She would even get to keep her current job in the lab; in fact, her presence in the lab was an essential requirement for this new job. In short, an agent working for the Wiyrkomi corporation approached her one day during her lunch hour and said if she would indulge in a bit of industrial espionage for her parent corporation her sins for leaving would be forgiven and a golden career path ensured. Ariko was skeptical at first, but when the agent offered help in ousting the pesky Medila as an added incentive, she couldn't refuse. Getting rid of Medila was all well and good, but the vision of her returning triumphantly to the State, Wiyrkomi singing her praises and her father browbeaten, was enough for her to accept the offer. She felt lightheaded all afternoon and it wasn't until she was alone in her small room that evening that it finally sank home; she was now a secret agent for the Wiyrkomi corporation, engaged to spy on her paymasters.

For the next week Ariko got an impromptu crash course in covert ops, especially in communicating and exchanging information in the utmost secrecy. Though a part of her was still reeling from what she was doing she couldn't help but enjoy it all immensely. She met her contact, who called himself Mitsu, every night in some unfinished part of the station. One night, another man was with him. It was a very ordinary looking Caldari, clothed in unassuming workers cloths. Yet even if he was so nondescript that he almost blended into the gray background she could sense that his mind was something else entirely. Her contact introduced the man and said he owed Wiyrkomi a small favor, which he would now repay by helping them to besmear Medila. The name Mitsu gave, Jirai Laitanen, didn't ring any bells with Ariko.

"I see you do not recognize me, even if I decline to employ some ridiculous pseudonym to hide my identity," the stranger said. "Maybe you know me better by my nickname, Fatal?" he asked mockingly. Ariko did. She felt a cold shiver run down her spine. Fatal, and his companion the Rabbit, were the leaders of the pirate group called Guristas. The pair, along with their fellow pirates, had harrowed the Caldari State for years, pulling stunts that seemed almost as much aimed to taunt the State as ruin it. Ariko was curious to know why Wiyrkomi owed this enemy of the State favors, but didn't dare ask.

"So are you enjoying your little spying game?" Fatal asked, still using that mocking tone.

"It's interesting, but I'm still a bit uneasy, what with the whole moral issue and all that," she answered hesitantly.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. It's like when you're having sex and need to take a dump at the same time. While you're going in and out at the front you don't know if something will stay in or come out at the back."

Ariko blushed at his vulgar words, then blushed even fiercer when Fatal laughed scornfully at her obvious

discomfort.

"Enough of this banter," Mitsu said brusquely. "Let's talk business. Medila is a Senate puppy and will remain so while the Senate sees her as the champion of their cause. We must drive a wedge between Medila and the Senate, it's the only way possible to get rid of her for good without rousing suspicion. Now, my thought was to try and besmear her in the eyes of the Senate by showing her cavorting with Caldari, but Fatal has a much better idea. Tell her about it, Fatal." Fatal produced a small crystal vial from inside his grubby coat, exaggerating his gestures as he showed it to Ariko, holding it between his thumb and forefinger.

"In this little vial here is a small gift I received from my very good friend Virge. It contains a little something his labcoats cooked up for him."

"Is it toxin?" Ariko asked. "Are you going to poison her?"

"No, nothing so crude. Killing her would rouse unwanted attention, which, Mitsu tells me, is a definite no-no." Fatal said this as if he lamented not being allowed to kill Medila. It sent another cold shiver down Ariko's spine.

"This stuff here makes you go funny in the head," Fatal explained.

"A drug?" Ariko asked, still unsure where Fatal was going with this.

"Sort of. Sort of a drug. But not quite. It makes you go funny as in crazy." A nasty laughter gushed from him. "Completely goo-goo." Realization dawned on Ariko.

"You're going to drive her mad?"

"Yes," Fatal answered, returning the vial to his coat pocket.

"For how long?"

"Oh, fifty, maybe sixty years. Depends on how long she'll live." Ariko was aghast. Pangs of conscience assaulted her. She had asked for help to get rid of Medila, but this? She knew there was no way for her to stop it, the ball was already rolling and she had no say in the matter now. That much was clear. The question now was, was she willing to take part in this scheme? Standing there, with the two intimidating men hovering over her, she wanted most of all to run away, to forget it all. But it wasn't an option. She'd gotten herself into this situation, foolishly letting silly romanticism about being a fancy spy cloud her judgment. The only way for her now was to go through with this.

Fatal procured the repulsive vial, but she had to administer it to Medila. She was the only one of the three in the position to do so. The only problem was for her to get the vial into the lab, as there was a tight security regarding everything entering or exiting the research zones. Fatal came up with the solution, using Ariko's personal code he could break into the security system and program it to disregard any survey checks made on Ariko. After discussing the task a little longer, Fatal finally gave her the vial. She hid it in her bra, praying it wouldn't break.

"Oh, one last thing," Fatal said as if it was an afterthought. "I may be paying my debt to the Wiyrkomi corporation, but I expect a favor returned from you in the near future." He indicated Ariko. She wasn't sure what he meant, so she just nodded her head. He seemed satisfied and bid his farewell. Ariko wasn't sorry to see the back of him.

The next morning a bleary eyed Ariko entered the lab, still dazed from her lack of sleep. Her conscience was nagging her constantly so she was actually glad when Medila confronted her later that morning and launched into one of her furious tirades about some perceived insubordination. Once the verbal assault was over Ariko was all poised and ready drive the tiresome woman mad, literally. That very evening Ariko snuck into the small lab kitchen, rummaging in the refrigerator until she found Medila's favorite food; it was some kind of a meat pâté native to the Mannars, but most others found revolting. Ariko carefully unscrewed the vial and stirred its contents into the foul-smelling pâté.

Only when she was falling asleep that night did she wonder just how insane Medila would become. Perhaps some precautions would have been wise. But it was too late to do anything about that now. The next day Ariko would almost come to regret it.

The morning turned out to be quite peaceful actually. Ariko managed to lose herself in cross-referencing data codes for a promising drone AI project, with no sign of Medila anywhere. After lunch, though, with Medila having eaten a generous portion of her loathsome pâté, things quickly escalated into the realms of the absurd.

It started innocently enough, with Medila being unusually domineering around Umailen and Touvolle. But as the hours passed she grew more and more possessive, while at the same time showing increasing megalomaniac tendencies. Late in the afternoon Medila had convinced herself that the fate of the project rested on her shoulders solely and that it was her genius and her genius only that would spark all the wonderful new

discoveries. This didn't sound too bad until she got the notion that only by devouring the brains of the other scientists could she fulfill her own prophecy of becoming the Queen of Inspiration. She managed to lock herself, along with Touvolle and Umailen, inside one of the offices, barricading the door. Someone had called security, but the door wouldn't budge.

Ariko was in shock. It was bad enough being responsible for driving poor Medila insane, but now she had to contend with her possibly killing the two men that the whole project hinged upon. She watched the frustrated efforts of the security guards trying to force the door open. 'This is absurd,' she thought, 'this is a lab. There must be something here that can help us open this damn door.' She looked around, searching for something, equipment, chemical components, anything. Her eyes finally came to rest on a half-assembled infinite impulse processor, part of some linear audio phaser research she wasn't party to. But it gave her an idea.

Grabbing the equipment she made her way to her own workbench, where she located a small fusion array. She wasn't all that sure this would work, but it was worth the try. Working quickly, she fused the two items together. She then rushed to where the security guards were still trying to pry the door open, all the while shouting through the door for Medila to give herself up. There was no time to ask nicely.

"Get away," she shouted, as she put her newly created audio blaster on the floor in front of the door. The security guards looked at her in confusion, but Wobanen was quick on the uptake and dragged them away. Ariko activated her newly created weapon, cursing for not having enough time to set up a timer. She could only hope the directional field in the processor was working adequately, or she would blow the eardrums of everyone in the room. And possibly fry their brains in the process. She waited for the fusion array to charge completely, then she turned it to maximum output, released the holder key and scampered away.

The sonic boom shook the room like an earthquake. Ariko was sure it could be felt around the station. After all, it was circular. Raising herself, all she could hear at first was a high-pitch buzz in her ears. It faded quickly though. A few others were not so lucky, as she would later find out, the blast causing permanent damage to the sensitive auditory system.

Most importantly, the door was now open. The two halves of it were bent backward as if they were made of butter instead of a hardened steel alloy. Ariko rushed into the room, fearing the worst. The office was a mess, but the three people inside were thankfully unharmed. The security guards quickly took hold of Medila, even as she fought them with the inhuman strength of the deranged. She was no longer screaming for brains to feed her newfound queenhood. Instead, she was shouting abuses at the guards.

"I'm Medila!" she screeched hysterically. "I must contain the maniacs!" She nodded her head in the direction of Touvolle and Umailen. "I gave a sacred oath!" she continued. "To Mentas Blaque himself. He charged me with suppressing this whole idiotic project! I'm a smotherer! A smotherer!" she screamed as the security guards dragged her away.

'This is interesting,' Ariko thought. 'In her crazed state she has given up her secret mission.' During her research on the political structure behind the Crielere project she had often come across the name Mentas Blaque. He was the leader of the Federation Senate and a sworn enemy of president Souro Foiritan. She chuckled to herself. While she felt sorry for the sudden and tragic downfall of Medila she couldn't believe how things had played into her hands. Not only was the Senate crony now gone forever, but the Senate wouldn't dare replace her now that it had been revealed it had tried to impinge on the project in a most improper manner. Ariko also realized that her first impression of Medila being the main obstacle to the project really taking off was completely accurate.

Following the downfall of Medila, the Senate was quick to denounce any knowledge of any secret dealings with the mad woman and withdrew completely from meddling with the running of the station. Ariko could easily picture Mentas Blaque sulking in some extravagant luxury yacht somewhere, cursing the name of Medila and all her ancestors from here to eternity. The thought made her laugh.

In the quiet aftermath following the uproar few witnessed the arrival of the man destined to be responsible for the rise and then the ruin of the Crielere project. Otro Gariushi, CEO of the Ishukone Corporation, arrived silently at the half-built station in the early hours of the morning, slipping almost unnoticed into a docking bay on an unassuming shuttle. Branded an ugly brute by his enemies, of which there were many, he had never been quite able to shake off the dark rumors of a shady past that followed him wherever he went. Driven by some secret inner demons, his blind ambition lent him a powerful charisma that swept those around him into a maelstrom of obedience and compliance.

Gariushi, tipped off by his agents on the station, was quick to grasp the change in the power structure and his arrival was no mere happenstance. Like the other CEOs of the mega-corporation Gariushi had watched in worry the problems on Crielere escalate, but unlike the other CEOs he was more than willing to take an active part in rectifying the situation; a breach of protocol was not something Otro Gariushi lost any sleep over.

A former adversary of Gariushi once remarked that 'Gariushi fills a power vacuum like an obese person a spandex suit' and before the day had turned to evening Otro had firmly asserted himself as the man in charge on the Crielere station.

Though Gariushi was not held in high esteem in the State due to his shady background Ariko was inwardly pleased that a Caldari was now calling the shots. The Gallenteans naturally grumbled a bit, but they had suffered from the lack of leadership just as acutely as the Caldari and most of them were simply glad that someone was taking charge, even if it was an obnoxious Caldari.

Ariko decided it was best for her to lay low for awhile until the situation had stabilized. She had no idea how Gariushi might react to what she had done or, more importantly, if he knew anything of her secret dealings with Mitsu or Fatal. Working the graveyard shift for a few weeks was much preferred than being booted out of the station. She had accomplished what she set out for; getting rid of Medila and gaining the favor of the scientists in the process. She wasn't about to jeopardize that now by sticking her neck out. Instead, she opted to observe activities from afar. There was another reason for her decision, the family name Cumin might ring some unwanted bells with Gariushi. She didn't know all the gritty details, but she knew that when she was a girl, her father, an important negotiator for Wyrkomi at the time, had been sent to the headquarters of Ishukone to barter a deal. Gariushi had entangled her father in a conspiracy ploy and then threatened to reveal it to Wyrkomi unless a very favorable deal would be settled on. Her father had no alternative but to accept, being branded an idiot was far better than that of a traitor. After his return her father's career slowly faded into obscurity and instead he pinned the hope of his family on Ariko's slender shoulders. Ariko was pretty sure that Gariushi had long since forgotten the name of Cumin, but she didn't want to take any chances on the matter. She would stay in the shadows for the time being.

Gariushi was quick to stamp his mark and in only a few days the construction process was as fast as it had ever been. In fact, construction materials were soon in short supply. At first Gariushi tried to increase shipments from the contracted shipping firms, Inner Zone Shipping and Ytiri, but they were slow to respond. Undaunted, his next move was to get freelance pilots, mainly from independent companies, to ship materials in. By appealing to the altruistic nature of the Crielere project, aimed to aid everyone, the response was overwhelming and gave a good indication what a shrewd nose Gariushi had when it came to political machinations.

The problem of an inadequate workforce remained. Much of the budget allocated to build the station had been spent, yet it was only half built. A week after his arrival, Gariushi ordered the construction zone to be sealed off, as well as the docking bay serving the zone. He justified this by stating that the workforce needed to shield itself from outside interruptions and attractions, so they could concentrate fully upon the task at hand. Ariko couldn't quite understand this need for seclusion, but dismissed the conspiracy theories about slaves being used to bolster the workforce as fabricated rumors spread by former cronies of Medila. The sudden appearance of burly Amarrians walking the station's halls was merely a coincidence, Ariko reasoned. Whatever methods Gariushi was employing he certainly seemed to be getting the results, as new sections of the station seemed to open up almost every day.

The impact these development had on the research effort was evident to everyone. Better facilities, coupled with optimism that the Crielere project was finally spreading its wings, meant that new and fabulous discoveries were being made. Already blueprints were being churned out and the eye of the world again turned to Crielere for wondrous news. Ariko enjoyed being part of what was happening, particularly for her small but significant contribution in getting things on the right track. Vanity tickled her to shout her accomplishments to the world, but she had plenty of common sense to wrestle it to the ground. But when Gariushi declared that the first fully developed blueprints, for advanced mining equipment, would be made public to everyone, she felt that it was time to come out of the shadows again. She didn't know what Gariushi was up to, giving away discoveries like that. She doubted his stated reasons of philanthropy, but couldn't discredit them. But his actions meant that if she wanted to be of any value to her new secret employers then she'd better get closer to the two pioneers.

Gunaris was still working on his calculations, happily oblivious to the hectic goings on in other parts of the station. But he was on the inside track when it came to communicating with the two scientists. Through him, Ariko got to meet the scientists on a regular basis, even sometimes participating in brainstorm meetings or being asked to note down theories or ideas they seemed to be constantly throwing between themselves. The creative atmosphere surrounding the pair was so contagious that Ariko found herself easily caught up in the fever and enjoyed every second of it.

Umailen and Touvolle turned out to be quite the characters. Their relationship was almost a symbiotic one, they complemented each other so perfectly that after decades of working together they often finished each other's sentences or merely glanced at each other to see what the other was thinking. Far from being the stuffy old bores like many people imagined scientists to be they were almost like children in their irresponsible, playful behavior. Ariko could sense a darker side to them, something to do with their war experience all those years ago when they were both young men. It was as if those haunting memories they had drove them on, yet never surfacing in a negative manner. In fact, Ariko often felt like she was back in college, such was the atmosphere in the lab now that the stifling regime of Medila was at an end. She especially enjoyed the silly banter the scientists often engaged in. When they entered the lab in the morning they frequently made boastful proclamations about who would discover more wondrous things that day. She particularly enjoyed their 'science is' game, where they likened science to some thing or another, in a tongue-in-cheek manner. In time she became a participant herself in this game, where the trick was to out-do the others based in previous comments.

"Science is like a prostitute," Touvolle would perhaps say out of the blue. "You lust for a short-lived pleasure, but are left with something itchy and indescribable in the long-term."

"I beg to differ," Ariko would counter. "Science is like a callgirl. You know the number, but have no idea how to handle all the complexities."

"Ah, you're on the wrong track all together," Umailen would retort. "Science is like a marriage. It starts with an exciting affair and ends up eating all your time."

Thus it would go back and forth for awhile, before they all delved once more into serious work. Despite spending time playing silly games like 'science is' they were still even more productive than before and new blueprints saw daylight more or less every week. It was a fantastic achievement.

While Ariko was in a privileged position being part of the team surrounding the two scientists she was still just a junior assistant and as such still had some tedious assignments to complete. Working late one evening she decided to make a routine check on the blueprints already filed. It wasn't the most fun job in the world, but it always filled her with a sense of accomplishment seeing a concrete proof that coming here hadn't been the disaster she initially thought it would be. Her father had sent her here when she refused to come work in his office after graduation. It was intended as a punishment and she had taken it as such initially. Now she knew differently. She thought it was ambition that had brought about her little rebellion, but now she knew it really was a longing to be part of something important; where she felt her contribution was not only appreciated, but also of value to more than just her family's prestige or her corporation's bottom line.

Ariko couldn't come near the blueprints themselves; their high value meant they were only accessible to a handful of people. Instead, she had to use a complicated robotic system to access and file the blueprints. Putting her mind into automatic, she filed the blueprints one by one while letting her mind wander about the impact these blueprints would have on the world. A soft beep on the console she was working on brought her back from her reverie. Blueprints were missing. Accidentally, Ariko had made a fateful discovery of the most innocuous nature, but which would unleash a series of events that would in the end shake the whole world.

At first Ariko thought it was an oversight on her part, due to tiredness, but she double-checked, then checked again, always with the same results. Missing were original blueprints of many of the most stunning and exciting discoveries made so far on the station. Ariko was at a loss what to do. Was it a theft or just an innocent mistake? She wanted to believe the latter, but her gut feeling told her otherwise. Her sense of duty told her she should report this to her superiors. But if this was a theft, who was responsible? Even the mere existence of the blueprints was top secret, making it almost impossible this was an outside job. Ariko didn't like the path her train of thoughts was taking her down, but there was only one inevitable conclusion; if this was theft it was done by an insider. Not only that, it was done by someone high up in the chain of command.

Ariko was in no position to investigate the matter herself. But she had no idea whom she could trust. The one thing she did know was that she had to report this to someone, otherwise the blame would fall on her. Gariushi she didn't trust. Besides, he was away on a visit to New Caldari. But she knew just the people to turn to.

The news spread like wildfire through the station. The next day when Ariko woke up the station was buzzing. She had told the scientists last night; after telling Mitsu first. Obviously the scientists had wasted no time in getting the story out, or at least not bothered much to conceal it. When Ariko entered the lab the tension was tangible. No one managed to do much work that day, suspicion and uncertainty the only thing on people's mind. Ariko hadn't slept much during the night. She was out in the open now, with all eyes on the station on her. She felt naked and defenseless, sure that everyone could see all her dirty little secrets. During the night she had half expected the police to come crashing through the door, dragging along Mitsu bound and gagged. At a time she even thought that the whole thing was a setup. After all, how stupid was it to steal these blueprints? It was bound to be found out eventually. How much better just to make copies or at least record the information, but leave the originals behind, then no one would have been any wiser that anything was amiss. In the darkness of her room Ariko was certain the only explanation was that someone wanted to pin this on her. Now, in the daylight, she laughed at her silly paranoia, though the uneasy feeling remained. There were other explanations: maybe the thieves didn't have time to make copies, or maybe they wanted to possess the blueprint technology all to themselves, or maybe they were simply cocky and didn't care if they were found out.

Gariushi, back from New Caldari, and his people were also ominously silent. Some took this as a sign that the whole thing was a hoax and would be cleared up shortly. Others took it as a sign that Gariushi was trying to think of ways to cover this up. As day turned to evening the first orders from Gariushi's office filtered down; no one was allowed to leave the station, communications with the outside world were severely restricted and only employees of the station were allowed in.

At first Ariko thought these measures were to hinder the thief or thieves from getting their ill-gotten items out of the station, but then she realized that it was much too late for that – the thieves could have left long ago. The only explanation for this order was to hinder news of the theft from spreading outside the station. Ariko suspected it was also much too late for that. Of course, this also meant it was too dangerous for her to talk to her contact for the time being. But she had talked to him last night and there was no need to talk to him again quite yet.

The next day Ariko was finally called in for questioning. She had had butterflies in her stomach the previous

day, fearing what her discovery the previous night might entail. A couple of officials showed up at her small apartment and escorted her to a secluded room in the upper levels of the station. There she met a soft-spoken man that simply interviewed her about her findings and her subsequent actions. It wasn't quite an interrogation, because Ariko was so co-operative, but she sensed that the soft-spoken man was quite ready to turn the screws on her if the need arose. He even seemed a bit disappointed for her not giving him an excuse for doing so. The interview only took a couple of hours, after which she was allowed to go. Ariko breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed that although Gariushi was unhappy with developments, having openly raved about her incompetence and disloyalty in informing the scientists first, he wasn't going to take it out against her. And more importantly, her cover was still intact.

The atmosphere was muted when she got back to the lab. Ariko was certain that Umailen and Touvolle would be crestfallen at the loss of such valuable blueprints, but they seemed as cheerful as ever. Touvolle summed up the feelings of the pair when he said:

"Ah, those blueprints may be of some value at the moment, but with the ideas me and Taromi have they'd be obsolete in a few months anyway." Having said that he urged his coworkers to start working again, the best way to stick it to the thieves was by producing even better blueprints as soon as possible. Touvolle's short speech lifted the gloomy spirit in the lab and soon everyone were back at their workstations, toiling away happily. Ariko joined the others, glad that the research effort was still in full swing. 'All the more for me to report,' she thought grimly.

The next day the station was again buzzing. Not because of the stolen blueprints, but because Otro Gariushi had slipped away during the night, disappearing just as quietly as he had appeared a month earlier. While leaving behind a deputy to take care of business, it was obvious that Gariushi was washing his hands clean of the Crielere project. Ariko suspected he had already got what he wanted. She could only admire the man. He shrewdly manipulated the public opinion to remain in charge, while behind the scenes he carefully acquired what he was really after. 'Then he slipped away like a thief into the night,' Ariko mused. There was no doubt in her mind that Gariushi was responsible for the stolen blueprints. It was only a question of whether he would get away with it or not. She couldn't help but compare how differently Ishukone did business than her own Wiyrkomi corporation. 'With Gariushi at the helm Ishukone simply comes in and takes what it wants. All Wiyrkomi could do was to recruit lowly me.'

The deputy left behind by Gariushi did his best to hush the blueprint theft. He launched an internal investigation, but gave no progress reports, or even an indication on when the investigation would be concluded. Days passed and still there were no official news. But there were subtle hints that behind the scenes a cleanup was taking place. Several high-ranking officials, including some Caldari scientists, had handed in their resignations, claiming they were too distraught by the theft to continue working on the project. All of them immediately got jobs elsewhere for empire corporations. The theft was becoming old news. Ariko was hoping the whole thing would blow over, allowing the research effort to resume. But she failed to take the righteousness of the Gallenteans into account. They wouldn't forget something like this and they would want to find the culprits. All they needed was someone to enforce their will. And that is just what they got. A week after Ariko first reported the stolen blueprints, Souro Foiritan, president of the Gallente Federation made an unannounced visit to the station.

Foiritan had been one of the staunch supporters of the project from the very beginning. It was well known that the man had a passionate interest in technology and new gadgets, and from what Ariko had heard from her coworkers Foiritan had to wrestle the Federal Senate tooth and nail to get it to fund the project. Thus, his arrival now when his pet project was in danger came as no surprise.

Of course, Foiritan had no official authority on the station, but with the current leadership being as tentative as it was he could steamroll over all barriers and protocols like a scorpion in a henhouse. Ariko would have thought Foiritan would storm right to the command center to take control, but she didn't count on his fascination for technology. He had to take a tour of the facilities first, starting with a visit to Umailen and Touvolle, whom Foiritan had come to love and respect. They showed him around the lab. Foiritan's face lit up each time a new invention was shown to him and by the time they came to Ariko's desk he was positively beaming.

"Here is the girl that discovered the missing blueprints," Touvolle said, introducing Ariko. She shyly shook Foiritan's hand. A shadow had past over his face at the mention of the stolen blueprints and now he looked grave and troubled.

"Ah, yes. The missing blueprints," he said softly, staring Ariko straight in the eyes as they shook hands. She could feel the charisma radiating off him and understood finally what the Gallenteans saw in this man that many considered a buffoon not fit for office. She remembered all the times she and her schoolmates had mocked this man after his latest folly. It made her blush and avert her eyes. Foiritan smiled knowingly and released her hand.

"Such a shame that some people are willing to sacrifice the future for such a short term gain," he continued softly, still looking intently at Ariko.

"Quite so," Touvolle concurred, a bit bewildered by the short exchange of words between president Foiritan and

Ariko the junior assistant.

Ariko tried to breath calmly as Foiritan continued his tour of the lab. The sheer animalistic charisma of the man was enough to overwhelm anyone, but his words had hit her like a sledgehammer. Did he know about her being a spy? Or was it just innocent small talk? She couldn't tell.

She watched Foiritan as he talked privately with the two scientists for a few minutes, his bodyguards making sure no one could approach them. The scientists glanced furtively around the lab a few times, but never at her. She breathed a sigh of relief. If they were talking about her they surely would have looked in her direction at least once.

Later that day Ariko found out that Foiritan had ordered a thorough investigation into the theft, to be carried out by a team of independent investigators brought from outside. Foiritan made it quite clear that this team would have full access to the station and all relevant data, in order to speed up the investigation process as much as possible. Having come what he set out for, Foiritan and his entourage of PR people and the media, left the station on the large luxury yacht that had brought them here.

The next few days went by like in a dream. Ariko tried to keep her mind on the job, but her mind kept returning to the stolen blueprints. She knew that the future of the project hinged on the results of the ongoing investigation and so did the rest of the workers. Even Gunaris seemed too distant and preoccupied to talk to her. Only now, thinking about the future of the project, did she realize really how important it had become to her. She had been skeptical for a long time and the spying game had distracted her from seeing where her true priorities lay. Now she knew; with the project. With Umailen and Touvolle. She also feared that the investigation would turn up something unwanted, such as her being a secret agent. She hadn't heard anything from Mitsu in days, and though she hoped this merely meant he was being cautious she sometimes feared he had been arrested. She needed someone to talk to so she wouldn't go mad, turning these thoughts around in her head again and again. She finally managed to break Gunaris down and get him to talk to her. She stayed well away from discussing current affairs with him, as she feared this would shut him up, so she opted instead to talk about his youth. After a hesitating start, he soon got into gear and started telling her about his enthusiasm for numbers.

"I've always been fascinated by numbers, for as long as I can remember," he confessed. "My home planet, Ation VIII, has 21 moons and I remember I thought this was a magic number when I was a boy." He smiled his shy little smile that Ariko thought so endearing before continuing.

"To me mathematics was like magic and I loved number puzzles or strange sequences. Like this number," he said, picking up the light pen on his desk and drawing the number 142857 in the air. "It seems like just a random six-figure number, but try multiplying it by two." Ariko quickly did so in her head.

"285714," she said.

"Right, now multiply it by three, four, five and six." This was more difficult, and Ariko scrunched her face in an effort to do this quickly. Gunaris laughed merrily as he saw her struggle.

"Never mind," he said. "I'll give you the numbers." He wrote the numbers down below the first number, in a list. "Now, add the individual numbers of the first number together, what do you get?"

"27," Ariko replied promptly. This was easy.

"Correct, and the next and the next?" She looked at them, wonder spreading around her face.

"27, they're all twenty-seven."

"And if you add them vertically?" he prodded. Now she gasped and smiled in amazement.

"27 too, for all of them. That's amazing!" They both laughed.

"Yeah, well, this was the kind of stuff I found fascinating when I was a small boy, four or five probably. It sparked an interest in numbers that has never dwindled. Even though I've found no true magic in there."

"Are you still looking?" she asked. It was meant as a tease, but Gunaris became serious.

"I am," he finally said and Ariko saw he meant it. Then the investigators arrived in the lab and the conversation ended.

The investigators, most of them Gallenteans and Intakis, worked fast and efficiently. The thieves hadn't been all that careful in covering up their tracks, as they seemed confident that the powers that be would protect them. So the investigation was over swiftly and the results didn't particularly surprise anyone: men working under direct orders from Otro Gariushi had systematically plundered blueprints and even prototype equipment.

After the findings of the investigators had been announced it was like all the racial and political tension that Gariushi had held in check were now out in the open twice as forceful as before. With growing dismay, Ariko watched helplessly as confrontations between Gallenteans and Caldari escalated by the hour. Bar brawls became common, soon intensifying into full scale riots. The day after the investigative report was made public, a Senate delegation arrived to take stock of the situation.

With the arrival of a new Senate delegation, throwing the leadership on the station into confusion, things quickly escalated beyond control. The security personnel on the station, hitherto considered to have the easiest jobs around, suddenly found themselves in full riot gear, facing a mob that seemed ready to tear the just completed station apart with their bare hands. Conflicting orders filtered down from above, inflaming the volatile situation even further. Martial laws were declared, but with little effect. People started leaving in droves.

The Senate delegation left in a huff, furious about not being given sole command of the station. It came as no surprise to Ariko when she heard the next day that they had pulled the financial plug. The Caldari mega-corporations followed suit shortly after. The Crielere project was in a crisis, with most of the staff gone and now no budget. And yet, Ariko felt defiant. Not because she wanted further chances to conduct industrial espionage for Wiyrkomi. In fact, she was fed up with the greedy corporations and their power politics. She didn't want the project to end.

The Crielere project was like a dream you have when you're neither awake nor asleep, one you never want to end. Ariko realized what she wanted most of all was to keep the dream alive. It was too valuable for it to succumb to petty corporate rivalries and racial antagonism. She was reminded of one of her heated conversations with her father shortly before she left where he accused her of betraying her corporation. She could still feel the sting of tears of frustration in her eyes. To be branded a traitor and a spoiled brat by her father, whom she'd looked up to her entire life. She remembered how angry and humiliated she'd felt at being accused of betraying the corporation that had reared her, even if it wasn't true. She had intended to work for Wiyrkomi. She only wanted to do it on her own terms. But now, his accusations were true. She didn't even try to convince herself that staying with the scientists gave her further opportunities to wring some valuable information out of them. She was too smart for that. She was staying because she wanted to use her talents the way they were supposed to; not stifled by the corporation, but allowed to flourish doing something that really mattered to all mankind.

Ariko had thought that coming to Crielere, bad as it sounded at first, would at least quench her thirst for adventure, but instead it opened her eyes to how narrow-minded her father was, or she had been, for that matter. How could she stay loyal to her corporation when it meant betraying humanity?

Entering the lab, Ariko mused that what was now left of the Crielere project was the essence of what it stood for. All the money grabbers and band wagoners were gone, leaving only those that truly wanted to make a difference, even if it meant sacrificing their careers. Gunaris was there and the sight of him made the cynical side of Ariko wonder how much the fact that he was staying behind had influenced her own decision unconsciously. Ariko knew the time was drawing near when she had to bare her feelings for him, as much as she dreaded it.

Touvolle and Umailen were seated in their favorite brainstorming chair, but for once they weren't discussing new science theories. The pair had earlier in the morning sent out a plea to the outside world asking for support, financial or otherwise. It had met with a bland response. There was an air of resignation around the lab. Ariko knew that if she didn't convince them to continue with their work, then all she had to look forward to was to return to the fold of Wiyrkomi and sign her life sentence of obedience with them. A few months earlier it would have truly honored her. Now it was abhorrent to her. Ariko had never considered herself to be of much a motivational speaker, but she had passion and hoped it lent her some powers of persuasion. She surveyed the motley crew assembled before her. There were maybe fifty of them left, a fraction of the thousands that had swarmed the station only few short weeks earlier. All had the look of gloom in their eyes, but she hoped the reason they hadn't left yet was because they still harbored some secret hope that the project could go on. She recalled a parable from back home, told to all aspiring young Caldari students.

"There once was a great rich merchant," she began hesitantly, suddenly all too aware that all eyes in the room were on her. But she plunged on regardless, steeling her nerves. "He lived to a grand old age and possessed every wealth a man could dream of. Many looked to him in awe or envy, coveting his treasures and desiring to imitate his great successes. Yet the old man was never happy and on his deathbed, a young clerk working for him asked: 'You must feel that your life has been one great success story, what with all the wealth you have accumulated.' But the old man replied. 'My life has been one of misery and sorrow. As a young man I chose wealth over family, discarding the love of my life. When I die all that I will leave behind in the world is money. But money is the same all over, mine is no different from anyone else's. Once my wealth has been scattered, all that I will be is dust and vague memories. My life is a failure young man, don't make the same mistakes I did.' The young clerk heeded the old man's advice, making sure he had the time to rear a family even if his focus was on his career path." Ariko took a deep breath, watching her attentive audience ponder her little anecdote. "Now, this story may not be all that relevant to our situation here, but to me, and I hope for the rest of you, I've become to realize that the Crielere project is the love of my life. If I abandon it now, no matter how successful I'll become later in life, I'll always regret having done so. This is an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make our mark on the world, to create something that will go down in history and not scatter in the wind like dust. I have

no idea if we can pull this off on our own, but by Fate, I'm willing to try my best until all avenues are spent." By this time Ariko was almost shouting, her passion and enthusiasm shining through. She didn't know what more she could say. She wanted to run to each and every one of those in the room, shake them by the shoulders and beg them to stay on.

No one spoke for a minute. Ariko was certain her words hadn't hit home, that she'd sounded too desperate, too manic. Then Touvolle stood up, a thoughtful expression on his face. He slowly walked over to where Ariko was standing and, in a sudden gesture, embraced her. "Thank you," he whispered in her ear. "Thank you."

It was done. They would stay and continue. Ariko was thrilled, but at the same time, her pesky cynical side couldn't help but wonder if all of them were living a dream they hoped never ended, but a dream nevertheless. No. This was no illusion. The Crielere project was real. Maybe more real than anything else she'd ever known.

Ariko had grown accustomed to the hustling and bustling of the station while the project was in full swing. Now the empty corridors echoed back her footsteps, hammering home the bleakness of the place. Everything seemed to be malfunctioning and the few dozen people she'd managed to convince to stay on had to spend most of their time keeping the station up and running. Closing down a few sections had alleviated the problem somewhat.

Touvolle had taken Ariko's speech to heart and was now carrying the torch for the rest of them. Ariko was happy to step back into the sidelines and let the energetic old man take on the role of a leader of this rag-tag team. Umailen was not far behind in spurring people on and together great progress was made everyday. But supplies were getting low and the crew was even forced to beg benevolent visitors for handouts. And Fatal would come soon and claim his reward, somehow Ariko was sure of that.

Mitsu was long gone, but he left her with a small communication device she could hide in her room. It was dangerous to use, even if they employed codes and encryptions. She used it only sporadically, just enough to keep Mitsu happy. But he was becoming impatient with the lack of hard data she was sending, demanding more and more. For a long while his threats of total ostracism from the State kept her in line. He even stooped so low as to threaten to make the life of her elderly parents difficult if she didn't comply. But as her admiration for Umailen and Touvolle grew she began to loath this secret side of her life ever more. It was beginning to affect her self-esteem; she began to loath herself for her treachery and low moral fiber. She was thankful to the State for rearing her for all those years, but since her arrival here at Crielere she had seen a darker, more sinister side of it. This was its true face, she realized. This is how the State behaved behind the pretty veil it cast on its citizens. It may shelter them, but it deceived them at the same time. What worth was the life's work of an honest man when it was made under deception and guile? She knew it was time to cut the umbilical cord for good. Maybe complying with Mitsu offered her a future with the State, but it wasn't a future she wanted anymore. She contemplated just throwing away the communication device; maybe Mitsu would think it had been damaged or she found out. But she wanted a clean break. It took her a few days to amass enough courage, but in the end there was nothing to it. Sure, Mitsu cursed her and all her ancestral line. He dragged her poor parents into it again. But she wouldn't budge. It was an ugly break, she shook all over for an hour after cutting the com-link for the last time, but it was over. She was now a persona nongrata. A person without a nation. She was remarkably relaxed about this, given that to most Caldari this was almost worse than being dead. The State had given her the time and the resources to grow and be educated, but she had given it all her time in return. Yet it always demanded more, demanded all of her time all for itself. This she was not prepared to do. Her time was now here, on the Crielere station, with the scientists and the all-important Project.

'If only we had a little more time,' Ariko thought for the umpteenth time. 'Then we could complete some of the stuff we're developing and sell the blueprints. With a bit of luck we can become self-sufficient in a few weeks.' Ariko didn't consciously think the world worked in a predestined way, but if she did, then she would have cursed Fate for the blow it dealt next. The empires withdrew their police forces from the Crielere system. And then Fatal arrived. With his friends. Lots and lots of them.

The Guristas were quick to assert their authority in the system. Fatal had come to exert his due reward – full access to the station and every secret it held. This was an extortion of the highest magnitude and Ariko didn't blame the scientists to balk at Fatal's demands.

The empires turned a deaf ear when the scientists pleaded for their help in fending off the Guristas. It seemed as if they were on their own. But then help arrived from an unexpected source. The independent pilots, formerly so helpful in getting the station completed in time, arrived in droves. They had heard the pleas of the scientists and, unlike the callous empires, they had decided to respond.

Some came because they wanted to help fellow humans in need. Others because they believed in the project and wanted to help keep it intact. Still others came for glory, for the chance to hunt down pirates, hoping to get valuable loot or simply out of curiosity. But their strength and determination amazed Ariko and showed her how strong and vivacious the independent pilot community was becoming. She knew many discounted them as being immaterial, but Ariko now knew better. They were the future because they were organized yet flexible, tolerant yet principled; an ever growing organism whereas the empires were bound by their traditions and mistrust of each other.

The skeleton crew left on the station was already stretched thin working on the energy systems so the huge particle accelerators and other energy draining research equipment didn't overheat or destabilize. Now it also had to contend with bolstering what little defenses the station possessed. Power was re-routed to the shields and weapon platforms. It gave them all some sense of security, but Ariko knew enough about shields and weapons to deem the station defenses as pathetic; if it wasn't for the pilots out there sacrificing their ships or even lives then the Guristas could almost have waltzed right into the station. This was undoubtedly what Fatal had counted on, hence his decision to risk directing his pirate fleet so far from their traditional playing grounds.

The arrival of the freelance pilots was a surprise to the Guristas, but it wasn't a sufficient threat to make the pirates flee. A fierce battle ensued. Most of the Guristas engaged the freelance pilots, but several cruisers headed towards the station and started blasting it with everything they got. The Guristas obviously hoped to damage the station so severely it would be forced to surrender. Missile after missile slammed into the feeble shields, battering the hull in the process. The crew watched in mounting horror as the fission core used in their morphite plasma research became unstable to the point of threatening to explode. A team was hastily deployed to make emergency repairs, Ariko being one of them.

Laboring in the bowels of the station to stabilize the overheating core took Ariko out of the loop, leaving in her complete darkness as to how the battle was going. Later she would often reflect if it would have mattered had she been in the command center when the greenhouse was breached. Would she have stopped Gunaris from going there for emergency repairs? Would she have argued with Umailen for his decision to close the section off? Would she have had time to say goodbye?

In the end it didn't really matter. The only thing that mattered was that Gunaris volunteered to enter the greenhouse, in an order to seal a breach that was letting essential oxygen escape. When subsequent explosions damaged the greenhouse section beyond repair, Umailen had ordered it to be sealed off before the whole station was extinguished. It hadn't been an easy decision, Ariko knew that when she looked into Umailen's haunted eyes. Yet she wished he hadn't had to make it.

They found his body the next day, lying peacefully between some tomato plants as if in deep slumber. It was impossible to tell whether he had suffered in his death or not, but Ariko didn't feel it mattered. She felt empty inside. Never having experienced true sorrow before in her life, she was unsure how to behave. Suddenly her time with Gunaris, their small talks and short walks, took on a whole new meaning. They were now cherished memories of someone she would never see again. Never talk to again. Never touch. In the first few hours after she returned to the lab and found out his fate emotions had raged through her. Anger, bitterness, loneliness, confusion, denial, grief.

The Guristas were beaten back finally, retreating into nearby systems to lick their wounds. This hardly registered with Ariko. Yet again she lost sleep that night, her mind in turmoil. For the first time in her life she prayed to her ancestors. She knew many Caldari did it; her mother for one. Until now she had scorned such practices as relics of the past, but now she found solace in it. It also allowed her to steel her mind against the grief that threatened to overwhelm her. All the emotions she had felt for Gunaris, but suppressed, now came flooding back, multiplying her sorrow. When morning came she had resolved to stay strong. She would find time later to grieve properly. Now her scientists needed her. And she needed to focus on the task at hand: successfully defending the station against the Guristas. They might have been driven back yesterday, but they were not beaten.

The lab had been turned into a makeshift command center. Nobody had wanted to take up residency in the old one, so they'd simply stripped the necessary equipment and set it up anew. Some had even started sleeping in the lab, not wanting to wander the empty corridors alone. Ariko couldn't blame them, thought she still stayed in her drab room. With half the station at her disposal she could have easily found something more grand, but she didn't bother.

Yesterday's events were being discussed as Ariko entered. The lab grew quiet. Everyone knew how Ariko and Gunaris had felt for each other. 'Everyone but me,' she lamented. She managed a smile and joined the discussion, brushing off all attempts at compassion. Soon, the conversation was back on track.

"That should show the empires how people feel about the Crielere project," Touvolle exclaimed when the independent pilots were being discussed. "These pilots can understand the value of our work."

After the initial rush of euphoria a battle council was called on the urging of Ariko to discuss how the station could be defended on a permanent basis.

"The Guristas will most likely attack us again," she explained. "And even if they don't then somebody else will pop up sooner or later. We can't depend on those independent pilots to keep defending us. Heck, from what I gather they've already started bickering amongst themselves over spoils of war following the retreat of the Guristas. They could even end up turning against us." This sobered the elated scientists somewhat. Umailen spoke up:

"We don't have the money to hire professional help and the empires have washed their hands clean of us. Maybe depending on those pilots is naïve, but they're our only hope as it stands. We just have to keep the

wolves at bay for a few more days, some of what we're researching is nearing completion."

"If we can find the time to work on them," Ariko answered gloomily. "Listen, I don't particularly enjoy being the party-pooper, but somebody has to do it. Sure, we don't have money in the hand know, but we're rich in human resources. Surely we can sell that to somebody."

"You mean selling future discoveries?" Umailen said, sounding skeptical. "Then we'd lose our independence. We could just as well give up right away and start working for one of the large research firms. Being independent is essential so we can fulfill our promise of helping all mankind." The others nodded in agreement and Ariko saw it was a futile argument.

Touvolle had remained silent during much of the discussion, resting his chin in his hand. Now, seeing Ariko's discomfort, he spoke up.

"You have to understand, Ariko, where we are coming from. During the war, both me and Taromi worked for our respective governments. They used our creative energy to increase the suffering and the pain of the common man. Have you heard of Rutheren IV?" When she shook her head no, he continued. "That is understandable, few have. The name was stricken from the records, erased so completely that even those that were there have a hard time convincing themselves it was real. But it was. I bet you have heard of Nouvelle Rouvenor or Hueromont, but there were greater atrocities committed in the war than even those, bad as they were. Rutheren IV was the worst of them and it's there that I and Taromi met. On the ground. Face to face with those bleeding and dying. Until then I had been proud of my work for the Federation, convinced, nay, righteous in my belief that what I was doing was for the greater good of all. On Rutheren IV the reality, the enormity, of it all came crashing home. Through happenstance, which takes too long to describe, I met Taromi in a hospital tent, tending for those still clinging to life. And we made a pact. Good intentions count for little if the cause isn't right. I know your belief in Fate, Ariko, though you try to deny it. That day we decided to take our destiny into our own hands. That is only possible if we're our own masters. Getting funds from the Federation and the State to bring the Crielere project about was a necessary evil we had to endure. We hoped by having both sides onboard, then the common good of all would prevail. Maybe that was naivety on our part, I don't know and it doesn't really matter. What matters is that we can't now put our destiny in other hands than our own. We simply can't. I hope you can understand that." Ariko only nodded her head, she couldn't argue with that.

The meeting was soon called to an end. Pretty much the only thing that had been agreed upon was to urge the independent pilots to remain alert and prepare the defenses of the station as best as possible. Umailen had come up with a way to bolster the station's shields manifolds by re-routing the power generator through the heat sink system. Though it wouldn't hold a determined attacker at bay indefinitely it was nevertheless a great improvement.

The Guristas came at them again the next dawn. The vigilant freelance pilots engaged them as soon as they came in sight and soon had the assaulters pinned down. Umailen and Touvolle looked a bit comical sitting in front of the command desk with com-link devices covering their ears and eyes. Yet Ariko felt strangely affectionate as she looked upon them in their excitement. They monitored the battle from the lab, using the sophisticated sensor systems brought from the command center. The old men participated fully from afar, often shouting encouragements or warnings to the pilots who so valiantly defended the station.

The Guristas showed little in the way of devious battle tactics and seemed happy just to slug it out with the resilient defenders. This seemed very strange to Ariko, as the Guristas were not known to squander their ships in such a wasteful manner.

"The Guristas are retreating again!" Touvolle exclaimed. "They're withdrawing to the Thelan system. We can't allow them to rally now that they're in disarray! Follow them!" By now Touvolle was literally jumping up and down in his seat, sweat pouring off his face as he scanned the screens in front of him, tracking the pursuit. Suddenly, Umailen chimed in.

"I've spotted a second Guristas task force coming from the opposite direction. They're closing in on us." Ariko could feel cold sweat trickle down her spine. The retreat was a ruse. But the shields were up, stronger than ever, and Ariko was confident they could keep this small marauding fleet at bay until the defenders returned.

But then her personal console lightened up. It was Fatal. Ariko furtively glanced around, but thankfully no one was looking in her direction. She quickly disconnected the visuals in the com-link, blackening the screen once more.

"Hello there, pretty one," Fatal said, teasingly. "How's your parents?"

"What do you want?" Ariko said between clenched teeth. She wondered briefly how he knew about the threats Mitsu had made to her parents during their last talk.

"Now, now. Don't take that tone with me," Fatal continued, faking indignation. "You and me go a long way back, I thought we were friends." Even if Ariko could no longer see Fatal's face she could easily visualize the slimy

smile licking his lips as he spoke. When Ariko didn't answer, Fatal continued.

"Well, enough fooling around. Me and my boys are keeping your vigilantes occupied, allowing my friend Rabbit to do what he does best; sneak around," Ariko shivered at his words. What was he up to? "I want you to open bay door number 3 for him. Open it up and you will have repaid your debt," he continued matter-of-factly. Ariko was incredulous.

"You bastard. You think you can make me sell the station into your hands just like that?" Ariko was fuming, she knew she had promised to repay the debt she owed Fatal, but this was too much.

"Ah, well," he sighed. "I was hoping your sense of duty was stronger. Obviously fraternizing with Federation puppies has tainted your sense of responsibility. But nevermind. I wanted to give you the opportunity to redeem yourself."

"Shut up!" Ariko screamed, turning a few heads around her. She had had enough of this arrogant bastard. "You're never getting in here. You hear me? Never!"

"Listen to the girl," Fatal now sounded amused, infuriating Ariko even more. "I don't need your help. What do you think I was doing on the station the other day? Taking a vacation? Thanks to you, I have the access codes. You really shouldn't have let me rig the security system, it allowed me to plant this nice little Trojan. Oh! Will you look at that? Bay door number 3 opening up! Heh! I think Rabbit will accept your invitation. You'll be seeing him in a jiffy." The com-link went dead. Ariko sat paralyzed. What had she done? Thanks to her desire to get near the scientists she had inadvertently given the station's access codes to the leader of the Guristas!

The others had noticed the bay door opening. Ariko listened as if in a trance as they desperately tried to override the docking system, to no avail. Thankfully no one blamed her for what was happening. A small part of her almost wished she would be blamed, sacrificed. She deserved it. When Umailen declared in panic that the Guristas were inside the station, she blushed in shame. She couldn't let the station fall. It would mean Gunaris death had been in vain.

Ariko tried to call an emergency meeting on how to meet the onrushing threat. She knew confronting the Guristas face-to-face was out of the question. Though they had access to some weapons left by the security personnel, they would be no match to the trained ruffians that the Rabbit was leading. But chaos had engulfed the lab. The din made by those shouting to be heard meant that nothing could be heard. Some rushed out of the lab to engage the invaders without even bothering to check if anyone was following. Precious minutes were lost before Ariko managed to calm things down. Touvolle had aided her, Ariko felt it was remarkably that the impulsive researcher managed to keep cool head. But by then Umailen had already left along with a few others and Ariko had no idea where he was.

The only option available to them was to seal the lab and the surrounding living quarters from the rest of the complex. Unfortunately, the station had not been designed with combat purposes in mind, which meant that five corridors had to be closed, along with several bypasses and maintenance tunnels. Time was of the essence, the Rabbit was closing in and Ariko had no idea how long it would be for him to arrive. But she was sure he would take the most direct route, not foreseeing any trouble. So she rushed a team to close the main entrance way into the lab section, hoping this would stall the raiders.

Meanwhile, Touvolle, still watching the sensors, reported that Fatal and his task force had turned the table on the defenders and were closing in on the station again. Undoubtedly, his intentions were to continue harassing the independent pilots to give his comrades inside the station time to complete their mission. It meant that Ariko and the rest were on their own. This only made her more determined to succeed.

Ten agonizing minutes ticked by. More teams had been dispatched to seal off more corridors and entrance ways, but Ariko was waiting anxiously to hear from the first team. Were they quick enough? She had contemplated moving out herself to help out, but someone had to stay behind to coordinate the effort. So instead she tried to calm her frayed nerves by focusing on a large map of the complex, searching for some entrance way she'd missed. Finally, her headset chimed. The main entrance way was closed. There had been no sight of the Rabbit or his henchmen. Ariko allowed herself to breathe easier. Now if only they could locate the foolish Umailen, rushing off without so much as taking a communication device with him. Then Ariko's headset chimed again. It was the team leader at the main entrance again. It seemed that the Rabbit had found Umailen first.

It was blackmail, plain and simple, and listening to the Rabbit Ariko was sure it wasn't the first time he'd done something like this. His demands were simple. Open up the lab and give up or Umailen would get it. Ariko told him they would think it over, but she knew there was nothing to think about. None of the crew wanted to be responsible for Taromi Umailen being executed. The death of Gunaris was still too fresh on their mind. Ariko, as the spokesperson for the crew, negotiated with the Rabbit, trying to set at least some conditions on their own. But the Rabbit knew he held all the aces and all he was willing to promise was not to kill anyone.

The Guristas wasted no time once inside the lab to raid it off the few blueprints still remaining. Ariko had imagined the Rabbit to be a haughty, cocky son-of-a-bitch following their curt negotiations, but he turned out to be quite the opposite, modest, quiet and well-behaved. But he had a mind of steel and when he declared that

Umailen and Touvolle would come with them, Ariko knew that all pleas would fall on deaf ears.

It took the crew several minutes to register just what had happened once the Rabbit and his men had left. Taking Taromi Umailen and Henric Touvolle along with them. The lab was in shambles after the pirates' raid, which had resembled more of a tornado. Touvolle and Umailen had become almost like permanent fixtures in the rooms and with them now gone the lab seemed strangely deserted. Not knowing what else to do they fixed the communication equipment, restoring communication with those outside the station.

The Guristas were getting away, Fatal and his men shielding the Rabbit and his marauders with their valuable cargo. But the defense forces, bigger than ever, were giving the Guristas everything they got. The pirates fled towards the Olettiers system, with the defense forces snapping at their heels. Finally, one of the puppies managed to bite into Fatal. The pirate's ship slowly disintegrated as his comrades sped away, none willing to share their leader's fate. Fatal, in his pod, made a futile attempt to reach the stargate jumping him to Olettiers and safety, but Doc Brown was having none of it and promptly obliterated the pod. The rest of the Guristas got away, but they had paid a heavy price for their wild foray into the Crielere system.

Ariko rejoiced over the death of Fatal, hating the man for his betrayal. Yet his death paled in comparison to that of Gunaris. And the scientists, whose work Ariko had pinned her hopes and dreams on with Gunaris gone and all bridges to the past burnt; now they were gone too. Continuing their visionary work without them was impossible. Ariko felt lower than she had ever done in her entire life. And to top it all off, the station had finally had enough of the battering it had received over the last few days and was slowly disintegrating. The awe Ariko had initially felt for the majestic place had now been replaced by nothing but loathing. It now held too many bad memories; of Fatal and the Rabbit, the racial disputes destroying peace and harmony and last but not the least, the greenhouse where Gunaris had died. It was time to leave the crumbling Crielere station for good.

Several old shuttles nestled in the docking bays, leftovers from the hurried exodus of the last few weeks. Ariko entered the passenger cabin of one along with a few other Caldari heading home. 'Home,' she thought. 'This was my home, do I still have one at Wyrkomi?' She knew that even if they let her back in, she'd be reduced in rank, probably forced forever to toil away her entire life as a lowly clerk, serving as a warning to others. The thought didn't please her at all. Fidgeting in her seat, she pondered her destination. The Crielere system was directly on the borders of Federation and State space. The shuttle was heading for the Kubinen system, on the Caldari side of the border. Once inside there might be no turning back. The thought frightened her. She realized it was not because of the fate that awaited her. She feared it would be the final nail in the coffin of the late Crielere project.

Ariko hadn't let her thoughts linger too much on the fate of Umailen and Touvolle, but it was undoubtedly much worse than what awaited her. But now that the hectic departure from the station was over and she had time to reflect upon the situation, she felt ashamed for abandoning the scientists in their terrible predicament, and to abandon the vision of the Crielere project. She realized that the spirit of the project could only be kept alive if the scientists were free to continue their work, for the good of all mankind. Yet there was nothing she could do. The scientists were gone with the Guristas deep into the outer region. Retrieving them would be impossible. Still, Ariko had a nagging feeling she should wait.

Just as the pilot was about to activate the shuttle's warp drive to make the short jump to the gate leading to Kubinen, Ariko made up her mind; she would stay and see how things panned out. The shuttle changed course at Ariko's insistence, much to the chagrin of her fellow passengers. But she was only taking a short detour; her destination was the Artisine system close by. The Scope had a development studio there and a reporter Ariko had met some weeks earlier was working there. The reporter, Jinette Pandour, was an experienced investigative reporter that had covered the Crielere project from the start. Ariko considered her to be little more than an acquaintance, but Pandour had interviewed her and had struck Ariko as a sensible person passionate about her work. Not knowing anyone else in the region, it was the only place Ariko could think of while waiting to hear of the fate of her two scientist friends.

The Scope station was a low profile station that didn't see many visitors outside those that had some business with the huge media conglomerate. Nevertheless, Ariko received a warm welcome there. Pandour was eager to hear all about the events of recent days, as news from the faltering Crielere station had been little more than rumors since the empires pulled out. The energetic reporter felt the events warranted more coverage and managed to convince her editors to get an exclusive on the goings-on in the Crielere complex in its last few days of operation. The daring Guristas raid and brave resistance of the independent pilots would surely merit the attention of the Scope.

So Ariko found herself having agreed to provide Pandour with all the nitty-gritty details of everything that had transpired in the station since her arrival. Naturally, Ariko left out the covert ops parts, but otherwise remained cooperative. After all, being on an all-expense account paid by the Scope was nothing to sneeze at.

Ariko was certain she had a long, anxious wait ahead of her before hearing anything from the scientists. But less than a week after her arrival in Artisine, Pandour burst into her room one morning shouting:

"They're being sold! The Guristas have put them up for ransom!" Pandour was pacing the room in her excitement, her mind racing at the possibilities these news opened up. Ariko finally managed to get the whole

story out of her. The Guristas, now led by the Rabbit after the fall of Fatal, were in disarray and wanted to offload Umailen and Touvolle to the highest bidder to get some heat off themselves. Ariko was glad to hear that Fatal, in his typically arrogant manner, had refrained from buying a quality clone of himself and thus found himself with severe memory loss and reduced motor functions, once he was revived after being podded. In his weakened state he had been ousted out of the Guristas and gone into hiding. 'What goes around, comes around,' Ariko thought.

Ariko found the idea of her friends and mentors being sold like cattle to be totally repugnant, but at least it would mean they'd escape from the clutches of the Guristas. Once more she wished she had the opportunity to talk to them, instead of being forced to fret in total darkness. Pandour was kept busy over the next few days keeping track of those in secret or not so secret negotiations with the Guristas. Ariko routed with an effort launched by the same independent pilots that had helped defend the station during the last few dark days of the project. But though they managed to collect an impressive sum, their financial strength was still too weak for them to compete effectively. Still, Ariko was confident that she would soon be able to see her friends again, free at last.

Then Fate dealt her another blow, as if to scorn the visionary efforts she was part of along with Umailen and Touvolle. Ariko Kor-Azor was the highest bidder, by a large margin from what Ariko gathered from Pandour. It seemed the man had no qualm about plundering the estates that his father, the current emperor of the Amarr Empire, had so carefully cultivated over the decades. The royal heir intended for the two scientists to head a new research lab he was constructing. Ariko didn't know what they were supposed to research but was certain it had nothing to do with their previous work. Ariko Kor-Azor was not known for his benevolent nature.

Now that Ariko knew Umailen and Touvolle were to be released by the Guristas in mere hours she grew even more restless than before. She couldn't wait to speak to them again. She got just that opportunity later in the day, thanks to Pandour using her media links as leverage. When Ariko finally saw the haggard face of Touvolle on the screen, she felt she would cry from joy. The two chit-chatted for a few minutes, Ariko was so overwhelmed she hardly noticed what she said. She barely registered what Touvolle said. He and Umailen where being held in an Amarrian station at the outskirts of empire space, he didn't know the name of it. The Guristas had released him and Umailen at dawn, seemingly glad to be rid of the pair.

"We will be transported later today to the research lab," Touvolle said wearily.

"Do you know what it is you will be working on?" Ariko inquired.

"No, we've been told nothing. I'm just hoping that getting back into a lab will at least allow us to keep our pet projects alive, even if we can't work on them except periodically." Touvolle replied and sounded a little more upbeat when the discussion turned to the work they'd been engaged in on Crielere. "The little I've been told," he continued, "is that this new research facility is only just completed and it hasn't even been properly staffed yet. In fact, the only thing the Amarr officials said to me after we were taken into their custody was to order us to recruit other scientists to join the lab. They're obviously putting much stock in our reputation, hoping to use it to attract others."

"Oh?" Ariko hadn't considered that. Now it made her wonder. The possibility of working again with Umailen and Touvolle, even if it was on some nefarious research for the loathsome Articio Kor-Azor, excited her no end. "I'd love to have the opportunity to work with you again," she'd blurted out without really thinking about it, but she didn't regret it.

"That's fabulous news, Ariko," Touvolle replied, the relief visible in his eyes. "I was afraid to ask, after all we may have to work on something despicable for this man, but I'm really happy to have you aboard. It makes all this so much easier to bear."

The two chatted for a little while longer, Touvolle much more upbeat than he was at first. Finally, the Amarrians grew impatient and terminated the communication link, hardly giving them time to bid farewell.

Afterwards, Ariko was in really high spirits. Even the thought of traveling into Amarr space and working in some potentially hostile place didn't put her off. This was what she had been waiting for all those long days here at Artisine. She had no home in the State, she would not be welcome there. It was a remarkable easy decision to make.

She had allowed Pandour to listen in on her conversation with Touvolle, as part of their arrangement. Now, with Ariko leaving soon, Pandour had to decide whether to wrap up her story or follow it through all the way. It was also an easy decision for her. She would accompany Ariko into the Amarr Empire and witness the happy reunion.

Ariko finally felt at ease. The last few days she had been in a limbo, with no clear future ahead of her. Now she had a plan, something to aim for. She would travel into the Amarr Empire and become a full fledged researcher, working alongside Umailen and Touvolle. It was like a dream come true for her.

For the first time in awhile she allowed herself to think about Gunaris. Every time she'd thought of him, she felt sorrow threatening to wash over her, engulfing her. She thought of him when she saw something beautiful or

remarkable. It always made her think how unfair, how tragic, it was that he couldn't be here to see or experience the same. That he would never get the chance to experience beauty or awe ever again. Now she wondered whether he would have approved of her decision.

Early the next morning Ariko and Pandour left the station on a Vexor cruiser owned and operated by the Scope. Their destination was a system in the Kor-Azor region, named Nebian in the Jatari constellation. There they would rendezvous with another Scope reporter, a veteran of the intricate political structure of the Empire. As Ariko was not yet officially an employee of the Kor-Azor's new research lab, she had not been told the whereabouts of this highly secret place. But she saw no reason to lope around in Artisine waiting for her employment status to come through. Pandour also wanted to cover this new twist in the story of Umailen and Touvolle from early on, so she had arranged for the transportation. They expected a dull and uneventful voyage, but while they were still in Federation space they received the news that president Foiritan was working behind the scenes to get the scientists released.

In light of the new information they decided to halt on the border of Federation space, before heading into the Genesis region. Ariko was unsure what to make of the news, so many unexpected twists and turns had happened in the last few days that she was becoming quite confused. Pandour, who was no great fan of Foiritan, was certain that there was something fishy about the whole thing. Was Foiritan's reasons purely humanitarian in nature, did he want to thwart Kor-Azor's research scheme or did the scientists possess some secret knowledge that Foiritan didn't want to fall into the wrong hands? All these speculations came up as the hours ticked by. Ariko was pretty sure that the last conspiracy theory was untrue, but then she remembered the private talk between Foiritan and the scientists the day he visited Crielere and wondered. The Senate was livid that Foiritan was negotiating with Articio, which it considered to be immoral and dangerous to the interests of the Federation.

As evening drew near it became evident that the matter would not be settled any time soon, so they decided to camp out at the border. Ariko was confident that matter would be settled overnight, but she had to wait three whole days before a settlement was finally reached. Articio would give up the scientists, but what he was getting in exchange was kept secret. Ariko didn't care, she hadn't really hoped this would happen and now that it had she was overcome with joy. She even began making plans on how the scientists could continue their work once they were back in Federation space.

Pandour was clamoring to be present when the scientists were handed over, but everywhere she turned she hit a dead end. It seemed no one wanted a reporter anywhere near the place where Articio was giving the scientists into Federal custody. Pandour was quite agitated by this, and claimed Foiritan was holding a grudge against her after she had released a story last year that didn't paint him in a favorable light. Ariko only half-heartedly listened to her prattle; her mind was already with her impending rendezvous with Touvolle and Umailen.

Again, Ariko was forced to stew in her own anxiety for several days before the paperwork for the release of the scientists could be cleared up. She had no opportunity to speak with the scientists, as they were already on the secret research lab and outside communication was not allowed. Finally the word arrived: Federal officials had arrived to take the pair into their custody. But once they did, they immediately saw that something was amiss. The two persons the Amarrians handed them were Minmatars.

Ariko was in shock. Fortunately, Pandour was at hand to gather information on what had happened. It was almost beyond belief. Articio Kor-Azor, in his arrogance, had shipped the two famed scientists on a common slave transporter to the research lab. Somehow, two of the slaves managed to steal their ID chips and pose themselves as the scientists. As the research station was only occupied by construction workers and security personnel, who had no idea whom to expect, the ruse only came into light when Federal officials arrived at the station.

Pandour was investigating what had happened to the scientists and her findings were disturbing. They had been shipped, along with the rest of the slaves on the transporter, to a slave colony in the Inis-Ilix system. Presumably, they were then dumped there with the other slaves. Ariko was sure she was going to faint when she realized that for several days the two old men, accustomed to life in a peace and quiet in a lab, had been working in a hard labor camp. A hard labor camp where ground condition where terrible, to boot. Inis-Ilix IV was little more than a blasted rock with a barely breathable atmosphere. Ariko shuddered at the thought what it would do to the two old men.

Ariko was certain that an immediate rescue effort would be launched by all parties involved, but she was sorely disappointed when all that happened over the next day or so was silly bickering between Articio Kor-Azor and president Foiritan regarding the fate of the two Minmatar imposters. Articio wanted the two executed, while Foiritan claimed that Kor-Azor had handed the pair over to the Federation, thus it was up to the Federation to decide their fate. Finally, Articio grew tired of the whole matter, not wanting to further his embarrassment by engaging in an international dispute over some inconsequential Minmatars. Ariko for her part couldn't care less about their fate. She wanted the scientists found. She couldn't sleep, every time she closed her eyes all she could see in her mind's eye was an image of Umailen and Touvolle toiling away in some filthy sulfur-mine, sweat pouring of their frail bodies as the brutal ultra-violent sunrays blistered their skin. She had to find them.

Fortunately, Foiritan's involvement had Pandour all fired up and she was more than willing to go the extra mile to get to the bottom of the story. She was just as keen as Ariko in finding the two scientists, though for different reasons. She wanted to interview them to see how deep Foiritan's involvement really was. The Vexor was still parked in the docking bay ready to go and since their permission from Amarr authorities to land on planets within the Empire was still valid, Ariko and Pandour simply decided to assemble a rescue team of their own. Again Pandour managed to get the Scope to foot the bill. The company's money made it easy for Pandour to attract people to their cause and in less than a day they were ready.

The team Pandour had assembled in record time wasn't professional by any stretch of the word, but to Ariko they seemed up to the task. Or at least she hoped so, as she was pinning her future hopes on them. Only in the recent few days, which had given her ample time to contemplate, had Ariko finally come to grips with her decisions. Her path was that of Umailen and Touvolle, aiding them along the way to human enlightenment in science. Only her fear of cutting all ties with her past had held her back in realizing this sooner. It was a big mental step for her to wrench her foot from the doorway leading to the State, but she had to do it. Now all she had to do was to find Umailen and Touvolle and she could begin building her life anew. When they finally departed and headed into Amarr space, it wasn't a moment to soon for her.

The journey, as usual, was uneventful. On the way they learnt that Articio Kor-Azor had finally handed the two Minmatar impostors over the Federation, grudgingly. Foiritan had also acted quickly and had assembled a rescue team of his own, which was also heading to the Inis-Ilix system. In his typically blunt manner he had simply put a huge bounty on the heads of the two scientists, thus sparking the interest of every bounty hunter in the area. Of course, the bounty would only be paid out if the scientists were brought back alive and well. Ariko silently thanked the energetic president for his efforts; the more people searching for the scientists, the sooner they would be found. But she didn't voice her feelings to Pandour, who sarcastically called this a mere 'token gestures' to make up for his earlier blunders. Ariko didn't ask what these supposed blunders were. It was irrelevant.

They arrived at Inis-Ilix IV at dusk, docking at an Amarr Construction foundry station orbiting the planet's only moon. The bounty hunters hired by Foiritan were already there, unloading their gear in the docking area and preparing to descend to the planet. A handful of Amarr officials hovered nearby bewildered by this sudden invasion of dozens of tough-looking bounty hunters, most of them of Caldari or Gallentean origin. Ariko herself quickly became floundered in the chaos, but fortunately Pandour was used to such hectic rush and not before long Ariko, Pandour and the rest of the team were onboard a shuttle heading for the surface.

It was nighttime when they arrived. The night air was chilly, but Ariko could feel the heat rising from the ground, indicating how hot it had been during the day. The air was thin and had a rank sulfuric taste that clung to the tongue. The team set out erecting a base camp; the search would begin at dawn. Despite the terrible condition, Ariko was feeling very optimistic that she would be reunited with Umailen and Touvolle sooner rather than later. She was already planning in her head what she would say to them and how they could get back on track with their work. Lying there in the make-shift tent, she played these fantasy conversations again and again through her mind.

But she had to wait four days before getting a chance to act these conversations out for real, and by then she had all but forgotten them in her fatigue and frustration. Dealing with the Amarr authorities on the planet was an exercise in futility. They seemed to have no understanding of the notion of individuality of slaves. Slaves were labeled for inter-stellar transportation, but once on a slave colony they lost all identity. There was no need for the slave masters to know their name; to think of them as unique or special in any way was totally alien to them. Time and again Ariko and her team spent hours trying to make stubborn, narrow-minded officials understand, often to no avail.

Then on the fourth day they received the news that the bounty hunters sent by president Foiritan had found the scientists, in a cave outside one of the slave camps. The news was vague and failed to mention the condition of the pair. Pandour rushed them to the hover cars she'd rented for the team, herself taking control of one. Sitting next to her, Ariko noticed the strange gleam in her eye as she commanded her media crew to get their equipment ready. This was her big break.

It took two hours for them to reach the cave, even if they traveled the whole way at breakneck speeds. There was already considerable activity around the cave, kicking up dust clouds that triggered coughs and watery eyes, but at least shielded them from the worst of the sun. Yet despite all the people already on the scene when she arrived, she was surprised at the lack of urgency or even some token show of joy. Instead, the burly bounty hunters looked sour while scrawny Amarrian officials wandered aimlessly around. Then she saw the stretchers being carried out of the cave, white cloth covering what lay beneath. Even without actually seeing their faces, she knew they were dead. Somehow she had always known since she heard where they were, she had just embraced the soothing illusion of denial, convincing herself otherwise. She was on her knees now as she watched the stretch-bearers entering a tent a short distance from where she was; she didn't remember falling on her knees.

"No!" she wanted to shout to the world, but it only came out as a croak, barely audible. Tears cleared shiny paths down her dirty cheeks and soon she was raked with sobs.

She felt she cried for hours, but it was only a couple of minutes. She had to see them. One last time. With a renewed resolution she stood up and set out for the tent. She was vaguely aware that Pandour was following her every footstep, making sure the holo-cameras hovering around were aligned correctly. Two grim-faced bounty hunters stood either side of the entrance to the tent, but they barely registered with Ariko. Only when one of them grabbed her as she was about to enter did she come out of her daze. An Intaki man appeared from inside the tent. He was clad immaculately and seemed the only one around not affected by the dust that permeated everything. Ariko found him familiar and when he looked her in the eye she remembered him as one of Foiritan's entourage when he visited the Crielere station. She saw recognition in his eyes too and when he smiled it was the first comfort she felt since she saw the stretchers.

"She can come in," he said softly, indicating Ariko. "But keep the others out." Pandour protested loudly, then when this didn't have any visible effect pleaded with Ariko to speak on their behalf. But Ariko didn't have any patience for the prattling Scope woman now.

The tent was dimly lit and it took her eyes some time to adjust. The bodies of Henric Touvolle and Taromi Umailen were lying on narrow tables in the middle of the tent. The white cloth still covered them from the waist down, revealing their thin, shrunken chests. A doctor and a nurse were setting up field gear to conduct an autopsy. Ariko felt oddly relieved they hadn't started the gruesome operation. The Intaki man, introducing himself as Endt Strovare, escorted her to the tables. The doctor, taking Ariko for someone important, started yammering something about respiratory problems and malnutrition, but he quickly shut up when he noticed that nobody was listening.

Apart from Gunaris, this was the first time Ariko saw bodies close up, though whether she should blame or thank her sheltered upbringing she was uncertain about at the moment. With Gunaris her grief had been too overwhelming for her to notice the small details and she was too distraught to partake in preparing him for his funeral. She had heard all the stories about how serene someone looked that had just died peacefully, and to an extent she saw they were true. But she also saw red-rimmed eyes that stared into oblivion and bluish lips that no breath passed between. She saw their destroyed bodies and smelled the foul stench of their feces disposed from their loosened bowels. Death might be peaceful, but it certainly wasn't pretty.

Ariko had seen enough here. But she also wanted to see the cave where they were found. Strovare, who seemed to be the man in charge, approved quickly, but for her alone. He escorted her from the tent and followed her to the cave, keeping a respectful distance. Ariko had heard that the Intakis had great empathy for the feelings of others and this certainly seemed true of Strovare. Thinking about the Intaki she couldn't help but wonder what one of the top aides of president Foiritan was doing here. And why he was in charge, and not the Amarrians. But then they were at the cave and she let it go.

It was not a big cave, perhaps 15 meters deep and 4 meters wide. The floor was sandy, the rock wall was brown with a yellowish tint. A few items indicating human inhabitation littered the floor, but they didn't interest Ariko. The walls did. They were covered with scribbles, painted on the wall with anything the scientists had laid their hands on, juice from berries, soot, even dung if her nose wasn't deceiving her. Everywhere her head turned she could see intricate formulas and advanced theories, written by men on the brink of death possessed with ideas they had to get out, lest they died with them.

A few workmen entered the cave, clad in body-covering suits with breathing masks. Strovare indicated to her that they had to leave, gently taking her by the arm. Ariko didn't resist at first, but then she realized what these men were doing here. They were going to wash the walls clean, eradicate the last message Umailen and Touvolle had for the world. She tried to wrestle out of Strovare's grip, but he had anticipated her reaction and held fast. He had to drag her from the cave, as the workmen fired up their powerful hoses and started hosing the walls.

It was the next day. Ariko, Pandour and the team were back on the space station orbiting Inis-Ilix IV's lonely moon. They had been told gently, but firmly, that they were no longer welcome on the planet now that the scientists were found. Pandour was still seething at the treatment she had received, but her nose for news was also as strong as ever and she could easily smell the story here. Some sort of a cover up was taking place, but she had no idea what. President Foiritan might be involved, or maybe it was just the stubborn Amarrians. She had been intrigued by Ariko's account of events in the cave. The scribbles themselves didn't interest her that much, but the hint of conspiracy did.

It was the opposite for Ariko. She didn't care for conspiracy theories or corrupt politicians or imperialists. The ideas of Umailen and Touvolle did. With them gone, these ideas of theirs were all that was left. It was their legacy, and she was the only one that could appreciate it. But already Ariko could feel her memories of the cave scribbles fading. She had only had a chance to look at them for a few seconds before being ushered out. Although she had scanned all the walls, it was only for the briefest of moments, much too short for her to get a clear picture of what was being written.

But this knowledge couldn't be lost. She couldn't let it happen. She had burned all the bridges linking her to the past, pinning all her hopes and dreams on the two scientists and their wild but wonderful schemes. She had jumped aboard and taking a ride to the heavens and now there was no way back. In a sense, she was the only thing that remained of the great pioneering spirit that had roamed the halls of Crielere for few short weeks and

shifted the world. But she wasn't a pioneer herself. The most she could hope for was to be a spectator.

Or a courier. This new thought flashed in her mind and physically jolted her. Of course. She could never hope to revive the spirit all by herself. But she could be the vessel for which to bring the message to the world. What she saw in the cave was still in her mind. She couldn't recall it herself. But she knew somebody that could. The Jovians.

It was a wild idea. It wasn't even a longshot. It was borderline lunacy. But in a way it made sense. The Jovians were wonderfully advanced, they possessed the technology to extract the cave memory from her mind. And they would most surely agree to do it once they knew what was in her head. She didn't know much about Jovians, but she knew they craved new knowledge above everything else. So she would bring it to them. And enlighten the world.

A week later a Caldari Navy frigate on a patrol on the border of Caldari space noticed a small shuttle cruising to a stargate that would take it deep into the outer regions. It wasn't really his business, but the captain felt obliged to warn the occupant of the shuttle of the dangers it was heading into. The only reply he got before the shuttle disappeared into deep space:

"Fate won't kill the Messenger."

Forsaken Ruins

E8-YS9 Solar System, EL8Z-M Constellation, Immensea Region

20.01.106 - 05:41 EVT

Failure always begets reflection, and Mattias found himself asking the same question over and over again:

How could it have come to this?

He stared in crushed disbelief at the rippling translucent inner membrane of the warp tunnel, watching the planets and moons of the E8-YS9 system shoot past his ship. The Blackbird-class cruiser at his command was hurtling through the tunnel at hundreds of times the speed of light. Mattias was amazed the battered vessel was still capable of sustaining this speed without breaking apart.



We were so close to killing him, he thought. So very, very close.

The tragedy would not be in his own death, but in the fact that his prey would continue to live out its wretched, despicable existence. For Mattias and the team of loyal bounty hunters that he had dedicated his life to, this was the ultimate failure. They had lost the bounty, were about to lose their lives, and worst of all, lost an opportunity to do some good in a galaxy controlled by greed and evil above all else.

"Do you believe in God, Mattias?" asked the voice of his enemy. Mattias cursed his own misfortune and refused to answer.

"And what of the Amarr and Minmatar comrades that you are leading to death?" the wicked voice sneered. "Are they believers in an afterlife?"

In an instant, Mattias thought of the entire history of the two outstanding bounty hunters—and great friends—whose lives were in as much peril as his own. Kirlana was an Amarr by birth, but had rebelled against her lavish upbringing and become ashamed of her cultural roots. She renounced her family name and turned her back on the fortune that would have been hers by birthright. The only "possession" she took with her was Matuno, the Brutor slave that had looked after her since childhood. She transformed him into an independent, Tempest-class battleship captain. Now, he answered to no one. But he would never forget those he was beholden to.

Forever grateful for being set free of Amarrian bondage, Matuno found himself unable to leave Kirlana's side, and together they sought greater purpose in life. After months of wandering Empire space, fate would introduce them to Mattias Kakkichi. Inspired by his passion for truth and justice, they readily joined his self-appointed mission: To become the arm of justice where the laws of Empire space could not reach. The money received from collected bounties was unimportant to them. The real reward was the righted wrong, accomplished through the kill itself. Watching evil succumb to the thunder of guns filled each of their souls with delicious satisfaction. No single feeling was more powerful than knowing that an injustice had been avenged. But on this day, the odds of lethal misfortune for pursuing such a risky profession finally caught up with them.

Mattias, Kirlana, and Matuno were fleeing from the scene of an assassination attempt on Trald Vukenda, the leader of the infamous Angel Cartel and the highest profile target they had ever hunted. The operation had gone horribly wrong. Within sight of their prey, the enemy surprised the bounty hunters with reinforcements, and they suddenly found themselves greatly outnumbered. Their ships were punished almost to the breaking point, and they were lucky to have escaped into warp. But there were only two jumpgates leading out of the system, and Trald already knew which one the bounty hunters were running towards. Both exits were already blockaded by Angel Cartel ships.

"I'm going to nail your self-righteous corpse to that jumpgate, Mattias," snarled Trald. "As a reminder to others about the perils in pursuing delusional moral obligations."

The hatred that Mattias felt swelling in his heart was powerful. He forced himself to suppress his anger and focus on trying to find a way to keep his good friends alive. They would be emerging from warp in just a few moments.

"Kirlana, Matuno...I'm sorry I got the both of you into this, but I'm not ready to say goodbye just yet." Mattias willed the camera drones orbiting his ship to zoom out so he could see all three ships traveling inside the warp

tunnel. Kirlana's Omen-class cruiser was in the worst condition of them, venting plasma from a rupture in the hull plating alongside one of the ship's engines.

"Standing by," said Kirlana. Her voice was terse, and filled with fear.

"At your service," said the deep voice of Matuno, who had not known fear since the day Kirlana set him free. Their ships were already beginning to decelerate.

"We're only going to get one shot at this, so pay attention." Mattias was thinking quickly. "When the warp engines quit, Kirlana, point your bow at the nearest object you can warp towards and get out...Matuno, we have to give her enough time to get aligned, so fire up your sensor boosters as soon as you're able to and concentrate fire on anything that tries to cut her off. I'm going to target link with your ship to assist your artillery tracking and target jam anything that tries to close in..." The warp tunnel surrounding them had just about disappeared, and the jumpgate was coming into view. "Matuno, as soon as she's out, warp yourself out of there, anywhere you can..."

Both of them started to protest at the same time. "Mattias, what about you—"

"Go, damnit! Go! Go! Go!" The warp core disappeared, and the Blackbird's engines switched to impulse power. The ship's threat detectors registered danger immediately. Mattias counted at least 4 ships, and saw the unmistakable profile of a deadly Arch Angel Warlord floating directly above the jumpgate. An icy lead ball formed in his stomach. He was well within range of the Warlord's most powerful cannons, and three Arch Angel Scout cruisers were speeding directly towards them. Mattias was certain that the Scouts were equipped with warp scramblers.

"Kirlana! Go!" Plasma trailed behind the Omen as it pitched upwards and turned away from the jumpgate. The first spread of Arch Angel heavy missiles began coursing towards them. The cruiser made painstakingly slow course adjustments to align itself perfectly with the warp tunnel projected in front of it. The ship accelerated and vanished just in time. Missile exhaust plumes crisscrossed each other at the exact spot in space where the Omen was just a fraction of a second earlier. One away. Right on queue, the Blackbird's sophisticated electronics systems established targeting locks on the three incoming Arch Angel Scout cruisers. Mattias linked with the weapons system onboard Matuno's Tempest, feeding it telemetry. The enormous 1400mm artillery turrets spread along the battleship's hull began tracking in unison. The Arch Angel Scouts unleashed a second spread of heavy missiles towards them.

"Matuno, go!" Mattias could see missile plumes from the Warlord extending towards them now as well. The Tempest's portside seemed to explode as the 1400mm artillery pieces unloaded. The shells slammed into the lead Arch Angel a split second later, nearly breaking the enemy cruiser's spine on the first salvo. Mattias willed his shield hardeners online and target jammed the second Scout. He simultaneously launched a missile volley of his own towards the crippled Arch Angel. "Warp now now now!" Mattias screamed in his mind at Matuno, inadvertently gulping down some of the ectoplasm inside of his pod.

Mattias could see the massive Tempest slowly swing its bow around in the same direction that Kirlana had warped towards. A half second before the detonation of the first incoming missile, a bluish-white aura engulfed the goliath battleship as Matuno activated his own shield hardeners. Mattias counted off eight devastating explosions as the Warlord's cruise missiles slammed into the Tempest, throwing it off course and ripping enormous gashes into the hull. The shockwaves expanding from the explosion sites crashed into the Blackbird, tearing through its shields and punching through the last of the ship's armor. The Tempest was violently spewing plasma and debris directly into space now, and a third Arch Angel missile spread was already on its way as Matuno desperately tried to coax his crippled battleship into warp.

The lead Arch Angel Scout exploded just as Trald's fleet arrived. Mattias activated one last blistering burst of signal-scrambling electronic noise towards the third Arch Angel Scout—now just 12 kilometers away—before randomly selecting a planet on his navigation list and activating the warp drive. Mattias thought he saw a flash erupt from the direction of the Warlord a half-second before the Blackbird's computer registered near-catastrophic hull breaches all over his ship. It was such a powerful impact that Mattias swore he could actually feel the shells slam into the hull from inside his pod.

That's it, thought Mattias. This is how it finally ends.

The Blackbird's thrusters were still trying to correct the ship's course from the devastating impact. The first spread of cruise missiles from Trald's ship began arcing towards it.



"My regards to hell's keeper, Mattias," said Trald. "Good bye."

Mattias rotated the camera drones around and focused them on the ship of his enemy. He always told himself that when the time came, he would stare death in the eyes, and take the hatred for his enemy to eternity. Severing the communication link between himself and Trald, he allowed his mind to let go of the ship's controls, and waited for the inevitable to consume him.

But instead of greeting death, he saw the image of Trald's Seraphim-class battleship yanked away as the Blackbird miraculously accelerated into warp. Mattias nearly swallowed more of the pod's ectoplasm, and had to make a concerted effort to control his breathing through the nose tubes. For the time being, he had survived, and the subsiding adrenaline rush from his near-death experience nearly left him incapacitated with nausea. The ship's vital signs projected a grim image onto his mind's vision:

Shields: 8% and rising.
Armor: 0%
Structure: 4%
Capacitor: 2% and rising.

Come to your senses, Mattias thought. Think. The capacitor was almost completely drained. Wherever it was that he set course for, his ship would come up well short of the target destination.

"Mattias, check in." Matuno had made it out! I need to be strong here, he thought.

"Roger that, Matuno, still alive. Are you with Kirlana?" The Blackbird was decelerating from warp. He was beginning to get his shaking under control.

"I'm here with him, Mattias," she answered. "We're in orbit around the 5th planet in the system. Hull and armor levels are negligible, diagnostics are red across the board."

"Must be that lousy Amarr engineering." It was a half-hearted attempt to relieve some of the tension with humor. Mattias sensed it didn't work, and the Blackbird was nearly out of the warp tunnel. "Make sure you keep moving, and warp to my location as soon as your capacitor will let you." Mattias checked his weapons inventory: no extra missiles other than what was already loaded in the launchers, and 34 total antimatter charges for the Blackbird's 250mm railguns. Mattias grimaced underneath the mask covering his eyes. "How are you two on ammo?"

"A dozen fourteen-hundred shells and a handful of six-fifty rounds, no missiles," replied Matuno.

"Radio crystals loaded, multi-frequencies in the hold, bingo missiles," answered Kirlana.

Great, thought Mattias. Here's where I come up with something brilliant to get us out of this. The situation could not possibly be any worse. His fleet would not survive another engagement with Angel Cartel forces, or any other adversaries for that matter. Some said that Trald Vukenda was the most powerful man in all of unregulated space. Whether or not that was true was debatable, depending on which pirate you asked. But they would all agree that Trald was definitely the most powerful man in this region of space. As the head of the most notorious pirate organization in existence, it was well within his means to seal off entire systems to prevent anything from coming in or leaving. This space, and everything in it, belonged to the Angel Cartel. Mattias knew that the longer they stayed here, the tighter the noose around their necks became.

In the bounty hunting profession, lofty ambitions bear enormous risks. Mattias was the one being hunted now, and he had placed the lives of the people he cared for most in great danger. Why was doing the right thing always so damn difficult, he asked himself. Why is it that so few of us find the courage to fight for the unpunished injustices of our time? Mattias focused the drone cameras on the Blackbird, inspecting the massive gashes in its hull. Judging from the metallic carnage, he estimated that sections of at least 6 decks were now exposed directly to space. Somewhere beneath where he was sitting, hundreds of crewmembers were sealing off compartments, fighting electrical fires and desperately struggling to keep his ship's vital systems functioning. How many of them died because of this, he wondered. As the captain of the ship, he was sealed inside a pod made of an ultra-strong, Jovian-manufactured alloy and neurologically connected to the Blackbird's systems. Inside of it, so long as the ship was intact, the captain was immune from harm. It was the Jovians who had introduced this remarkable innovation, and it had changed the face of naval warfare forever.

Mattias began contemplating the Jovians and their technology. As spectacular as the pod was, it was also emblematic of the traits that defined the entire Jovian race: hyper-intelligent, but utterly and completely numb to human emotion. Modern day starships are massive and incomprehensibly complex. Before the pod, there were so many points of failure between a captain's decision and the execution of his orders. The ability to create a direct neurological connection between a human mind and a ship's systems reduced those points of failure to zero. Commanding a starship was now a natural extension of the mind's will. All a captain needed was to just think about what he wanted his ship to do, and it was done.

To Mattias, it was all so impersonal. Because of the technology, a captain could skipper numerous ships over the

course of a lifetime without ever meeting a single crewmember from any of them. Mattias was one of the few who made an effort to meet at least some. It seemed like the least he could do in exchange for their unquestioning faith in his abilities, and their trust in him to keep them alive.

As the Blackbird's warp drives shut down, Mattias expected to find himself surrounded with the vast expanse of nothingness that exists between celestial objects within solar systems. Instead, he saw that the ship had exited the warp tunnel just 40 kilometers from the surface of a colossal rock formation the size of a mountain range. It was surrounded by several small asteroid fields, and looked almost serene against the greenish-black nebula backdrop of the E8-YS9 solar system. Mattias was no geologist, and was at a complete loss to explain how such a bizarre formation could have formed. He willed the Blackbird to cruise towards it, contemplating the idea of using the range as a place to hide from the Arch Angels.

"Mattias, we are en route to your destination," said Matuno. "Be advised, Arch Angels warped to our location just as we got aligned."

"You guys aren't going to believe what I just found," Mattias answered. The formation was growing larger as his cruiser approached. The Blackbird's avionics registered the arrival the Omen and Tempest.

"Whoa..." breathed Kirlana. "Is this formation mapped?"

"Negative, but it does appear on scanner, which rules out using it as a place to hide," said Mattias.

"I'm not sure the Angels have ever been here," said Matuno. "No debris, no containers, no mining equipment...no signs of activity anywhere along the range."

Mattias rotated the view 180 degrees away from the rocks and watched as his two comrades pulled their battered vessels alongside of his own. The Omen was about the same size as his Blackbird, but the Tempest was much larger than the two of them combined, with more than twice the number of crew onboard. Amazing that the three of us are still in one piece, thought Mattias. The three ships were cruising above the rocks, still trailing long jets of fire and plasma behind them.

"No, something was definitely here," interrupted Kirlana. "Look closer at those pinnacles directly beneath us...can you see that flashing?"

Mattias swung the camera downwards and zoomed in closer. Yes, there it is. The sides of some rock pinnacles jutting outwards from the formation were being illuminated intermittently. He slowed down the Blackbird's speed almost to a stop and altered course just a few degrees to try and find the source of the light.

"There...it's a strobe or beacon of some kind. Actually...that looks like an escape pod or something," said Kirlana.

Mattias zoomed the cameras in even further and was finally able to focus on the image. It was about 5 meters in length, with a polished metallic black exterior. One end was lodged against the base of the pinnacle, and the other had the flashing strobe light. Mattias did not recognize the object, and it was still invisible to his ship's sensors.

"Matuno, do you still have salvage drones onboard?"

"Yes, deploying now." Mattias watched as a tiny drone began orbiting the Tempest. Salvage drones were not available anywhere within Empire space. Matuno had found this one among the wreckage of a pirate convoy that he had destroyed. For all of its risks, bounty hunting occasionally yielded some rare finds. Mega-corporations weren't the only organizations with talented engineers, and pirates were more than capable of generating their own prototype technology. "I can't lock the object, my sensors think that it's physically part of the formation's surface. The drone might be able to make the distinction, if I can get it close enough."

The drone descended from the Tempest to near the formation's surface. It started flying small racetrack circles around the pinnacle area. After several orbits, it abruptly stopped and changed direction, heading directly towards the mysterious object.

"The drone acquired it. Stand by for extraction," announced Matuno. The drone came to a stop and dropped its four, tentacle-like arms onto the surface, gently drawing them around the object. The arms appeared to struggle a little bit, and then it came free amidst a plume of dust and pebbles. Within a few moments, the drone and its mysterious cargo were onboard the Tempest.

For a few moments, there was silence.

"Hold...hold on..." Mattias could feel his eyebrows rise slightly. Not like him to get flustered at anything, he thought.

"This is no pod," Matuno started. "It's a casket of some sort. There are no neurolinks or traces of ectoplasm inside. The beacons were affixed to the external structure intentionally, and there is an engraving on the

outside that reads 'FORMATOR IMMENSEA'."

"Immensea? The region we're in?" asked Mattias. He started a routine to perform deep-space scans covering every direction around them. As much as this find was interesting, they were all still in danger of being found.

"If it's a casket, then who's inside of it?" asked Kirlana.

Again, Matuno paused before answering. "A Gallente male dressed in some sort of ceremonial robes. He...looks like he was murdered."

"Murdered?" said Kirlana. "How can you—"

"There is a gold-plated dagger driven up to the hilt through the man's sternum, but his hands are resting on each other over his navel. He actually looks like he's at peace. The body appears that it was deliberately arranged in this exact fashion and laid to rest inside the casket."

Mattias thought about that for a moment. He had killed before. In fact, all of them had, but only by using their ship's weapons as an extension of their mind. To plunge a dagger through another man's heart...that was grotesquely barbaric, if not outright inhuman.



"One more thing," Mantuno interrupted his thoughts. "There are coordinates engraved on the inner plating of the casket. They point to somewhere within this system."

Somewhere. Well, there were risks in trying to find out where that was, and risks for not trying as well. Staying on the move was an absolute necessity, but he was surprised at how his own curiosity exceeded his fear of being discovered by the Arch Angels. Whoever put him in there, he thought, wanted him to be found. The man inside the casket had been murdered, and Mattias found that to be a compelling enough reason to investigate.

"Matuno, transmit those coordinates to my navigation computer. I'm going to have a look."

"Roger." There were no protests from either of them this time, at least not spoken. For all they knew, Trald himself could have planned all this, and set the bait which would deliver them to a pack of bloodthirsty Arch Angels.

Mattias engaged the warp drive. Immediately, the computer indicated that the target destination was a mere 300 kilometers from the rock formation. A few seconds later, the view of an enormous space station rushed into view. He thought for certain this was a trap, and that sentry guns were moments away from cutting his ship to pieces. Mattias was about to panic when he realized that there were no guns or defenses of any kind at all. As the Blackbird approached the dark, foreboding structure, Mattias realized that the station was abandoned. And more importantly, according to the CONCORD maps, it didn't exist.

"Warp to my location," he ordered. "And tell yourself that what you're about to see isn't an illusion." Mattias steered the Blackbird alongside the station's greenish-metallic hull. Is the dead Gallente the owner of this place? Some of the exterior hull plating was missing along several decks. An ominous feeling descended over him. Something isn't right here, he thought. Every station he ever visited was always bustling with activity, even the ones in deep space. There were no signs of life here at all, even though the station still had power. The contrasting images in his mind made him uneasy.

The Omen and Tempest suddenly appeared.

"Unbelievable," said Kirlana. "This isn't on the map!"

"No sentry guns, no defenses except for the shields." said Matuno. "And harbor control rejects all docking requests."

"So the big question is how the heck do we get onboard this thing," Mattias wondered out loud.

"And why haven't the Angel's claimed it for themselves, assuming they even know it's here," said Matuno.

"The shields," said Kirlana, sounding a little nervous. "Take them down, and you'll get in. It's an emergency failsafe mechanism built into most station's AI. If no active defenses are remaining and the shields are breached, the AI automatically shuts harbor control down, allowing anything from the outside to get in, and anything from the inside to get out. The thinking was that if something was powerful enough the take down a

station's defenses—natural or man-made—then it assumes that hull failure and catastrophic loss of life are imminent. It makes zero sense to keep harbor control active at that point. The station is either already lost or about to be destroyed.”

“How do you know all this?” asked Mattias.

“The Amarrs learned about it the hard way during the Rebellion,” she answered. “The Minmatars tried it successfully during some pretty ballsy missions to rescue slaves just after the Jovians crushed the Amarr invasion fleet.”

“Thank God for that,” muttered Matuno.

“God had nothing to do with it,” she answered. “Because there's no such thing.”

Her words resonated in Mattias's mind. He wasn't a religious man—at least not in a traditional sense. But the comment still made him uncomfortable. Regardless of her rebellion against the religious paradigms of the culture that she was born into, to hear an Amarr say there was no God was extremely disturbing.

The plasma and fire escaping the gashes in her ship drew his attention for some reason. He decided to reclaim his team's focus.

“So what you're telling us is that we don't have the firepower to get inside.”

“In so many words, yes. Even if we had unlimited ammunition, our three ships combined couldn't overtake the shield's rate of regeneration.” Mattias's attention was diverted again, this time towards the station's hull, now more than 3 kilometers away from the Blackbird. The surface appeared to distort itself slightly, and a ripple began to move across it from left to right. Mattias's sixth sense screamed danger to him, and his heart stopped as he realized what was happening.

“Both of you, put your shield hardeners on.” Mattias ordered.

“Say again? I don't see any—”

“Now! Quickly!” Whitish-blue auras enveloped all three ships as the bounty hunters followed Mattias's instructions, unsure of their purpose. One second later, the reason became perfectly clear, as a Jovian Wraith-class frigate uncloaked just 300 meters from Mattias's Blackbird. Although the Wraith was the smallest ship in the group, it was the most technically advanced, and had the enormous tactical advantage of being able to cloak itself. In numbers, the Wraith was among the deadliest ships in space. Mattias wondered if there were more of them nearby.

“I can't lock him up,” said Matuno. “And even if I could, he's too close, I doubt I could hit him with anything.”

“Stop trying,” answered Mattias. “Who knows how many others are out here. We'd be in pods or worse by now if he had bad intentions.” He brought his ship to a complete stop. The Wraith gracefully slid alongside, closing to within 100 meters. The Jovian opened a communications channel with him.

“A thousand apologies for my abrupt appearance, Captain Kakkichi” began then Jovian. “But the circumstances required this choice of tactics.”

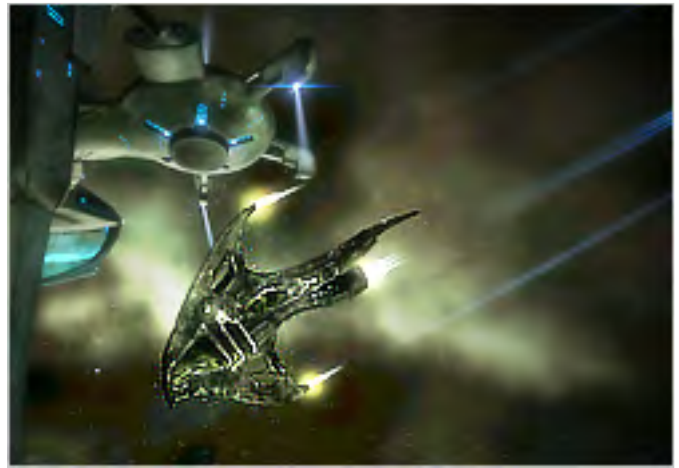
“What can I do for you?” asked Mattias. He had never spoken to a Jovian before, let alone been this close to one of their ships. The camera drones were snapping pictures like crazy.

“My name is Veniel, and as you already know, I hail from the Jovian Empire.” His voice sounded almost hollow, like a drone. Mattias studied the portrait of the “man” speaking to him. He was human, but so...not human either. The Jovians were products of genetic engineering, literally harvested from cultures and grown in fetus test tubes until “maturity”, as they coldly referred to it. “Would you like me to invite your crew to participate in our conversation?” he asked.

“Allow me,” answered Mattias, patching in Kirlana and Matuno. “How long were you following us for?”

“It isn't often when the Angel Cartel actively hunts anyone specifically, let alone blockades the entrances to solar systems for the occasion. I had to find out for myself who the recipient of this honor was.” He paused for a moment. “I have to say Captain, that I am very impressed with your tenacity for survival.”

“I'm glad you find it entertaining,” Mattias shot back. “But as you can see from the condition of my fleet, I don't



have time for games.”

“Of course not Captain, I understand completely. But before I leave you to your business, I have to ask...how, exactly, did you find this station?”

Mattias thought about his question carefully before answering. Odds were that the Jovian already knew the answer, if he was able to follow them to the rock formation. Veniel was fishing for information, and Mattias decided to play along.

“We discovered an artifact in an asteroid field not too far from here, and it led us to this location.”

“And this ‘artifact’, did it contain the corpse of a Gallente?”

Aha. The man knew exactly what he was looking for. “Yes, it did.”

“Then I have a proposition for you and your crew, Captain. First, let me begin by saying that you will not survive another attempt to run the gauntlets in place at the gates in this system. Trald is focused on your destruction, and you will not escape from him again. Therefore, in exchange for the artifact in your possession, I offer you all three of the following: Access to this station, the explanation for its existence, and a way past the blockades in this system.”

Mattias had heard about the Jovians insatiable lust for knowledge, and that they were often willing to trade hyper-advanced technology in exchange for it. Veniel, on the other hand, was offering ways to spare their lives in exchange for, of all things, a corpse. Why he wanted it was both beyond explanation and irrelevant in this context. The upper hand in this agreement belonged to Veniel, and Mattias knew he'd be a fool to refuse. The Jovians were never known for cruelty or deceit, and although this one seemed atypical of the stereotype, he sensed no ill will on Veniel's part.

“Very well, Veniel. Deal.”

“Excellent, Captain. Now, the artifact, if you please.”

“I have your word that you'll fulfill your part of the bargain?”

“Most certainly, Captain.”

Mattias took a deep breath through the nose tubes. “Alright, then. Matuno, please jettison the casket.”

“Roger.” A tiny cargo container appeared just above the Tempest. Mattias was thankful that the errant plasma and fire jets still erupting from the damaged ship were pointing away from it. The Wraith slowly pulled away from the Blackbird and positioned itself above the floating cargo container, guiding it on board.

“Superb. Now, for my part of the bargain, if you'll excuse me for just a moment...” The Jovian broke the connection. Mattias focused his view on the Wraith hovering above the Tempest, already beginning to question his own judgment. It wasn't the first time he'd done that today.

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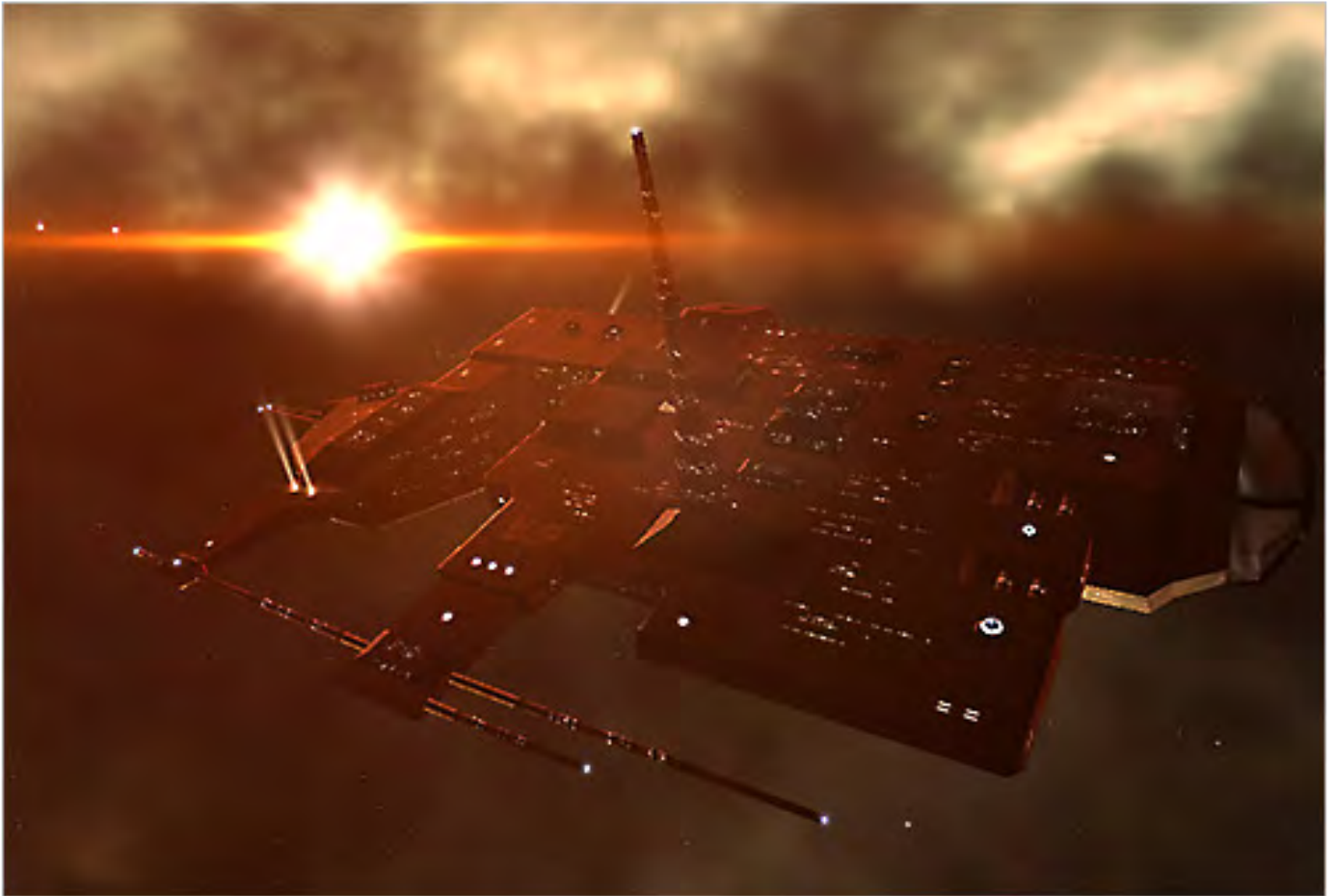
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The DED is the police force of CONCORD, and a Spartan affair even by military standards. Charged with the responsibility of maintaining law and order within the borders of Empire space, the men and women who make up its ranks are meticulous in their work, fervently devoted to their mission, and strict advocates of structured rank and their own respective place within it. Candidates wishing to join the DED are subjected to a near ruthless application process. If accepted, recruits are given a training regime whose intensity rivals or exceeds any military institution in mankind's history.

Their philosophy discourages autonomy insofar as its place within fighting units is concerned. DED ships are rarely seen alone. They patrol Empire shipping lanes and property in balanced fleets of varying military capacity, and are always within range of other patrols so that the response time to any crisis is almost instantaneous. The DED's prowess for coordinating strikes and rapid-response counterattacks within Empire space is staggering, thanks to the uniquely trained individuals that CONCORD enlists for the task.





But no large organization is without its informants. And the DED, despite the extensive background checks, personality evaluations, and constant surveillance of new and experienced employees, was not without their own. With so much power concentrated there, entities both malicious and neutral went to great lengths to infiltrate the law enforcement agency. The DED quietly dealt with the moles they were able to catch. But with espionage at this level, where the stakes are so high and the potential for damage so great, no one could ever be certain that every spy was purged.

Tantoseisen Kakkichi—the Chief of Internal Security at the DED—knew that other spies existed within the agency. He had been reviewing disinformation items designed to expose potential operatives when the Jovian contacted him. Midway through the conversation, Tantoseisen started believing that he was being set up for a disinformation play as well.

“How many stations did you say there were again?”

“Sixty-nine, to be exact,” Veniel repeated.

“In twenty three deep space regions surrounding Empire space?”

“Correct, Commander.”

Tantoseisen sat back in his chair, glancing towards Veniel's dossier on the other screen. Although they never formally met, this was one of the few Jovians that CONCORD had some record of. Ever since the legendary trade that brought pod technology to the forefront of naval warfare, contact with the elusive race had been rare. Veniel was the only Jovian who surfaced from time to time, and whenever he did, there were always significant repercussions. The consensus among DED intelligence analysts was that Veniel was the Jovian equivalent of a maverick, and they had serious doubts that his actions proceeded with the blessings of his own kind. That notion alone would make anyone wary of trusting him, let alone believe his claim that dozens of stations existed in deep space which CONCORD knew nothing about.

“Veniel, with all due respect, you'll understand that I'm having a difficult time believing your claim.” And that's about as delicately as I'm capable of saying that, he thought.

“If you so desire, I can show you proof.”

“Very well then. Show me proof.”

Veniel's pale, vein-crossed, elongated face was replaced with the image of a Jovian frigate cruising slowly

against the backdrop of a station. That could be anywhere, Tantoseisen thought. Something did seem different about it, but nothing so much out of the ordinary.

"Are you convinced yet, Commander?" asked Veniel.

"I'm afraid I haven't seen anything to make me change my mind."

The image rotated so that the camera perspective was behind the frigate, still continuing its deliberate pace outside the station. Tantoseisen could see the outer hull of the base in more detail. Emergency lighting, he thought. But again, that could be any one of dozens of Gallente stations here in Empire space. Approaching the end of an enormous hull section, the ship began a slight bank to its left. When it finished rounded the corner, the camera panned back again.

The image of a critically damaged Tempest-class battleship came into view.

"Veniel, I thought you said that no one in Empire space knew about this."

The Jovian did not answer. A second ship—an Omen-class cruiser, also badly damaged—was there, floating alongside the battleship. Both ships looked like they were on fire.

"If my word alone will not suffice," said Veniel. "Then perhaps his will." The view focused back to the Tempest, then panned to an angle above and behind it. A third ship—a Blackbird—was also there, on fire and...

The image suddenly registered as being very familiar to Tantoseisen: A Caldari, an Amarrian, and a Minmatar...

Mattias! How can that be? "Is that my brother?" he asked incredulously. His question was answered immediately, as the view was replaced with portraits of his older brother on one side, and the Jovian on the other. "Mattias, where are you? What happened to your ship?"

"Tantoseisen, it's good to see you", said Mattias, who sounded angry. Veniel was silent. "I'm really sorry you got brought into this, but as long as we're all here, this is what happened..."

Mattias explained the entire course of events that brought them to the abandoned station. He talked about the tip they received about Trald Vukenda's whereabouts and movements, the operation that he and his team had planned to ambush him, and how it went terribly wrong. Tantoseisen was stunned.

"My God, Mattias...why Trald?" Tantoseisen didn't want to start an argument, but he just couldn't help asking. You're completely out of your league is what he should have said. Mattias was always like that, pushing himself to pull off impossible feats and insisting on doing things his own way. It was reckless, and it endangered everyone in his care. The strict military officer of Tantoseisen's psyche hated it. But as a younger brother, he found it inspiring. Mattias was always a source of strength in his life growing up. Tantoseisen surprised himself to discover that he still admired his brother's courage. He knew exactly what motivated him, and what the reply to his question would be.

"Same reason as always, little brother," he answered. "Because it was the right thing to do."

Yes, the right thing to do. Tantoseisen nodded his head slightly, not saying anything. He often passed along information about criminals who escaped the punishment of CONCORD to Mattias, always in secret. The DED, as powerful as it was, lacked the resources to chase felons past Empire borders. Justice should have no bounds, the brothers always said. Mattias would be the instrument of CONCORD where the Tantoseisen and the DED could not tread.

"Commander, I can give you the exact locations of the other 68 stations," said Veniel. "But that is conditional on two terms. First, you and your fleet must come to our present location here in the Immensea region."

"Hey, wait just a minute—" Mattias started, but was cut off again by Veniel.

"The second term is that you do not, under any circumstances, tell any of your superior officers of your intentions."

"So that's how you plan on fulfilling your agreement with me? Goddamn you, Veniel," cursed Mattias. "You know he can't do that, he's a DED officer! He could be court-martialed and executed for doing something like that. Tantoseisen, don't listen to this snake, we'll be alright over here."

Veniel was unfazed. "It is true that the risks are great. But there is greater risk by not acting."

Remarkable, Tantoseisen thought, that he could put the both of us into positions that pit our mutual fates with each other's decisions. Was this man seriously prepared to let Mattias die at the hands of the Angel Cartel if I refused? Was he seriously capable of doing something that sinister? What was it that he really wanted, and why all this trouble for a corpse?

"Why the second term, Veniel. Why is it that my superiors are to be kept out of this?"

"There are certain elements within the DED which stand to benefit directly from this information, Commander. Some would almost certainly use it to advance their own personal incentives, rather than promote the cause of the greater good, as the DED mission statement specifies."

Tantoseisen was losing his patience. "'Certain elements'? Veniel, don't be cryptic with me, give me straight answers—"

"Elements who would take this information and attempt to conceal it from the other Assembly members. Tell me, what do you suppose the repercussions would be if it was revealed that a member government was hiding the existence of these stations?"

Veniel had a valid point there. Unbeknownst to the general public, the political situation within the Assembly had become very volatile, with disagreements between member governments on issues ranging from debt restructuring to deep-space territorial disputes. The internal strife wasn't serious enough—yet—to endanger the integrity of CONCORD, but this was precisely the kind of thing that could ignite the situation. If the right spies were to get hold of information this sensitive, the results could be drastic.

Sixty-nine stations, Tantoseisen thought. Trillions of isk worth of property and assets, up for grabs to whoever wants them...nations have gone to war for much lesser reasons than that.

Veniel continued his case. "Commander, time is running short. Trald's forces are actively hunting your brother, and they could appear here at any moment."

The comment infuriated Tantoseisen. "What's in this for you, Veniel." He spoke through clenched teeth.

"Knowledge, of course. And clarity of vision, for I consider myself a student of humanity."

This didn't surprise him. Jovians were known to covet the things that most other races took for granted. Judging from their grim, ghastly appearance, Tantoseisen could easily see how rediscovering humanity would be at the forefront of any Jovian's agenda.

"I suppose you need my fleet there as well to get inside?"

"Correct. We can begin during your journey here."

"No! Goddamnit, Tantoseisen, don't listen to this man!" Mattias protested.

"Mattias, I've already made up my mind. The Jovian is right; it's riskier not to do this. This is the right thing to do, even if the DED thinks the contrary." He began tapping commands on the screen console in front of him, readying his battleship and replacing the hybrid weapons with energy turrets. "I just hope I don't have a mutiny on my hands once I tell the crew where we're going."

"You are a courageous man, Commander. The crew will rally to you, not to a DED protocol." said Veniel.

"Veniel, I'm still not sure what kind of elaborate scheme it is you have going here, or if I even understand what your true intentions are. What I do know is that it is not your place to make assertions of any kind about me, and especially not about my crew. I want you to know that I am disgusted about the manner in which you decided to handle this situation, and that I would prefer it if you ceased making any more judgments about what you think my brother or I believe is right. Are we clear?"

"I intended no disrespect, Commander. I am deeply regretful for offending you."

"You're making a mistake, Tantoseisen", said Mattias. "Your command, your career, your life, all of it is in jeopardy—"

"And I'm talking to someone who has done the exact same thing for years. For this one, I think I'll be the big brother for a change, Mattias." He keyed in an order to have spare armor and hull repair modules loaded into his battleship's hold. God knows we'll probably need them also, assuming we actually make it there, he thought. "The order to recall my fleet from their patrol has already been issued. They will rendezvous with me here in Orien within 20 minutes, then we're going to set course for E8-YS9. That's 44 jumps...my ETA is 2 hours. I'm going to leave this channel and will contact you after we cross the line into unregulated space. Any questions?"

Neither of them said a word.

"Good. I'll be seeing the both of you soon." Tantoseisen terminated the connection and looked down at the DED 5-star patch insignia on the breast of his uniform. He was about to violate every principle that he held his own crew accountable for. The only way out of this, he thought, is by going right through it. Without hesitating any longer, he rose from his desk and made his way for the door.

E8-YS9 Solar System, EL8Z-M Constellation, Immensea Region

Planet VI, Moon 4

Unknown Station

08:58 EVT

Mattias was awestruck as the CONCORD-class battleships and their escorts unleashed a torrent of devastating firepower into the station. Tantoseisen had brought an entire task force with him—18 ships in all. Minutes earlier they had decimated the same Angel Cartel blockade which, hours before, had nearly killed Mattias. Using his cloaked Wraith, Veniel told Tantoseisen exactly what to expect before his fleet jumped in. The Warlord battleship was destroyed so quickly that the remaining ships retreated, but Trald—the slippery snake that he was—warped out immediately after the CONCORD ships arrived. It was anyone's guess whether or not he would return with a bigger fleet. But oddly enough, no one seemed concerned.



The mood should have been more elated, given the brutal decisiveness of the battle that had just taken place. Instead, there was complete silence, even as the tachyons and heavy beam weapons drilled into the station's shields. Everyone was stunned by the story Veniel had told during Tantoseisen's journey to E8-YS9.

About 40 years ago, a movement of radical thinkers emerged from the swirling maelstrom of galactic politics that were unhappy with the institutions responsible for shaping the post-EVE era." The group saw no purpose in borderlines or the imposition of cultural ideals into the populace through the use of government. They cited that this kind of thinking was counterproductive and ultimately to blame for the greater "fallacies and debacles of our time", as Veniel had said, which included the continued imprisonment of Minmatar slaves by the Amarr Empire and the Caldari-Gallente War. They wanted to create a society that looked beyond bloodlines and focused more on the commonality between all the races; to embrace human diversity yet retain the true "embodiment of mankind" that has "kept our species from disappearing from the universe forever."

Every generation, Veniel had explained, has its prodigies. From time to time, people with extraordinary gifts surface in the gene pool, and the results are often unprecedented breakthroughs and contributions in a discipline commensurate with the individual's talent. The leader of the radical thinkers was a man named Sébastien Moreau, and his gift was charisma unlike anything the galaxy had ever seen. He was a powerful speaker and motivator, but could also make anyone feel at ease within minutes of meeting them for the first time. His charm—and soon, his mission—became irresistible to almost everyone who listened. Through the sheer power of Moreau's persuasion, "Immensea" was born.

Refusing to take his cause for racial unity to the floors of government halls out of pure spite for the "antiquated institutional paradigms" they represented, Moreau sought believers of his mission in private. He recognized that his dream society could not coexist with the Empires. To make real strides in pursuing his goal, he needed to attach the idea of racial unity with a physical objective that his followers could work towards. Therein, Veniel explained, the concept of "Immensea" was defined: The "immense sea" that separates the horrors of yesterday from the utopian bliss of tomorrow. Earth—like the notion of utopia—is out there, but a vast physical and spiritual distance must be traversed in order to reach it. "Paradise was always within", Moreau had once said. "And so the journey home completes the circle: From one we were defined, and to one we shall return, unbound, and true to our own pure selves."

Moreau's followers, now numbering in the thousands, became so passionate about this quest to "return home" that the task itself began to assume the form of a divine imperative. A massive research initiative was planned with a host of ambitious objectives, which included studies on how to stabilize the EVE gate in New Eden and a fast-track development of jump drives. All they needed was a base from which they could pursue these studies in earnest, far from the prying eyes of governments and "institutional bigots". The cost to build even a single station was astronomical, but money, as it turned out, was hardly an obstacle.

Immensea was spreading, picking up momentum, members, and resources at a frenzied pace. Because of Sébastien Moreau's supernatural gift, the talent pool and economic resources of the Immensea were enormous. CEO's of mega-corporations, high ranking military officers, government officials, and brilliant scientists from each sovereignty were either secretly a part of it or contributing directly to its growth. Immensea had become a cult with the financial and intellectual capital to rival any organization in EVE, and because it had pervaded every level of society—military, government, corporate, and even criminal—people looked the other way as convoy after convoy disappeared into the deep of space.

True to the cult's directive to keep the institutions in the dark, no one said a word. People who tried to raise

alarms about missing equipment or deleted journal entries were bribed to stay quiet. When that failed, they were silenced permanently. The first stations were built in the Immensea Region; they would eventually be constructed in a total of 23 regions, in some cases with the direct assistance of the local pirate cartels themselves. These “institutional outcasts” were especially vulnerable to Moreau's persuasion, who welcomed them as would a “foster parent to an abandoned child.”

Every station was completely isolated from the commerce of Empire space, but entirely self-sufficient. They were all equipped with refineries, factories, clone banks, research facilities, and starship fitting hangars; everything that they needed to exist harmoniously with each other and pursue their mutually shared goals under the now prophetic vision of Moreau. Loners, families, and sometimes even entire colonies would vanish from Empire records as they traveled into the open arms of the Immensea, which held no person accountable for any sins committed under the roof of the Institution and never, ever discriminated by bloodline. Caldari, Amarrs, Minmatar, Gallentes, and even the occasional Jovian found refuge in this hidden society. Utopia, so it seemed, had been achieved.

But it was not to last, said Veniel. Two things had happened which spelled the beginning of the end for the Immensea. One, its members began to think of Moreau as a god; and two, Moreau also began to think of himself as a god. It was all perfectly sensible to Moreau that the Immensea should worship the man who had created so much from so little. How else to explain his wondrous powers of persuasion and the results of his vision as anything other than divine? Sébastien Moreau cultivated the image of a god as much as he could, fabricating miracles with the use of technology and demanding worship from his followers. There was nothing that he would not take; no custom that he would respect; no law that he would honor; and no woman—married or not, young or old—that he would not ravish, for who could deny the seed of a god?

Moreau had descended into the darkest realm of the categorically psychotic, yet he retained his charismatic personage—a lethal combination that has manifested itself many times over in various rulers and tyrants throughout mankind's history.

The deification of Moreau began to resonate deeply within the souls of the Amarr among the Immensea. While some were born directly into the cult, every Amarr was still deeply rooted in his or her belief in One God, and that hell itself awaited anyone who blasphemed the Faith by creating false idols to worship. “For the Amarr,” said Veniel, “it is better to have never been born, should you be guilty of this sin.” As for Moreau, the only evil more sinister than worshiping an idol was to claiming to be one. In the end, the religious conscience of the Amarrs proved to be too much, and they tried—unsuccessfully—to assassinate Moreau.

The botched attempt on his life enraged Moreau and catapulted him even further into a deranged, diabolical mental abyss. He was now “fully capable of horrific atrocities and astounding cruelty.” He issued an edict declaring that all of the Amarr among them were to be exterminated for “interfering with the divine imperative that is the destiny of Immensea.” The result was effectively flat-out civil war and genocide. Suddenly bloodlines were drastically relevant again, and the Amarr were pitted against everyone else. In the end, all of the Amarr's—every man, women, and child among them—were mercilessly butchered by the other followers.

Moreau meditated on the event and decided that its cause was due to the stations being too autonomous, thereby detracting from his “divine” cornerstone philosophy of interdependence and unity for one, single race. To set matters straight, he ordered the destruction of all but one of the three “life essence” modules aboard each station, decreeing that only one of each shall be permitted to exist per region. If his people would not cooperate with each other in the exact way that he ordained, then he would force the issue upon them and mend their foolish ways. His remaining followers rendered station modules useless by sabotaging them in ways that would make them impossible to repair, and murdered anyone who tried to stop them.

In Veniel's opinion, the act merely accelerated the inevitable. Rumors of the slayings began to spread, and contacts within Empire space quietly began distancing themselves from any association with the Immensea. The logistical nightmare of having to support three stations with one module each for every region they had settled in was unmanageable. One by one they fell into ruin and were abandoned. Almost overnight, the Immensea had all but disappeared, and some of its survivors—many of whom were the source of Veniel's information—took their own lives, overwhelmed by the heavy burden of guilt from their complicity in the greatest human atrocity of the post-EVE era.

Veniel said that there are remnants of the Immensea among us. Most of the Empire-based intelligentsia who supported the cult, but did not actively participate in the Amarr massacre, continued the grim task of keeping their identities and roles within the Immensea a closely guarded secret. Veniel said that he was once close to obtaining clear evidence that “the government officials of several sovereignties” were secretly hunting down Immensea survivors, but suddenly lost all contact with his source. Many intelligentsias still remain in positions of considerable power including, very much to Tantoseisen's concern, positions within CONCORD. Veniel refused to name anyone he personally suspected until he had irrefutable evidence, which as always, he would trade—for a price.

Until this day, the fate of Sébastien Moreau had been unknown. By blind luck, Mattias had unwittingly stumbled across the final piece of the puzzle, and Veniel would have paid handsomely for it had the bounty hunter's situation been any less dire. He explained that Moreau's corpse held enormous scientific value to the Jovians,

who were extremely interested in determining the biological components of Moreau's legendary charismatic qualities. The Jovians had been actively monitoring the Immensea stations for some time, searching for clues on the whereabouts of the cult figurehead. But to everyone's amazement, the Jovian's never ventured inside any of the stations to look, believing that it was not their place to disturb what was left before the Immensea's existence became known publicly.

According to Veniel, the Angel Cartel knew the exact locations of every Immensea station in space. In fact, all of the major pirate organizations did, including the Serpentis, the Guristas, and the Blood Raiders. And most importantly, so did Trald Vukenda, who by now had to know where Mattias and the CONCORD fleet were, and that the dark secret of the Immensea was about to be revealed.

As the tachyon laser turrets from the CONCORD battleships continued to spit focused white beams of searing energy into the station, Mattias focused on the last thing that Veniel said before concluding his story. He said that the pirate cartels wouldn't go near the Immensea stations. Far away from Empire borders, legends and stories can grow unchecked by rationality. The isolated life that pirates lead in the remote systems of deep space lends itself to being highly vulnerable to superstition. Out here, said Veniel, the word "Immensea" was a curse. The pirate's tale was that if you listened closely enough, you could still hear the screams of dying Amarrs as the demonic Moreau and his minions struck them down by the thousands. For the more practical minds among the scoundrels such as Trald, the reason to stay away from the stations was apparent in their condition. The Immensea made certain that the damage they inflicted to their own outposts was permanent. The pirate cartels were well financed and smart with their money. It was far more economical to build a station from scratch than to even attempt to make use of stations in such bad shape.

There was one more part of the story that Veniel had intentionally omitted, saying that he would continue it once he was onboard, and in doing so complete the three terms of their agreement. Mattias panned the camera away from the CONCORD ships and back towards Kirlana's battered Omen. Neither she nor Matuno had uttered a word since the Jovian stopped speaking. He was deeply concerned about her.

"Mattias..." said Tantoseisen. "It is done."

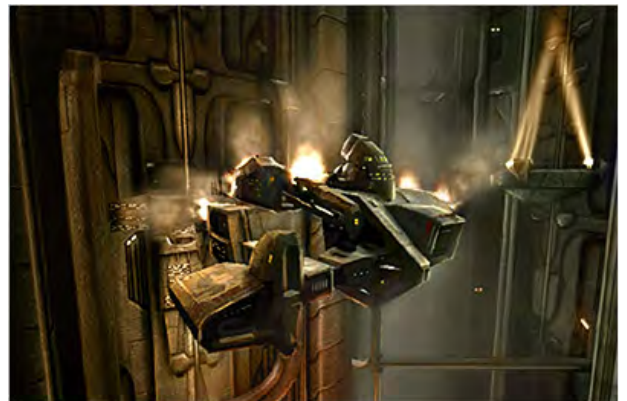
He panned the camera back around and saw that the CONCORD fleet had ceased firing, and were slowly aligning themselves behind the Wraith. One by one, the ships began a procession into one of the station's massive hangar bays. Matuno's Tempest swung around behind Tantoseisen, with Kirlana's Omen trailing in its wake. The ominous feeling that Mattias had when he first saw this station was much worse now.

E8-YS9 Solar System

Immensea Uncharted Base One – Main Hangar Concourse – Deck 22

09:23 EVT

My God, you just lose perspective when you're looking at all this from a camera drone, thought Mattias. He was standing inside of the Mobile Gantry Unit (MGU) that had just extracted his pod from the Blackbird. The size and scope of the damage to his ship made him shake his head as the MGU flew downwards past one of the cruiser's massive engines. As big as his ship was, it was nothing compared to the immense size of the hangar it was floating inside of. They built so many of these stations, he thought. How could they have done all this so quickly? The darkness made him uncomfortable. Usually there was lighting from the windows of hundreds of offices, labs, and living quarters built into the walls of the hangar. In here, all of them were darkened. The entire cavern had a hazy, bluish glow from the emergency lighting system, and he could see debris drifting throughout as the MGU continued its descent towards the concourse.



A click hiss sound marked the end of the trip as the MGU docked with the deck hub. Mattias oriented himself as the door in front of him opened. The hangar was a zero-G vacuum environment, but all sections that were accessible by habitants were surrounded by gravity wells and pressurized with breathable air. His knees buckled a little as he stepped through and adjusted to his own weight again. Matuno was waiting for him inside.

"Mattias, Kirlana is not herself", he said. "She has not been the same since the Jovian told his story." Matuno was speaking quietly. "She will not tell me what troubles her."

"I'm worried about her too," said Mattias. "I don't think she's ever been that close to death before in combat, and as if that wasn't enough for her, to hear about what happened to the Amarrs who used to live here..." Mattias kept trying not to think about the comment she made earlier, about there being "no such thing as God". He took

a deep breath. "I know I don't have to tell you this, but...just keep an eye on her."

"There is something else," added Matuno, leaning even closer. "The Jovian and your brother started looking through station's logs as soon as they arrived. Veniel pointed to something on the screen and said very audibly, 'Without question, that is Admiral Sulei Manatir. Now, look at the hooded female surrounded by the Amarr bodyguards.' Your brother looked very surprised, almost shocked, and then said 'Veniel, are you sure that's her?' The Jovian answered that he was 'certain of it'. Then your brother re-entered the hub and went back to his ship."

Mattias blinked. "Back to his ship?"

"Yes. Veniel is still here, just outside in the concourse, still pouring through the logs. Tell me, Mattias...do you know who this hooded female is that they were referring to?"

Mattias said he honestly had no idea, and shrugged. Matuno took one step closer to him. The Minmatar Brutor towered over Mattias, and was almost twice his weight.

"I certainly hope you'll tell me if you know." Mattias was slightly unnerved, and stepped to the side.

"Of course, Matuno. I'll...see what I can find out." As he took a step forward, Matuno lowered a giant hand onto his shoulder, preventing him from exiting the hub.

"Mattias...if it is her, then you know how personal it is with me."

Mattias looked up at him. "I know it is, Matuno. It's probably personal for a lot of other Minmatar's as well. But now is not the time, even if it's who you think it is. So, if you'll please excuse me, I need to get back to the business of trying to keep us alive."

Matuno removed his hand and allowed Mattias to pass into the concourse. The only light came from the hangar itself, through the transparent side of the concourse. The arched doorways to offices, freight warehouses, and even hovertram stations on the other side were barely visible. The Blackbird was high overhead, and its blinking navigation lights sent soft pulses of light throughout the darkened hall. Kirlana was sitting on floor with her back against the glass, staring blankly at a locket she held in her hand that was still hanging from her neck.

Veniel was standing in front of a console built into the hub that Mattias had just exited from. The greenish hue from the console gave him a ghastly appearance. Without saying a word, he extended his hand towards Mattias. A disc was between his thumb and index finger.

"What's this?" Mattias asked, taking the disc.

"The last part of our agreement," Veniel answered. "A way for you to get past the Arch Angel blockades on either side of this system."

"You mean having a CONCORD fleet blast through them for us wasn't your plan all along?"

Veniel dismissed the remark. "Your brother has also been given a copy of that."

"What's on it?" Mattias asked. Matuno stepped out from the hub.

"The Immensea had some help when they built these stations, Captain", Veniel said. "What you are holding in your hand are the exact locations of not only these bases, but of a jumpgate network that you will not find on any CONCORD maps."

"What are you talking about?" Mattias asked. Kirlana looked up from her fixation on the locket.

"This jumpgate network rings Empire space, but does not traverse it. Thus, every region in deep space is interconnected and completely independent of Empire influence."

Mattias was stunned. "The Immensea built them?"

"Not the first ones, but once Immensea began establishing a presence in the outer regions, the gate builders realized they shared common ground with Moreau, especially where it concerned hiding their existence from certain Empire influence." Veniel emphasized that word.

"So, the Amarr built them?" asked Mattias.

"Quite the opposite," answered Veniel, who was now looking directly at Matuno. "The rise of Minmatar power was always puzzling to us, considering the extent to which the Amarr Empire went to suppress their ambitions. Amarr ships used to patrol all of the gates leading to and from Minmatar systems; nothing could travel in or out without being checked. We wondered how an enslaved nation was able to amass armies and construct warships right before the watchful eye of their alleged masters."

"The answer was hidden jumpgates, unknown even to us until very recently. With the help of Gallente engineers, Minmatar tribes began construction on the gates in complete secrecy and without Republic knowledge. The pirate cartels operating in the vicinity were sympathetic to the Minmatar's plight, but also saw an opportunity to advance their own agenda by assisting them. The gates provided the Minmatar with a 'back door' through which rescued slaves, construction materials, supplies, troops, and warships could travel unhindered by Amarr checkpoints."

"Years after the Rebellion, the cartels continued work on extending the network to include more systems. When the Immensea constructed their first bases here in the Immensea Region, Moreau convinced the cartels of the mutual gains that could be realized by sharing resources. Moreau offered them access to his stations in exchange for access to their jumpgates. The resulting partnership quickly accelerated both projects, since they complimented each other's practical needs and counter-institutional ideals. In the end, 96 gates were constructed over the course of more than 140 years, with more than half built in the last 30 or so, after Immensea was founded."

"One of those gates is in this system, Captain, and Trald Vukenda believes that you are unaware of its existence. Most of the smuggler gates are used primarily to ferry supplies, the majority of which are illegal within Empire space. The pirates have never felt a compelling need to guard them, except when traveling near the borders of rival or competing clans. The only ships you will see near there will be Cartel industrials, although I imagine all that will change once knowledge of this network comes to public light."

The sound of the click hiss from another MGU startled Mattias. Tantoseisen emerged from the hub.

"Well, it's official, I'm to be court-martialed as soon as I return," he said. "But so long as I'm here anyway, I'm going to have a look around. If there is any evidence here about any intelligentsia still in power within Empire space, I need to find out."

"How did CONCORD take the news?" asked Matuno. Tantoseisen shook his head.

"They're completely shocked. I'm still not sure they even believe it, and knowing them, there's going to be an expedition—this time, an authorized one—to confirm everything."

"I hope you exercised caution in choosing whom to share that information with, Commander" said Veniel.

"It's been taken care of," he answered. "No matter what, they won't be able to keep this discovery quiet."

"Court martial," Mattias breathed. "Tantoseisen, I'm sorry," said Mattias. He knew how hard his little brother had worked to build such a remarkable career in law enforcement, and that if not for his own bad luck and poor decisions, this would have never happened.

Tantoseisen took a deep breath. "We were spotted near the Edbinger crossing by a convoy that was on their way out to deep space, and they reported it to the press. Now it's public knowledge that we're out somewhere we shouldn't be, and the spin on things is that I'm 'defecting', or some other nonsense. Anyway, it's against the rules to take a CONCORD task force on a joyride through unregulated space without authorization, and I'm going to be punished accordingly for it."

"Where should we be looking for clues?" asked Matuno. "And how do we know for certain we're really alone here?"

"I cannot say I agree with this idea," said Veniel. "But if that is what you feel you must do, this is where I would look."

Matuno, Tantoseisen, and Mattias gathered behind Veniel, who stepped aside so everyone could see the screen. Displayed on it were schematics detailing the deck level they were currently on. Mattias could recognize the floor plan of the concourse and the hub they were standing in front of. Five blue dots were clustered around it.

"In this program, the blue represents detectable heartbeats. These sensors and others like it are embedded in hull structures throughout the station," Veniel explained. Then the image zoomed out slightly so that more of the area was visible, but a section covering the entire right half was blacked out.

"The dark areas denote zero data. The sensors in this area were either intentionally disabled or destroyed. This section is also where the clone facility would be, prior to its destruction as per Moreau's orders. I can tell you for certain that nothing lives outside of this area." Veniel tapped on the darkened section. "But in there, I cannot say. There is no way to find out if any clones are intact unless someone goes inside. However, the station's computer is indicating that the area is a 'breach zone', which means there is no air, and no gravity."

"I have to do this," said Tantoseisen. "And I know I don't have a lot of time to get it done. The troops outside are understandably restless, and I can't ask them to do much more for me."

"I'll go with you," said Kirlana. Everyone turned towards her. It was the first time she had spoken since coming aboard.

"Kirlana, are you sure? You haven't—" Matuno started.

"I'm fine, really." She picked herself up off the floor. She appeared alert, and the distant look she had up until now was gone. "But we're going to need survival suits and weapons, and mine are on my ship."

"Weapons?" asked Mattias. "Who do you think is going to be shooting at you in there?"

"You've always been a cautious fellow," she answered, almost sarcastically. "And I've always been a cautious gal. If I don't know what I'm getting into, then I say bring a weapon."

That sounded like the Kirlana of old, but for some reason the confidence in her voice still wasn't as reassuring as it used to be. It sounded so feigned. "Well, if you're going, then I'm going," said Mattias. "And that means Matuno is also."

Veniel had a strange look on his face, almost as if he was worried. "There is a former security outpost alongside the bulkhead which separates the corridor from the clone facility. You will find weapons and survival suits there."

"Are you coming with us?" asked Tantoseisen.

"With all due respect Commander, no. But I will remain in contact with you from here, and provide whatever assistance I can. But again, I highly suggest you act quickly, and not overextend yourself for the task."

"Noted, Veniel. And thank you for your support," said Tantoseisen. "We'll be aboard our ships in 60 minutes time at most."

"All of you, be careful," Veniel said. He spoke without emotion, but it was sincere.

Deck 22 Security Outpost – Main Concourse

09:53 EVT

Mattias watched Kirlana recheck the ammunition clip on her rifle. She was acting as though nothing was wrong, even as the rest of the group acted cautiously around her. His brother was testing the camera feed and a portable radar-imaging device (PRID) with Veniel over the radio. Matuno was lucky to find a suit big enough to fit him, no doubt a product of the multiethnic culture that this place once fostered.

None of this feels right, thought Mattias. It had felt that way for so long now that he wondered if anything would ever feel right again. He could understand his brother's reasons for doing this. It was a last ditch effort to save his career, and Mattias felt he had no right to complain since they'd all be dead without his brother's help. But he had put Kirlana and Matuno in enough danger already, and this was by far the riskiest proposition of the day. You could make a mistake in a starship and maybe your crew and your shields would get you out of trouble. But in a pitch-black, zero-G chamber with god-only-knows what floating around in there, the margin for error was a lot narrower, and most of this bunch hadn't seen zero-G training since flight school.

The bad feeling he had about Kirlana just wouldn't go away. And since he failed to understand exactly what was causing it, he couldn't justify putting a stop to her coming along. He'd seen her and Matuno argue about missions he had objected to her participating in a hundred times. That was just the kind of person she was. In fact, they were all stubborn that way, the three of them. Tell any of us that there's something we can't do, and you may as well consider it done. Until today, their collective stubbornness had paid off well.

But now even Matuno wasn't sure how to read her, and he couldn't remember the last time he ever expressed concern over how she was acting. It was the combination of her past and the events of today which kept coming to mind; her rejection of God and the entire Amarr culture, this crazy Sébastien Moreau person and the cult he created, and who could forget what happened to all those Amarr people...

And then it dawned on him: She's questioning all of it, Mattias thought. Everything that's happened today is making her question the choices she's made in her life. That must be what it is. Who could blame her? We were all probably doing the same thing.

"Alright team, helmets on," said Tantoseisen. "We're just going to check a few of the clone banks, then we're out of here. Veniel, we're ready when you are."

Mattias could hear Veniel on the radio via the earpiece inside his helmet. "Have your team enter the airlock, Commander."

"Roger that. Everyone inside," said Tantoseisen. The "airlock" in this instance was actually the antechamber allowing access from the security post to the clone facility. Stations were built like ships; every compartment was

separated by one or more antechambers that could be sealed off in the event of an emergency. The corridor between the two doorways was barely large enough for the four of them to fit inside. "Everyone inside and clear of the hatch?" Tantoseisen asked. All answered affirmatively.

"Clear," said Tantoseisen.

"Sealing the hatch, standby," said Veniel. The door behind Mattias hissed shut.

"Disabling gravity well." Suddenly Mattias felt himself rise off the floor grating slightly. "Mag boots," said Tantoseisen. There were eight thumps as the magnetic fields generated by the survival suit boots were all switched on.

"Standby for depressurization." A loud whoosh sound filled everyone's ears as the air inside the chamber was removed. Mattias immediately felt claustrophobic. He was standing behind Tantoseisen, who was facing the door leading to the clone center. Or whatever the hell else is on the other side.

"Opening the clone center door," said Veniel. The helmet's breathing apparatus made each exhale much more audible than usual, and he could hear himself start to breathe faster. The door slid open slowly, and there was nothing beyond it but pure blackness. It was suddenly very cold, and Mattias could feel the survival suit generating more heat to compensate. He watched his brother step through the doorway.

Beams of light from Tantoseisen's helmet cut through the darkness. "Okay, Mattias, I'm on solid ground where I am. Move forward and hold next to me."

The magnetic boots made a hiss ker-chunk sound that was audible only to Mattias as he took several steps forward and stopped alongside his brother. He kept the light beam pointed downward at the floor grating until he saw his brother's right boot. Looking up, the light beam caught reflections of some small debris floating not too far in front of them. There was a considerable amount of dust in the room, and the beams weren't powerful enough to reach through to any walls or structure in front of him.

"Mattias, fire up the PRID," said Tantoseisen.

"Roger," he answered. Mattias set the tripod in front of him, kneeling to make sure it was anchored to the floor. Satisfied that the device was secure, he turned a dial and the tiny parabolic dish began tracking slowly back and forth.

"No one move," Veniel said suddenly. Mattias froze. The dish was sending its return images to Veniel, giving him a fuzzy picture of what was inside. "You are standing on a catwalk about 125 meters in length, but there is a gap in the scaffolding about 5 meters in front of you. There is a 60-meter drop on either side, at the bottom of which there appears to be significant quantities of wreckage. The ceiling is approximately 50 meters overhead, and you should be able to see breaches in the hull which are directly exposed to space." Mattias looked up and to his left, hoping to see something that would help him get his bearings. He only saw more dust and haze in his beam, and blackness everywhere else.

"The entire facility is filled with a large debris field," Veniel continued. "And there are several large fragments floating directly above the both of you."

Kirlana was still waiting in the doorway, eyes wide as saucers. She took one step forward.

"Don't come in here," warned Tantoseisen.

Kirlana was training the beam from her rifle upwards of Mattias and Tantoseisen, holding the weapon out in front of her as she took another step, clear of the doorway.

"Kirlana! Wait!" said Matuno. Mindful of Veniel's warning, Mattias rose slowly to a crouched stance. For some reason, he felt like he was going to lose his balance even though the boots fastened him securely to the floor. He turned around to face Kirlana, watching the light beam from her rifle slice through the dusty blackness above them.

Veniel's voice came through the radio, directed only at the brothers and Matuno. "Her heartbeat is racing, and her breathing is fast and shallow," he warned. "You should disarm her and get her back inside."

Mattias was about to speak, when the length of the beam from Kirlana's rifle suddenly shrunk as it illuminated debris just 2 meters over her head. Her eyes opened wider and she started to scream, just as Matuno's hand came from behind her and swatted the weapon away. The rifle tumbled end over end, its beam cutting 360-degree arcs through the blackness, changing directions several times as it collided with invisible objects. Matuno wrapped his massive arms around Kirlana and pulled her back inside the doorway.

"What the hell happened?" shouted Tantoseisen. Mattias could see her anguished, horrified face through her helmet, screaming as though in extreme pain and agony. Suddenly, the inside of Kirlana's facemask was

splattered as she retched violently and began coughing spasms.

Matuno was banging on the hatch leading back inside the security outpost with one hand, and holding Kirlana around him with the other. She didn't look like she was moving anymore.

"Veniel! I have to get her back inside!" Matuno screamed.

"Mattias, Tantoseisen, get clear of the door," said Veniel, whose voice was completely devoid of panic, urgency, or emotion.

The doorway closed and sealed, leaving the brothers standing in a sea of darkness. The only light came from their helmets and Kirlana's rifle, far off in the distance. Mattias's head was spinning, and he was trying not to panic. He wasn't used to this at all. But his brother was well trained for zero-G operations, just like all enlisted men and women in the DED were.

"What did she see that made her react like that?" Tantoseisen asked.

Mattias dropped to a knee again, just wanting to be close to catwalk grating. It was the only thing he could use to keep his bearings. "It was right above the door," he breathed, trying to stay under control. He was just staring at the floor grating. "I should have never allowed her to come, I don't think she's ever had this kind of training before."

"Oh my God..." gasped Tantoseisen.

Mattias looked up, and saw the beam from Tantoseisen's helmet focused on something almost directly above him. His heart stopped from the reaction that something invisible had been so close to him all this time. But then his eyes widened in terror as recognition of what was floating there settled in.

The ghastly visage of a corpse was staring right at him, illuminated by Tantoseisen's beam. The skin was a grayish-drab color, preserved from the lack of oxygen and extreme cold. Its eyes were still open, mouth agape, neck split across the Adam's apple. Mattias stopped breathing for a moment, and then started shallow breaths as his own heartbeat started to race in panic.

"Stay under control, brother..." breathed Tantoseisen, panning the beam to his right and catching the suspended arm of a second corpse floating over the door. The dead appeared to be wearing the same expressions as the instant they perished.

Veniel's voice came through. "Kirlana is in shock, and is being rushed to a CONCORD ship for treatment. She has suffered some kind of traumatic emotional breakdown, and will be unable to pilot the Omen."

"Veniel," breathed Mattias, trying to get his breathing under control. He felt extremely dizzy now, almost as if in a nightmare, for he could not think of anything except darkness and the face of the corpse. "Find a way to light this place...flares, emergency lights, anything..."

Mattias was on all fours now, resting his helmet on the grating. Veniel did not reply. He felt a hand on his back. "Mattias, easy," his brother said. "We're going to get out of here, right now."

"Veniel...Veniel, do you copy?" said Tantoseisen. "Veniel, come in, we need to get back inside. Veniel!"

There was no answer, and Mattias started to lose his composure as the panic began to overwhelm him. He could hear his brother shouting something, cursing, but none of it registered. He just focused on the floor grating now resting directly against his face shield, getting lost in the details of its nothingness, wishing he could escape from the corpse who was trying to speak to him and the blackness that existed everywhere else.

Mattias lost consciousness while listening to the words of the dead, who spoke to him of righteousness and avenging injustices.

Epilogue

Using the smuggler jumpgates, Tantoseisen Kakkichi's CONCORD task force returned safely to Empire space. Veniel provided forward scouting for the fleet, breaking contact after they had safely crossed the border. Tantoseisen immediately turned himself in to DED authorities and was arrested. All charges, save for one, were eventually dropped after the full account of the Immensea became known.

Before starting the long journey back to Empire space, the remaining crewmembers of the Blackbird and Omen cruisers were transferred to CONCORD ships. The vessels were then scuttled outside of the Immensea station in E8-YS9.

Mattias Kakkichi would make a complete recovery from the temporary delirium that was induced when he succumbed to spatial disorientation inside of the clone facility. Shortly after he lost consciousness, Veniel



appeared at the security outpost, manually pressurizing and then opening the door from there. He claimed that the station's AI would no longer allow him to operate the door remotely after Matuno and Kirlana were back inside.

Kirlana would not fare as well. She vowed to never pilot a starship again, and that her days as a bounty hunter were over. She never disclosed to anyone, not even Matuno, exactly why the story of Immensea was so personal to her.

Before breaking formation with the CONCORD fleet near the Empire border, Matuno asked Tantoseisen to pass his brother a message for him. Tantoseisen agreed; Matuno transmitted the encrypted message and then disappeared. When asked some time later what that message was, Mattias would only say that Matuno was chasing after his "life's ambition", and that when the time was right, he would contact him again.

The press demanded an explanation as to why a CONCORD task force would leave Empire space. Dantennen Fisk, the legal counsel and longtime friend of Tantoseisen Kakkichi, answered before the DED could. He publicly stated that his client's actions were "justified" and that the reason for his excursion to deep space was not rebellious or the result of any falling out with DED high command. Because of the publicity surrounding the issue, CONCORD had no choice but to associate the discovery of the abandoned stations with Kakkichi's actions, which they did in a press release of their own. But before they would reveal the station's locations, they wanted answers about the Immensea, and to recover as many of the dead as they could.

Through a deal brokered in secrecy by Veniel between the DED and the Jovians, CONCORD was able to recover thousands of bodies and compile a detailed history of the Immensea. DED scouting vessels carrying investigators met Jovian warships at all 69 stations, exchanging information for the firepower required to get inside. With the exception of a single leaked photograph from the inside of one of the E8-YS9 disabled modules, the DED has clamped down on the release of any investigation details.

Veniel disappeared after brokering the deal. No one has reported seeing him since.

The regional government's public reaction to the Immensea was one of apathy, but in reality sent their respective intelligence agencies into upheaval. Furious officials scrambled for an explanation as to how, exactly, news of this scope and size could have eluded them all this time. No government would ever publicly admit to an intelligence failure so pronounced.

Mattias Kakkichi found other bounty hunters who shared his ideals, and continues to patrol deep space in search of injustices to avenge.

The Artifice Maker

The tall man moved slowly through the packed transit hall. His gaunt, eagle-nosed face registered total lack of interest in his surroundings, like he had seen the same or similar ones a thousand times in the past. His garments, cheap and somber, were identical to those worn by millions of migration workers, constantly on the move from one station to another in search of work. A small satchel was slung over his shoulder, seemingly holding the man's only possessions. At the back of his bare skull a crab-like cyber-ornament clung, its azure colored arms extending all the way to his temples.

The large transit hall was an irregularly shaped circle, with a glass dome overhead. The transit hall had been strategically positioned so that people arriving or leaving the station could gaze through the dome at the reddish planet below and the pale sun in the background. But like with so many small industrial stations in the empire's interior the almost total lack of maintenance had long since ruined the spectacular view, a greasy-brown film of dirt giving those below in the hall only a vague idea of the vista outside. The walls were covered with a once-colorful mural depicting an often-used theme in Amarrian wall paintings – scenes of the Emperor performing assorted heroic deeds. Here and there the mural was severed by an entryway to one of the dozen passages leading to and from the transit hall.

The large man headed towards the passage leading to the lower levels of the station. For a fraction of a second his darting eyes looked directly into the security camera located above the entryway. Then he disappeared down the passage, his face as impassive as when he stepped out of the shuttle fifteen minutes earlier.



The small room was illuminated solely by a two dozen monitors mounted into the back wall. Before them sat a tired looking officer, his heavy eyes scanning the screens before him. The picture on a screen in the middle had been frozen; a gaunt face with a patriarch nose filled the screen. In the far corner of the room a figure stood leaning on a cane, the glare of the monitors only managing to paint it in a ghost-like blue silhouette.

"He's here, sir. He's heading towards the lower levels." The officer said. "Do you wish me to have him apprehended?"

"No need for that yet." The shadowy figure answered. "We'll allow the fox to flush out some hens before moving in."

Etian pressed his back into the corridor's wall, his head bowed to his chest as the process of Holders passed him by. Leading the process was the governor himself, his fine linen cloths embroidered with gold threads and platinum pearls. Out of the corner of his eyes Etian watched the others lined up against the wall, commoners like himself, stealing furtive glances at the majestic process as it passed. On some faces Etian could read envy or awe or odium, but each one also registered fear. For those men passing them were the most powerful men on Inis-Ilix station and each and every one of them had the power and the authority to dictate the destiny of any of these commoners that lined the walls in apparent reverence.

Once the Holders had disappeared round a corner Etian straightened his small but stocky body and continued on his way to the St. Helion Social Club, his favorite after-work retreat. As he walked he wondered what the Holders were doing down here on the lower levels, they seldom visited the levels of the commoners. The fact that the Holders had been traveling without any personal guards didn't come as a surprise to Etian; to the common Amarrian a Holder symbolized the grandeur of the Amarr Empire and to attack one was to attack the Empire itself. Such an act was unthinkable to the common Amarr man; the Empire, with its age-old traditions and structure, was the foundation of society itself. To every Amarrian life without the Empire was nothing but anarchy, chaos, dread and darkness.

Etian belonged to a group of skilled workers that traveled from one station to another in the Trigentia sector, offering their services to factories and foundries on the space stations. This custom, which is found almost nowhere else within the vast Amarr Empire, started several centuries ago when the sector was recently settled. At that time numerous minor Holders vied for power, each with his own ideas on how to run things. This resulted in a complex tapestry of rules and regulations regarding for instance education, travel permits and freedom of employment. With time this resulted in great economical diversity between the stations in the area, some prospered while others stagnated. When the emperor re-organized the administration in the sector a sole Holder

was chosen to govern it as a whole, with governors on each station working under him. Soon thereafter the first migration workers appeared – people with some specific skills that only a handful of the stations could train and produce. This system worked well in the economical sense – the sector was prosperous and was fast becoming one of the most important industrial zones in the Amarr Empire. But this prosperity came at a price; the migration workers were better informed and enjoyed more liberties than other workers, let alone the slaves. They gobbled up dangerous ideas regarding their rights and stature, resulting in demonstrations and protests, sometimes violent. The Holders were facing a dilemma; they were anxious to keep social stirrings to the minimum, but were unsure how to accomplish this without breaking their golden eggs – the migration workers. While the Holders were searching for ways to keep things getting out of hand the migration workers were clamoring ever louder for greater rights and higher wages – on many stations in the Trigentia sector tension was rising to the boiling point. On many there had been bloody fights, sometimes resulting in the total expulsion of migration workers or severe restriction on their privileges. But there was one fabled one where the workers had succeeded...

To Etian this development was making him deeply anxious. Born into a strictly orthodox family and raised to respect the social order no matter what, these stirrings by his fellow workers seemed almost treasonous, even sacrilegious. Yet, Etian had to admit that this fight for increased rights seemed reasonable enough. His mind was torn between his duty to the state and loyalty to his co-workers; the responsibilities of his public life against the comfort of his private one; all these things sat heavily on Etian's mind as he made his way towards the club.

Inis-Ilix station had seen its share of unrest in recent months, only the week before two migration workers had been imprisoned for 'disturbing the peace', as the official statement read. Etian knew of several small cells operating, but they didn't amount to much – only a handful of the migration workers had truly succumbed to the fervor of power politics, most, like Etian, were doubtful. In their view this whole turbulence could be blamed on those impulsive fools on Turba.

St. Helion Social Club was opened some 30 years earlier by a religious order with the purpose of spreading the word of St. Helion the Virtuous among the lower classes. The order was at that time under the patronage of Lady Temal Kador, one of the Five Heirs, and through her influence the order opened vast number of similar clubs all over Kador's domains. But a few years later the order fell out of favor with the Heir and their clubs were sold. In the three decades of operation the club had slowly degenerated from a respectable, if boring, religious establishment into a grubby workers bar. The club was not big, one room crudely split in the middle by a bar. The interior was still covered with religious symbols and signs but St. Helion's order had long since left and the word of God had been replaced by the drunken drivel of the workers frequenting the place.

Etian took his usual seat in a back corner, scanning the familiar faces on the tables around him. He nurtured his drink for a few minutes in silence until a friend and a co-worker of his, Ryed Gambala, moved over to Etian's table. Most of the people in the room were migration workers like the two of them and many of them were fellow employees at RPI. Yet they were grouped in pairs or at most three at a table, occasionally a person moved from one table to another, this always spurred a person on that table to move on too. The station authorities had banned migration workers from grouping together – a group of more than 2 or 3 people together made the authorities extremely paranoid. So even while relaxing in a bar the migration workers took the precaution to give the impression of separation, in case of lurking informers or camera drones.

"So, Etian." Ryed said, half-whispering, glancing furtively around the bar before continuing: "Will you be coming?" Etian sighed, seeing where this conversation was leading. Ryed was in one of these newly formed cells that dreamt of the success their brethren at Turba had got.

"Look, Ryed, I don't think a public protest will get you anything but trouble. I mean, how many are you? Maybe a dozen. That's hardly a sufficient number to shake the foundations of this station's government. From what I hear, the Turba protesters numbered at least a few hundred. It's a doomed prospect, man." Etian said, exasperated. This wasn't the first time that Ryed brought this up, but each time Etian had turned him down. Much as he wanted to see some changes, Etian was much too clever and cautious to take part in any risky demonstration like the one Ryed's cell was planning.

"Where's there will there's a way. We may be few, but we're dedicated to the cause. Come on, it's now or never." Ryed continued chanting his slogans like in a religious fervor. It was clear to Etian that Ryed had become fanatical about this whole business: he was obviously never going to change his mind and, more exasperatingly, never going to change the subject. Etian began looking for an excuse to bring the conversation to an end, when he saw her.

She walked into the bar with a light spring in her step that spoke of perfect body control and self-assurance. Etian only knew her first name: Dekka. Like him she frequented the club, but apart from her name he knew nothing about her; this perceived mystique only made Etian all the more infatuated with her. Watching her from afar Etian's ample imagination had time and again played out one dramatic scenario after another where he was the hero in white and she the damsel in distress. Afterwards Etian always felt sick of himself; of the way he dawdled over his daydreams constantly, never having the courage to act any of them out in real life. And this time it was no different. While Ryed droned on in the background Etian once again let his mind slip into the comforting mode of daydreaming. The more he dreamt the more he drank and the more depressed he felt.

Staggering home some two hours later he wondered for the umpteenth time if he'd ever be man enough to go talk to her.

The factory of the Royal Precision Instruments, known as RPI, was situated on the lowest deck, like most of the factories on the station. Most of the year the permanent workers made micro-optics and fiber-conduits, but during the months of Domar and Nemar the workforce of RPI tripled as migration workers came in to make quantum clocks, using the volatile argon isotopes laboriously mined in a nearby asteroid field. In those two months the migration workers used up all the factory's supplies of the substance, which then took the company a whole year to restock.

The month of Domar was coming to an end. Etian, working through his hangover and cursing himself for drinking so excessively the night before, let his mind wander while performing his tedious work on the clock's escapement. It seemed to him like the whole RPI was seething, that his fellow migration workers were like a dormant volcano only waiting to erupt. Etian knew he was caught up in one of the rarest of social phenomena in the Amarr Empire; that of social uprising. Somehow this privilege didn't comfort him all that much. Overhearing snippets of conversations around him Etian learned that a big gathering was planned for tonight at St. Helion's Social Club. Etian decided to go, he couldn't tell why. Maybe it was out of curiosity, maybe to show solidarity, or maybe just to get yet another glimpse of her, Dekka.

When Etian entered the social club it was already teeming with people. His usual table at the back was already occupied by loud-mouthed men in overalls, so he sat at a table closer to the center. A man was already sitting there, hunched with a cape hiding his features. There was no sign of Dekka.

"Are you here for the demonstration?" The stranger asked, a pair of pale-blue eyes peering at him from under the hood of his cape. Etian felt strangely naked in front of that stare. Looking into those eyes set his head spinning and it took seconds before the question registered in his mind.

"I, uh... I don't know." He finally stammered. The stranger seemed a bit annoyed by his answer and Etian felt strangely compelled to please this man he'd never seen before.

"I came here to give my support to the cause." Etian said more forcefully, hoping that this vague answer would satisfy the man sitting opposite him without sounding as a commitment to do something foolish. The stranger stared at him for a few moments before speaking:

"I'm Fradis Ludono." He declared, staring intently at Etian as if to gauge his reaction. Again it took Etian a moment to get his mind around what the man had said. Then the name registered and Etian jumped. Fradis Ludono. The man from Turba. The man who led Turba's migration workers to a victory against the station's rulers. The man who faced down the Holders of Turba and won for the workers a freedom to work and life as they chose. The man was a living legend, traveling from station to station to preach the word and support the people.

For several seconds the two men stared each other in the eye. Finally Etian managed to get his mind into gear:

"I'm Etian Subidam." He said and extended his hand. Fradis gripped it firmly. Then he spoke:

"Etian Subidam, will you help me help you? Will you aid me in securing for you freedom from the tyrants of Inis-Ilix station?"

"I guess I do." Etian stammered. At that moment he noticed Dekka sitting by the bar and suddenly Etian had flash of insight. His biggest weakness was his lack of self-confidence and what better way to alter that than to rub shoulders with none other than Fradis Ludono. If anything was going to work in bringing Etian some self-esteem this was it. And heck, with Fradis here this demonstration might not be as dicey as before.

"I will help you." He said with fervor, the conviction clearly evident in his voice. Fradis seemed satisfied.

"Good." He said. "I haven't been here for long, but we must act as quickly as possible. If the authorities discover I'm here before we're ready things could turn bad. From what I've heard there are already some cells operating in this area, so preparations should be easy."

"It is true that there are a number of cells around." Etian said. "But they don't hold much sway. I'm afraid that most of the workers are a bit skeptical about this whole thing." He finished almost apologetically, aware that not so long ago he had been one of those skeptics. Fradis didn't seem at all daunted by this news.

"That's because they haven't heard the word yet." He said with confidence. "We will show them what it means to be a real man." With that Fradis removed his cape, revealing his bald head with its intricate implant at the back of the skull. If Etian had ever been in doubt if the man really was who he said he was that doubt was totally expelled now – the image of Fradis Ludono was almost as well known in these quarters as the portrait of the emperor himself. No sooner had Fradis removed his cape than people began pointing and whispering excitedly.

Fradis climbed onto the table and then stood there surveying the room calmly, scanning the faces of the excited but hushed workers thronging around him.

"Fellow migration workers." He finally said, his sonorous voice carrying to the farthest corners of the room. "You all know me. And you know my background. So you shouldn't guess why I'm here. In a way, I'm answering your call, for many of you have already laid the foundation for our glorious victory over the tyrants of this station that is soon to come." The crowd was now hanging onto his every word.

"But I know many of you also have doubts in your hearts." Fradis continued. "You doubt the righteousness of this deed. You doubt whether you are worthy of taking the power from those that took it from you so long ago. For you've been conditioned from birth to respect and fear those men that claim to be better than you. I say: cast those shackles of you!" Etian could see that Fradis was getting to the people, yet there were still those that were unconvinced. Etian suspected himself as being one of them. Fradis sensed this all, he knew from experience that more was needed to convince them, or at least to persuade them join the fray. He continued:



"They have told you time and again that you're not capable of governing yourself, that you're too weak of mind. Their teachings have long since reached the core of your souls. I say: to free your soul you must forget those teachings. You must stop believing that you're incompetent to rule yourself and start believing that a free mind can accomplish anything it wants!" Fradis was reaching a crescendo. The crowd was shouting encouragements, the majority already gleefully shouting their approval. Etian saw Ryed among them. To Etian the words Fradis spoke were much more radical than those he'd heard previously and that frightened him. Ryed and his gang had only been advocating a demonstration for higher wages and more rights, but Fradis' words seemed to imply a complete overthrow of the government of the station. Yet Etian, for all his misgivings, couldn't help but be moved by the passion of Fradis and the excitement of the crowd.

Maybe you don't believe me when I say that you're all conditioned." Fradis shouted to the frenzied crowd. "But let us all look at one example. Name me a poem that we all know, a poem that is taught to all children at an early age. A poem that supposedly shows that man should not try to usurp God but put their faith in him, but which in reality describes the way the upper classes trample on the ignorant commoners. Yes, you know what poem I'm talking about. You all know it by heart. Why don't we recite it together so your eyes can be opened to just one of the cunning ways the Holders have put their shackles on your souls." And Fradis began chanting, many in the crowd joining in:

*'I raised my head and saw this stair;
A solid structure made of stone,
Reaching high into the air.
I looked around, I stood alone.
This muddy field held no appeal;
Full of care I neared the base;
Sure enough, the stair was real.
What hidden dangers might I face
Climbing up this endless stair?
I knew not, nor ever could
For always gazed in unknown fear
Of future bright or bleak or good;
'Tis matters not when control lack;
The fate of man in other's hands.
But then again this skybound track
Might lead me to the promised lands.'*

"What does this first verse tell us?" Fradis asked. He waited a second before continuing: "It tells us that we all have a desire to govern our own live, that this desire is ingrained in every one of us and that we dream of becoming our own masters." He then said, answering his own question. Then he continued:

*'With eager heart and earnest face,
I set out to seek this exulted place.
And once I had the first flight won
I felt as the climb was halfway done.
Soon I learned to stride the stair
With ease and thus became aware
Of my surroundings for the first time,
Around me saw this view sublime.
Fresh air caressed my cheek and jowl,
Below me saw a friendly fowl.'*

*With joy I climbed and noticed much;
Happy games and wonders such.
I knew this world belonged to me
Now at last that I was free.
'Why, arts and music; life and joys;
And let's make all those science toys.'*

"And here, like a glimpse into paradise, we're given a taste of what self-government might achieve." Fradis declared. "But dangers lurk, as the next verse tells us:"

*'Finally I felt my powers could
Choose my fate as I saw fit;
This world I owned and understood,
It was made for my own benefit.
When I slept I dreamt sweet dreams
Of things to come I knew where true.
Once I'd reach the top my schemes
To make this world all anew
Should at last all bear fruit.
But this sound beneath my soles,
Restless, endless, nagging, crude,
Rasped my soul and raped my goals.
The stair behind me slowly fell,
Erased forever with a tired sigh.
Empty steps with tales to tell
Raced towards me in a silent cry.'*

"Here, we're told that our greed and our stupidity will always come back to haunt us. That only those better than us are capable of ruling wisely enough to keep us from destroying ourselves. And the last verse tells us the ultimate price our pride may have to pay if we don't stay in our place:"

*'Now I realized this frail old track
Chased me up with no way back.
Faster, faster, I fled in dread;
My every effort spent, I sped
Upwards, fearing death and drop,
When suddenly I reached the top.
Before me stood this man in white.
Slipping still, in dismay I cried:
"Old man, help me on my feet!"
"Poor victim of your filthy greed,
Learn the humble way," he said.
And spat and kicked me in the head.
I fell and felt my mind go blank.
I hit the ground, in mud I sank.
'Who am I and where is here?'
I raised my head and saw this stair.'*

"I say to you: is this the world we want to live in? Are we to accept that we're not good enough to govern our own lives?" Fradis was whipping the crowd into a frenzy and Etian felt himself swept into this vortex of emotions and passions, shouting himself hoarse, for the first time feeling enraged and disgusted with the way the authorities had been playing him like a fool. 'No more!' echoed through his mind and his thoughts were being shouted throughout the room. Fradis raised his hands, waiting for the room to calm down before giving his final verdict, in almost total silence:

"I say, my brothers and sisters: they may govern the way we live, but we can still govern the way we die and if there is any cause worth dying for, then this is it. I have put myself at risk a thousand times for this cause; I have faced death a hundred times; and I've come here tonight to tell you that I will continue to do so until a day will come when we can live our lives as we please with no-one trying to oppress us or kill us." Etian was sold, as was the whole room. If Fradis had ordered it Etian was sure that the whole crowd would march to the upper levels this very minute to die by his side. But Fradis ordered no such thing. Instead he said:

"This is only the first step. We must now prepare ourselves, but we must move quickly before suspicion arises." He stepped down from the table and was immediately surrounded by people asking him questions or simply touching him in awe. Suddenly Etian noticed that Dekka had slipped beside him.

"I saw you talking to him earlier." She said quietly, keeping her eyes on the man in question.

"You noticed that?" Was all Etian could utter.



"I've also noticed you staring at me in the past." She said amusingly.

"Ah..." Etian felt himself blush.

"What did you two talk about?" Deka asked, looking at Etian for the first time. He had to muster all his willpower to refrain from shuffling his feet. She was so forward!

"We talked about the upcoming demonstration." He finally answered.

"Really? Are you planning it with him?" She probed.

"I'm helping him out." Etian said evasively. By now they had moved over to a nearby table and sat down. Etian was cursing himself for lying to her. 'But I didn't exactly lie,' he thought. 'I only omitted some of the truth,' he then justified. But he also knew that only through his supposed association with Ludono did he have enough self-confidence to stay there talking casually with the woman of his dreams. 'I'm now eternally committed to this demonstration,' he reflected gloomily. 'Or should I say revolt? That seems to more to the mark.'

Fradis dispersed the crowd a little later, wisely remarking that such a large gathering was bound to draw notice

sooner or later. Etian tried not to look too crestfallen when Deka left, at least he had her promise to meet again to sustain him. Etian was just about to dive into some heavy drinking to sooth his nerves when Fradis laid his hand on his shoulder.

"We've got some planning to do." He said. Etian saw Ryed standing behind Fradis, grinning like a maniac in the company of some of his mates. 'Sink or swim,' Etian thought, joining his fellow conspirators into a back room.

The spacious office overlooked a pleasant little garden, a rare sight on any space station. The man leaned on his cane, looking out over his garden of retreat. Behind him stood a small man clad in a blue and black security uniform.

"Has he made contact yet?" The man with the cane asked.

"Yes, sir." The small man replied. "Last night in..." he glanced at his notes. "St. Helion's Social Club."

"Good, good. Keep a tab on things. He should move soon, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes, sir. Is that all, sir?"

"For now, just remember to clear out Hangar 8."

"Yes, sir."

The old furnace could still be turned up for heat, making the small alcove cozy and warm. Etian lay on the divan going over the events of the last couple of days in his mind. He was certain that nothing he had experienced before came close. Not only was he in the midst of some sinister plot to uproot the government, but here, on this very divan, lay the woman of his dreams snuggled up against him sleeping soundly.

She had told him her life story, more or less. Her ancestors were of the lowest class of the commoners, just above slaves. Her large family was still eking their living out as the poorest of the poor. But she had managed to get out, quite an accomplishment by the standards of the empire. But he hadn't managed to get her to tell him what she did for a living.

And now the woman in question was stirring in his arms, slowly returning to the waking world.

"Good morning." Etian said cheerfully. Deka yawned, bleary eyed.

"Mornin'" She muttered, rubbing her eyes. Etian suddenly felt the urge to probe deeper into her life:

"Say, why don't you have to worry about going to your job? I know you didn't go yesterday and you don't seem to worried for today?" He inquired, hoping to get a glimpse into what she did for a living. Deka only muttered something under her breath.

"Your not unemployed are you?" Etian asked teasingly.

"Certainly not!" She snapped, sitting bolt uprights. "If I didn't have a job I would be forced to go back to my family, I'd rather die." She said with a feeling. Etian was a bit taken a back by her outburst, frightful that it might affect their budding relationship.

"I'm sorry, it just looked to me like you didn't mind your job too well." He said apologetically.

"I mind it very well, thank you." Dekka said, still irritable. "My job and my status means everything to me."

"So you'd do anything to keep your job?" Etian asked, racking his brain for what this job of hers might be.

"Of course, it's all I've got." Dekka replied. Etian was a little hurt by this remark, but kept quiet. He rose from the divan ensconced between the furnace and the wall and started dressing.

"Why do we have to meet here instead of your apartment?" Dekka asked.

"Because my apartment is maybe being watched. Fradis pointed that out to me. This is safer. No-one but you and me know about this place. Nobody comes down here anymore after the new reactor was opened. We're secure here. I've even stocked this place full with food, we could hide here for ages." Etian answered, pulling on his boots. "Come on, we've got a big day ahead of us." He said eagerly, throwing Dekka's cloths to her.

The demonstrators came trickling into the back-alley storage area. Etian had left Dekka at the entrance earlier – they planned to meet after the demonstration, although both of them knew that things were likely to change dramatically in the next few hours, making any such plans hollow. Etian looked around him, the demonstrators were close to one hundred – young and eager. Most of them male; most only in their early twenties. As could be expected trepidation and uncertainty battled with anticipation and exhilaration on their faces as they unfurled their banners and hid their long knives in their jackets. At last Fradis stepped up and made his last speech before they'd march.

"Remember our aim, people. We will march to level 2 where the governor's quarters are and demand our rightful share in the government of this station. We will not resort to violence unless absolutely necessary – we can talk to the guards, they will understand our cause and maybe join us. If things get tough you will follow your group leaders to the designated rally point, where we will re-group and re-organize. Now lets move!"

The march had been carefully stage-managed, the mob was grouped into small groups of 10 people, with one person responsible for their movements and coordination. Etian was one of the group leaders, his group was the third from the last. Fradis marched with the last group, egging people on. As soon as the demonstrators were out on the street they started waiving their banners and chanting their slogans:

"Power to the People!"

"Down with Tyranny!"

"Out with the Old, In with the New!"

The procession slowly weaved its way towards the upper levels, in every street and at every corner they were met with astonished onlookers. Some shouted jeers or obscenities, other shouted encouragement and a few even joined in the march, swelling the number to well over hundred.



Then they turned into the street leading up to the 4th level. It was empty. On they marched, their shouts echoing on the empty street, putting fright into some of them, their shouts growing fainter. At the end of the street they met a line of security guards blocking the street. The foremost groups happily marched towards them, expecting them to open up before them. Etian became apprehensive – he looked back and noticed that another group of heavily armed security guards were advancing up the street towards them. The front of the march now met the barricade of guards – they didn't budge. Tension was rising, some were fiddling with the sleeves on their jackets fingering their knives. Etian could easily see where this was heading. He sought out Fradis, but the tall man was nowhere visible. Others in the group were noticing the absence of their leader. Fear set in.

Catch of the Day



"Gallente frigate Notrimus, you've been cleared for docking. Prepare for initiation of docking sequence. Enjoy your stay in Korridi station." The monotonous voice of the command tower's personnel sounded even more bored than Gaspar Anoun was feeling. Although the journey had been short and relatively uneventful it was always tiresome to deal with Amarr custom officials, and Gaspar had met a lot of them in the last few hours since his arrival into Amarr space.

The Amarr station loomed large above him, majestic in its monstrosity. Gaspar swiveled his camera drone around, behind him he saw a line of ships waiting to dock while a handful of police vessels shuffled along the lines keeping an eye on the foreign merchant ships. Looking forward again he noticed that from his angle the sun was already partly obscured by the planet - it was late afternoon at the station.

Gaspar felt his ship respond to the commands of the docking sequence sent by the command tower. The ship sailed in a gentle curve towards a docking bay close to the lower end of the station. Gaspar noticed that the docking bay was only half full. This years Trade Fair wasn't particularly well attended, it seemed. The auto-

control eased the ship into a berth, fastening it with a loud clank and a low hiss.

The camera drone had entered the ship when it docked and only the infrared sensors were available to Gaspar to get a picture of his surroundings in the few moments it took the berth crane to lift the capsule from the ship. Gaspar always hated these moments, he relied heavily on his camera drone to get a sense of his whereabouts and with it gone he always became uncomfortably aware of the sticky goo and the blackness enveloping him in the capsule. But this discomfort was offset by the anticipation that in a few minutes he'd be free of the confines of the capsule and his senses would again be allowed to feel and function normally.

Gaspar washed himself clean in the neat little shower box adjacent to the disembarkation room. Then he dressed himself, putting on clothes he kept in the small storage box in his capsule. He chose a smart looking suit with a long-sleeved jacket, nothing too fancy - he didn't want to irritate the Amarrians too much by his appearance. Gaspar left the room and commissioned a cart robot to follow him with his luggage taken from the ship's cargo hold.

On the corridor connecting the docking area with the main body of the station Gaspar was greeted by a short Gallentean in a ruffled suit. The man introduced himself, matching his stride with that of Gaspar's.

"My name is Naine, Niedanai Naine. I have been appointed as your diplomatic attaché during your stay here." He wheezed, smoothing his greasy hair.

"A diplomatic attaché you say." Gaspar said, hiding his surprise. "I don't recall having requested one."

"It's the policy now, sir." Naine said with a tiny smile. "The Federation demands that all Gallenteans wishing to enter into a formal trade agreement with the Amarrians must be accompanied by a diplomatic attaché from the Foreign Ministry."

"How very thoughtful of them. So, your role is what? Fetch my slippers, make me coffee, that sort of thing?" Gaspar answered sarcastically.

"No, sir." Naine said, visibly hurt. "No. I'm to ensure that your dealings with the Amarrians remain civilized and go through smoothly. In the last few months there have been numerous incidents where the negotiating parties parted on bad terms because of some real or imaginary slights. It is my job to make sure that any misunderstandings don't escalate into a serious breach."

"I see. Tell me Naine, you must have extensive experience in dealing with the Amarrians, right?" Gaspar asked.

"I have worked for the ministry for 14 years. During that time I have analyzed and filed thousands of field reports on every race there is."

"So you have no direct experience of a face to face contact with the Amarrians?" Gaspar probed.

"Well... I, uh..." Naine's face suddenly seemed flushed. "Not as such, sir."

"So, correct me if I'm wrong." Gaspar said in an amused tone. "You, a man with absolutely no experience in dealing with the Amarrians or anybody else for that matter, are going to supervise me - a 20 year veteran of inter-stellar trading - in how to conduct my business. Is that right?"

"Well, I won't supervise as such. I'm more of an advisor, you see." Naine said hesitantly.

"Ok then, Mr. Advisor. Why don't you give yourself the advice to stay out of my face and we'll have peace and harmony all around. I'll quietly make my deal and for you it's mission accomplished." Gaspar said convincingly. Naine mulled things over for a minute before answering:

"I guess that could work, as long as I'm present when you're conducting your negotiations, sir."

"Splendid. Stick to me my dear Niedanai, and not only will we swing a hefty profit back home sweet home, but along the way I'll teach you a trick or two about being a Gallentean super-trader." Gaspar said raucously and put his hand over Naine's shoulders.

"So Naine, where are you from?" Gaspar asked in a friendly tone.

"Me, sir? I'm from Sacreaux." Naine replied perplexed. "In the Neronne district." He added when he saw the lack of recognition on Gaspar's face.

The two men navigated the narrow corridors of Korridi station en route to Gaspar's suite, the cart robot trudging behind them carrying Gaspar's emerald-green travel trunks. Gaspar knew his way well around the station as he'd been here many times before. He stayed clear of the busy thoroughfares, preferring the side corridors as they allowed for a more relaxed stroll. He used the time to explain to the woefully ignorant attaché the purpose of his trip here.



"You know, Naine, the Amarrians can be a real pain in the ass to deal with. But the Amarr Empire is a huge market and it seems every soul there is crying out for Gallentean or Caldari or Jovian goods. The Amarrians like to regulate things, just to let you know who's got the power, and these Trade Fairs are a part of that. You can't just waltz into the Empire and start trading left and right. You have to have permission to trade certain goods. That's what these Trade Fairs are all about - establishing contacts, making trade agreements, getting permission, you get the picture."

"So it's not a market fair, then?" Naine asked. Gaspar shook his head.

"No," he answered. "There's very little actual trading going on, it's all about making those connections."

"Sir, I've been waiting here since yesterday morning, when the fair started. Why are you running so late, the fair ends at midnight tonight?" Naine inquired.

"It's all part of the head game." Gaspar said, tapping the side of his head. "My trade rivals will be thinking the exactly same thing. And the more they wonder, the more irritated they become, which is good for us. It's all a part of the Plan." Gaspar finished with a flourish, waving his hands in the air like he was talking about some religious experience. Then he laughed heartily and slapped Naine on the shoulders.

"Very clever, sir." Naine said, obviously wondering how much truth was in what Gaspar had just said.

"Remember, my dear Niedanai, appearance counts for everything." Gaspar said and looked at Naine's skeptical face. "You'll see."

Gaspar's suite was more of an apartment, with a huge living room and a luxurious bedroom. The suite was decorated in the latest Gallentean fashion, contrasting nicely with the somber but stylish Amarr fashion. Gaspar unloaded the cart robot in the living room and sent it rumbling back. Then he ushered Naine out of the room.

"I'll have to make some small preparations before we go to the main hall. I'll be with you in five."

Once the door had closed on Naine, Gaspar in a quick motion belying his former easy manners opened his briefcase, revealing a small portable computer. He plugged the computer into the station's public system. For the next few minutes his agile fingers tapped furiously at the keyboard, only stopping occasionally when he established contact with persons in other parts of the station and brief conversations ensued. Finally, he slapped the computer shut, locking it again down into his briefcase. Brushing down creases on his trousers, he then proceeded out into the corridor once more, where Naine was patiently waiting.

"Ready, sir?" Naine asked, the disdain in his voice over Gaspar's apparent fussiness over his physical appearance barely visible.

"Ready for anything." Gaspar replied cheerfully, again embracing his jovial charismatic behavior as they set out for the elevators to the main hall.

The floor of the main hall was an unblemished white marble and the ceiling was a sparkling glass dome, through which the lush Korridi planet was clearly visible. The effect was quite magnificent, something the Amarrians excelled in portraying.

The sheer size of the hall seemed to engulf everyone in it and it almost had the appearance of being deserted. Numerous small groups of people were scattered around it, huddled together in discussion. The majority of those present were Amarrians, with Caldari and Gallenteans being of about equal number. There were even a few Jovians visible, but understandably not a single Minmatar was in sight. Waiters scurried around carrying trays stacked with glasses filled with every kind of drink imaginable.

A gaudily dressed Gallentean waddled towards Gaspar and Naine. The man was obese and reeked of greed.

"I knew you would come, Gaspar you bastard!" The man almost shrieked, turning a few heads in the vicinity. "Not sure if could stomach another round against Anton, eh? I'm telling you, this time you'll leave empty handed. Anton hasn't been idle in your absence, no he hasn't."

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the great Anton Ecumide. Master of shaky investments and lost deals." Gaspar replied, seemingly unruffled by Anton's rude manners.

"Don't you taunt me, Gaspar. It will only make you look all the more of a fool when I've stolen each and every one of your deals from under your nose." Anton said and grinned nastily. It didn't help his appearance a bit.

"Let me introduce you, Niedanai this is the esteemed entrepreneur Anton Ecumide. Anton, this is my diplomatic attaché Niedanai Naine." Gaspar said, continuing to ignore Anton's outbursts.

"I see yours sticks to you like a fly on shit. How appropriate. I kicked mine out the moment I arrived. I believe he's sulking in some corner composing a complaint to his superiors." Anton said nastily.

"Aw, I saw pity on the poor lad. I'm teaching him the ropes of inter-racial trading." Gaspar said. Anton replied, addressing Naine:

"Watch out, boy. Don't let the manipulative bastard screw too much with your mind. As for you, Gaspar, I hope you'll sleep well tonight." With that Anton stormed away, giving Gaspar an evil side-look as he passed him.

"I can sense you two share a lot of history." Naine said to Gaspar once Anton was out of earshot.

"Yes, our paths have crossed many times in the past. Old Anton never seems to get the breaks and he blames me for his bad fortune." Gaspar answered.

"And is he right? Are you to blame?" Naine inquired. Gaspar just smiled, clasped his hands behind his back and ventured further into the hall at a leisurely pace.

Gaspar set the course for a couple of richly dressed Amarrians standing by themselves. Once close enough to be heard Gaspar said:

"Governor Sed-Innad, you're looking older than ever." Naine jumped at the words, fearing the Amarrian would flare up at the insult. But when the older Amarrian just smiled he remembered that to the Amarrians looking old was a sign of maturity and stature. The younger Amarrian, probably still in his twenties, had even made obvious efforts to make himself look older than he actually was, thinning his hair and painting his face pale and gaunt. The older Amarrian, the one Gaspar had addressed as governor, was at least a century old. The two shook hands, they undoubtedly knew each other well.

"Gaspar Anoun." The governor said warmly. "So you turned up after all." The old man indicated the younger Amarrian standing beside him and continued:

"This is my nephew, Tarnak Nas-Innad. We're searching for a suitable position for him." The young man bowed a little to Gaspar.

"Of course." Gaspar said nonchalantly. "After all, next to despotism nepotism is the favorite past-time of the Amarrians, right? You guys never change."

"And neither do you, Gaspar. Always the witty one. One of these days your rude quips will become your bane." The governor replied, yet he didn't seem the least bit ruffled.

"Forgive me, my lord." Gaspar said. "Unfortunately Asslicking 101 wasn't on the curriculum at my school. Instead I had to learn such useless tasks as adding and subtracting. Such a pity." By now Naine was literally jumping from foot to foot in his anxiety, fearing the worst.

"Gentlemen, meet my diplomatic attaché, Niedanai Naine. He seems a little agitated at the moment." Gaspar said and turned to Naine. "What's the matter? You need to use the little boys room?" Naine, noticing that the Amarrians were still calm despite Gaspar's words, composed himself.

"No, sir. I'm fine. Don't mind me." He finally murmured. Gaspar turned back to governor Sed-Innad.

"How's the wheeling and dealing going?" The governor asked.

"I just got here. No time to screw anybody over yet." Gaspar answered jokingly.

"And the Upper Debyl deal?" The governor inquired, taking a sip from his glass.

"On schedule. It can proceed." Gaspar answered, giving Naine a glance. The governor stood silent for a minute, sipping his wine.

"So what's this I'm hearing about you trading in Caldari wares, Gaspar?" He finally asked.

"Pure coincidence. I happened upon this heap of excellent Caldari scanner systems a while ago. Dead cheap. You know I'm not scrupulous about what I sell. Or to whom." Gaspar answered.

"Well, lucky for you then. Scanner systems are always in demand. Anywhere." The governor said innocently.

"My thought exactly, governor." Gaspar said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to mingle a bit." The Amarrians nodded their heads in farewell and Gaspar and Naine did the same. Then Gaspar set out for a group of Caldari standing near the main entrance. Naine took the opportunity to berate Gaspar.

"What you did was very dangerous, sir. The governor could easily have been offended and where would you stand then?" He said.

"Me and governor Sed-Innad go way back, Naine. He's as close to being a friend of mine as an Amarr Holder can be. Besides, I've told you, it pays to get people on the edge." Gaspar answered.

"I'm still not convinced of that, sir." Naine said sourly.

"Look, it's very simple." Gaspar explained. "Both the Amarrians and the Caldari put a huge stock in maintaining their dignity and posture. If you crack that mask a little by unorthodox behavior you make them uneasy, unsure of the situation. Pierce that crack a bit more open and before long you have them eating out of your hand. And that, my dear Niedanai, is the whole idea."

By now they were very close to the Caldari group. Naine saw by the military uniforms some of them wore that they were representatives of the CBD Corporation. The Gallenteans stopped just outside the little group. The Caldari ignored them for a few minutes, on purpose no doubt, trying to gain the upper hand in the upcoming discussion. Finally, one of them, apparently the head of the delegation turned towards them. He was a tall, grim-looking man in a military uniform.

"I'm major Ati Mittuchi." The man gave a brief military salute. "Whom do I have the pleasure of conversing with?" He continued in a formal tone, looking questioningly at Gaspar and Naine.

"I'm Gaspar Anoun, this is my diplomatic attaché Niedanai Naine." Gaspar said, giving a mock salute in response, something that didn't go down too well with the Caldari.

"Ah, so you're Anoun." The major said. "I should have recognized you by your flamboyant arrogance."

"The one and only." Gaspar said, showing no sign of irritation over the major's insult. "Tell me major, this is a Trade Fair. Where's the war? Why this military showdown?"

"The Amarrians respect power, Mr. Anoun. They, like everybody else, want to make sure that what they've bargained for gets delivered in one piece. Now, with all those pesky Minmatars pirates around, the Amarrians appreciate all assurances that the border-zone trade routes are safe." The major said confidently.

"So you're giving a safe delivery guarantees? That must cost a bit." Gaspar said.

"Our trade package is very reasonably priced, Mr. Anoun. And most importantly, for a few extra credits every item is guaranteed to arrive safe and sound. That's naturally much better than never getting anything at all."

"Is it?" Gaspar looked surprised. "Gosh! I never would have thought of that. You Caldari sure do think things through." The major seemed to inflate with smugness. Beneath that dignified exterior hid a pompous man Naine thought. And Gaspar flushed him out right away with some silly sarcasm, something most people saw right through.

"Well, too bad for you then that the Amarrians are planning on dealing with me." Gaspar continued. The major exhaled, his face turning red.

"What?" He shouted. "So you're the one that have been offering our scanners to the Amarrians at a ridiculous price, eh? Well, I'm interested to know where you got your product from, Mr. Anoun. I wouldn't be the least surprised if we found out that these were stolen goods. Ah, ah, don't look so offended, Mr. Anoun, it isn't your style. So, can you show us legitimate papers to certify where you acquired the scanners?" Suddenly the Caldari seemed more menacing, looming over the two Gallenteans. Gaspar took his time reaching for a glass from a passing waiters' tray and taking a sip before answering the major's accusations.

"Your paranoia amuses me, major. I will indulge your interest. I got them from Yria Base." Gaspar reached into his pocket and produced an id-chip, handing it to the major. "Check this out. It should satisfy your curiosity." The major gave the chip to one of his assistants, who inserted it into his palm computer. He scanned his screen for a few minutes before speaking.

"The chip seems to be authentic, sir." The assistant said.

"Just to make sure contact Yria Base, check their logs." The major said, handing the id-chip back to Gaspar. The assistant established wireless contact to the Korridi station's mainframe and requested a com link to Yria Base. Gaspar put the chip back in his pocket and Naine noticed he seemed to fidget something in his pocket for a second before retrieving his hand. The assistant fiddled with his palm computer for a minute before speaking again:

"Sir, we're unable to establish contact with Yria Base, there's some interference. The Amarrians think it's one of these sun flare phenomena." The major seemed disappointed.

"Well, Mr. Anoun. How fortunate for you. You seemed to be sweating there." He said.

"The idea of all the credits I'll make on these scanners tonight makes me all hot, major." Gaspar teased. The major frowned.

"Good evening to you, Mr. Anoun. And don't expect to get lucky every time." He said and prepared to leave.

"Believe me, major. Luck has nothing to do with it." Gaspar replied and raised his glass in farewell. Gaspar and Naine watched the Caldari delegation depart, the major cursing the poor assistant for his incompetence.

"Come, Niedanai, let's return to my suite." Gaspar said and started to leave the main hall. Naine was stunned.

"But, Mr. Anoun, you just got here. You haven't made any deals yet." He said.

"There are still two hours till midnight. Plenty of time." Gaspar said while they waited for an elevator.

"If I may say so, sir, I don't understand why you're trying to outbid the Caldari on their own product, it seems so far fetched. And what is this Upper Debyl deal you and the governor were talking about?" Naine asked, his curiosity getting the better of his manners.

"It will all be revealed in good time, my dear Niedanai. For now, let's just say that I'm playing the head game for the high stakes. It's all about keeping your adversaries occupied." Gaspar answered as they entered the elevator. Once the elevator's door had closed behind them Gaspar fetched a palm computer from his pocket. He frowned at it for a moment.

"It seems my palmer is out at the moment. Can I borrow yours for a second? I just have to send one simple message." Gaspar asked.

"Uh, sure. Here you go, sir." Naine handed Gaspar his palm computer. Gaspar operated it quickly and efficiently and finished before the elevator reached their floor. Nothing more was said before they came to the double-doors leading to Gaspar's suite. Gaspar spent some time staring at the doors like he was expecting them to open on their own. Finally the two of them entered the suite. Gaspar sat by his desk and once again opened his briefcase with the portable computer. He established a com link and briefly chatted with a Gallentean on the other end.

"Who was that?" Naine asked when Gaspar had closed his briefcase.

"That was my good friend Barridour. He's organizing a little something for me later tonight." Gaspar answered. Naine stood mulling things over for a while before he poured himself a glass of water from a jug on a side table.

"I wouldn't drink that if I was you." Gaspar said as Naine raised the glass to his lips.

"Eh? Why not?" Naine asked.

"Because there is a sleeping potion in there. It will put you to sleep for the rest of the night." Gaspar answered.

"How do you know?" Naine said, putting the glass down.

"Because the fool Anton Ecumide more or less blurted it out when we ran into him. And when I noticed that someone had fiddled with the lock on our door it was easy to figure out. But now, we must ready ourselves for the night. Don't you have anything better to wear than that wrinkled suit?" Gaspar asked. Naine looked down on his suit.

"Uh, yeah. I've got a spare suit." He answered.

"Good, why don't you change into that and meet me here in 15 minutes?" Gaspar said.

"Very well, sir. But I can be ready in five." Naine said.

"But I can't, Mr. Naine. Fifteen minutes, ok?" Gaspar said. Once Naine was out of the room, Gaspar once more got his portable computer out of the briefcase and fired it up. First one to appear on his screen was governor Sed-Innad.

"Well?" Gaspar asked.

"He bought it. Double what we'd figured." The governor said smiling. "And the Caldari?" He asked.

"They took the bait. Expect to haul them in later tonight." Gaspar answered. "That only leaves our little deal..." He finished.

"Yes, of course. I'll give you the confirmation later tonight. And the guards you asked for will be ready, as you requested." The governor replied.

"Good, good. Then all is settled. See you tonight." Gaspar said and cut off the link. He established another connection. This time a serene Jovian face appeared on the screen.

Naine was waiting patiently outside in the corridor when Gaspar left his suite some ten minutes later. Naine looked marginally better in a light gray suit, but still left a lot to be desired.

"Where are we going, sir?" Naine asked.

"Now, my dear Niedanai, I'm going to show you how real Gallenteans conduct their business." Gaspar exclaimed. "Until now we've been playing by the business books of the Amarrian and the Caldari - boring conversation between somber men making somber deals that might earn their grandchildren a nickel. They're always complimenting themselves how smart they are in their long term planning, but there's no fun in it Niedanai, no fun in it at all. I mean look at them. They labor like ants around the clock, setting aside some measly sum so they can go on some lame space cruising when they've become too old and spent to work anymore. They're spending their youth toiling away so they can have a bit of fun when they're 150 years old. Too old to have any real fun, as I see it. Where's the logic in that, I ask you? You know what their problem is?" Gaspar paused, obviously expecting some kind of an answer from Naine.

"Uh, I don't know, sir. What's the problem?" Naine ventured.

"They're too fixed up on keeping work and leisure separate. To them, the two things don't go together. But we Gallentean traders know that work and leisure go very well together, they're just two sides of the same coin. Meaningful playing and playful working, that's what I always say." Gaspar finished his speech just as the two reached a large double-door at the end of a corridor.

"And now, Niedanai, I'll show just what I mean." With that Gaspar threw the doors open. Loud noise and bright lights engulfed Naine, battering his every sense. Behind the doors was a large room and at the moment it was filled with laughing, shouting people. There was a wild party going on. The attendants were mostly other Gallenteans, but a number of Amarrians and some Caldari were also to be seen.

"What do you think?" Gaspar shouted over the din.

"I don't know, sir. What's going on?" Naine asked clearly bewildered.

"This is what I was organizing. This is playful work, or meaningful playing, whichever you prefer, in its purest form." Gaspar said and then dived into the crowd.

Gaspar quickly got into his host gear, walking among the guests, shaking hands with many and sharing a brief chat with some. Naine trailed behind, trying to grasp the situation.

In one of the corners Gaspar came upon Anton Ecumide seated with couple of girls on each arm. The man was already well drunk. When he saw Gaspar he cackled loudly and shouted:

"Gaspar! I bet you're wishing you were asleep right now because I stole the Upper Debyl system from right under your nose, just as I promised!" Anton laughed loudly, enjoying his victory to the fullest. Gaspar seemed a little taken aback.

"How did you know...?" He stammered. "Well, never mind. Say, Anton, I'll buy it back from you. Whatever you paid plus 50% extra, that's a hefty profit right there." He said, looking hopeful.

"In your dreams. That system is mine. You'll never get it!" Anton laughed again, even louder this time. Gaspar, dejected, walked away. Anton's shrill laughter chasing his heavy steps. Naine followed Gaspar, wanting to comfort him but unsure how to go about it without embarrassing him even more. Once they were close to the entrance Gaspar whispered quietly to Naine:

"Can he see us?" Naine looked back, Anton was hidden from view by a happy throng of party-goers.

"No, the crowd is in the way." Naine replied.

"Good." Gaspar said and then he lifted his slumped shoulders and unwrinkled his saddened face. The old Gaspar was back again, jolly as always.

"Well, Naine. That went rather well, didn't you think?" He said merrily. Naine felt his head spinning.

"But, sir. Anton just bought the system you were after." He said.

"Yes, he did." Gaspar said. "And do you know why I was after it?" He asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"Well, I guess because there's something of value there."

"No, the system is totally and utterly void of anything interesting or valuable. I was after it because I wanted Anton to buy it." Gaspar said. Suddenly it dawned on Naine:

"I see, sir. You knew that if Anton heard about your interest in the system, then he would become interested in it. So you deliberately started the rumor that you wanted to buy it. Very clever, sir. But from whom did Anton buy it? No! Don't answer, let me guess. Governor Sed-Innad, right?"

"Well, the governor's brother actually. But otherwise you're correct in your assumptions, well done. You might have a future in politics after all." Gaspar said. Naine beamed. Gaspar spotted governor Sed-Innad and his nephew. He waved them to come over. Then he leaned towards Naine and said:

"Meet me at my suite in one hour. I've got some business to discuss and then some hard partying to do." Then Gaspar took Naine's arm and led him to a sofa where two Gallentean beauties were seated. "Why don't you in the meantime get on first name basis with my friends over here?" Gaspar whispered into Naine's ear and steered him down into the sofa.

"Sir, are you sure about this?" Naine wailed in near panic as the two girls leaned into him on both sides.

"One hour, remember that!" Was all Gaspar shouted as he led the Amarrians away into the crowd.

An hour later a sweaty but happy Gaspar rounded the corner to his suite. It didn't surprise him all that much to see Naine already waiting in front of the door. His hair was tangled and his cloths disheveled.

"So, did you get on ok with the girls?" Gaspar asked him as he led them into his suite.

"They... they we're like animals!" Naine exclaimed, clearly still flustered from his encounter.

"Ooo! You lucky man!" Gaspar said smiling. The two men entered the living room. Two heavysset Amarrians were seated near the door. They stood up when Gaspar and Naine came in.

"Ah, gentlemen." Gaspar said, not the least surprised to see the two Amarrians there. Gaspar seated himself while the Amarrians planted themselves on either side of Naine.

"Well, Naine. I'm afraid this is the end of the road for you." Gaspar signaled the Amarrians, which promptly pinned Naine's arms to his sides. Naine's face registered astonishment and fear in equal proportions.

"What's the meaning of this? I will let you know that I'm employee of the Foreign Ministry, they'll surely hear about this and then it's the end of the road for you, pal." Naine said, anger welling up in him.

"I'm afraid not. The Foreign Ministry has fired you and absolved themselves from any fate that may befall you.

And your fate is in my hand.” Gaspar said harshly. “I can see you’re confused, Mr. Naine. I’ll make things a bit clearer for you. I know that you’re a Caldari agent.” Naine licked his lips, but otherwise his face was impassive. For a minute neither man said a word, then Naine spoke:

“You come here all high and mighty, constantly making boisterous remarks and outrageous claims. But now you have gone too far. I’m afraid I cannot let these accusations go unanswered.” He said, sounding confident, but sweating profusely.

“Don’t bother with the lies and denials.” Gaspar said. He reached into his pocket and produced a small data-vis chip. He activated it and a pale hologram sprouted from the floor between the pair. Even if it was grainy and occasionally out of focus the men in the hologram were clearly the Gallentean diplomatic attaché Niedanai Naine and major Ati Mittuchi of CBD Corporation. The two were conversing in hushed tones in a bar or restaurant it seemed.

“Do you want me to turn the sound up?” Gaspar said. “It’s pretty condemning, what with you spilling your guts about all sorts of interesting issues supposedly a secret. I have a whole stack of these holograms.” Naine seemed to go weak at the knees, slumping like a drunken man. Then he contemplated for a moment trying to escape the steel grips of the hulking Amarrians, but thought better off it.

“Your fate is sealed, my dear Niedanai.” Gaspar said, driving the facts home.

“What made you suspect me?” Naine finally moaned pathetically, seeing no point in trying to deny anything anymore. He was clearly crestfallen, his little world collapsing around him.

“Huh! You’re more Caldari-like than many Caldari I know. You practically reek of being their spy.” Gaspar answered. “All I needed was a confirmation and I got it earlier tonight from a Jovian contact I have. Do you know what I had to pay for a proof? Do you know what you’re worth to the Jovians?” Gaspar taunted. Naine shook his head.

“A rock. A medium sized rock from Gallente Prime. Not a special rock at all, just... a rock. Don’t you find that funny?” Naine was visibly shaking by now, his body hanging limp between the Amarrian strongmen. Gaspar continued:

“But then again I understand that is the standard price for a Caldari spy: a medium sized rock from Gallente Prime. Weird, don’t you think? If you ask me I think the Jovians are conducting a little experiment. Are there more Caldari spies within the Gallente Federation than there are medium sized rocks on Gallente Prime? I don’t know, maybe one day we’ll have to go to the Jovian Empire to visit our ancestral planet.” Gaspar let out a short laugh at the thought.

“What are you going to do to me?” Naine whispered.

“I’m selling you to the Amarrians.” Gaspar said coldly. “Oh, don’t worry, you’ll be well cared for, you’re going to one of their better slave plantations. I gather the work is not so hard there once you get used to the heat. I hear they got a slave spokesman there, sort of like a union leader. I’m sure if you put the things I’ve taught you tonight to good use you can work your way up to it. And until then, remember, playful working. Take him away, boys.” The Amarrians started dragging Naine towards the door.

“Wait, wait!” Naine wailed. “Answer me just one question. How did the Caldari deal go?” Gaspar motioned the guards to halt. Then he withdrew the id-chip from his pocket and threw it at Naine’s feet.

“That chip is a phony, Mr. Naine. Just like you.” Gaspar said. “It was all a ruse, a bit of a trickery by me and governor Sed-Innad. He got the Caldari to lower their price by 15%, I’ll get a share of the profit and my own little deal involving Gallentean-made ship thrusters went through smoothly, what with all my rivals focusing on

something entirely different. I guess major Mittuchi is quite pleased with himself at the moment for ‘outbidding’ my Caldari scanners, but I’m not so sure if his superiors will agree when they discover that I’ve never bought any scanners on Yria Base. That’s what happens when they send amateur negotiators to do a real man’s work. Goodbye, Mr. Naine.” The two guards dragged the whimpering man out of the suite.

Gaspar sat down at his desk, pouring himself a stiff drink and DNA drug tested it before sipping. He ran the events of the day through his head. The thruster deal alone netted a hefty 200% profit and his share of the Upper Debyl sale and the Caldari deal was not too shabby either. Firing up his portable computer he scanned his diary, making a few notes and reflecting upon those things next on the agenda. He established connection with the station management office.

“Wake me up at 7 am tomorrow.” He said to the receptionist,



glancing at his timepiece. "And can you contact the docking bay and make them have my ship prepared at 8 am?"

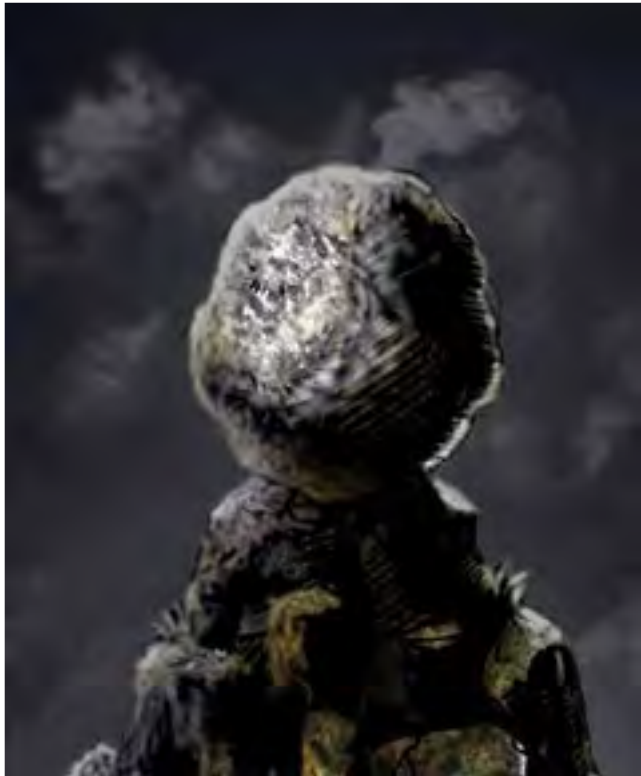
"Yes, sir. Have a good night." The receptionist answered. Gaspar leaned back in the chair, taking another sip.

'Tomorrow its Hrokkur station for those sly Krusuals and their contraband goods. And the day after... Well, lets not waste today thinking too much about future days. I'll play it by the ear as always.' Gaspar thought. Saluting himself in the mirror he drank the rest of the spirit and went to bed.



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The Ray of Matar



It was trapped beneath all the small rocks that it had gathered for its mountain; the Rock felt like suffocating.

"...and the bloated Rock perched itself on the top of the new mountain, gloating and wallowing in its own self-esteem.

'Look, Mountain,' the Rock said. 'Look at me on top of my own mountain.' But the Mountain answered:

'Foolish Rock, look beneath you. Your mountain is weak. It cannot support you.'

The Rock looked down, and saw it was true. Its mountain was feeble, frail. The Rock could hear all the little rocks in the mountain groaning beneath its weight.

'Maybe my mountain will crumble, but I got to the top, as I set out to do; I fulfilled my dream.' the Rock righteously said to the Mountain.

'Yes, but then what?' The Mountain enquired. 'You had a good place on the side of me; you were in the light, with the wind caressing you and the sun warming you and the moss licking you.'

Suddenly the little mountain the Rock had erected collapsed. The Rock felt itself being dragged down; it toppled down the mountain side and all the little rocks came in its wake. It hit the ground and the little rocks piled in front and back and the sides and on top the Rock. They gathered for its mountain; they squeezed it tight and the

'Mountain!' it wheezed weakly. 'Help me!'

'What can I do?' the Mountain said. 'You brought this onto yourself. You couldn't be satisfied with the place I gave to you; you had to get to the top. And now look at you, trapped beneath your own mountain forever.'

'But it was my dream,' the Rock sobbed, 'everybody has got to have a dream.'

'Not if your dream is based on a fantasy, rather than reality.' The Mountain replied sagely and went back to sleep."

Vormar finished the story with a small bow and Karin started breathing again. She didn't hold her breath through the whole story, that was humanly impossible, but she always held her breath during the last part of the story, when the Rock was smothered under its own mountain. Maybe she did it to empathize with the Rock; as a child Karin always took the side of the Rock in its struggle with the evil Mountain. That was before she understood the metaphorical meaning of the story and realized the folly of the Rock's actions. But the story had always remained one of her favorites and the chance to hear it now from a master storyteller like Vormar enchanted her even more.

The large tents were the only constructions allowed close to the sacred ground.

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People thronged the large, dimly lit tent. The tent was at the apex of a small camp situated close to the sacred ground. Karin's eyes were watering because of the smoke in the tent and her buttocks were sore from the uncomfortable cushion she sat on. But the tents were the only dwellings allowed within miles of the sacred ground, a tradition refurbished after the rebellion to give people a better feeling for the ancient rituals and ceremonies performed at the place. One of these ceremonies was to take place that night and Karin was to participate in it. This was the most important ceremony in a Minmatar life, called Voluval or the Test of Destiny. In the Voluval a Minmatar faced his true inner-self and, most importantly, the findings would permanently mark the body for all to see. Karin was to participate that night.

Vormar was her essence instructor. His responsibility was to educate those undergoing the test on what it involved and prepare them mentally for it.

Karin was thankful to Vormar for telling them the story of the Rock and the Mountain, for it calmed her nerves for the upcoming event. She approached Vormar at the back of the tent where he was putting away his battered copy of Minmatar folk tales; he didn't actually read from the book, but in his old age he felt comfort in having it at hand in case his memory suddenly failed.

"Ah, Karin," Vormar said when she entered his field of vision. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, it's about my tattoos..." Karin began hesitantly.

"Yes, your tattoos." The old man said. "You're unsure what motif to go for, right?"

"Yes, that's it." Karin said. "Well, as I'm a slave-child and all that. Not knowing my family clan..."

"Don't worry. You're of the Minmatar tribe Sebiestor; that's what is most important." Vormar said and smiled reassuringly.

"But what family clan motif should I choose? I might upset somebody by my choice..."

"Not all families have a motif and not all motifs are associated with a specific family." Vormar said. "Here, let me show you something." The old sage started rummaging in his trunk. After a while he produced a large leather-bound book.

"My father gave me this book when I was your age." He said. "It illustrates and explains everything you want to know about tattoos. Take a look at it, maybe it will help you decide what motif you want." Vormar handed Karin the book. She opened it at random. The page showed a picture of a tattooed man, with explanations for each tattoo.

"This book was published shortly after the rebellion." Vormar continued. "While we were under the yoke of the Amarrians they systematically tried to erase many of our most sacred traditions; tattooing amongst them. This book was intended to re-introduce this ancient custom to those that had never experienced it. Admittedly not all modern motifs are in it, but all of the old major ones are there. I've used it before to teach slave-children such as you about tattooing. You can borrow it for a few days."

Karin flicked through the aged tome, examining the finally drafted images. She already knew the gist of the tattooing tradition; that part of the face was reserved for the clan tattoo and the shoulders for rank tattoos. She also knew that facial war tattoos based on nano technology were very popular among the younger generations. This special type of tattoo could appear and disappear depending on the emotional state of the person. Like all Minmatar children in the Republic, Karin had picked up this basic knowledge of tattoos at an early age. But she was still uncertain about what kind of tattoos to choose and now that the Voluval was fast approaching the time was running out, as she was allowed to get tattoos once the ceremony was over. It wasn't exactly essential to make the selection now; many only did so after they saw what mark they got. But for Karin the selection meant more than just decorating her body, to her the tattoo motif revealed and reinforced her identity, something she had always struggled with, being a slave-child. Karin sat down in the far corner of the tent to look more closely at the book Vormar had given her. In half an hour Vormar would give the last lesson to her and the other adolescents preparing for the Voluval in his role as their essence instructor and she intended to use these few minutes to study the tattoo book. But when she had just started a commotion in another corner of the tent distracted her.

Mattmar Graur and a few of his friends were light-heartedly arguing with some girls. Karin noticed that Mattmar gave her a smile and a wink when he noticed her looking at him and she quickly looked down at the book again. 'The silly fool' she thought. She involuntarily ran through the events of last night in her head.

Karin was sitting on the flat roof of the tent-house of Graur at the outskirts of the camp. Troinn Graur was the richest merchant in Karin's hometown of Mithuris, and his son and heir, Mattmar Graur, was sitting beside her. They had been friends since childhood, but since Mattmar hit puberty they'd sort of drifted apart. Mattmar became pompous, vain and superficial, all traits that Karin loathed. But their mutual trepidation for the upcoming test tomorrow night made them seek each other out for support.

"What's on your mind, Karin?" Mattmar asked, watching her stare at the night sky.

"You should know." Karin answered after some pause.

"How could I know?" Mattmar laughed, "I'm not a mind-reader."

"Well, I know what's on your mind." she replied, leaning backwards on her hands and staring even more intently at the stars above.

"That's because I always have the same thing on my mind." Mattmar said with a twinkle in his eye and moved closer to Karin. Karin paid him no attention.

"What are you going to do after the ceremony tomorrow?" She asked him.





"I dunno, depends on my mark, I suppose." He answered, obviously not all that comfortable talking about it. Karin looked at him.

"You haven't thought about your mark?"

"No, why should I? It's all subconscious anyway," Mattmar said, adding: "And besides, almost all males in my family get the same basic mark: an upside-down triangle with two spokes at the top; the bull-mark. I'll probably get the same."

Karing and Mattmar talking under the starlit night sky
Karing and Mattmar talking under the starlit night sky
Karin saw that he was far from being as confident about it as he would let her believe, but decided not to press him about it. She was nervous enough about her own mark as it was. She feared she would get one of the degrading marks: the spiraling circle; the scarecrow; the purple cross; or any of the numerous other marks that could forever exile you from Minmatar society. Fortunately this didn't happen often; Karin had only witnessed it once, when she was six years old. A teenage boy got the worst mark there was: the pale eye. The poor boy had been driven away from the town, not even his family was willing to recognize him, let alone help him. The memory still sent shivers down Karin's spine and she huddled closer to Mattmar. Of course the boy misinterpreted this for a sign of affection and he tried to put his hand around her shoulders. She shook him off.

"What?" Mattmar said in mock surprise. This wasn't the first time he tried it and failed. Suddenly Karin flared up, all her uncertainties and inner anxiety bursting out.

"What!? I tell you what, Mattmar Graur. Tomorrow you'll be tested, tomorrow you'll find out what future lies ahead of you, and you shrug it off like it was unimportant. I remember the time when we could talk about the future, our dreams, but now... Now, all you want to do is hang around with the guys and ogle the girls. What happened, man?" Karin shook her dark tresses in disgust.

"Hey, chill out kid. I care for the future. I just find it smarter to live in the now, rather than to constantly dwell on the future." Mattmar leaned towards Karin, his tone suddenly more serious. "To tell you the truth, I dream of becoming a High Justice."

"Well, in that case you should spend more time on your school books than on partying. With your grades you're lucky if you get to be a waiter in a Vherokior diner." Karin said teasingly.

"Aw, come on. I've got brains." Mattmar replied. "Plus, daddy has some friends in high places; he can get me an internship in the Justice Department. And once I've got my foot inside the door..." He thrust his hand upwards. "I'll shoot straight for the stars." He finished, laughing.

"So, it seems you've got it all figured out." Karin said.

"Sure I do. I always have and always will. What about you? I bet you have some fanciful dreams for the future." Mattmar asked.

"Yes..." Karin said reluctantly, unsure of how wise it was to confide in Mattmar. "It's only fair I tell you, right? Well, I feel deeply about the poor situation we Minmatars are in today."

"What are you talking about, kid?" Mattmar said. "We threw out the Amarrians, we're free."

"Maybe so, but we're still divided into multiple factions. The Republic is nothing but a loosely united assembly of factions, each seemingly with the only agenda to disrupt and disintegrate the state. We can't extend our political thought beyond the clan and it's tearing us apart. The result is that the Minmatars are scattered throughout our world of EVE; billions of them are still enslaved within the Amarr Empire and we don't have the wits to pull ourselves together to free them." Karin paused for breath.

"So we all hate the Amarr Empire." Mattmar chimed in. "Don't worry your pretty little head over these big issues."

"I do worry, I'm slave-child, remember. My parents risked their lives getting me smuggled out of Amarr space



and they're still there, slaves to some hideous Amarrian." Karin almost shouted, her anger and frustration again getting the better of her.

"We do fight the Amarrians, we're doing our best." Mattmar said soothingly.

"We're not fighting the Amarrians, we're fighting the Ammatars, our own cousins."

"Those scums deserve to die, we'll finish them off and then the Amarrians." Mattmar responded.

"No, that's what I'm trying to tell you. The Ammatars aren't our real enemy. The Amarrians just play them off against us, keeping us both occupied. But if we'd unite we could take out the Amarrians for good." Karin said heatedly.

"It's impossible, we can never unite with the Ammatars." Mattmar said. "Many have tried, and failed. You don't want to become a failure, now do you?"

"I don't care, all I know is that uniting the Minmatars is something I'm willing to fight for, even die for."

"You know, it's fanatics like you that give the rest of us a bad image." Mattmar said, obviously tired of listening to what he considered to be silly ravings.

"No!" Karin screamed and jumped to her feet. "It's people like you that are stifling the Minmatar race. It's your narrow-mindedness that's keeping billions of our people enslaved and oppressed this very minute!" Karin was fed up and stormed away, furious.

Thinking about all of this now, sitting here in the murky tent with Mattmar and his friends nearby, made Karin regret having said those things to him. Not that she was ashamed of her beliefs, but she shouldn't have blurted them out like that, Mattmar was just the type to misunderstand the whole thing. She also regretted losing her temper, it didn't improve her views in Mattmar's eyes. Hopefully he would forget the whole thing.

Karin was pulled from her reverie by Vormar's voice. He was gathering the adolescents around him, in preparation for the guidance he was going to give them in his role as essence instructor. Once they were seated around him, he began.

"Well, this is our last discussion before the ceremony begins. We've already covered pretty much everything and I think you're all ready for the test. Just remember to stay calm during the ceremony and keep your mind focused. We have a last minute arrival here, Eliza. She's been space cruising with her family for the last few weeks and they just arrived in time for the ceremony. So if the rest of you don't mind, I'll give Eliza a quick review. The rest of you can stay if you want to."

No one moved, Vormar's presence helped them to relax, something they all needed at this time. Vormar continued:
The destiny mark describes that person's Inner-self; what sort of person he or she is deep down.
The destiny mark describes that person's Inner-self; what sort of person he or she is deep down.
"Eliza, maybe it's best if you ask me about anything that's on your mind."

"So, how exactly does the mark appear as it does?" It came as no surprise that Eliza, obviously a keen and bright girl, immediately asked about the most troubling matter on the minds of those undergoing the test.

Vormar cleared his throat before replying: "Yes, thank you Eliza for coming right to the point. As you know, if you've witnessed a Voluval before, those being tested undergo a special treatment by the spirit conductor overseeing the ceremony. This treatment involves direct injections into the heart and the ventral root area..."





"What kind of injections?" Eliza interrupted.

"Well, a large quantity of tyrosine is injected into the heart, which then, through metabolism, is turned into melanin by the body. Frankly, I'm not sure what exactly the mixture injected into the ventral root area consists of; it's a closely guarded secret of the chemists that prepare it. Only a few of the ingredients are commonly known, among them are acetylcholine, oxytocin, calcitonin, and vasoactive intestinal polypeptide." The names were clearly just as unfamiliar to Vormar as the rest of them, but at least it was something.

"And what does it do?" Eliza probed further. Vormar didn't seem annoyed by Eliza's discourteous questions; he was probably used to all kinds of weird or silly or rude questions from those he was preparing for the Voluval.

"Magic!" Vormar said and smiled. "No, seriously speaking, I can't tell you with certainty. The melanin spreads all over the body through the blood stream, but only the small bit that is affected by the other

injection does. The rest flushes out of the body. Now, the real mystery is what the ventral root injection does. We only know what little the chemists that prepare it tell us: that it connects with the sub-consciousness and then uses the free-flowing melanin to form intricate marks on the body. These marks become a permanent feature of the person's skin, a permanent tan so to speak that alters according to the skin color of the person to be constantly visible. They describe that person's inner-self; what kind of person he is deep down. I'm afraid that's all I know, and I guess you've heard it many times before."

Eliza continued to ask Vormar about the effects and nature of the injection, but Karin ignored them, she'd heard it all before. It was obvious to her that Vormar knew nothing more, or at least was unwilling to reveal it. Like most Minmatar men Vormar was bare from the waist up, only thus could the multiple tattoos be displayed and appreciated properly. She scrutinized Vormar's mark: a circled dot just above his navel. Sinuous tattoos coiled around it, but none covered it.

It was forbidden to put a tattoo over one's mark. Karin wished her mark would appear on the abdomen like Vormar's. It was humiliating to get it on the legs or arms or even the back. Karin knew that many dreamed about getting their mark in the face; it was the ultimate honor and brought instant fame to anyone that acquired it. But only one in a million got a facial mark, and the social burden of getting one was something that Karin was certain she could never handle at her age.

Once the session was over Karin joined a group of buddies from school. She couldn't really call any of them a friend; being the only slave-child in the school she was an outsider to most of the others.

The group was chatting about idle things, school and the weather; none of them wanted to think too much about the ceremony that was to start in a couple of hours. Not that the ceremony itself was that terrible, but the results of the ceremony could permanently alter the lives of any of them. Suddenly Mattmar barged into the group along with his loud and boisterous friends.

"Why's everyone so gloomy?" He cried. "We're getting our ticket into adulthood in a few hours and you act like a bunch of scared sissies. C'mon you guys, brighten up. We'll party through the night and tomorrow we go and get ourselves our first tattoos." Mattmar finished with a flourish. All the kids around him cheered. But like the night before, Karin felt that Mattmar's attitude was immature, even if it lightened the crowd. He was too superficial about the whole thing, like it was some kind of a game. Mattmar spotted her sour face and called out:

"Hey Karin, what's up? Afraid you won't get your martyr mark?" He then turned to the others and continued:

"Karin wants to become friends with the Ammatars, she wants to go on a crusade with them." All the kids laughed and jeered at Karin.

'The bastard.' She thought, fighting the tears. 'How could he?' Karin finally realized what kind of a person Mattmar was. To him friendship meant nothing. He only called someone a friend when it suited his own selfish purposes. 'How could I be so stupid to trust him?' She thought. The taunts continued, the kids began calling her names:

"Stupid Ammatar bitch..."

"Filthy slave-lover..."

"Your mother was raped by an Amarr Holder, you ugly bastard..."



Karin ran away, the taunts following her retreating steps, silent tears streaming down her cheeks. She knew her dream was to most people absurd, but she fervently believed in it, and she wasn't going to give it up for anybody. 'Maybe I'm like the Rock in the story.' She thought to herself. 'Maybe I want to build my own mountain, pebble for pebble, stone for stone. And cripple myself when it crumbles.'

Chapter 7

The sacred ground was a flat piece of land about quarter of a kilometer on each side. It formed a small stage-like plateau of crystallized rock, formed by the extreme heat caused by the thrusters of a landing space ship. The sacred ground marked the place where one of the huge colonization ships carrying the ancestors of the Minmatars landed thousands of years ago.



A circle of fires enclosed the plateau, the flickering lights illuminating the place and blocking out the stars. Spectators numbering a few thousands thronged the area around it, but the plateau itself was empty. In the middle of it, circles and signs had been painted in preparation for the upcoming ritual.

The ceremony was about to start. The spirit conductor entered the plateau; his appearance silenced the expectant crowd. Behind the spirit conductor the lesser supervisors filed along, each taking their places on the plateau. Music, rhythmical beatings, sprang forth; the men on the plateau began humming a hymn in time to the music; the Voluval had started.

On a stony hillock some two kilometers from the sacred ground a lonesome figure huddled on a rock. Karin watched the ceremony commence, uncertainty written over her face. She wanted to crawl under the rock she sat on, crawl beneath it and disappear forever. But she couldn't do it, she owed it to the parents she never knew to go back and take the test. She kicked a small pebble at her feet and watched it roll down the hillside, taking dozens of its brethren with it. She made up her mind. If she couldn't face her fears here, among supposed friends and allies, then when could she? If she wasn't ready to stand up for her beliefs against her compatriots, then how could she do so when facing Ammatars, or Amarrians? Karin stood up and started running. The first few participants were through. All had escaped humiliation and many were proudly brandishing respectable marks. Karin joined the back of the line, ignoring the curious gazes around her. Next up was Mattmar.

He strode to the spirit conductor, confidence radiating from him. He kneeled before the conductor, who sprinkled Mattmar's head with a smelly brew intended to cleanse the spirit. Then Mattmar raised his head and one of the assistants handed the conductor a silver syringe. With one swift stroke the conductor plunged the syringe right into Mattmar's chest, through his breastbone and into his heart. Mattmar's body tensed, but he didn't cry out, as so many did. The conductor pulled the syringe out again in another practiced stroke and the assistant pressed a cloth against the small puncture wound on Mattmar's chest.

The conductor continued his ritual mumblings, walking behind Mattmar. Kneeling behind the boy he took another syringe from the hands of an assistant. With his left hand he felt Mattmar's small back for a second before plunging the syringe into the base of the spine. Again Mattmar tensed, but there was no cry.

The conductor rose to his feet and walked in front of Mattmar again. Now it was Mattmar's turn to speak, the only time during the ritual he was allowed to. A small saying was required, while the potions started racing through the body. The saying was intended as a declaration of the person's look on life, himself, or his



surroundings. Through the ages, many of the sayings became standardized, children saying the same thing as their mother or father before them. Karin had thought long and hard about her saying, finally deciding on two lines from a poem by Hantur Gutreren: 'Place yourself in the heart of your family/Then nothing can separate you', finding it appropriate for her background and future dreams. Mattmar didn't say anything new, his saying was the same as his father's: 'I take pride in protecting my people and honor in housing them.'

Mattmar rose to his feet and the conductor placed a black mantle around his head and shoulders, covering him completely. It would be removed once the mark had appeared. Everyone waited in anticipation; the minutes ticked by. Finally the conductor declared that the mark had appeared and removed the mantle. Mattmar looked down, then turned towards the crowd. The bull-mark, the horned triangle, was sitting squarely in the middle of his chest. It

was the ultimate place for such a mark. Mattmar beamed with pride when the crowd enthusiastically applauded. He took his place on the plateau among those already tested, his haughty manners disgusting Karin. The ceremony continued, one adolescent after another. Karin didn't pay much attention to the procedure. Between her nervousness and the arrogant glare of Mattmar in her direction her mind didn't seem to function all too well. At last it was her turn. She walked up to the conductor, trying not to shake visibly. She went through the motions of the ceremony like an automaton, not even noticing whether she cried or not when the steel syringe penetrated her flesh. The conductor's voice broke through to her; it was time for her saying. She opened her eyes. Over the shoulder of the conductor she saw the toothy grin on Mattmar's face. Karin opened her mouth and listened to the words spill out: 'Vain flame burns fast/and its lick is light/Modest flame lasts long/and burns to the bone.' Karin didn't realize what she said until it was all out; she was as startled as the others. She saw Mattmar's smile falter a little. He knew what she meant.

Karin felt the tingle, in her spine and under her skin. She wasn't sure if it felt discomforting or merely unpleasant. The conductor placed the mantle on her shoulders and lifted the hood over her head, shielding her eyes from those around her. Her mind was a blur, but from its depth she heard Vormar's voice: 'Keep your mind focused.' She forced her mind clear, her skin now felt cold and clammy, then suddenly the mantle was pulled off her. She blinked once or twice, accustoming her eyes once more to the bright lights illuminating the small plateau. She looked around her. Every face was staring at her like she had suddenly materialized from thin air. Silence, none spoke, all she heard was her own shallow breathing. The decade old memory of the boy and his pale-eye mark popped into her mind; the reaction then was the same stunned silence. Karin looked down on herself. Nothing, she saw nothing on her torso or abdomen or legs or arms. Then the conductor lifted a mirror and she saw her face. And there, extending down and side-ways from her left eye were several dark lines, ranging from one to three centimeters in length. She caught her breath. It was the Ray of Matar mark, the rarest and most revered of all the marks.

Epilogue

Karin felt dizzy, like she was going to faint; her mind was in turmoil. And yet her face, staring at her in the mirror, remained impassive and calm. She looked the conductor in the eye; the man was obviously in a state of shock and disbelief. As Karin was the last of those undergoing the test the conductor should be finishing off the ceremony at this very moment, but he stood there immobile. She scanned the faces of the crowd, finally finding a familiar face in Vormar. The pleading in her eyes was not unnoticed by the old man and he walked to her. Vormar took her hands in his and softly said:

"You're obviously meant for something great, my dear."

"Yes." Karin answered confidently. "Yes, I'm sure I am."

In her mind, the stones were beginning to pile up, one by one.



The Jovian Wetgrave

Lieutenant Hirakii Pirkotan looked at his freshly shaven face in the steel mirror in his cabin aboard the Caldari cruiser Okarioni. Immaculate. For the first time in weeks the young lieutenant had the almost forgotten feeling of excitement in the pit of his stomach. Pirkotan's father had fought in the war against the Gallentean Federation and his thrilling tales of battles and bravery had made their mark on the teenage mind of Pirkotan. But the war had been over for 15 years, and in all the years that Pirkotan had spent in the navy, hardly anything noteworthy had ever occurred. Scrubbing, drilling, sleeping - that seemed the be-all and end-all of navy life. But then, less than two months ago, a new race had made contact with the Caldari. Pirkotan knew little about the race, except that they were most likely of human origins. Shortly after the first contact, the Okarioni had been ordered to the frontier where the new race had introduced itself. And now, after days of uneventful cruising through Caldari space, the ship was nearing its destination - a rendezvous with a ship belonging to the new race.

Pirkotan straightened his jacket for the umpteenth time and left his cabin. While walking towards the bridge his mind once again turned to this unorthodox mission. There were too many loose ends and unanswered questions for Pirkotan's comfort. Why had the Okarioni been ordered to berth on a high-security military shipyard belonging to the Ishukone corporation for two weeks before coming here? And what strange devices had been installed and then sealed in Cargo Hold B? Why this secrecy, preventing even him, the second-in-command, from knowing what was going on? Pirkotan was not happy with the situation and while he was aware that many of the crew members felt the same way, he knew better than to complain. With these troubled thoughts on his mind, Pirkotan reached the bridge.

Captain Ouriye was seated in the command chair on the bridge, overseeing the last course-changes to the meeting point. Pirkotan sat himself down in his own chair to the left and a little bit behind the command chair.

"So what's the situation, sir?" he asked.

"We should rendezvous in about 20 minutes," Ouriye responded. The captain and his sub-ordinate sat in silence for a minute. Finally, Ouriye spoke:

"Now that we're about to rendezvous I can fill you in on our mission." Pirkotan's ears perked up; at last he'd know why they were being sent here. The captain sat silent for a full minute before he spoke again.

"This race we've made contact with calls itself Jove. I know nothing more of them, except that the high command informs me that they seem highly advanced. The reason for us being here is to exchange information. It seems these Jovians regard the acquisition of information to be their highest goal in life and are willing to pay handsomely for it," Ouriye chuckled, then continued:

"We're giving them all kinds of information: data on social issues...

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"We're giving them all kinds of information: data on social issues, historical facts, navigational charts, even some military secrets," captain Ouriye was visibly upset by this last statement.

"But our superiors feel that what we're getting in exchange is worth it..." the captain trailed off.

"What are we getting in exchange?" Pirkotan asks.

"I'm not sure, lieutenant, I'm not sure. It's some sort of a device for controlling or communicating with your ship, that's all I know."

Pirkotan sat thoughtfully, scratching the back of his neck. It was still sore after the operation. While berthed on the Ishukone station Ouriye had encouraged Pirkotan to have neural implants inserted into his spinal cord and cerebellum, saying that it would definitely further his career.

"Sir, these things we're giving them, are they in Cargo Hold B?" Pirkotan asked the captain.

"No, that, uh... device, is what we're getting in exchange from the Jovians." Ouriye answered.

"What? We already have what we're getting here on this ship? I don't understand, sir." Pirkotan said puzzled.

"We've got a part of it. All the vital bits, such as the cognitive pattern decoders, are missing. The Jovians we're about to meet will bring those missing bits and show us how everything works." Ouriye said.



Pirkotan pondered for a while. "What I don't understand, sir, is why we were sent on our own to meet these Jovians."

"What do you mean?" inquired Ouriye?

"Well, I'd think that at this early stage in our relationship with the Jovians that diplomats, not soldiers, would deal solely with them, sir. I wonder why we weren't assigned a diplomat to handle the discussions..."

"We're not here as official representatives of the Caldari State. Our orders come directly from Rato Momoriyota, CEO of the Ishukone corporation. This mission, this trade, is strictly the business of the Ishukone corporation. Our superiors have every confidence in us to complete this mission on our own." Ouriye explained.

"By our superiors, you mean the heads of the Ishukone corporation, sir?"

"Yes, that's correct, lieutenant." Ouriye replied. "But that doesn't make this mission any less important or meaningful."

By now, the vessel they were to meet was clearly visible on the radar.

"Their ship doesn't seem all that big," Pirkotan observed. Indeed, the vessel was only half as big as the Okarioni, only slightly bigger than an average Caldari frigate. The ship was a combination of rather dull-looking shiny-metal green, brown and gray. It had a most peculiar shape, almost like it had been grown or carved, instead of built.

The communication officer waved them over. "We're receiving a message from the Jovian vessel," the officer said. "It says they're coming over."

"All right," Ouriye said, "Lieutenant, you know your duty."

"Yes, captain," Pirkotan answered and exited the bridge. He went to the shuttle bay, bringing four marines with him. "Behave yourself, men," Pirkotan said, "These are distinguished guests we're to escort, each and every one of you is now an ambassador for the Caldari State." 'Or the Ishukone corporation, at any rate.' Pirkotan thought.

A shuttle, in the same colors as the Jovian ship, was docking in the bay. Three small men exited the shuttle. Each of them wore a tunic-like uniform of fine materials, light-brown and gray in color. Although they were definitely human, they looked very strange: their skin was pale grayish yellow, almost transparent, with veins clearly discernible. The heads seemed abnormally big, but otherwise their bodies were thin and feeble-looking. Pirkotan couldn't help the uneasiness he felt by looking at them. The three men walked towards Pirkotan and one of them, walking in front of the others addressed Pirkotan. "Greetings, Caldari officer. I'm Anu of Jove and these are my aides Yed and Elas," the Jovian spoke in perfect Caldanese, with almost no detectable accent, his movements and gestures were lithe and graceful. Pirkotan wondered where the Jovian had learned such good Caldanese.

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Pirkotan caught himself staring into the pale yellow eyes of the Jovian and stuttered his answer. "Yes, uh... welcome aboard the Okarioni, sir. Um... I'm lieutenant Hirakii Pirkotan. Please follow me." Pirkotan tore his eyes away from the probing gaze of the Jovian, turned on his heels and started walking towards the main deck. The Jovians followed and Pirkotan heard them chattering among themselves in a strange language that seemed to consist entirely of vowels.



Back on the bridge, Pirkotan introduced the captain and the Jovians. Ouriye seemed perfectly at ease conversing with the Jovians, unlike Pirkotan, who was nervous and uncomfortable. But while the Jovians were making small talk with the captain, Pirkotan for the first time managed to see them as humans and not some outer space aliens. They even laughed dutifully at the captain's jokes, showing their full understanding of the social etiquette found everywhere among humans. Soon, the conversation turned to the matters at hand and the Jovians asked to see the items they were to receive.

"Lieutenant Pirkotan, bring the crate in my personal quarters." Ouriye ordered Pirkotan, handing him a security key. "Bring it here to the bridge."

"Yes, sir." Pirkotan answered, motioning the four marines to follow him. As he was leaving the bridge he heard one of the Jovians ask: "Has he been prepared, captain?" and

Ouriye replied: "As much as he needs to be." Pirkotan hesitated for a moment, but then continued, contemplating what he'd overheard. 'Were they talking about me?' he thought.

The crater was not all that big, maybe one meter in length and half a meter in height and breadth, but it was surprisingly heavy. Pirkotan unlocked the security bindings and the four marines struggled with it to the bridge. Pirkotan handed Ouriye back the security key and the captain used his personal code on the crater. The lock snapped open with a loud hiss and Ouriye stepped back, allowing the Jovians access to the crater.

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Anu opened the crater and started pulling items out of it and handing them to his assistants, who compared them to a list they had, marking things off. Once the Jovians were satisfied that everything was as it should be they began studying the items carefully. They worked incredibly fast, inserting data disks and info clips into their palm computers, scanning the contents for a few seconds, then throwing it away for another. They fired up hologram reels and fast forwarded through them, casting flickering lights around the bridge and made the heads of the Caldari spin in confusion. After a few minutes the Jovians suddenly stopped all at once and began chattering excitedly to each other. It was obvious that they were satisfied with what they had seen.

"This crater contains what we bargained for. Please take it to our shuttle." Anu said to Ouriye.

"First, let's make sure everything we bargained for is in order." Ouriye replied wryly, emphasizing 'we'.

Pirkotan noticed a momentary hesitation in Anu before he answered: "Of course, captain. A deal is a deal. Everything according to the plan, eh?"

"Yes," Ouriye answered, glancing at Pirkotan, "according to the plan."

The doors to Cargo Hold B had been welded shut and it took few minutes to cut them open. Pirkotan felt his gut tighten in excitement, but also dread. He'd always prided himself in having full knowledge of every situation, full control. Now that he was left more or less in the dark, he feared the unknown. Pirkotan remembered a saying of one of his teachers in officer training: 'Always expect the unexpected. Then all surprises will be pleasant ones.' Somehow, this did not comfort him all that much at the moment.

The inside of Cargo Hold B was cold and darkly lit. In the middle of the floor was a black metal object, about four or five meters tall. Numerous pipes and wires linked it with the walls of the cargo hold. The object was obviously of Jovian design; it had the same oddly carved shape as the Jovian ship and shuttle. The Jovians walked up to the object and made a quick inspection of it.

"This is a capsule," Anu said to the Caldari. "It is used to control a ship. With it a ship as big as this one can be controlled with only a handful of crew and smaller ships, like your frigates, can even be controlled by a single person."

"How is this possible?" Ouriye asked. He was obviously skeptical, even if he didn't seem as surprised by what Anu said as the other Caldari.

"The controller, captain if you like, of the ship is stationed inside the capsule. Through it, he's neural rigged to all parts of the ship. The capsule is like one gigantic computer, with the captain at the core, controlling everything." Anu answered.

"But how can a single man control a whole ship?" Ouriye pressed.

"Thank you, captain, I was coming to that. As I said, the captain acts as the central unit in a highly advanced computer. This role allows him to access and evaluate data at extreme pace. He can easily handle the jobs it takes 5 or 10 people to do normally. It also makes him a better commander, he has better understanding and awareness of his environment and he's not boggled down by tedious crew management issues and frequent communication breakdowns are now history." Anu finished, looking over the faces of the thoughtful Caldari standing before him.



"So what is the downside?" Pirkotan asked. "There is always a downside."

"Not in this case, lieutenant," Anu replied. "The capsule offers greater control to ships, yet fewer crew members. As you know one of the biggest costs in maintaining a ship is training the crew, this cost is now much reduced. We Jovians are not numerous, yet we can field a very formidable fleet because of capsules."

"So what about this capsule controller? Can anybody control this thing?" Ouriye probed, obviously eager to garner as much knowledge as he could about these capsules.

"Not anybody, no," Any answered. "The controller must have the required neural implants."

Pirkotan fingered the newly planted implants at the back of his neck; a grim realization dawning in his mind.

"But why this huge structure? Couldn't the controller simply be strapped into a neural chair?" Ouriye inquired.

"The neural riggings for the capsule are much more elaborate and advanced than those you know, captain; they require the user to be in complete stasis for efficient usage. The capsule is filled with a fluid, in which the captain floats. This fluid filters out all external interferences, as well as protecting and nourishing the captain." One of the Jovian aides had now opened a hologram blueprint of the capsule and Anu used it while explaining how it was built. "Also, the capsule has extremely strong armor, giving even more protection to the captain. We Jovians do not like unnecessary squandering of lives." Pirkotan thought Anu said this last sentence with an unusual fervor.

"So, can you make it work?" Ouriye asked, he had obviously satisfied his curiosity about this thing and now wanted to see it in action.

"Yes, as long as your engineers followed our instructions correctly when building the capsule and connecting it to the ship."

"You mean, this capsule will take control of the ship?" Ouriye asked anxiously.

"Yes, but we can override it easily. This is only for demonstration purposes." Anu answered.

The Jovians started fiddling with various control panels on the capsule. One by one, the systems in the capsule came to life, lights started blinking and a low humming noise emanated from it. Finally, Anu turned to the Caldari: "The capsule is now operational. It is ready for testing."

The eyes of the Jovians and captain Ouriye turned to Pirkotan. He felt like a mouse trapped in a cage. He knew now that Ouriye's suggestion about the neural implants hadn't been based on friendship; he'd been cunningly manipulated into this position and he knew it was impossible to refuse now. But why this duplicity? Why hadn't they simply ordered him to take the implants?

"I, uh... you want me to go into that thing, sir?" Pirkotan stammered, hoping against hope that his suspicions were false.

"Yes, lieutenant Pirkotan. You have the honor of being the first Caldari to test a capsule." Ouriye answered. "Don't you feel honored?"

"Ah, yes. Yes, sir. I'm deeply honored," Pirkotan whispered. The two Jovian aides were now standing beside him. Pirkotan started walking forward, as if his body was moving of its own accord. He was now standing before Anu, who placed his hands on the back of his neck. Anu explored the neural implants with his fingers and stared intently into Pirkotan's face. Pirkotan couldn't make himself meet the gaze.

"Please stand absolutely still," Anu said to him. "We need to hook you up." Pirkotan was too numb to answer, let alone move. One of the Jovians placed a tight rubber cap with lots of tube sockets over his head, covering his eyes and ears. Another Jovian inserted tubes into his nostrils. Finally, he felt his neural jacks being plugged. "He is ready," a voice said. Pirkotan felt hands lead him, he was lifted and he felt liquid engulf him. He was sinking! He had read about people being accidentally buried alive in olden times and now he felt like they must have; this capsule, this thing, felt like a wet grave, burying him. 'Is this the end?' He had read about people being accidentally buried alive in olden times and now he felt like they must have; this capsule, this thing, felt like a wet grave, burying him. 'Is this the end?'



But he could still breathe through his nose. He couldn't see and he couldn't hear. All he felt was this cold, sticky fluid all around him. He was inside the capsule! Pirkotan slowly ran his hands over the inner surface of the capsule. It was very smooth and Pirkotan found no seams or cracks, or any controls or buttons for that matter. The capsule was tightly closed and no discernible way to open it from the inside. Pirkotan was not normally claustrophobic, but now he felt panic rise within him and he wanted to scream and run. But he could do neither; the thick fluid hindered all fast movements and when Pirkotan opened his mouth it was instantly filled with the strange-tasting bluish liquid. Pirkotan was forced to swallow it so he could breathe again. Pirkotan tried to calm himself down, but when nothing happened for what seemed like eternity he once again despaired. He had read about people being accidentally buried alive in olden times and now he felt like they must have; this capsule, this thing, felt like a wet grave, burying him. 'Is this the end?' Pirkotan thought. 'Maybe the machine has malfunctioned, maybe they can't get me out!'

Then, all of a sudden, a bright light filled his eyes and a sound like rushing wind filled his ears. After few seconds the light dimmed down and Pirkotan was able to see, but everything became deadly quiet. And what he saw made his stomach somersault. He was looking at the Okarioni from the outside! It was as if he was floating in space maybe 100 meters from the ship.

"Can you hear me?" a voice said. It was Anu. Pirkotan tried instinctively to speak, but his mouth was again filled with the fluid and only a strangled croak emerged. 'Hello?' he thought.

"Hello, lieutenant Pirkotan," Anu said. "We can hear you. The communication link in this demonstration capsule is automatically open, normally you control whether it's open or closed. We are monitoring your progress. Can you see the ship?"

"Yes," Pirkotan replied, simply by thinking about it. "Yes, I can see the ship. But whose eyes am I seeing through?"

"You're viewing the ship through a camera drone. Think about moving. Try to move to the right. See what happens."

Pirkotan thought about this and was delighted to find the camera move according to his wishes. He swooped alongside the ship, spinning the camera in circles and zooming it out, all with a mere thought. Pirkotan noticed that no matter how he turned the camera, the ship always stayed in the middle of his vision. As he got more accustomed to this new sensation he could feel his surroundings much better. In fact, if he concentrated he could feel Okarioni, like he and the ship were one; he felt the engines purr in his belly, he felt the electrodes bounce on his skin, he felt the crew crawl around inside him. The feeling was exhilarating.

After a while Anu's voice came back: "You're doing very well. Now we are going to activate the audio synthesizers."

"Audio synthesizers? What do you mean?" Pirkotan thought.

"As you know there is no sound in space, but when we were developing the capsules we found that people wanted to use as many of their senses as possible, thus we added the sound. By letting a computer create three dimensional sound we also add to the awareness you have while in battles, for instance."

Several seconds later Pirkotan could hear the audio synthesizers kick in; he could hear the low humming noise of the propulsion system and the sudden hissing sound of course-correctional thrusters. Anu came back on: "Now we'll test the audio system."

Suddenly a missile was launched from one of the missile bays. It flew majestically out from the ship and disappeared to the right of Pirkotan's vision. Pirkotan turned the camera and watched it fly away from the ship. Then a stab of green and yellow light came from the Jovian vessel, accompanied by a loud crackling noise. The weapon burst hit the missile and it exploded. Pirkotan heard the explosion clearly and when he turned the camera to the Jovian vessel he could still hear the explosion's residue in the background. Once again, Anu spoke: "That went very well. Now for the final test. I want you to shut down the propulsion system, and then turn it back on. You must open the ship control menu and use that."

Pirkotan thought about the propulsion system. Nothing happened. Then he thought about controlling the ship. And then, before him and overlaying the ship, a menu appeared. Pirkotan navigated himself through the menu with his mind and found the shut down action for the propulsion system. He activated the action and the menu disappeared. Pirkotan now saw the propulsion glow fade out and the constant humming slowly died out. Pirkotan now repeated the process, turning the propulsion system back on.

"Well done, lieutenant Pirkotan," came Anu's voice. "You have concluded the testing. Your performance was flawless."

As suddenly as it had appeared the vision before Pirkotan's eyes disappeared and darkness engulfed him. He blinked his eyes several times, the vision of Okarioni still embedded in his nerves, but slowly fading away. Pirkotan then felt as if he was falling at a great speed, but before he could react he passed out.

Epilogue



Pirkotan awoke slowly like from a deep sleep. His eyes were open and he was staring at a dull gray wall. He tried to look around, but found that he couldn't. He felt strangely disoriented. From somewhere behind him he heard low voices speaking. He recognized the voice of his captain and that of Anu of Jove. He tried to speak, to let them know he was awake, but nothing happened. Suddenly the chatter in the background registered in his mind:

"I have examined him, I'm afraid the symptoms all point towards it." Anu was saying. "This mind-lock as you call it, is it permanent?" captain Ouriye asked. "I'm afraid so..." "I have examined him, I'm afraid the symptoms all point towards it." Anu was saying. "This mind-lock as you call it, is it permanent?" captain Ouriye asked. "I'm afraid so..." "I have examined him, I'm afraid the symptoms all point towards it." Anu was saying.

"This mind-lock as you call it, is it permanent?" captain Ouriye asked.

"I'm afraid so. We have studied it thoroughly and found no cure. It's a shame, if I may say so."

"But how do you prevent it in the first place? I mean, was this bound to happen?" the captain enquired.

"Under the circumstances, yes. The only way to prevent this is with intense training for many years. That timeframe was unacceptable to your superiors. Besides, you knew what was going to happen all along. You have no grounds for complaints now."

"I know, I know," Ouriye sighed. "I had my reservations, but what could I do? I was under strict orders."

"I understand," Anu replied. "The lieutenant performed admirably. You can be proud of him."

"I am," Ouriye answered.

Silence. 'What is going on?' Pirkotan thought. 'They must be talking about me. What mind-lock?' Then the captain and two of the Jovians appeared before him. They looked at his face, into his open eyes. 'Hey!' Pirkotan screamed in his mind. 'Help me!'

"He looks so peaceful, lying there. Is he conscious?" asked the captain.

"Who knows? Maybe, maybe not," came Anu's reply.

"It's sad to lose him, he was an efficient officer. And a valued friend," Ouriye said. "He will receive the Medal of Valor for this, it will be sent to his parents. His father will be so proud."

"And rightly so," Anu said. "Anyway, we have certain... treatments that can be beneficial to him, if you're interested...?"

"I thank you for your offer, but it is unnecessary," Ouriye replied. "We have very good institutions that can take care of him. He will be well provided for."

Pirkotan screamed a silent curse. His fate was sealed. He had been sacrificed for the greater good of the Caldari State, like a clog in a great big machine. Just before he passed into a murky slumber, Pirkotan read the motto of the Caldari Navy embedded on the captain's sleeve: 'All For the Good of Many.' Much good it would do him, stuck in his own mind for the rest of his life.

Caldari State

The Caldari State is ruled by several mega-corporations. There is no central government to speak of - all territories within the State are owned and ruled by corporations. Duty and discipline are required traits in Caldari citizens, plus unquestioning loyalty to the corporation they live to serve. The corporations compete aggressively amongst themselves and with companies outside the State, resulting in a highly capitalistic society.

CBD Corporation

The CBD Corporation is one of the biggest export/importer in Caldari space. The corporation has established trade links far and wide, with huge amount of goods in constant fluxuation.

Spacelane Patrol is the police and security arm of the CBD mega corporation.

CBD Sell Division

Originally part of the mother company CBD, the CBD Sell Division was made independent some years ago in an effort to revitalize the stale retail business of the company. This paid off and the Sell Division has shown steady profit ever since it was created.

Caldari Business Tribunal

The Caldari Business Tribunal is the only non-corporate justice system and police agency in the Caldari State, tasked with policing the megacorporations and their disputes. The main function of the Tribunal is to provide a nonviolent means for corporations to resolve grievances, as outright inter-corporate war tends to do significant damage to corporate bottom lines. Tribunal justices are appointed by the Chief Executive Panel, and many appointees are corporate lawyers or security executives prior to their nomination. Additionally, Tribunal investigators are among the few people in the State who are ostensibly free of corporate loyalties.

The Tribunal's courts are modeled after the Raata Code, an inquisitorial system where the court's goal is to determine the facts of the case, not the prosecution of an individual or corporation. Tribunal agents have the authority, in theory, to enter any corporate facility and confiscate corporate property, provided that a warrant is issued by a Tribunal justice; in reality, agents are often delayed by corporate legal teams and stymied by corporate security. This situation varies depending on how much political power the corporation driving the investigation can wield.

The Tribunal does not generally deal with crimes against the person and is not the "Supreme Court" of the Caldari State, as many outsiders assume. Most criminal prosecutions, such as those for murder or embezzlement, are handled by megacorporate justice systems, and they cannot appeal to the Tribunal. The only time the Tribunal deals with such cases is when they are committed by or against government officials, or when asked to resolve a question of jurisdiction

Caldari Customs Authority

The Caldari Customs Authority (CCA) is a division of the Caldari Business Tribunal, which is the only nationwide law enforcement agency in the Caldari State.

The CCA is in charge of policing trade at the borders of Caldari space and enforcing any customs duties or tariffs, though the State generally has few of those with both the Liberal and Practical factions both being free trade advocates. However, the CCA tends to be short-staffed, despite being adequately funded, and as a result they often outsource customs duties to the Navy or corporate security forces, who will in turn sometimes subcontract to individual pod-pilots.

In general, customs duties are a low priority (and sometimes an obstruction) for many of the Caldari megacorporations' operations, so they tend to be pushed upon pilots and officers towards the low end of the totem pole.

Caldari Constructions

After the great exodus during the Caldari Breakout when the Caldari left their home planet, a new state had to be built from the scratch in very short time. Caldari Constructions was one of the companies that participated in that great effort and it has been living on this past achievement ever since. Though not very active any more in the wheeling and dealing of power politics it still holds some very valuable cards on its hand.

Caldari Navy

The Caldari Navy is smaller in personnel and total ships than both the Federation Navy and the Amarr Navy, yet they have more battleships than any other fleet and the average age of the Caldari ships is considerably less. This is because the Caldari are constantly replacing their oldest ships with newer ones, with better hi-tech equipment. The strategic doctrine of the Caldari Navy is simple: to be able to defeat any other navy in the world. Most experts believe it is.

Caldari Providence Directorate

The Caldari Providence Directorate (CPD, aka 'the Directorate') is an organization controlling corporate interests under the nationalistic movement led by Executor Tibus Heth. Currently in power in the Caldari State, the CPD was founded by Tibus Heth in YC110, capitalizing on anti-Gallente sentiments following the Malkalen Incident.

In a dramatic series of corporate upheavals, Heth, beginning as a violent corporate protestor, rose quickly in power to first CEO of Caldari Constructions, then to CEO of Kaalakiota Corporation, and finally to leader of the State via the Directorate. Heth's stated goal in the founding of the CPD was the "restoration of [the] State's dignity".
Provists

Gendarmerie founded by Tibus Heth shortly after the launch of his successful coup against the Caldari Constructions Corporation. Initially manned by Constructions workers loyal to Heth, Templis Dragonaurs were secretly appointed as the agency's officers and were responsible for providing State-wide internal security and running Heth's anti-Gallentean/Caldari supremacy propaganda campaign. Noted for their physical perfection and trademark dark blue uniforms, these men and women were nicknamed "Provists" by the Caldari population.

Background Heth's Rise to Power

(YC110.05.02)

Tibus Heth secured unauthorized airtime for the Caldari State's largest news broadcast hub to make his first public address since the Constructions Revolt. In a passionate, fiery speech, Heth asserted his ownership of the corporation and accused mega-corporate leadership and Federation influence as being the core root of the Caldari State's woes, and promised to make an example of Constructions to "restore the State's dignity".

The Malkalen Incident (YC110.05.15)

During the visit of a Gallente diplomatic envoy to Ishukone headquarters on, a Nyx-class mothership, piloted by Alexander Noir collided with the station causing massive damage and destroying itself in the process. The high death toll included Ishukone CEO Otro Gariushi. Tibus Heth rallied the resulting rise of anti-Gallente sentiment in the Caldari State, turning it to support for the newly formed CPD.

Partnership with Megacorporations (YC110.05.29)

The Sukuuvestaa, Nugoeihuvi, Wyrkomi, Hyasyoda, CBD and Lai Dai mega-corporations reached a breakthrough agreement with the Kaalakiota-Ytiri conglomerate led by Tibus Heth. The deal gave the Directorate immediate access to the State's industrial base.

CAESA Training Program (YC111.01.02)

Based on the Caldari-Amarr Economic Stimulus Agreement negotiated in early YC111, the Directorate is responsible for implementing a training program for freed slaves choosing to take up residence in the Amarr Empire.

Caldari Provisions

Caldari Provisions is one of the companies that were created by war veterans of the Gallente-Caldari War. Specializing in the distribution of supply and logistics, Caldari Provisions have carved themselves a nice little niche within the Caldari State and are looking towards expanding their operation in other empires.

Corporate Police Force

Hyasyoda's private security corporation, the Corporate Police Force, focuses on counterintelligence and counterespionage work, largely due to its parent company's distrustful nature. As a result, it is one of the most effective corporate security forces in the State, despite Hyasyoda's small relative size to most of the other megacorporations. It is not uncommon for CPF agents to be contracted by the Navy for their expertise on such matters.

In comparison, the CPF does not maintain as large a military force as the other megacorporations, preferring instead to protect its assets through superior intelligence networks. However, these civilian police forces are second to none; while corporate police are often seen as softer on run-of-the-mill crime, the CPF is a notable exception, and many independent corporations use the CPF as their preferred security provider.

The CPF tends to favor smaller, better-equipped starcraft for its operations, especially those ships equipped with high-end electronics. The Ishukone-designed Falcon is a particular favorite of the CPF, and they are common sights near Hyasyoda colonies and installations.

Chief Executive Panel

The Chief Executive Panel is the main bureaucratic apparatus through which the Caldari megacorporations rule the State. The Panel's primary purposes are to determine the budgets for the State's few government agencies, such as the Navy and the Tribunal, and to act as a way for the State's corporate powers to coordinate national policy, such as foreign relations, customs and trade regulations, and inter-corporate business laws.

The Panel itself consists of the major megacorporate CEOs and a non-partisan director. In reality, the CEOs usually send a delegation of trusted executives, corporate lawyers, or board members to represent the

corporation's interests on the Panel, and the director is nothing more than a figurehead, a pawn of the most influential political bloc at the time.

Though the State Executor and the Caldari Providence Directorate exert a great deal of influence over the Executive Panel since its creation in 110 YC, the CEP must endorse the policies of both groups in order to make them law. So far, however, there have been few substantive challenges to proposed initiatives.

Deep Core Mining Inc.

Deep Core Mining is a young company that was founded on the basis of a revolutionary new mining drill technology. This new technology, details of which have never been revealed, gives much higher yield than older techniques and has promoted DCM to the top echelon of mining companies very quickly.

Echelon Entertainment

Echelon Entertainment was created by the Kaalakiota Corporation as a direct answer to NOH. Though NOH still has an overwhelming market share in the entertainment industry Echelon Entertainment has still managed to shine on its own and their products are becoming more and more popular.

Expert Distribution

The Expert brand can today be seen in all major cities in the world of EVE, this retail company has seen phenomenal growth in the last decade, thanks to their self-service policy and low overhead. Part of the NOH family, Expert Distribution is Caldari's answer to the large Gallentean retail chains that have dominated the market in the past.

Expert Housing

Expert Housing was founded at the same time as Expert Distribution, but the two sibling companies have fared very differently. While Expert Distribution has been a continuous success story Expert Housing has suffered in a tough, highly competitive real estate market. The company is on the lookout for investment funds, which it hopes will help revive it.

Home Guard

Home Guard is the police and security arm of the Kaalakiota mega corporation. As the mega corporations only trust each other so much, they all have their own police force to guard their properties.

House of Records

The fragmentation of the Caldari government has often proved to be problematic when it comes to documenting events, deals and communications. The House of Records was set up by the Caldari mega corporations to act as a central source for all this information. Information on all transactions, business deals and governmental involvements within the State must be sent here and are stored in huge data banks.

Hyasyoda Corporation

Hyasyoda is one of the oldest Caldari megacorporations, formed shortly after contact with the Gallente. The corporation is conservative and cautious in its business dealings. Hyasyoda focuses on bread-and-butter industries such as agriculture, mining, and consumer products. Its operations are largely contained to the State itself, although it has partnerships with foreign companies to market many of its products in foreign territories.

The corporation is still largely controlled by the Osmon family that founded it, though much of its stock has been sold off over the company's long history. Perhaps as a result of this history, Hyasyoda's corporate culture is just as conservative as its business strategies, with a strong leaning toward old school corporatism and established tradition. The amount of social pressure on Hyasyoda employees to "fit in" is extremely high, even for the Caldari State, where such pressure is part of daily life.

Hyasyoda is also extremely distrustful of the other megacorporations, the exception being Ishukone, their longtime ally; the corporation is also wary of any hint of centralized State authority. As a result, Hyasyoda has been one of the strongest critics of the Caldari Providence Directorate, despite joining it voluntarily shortly before the Caldari Prime invasion, and has led opposition to the Executor in the CEP.

Corporate Police Force is the police and security arm of the Hyasyoda mega corporation.

Internal Security

Internal Security is the police and security arm of the NOH mega corporation. As the mega corporations only trust each other so much, they all have their own police force to guard their properties.

Ishukone Corporation

Ishukone is a corporation with a long and storied history in the Caldari State. A special point of pride for the company is their contribution of Jovian hydrostatic capsule technology to the war effort during the Gallente-Caldari War. Ishukone's primary business model deals with the development of high-end technologies in fields such as advanced spacecraft engineering, electronics, medicine, and biotechnology.

The megacorporation is the leader of the liberal bloc in Caldari politics, a position it has held since Otro Gariushi seized control of the company during a period of complacency and decline in YC100. Under his leadership, the

company advocated free market policies, relaxed trade barriers, and an easing of tensions between the State and the Gallente Federation. Gariushi also gave the company its reputation for being relatively employee friendly and for its ruthless competitive practices with rival companies. Despite the death of Gariushi in the Malkalen Disaster, his policies still cast a long shadow over the corporation, and the current leadership appears to be following in his footsteps.

As a result, Ishukone remains a reluctant partner in the Caldari Providence Directorate. With little choice but to go along with the Directorate after Gariushi's death, the corporate leadership remains of two minds about the situation. On the one hand, many board members support the meritocratic reforms instituted by the Directorate, which were similar to policies already in place under Gariushi. However, considerable resistance to the centralization of power and the Directorate's belligerence remains among the corporate leadership. Ishukone Watch is the police and security arm of the Ishukone mega corporation.

Ishukone Watch

Ishukone Watch is the police and security arm of the Ishukone mega corporation. As the mega corporations only trust each other so much, they all have their own police force to guard their properties.

Kaalakiota Corporation

The largest of the Caldari mega corporations, the KK, as it is commonly known as, has its fingers in most everything. They are manufacturers, distributors, retailers and researchers, as well as being a formidable voice in Caldari politics. Their great rivals in both business and politics is the Sukuuvestaa Corporation. Home Guard is the police and security arm of the Kaalakiota mega corporation.

Lai Dai Protection Service

Lai Dai Protection Service is the police and security arm of the Lai Dai mega corporation. As the mega corporations only trust each other so much, they all have their own police force to guard their properties.

Mercantile Club

The Mercantile Club has grown from being a simple gentleman's club into a full fledged political entity, such are the peculiarities of the Caldari governmental apparatus. The Mercantile Club is a meeting place for diplomats, business men, CEOs and politicians to make deals and discuss matters of the state.

Minedrill

Minedrill traces its history back to the war with the Federation, to a special force unit within the Caldari Navy that rigged asteroids with explosives and used them as booby traps. After the war the personnel in the unit created Minedrill and used their special knowledge to quickly gain prominence within the mining industry.

Modern Finances

The largest investment company in the cluster, Modern Finances was started by Nugoeihuvi during the Gallente-Caldari War in order to raise its profile among the other megacorporations; at the time, Nugoeihuvi was the smallest and newest of the Big Eight. Formed largely to isolate risky investment opportunities from its parent company, Modern Finances has achieved great success by bankrolling high-risk, high-reward endeavors. Unfortunately for Nugoeihuvi, setbacks over the years have forced the megacorporation to sell off Modern Finances stock in order to recoup losses; though the company still maintains control with its remaining shares and proxies, its control is no longer absolute.

In addition to bankrolling risky business ventures, Modern Finances has also made a strong profit bundling high-risk financial instruments and selling them to investors. At times, this practice has brought them under CBT scrutiny, as unhappy investors have accused the company of misleading investors as to the prospects for so-called "junk bonds," but no serious charges have ever managed to stick.

The company's other major line of business has been funding expansions of regional corporations into Statewide operations or, conversely, State-based corporations into international ventures. Modern Finances helped facilitate Lai Dai's establishment of both the Carthum Conglomerate and Khanid Innovations, for instance, and also established the investment fund that expanded the CBD Corporation's Federation-based operations shortly after the signing of the Yulai treaty.

Because of their experience and success, Modern Finances has built a strong relationship with many foreign governments, especially the Khanid Kingdom, and stands poised to take assert its dominance in foreign markets even more in the future.

Nugoeihuvi Corporation

The only Caldari mega corporation that has focused on the entertainment industry. NOH, as they're commonly called, have always been suspected of strong ties to the Caldari underworld, mainly because many of their products cater to that social element or are on the borderline of legality. Internal Security is the police and security arm of the NOH mega corporation.

Peace and Order Unit

Peace and Order Unit is the police and security arm of the Sukuuvestaa mega corporation. As the mega corporations only trust each other so much, they all have their own police force to guard their properties.

Perkone

One of the few remaining Caldari corporations that were founded during the Industrial Age on Caldari Prime, before the arrival of the Gallenteans. Perkone took to the Gallenteans like ducks to water and had its glory days in the years leading up to the war with the Federation. After the war Perkone has struggled, but still manages to produce solid, high quality equipment.

Poksu Mineral Group

Poksu was founded by a group of independent miners. Through shrewd business deals and solid mining income Poksu has slowly grown to join the ranks of the big boys in Caldari corporate politics.

Prompt Delivery

Prompt Delivery is a express delivery company that operates mainly within the Caldari State. They have a fast, efficient, quality service, but the price of this excellence is that they must keep the company small and compact.

Propel Dynamics

Propel Dynamics was founded by the team that discovered the first functional warp drive for short jumps within a system. Though it has never managed to live up to its early expectation the company has always turned out innovative and interesting designs that have driven the field of propulsion forward.

Rapid Assembly

Manufacturer of cheap gadgets and low-level equipment, Rapid Assembly is by no means a driving force in the manufacturing sector. By catering to low-budget buyers they fill an important niche, unsexy as it may be

School of Applied Knowledge

The School of Applied Knowledge (from where future Caldari industrialists graduate) focuses mainly on technical studies and is considered the best school for aspiring engineers. The school collaborates with many leading Caldari corporations, an arrangement which benefits the school, the companies and not the least the students.

Science and Trade Institute

Like all Caldari schools, the Science & Trade Institute (from which all Caldari Business Students graduate) has a very formal curriculum that focuses primarily on the practical side of education. This results in a very dull and tedious learning process, but one that is remarkably efficient.

Spacelane Patrol

Spacelane Patrol is the police and security arm of the CBD mega corporation. As the mega corporations only trust each other so much, they all have their own police force to guard their properties.

State Protectorate

We are the State, and we have claimed our long-lost homeland. Now we are at war; united, whole and full of fire and purpose. The State calls you, capsuleer, for it needs your strength and your leadership to fend off the encroaching Gallente menace. The State will not fall. Join us. Fight. Conquer.

War Academy

The State War Academy (from which all Caldari enlists graduate) was founded shortly after the Caldari State came into being, while the war with the Gallente Federation was still in full swing. Due to this, the academy has always had a very combat oriented slant, as opposed to the broader scope of ship handling.

State and Region Bank

One of the oldest banks in the Caldari State, the State and Region Bank dates back to before the Caldari secession and has a long tradition of being the bank of record for the elite of Caldari society. It caters to corporate executives and highly placed government officials – not that there is much difference between the two in the State. The Wiyrkomi Corporation has held a controlling interest through proxies and direct stock ownership since the Caldari secession from the Federation, when the Seituoda family carried the bank through rough economic times, largely for the purpose of securing its own sizable fortunes held by the bank.

The State and Region Bank has historically focused on conservative investments, such as low-yield corporate bonds, index funds, and precious metals, though it has provided short-term loans to favored clients for riskier purposes in the past. Over the last decade, however, a shakeup at the highest levels of corporate management has led to an increased amount of investment in cutting edge sectors such as celestial industry and colonial development, as well as expanding the market for their services to Amarr and Khanid clients as well as Caldari ones. This shift has caused some concern for members of the corporation's old guard as well as its partners in the Patriot faction, but so far there has been little actual resistance.

Sukuuvestaa Corporation

Sukuuvestaa, or SuVee as it is commonly called, is the second largest Caldari megacorporation and is heavily

focused on agriculture, mining, real estate, and consumer products. According to estimates from the House of Records, over a third of all Caldari real estate is owned by SuVee or one of its subsidiaries, though most of it is largely uninhabited, used for vast automated farms or hazardous environment mining operations.

SuVee has a reputation as one of the State's most ruthless corporations, seizing smaller rivals and selling off the pieces to ensure its dominance. While this often causes tensions between it and the other megacorporations, even allied ones like Nugoeihuvi and CBD, it has also forced them to think twice about challenging Sukuuvestaa in any market where it has significant influence.

Since resettling in the Achura home system of Saisio after the evacuation of Caldari Prime, the corporation has become the sentimental favorite of the Achura population for both employment and purchasing decisions. Many of the corporation's high level positions are filled by Achura, and images from Achura culture are often used for corporate products. However, corporate philosophy is still dominated by SuVee traditions that date back to its origins on Caldari Prime, not Achura culture.

Peace and Order Unit is the police and security arm of the Sukuuvestaa mega corporation

Top Down

Top Down is a small manufacturing company that specializes in component assembling. It is owned by the Lai Dai corporation, which provides it with new technology to keep up with other manufacturing companies. Although Top Down has never really taken off, many believe their products to be of the highest quality on the market, as befits a company associated with Lai Dai.

Wiyrkomi Corporation

Known and respected throughout the cluster, the Seituoda name has been the driving force behind the Wiyrkomi corporation ever since its inception in the years prior to the Gallente-Caldari War. With a reputation built upon the unimpeachable word of its founder, Tyunaul Seituoda, Wiyrkomi continues to enjoy unique relationships with many of New Eden's most influential corporations. Given the reputation of most megacorporations, Wiyrkomi is regarded by those inside and outside the State as a curious anomaly, though one that is not to be underestimated.

Stoically patriotic, the Seituoda family's love of the Caldari State and its stubborn insistence on the promotion of Caldari ideals above all else has been criticized for limiting the company's ability to expand its market share beyond the manufacturing and industrial sectors. The company has traditionally enjoyed significant success in these two sectors, namely through its multiple energized plating and containment field product lines. The media frenzy surrounding an alleged incestuous relationship spanning at least two generations of the family led to the Seituoda's increasing reclusiveness, and the family jealously protects its privacy. Only Duisla Seituoda, great-grandson of Tyunaul Seituoda, is ever seen in public, leading many of the family's most bitter detractors to label the secular heirs as irrelevant and out of touch.

Other theories about the corporation have even speculated that the Seituoda family is nothing more than an ingenious marketing ploy, devised and orchestrated to maintain the image of honesty and transparency that are the hallmarks of the Seituoda legacy. or that the family no longer exists, if it ever did. Despite the hearsay, the Seituoda brand remains largely untarnished, and the company has publicly stated its intent to reach out to high-end consumers outside of the established capsuleer demographic.

Though largely uninterested in Sleeper technology, Wiyrkomi has in recent years invested significant sums in developing small arms technology, with an apparent eye towards refactoring some of its most popular engine designs for atmospheric flight. Civilian versions of this technology are already being made available to interested parties in limited quantities.

Wiyrkomi Peace Corps is the police and security arm of the Wiyrkomi mega corporation.

Wiyrkomi Peace Corps

Wiyrkomi Peace Corps is the police and security arm of the Wiyrkomi mega corporation. As the mega corporations only trust each other so much, they all have their own police force to guard their properties.

Ytiri

Ytiri is a rare example of an outsider company that manages to establish itself within the Caldari State. Formerly an underworld smuggling company, Ytiri adjusted its operation to gain admittance into the State. Since then the company has flourished and is one of the fastest growing companies in Caldari space.

Zainou

A biotech company founded by the eccentric Todo Kirkinen, the first man to have his mind transferred into a machine. Zainou has from its inception been at the forefront of bio-chemical and nano-mechanical research, its headquarters are described as a combination of a mad scientist's lab and a jungle zoo.

Zero-G Research Firm

A small research firm that specializes in space habitats and other life support modules for humans. In its heyday Zero-G was hailed as the great hope of the Caldari people, but the company has been in a steady decline for the last few decades.

Minmatar Republic

The Minmatar Republic was formed over a century ago when the Matari threw out their Amarrian overlords in what is known as the Minmatar Rebellion. The Matari had the support of the Gallente Federation and to this day, the two nations remain close allies. Yet, only a quarter of the Matari people reside within the Republic. The rest are scattered around the world, including a large portion still enslaved within the Amarr Empire. Minmatar individuals are independent and proud, possessing a strong will and a multitude of tribal traditions.

Brutor tribe

The Brutors suffered the worst under the Amarr occupation and many of them are still enslaved within the Amarr Empire. This fuels their hate for the Amarrians and they are the only tribe to actively pursue a continuation of the war against the Amarrians and their underlings, the Ammatars.

Core Complexion Inc.

The great success story of Minmatar business, Core Complexion is one of very few Minmatar corporations that have managed to succeed on a universal scale. The company combines innovative designs with cost-effective production methods to create equipment that gives much bang for the buck.

Eifyr and Co.

Founded shortly after the Minmatar Republic's establishment by the renowned, yet enigmatic, biochemist Kolvil Eifyr, the Eifyr and Co. corporation swiftly became a potent force in the biochemical and cyber-implant industries. Backed by investment from the shrewd leaders of the Krusual Tribe and steered by Eifyr, the corporation remains a lean, relatively small, but highly efficient powerhouse. However, its emphasis on secrecy and rumored connections to the Minmatar underworld have fuelled speculation as to how the company really makes its money. The most persistent rumors and occasional accusations have centered on allegations of illegal booster manufacturing and secret contracts with the Serpents Corporation. Whatever the truth may be, none of the investigations mounted against Eifyr and Co. have ever uncovered concrete evidence of wrong-doing, and no prosecution has been attempted to date.

For much of its history, Eifyr and Co. pursued relatively mundane biochemical manufacturing and distribution on the open market, while its cyber-implant division developed and released popular ranges of gunnery and propulsion implants for the lucrative capsuleer markets. When the SCC deregulated markets with regard to boosters, and the possibilities of synth boosters came to light, Eifyr and Co. were immediately ready to take advantage and began offering biochemical reactors and other equipment vital to booster manufacturing on the open market. The corporation also released new implants designed to enhance booster uptake and alleviate adverse reactions, leading to a resurgence in speculation regarding links to the underworld booster rings. Many observers asked how Eifyr was able to swiftly and effectively respond to the booster deregulation.

The widespread emergence of unstable wormholes and the technological possibilities opened by these phenomena is the most recent opportunity seized by Kolvil Eifyr's remarkable corporation. Eifyr and Co.'s expertise in chemical reactor technology was swiftly adapted to the newly emerging polymers derived from wormhole space gas clouds. Additionally, Sleeper technology became a particular interest of the corporation. Today, Eifyr and Co. acquires Sleeper-related data in a variety of forms primarily from capsuleers, who encounter the ancient civilization's drone guardians in wormhole space.

Freedom Extension

Freedom Extension was founded by Minmatars that moved to the Gallente Federation following the Rebellion, but returned to the Republic to foster the good relationship between the two races. Freedom Extension is a courier company modeled after Gallentean ones and quickly established itself as the main shipping company in Minmatar space.

Krusual tribe

The Krusual tribe is sly and cunning, shrouding its ways in lies and secrecy. It is isolationist by nature, but lately it's been becoming more and more involved with the power politics of the Republic, staking a claim for its mastery.

Minmatar Mining Corporation

Minmatar Mining Corporation is the only Minmatar corporation still in existence that can trace its foundation to before the conquest of Minmatar space by the Amarrians. It managed to stay in business while the Amarrians ruled the Minmatars only because it was useful to the Amarrians. Now it is useful to the Republic by providing the raw materials to build a space fleet to defend the Republic against the Amarr Empire and its minions.

Native Freshfood

The Amarrians had tried to eradicate the Minmatar heritage during their occupation of Minmatar space. One of them was the Minmatar cuisine and Native Freshfood has been at the forefront in establishing traditional Minmatar food all anew.

Pator Tech School

Pator Tech School (from where Minmatar business people are commonly educated) was founded on the principle of helping gifted Minmatar children be better qualified for high-level positions; something the Republic was in

dire need of when assembling a new government and administration virtually from scratch. This principle has held intact to this day, even if the foundations of the Republic were firmly set a long time ago.

Republic Fleet

The Republic Fleet was formed from the surviving elements of the rebel fleet after the Minmatar Rebellion. Though it has not the same access to advanced weaponry or hi-tech equipment as the fleets of the other empires, it more than makes up for this with fierce spirit and clever battle tactics.

Republic Justice Department

Once an uninspiring part of the Minmatar government the Justice Department has in recent years taken on a life of its own by supporting the Minmatar rebels. Though not an official policy of the Republic, the Justice Department promotes what most Minmatars secretly want: to defeat the Amarrians, and is thus cordially allowed by the Parliament.

Republic Military School

The Republic Military School (from which all Minmatar enlists graduate) was for a long time the bastard child of the Minmatar education system - it existed because it was perceived as needed, but it had no support; most military personnel were Gallente trained. In recent years, however, as the Republic tries to ascertain its total independence, efforts are being made to transform the RMS into a top-notch military school.

Republic Parliament

The Parliament is the main political vehicle in the Minmatar Republic and has replaced the gathering of the tribal leaders as the place of power and decision. Though the Parliament has little say in the internal affairs of the tribes it acts as the voice of the Minmatar people to the outside world and governs the relations with foreign powers.

Republic Security Services

The Minmatars learnt early on in their freedom that it can only be kept by wrapping it in secrets and deceit. The vigilance of the RSS has helped the Republic weather many storms that threatened to engulf the fledgling state. The RSS has strong links with the underworld elements in the world of EVE, the information exchange and black marketing strengthens both sides.

Republic University

The Republic University (from where future Minmatar industrialists graduate) was founded by Minmatar emigrants as a show of support for the fledgling republic shortly after its inception. The school is modeled after the University of Caille and based on the Gallentean education system.

Sebiestor tribe

The Sebiestors are technically and mechanically inclined, most Minmatar technology comes from them. The Sebiestors have always been the leading tribe in the Minmatar Republic, though their authority has many times been under attack from the crafty Krusual tribe, their main rivals in Republic politics.

Six Kin Development

One of the many companies that was formed after the Rebellion, the Six Kin dived headfirst into the rebuilding effort. Considered to be hard working and decent the company has seen a steady growth in recent past and seems poised to become a major player in the galactic construction business in the near future.

The Leisure Group

The enigmatic Kolvil Eifyr is a large shareholder in the Leisure Group and this ties the company in with the criminal elements so strong in the shady world of Minmatar power politics. The Leisure Group is an entertainment company that is known for its barbaric, yet stirring, pleasure nodes.

Tribal Liberation Force

The Minmatar heart sings for freedom and the Minmatar soul strives for open skies, but the Minmatar heart has been withering away in captivity. It is now up to you, capsuleer. You hold the power to free our people. You are the heroes of your generation. Join us in the struggle for freedom. Death to Amarr; long live the Minmatar Nation.

Urban Management

When the corporation was a part of the Minmatar government, Urban Management was responsible for the disbursement of land throughout the Republic after the Minmatar Rebellion. Following the immediate reconstruction period, the company was privatized, and it is now one of the Republic's largest corporations, with large real estate holdings and the majority of the Republic's construction and civil engineering services. In a growing economy like that of the modern Republic, such industries have been thriving, and Urban Management is now one of the largest such companies in the entire cluster.

Despite being privatized, the Minmatar government still maintains contracts with the company to provide many of the Republic's necessary administrative functions, such as tracking property ownership and certifying construction projects. Urban Management also serves in advisory roles, assisting the government in designing new urban centers and transportation projects.

Since the Elder War, Urban Management has been under a cloud of lawsuits by Nefantar families migrating from the Mandate. Prior to the Rebellion, many of these families held land in the Republic, but when the Mandate was formed, Urban Management confiscated that land and distributed it to other tribes on behalf of the government at the time. Thus far, no lawsuit has been successful, but Urban Management has invested a significant amount into its legal defense, cutting into its bottom line.

Vherokior tribe

The Vherokior tribe is perhaps the least troubled of the Minmatar tribes, with little aspirations for dominance, content to live on the fringe. Most Vherokiors are shop-keepers or small scale businessmen, seldom venturing into the big boy's league.

Amarr Empire

The largest of the five main empires, the Amarr Empire is a sprawling patch-work of feudal-like provinces held together by the might of the Empress. Religion has always played a big part in Amarrian politics and the Amarrians believe they are the rightful masters of the world, souring their relations with their neighbours. Another source of ill-feelings on part of the other empires is the fact that the Amarrians embrace slavery

24th Imperial Crusade

It was us who brought civilization to this dark and perilous world, and it is us who uphold it, with compassion, strength and courage. We need you to help us save the Minmatar from themselves. We will help the lost ones find their way, capsuleer, and we will do it with the deathless force only you can wield.

Amarr Certified News

The Amarr Certified News is one of the largest news corporations in all of New Eden, rivaling the Scope in size. In terms of sheer numbers, the Amarr Certified News is certainly a powerhouse, maintaining offices throughout the Amarr Empire and reporters in the State, Federation, Republic, and the nullsec space lanes.

The ACN covers all events in the Empire, from the pronouncements of the Emperor, to smaller, planetary stories of interest only to locals. It is the only news agency allowed to report directly from the royal courts, giving it unparalleled access into the inner worlds of the Heirs and other Amarr nobility. The news agency also has access to the highest justices on the Theology Council, naturally making it one of the few news sources that can cover matters relating to the Amarr religion with true authority.

When it comes to the other empires, the ACN tends only to cover those major events which can be painted with a pro-Amarr brush. While the State is given a relatively easy time, the ACN frequently depicts the hardships of the Federation and Republic, while completely ignoring their successes. When events are so major that the Empire has little choice but to cover them, it tends to push those stories to the margins.

This tendency has led opponents of the Empire to declare the ACN as little more than an Imperial propaganda tool. While this is in some cases a fair assessment, in practice the Empire does little to censor its news agency. The ACN was the first news corporation to cover embarrassing events such as the gruesome public trial of Aritcio Kor-Azor, all in a relatively unbiased and open manner.

Amarr Civil Service

The Amarr Empire is a bureaucratic juggernaut and the Amarr Civil Service has taken on a life of its own at the center of the vast web of governmental offices and institutions. The civil service is the largest employer within the empire and wields considerable political power through its ability to smother or speed up cases.

Amarr Constructions

A low-profile, conservative construction company that likes to keep out of the lime-light. Amarr Constructions had its heyday when the Amarrians were first entering space and participated in the construction of the first star gates. The innovative side of the company is long gone, though it still retains much of its old power and majesty.

Amarr Navy

The history of the Imperial Navy stretches back to the beginning of the Reclaiming on the continent of Amarr, making it the oldest armed force in the cluster.. In its time, the Navy has been a driving force in Amarr society, responsible for much of the Empire's advances in technology and exploration. The Navy's touch can be felt on every facet of the Amarr lifestyle, from the Emperor down to the lowest slave.

Nearly every corner of Empire space was first visited by the Navy's exploration corps, which investigates uncharted regions of space and surveys them for possible future conquest. First contact between the Amarr and nearly every other race in New Eden was facilitated through the Navy; sometimes peacefully, but often ending in violence.

The Imperial Navy is the largest naval force in New Eden, though much of the fleet has become obsolete in recent years. Its primary battle doctrine is one of overwhelming force, sending its large, well-armed and armored ships onto the field to mow down the opposition. This tactic served the Navy well for thousands of years, and between the launch of the Reclaiming beyond Amarr Prime and its meeting with the Jove Empire, the Navy could claim to have never lost a major fleet engagement.

It was the meeting with the Jove, however, that shattered the Navy's illusion of invulnerability. In the system of Vak'Atioth, an Amarr fleet was utterly decimated by the Jovian forces. Shortly after, with the Navy in minor disarray, the Minmatar people used the opportunity to rebel and successfully drove the Empire out of their homes. The Navy recovered from this disaster, and over the next hundred years re-established itself as a major force to be reckoned with. However, the events of the Elder War found the Empire under a large-scale invasion from Minmatar forces, and the Navy was saved from another serious defeat by the arrival of Empress Jamyl I and her fleet.

Despite this black mark to the Navy's record, it remains a powerful fleet inside the Empire. Citizens with military records are held in high regard in Amarr culture, and families with a long history of military service elevate themselves within Amarr society. The Navy offers one of the few ways that someone can raise themselves from

poverty. The fleet is remarkably non-discriminatory for an Amarr institution, accepting personnel from all bloodlines. Many people of Udorian, Ni-Kunni, and even Minmatar birth have served with distinction within the Navy.

The ascent of Jamyl I to the Imperial throne brings fears from the Navy's detractors that the Imperial Navy will be transformed into an even greater institution. It remains to be seen what the full impact of her reign will have, but it continues to be one of the most powerful and capable forces in all of New Eden.

Trade Registry

The Amarr government seeks to control as many aspects of the daily life of its citizens, especially everything that has to do with trade and communication. The Amarr Trade Registry has records of all transactions within Amarr space and also monitors all foreign trades and investment made within the empire.

Ardishapur Family

The Ardishapur family is the traditionalists of the royal families. They are conservative and champions of the Amarrian religion. Their domain is in many ways backward, but it is stable and secure.

Carthum Conglomerate

The Carthum is a fairly new company that was formed with aid from the Caldari Lai Dai mega corporation, which owns a considerable share in the company. Carthum brought much needed vitality into the stale field of research and development and has been responsible for the respectable hi-tech gadgetry in many recent Amarrian space ships.

Civic Court

The secular arm of the Amarrian justice system, the Civic Court has always acted in the shadow of the Theology Council. The Civic Court has often become a pawn in the political machinations of more powerful entities, though in latter years it has managed to stay relatively independent.

Ducia Foundry

One of the few Amarr companies that has ventured outside its borders in search of business opportunities. Ducia Foundry is an energetic mining company that is willing to take chances in their search for rich minerals. The company has been known to send heavily armed mining expeditions deep into the outer regions, a risk that few respectable companies are willing to take.

Emperor Family

An integral part of the bureaucratic behemoth that is the Amarr Empire, the Emperor Family acts as an extended court of the chosen sovereign. Upon his coronation, a new Emperor is expected to take his immediate family and trusted members of his royal house to join the families of previous Emperors. The structure of the Emperor Family promotes continuity and conservatism, as many key positions in the Family are invariably held by allies of Emperors past. This passive safeguard against change has helped the Amarr Empire remain stable for nearly 1400 years.

Since its creation during the Moral Reforms, the Emperor Family has always been a quiet political power, with the edges of its web touching upon every facet of imperial administration. The mixed heritage of the Family denotes that no single royal house is ever in complete control of Amarr, and that the Emperors must maintain good relations with all houses, constantly balancing expansion of power and the division of influence. The Family's secretaries and bureaucrats have no explicit power, as they are retained purely to implement the Emperor's will. However, the nature of such an organization allows them to subtly thwart edicts and initiatives that conflict with their own agendas.

The Court Chamberlain of the Amarr Empire is often chosen from among the most able members of the Emperor Family, and former Chamberlain Dochuta Karsoth was particularly adept at managing the disparate political wills of the Family. Through his contacts within the Emperor Family, Karsoth was able to remain in that position through the reigns of two Emperors, and effectively steal the power of the throne after the death of Doriam II.

Although it is uncommon for an Emperor to demand a member of the Emperor Family to leave the court, it has become a regular occurrence under the reign of Empress Jamyl I. Karsoth had many close allies within the Family, and Jamyl's allies have spent the better part of the past year purging the court of dissenters, who were presented as collaborators of the former Chamberlain. Until the Empress can be certain of the loyalty of the group, the Emperor Family remains in a greatly weakened position.

Further Foodstuffs

A small agricultural company jointly owned by the Ardishapur and Sarum families. The products of Further Foodstuffs are mostly used by the subjects of these two families, with what little is left surplus allowed to be sold on the open market. This has curbed the expansion opportunities of the company, though it means the fleets of Ardishapur and Sarum will never lack for food.

HZO Refinery

A small, but aggressive mining company that has concentrated its operation in the highly disputed regions between Minmatar and Ammatar space. Many of these areas are very mineral rich and HZO Refinery has shown

a hefty profit in recent years. The company is backed by the Ammatar authorities and the Sarum family, which has given the company the military power it needs to operate safely in this hotly contested space.

Hedion University

Hedion University (graduating the best Business students in the Empire) is located in the Hedion system - the first solar system colonized by the Amarrians after their own. The university was founded by spirited and liberal scholars, free from the scrutinizing eye of the Emperor and his theologians.

Imperial Academy

The Imperial Academy (from which all Amarr enlists graduate) is rooted in tradition and generally considered sub-par to the more modern military institutes found in the other empires. However, it is the only one of its kind within the Amarr Empire, thus serving a vital function.

Imperial Armaments

Imperial Armaments is the largest weapon manufacturer in the world of EVE. The company manufactures a full range of weaponry, from small arms to battleships. Typically of the huge Amarr Empire, the company has always preferred quantity over quality, thus its equipment is not particularly interesting from a technological standpoint, but it is reliable and durable.

Imperial Chancellor

The head of the executive branch of the Amarrian administration, the Imperial Chancellor is appointed by the Amarr Emperor and is answerable only to him. Though the Chancellor's authority is mostly confined to the bureaucracy of the empire, he is still considered one of the most powerful individuals within the empire.

Imperial Shipment

Imperial Shipment started out as the official courier service of the Amarr Emperor, but evolved some decades ago into a full fledged shipping company that operates throughout the Amarr Empire.

Inherent Implants

Inherent Implants is the leading cyber implant company in the world of EVE, which is easy to understand as they've been in business for centuries. Inherent Implants started by catering to the needy Holders, especially the royals. This is still their largest clientele, but recently the company has also started selling to other Amarrians and even foreigners. This has increased their profit many times, but is frowned upon by the conservative elements of the Amarr Holders.

Joint Harvesting

Joint Harvesting was formed a decade ago when several agricultural and mining companies joined together to form one giant company. One of the largest raw material companies in the world of EVE, Joint Harvesting conducts a wide variety of resource gathering and operates both inside and outside the Amarr Empire.

Kador Family

The Kador family symbolizes the grandeur of the empire. The family has had the most emperors elected in the past and to most Amarrians they stand for the strong, majestic empire of the old.

Kor-Azor Family

The Kor-Azor have traditionally been in the middle of Amarrian politics, actively trying to find compromises and peaceful solutions to any problem. Their diplomatic style is favored by the public, but has created many powerful enemies that are biding their time.

Ministry of Assessment

The Ministry of Assessment is responsible for surveying and exploring the solar systems in and near Amarr space, charting lucrative asteroid belts and planets. It is also responsible for monitoring the mining activity in these same areas and organizing the mining operations of Amarrian companies.

Ministry of Internal Order

The Amarr authorities have vast experience in molding their citizens as they want. The Ministry of Internal Order is responsible for hunting down disgruntled elements in the society and eradicating them. Since first contact the Ministry of Internal Order is also responsible for monitoring the activities of foreigners within the Amarr border, especially Minmatar terrorist cells.

Ministry of War

The Ministry of War wields extensive powers within the Amarr Empire through their control of the armed forces. The Ministry of War is responsible for the construction and maintenance of the Amarrian military and space navy, and it also has a great say in the foreign policy of the empire.

Noble Appliances

A small manufacturing company that specializes in customized jewelry for the very wealthy. But the company's managers have been shrewd enough to expand its production line to increase its flexibility and security. Today, the company manufactures many kinds of both luxury and mundane items, usually in high quality and small numbers.

Gallente Federation

The Gallente Federation encompasses several races, the Gallenteans the largest by far. The Federation is democratic and very liberal in a world full of dictators and oligarchies. The Caldari State was once part of the Federation, but a severe dispute resulted in their departure and a long war between the Gallente Federation and the Caldari State. The Gallenteans are the masters of pleasure and entertainment and their rich trade empire has given the world many of its most glorious and extravagant sights.

Aliastra

A well-run retail company that has a broad inter-stellar scope, with operations in all the empires. Aliastra has not been able to compete domestically with FedMart, but has seen moderate success in other empires.

Allotek Industries

Allotek Industries is an offshoot from Roden Shipyards, founded several years ago to develop and manufacture top quality ship modules. Though the company is still in its infancy it already has an impressive product catalog that promises great things for this company in the future.

Astral Mining Inc.

Astral Mining is considered by many the best run mining company in the world of EVE. It is well organized, with well defined surveying, mining and selling divisions that year after year make Astral Mining one of the biggest earners in the corporate world.

Bank of Luminaire

The national bank of the Gallenteans, located on Gallente Prime. The bank has been in operation for many centuries and has a web of vested economical interests throughout the Federation, allowing it to participate or interfere with most aspects of Gallentean society.

Center for Advanced Studies

Originally conceived as a think-tank for researchers at Chemal Tech, the Center for Advanced Studies (the breeding grounds for future Gallente industrialists) evolved into an independent educational facility that today is considered one of the very best technical schools in the universe.

Chemal Tech

Chemal Tech is an established hi-tech company that was at the forefront of electronic warfare technology a few decades back. Though the fortunes of the company have somewhat dimmed since then it still cranks out top quality EW equipment.

Combined Harvest

The main agricultural company in the Federation, Combined Harvest is conservative and passive in nature. It operates solely within the Federation and has no aspirations to muscle in on other markets. However, it is extremely paranoid about its own market share and is willing to go to any length to protect it.

CreoDron

Founded by Old Man Darieux after his return from his fantastic journey to the Ouperia system, CreoDron has been the leading corporation in drone manufacture and development for many years.

As the largest drone developer and manufacturer in space, CreoDron has a vested interest in drone carriers. While sacrificing relatively little in the way of defensive capability, CreoDron ships can chew their way through surprisingly strong opponents - provided, of course, that the pilot uses top-of-the-line CreoDron drones.

Duvolle Laboratories

Duvolle Laboratories is one of those rare companies that focus more on the research than the practical application of their discoveries. Duvolle is engaged in a myriad of R&D, ranging from hi-tech weaponry to nano-robots to cloning equipment.

Duvolle Labs manufactures sturdy ships with a good mix of offensive and defensive capabilities. Since the company is one of New Eden's foremost manufacturers of particle blasters, its ships tend to favor turrets and thus have somewhat higher power output than normal.

Egonics Inc.

Egonics holds a unique place in the music industry. The company uses a special technology for broadcasting sound, which has become extremely popular, especially amongst the younger generations. Egonics employs its own music makers and can tailor the music to the individual taste of every listener. Not everyone is happy with the Egonics technology and it has been outlawed from the Amarr Empire.

FedMart

The largest retail corporation in the world of EVE, FedMart is close to having a monopoly within the Federation, something that is of great concern to the Federal administration.

Federal Administration

The Federal Administration has greater presence in space than the bureaucratic apparatus of the other empires. This is mainly due to the fact that space travel became a common thing for the ordinary Gallentean citizen much

earlier than for the other empires and also because inter-stellar trade is proportionally much larger in the Federation than elsewhere.

Federal Defence Union

The Federation has awoken to the threat, and now its strength shall be tried. We wanted peace, and now we are faced with war, provoked by the destructive Caldari. We need brave pilots to fly into the fray and protect not only the ideals for which we stand, but the Federation that upholds them in these dark times. Join us, capsuleer. With your strength and your conviction we shall endure.

Federal Freight

Even though Federal Freight is smaller than many other shipping companies it is still the most recognized shipping brand within the Federation. The company is old and established and has always concentrated their efforts within the Federation, even at times when it seemed lucrative to expand out of it.

Federal Intelligence Office

The FIO answers directly to the President and its works are shrouded in secrecy and covert operations. It is believed to operate an extensive spy network that is only rivaled by the Jovians.

Federal Navy Academy

The Federation Navy (where all Gallente cadets are enlisted) has recently begun upholding extremely strict standards of professionalism for its cadets. The result of these standards, draconian even for a military school, is a leaner, meaner academy with much stricter entry requirements than before and more effective tutoring.

Federation Customs

With trade, especially inter-stellar trade, such an integral part of Gallentean society, it is no wonder that the Customs office has gained so much power and influence. Goods are constantly flowing in and out of the Federation and the Customs have its hands full in monitoring that everything is done by the book.

Federal Administration

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Federation Navy

The Federation Navy has seen better days, since the end of the war with the Caldari and the thawing in relations with the Amarrians the budget for the Navy has been slashed severely. It still relies on its drone armada to defeat opponents, but ship wise the Federal Navy is lacking.

Garoun Investment Bank

The Garoun Investment Bank specializes in funding startup companies, especially in the hi-tech and entertainment sectors. It is owned by Quafe and the media mogul Raphel Bar, they formed it to further their influence in these vital industries.

Impetus

Impetus is the main producer of holo reels in the world of EVE, producing anything from epic historical movies to cheap porn flicks. Impetus has in recent years led the development of instant news arrays, a technology that will revolutionize the news business once complete.

Inner Zone Shipping

A small shipping company that specializes in the bulk shipment of raw materials. The Bank of Luminaire bought a majority share recently and has employed IZS in shipping money and other valuables between stations, due to IZS' excellent security system.

Material Acquisition

Material Acquisition has grabbed a sizeable market share in the short time since it was founded, mainly due to its ruthless business practices and tendency to buy out competitors. MA's mother company is Quafe, which has poured money into MA in an attempt to make it the largest mining company in the Federation.

Pend Insurance

Pend Insurance was founded by Pier Ancru some 20 years ago. Ancru is a true Gallentean success story; he comes from very poor background, but through grit and determination he rose to the top and is today one of the richest person in the Federation. His company is mainly an investment firm, though they also act in the role of a traditional bank.

Poteque Pharmaceuticals

Poteque is one of the leading biotech corporations in the world of EVE. In its rich history it has often worked small miracles in discovering or developing cures for a host of human sicknesses. It is currently embroiled in a top secret research project for the Federal government, the result of which should come to fruition in the near

future.

President

The President is the head of the executive branch of the Federal government. He wields great power and is in many respects the most powerful individual in the world of EVE. The current President, Foiritan, is very much a man of the people.

Quafe Company

One of the largest corporations in the world of EVE, Quafe bases its phenomenal success on their extremely popular Quafe drink. But the company operates in many other fields and its power is such that it has a considerable political clout.

Roden Shipyards

Owned by the infamous Jacus Roden, a robber baron and scoundrel if there ever was one. Under his cunning leadership the company has established itself as a leading manufacturer of frigates and shuttles in the Federation. The company also operates a strong RDdivision, Roden has been active in hiring the best talents out there, often by prying them from other companies with promises of fame and fortune.

Senate

The Senate is the legislative arm of the Federal government. It also oversees the Federal budget, which gives it great powers. The Senate has often been weakened by factionalism, but the current one has often presented a united front to the President, making his life very hard.

Supreme Court

The Supreme Court is the highest judicial institution in the Federation. It makes sure the Federal constitution is upheld, but it is mainly concerned about the higher truths of authority, striving to make the administration as open and honest as possible.

The Scope

The Scope is the leading news agency in the world of EVE. Though based in the Federation the company takes pride in its total independence and operates separate agencies throughout the world. The Scope swings slightly to the left, but it's conservative enough to be considered a reliable news agency even to the toughest businessmen and politicians.

University of Caille

The largest school in the universe at almost half a million students, the University of Caille has long acted as a melting pot for cultures and ideas from all over. As befits its status, it offers a wide range of studies, but is best known for its extensive anthropology department.

TransStellar Shipping

The largest shipping company in the world of EVE, TransStellar Shipping offers a cheap and reliable service almost anywhere. Considered the next best thing to InterBus in interstellar shipping, TransStellar Shipping is a stellar example of a big company getting bigger due to pure marketing muscle.

Nurtura

The Amarrians have whole planets dedicated to food production, the populous state has bitter experience from famine and wants to make sure it never experiences famine again on a large scale. Nurtura is one of the larger Amarrian agricultural companies, one that has been in the forefront of exporting basic foodstuff to the other empires.

Royal Amarr Institute

One of the oldest educational facilities in the universe (the breeding grounds for future Amarrian industrialists), the Royal Amarr Institute dates from an era when the Amarrians were still confined to their continent on Amarr Prime, before the Empire and the Great Reclaiming.

Sarum Family

The Sarum family has always been the most belligerent of the royal families, always willing to take up arms whenever required. The family has vested interest in the Amarr military and the armaments industry. They are the only royal family that wants to revive the Reclaiming efforts of old.

Tash-Murkon Family

The Tash-Murkon family was elevated to the status of a royal family following the departure of the Khanid family. The Tash-Murkons are also outsiders because they are of Udorian ancestry, not true Amarrians. Yet through their vast wealth they have managed to buy themselves to the top.

Theology Council

The last great vestige of the religious sect that once ruled the empire, the Theology Council has the same role as the supreme court has in other empires. It also acts a moral police and hunter of heretics, which gives it considerable power within the empire, allowing it to investigate, question and even imprison almost anyone at its whim.

Viziam

Viziam is only a few years old, having been founded around the remnants of a hi-tech company that floundered. Viziam received support from the Carthum Conglomerate and has quickly risen to prominence in the industrial sector of the Amarr Empire.

Zoar and Sons

Zoar and Sons is one of the oldest manufacturing companies in the Empire, dating back to the Moral Reforms around 1500 years ago. The company was founded by an influential and shrewd Holder named Zoar, who had numerous connections with the newly formed Privy Council. Utilizing those connections to the fullest degree, Zoar managed to propel his company to the top, becoming the most widespread and powerful corporation in the Empire.

At its height, Zoar and Sons supplied nearly every region of the Empire with everything from electronics to vehicles to construction supplies. Beyond his own connections, Zoar proved to be an amazing businessman, and he enjoyed rare successes with both commoners and Holders. His techniques were so effective that they are still taught to aspiring Amarr businessmen, and even in some Caldari schools.

However, the success lasted only as long as Zoar did. Upon his death, he left his many sons in charge, each the head of different divisions. With every son desiring to leave his own legacy on the company, the once unified corporation found itself driven in a multitude of incompatible directions, weakening the company significantly.

In addition, the company found itself under attack by the many political enemies Zoar managed to accumulate during his life. The company lost many of its manufacturing contracts with the Imperial Navy and Heirs, and on more than one occasion the sons considered selling out to foreign investors.

Eventually, one of the sons managed to secure investments from Khanid Innovations and bought out his brothers. Finally under a single umbrella, Zoar and Sons managed to stay afloat, and the old grudges against Zoar died and were forgotten.

Since those days, the company has managed to regain some of its standing in the Empire. It has never regained the importance it once held in Zoar's time, but the company is larger today than it ever has been, serving a majority of the Empire with its products.

Jove Empire

The Jove Empire is isolated from the rest of the world to all but a selected few. The Jovians are a mystery to the other races, fueled not only by their elusiveness, but also their highly advanced technology, eons ahead of the other races. The Jovians have been civilized longer than any other race in the world of EVE and have gone through several golden ages, now long-since shrouded in the past. The current Jovian Empire is only a pale shadow of its former self, mainly because of the Jovian Disease - a psychological disorder that is always fatal.

Academy of Aggressive Behaviour

Most Jovians have had their aggressive instincts curbed or even removed through genetic engineering. The Academy for Aggressive Behaviour, responsible for training space cadets, uses the latest in gene therapies to reintroduce the base instincts to their students to ensure the animalistic nature of humans, so important for fighting, is alive and fresh in them.

Genolution

Genolution is the leading cloning company in the world of EVE. Not only was it the first company to start offering clones to the public, but since then it has improved the cloning technique considerably, paving the way for others to follow in their footsteps.

Impro

Impro is a small hi-tech company that is one of the few Jovian companies to operate outside Jove space. It manufactures mainly electronic hardware, far superior to those produced by the other empires.

Jove Navy

No one knows how big the Jove Navy is, though judging by the number of Jovians it can't be all that big. Yet it is universally revered and feared, considered the most powerful of all the empire's fleets. Its reputation dates from the Amarr-Jove War when it decimated a whole Amarrian armada in a single battle.

Jovian directorate

The Jovian directorate is believed to be the highest governmental authority in the Jove Empire, though this has never been confirmed or denied by the Jovians. The inner workings of the directorate are also uncertain.

Material Institute

The Jovians, with all their power and resources, are not always very pragmatic. The Material Institute was founded precisely to combat this. Most Jovians are already well schooled in the technical aspects, but they need some tutoring on the practical application for use in industry and manufacturing.

Prosper

Prosper is a financial corporation that has in recent years invested in several hi-tech companies around the world. It has never sought a majority ownership in any company and has a policy of non-interference. Nevertheless, most companies welcome their capital with open arms, simply for the prestige that having a Jovian investor gives.

Shapeset

Shapeset is the main manufacturer of Jovian ships and ship modules. It operates solely within Jovian space and has refused all approaches from abroad to sell the products to non-Jovians.

X-Sense

X-Sense manufacture medical equipment that it sells all over the world of EVE. When neural boosters were legal X-Sense was also one of the leaders in that field, though it naturally stopped producing them once they became illegal.

CONCORD Assembly

CONCORD is an independent organization founded a century ago to facilitate negotiations between the races to improve relations, as well as to foster inter-stellar trade through policing and regulations. Starting as a fledgling meeting ground for diplomats CONCORD has in the decades since it was founded slowly increased its power and influence. It has become an entity independent of the races, as it is able to largely fund its own operation through customs, confiscation of contraband goods, and other means.

CONCORD

CONCORD was jointly formed a century ago by all the empires. The intention of it was to foster the fragile relationship between the empires and act as a meeting place where they could discuss their differences and hammer out a compromise solution. CONCORD has since taken on a life of its own, proud of its independence and determined to uphold its duties.

DED

DED (Directive Enforcement Department) is the police enforcement arm of CONCORD. DED has the responsibility of tracking down known criminals and attacking criminal facilities. They frequently operate outside empire space, wanting criminals to understand that they are nowhere safe from the long arm of the law.

Inner Circle

Inner Circle is the top level department of CONCORD. The policies of CONCORD are discussed and decided on Inner Circle meetings, which are usually closed to the public. At first the members of the circle were nominated by the empires, but now they rise from the ranks of CONCORD employees. Thus, their loyalty is no longer bound to any one empire, but rather to CONCORD itself.

Secure Commerce Commission

The SCC is responsible for regulating and monitoring all trade transactions that take place on space stations. It has agents on all stations that record the transactions and they also offer courier and escrow services to make trade smooth.

Ammatar Mandate

The Ammatars are part of the Amarr Empire, but are of Minmatar origin. During the time the Amarrians occupied the Minmatar home worlds one of the Minmatar tribes, the Nefantars, collaborated heavily with the Amarrians. The Nefantars fled Minmatar space during the Minmatar Rebellion and the Amarr Emperor set them up in Amarr controlled areas close to Minmatar space. Soon everyone had started calling them Ammatars. Today, the Ammatars enjoy a semi-autonomy in their own space and are still embroiled in war with their former Minmatar brethren.

Ammatar Consulate

The Ammatars have a semi-sovereign state bound to the Amarrians. The Ammatar Consulate is the highest governmental office for the Ammatars and takes care of the general running of the Ammatar state. It is manned by Ammatars, but they all bow to the Ammatar governor, which is an Amarrian.

Ammatar Fleet

The Amarrians allow the Ammatars to operate their own fleet, knowing that it will be employed against the Minmatars that otherwise would harass the Amarr Empire. The Ammatar Fleet is neither big nor sophisticated, but it's strong enough to keep the Minmatars at bay.

Nefantar Miner Association

The Nefantar Miner Association is primarily a mining company, but with a strong militaristic overtone. This is because it operates mostly in the areas between Ammatar and Minmatar space. The area has many rich mineral zones, making it coveted by more or less everyone.

Khanid Kingdom

The Khanid Kingdom, also known as the Dark Amarr, was founded a few centuries ago when the last Amarr Emperor was chosen. Khanid was one of the royal heirs at the time and, in accordance with tradition, should have killed himself after failing to become emperor. This Khanid refused to do and split his vast domains from the Amarr Empire. The empire retaliated, but only managed to conquer some of the vulnerable outer regions from Khanid. The Kingdom still upholds many of the tradition of Amarr society, but has also wholeheartedly embraced the customs of others, mainly the Caldari. Many visitors to the Kingdom feel like it is a surreal mix of the Amarr and Caldari empires.

Khanid Innovation

Khanid Innovation is a hi-tech research firm that has come up with many astounding discoveries in the past few decades. The company has always been at the forefront of weapon research thanks to the urgency in combating the threat of an Amarrian invasion.

Khanid Transport

Khanid Transport is a small shipping company that operates mainly within the Khanid Kingdom. It has also tried its hands at exploration, but there have been no news about its successes or failures in that endeavor.

Khanid Works

One of the first things that Khanid II did after separating from the Amarr Empire was to set up a company capable of building a brand new space fleet to deter the Amarrians from invading. Khanid Works cranked its first ship out within weeks and its success is evident as the Amarrians have never invaded the kingdom.

Royal Khanid Navy

The Royal Khanid Navy consists of ships designed by the Dark Amarrians themselves, with a bit of help from the Caldari, which the kingdom has always held good relations with. The RKN is not big, but much more hi-tech than that of their cousins the Amarrians.

The Syndicate

Formed by Intaki exiles from the Gallente Federation during the Caldari-Gallente War. The Syndicate has slowly grown in stature and influence and now serves as an important link between the empires and the illegal elements in the outer regions. Syndicate space is a pirate haven, but still retains enough civility to allow pretty much anyone to travel there to do business. The Syndicate markets are always chockfull of contraband goods and illegal wares that are hard or impossible to come by elsewhere. Each Syndicate station is a autonomous entity, but they cooperate on security and information issues. The unofficial leader of the Syndicate is Silphy en Diabel, a former Sister of EVE that returned to Syndicate space to save her family's fortune. Since then she's turned out to be just as resourceful and ruthless as her late father.

Intaki Bank

The Intaki Bank has seen brisk business in the decade since it decided to keep the names on all accounts secret and inaccessible to anyone. Everyone knows that dirty money pours in and out of the bank, but the general consensus of the Syndicate is that if it doesn't provide this service, then someone else will.

Intaki Commerce

The Syndicate is the biggest black market dealer in the world of EVE, a place where shady traders from the outer regions can meet merchants from empire space. Intaki Commerce handles these transactions, making a nice profit for the Syndicate.

Intaki Space Police

The Syndicate wants their space to be relatively trouble-free, so as to encourage people to visit and spend their money. With empire policing infrequent, they employ their own police force to enforce the peace.

Intaki Syndicate

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Guristas Pirates

Formed by two former members of the Caldari Navy, the pair go by the names Fatal and the Rabbit, the Guristas are a constant thorn in the side of the Caldari State. The Guristas are traditional pirates in the sense that their operation is not based around some creed or ideology, but rather a plain and simple greed. The Guristas have bases close to Caldari space and from them they embark on daring raids, often into the State itself. Though the Guristas are considered more honorable than many of their counterparts, they are still extremely dangerous and not to be tampered with

Guristas

The Guristas are a pirate cartel that has harassed the Caldari for some years. The Guristas are led by former members of the Caldari Navy and they are the best organized and most disciplined pirate cartel operating in the outer regions.

Guristas Production

A recent addition to the Guristas pirate cartel, responsible for maintaining the cartel's fleets and stations. Guristas Production is also believed to be engaged in several top secret research projects, mostly in the missile field.

Angel Cartel

Operating from the heart of the Curse region, the Angel Cartel is today the largest and best organized of the space-based criminal factions. The Angels are divided into several groups, each with a very special function. It is commanded by the Dominations and in the century they've been lurking in deep space they have stolen, plundered or sabotaged countless number of ships and kidnapped, molested or murdered thousands of people. The Angels recruit members from all the races, and are thus not bound to any one zone of operation, which spans almost the entire known world. Many believe that the Angels got their power by uncovering Jovian technologies hidden in their ancient homes, now infested by the Angel Cartel.

Archangels

The main arm of the Angel Cartel, the Archangels have no one center of operation, but can be seen roaming the space lanes most everywhere. They are equally adapt at piracy, scavenging and smuggling.

Dominations

The Dominations is the command division of the Angel Cartel. The Dominations are quite elusive and seldom venture far from their bases in the Curse region. Little is known about the identities of the leaders of the Angel Cartel, though it is understood they come from all the races.

Guardian Angels

The Guardian Angels is a division of the Angel Cartel that are today exclusively occupied with guarding Serpents space stations. The Serpents Corporation pays the Angel Cartel handsomely for the protection, that is strong enough to keep even the DED at bay.

Salvation Angels

The Salvation Angels are the non-combat division of the Angel Cartel. The Salvation Angels are responsible for building and maintaining the Angels stations and space ships. For this, they frequently salvage what they need from the wrecks their fellow Angels have left behind.

The Blood Raider Covenant

The Amarr Empire has had its share of religious cults and fanatics in the past, but few have been as successful, or been feared as much, as the Blood Raiders. The Blood Raiders are a sect of an ancient cult called Sani Sabik, which uses blood in their rituals. The Blood Raiders believe that cloned bodies have 'purer' blood than other bodies and this explains why they operate mainly in space, attacking unwary space farers and draining their bodies of blood. The Blood Raiders are led by the fearsome Omir Sarikusa, who has remained on top of the DED most wanted list for many years now. Under his leadership the Blood Raiders have become more organized and they have established several bases in the Bleak Lands region.

Blood Raiders

The Blood Raiders evolved from an ancient Amarrian cult into a cut-throat bandits that revel in killing and maiming. Considered among the most dangerous and depraved of all pirate elements operating in space CONCORD strongly advises people to stay out of their zones in the Bleak Lands.

The InterBus

The InterBus is one of the more successful joint ventures the empires have undertaken. It was formed some 30 years ago to act as a neutral passenger transportation company that would span the entire known world. Since then it has evolved a bit, especially when it started to ferry goods too. The InterBus is used by the SCC to ferry goods between stations, as they are reliable and operate in every station in the world. As InterBus has to operate not only in empire stations, but also in pirate havens and other stations associated with organized crime, the company has to uphold a very strict policy regarding neutrality and secrecy. Even if the company is owned by the empires, no information regarding shipments or station locations is ever given out. The strict adherence to these rules has allowed InterBus to operate without harassment in every corner of the world of EVE, making them one of the pillars of the inter-stellar community.

ORE

Outer Ring Excavations, or ORE, is the largest independent mining corporation around. ORE was originally a fledgling Gallentean company, but struck gold when they found extremely rich Nocxium asteroid belts in the Outer Ring region. When the Gallente Federation tried to force ORE to reveal the location of the asteroid fields the company left Gallentean space and set up base in the Outer Ring region. They used their massive wealth to buy protection for their bases and keep their operation secret. Several pirate factions have tried to muscle in on the ORE territories, but with little success.

A filthy rich corporation that disassociated itself from the Federation when it tried to encroach on the companies riches. ORE operates mainly in the Outer Ring and Cloud Ring regions, where they have mining installations scattered around in hidden locations, grinding out the most valuable minerals on the market.

Thukker Tribe

The Thukker tribe is one of the seven original Minmatar tribes. After the Minmatar Rebellion the Thukkers left Minmatar space and took up the nomadic lifestyles of their ancestors, only this time in space. The closest thing they've got to home is the Great Wildlands region, where they are very numerous, but the Thukkers like to be on the move, constantly going from one solar system to another in their huge caravans, trading and scavenging. Respectable citizens of EVE frown upon the Thukkers, considering them to be nothing but scoundrels and thieves. Indeed, the Thukkers often operate on the shadier side of the law, but their resourcefulness and diligence count a lot more for their success than their criminal activities.

Thukker Mix

The Thukker tribe is one of the Minmatar tribes. It is nomadic in nature, constantly roaming from one place to another. The closest thing to a home they've got is the Great Wildlands region, where they have several pirate havens.

Trust Partners

The Thukkers are by many considered to be scoundrels and pirates, but many of them actually operate on the right side of the law. Trust Partners has established itself as a decent shipping and trading company that even respectable empire corporations have started dealing with.

The Servant Sisters of EVE

The Sisters of EVE are mainly known for their humanitarian aid efforts to those suffering because of war, famine or even just being lost in space. But the Sisters of EVE base their existence on strong religious beliefs, which they have coupled with scientific facts. They believe that the EVE gate is a gateway to heaven - that god resides on the other side of the gate. As well as dedicating themselves to aiding those in need they are also busy with scientific experiments around the EVE gate, hoping to gain a better understanding of the forces at work there.

Food Relief

Food Relief is the humanitarian aid arm of the Sisters of EVE. The company collects donations from all over the world of EVE and uses them to buy food and medicine, which it then distributes to those in need.

The Sanctuary

The Sanctuary is the center of the science research the Sisters are undertaking on the EVE gate. It also acts as a typical refuge haven as all other SOE stations, but this activity is secondary to its scientific pursuits.

Sisters of EVE

The Sisters of EVE are a humanitarian aid organization that is based on religion. The Sisters operate many stations outside empire space where weary travelers can seek refuge. SOE is also engaged in a scientific research project on the EVE gate, which they consider to be the gateway to heaven and are determined to unlock its secrets.

The Society

The Society of Conscious Thought is three centuries old and was founded by a Jovian named Ior Labron, who was in search of spiritual enlightenment. The Society has since then taken many guises and been anything from a religious sect full of hermits to a political institute playing the power game. Today, the Society is mainly known for their scholastic achievements, their schools are widely regarded as the best ones in the world of EVE and rich and influential parents everywhere fight to get their kids admitted. Offering large sums of money is, however, no guarantee for admittance, as the Society has its own peculiar selection process that seems to have little rhyme or reason to outsiders. The Society operates in remote areas, where they build strongholds called kitz. Not all kitz are schools, some are still devoted to spiritual enlightenment or scientific pursuits.

The Society of Conscious Thought was founded some 300 years ago. Since then it has seen many guises, including spiritual healing-house and political power-block. Today, it is one of the finest and most respected educational facilities in the world of EVE. As it is only loosely connected to the Jove state the Society admits non-Jovian students. For them, being admitted to a Society school is a great honor and an almost certain ticket to a prestigious position later in life.

Mordu's Legion Command

The origin of Mordu's Legion lies in the Gallente-Caldari War when a group Intaki military personnel sided with the Caldari. The Intakis were put into a separate unit with a Caldari officer named Mordu. After the war the Intakis settled in Caldari space, but unwillingly became entangled with Caldari locals in the Waschi Uprising. Mordu's Legion was formed at that time as a mercenary fighting force and after the uprising it continued in existence. The Legion is loosely associated with the Caldari Navy, but are in most part totally independent. Mordu's Legion is commonly hired by companies to protect valuable assets outside empire space, for instance Outer Ring Excavations pays them handsomely to patrol the Outer Ring region.

Mordu's Legion is a mercenary corporation that operates outside Caldari and Gallente space, hired by respectable companies such as ORE to protect their operation. Originally the members of the legion were mostly Intakis and Caldari, but lately they've started accepting members from most races.

Sansha's Nation

Sansha's Nation was founded more than a century ago, shortly after all the empires had come into contact, just when space exploration and colonization was taking off. Sansha was a Caldari tycoon that carved out a sizeable piece of space for himself. There, he set out to create an utopian state. His vision and charm attracted thousands of people and for some time the Nation flourished. But Sansha became ever more warped as his success increased. He started experiments, combining capsule technology with the human mind, creating a zombie like creatures that had the cold, calculating mind of a computer, but the ingenuity of humans. When this became public knowledge Sansha was condemned and the other empires joined forces to bring him down. His forces were decimated and scattered to the winds. Remnants still remain far in the outer regions, but the once glorious Nation has been reduced to pirates and pillagers.

True Creations

Despite the fact that Sansha's Nation was destroyed decades ago, remnants still remain in deep space and are in many ways growing in stature. True Creations operate several shipyards that are increasing the number of Sansha's ships roaming space each and every day.

True Power

True Power is what remains of the military arm of Sansha's Nation. Though it is mainly concerned about protecting the remaining assets of the Nation, it also is engaged in mining and manufacturing operations to maintain its strength.

Serpentis

The Serpentis Corporation was founded a few decades ago by V.Salvador Sarpati. At first it was engaged in hi-tech research, but with time its ties with the underworld grew and the Serpentis research stations, scattered around in remote areas, became infamous pirate havens. Sarpati made a deal with the Angel Cartel early on to provide protection for his stations and the duty was taken on by the Guardian Angels. Both sides have prospered enormously for this deal - Serpentis can operate in peace and the Angel Cartel gets access to the illegal research efforts of the Serpentis. It is strongly believed that Serpentis is the main developer and manufacturer of illegal neural boosters, especially since Sarpati's father was a renown specialist in that field. The home of Serpentis is in the Phoenix constellation in the Fountain region.

Serpentis Corporation

The Serpentis Corporation was initially a Gallentean research firm that evolved into a drug cartel. The Serpentis Corporation is believed to be the biggest producer and distributor of illegal neural boosters. They have employed the Guardian Angels to protect their assets in space.

Serpentis Inquest

Serpentis Inquest is a offspring of the Serpentis Corporation that is also a research company, but instead of focusing on neural boosters Inquest is researching black cyber implants and alternative cloning methods.

Regions

AB21-A:

"It was like the gods of old, descending from the heavens and handing us fire, empowering us far beyond our comprehension.. and then vanishing."

- Treatise on the rise of the capsuleer.

Aridia:

"It has been a long, tedious journey. Whilst my cartographer maintains that the distance from the central Throne Worlds is not great, the travails of getting here were, for many reasons, too tiresome to enumerate. The mineral survey report is also grim. It seems the riches we were led to expect are nowhere to be found. This region seems literally devoid of anything of worth, a desert with no oasis in sight, where even my faith seems to shrivel and die. Perhaps others will find worth here. I cannot."

- From the journal of Soruma Aquium, Commander 51st Exploration Corps.

Branch:

The northern hinterland of Branch remains a dismal and largely desolate region, despite its considerable mineral wealth. Unlike the rest of the densely-packed northern cluster, Branch and its neighbor Tenal occupy a sector of space located behind the vast tracts of Guristas-infested Venal, making access to them even more hazardous than usual. Perversely, this inaccessibility is also one of its greatest attractions: many capsuleer regimes have found this isolated fastness perfect for establishing the fortified core of their dominion.

Cache:

The history of Cache is shrouded in mystery, even among the highest levels of the four Empires. No record remains of its original explorers, or what they were after. The region stretches out into the eastern darkness like a mangled claw, stringing far-flung stars into a twisted necklace of frozen tears. What did the nameless voyagers hope to find out in the cold tomb of trackless space? And given the abrupt end to which the region comes, did they find it, or did some darker fate befall them?

Catch:

Catch has long been a strategically important region. During the initial expansion into the rim territories, it linked the Khanid Kingdom, Sansha's Nation and the Angel Cartel to one another, and through its connections to Providence was given considerable status as the "Southern Gateway" by the Amarr Empire. Unlike regions such as Pure Blind, however, its importance did not fade with the dawn of the capsuleer era, as its branching links east and west ensured continued relevance. As a consequence it has earned itself a bloody reputation - some say the very stars reverberate with the dying breaths of the countless lost souls.

Cloud Ring:

Named by noted Intaki astronomer Alnadil Joubert, Cloud Ring is notable for its central constellations, which are encompassed by a massive ring of dust and gas expelled from an ancient stellar catastrophe of colossal proportions. The first scientist to observe and detail this phenomenon from observatories in the Placid region, Joubert went on to theorize that analysis of the ring's extent, density, and rate of expansion could give insight as to what monumental event could have caused such a disturbance and when it might have occurred.

He further theorized that such an explosion might have had far-reaching gravitic effects that could destabilize wormholes, and might have been a contributing factor in the collapse of the EVE Gate. While later researchers have discounted many of his ideas, the validity of his theories has yet to be categorically disproven. It is noteworthy that the Sisters of EVE maintain several bases in Placid, from which scientific expeditions to study the Cloud Ring are coordinated.

Curse

Once we were mighty,
Stars bent to our will,
Our reach was infinite,
Our power incontestable,
With outstretched hands we tried,
To touch the face of perfection,
But we came too close,
To that which is not due mortals,
And our punishment is our curse,
Our endless sorrow.

- Translation of an old Jovian poem

"Perfection ain't all it's *****ed up to be"

- Angel saying

Deklein:

Deklein is a narrow band of stars loosely connected by some of the most ancient gates outside of empire space. Reminiscent of a skeletal finger pointing out toward the void, it is such a remote region that some of the gates found when the area was first explored are still in use. While in most regions gate crews swap out every five

years or so, in Deklein some of these ancient gates have been run by the same family for hundreds of years.

These families have intricate knowledge of their gates and the network they're connected to. It was once the practice that aspiring gatemen would travel to Deklein to do their year and come back "Deklein-trained" – a title of some honor which would almost guarantee them a chief gate operator position upon their return. Of course, some never would return...

With the gradual influx of heavy Gurista presence in the area this practice ceased, although the families still exist, keeping the gate network running and passing on their extensive knowledge to any gate operator crazy enough to run the gauntlet of dangers to reach them.

Delve:

Bloody Omir ran away
Hiding from the light of day
Made a base out in the night
Far far from the Empire's might
Holders think they all are safe
Protected by the Emp'ror's grace
Silly people, they should know
You shall reap just what you sow
Bloody Omir's coming back
Monsters from the endless black
Wading through a crimson flood
Omir's come to drink your blood
- Nursery Rhyme

Derelik:

The Derelik region, sovereign seat of the Ammatar Mandate, became the shield to the Amarrian flank in the wake of the Minmatar Rebellion. Derelik witnessed many hostile exchanges between the Amarr and rebel forces as the latter tried to push deeper into the territory of their former masters. Having held their ground, thanks in no small part to the Ammatars' military efforts, the Amarr awarded the Ammatar with their own province. However, this portion of space shared borders with the newly forming Minmatar Republic as well as the Empire, and thus came to be situated in a dark recess surrounded by hostiles.

Given the lack of safe routes elsewhere, the local economies of this region were dependent on trade with the Amarr as their primary means of survival. The Ammatar persevered over many decades of economic stagnation and limited trade partners, and their determination has in recent decades been rewarded with an increase in economic prosperity. This harsh trail is a point of pride for all who call themselves Ammatar, and it has bolstered their faith in the Amarrian way to no end.

Detorid

In the outer reaches of the south, nestled behind its formidable neighbors, lies Detorid. This unassuming region is home to what have become termed dead storms, a phenomenon thus far not found anywhere else. They appear randomly, centered around certain planets, ravage the area for days, then abruptly vanish.

Scientists have had relatively few chances to travel to the region to study dead storms, as Detorid once marked the edge of the Jove Empire and now lies within the Angel Cartel's territory. Current theory points to the storms being tears in the fabric of space. Why they exist in the first place, or the reason for their being focused around certain planets, remain mysteries and will no doubt do so for some time yet.

Devoid:

Only through many hardships
Is a man stripped to his very foundations
And in such a state
Devoid of distractions
Is his soul free to soar
And in this
He is closest to God

- The Scriptures, Book of Missions Verses 42:5

Domain:

"In God's name, the Amarr have reclaimed the entirety of our world. Now, blessed with the divine mandate of God, we spread our reach unto other worlds. From nearby Hedion, to the distant Misaba, to the burning southern star Penirgman, and all lands in-between. They are our birthright, our duty, our Domain."

- Emperor Heideran III, 21290 AD upon the opening of the first stargate since the collapse.

Esoteria:

When Sansha's Nation was at the height of its power, Esoteria was one of its richest territories. Scholars,

philosophers, scientists, and many of its most affluent True Citizens made it their home. The occupants relied on the remoteness of the region to keep them safe, anticipating that the legions of True Slaves in Stain would remain an impenetrable shield that none could pass.

When the Alliance of Empires swept down upon the Nation, the shield was shattered and their forces crushed under the alliance's unassailable might. Then, like barbarians of old, the forces of the Amarr Empire crashed into Esoteria, pillaging and slaughtering all before them.

Now, all that remains of the Nation's once-pervasive presence in the area is floating husks; great ruins that stand as both a eulogy to Sansha's former dream and a stark warning to any who might provoke the ire of all four Empire. The Nation continues to send their own ships into the area, scouring it for any bit of lost technology that might give them an edge in their attempt to resurrect Sansha's dream.

Everyshore:

The first region that the Federation colonized after Essence was Everyshore. The asteroid belts of this region were found to hold significant amounts of Veldspar and Scordite, which the Federation mined with a vigor never seen before in order to fuel construction projects that their quickly expanding borders required. When the belts were mined to a level that made large scale operations uneconomical, greedy eyes turned towards the planets, intent on mining these for minerals.

An incident on a lush jungle planet in the Aclan system forced the government to intervene. Astral Mining, filling a large contract for the Federation Navy, introduced a herbicide into the atmosphere to clear the jungle and enable mining to begin. Outraged at this senseless destruction, where many species of flora and fauna were lost that had not even been studied, prominent ecologists managed to force a bill through the Senate: no planet that supported any life-form was to have its ecosystem tampered with in any way without a license being granted from the Federation Senate. This law became known as The Aclan Agreement and it remains in place to this day.

Fade:

A foreboding area of space long considered to be the backwater of the galaxy, Fade was once the home of no less than a dozen small competing pirate sects. Never managing to pose much of a threat to Empire space due to their frequent clashes, they were mostly ignored. That is, until the Serpents came to be and began expanding its power base.

Seeing a region ripe for the picking, the Serpents began to insinuate its people into several of the most powerful factions, playing them off against each other until they were sufficiently weakened both politically and militarily that moving in and taking control was simply a formality. This audacious move put the Serpents firmly on the map of even the major Empires.

Feythabolis:

The human diaspora throughout the systems of New Eden was quite widespread prior to the collapse of the EVE Gate. In many areas, cultures cut off from other civilizations thrived in isolation. One of these regions was Feythabolis, a relatively small empire of progressive thinkers and egalitarian political philosophers. Unfortunately, this state lagged behind other empires significantly in technological advancement, having only recently started to colonize the local space just as the ruthless Angel Cartel was moving in to establish their control. Completely outclassed by the military forces of the Cartel, the fledgling empire was defeated with ease and its entire population bent to the will of the Angels.

Fountain:

"You young pod pilots have it lucky! Why, back in my day, we didn't have these fancy pants lawless regions like Pure Blind and Stain! We had Fountain! We had to go to Fountain! Through Aridia, both ways! And it was infested with Blood Raiders! They stole our blood and we didn't complain. We liked it! Because the other option was going to Providence, and they had Sanshas who stole your BRAIN! So when you're out there, smoking your fancy tobacco, drinking your fancy spiced wine, and mining with your fancy Hulks, remember: it wasn't so long ago that we had to give our first born to the Emperor just for a chance to apply for a permit to mine in Fountain! So be thankful for what you have!"

- Old Prospector Yurskeld to anyone who will listen to him.

Geminate:

Despite being overrun by Guristas, Geminate is home to the Society of Conscious Thought. Their headquarters are located in the middle of the region, quite a distance from civilized space. Many contend that the Society's most gifted students are brought here to learn the innermost secrets of the Society, far from the prying eyes of their parents and the Empires. Though the claims appear quite outlandish, the fact that the Guristas give the station a wide berth has led to rumors that the Society isn't nearly as passive as many think.

Genesis:

In the beginning all things were as one.
God parted them and breathed life into his creation
Divided the parts and gave each its place
And unto each, bestowed purpose.

- The Scriptures, Book I Verses 1:4

Great Wildlands:

"Pirates. Scoundrels. Vagabonds. The most enigmatic of all the Minmatar tribes members are called many things, but no one truly knows them. I have researched them perhaps more than any scholar alive and still I feel I've barely scratched the surface."

- The Travels of Germone Ferush

Immensea:

Immensea was mapped entirely by successive generations of an Ammatar Wayfinder clan. Driven by tales of massive clusters of Arkanor in the deep south, they forged deeper and deeper into unexplored territory, mapping out a long corridor of space. Eventually they encountered one of the many great voids littering the southern expanses and could go no further. Failing to locate precious minerals in any extraordinary volumes, they reluctantly turned back and returned to civilized space, content with the knowledge that they had pushed further south than any previous human.

It was only on their repatriation that they learnt of the Amarrian expedition launched many years later that, capitalizing on a number of technological advancements, had pushed down a parallel route through what is now Tenerifis, penetrating almost ten light years further into uncharted territory and returning decades earlier. The name of the clan who mounted the expedition is now lost to history.

Impass:

During the initial expansion of Sansha's Nation, some factions in the Imperial Court foresaw the coming conflict with that which they once supported and began formulating plans for an invasion. It was clear right from the beginning that the inability to penetrate into Esoteria without running the gauntlet of Stain would play in Sansha's favor, so they commissioned a military expedition to search for an alternate route in. Its leader, Commodore Barius, made good progress initially but soon ran into a great empty expanse blocking their path. His ships roamed high and low through the wall of stars marking the void's eastern edge, mapping many systems but failing to make any forward progress. Eventually, admitting defeat, he sent a single blunt transmission to Fleet Command: "Sir, we have reached an impasse."

Insmother

Little is known by the Empires about the region known as Insmother. Long a haunt of the Angel Cartel, it forms a tangled barrier between the dense south-eastern cluster and the barbed mystery of the Cache region. Once the guardian of a little-visited backwater volume, in the wake of the Spectrum Breach incident it now serves as the primary corridor between the southern expanse and the drone-infested eastern regions.

J7HZ-F:

Children.

Leave us be.

Kador:

Despite belonging to the Heir House known as the "Old Imperial Family," Kador is one of the least developed regions in the Empire. The Kador Family has not been progressive in encouraging trade and investment into the region, favoring older, established Holder families with proven bloodlines and heritage. Though in many ways a musty embodiment of the old ways, Kador may be one of the few parts of Amarr territory where a traveler can still get a glimpse of the grand and majestic Empire of days gone by.

Khanid:

"I will not be ordered by some whimpering fool to destroy myself when my work is unfinished. You will not take anything from me - not my kingdom, not my people and least of all my life."

- Khanid II

Kor-Azor:

During the time that Dorian Kor-Azor controlled this region it became a prosperous and thriving center of interstellar trade, its planets and cities flourishing. The whole area went into a state of shock following their beloved Emperor's assassination, and despite many attempts at rekindling the economic prosperity and spirit, the region and its people still mourn the loss of one of their greatest leaders.

Lonetrek:

"Our surveys show that there are many planets capable of sustaining life in these systems. However, the lack of a proper stargate network has drastically increased the travel time for our mission. I think it is worth it. I don't trust those Gallente further than I could throw one, and that isn't very far, given their indulgences."

The initial speculation for a fallback position seems to be sustainable, but we have one potential problem. The long-range probes we sent out have been reporting some strange readings. Our science teams think they are reading stargates and an adjoining region, which is disturbing. I do not think it possible that the Gallente have

yet moved that far. Until we can confirm these readings and determine who or what these stargates belong to , it would be ill-advised to place ourselves in a position where we have our movement restricted on multiple fronts."

-Minato Zumari, Caldari Navy Commander

Metropolis:

It has long been an established fact of civilisation that wherever a seat of government lies, then so will a concentration of its subjects, the better to fuel the halls of bureaucracy. In this, the Republic has been no exception and in locating their Parliament and Justice Department in the Gedulf constellation, they guaranteed a huge population influx. This population needs supporting, and so some of the largest Matari corporations also have their head offices here, making the region bustle with activity, not unlike a large Metropolis.

Molden Heath:

The common ground of the Heath, away from the bustling crowds of Heimatar and Metropolis, was in the days of the Elders committed as neutral ground between the Matari Tribes, to be claimed by none and developed by all.

Its scarcity of resources, as well as its proximity to the untamed reaches of Great Wildlands and the hated space of the turncoat Ammatar, have all diminished its value in the eyes of modern Minmatar society. Coupled with barriers imposed by bordering singularities and voids, this has created a region with an unsettled history and an uncertain future.

Today, as legitimate claimant to the title of "center of the cluster," and as the site of the Golgothan Fields, the region still evokes great national pride, but despite this it remains mostly undeveloped. Indeed, in recent years the outcast Thukker Tribe have been making inroads, which does little to enhance the region's already tarnished image.

Omist:

Out in Omist, civilization gives way to survival. Here, it is not one corporation against another. It is one tribe fighting in a blood war against another, not out of differing ideologies or any higher reasoning. It is only for the basest necessities of humanity that men wage war in Omist. Such is the way of life on the frontier's frontier. It is dark, brutal, and unforgiving. In a way, Omist is the rest of the galaxy, distilled down to its most elementary nature. Those who can survive and thrive here seem as untamed gods to those who luxuriate in more civilized space.

Outer Ring:

Before the discovery of nocxium changed the way industry functioned, the Outer Ring was considered nothing more than an average parcel of space. That was why Outer Ring Excavations was able to get their start here, mining the "low end" ores while braving unlawful space. But once the process of refining nocxium was discovered, the Outer Ring became a gold mine. Outer Ring Excavations quickly became leaders in the field of asteroid mining. Of course, such wealth always brings challenges.

For decades, ORE called Mordu's Angels their closest allies. The highly trained and proficient mercenaries patrolled the Outer Ring for troublemakers, focusing in particular on the Serpentis who made regular raids into the area. The Serpentis had the last laugh, though, when they bought a majority share in ORE. Now the Serpentis prowl the space lanes of the Outer Ring virtually unopposed.

Paragon Soul:

Dearest Heloise: I apologize for the tardiness of this message. It seems our host has relocated his research efforts further abroad, making this slave delivery a much longer endeavor. When I asked why, our host assured me that our upcoming tour of the facility would explain everything. I remain skeptical. Regardless, I promise to return to you soon.

Heloise: The facilities here are astounding! Our host has assembled a team of the finest minds to bring his dream to life. They have made major strides-- the implications of their cranial implant technology alone are dazzling.

Heloise: Our host introduced what became of the slaves I delivered. The brutes were silent and inert. I tell you, it was as if their very souls had been stripped from them. I will voice my concerns with our host tomorrow.

Heloise: Our host announced the birth of his 'Nation.' I sent a communique to the Ministry of Internal Order.

Heloise: I discovered my messages are being blocked. Our host never had any intention of sending them. His automatons are everywhere now. Their number grows every day. They are watching me.

My Darling Wife: How I miss you. The slaves have been set against everyone not of the Nation. I survived only by grace. The things are slow, but efficient. I hear their footsteps pass the room, regular, constant. It is only a matter of time. I pray God forgive us our terrible transgressions. I love you, Heloise. I am sorry that I must break my promise.

Period Basis:

When attempting to determine a universal timekeeping standard between regions, one of the factions attempting to make their case came to be known as the Arithmetics. Comprised mainly of engineers and physicists, the Arithmetics sought to use naturally occurring phenomena and mathematical permutations thereof to dictate a "pure" clock. During this time, the region now known as Period Basis was an area of intensive research. The region's inordinately high concentration of pulsars of various frequencies led the physicists to try to find some lowest common denominator among the harmonics, or in the common parlance of astronomer Callentus Holzine, "a basis from which the shortest period can be rigorously calculated, with all larger units of time expressed as multiples of that period." Once the Traditionalists carried the day with their historical reconstructions of the Earth-standard clock, extensive scientific exploration of the region lapsed in importance, and today the region's large number of pulsars and other stellar phenomena are largely considered merely a curiosity.

Placid:

In reality, Placid is anything but. The southern reaches of the region are home to the notorious Intaki, whose huge emphasis on personal freedom goes some way towards explaining its general lawlessness. The situation is not helped by the Federation's seeming reluctance to invest heavily in the region - a source of some resentment among the Intaki who haven't already fled to Syndicate.

To make matters worse, much of what does get earmarked for the region ends up being used to bolster the Federation's increasingly important military presence in Placid's turbulent and far-flung northern extremities, which are constantly under threat.

Providence:

The Empire long had its eye on the region it named Providence, a wealth of minerals on its border ripe for the plucking. Those plans were forced off the shelf with the Minmatar rebellion and the following disaster of Vak'Atioth. Hamstrung by these events and their repercussions, the expansion into Providence failed to materialize.

So the region was left to waste. Capsuleers now rule the byways, and Sansha's reborn Nation attempts to expand their influence into the region. But only a fool would assume that the Empire has forgotten its plans entirely. The enduring Amarr have learned to be ever patient, ever watchful.

Querious:

The Querious region was originally referred to as JK-FIX, and was seen as merely an administrative grouping for a large mass of disparate systems discovered near to the already-established Delve region. Many of these should by most conventions be part of Delve proper, but the growing Blood Raider presence in that region drove the administration at the time to fold them in with the rest of what is now Querious. When that region too was overrun by Blood forces the issue became irrelevant, but by then the maps had been finalized. The region was given its current name (a reference to an obscure piece of scripture) relatively recently, and while its original designation is no longer present anywhere in official records, part of it has been adopted by the region's hardy capsuleer residents who keep alive what they see as the old traditions.

Scalding Pass

Scalding Pass is a vast stellar nursery, the birth place of stars. A harsh and unforgiving region of space home to violent ion storms and rocked by intense solar winds, the Pass is littered with the wrecks of ships that were blindsided by the unpredictable dangers this region holds.

However, there are some who manage to find solace and safety in such a tumultuous place. The Cartel is rumored to have many outlying bases in the region, masked by stellar phenomena, and in recent times many capsuleer groups have braved its burning embrace in pursuit of their dark dreams of power.

Sinq Laison:

Sinq Laison suffered terribly during the war with the Caldari. On the front lines for much of the conflict, many small settlements were ruthlessly destroyed by small Caldari raiding parties operating a scorched earth policy to deny any industrial use of the region. It is testament to the hardiness of the human spirit that now it is economically one of the strongest regions in the Federation, ironically owing much of its rebuilding to the vast quantities of Caldari goods that are imported and traded at the many outposts and stations in the border region.

Solitude:

Despite its name, Solitude is hardly peaceful and quiet. Physically separated from the rest of the Federation it lies wedged between the Syndicate and the Amarr Empire. But for such a small, segregated sector of space, Solitude commands a great deal of influence in the Federation. Not only for its strategic location but the fact that many of the Federation's most influential and charismatic politicians come from Solitude. Over 15% of the current Senate, such as former Presidential candidate Senator Blaque, either represent Solitude or were born in the region and later migrated to others. This, some speculate, is what has led to the somewhat more warlike and isolationist tendencies within some quarters of the Federations politics.

Stain:

"So long as a single citizen of my nation survives, my dream lives on."

Syndicate:

"A den of thieves, scoundrels, bandits, black market dealers, gamblers, pimps and prostitutes. All in all, a nice place for a holiday"

- Unnamed Gallente Senator.

Tash-Murkon:

Even before they were an Heir Family, the Tash-Murkon house controlled much of the space they now lend their name to. Thanks to their enterprising ways, the Tash-Murkon transformed the once-backwater locale into a bustling trade hub. Though the pressures and duties of being a Royal Family have rendered the region less of an economic juggernaut than it once was, Tash-Murkon continues to be the friendliest and easiest region of the Empire for the average trader to make a living in.

Tenal:

Tenal has long been a refuge for those wishing to stray far away from the State, for one reason or another. The journey there is perilous due to the intervening Guristas territories, but that remains a major element of its appeal, and many pioneers, hermits and less reputable travelers have risked everything to travel to this quiet backwater and make it their home. Several Caldari mystics have claimed that Tenal is the place that one should travel to in order to come face to face with the Starsmith, although whether this is in reference to the view into space from its outermost systems or the likely outcome of trying to negotiate the dangers of the route has never been made clear.

Tenerifis:

Dividing much of the southern expanse into two, Tenerifis acts as both a transit corridor and a sinuous line of fortification, having seen plenty of violence in its recent bloody history. As with most of the outer territories, the advent of the capsuleer era brought wealth and warfare in equal measure. Indeed, the mere mention of the names of some of its systems will unsettle capsuleers all across the cluster.

The Bleak Lands:

When the Sani Sabik cults were first deemed heretical by the Council of Apostles millennia ago, they were driven out of the homelands of the Amarr Empire. Many of them fled to the Bleak Lands, where they sulked in hiding for centuries fighting amongst themselves until one stood victorious, The Blood Raiders. The Bleaks remained their seat of power until June 107 when, following the horrors of Mabnen, the Amarr Navy descended upon the region with all their fury and rage, forcing the Blood Raiders to retreat out of the Bleak Lands. Their presence is still felt, as the region remains a lawless danger to even the most wary traveler.

Recent times have pushed this traditionally neglected region once more back into a position of some prominence. The brief War of Defiance was fought almost entirely within this region, and the ripples of that conflict and its fiery conclusion are still spreading. Many see the Bleaks as a central battlefield in the oft-predicted conflagration between the Empire and its former slaves, ensuring that some at least still have serious plans for the volume.

The Citadel:

Acting as both an ideological fort as well as a physical impediment to invasion, the Citadel is among the most well fortified regions in the cluster. Despite their penchant for squabbling and competing with each other, nearly every Caldari corporation keeps a presence here, all working together to diligently defend their home. After having been ejected from one homeland, the Caldari are not about to suffer such a fate again. The Citadel stands as proud testament to that resolve.

The Forge:

"The greater the State becomes, the greater humanity under it flourishes."

Tribute:

For a long time, the Caldari State maintained an illicit but considerable military presence in the region they often referred to as "The Northern Barrier," patrolling the crescent-shaped region in an attempt to detect and intercept raiding parties from the Gurista strongholds in Venal. The arrival of capsuleer alliances made their listening posts both untenable and unnecessary, so they evacuated their assets and retreated from the region. Where the Empires saw a barrier, the capsuleers see a transit corridor, and the "Tribute Pipeline" is now a strategically important route carrying trade between the State and the northern territories.

Vale of the Silent:

A sprawling region in the galactic "north," the Vale of the Silent has a reputation as one of the most foreboding regions in the cluster. The Guristas pirates who prowl the area, scavenging for resources, do little to dispel the notion that the Vale is a haunted relic of times past. Rumors of secret Jovian experiments in the area abound, though no one has ever given proof of such things. The region is one of the closest areas to Jovian space, despite no longer having any functioning stargates leading there. Many of the other Empires have made attempts to set up spying stations in an attempt to probe out Jovian secrets, but none have lasted long in the harsh area. Now, the area is left totally to capsuleer control and they have proven hardier than those who came before them.

Venal:

"I can neither confirm nor deny the allegations that... what are we being accused of again, Rabbit?"

"This time? G-g-grand piracy, sixth-degree m-m-multiple-homicide, terrorism and littering, i-i-if I'm reading this right"

"Yeah, that. No comment"

Verge Vendor:

While otherwise unnotable, Verge Vendor is the home to one of the most infamous experiments of all time. Tierijev is found in Verge Vendor, the site of a doomed cooperative between the Caldari State and the Gallente Federation. While the ripples of Tierijev have long since settled, Verge Vendor still evokes memories of cooperation for the sake of scientific progress in many. As such, the number of young, idealistic scientists found in the region is disproportionately higher than found in other larger, richer areas. Many dream of the day the hope of Tierijev set won't be a simple one-off, but rather a blueprint for greater scientific harmony throughout the galaxy.

Wicked Creek

Forming the core of the southeastern cluster, this has long been a heartland of the Angel Cartel, as well as a frequent stomping ground of Thukker outriders. Its maze of systems, centralized position and multiple exits have also made it a favored hideaway of many particularly notorious criminals over the course of its long, tainted history. Some of the most infamous villains in living memory (including serially genocidal Black Harold, the arch-defiler Lucias, and the enigma that was Susa'tah) have run to - and occasionally been run to ground in - the Creek's dark embrace.

Landmarks

09-4XW:

Settlers from the Caldari State and beyond took up residence in 09-4XW a few years back after incredibly valuable gas clouds were discovered in the constellation. They braved the Guristas territories to get there, but have now become embroiled in a bitter war with local racketeers and pirates. The migrant's force is vastly outnumbered and it is only a matter of time before the Guristas launch an attack on their outpost.

760-9C:

Rumor has it that the infamous Thukker warlord, Martokar Alash, was last seen in the constellation 760-9C. He apparently fled his homeland after Republic authorities threatened an invasion should he not be extradited into their hands. It is believed that he has become involved in the booster smuggling business, working alongside the Angel Cartel.

Martokar's previous crimes include the murder of CONCORD officers, kidnapping and sale of Republic citizens into slavery. Investigators also blamed him for managing a large criminal network inside the Republic territories, which had direct links to the Angel Cartel. And although it is common knowledge that the Thukker Tribe leadership has strong ties to the Cartel, Dulinar Nerhoger, chief of intelligence in the Republic Justice Department, believes that Martokar's crimes are grave enough to warrant special attention. He advises all travelers venturing into 760-9C to keep an eye out for Martokar, he is considered extremely dangerous.

9HXQ-G:

The Sansha's Nation wishes to expand its borders, and 9HXQ-G is one of its targets. They have set up a major base of operations in 3GD6-8 and are slowly destroying all opposition to their forces, while their peons build their new starbases. The biggest hindrance to their plans is in MW-W1V. A gigantic mining colony, along with a trading hub, is located there and the inhabitants are extremely afraid of what might happen to them should Sansha declare ownership of their solar-system. They have assembled a sizable fleet of Amarr and Ammatar ships to protect their assets, and prevent the Sansha's Nation from expanding their sovereignty into 9HXQ-G.

Algintal:

The Algintal constellation is a natural beauty spot. Sporting several spectacular natural phenomena of breathtaking splendor, it was once one of the main tourist attractions in the Federation. But being situated on the border of the Federation and Republic has made Algintal a prime location for smugglers, which have entrenched themselves in many of the resorts, driving the tourists out. To top it all of the Caldari mega-corporation Wiyarkomi bought the mining rights in the constellation and massive construction plans are underway. The environmentally minded Gallenteans are not about to let some foreign capitalists corrupt and damage their precious nature and are flocking to the constellation to oppose Wiyarkomi anyway they know how.

Ani:

Former home of the Nefantar tribe, now better known as the Ammatars, the Ani constellation has been largely ignored by the Republic. But the Republic badly needs to bolster its public image, and what better way to do this but to settle the ancestral home of their treacherous cousins?

Assilot:

The famous dueling tournament, 'The Legends Trial', has moved to PPG-XC, to escape various expenses associated with having its tournament inside Federation space. Also by staging the tournament here, it can choose from a larger variety of competitors, such as criminals and members of outlaw organizations which would be immediately arrested in Federation space.

The Legends Trial is a popular show on Federation TV, it is broadcasted to billions of screens across many regions. Huge money is at stake, and gambling on the events is extremely popular. It is therefore not surprising that various criminal networks are working hard to 'influence' the outcome of the show and rig fights. The organizers of the Legends Trials have hired a sizable mercenary fleet to protect its assets, but even so it has become extremely vulnerable to pirate meddling, especially due to its new location outside of the protective embrace of Federation space. Certainly a freelance merc pilots dream come true.

Audesder:

Amarr militarization of nearby Kenobanala has forced the Minmatar and their allies to hastily build up a defensive perimeter inside Audesder.

Araz:

The Araz constellation typifies the feudal system found throughout the Amarr Empire. Wherever widely different ambitions and talents meet a power surge is inevitable. Uriam Kador, one of the five royal heirs, is the liege lord of Araz and he likes to employ the 'divide-and-conquer' approach in his governing; allowing his feudal lords to duke it out between themselves, making it unlikely they will join forces against him and also giving him a clear idea of their strengths and weaknesses. The two most ambitious and powerful noble families in the constellation are the Arachnan family and the Methros family. The two families have been rivals for decades, but now their rivalry is on the verge of escalating to a full fledged war between them. Kador is closely monitoring the situation, not the least because of the sudden appearance of a sizeable force of Blood Raiders that seem intent on taking over the constellation.

Black Rise:

Black void divides the western regions of the mighty Gallente Federation and the Caldari State, apparently without mass or dimension but still inexplicably closed to the eyes of science. During the Gallente-Caldari War, both empires tried to establish travel routes through the utter vacuum in order to outflank their foe, but all such endeavours were lost in the gloomy bowels of the Black Rise, never to be seen again. For decades no man has ventured far into it and no one really knows what secrets lie hidden in its murky depths.

City of God:

Built by the megalomaniac emperor Zaragram II some 2000 years ago, intended to be the home of the living god, namely himself. Zaragram set out to uproot and eradicate many of the most sacred traditions of the Amarrians, replacing them by his own mad ideas on divinity. He called his city Mezagorm, meaning Vision of God. Eventually, he was assassinated and later emperors, under pressure from the clergy, did their utmost to bury his memory. The ruins of Zaragram's city still exist, haunted by ghosts and pirates.

Cord of the Elements:

Winding through the Syndicate region is a natural phenomenon that has baffled scientists for centuries. The phenomenon, a super-dense dark cloud, bends time in such a way that all space-travel in or close to the phenomenon is impossible, or at least extremely hazardous. Most scientists believe that the Cord is the remnant of collision between two black holes millions of years ago that permanently 'scarred' space. Others believe the Cord to be the result of a science experiment, possibly conducted by alien life forms, that went seriously awry eons ago.

Curse:

Curse is the old home of the Jove Empire. The Jovians departed their home centuries ago after the fall of their Second Empire and set themselves up in their current whereabouts to form the Third (and current) Empire. The cause of the departure was the dreaded Jove Disease, which only Jovians could catch. Having found no cure for the disease the Jovians decided to leave their home worlds in a desperate bid to rid themselves of the disease once and for all. The attempt failed. Today, the former Jovian systems are occupied by the Angel Cartel, the strongest pirate clan in the world of EVE. Rumor has it that the source of their power is old Jovian technology scavenged from the relics of old Jovian stations and settlements.

Divinity's Edge:

In the early stages of Amarr expansion through space they encountered Divinity's Edge - a huge void with little in way of solar systems or other stellar bodies. For a long time they believed this was the end of the galaxy and that beyond this point, nothing existed. Centuries later the Great Wildlands were discovered and this theory was abolished, although the name for the place has remained.

E-8CSQ:

The Caldari State have found something significant in G5ED-Y. The State military has set up a huge base of operations in that system, and its presence there is thick as sour milk. The Guristas on the other hand are extremely curious as to what their arch nemesis has discovered, and have set up many bases in the surrounding systems to oversee reconnaissance missions into G5ED-Y. A division from the Serpents has also been sent to the constellation on behalf of the Smuggler Cartel, led by the infamous Black Jack.

Eve Gate:

In the system of New Eden sits the impenetrable EVE Gate. Thousands of years ago the forefathers of all the human races used the gate to travel to the world of EVE. But the gate has been closed for a long time, a catastrophe that destroyed all planets in the New Eden system and plunged the fragile human settlements to the brink of extinction. Anyone foolish enough to get too close to the gate today will be ripped apart by the magnetic storms that still surround the massive gate.

Fountain:

The Fountain region was one of the first areas opened up to public colonization by CONCORD - it was intended to be the 'fountain of inter-stellar cooperation and prosperity'. Although the colonization process began fine enough, in time the lack of empire protection and coherent regional authority began to tell. Slowly at first, then more surely, pirate clans and bandit gangs started taking over the settlements one by one. In the end the region was totally in the hands of pirate kings and robber barons. Later, these criminal elements were the foundation of the illegal booster industry and today the region is best known for its neural booster production, mainly in the form of the Serpents Corporation.

Ginnungagap:

Ginnungagap is a huge black hole at the edge of Minmatar space. It is the largest black hole close to civilized space. The black hole has already rendered several solar systems close to it uninhabitable, but otherwise it is not considered to pose any great risk to inhabited space for the foreseeable future. The black hole can be seen very clearly in the Konora system, located very close to it.

Golgothan Fields:

The Minmatar Rebellion saw many battles, both on ground and in space. The largest of the space battles took place in the Ennur system a few weeks after the start of the rebellion. The main Amarr battle fleet had returned

from Jovian space and intended to break the power of the rebels once and for all by sweeping through their core systems. The Minmatars met the Amarrians with everything they got. The battle was fierce and lasted for hours. In the end the Minmatars withdrew and the Amarrians claimed a victory, but the Minmatars had succeeded in disabling or destroying the best capital ships in the Amarr fleet, thus reducing their offensive strength dramatically. Today the old battlefield, commonly known as Golgothan Fields, is littered with old shipwrecks and infested with pirates that have taken refuge in the giant hulks. They fiercely defend their base, but daring scavengers can still sneak in and rummage around.

Great Wildlands:

The Great Wildlands area has been the bastard child of all the empires at some stage. During the Minmatar Rebellion it acted as a base for Minmatar guerillas and was also the avenue through which the Amarrians and Jovians fought their war at the same time. The Caldari invested heavily in the region at one point searching for rare minerals, but later pulled out due to ownership conflicts with the other empires. Today the region is a mismatch of pirate havens and mining facilities. Its jump routes are still used as short cuts, but only by those bold enough. The nomad Thukker tribe is a common sight in the Great Wildlands and is the closest thing to a home to them.

I-3ODK:

A gold rush has stricken this constellation, as rumor has it that extremely valuable gas clouds were found in various systems in the area. Potential excavators from all over the Eve universe have come to I-3ODK in the search for the hidden treasure. Obviously this influx of people has caught the attention of the Angel Cartel, who already had a strong presence in the area, and they have imposed high 'taxes' on any harvesters caught in their territory.

But the mainly Minmatar harvesters and pioneers are not the only outsiders the Cartel have had to deal with. The Sansha's Nation have also sent a fleet of worker-slaves escorted by an armada of warships to the constellation. Led by the brutal Sansha general Abufyr Joek, their task is to secure a supply route of booster regents to their headquarters.

When the Cartel leadership found out about Sansha's meddling in their territory, they sent in their own armada, spearheaded by the military genius Krur Tajar, to secure total domination of I-3ODK. He has set up camp in BJD4-E, claiming the mining outpost Freeboter's Haven for himself, from where he has launched repeated attacks against all those who refuse to pay the Cartel their due tribute.

Kenobanala:

A political crisis has encouraged the Amarr to militarize the zone between Kenobanala and Audesder, along with their allies, the Khanid Kingdom, Ammatar Mandate and Caldari State.

OK-FEM:

One of the most revered holy sites of the Blood Raiders is located in the constellation OK-FEM, called the Pagera Manton. The Pagera Manton was a giant space-ship that was at the head of a massive Amarrian exploration team that had ventured into unknown lands hundreds of years ago. A malfunction in its warp-drive stranded the ship, far away from the rest of the fleet. During that time space-communication was not as sophisticated as today, and it had no way of contacting other vessels of the expedition. Years passed and the crew had finally lost all hope of survival. Food supply was running dangerously low, and it seemed that starvation was inevitable. It was then that one of the officers, an Ammatar by the name of Kalorr Makur, took matters into his own hands. He staged a successful coupe against the commanding officer of the ship and had his most loyal followers bind and gag the dissidents inside a secure chamber under his control. These unfortunate souls became the crew's new food supply, unbeknownst to most of the crewmembers. For over a year this plan worked, although Kalorr did have to turn to his own followers eventually to replenish his stock of human meat.

Over a century later the ship was discovered by Blood Raider pioneers scouring the distant solar-systems of OK-FEM. They found the remains of the crew, and more importantly a few dozen gigantic tanks encasing millions of liters of blood. Unbeknownst to them the blood had been collected by Kalorr who dried the human meat before consumption. The blood had been meant as a final foodsource after the meat supply had run out, but was never actually consumed as the machine responsible for recycling the air supply malfunctioned which caused the remaining crew to slowly suffocate. Fortunately the blood containers were kept in sub-freezing temperature, which despite over a century of decay were still up and working when the Pagera was found. And not only that, Kalorr Makur's body was discovered in its very own container, along with his closest allies.

News of the find quickly spread through the Blood Raider territories, and their revered High Priest at the time declared it a 'gift from God'. The blood was stripped from the tanks and brought back to the Blood Raider headquarters for examination and ritualistic purposes. Kalorr was cloned, using genetic material retrieved from his body taken from the Pagera, and he was immediately instated as an officer of the Blood Raiders. Years later he was even made into a saint.

And to this day the Pagera is closely guarded by Kalorr and his small army of clones, extremely loyal to the Blood Raiders. Drugs, many generations of cloning and a terrible history has rendered the former Amarrian traveller completely insane. And despite the Pagera being a popular point of pilgrimage for the members of the Blood Raider organization, few venture there outside of large, heavily armed groups. Kalorr is known to pick off

stragglers for his sinister rituals, no matter to which religion or organization they belong to.

Okkelen:

A sparsely populated constellation in the middle of the Caldari State. Long since claimed by pirates and smugglers, the State is now launching a concentrated effort to wrench control of the constellation from the hands of the criminals and outlaws living there.

Outer Ring:

The Outer Ring is a mineral rich area controlled by Outer Ring Excavations, which was the first company to start operating in the system. The Outer Ring Excavations (or ORE) is an independently run mining company, the largest of its kind. ORE is very envious of their priced asteroid belts and have employed the service of Mordu's Legion to protect the region.

Pegasus:

Extremely valuable gas clouds have been discovered in the Pegasus constellation which have created a gold rush. ORE was quick to claim 'ownership' as the constellation borders its sovereign space, but the Serpents and the Syndicate, as well as multiple entrepreneurs from the Gallente Federation, have all claimed their own piece of the pie. Inevitably collisions have occurred and the constellation has become a sort of 'warzone' between various groups of greedy claimants.

Point of No Return:

Point of No Return is a small black hole located not far from empire space. The black hole is rather old and was formed by a sun only just large enough to create a black hole when it collapsed. One interesting fact about it is that it's located more or less exactly in the center of the known world, if you only count those systems that have been linked with star gates.

Pool of Radiance:

Space holds many spectacular sights and few are as spectacular as the crystal-clouds in the Pool of Radiance. The Pool is illuminated by surrounding stars, which makes it shimmer and shine in every color imaginable, radiating an almost hypnotic glow that delights anyone that sees it. The only problem is that the Pool is located in space controlled by Sansha's Nation, so any prospective visitors are advised to carry an armed escort.

R55 Colonial Ruins:

In the system of Isie the Lai Dai Corporation once ran the largest bio-chemical research facility in Caldari space. The facility was intended to establish Lai Dai as the main biotech company within the State. But only a few years into its operation an accident ruptured the storage tanks and the station had to be abandoned. The myriad chemical substances leaking from the storage tanks mingled in unexpected ways in the zero-g vacuum outside the station and in time formed a eerily beautiful, but highly toxic, gas cloud around the station. After the accident Lai Dai scuttled their biotech ambitions and the station remained vacant for years. Recently, Guristas pirates have started using it as an outpost.

Serpent's Coil:

The Serpent's Coil is at once one of the most exotic and most dangerous of all space locations in the vast world of EVE. It is currently inhabited by agents of the Serpents Corporation, which use the place as a gathering point for smugglers and raiders alike. At the heart of the Serpent's Coil lies a ruined military installation. This military base was constructed by the Gallente Federation during the Gallente-Caldari War to defend against marauding Caldari ships. After the war the strategic importance of the base diminished and it was eventually abandoned. The base is ringed by huge rock boulders the size of mountains. These magnificent boulders broke off a comet traversing the Vilinon system long time ago and today they stand proud in their protection of the most audacious Serpents base around.

Stain:

The home of Sansha's lost dream of utopia. True slaves once stood legion here, strong and unassailable, or so the Nation presumed. That presumption was crushed when the empires joined forces, for the only time in their existence, with the sole purpose of wiping Sansha's Nation from the face of EVE.

The empires thought the Nation vanquished, but however undeniably powerful the eradication was it did not destroy all that was created. Now Stain is home to numerous planets whose dark sides are lit up by eerily symmetrical city layouts. Stations hanging in space that are unnaturally quiet, the passive stares of the denizens sending a chill down even the hardest of spines. The Utopian dream may have been shattered centuries ago, but the nation persists, carrying on with its purpose unfeeling, unrelenting, a testament to Sansha's shattered dream.

The Cauldron:

In the Cauldron the remnants of several supernovas render the space unstable and treacherous. Filled with volatile gravity currents and large chunks of stellar debris the whole area is much too dangerous for space travel. The Cauldron lies between the Amarr Empire and the Khanid Kingdom and acts as a convenient natural barrier between the two hostile factions.

The Myridian Strip:

Several decades ago the Amarr Empire was desperate to improve their relations with the other empires, mainly to increase trade and tourism. One of the projects they embarked on was to build the Myridian Strip vacation resort, located above the plasma clouds in the Ezzara system. From an aesthetic point of view the location was perfect: stunningly beautiful and exotic. The resort itself was also a wonder of the world and for the first few years of its operation tourists from all over flocked to it. But the location had one fatal flaw, one that was to manifest itself less than 5 years after it opened: it was located too close to Blood Raider space. The Blood Raiders eagerly jumped on the opportunity presented to them on their doorstep and hundreds perished in their initial raid. Not long after the resort was permanently closed and since then only inhabitants it has had are Blood Raiders, reveling in their prized asset

The Syndicate:

The Syndicate is the home of the Intaki Syndicate, an independent organization of exiles from the Gallente Federation. The members of the Syndicate are not pirates as such, but rather unscrupulous businessmen willing to strike any kind of deal. You can expect to find all kinds of scumbags lurking within the Syndicate borders, but they will probably let you be, as they can appreciate the necessity of a safe haven as much as the next guy.

The Traumark Installation:

The Traumark Installation represents the proudest moment in the history of the Tash-Murkon family - a massive fortress guarding the southern space territories of the vastly rich royal family. But that moment came and went when the fortress, once thought to be impregnable, fell into the hands of Sansha's Nation. All efforts to retake the installation have failed and today it stands as a thorn in the side of the proud, but humbled, Tash-Murkons.

Trace Cosmos:

The fields of Trace Cosmos hold miniscule black holes and weird spatial rifts, making it much too dangerous to traverse. It is widely believed that the fields are the remnants of a massive collision between two galaxies millions of years ago. The colossal occurrence permanently altered the areas most affected, turning them into barren death traps.

Vapor Sea:

Vapor Sea, also known as Crib of Stars, is a melding pot of gaseous clouds where new stars are being born. Although new stars and solar systems are still millions of years away the area is of great interest to scientists. The lack of gravity wells makes it impossible to create stargates anywhere near the area.

Venal:

The Venal region lies far from empire space and few roam there except those that have direct business with the Guristas. The Guristas is a clan of pirates, though they like to describe themselves as 'adventurous opportunists'. The Guristas have no evil agenda beyond that of preying on the weak and stupid for quick profit. They have their own code of honor and can be quite amiable, but they're not to be messed with. Fighting the Guristas is one of the few things the Caldari State and Gallente Federation agrees on, but a lack of coherent action on their part means the increasing power the Guristas enjoy in the outer regions is only slowed down, not stopped.

Theodicy

An EVE Online Novella
By
Tony Gonzales

Alpha



"I give to you the destiny of Faith, and you will bring its message to every planet of every star in the heavens: Go forth, conquer in my Name, and reclaim that which I have given."

Book of Reclaiming, 22:13, The Scriptures

"And so we watched, those of us who had survived, from afar as our home world burned and the legions of evil marched before their sign, herding our people like so much cattle into transports. A life of slavery awaited those cursed souls; it would have been better for them had they never been born. How, dear God, did it come to this? Were these invaders not of flesh and bone like us? What evil is this that compels men to commit such horrors against each other?"

Sebiestor Tribe Chronicles, Minmatar Archives, "The Path of Krogan"

23216 AD

A normal man would have screamed at the scorching agony unleashed by the shockwhip. Instead, the slave merely picked his mining laser off the ground and switched it back on, continuing with his work as though nothing happened. The Amarrian guard, staring at the fresh wounds on the man's back, considered delivering a second blow. A slave numbed to pain was difficult to control, and besides, replacements were due to arrive at any moment should this one perish. The Reclaiming had conquered the planet Eanna yesterday, and hundreds of thousands of repentant pagans were taken prisoner. Those heathens who refused to embrace the Faith were dealt swift justice by the Emperor's Holy Paladins.

The guard wound his arm back and struck again. Sparks exploded from the slave's back, and this time he crumpled to the ground in a heap. The cauterized wounds intersected the previous marks, creating an approximate visage of the Sign. The beauty of the Faith, the guard thought, is that it offers a path for the unborn. Paradise was the exclusive birthright of pureblooded Amarrians, but for all others--including the Matari wretch lying at his feet--salvation had to be earned. Only through suffering can the unborn rise from the shadow of death to gain the blessing of immortality. I might yet walk in heaven with this one, the guard thought. His subservience speaks mountains of his quest for forgiveness.

Just as his arm drew back to strike for a third time, the guard's earpiece squawked. A slave transport was about to land, and he was to assist with processing the new arrivals. There were Glaive-collars to be fitted; labor tasks to be assigned; and mining equipment to be issued. He looked downwards at the slave, now crawling along the dirt and gravel. Yes, this one will see paradise soon enough. Sheathing the shockwhip, the guard turned and started back towards the section lifts.

Reaching against the cavern walls for support, the slave struggled to pull himself back onto his feet. Waves of excruciating pain pulsed through his wiry frame. He was terrified of each surge--not for its physical torment, but for the cruel reminder that death continued to elude him. If there was a time in this man's life that was not plagued by anguish, then its memory had long since been lost. Besides pain, all he knew was that he was damned for the crime of not being Amarrian by birth, and that the equipment now in his hands was the key to salvation. The escape from hell lies beyond these walls, the Paladin had told him. Use the laser to burrow through them, saving the hemorphite that the cavern yields as an offering to God. Switching the device on, he plunged the laser into the rocks before him, working the beam from left to right, searching for the precious ore and praying for forgiveness...

A searing heat erupted from a mysterious device that until now had lain dormant inside the slave's stomach. The pain swelled suddenly and then exploded in all directions at once. The mining drill fell to the ground as the slave clutched his abdomen and dropped to his knees. Then a second source of scathing heat originated from deep inside his skull, as if molten metal was injected behind his eyes. Writhing on the gravel in convulsions, he could feel the scalding liquid course through his bloodstream, incinerating everything in its path.

At the peak of his agony, a blinding flash overwhelmed the slave's vision. He unleashed a deafening scream, and its fevered pitch caromed throughout the pits and catacombs of the mines. But the reverberation assaulting the eardrums of countless slaves was not the shriek of a man in pain; it was the fiery shrill of a battlefield war cry. The fire that flowed through his veins had become the source of pure, exhilarating strength. Rising to his feet, the slave patted his skull and stomach down for wounds, but found none. He knew that he was just transformed into something inhuman, something stronger and more powerful than he could ever imagine. His hands latched firmly onto the Glaive-collar gripping his neck. Immediately, he could feel the device puncture his skin and inject its lethal toxins into his arteries. But the poisons that should have crippled and then killed him had no effect.

With a sharp, metallic crack, the collar shattered from the sheer strength of the man's hands. Slaves gathered and watched in amazement as he removed broken syringe needles from his neck and cast them harmlessly aside. Now keenly aware of his powers, he heard the voice of someone he had never met, but commanded his devout, absolute obedience:

Awaken, Minmatar! They have our Elders!

The slave shook his head in despair, clutching at his own skull as though it were about to break apart. There was an immediate clarity of purpose for his life. The voice came from inside, and he knew that he was born for a single mission.

They have taken them here, Minmatar! They are hidden among the ones who just arrived!

Immediately, he felt the presence of the Elders nearby and knew that the voice was truthful. His memory reached backwards in time to the exact moment when the Amarrian guard was poised to strike him a third time, to the radio squawking in his earpiece. The slave's mind amplified the sound, processed the words, and

learned in that instant that the Elders were being held in the landing bay just beyond the mines.

You must go to them now!

The urgency of the voice betrayed the presence of a shockwhip's charged lace screaming towards his back. Time slowed down to a crawl. Sidestepping the whip, he pivoted on one foot towards his attacker and lunged with an outstretched arm in a single, blurred motion. The slave felt his own tightened hand rip through the throat of his assailant. The Amarrian guard fell, his life spraying through the gruesome wound in his neck. No time was wasted savoring this delicious moment of revenge; instead, the slave turned and started to run. The inspired crowd, recognizing the opportunity, erupted into frenzy and ran after him.

Hurry, Minmatar! Time runs out for us all!

Three more guards died instant, violent deaths as they tried to stop the rogue slave. Behind him, the crowd had grown into an uncontrollable riot. Shedding their mining drills and running blindly onwards, the mob sought Amarrian blood to spill but found only the mangled remains left by the powerful one who had gone ahead. Reaching the great doors of the landing bay, the slave crushed the sternum of his next victim with a single strike. The radio on the corpse announced a terse warning:

"His Glaive-collar has been removed; disperse rifles to your squads and fire at will!"

Open the doors, Minmatar!

In a whirl of motions, he pressed the dead man's palm against the glass console and typed a five-digit sequence. The slave never considered how he could have possibly known what that code was. The mighty doors opened, and there before him stood hundreds of Minmatar men, women and children. The Elders were among them!

Come to us, Minmatar!

A bolt of fire slammed into his chest with terrific force. The sound of the shot caused the crowd to scream and panic. Feeling no pain, he took another step forward. Again, a powerful impact pushed him backwards, but instead of falling into open space, he was swept forward as the wrathful crowd of rioting slaves rushed past.

Staggering through the fray, the slave ignored the madness, desperately seeking the Elders who had summoned him from his sleep. Death was everywhere, but his eyes locked onto the frail figure of a hooded man moving in a slow, ethereal glide through the struggle.

Everything hangs in the balance; the destiny of worlds rests with the outcome of these days. Warn the others that the remaining Elders must not perish. Send this message with haste! Immortality awaits, Minmatar! Go!

And the slave could feel pain again, but not from the bullet wounds in his chest. The searing torture originating from the pit of his stomach returned, and the Elder disappeared into the chaos. Suddenly aware of his own mortality, the slave broke towards the lifts that would take him to the surveillance posts at the surface of the mines. He ran through crowds of flashing knives and spilled blood; past men clutching at their Glaive-collars with one hand and bashing Amarrians with the other. With abdominal pain intensifying every step, he hurled himself into a lift and shut the door. The elevator began rocketing upwards amidst a hail of bullets. Guards filed into a second lift and gave chase.

The pain spread upwards to his solar plexus, and tinges of agony began radiating from the gaping wounds in his chest and back. A computerized voice announced a warning as the lift shot past the gravity zone. Then came the nausea, and in a violent heave dotted with blood and serum, a small metallic sphere was forcefully expelled from his mouth just as the lift stopped. Summoning as much strength as he could for this final effort, the slave grabbed the tiny device and pulled himself out.

Bullets scorched overhead as he bounded towards the airlock entrance. The inner doors opened, and with the press of several keys, he ensured they would not close behind him. Air pressure alerts echoed throughout the cavern, amber-colored warning lights flashed, and sirens wailed as he waited until the exact moment to open the outer seal.

The slave heard a deafening whoosh, then silence. As his lungs imploded, the last image to be processed by his failing brain was the sight of Amarrian guards hurled through an opening in the surface below. The tiny device, encased in the death grip of this nameless slave, flashed once before converting every atom of its mass into an immensely powerful energy pulse that traversed light years of space-time in an instant.

The celestial event registered on the instruments of exactly four ships. In that single moment, the course of history was altered forever.



"I will not hesitate when the test of Faith finds me, for only the strongest conviction will open the gates of paradise. My Faith in you is absolute; my sword is Yours, My God, and Your will guides me now and for all eternity."

The Prophet Kuria, "Paladin's Creed"

"It is said that cowardice lurks behind power; that every tyrant ruler fears the day when his subjects learn where the source of real power lies. What better way for an emperor to hide that truth than by claiming the will of deities and threatening divine consequence to those who question it!"

"The Elder's Tome", Matari Chronicles

A darkened path, littered with charred bones and glowing embers, weaved through the smoking remnants of a dead forest. The mark of evil was everywhere in this forsaken place, and the whisper of demons taunted its sole visitor to turn away. Suppressing her fear, she pressed onwards through the blackened, shattered tree trunks and emerged into a vast field. A single object broke the emptiness of this desolate expanse: A stone crypt with its heavy lid resting alongside, waiting to be sealed for eternity. The sky overhead boiled with thick, black clouds that warned of the apocalyptic storm coming to destroy this world once and for all. But she had come too far to turn back now, and after taking a deep breath for strength, dared to venture one step closer.

Immense grief seized her instantly, the kind of suffocating misery that only the loss of a loved one can elicit. A great hero was laid to rest inside that crypt, struck down on the brink of vanquishing the curse of this land. Approaching the tomb of this unknown champion, she realized that she was no longer alone. Beside her walked countless other souls whose number filled the field for as far as she could see. They too were stricken with grief, and had braved the treacherous landscape to bid this great hero farewell.

She reached the open crypt, but was unable to gaze upon the corpse that lay inside. Looking elsewhere, she found that the people surrounding her were faceless. They stood silently, shoulder to shoulder, as if waiting for her to speak. But it was the demons that spoke first, as their sinister murmurs reached across the wasteland to her ears. A flash of lightning lashed out from the wicked clouds overhead. The spirits suddenly vanished from the great field without a trace. Only the crypt--and the greatest fear that she had ever known--remained.

Without warning, the corpse lunged at her with outstretched arms and shouted:

"Viola!"

Pulling her firmly into the depths, the corpse screamed again as they fell deeper and deeper towards oblivion:

"Viola! Pull up!"

With a gasp, she awakened to the blare of warning klaxons and flashing instrument lights. The cockpit's canopy was filled with the swirling, reddish-brown cloud bands of Ubtes IV's upper atmosphere. Viola pulled back hard on the flight stick and jammed the throttle all the way forward. The massive gas giant dropped from the canopy's view and was replaced by the blinding light of the system's sun. The Allotek engines behind her roared to life, and the spacecraft started to rattle violently.

The earpiece in her helmet shouted again: "You dropped below the grav deck, use more thrust!"

Viola's left thumb depressed a switch on the throttle. The afterburners erupted, and the rattling subsided as the Atron-class frigate accelerated safely away from the powerful grip of Ubtes IV. These dreams are going to kill me someday, she thought. Switching the engines off, she took in several deep breaths of oxygen and tried to calm down.

"What the hell is wrong with you? That's the third time this month!"

Still shaking, she unclipped the mask and reached for the vial of painkillers resting below the MPD(Multifunction Projection Display). Her face was moist with perspiration and tears. She popped the lid off and let two of the pills roll into her mouth.

"Viola!"

After swallowing the pills, she tried to forge a harsh edge to her voice. "Baer, shut up already!" she yelled. "Could you mind your own business for once when I'm out here?" The drugs started to take their effect. The high was not as potent as she had hoped, but the effects were welcome just the same.

The voice in the earpiece matched her harshness. "I just saved your life again! God-damnit, Viola! Give me one good reason why I shouldn't take that ship away from you right now!"

Through her watery eyes, the bluish-black canvas of Ubtes space came into focus as she turned the craft away from the sun. "Because you've made a career of riding on the success of my work, and you're not going to do anything to jeopardize that."

"You should remind DIVCOM of that more often," Baer sneered. "They seem to forget about the success of your work all the time."

Viola ignored the veiled threat. If those fools want my resignation, all they have to do is ask. But they're not going to do that now, not since the Hror System was taken by Emperor Heideran, as I predicted. "Listen to me," Baer continued, his voice more subdued. "I'm speaking to you as a friend now: You're burning yourself out, and it's going to draw attention from the wrong people. They're going to start auditing the flight recorder logs, Viola.

I can't cover up these mishaps forever."

Especially if anyone finds out about these pills. "Baer, this ship is the only shelter I have from Federation politicians," she answered. Leaning forward against the harness straps, she tapped on the MFD. The cockpit's instruments bathed her flight suit in a greenish hue as data scrolled down the screen. "Do you have the latest casualty estimates for Eanna?"

There was a pause. "At last pass, sixty-three million dead, mostly from orbital bombardment directed at population centers. One million or so killed during the surface landings; another million in subsequent ground combat. At least two million were taken as slaves, but we won't know exact numbers for some time."

The faceless souls of her dream returned to the forefront of her memory. She closed her eyes and tried to push them away. "And the Elders?"

"Viola, please--"

"The Elders, goddamnit," she yelled, angered now. "Have you heard any reports at all?"

"Nothing," Baer answered tersely. "And no word from your mysterious `Order', either."

"Then make sure the ELINT technicians retask any local assets to monitoring the transports that leave the surface," she responded, reaching forward for the painkillers again.

"That's a waste of time and you know it," he argued. "We'll never learn the identities of anyone who was down there, let alone--"

Two more pills rolled into her mouth. "I don't want to hear your opinion, Baer." She felt the drugs work over her muscles, relaxing them. "Just get it done. Do you have anything else for me?"

"Actually, yes, Viola," he retorted. "DIVCOM wants a report detailing your estimates on which systems the Amarrians will attack next."

The crypt in the barren field was beckoning her to walk forward, and the demons started to whisper again.

"Have them tell the politicians that Luminaire is next," she breathed.

Viola switched off the commlink before Baer had time to protest.

Essence Region - Crux Constellation
The Renyn System: Planet IX - Moon 4
Federal Intelligence Office Headquarters

Lieutenant Colonel Baer Gesdeneau slammed his fist against the desk. That miserable bitch, he thought, trying to raise her again on the commlink. There was no answer. His eyes scanned the display of live telemetry broadcasting from Viola's frigate. The toggle switch for the subspace comm had just been switched off from the inside. Why do I bother, he asked himself. If she wants to kill herself, there's nothing I can do to stop her.

With a sigh, he leaned back in his chair and stared at the holographic information dancing before him. Viola Antonnes had been with the Federal Intelligence Office for almost twenty years, and in that time became the F.I.O.'s leading expert on the Minmatar-Amarrian conflict. Her expertise was driven by her passionate--and extremely unpopular--opinions about the moral responsibilities of governments. The Amarrians, with their embracement of slavery and expansionistic ambitions, became the natural target of her intellectual wrath. The Gallente Federation was still embroiled in a bitter war with the Caldari State, yet she continued to lobby tirelessly for direct military intervention on behalf of the beleaguered Minmatars. Political suicide, Baer thought. Whatever the moral purity of her beliefs, the Federation was too weary from war to listen.

Viola ruined her career when she portrayed the F.I.O. as being critical of government policymakers, accusing them of collectively failing to uphold the Federation's "implicit obligation" to safeguard human rights beyond Gallente borders. It was not the opinion that infuriated Agency superiors and alienated her from colleagues--after all, she was paid to have opinions. It was the manner in which she decided to make them publicly known.

Tasked by the F.I.O. to produce a routine intelligence briefing for the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, Viola secretly produced two separate reports. One such report detailed what Division Command thought she would say. The other copy--worded much differently--is what would eventually make its way into the hands of Gallente Senators.

Baer still grimaced whenever he thought about the Committee's reaction. In her report, Viola cited "the utter lack of foreign policy backbone" as bearing partial responsibility for the Amarr Empire's aggressive push into Minmatar space. She decried the "political cronies" whose "gross incompetence was evident in their belief that

rational dialogue was even possible with fanatical zealots" and the "deadly failure of publicly elected imbeciles to recognize the Reclaiming for what it is: State-sponsored genocide, by far the gravest threat ever faced by humanity, let alone the Federation". The resulting political fallout put so much pressure on the agency that DIVCOM (Division Command) contemplated taking legal action against her, except for the fact that doing so would deprive them of a valued resource whose contributions to the Federation were uncontested.

The F.I.O. ultimately decided that incurring the wrath of politicians was worth the price of keeping Viola around, but only under the condition that her visibility--both publicly and internally--be reduced to nothing. Despite more than twenty years of professional experience, she was stripped of her rank and made the hierarchal equivalent of a first year associate. Viola's life was the agency; she had devoted little time to developing a social life, and had no friends or family to lean on. She was crushed, Baer thought. And she has never been the same since.

Baer lit a cigarette and slowly exhaled a plume of smoke through the visual telemetry floating over his desk. The agency wanted her out of sight, but they still wanted her talents; what better way to reconcile those needs than by giving her a ship. The electronics on Viola's Atron-class frigate were modified to broadcast her location to the agency at all times, and her security clearance was adjusted so that she could only access restricted information if she was physically onboard. On stations or planets, her clearance was blocked. Division Command was taking every precaution to avoid a repeat of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee fiasco while still getting productive work from her, and could care less if they crushed her ego in the process.

It was cruel, Baer thought, but it was working...until she started looking for ghosts. Despite the magnitude of the fall of the planet Eanna, Viola was investigating nonsense about secretive 'Orders' and hidden figures of power within the Minmatar tribes whose importance to Gallente interests she deemed as paramount. Yet she could produce no evidence of their existence, and still insisted on devoting precious intelligence-gathering resources to investigate her wild suspicions. I'm losing her, and it's just a matter of time before all of this ends badly, Baer thought. The intelligence business was costly enough to the psyche, but it was especially hard on those assigned to the Amarrians. Viola would not be the first analyst to lose her mind because of them.

He stamped out his cigarette and pushed himself away from the desk, giving the telemetry one last look: Ubtas System, fourth planet, geosynchronous orbit, all systems green, and all ambient signal strengths at zero. She's completely alone out there, Baer thought. A fitting picture for the life she chose. Straightening his uniform, Baer left his office to attend a meeting with the other task officers.

As soon as the door closed behind him, the telemetry graphic depicting ambient signal strength flashed bright red and held for a few seconds before returning to normal.

Metropolis Region - Tiat Constellation
The Hror System, Planet VI: "Eanna"
Armageddon-Class Battleship "Impervious"

As seen from the vantage of ships patrolling high above, the swirling cirrus clouds of the planet Eanna still bore long, dark streaks that spanned the width of continents.

Speak to me, God.

The screen cycled through different views provided by Imperial warships surrounding the former Minmatar world. Approximately twenty-four hours had passed since the last guns stopped, but uncontrollable firestorms still raged all over the planet. The occasional break in the clouds revealed green landmasses pockmarked with wide swaths of blackened scars.

Tell me that the millions of people I killed yesterday deserved to die.

Commodore Faus Akredon tapped the console, and the images disappeared. He swiveled the chair so that he faced the window of his quarters. The Hror System's sun gleaned off a section of the Impervious's hull, illuminating the darkened room with an eerie, gold-tinted aura. He put a hand to his forehead and closed his eyes, fighting back tears that threatened to reveal sympathy for an enemy of God.

"I...will not...hesitate...when the test of Faith...finds me..."

Faus broke down into sobs as he tried to recite the prayer which, hours earlier, compelled him to follow the Grand Admiral's orders to bombard the planet Eanna from space. The Impervious was just one of hundreds of Imperial Navy battleships in the armada sent to take control of the planet, and Faus was likely to receive special military honors for his role in the attack. The fleet under his direct command was one of the few that encountered serious Minmatar resistance. By the time the Impervious was training her deadly tachyon beams at the cities below, Faus Akredon had coordinated the systematic destruction of dozens of enemy warships. Not one Imperial ship was lost in the engagement. The decisiveness of the victory carried divine implications that inspired his crew, further strengthening their belief that he was a true Paladin: An executor of God's Will.

My God, I beg you...speak to me, please!

Faus wiped away the tears and ran his hands along his bare scalp. Dozens of military awards and religious artifacts lined the walls of his quarters. Most of the distinctions were presented by Emperor Heideran himself during elaborate ceremonies attended by the most powerful figures in the Amarr Empire. Commodore Akredon was already a legend in the Imperial Navy, renown for crushing pockets of Minmatar resistance throughout the Empire and requesting the most dangerous combat assignments for his fleet.

The Emperor treated Faus like a son; he placed more faith in his abilities as a Navy commander than he did in his own Admirals. It was publicly known that there were shared bloodlines between House Akredon and the royal Kador family, but in truth there was little contact between them. Emperor Heideran loved Faus not for his ancestry, but for his relentless dedication to the Reclaiming and deeply devout faith. They both envisioned a day when New Eden became the glorious paradise it was meant to be, when the faithful of every world within the cosmos lifted their universal praise to God.

But now his faith was rattled to the core. Grand Admiral Mekioth Sarum--the supreme commander of all Amarrian military forces--never asked Faus to participate in a surface bombardment before Eanna. Perhaps it was simply a tactical necessity; a military requirement to maximize the firepower directed against such a vital target. Or, it was the Emperor administering a final test of faith, one that would ultimately determine his ascension to the rank of Admiral. Faus was a man whose success in combat was driven by his belief in the divine righteousness of his actions. Yet today he found himself unable to rid the images of Eanna from his mind.

This burden is more than I can bear, My God...Was it not your divine will that these pagans be burned for their sins? Why do I not rejoice at the slaughter of your enemy now?

A soft tone broke the silence. Faus looked towards his desk.

You have listened, and now you speak to me...

The tone resonated a second time.

"What is it, Lieutenant."

The voice sounded apologetic. "My lord, I'm sorry to disturb you, but we have a situation."

"Go on."

"Comms detected a powerful burst of gamma and x-ray energy that was not generated by any known celestial objects. When they checked the recorders, they found that subspace ambient signal strength spiked at the same exact time, and...there was structure embedded in the transmission. It was a distress signal, but hugely amplified."

"From whom?"

"Some of our own high priests, my lord. The message is distorted, but we can confirm the voiceprint of the Apostle Taj Rukon. There are other voices in the recording, but we cannot identify them. It sounds like they were ambushed."

Another test of my faith? Faus's hands rolled into tight fists. "Rebels?"

"Correct, my lord. The message is explicit."

"Where did the burst originate from?"

"My lord, this will sound unusual, but the originating source is Diemnon."

Anger formed on the brow lines on Faus's expression. "The mining complex in Hahyil?"

"Yes, my lord. The comms officers checked several times."

I am your humble servant, my God, and I will show no mercy to the animals responsible for this atrocity.

"Lieutenant, hail the other captains and instruct navigation to set course for Diemnon. Best possible speed. I'm on my way to the bridge."

"Yes, my lord."

The battered planet Eanna moved out of sight as the Impervious started its turn. Faus stood upright and caught his reflection in the window.

I am your humble servant...

With a deep breath, he collected himself and moved towards the door.

There were no dreams this time. Only blackness prevailed.

Chirp.

Viola slowly opened her eyes, wondering for a moment how long she was asleep for and then realizing that she had barely slept at all. She felt so numb that she was having trouble focusing on her surroundings. The high was still there, sort of, only it was just as painful as it was relieving. Like trying to quench thirst by drinking seawater, she mused.

She blinked several times. Her mind was working slowly, drudging through fogged memory trying to remember how to interpret the myriad of readings and instruments on the MFD. The warning that had saved her from plummeting into the atmosphere of Ubtes IV had a different tone, she realized. This one was a signal.

Chirp.

She leaned forward and tapped the screen. Gamma and x-ray, she said aloud. The fog suddenly evaporated as she realized the significance of the signal type.

The Order!

She started tapping quickly on the screen, coaxing the Atron's sophisticated electronics to find the source of the signal. Frowning at the computer's first answer, she ran the analysis again. This time, it displayed a much different response. Viola's eyes opened wide, and she slowly moved her hands away from the controls. The screen read:

VIOLA ANTIONNES

WE HAVE BEEN WATCHING YOU

COME TO DIEMNON

BEFORE GRUUL SHATAN STRIKES

I'm not dreaming this, Viola thought as a chill ran the length of her spine. The literal translation of "Diemnon" in the Amarrian language was "Demon's Stone", and its location was deep inside of territory controlled by the Imperial Navy. Known as an infamous labor camp for Minmatar slaves, Diemnon was a planetesimal--a titanic asteroid that could be considered a failed planet. At just over 1,300 km in diameter, it was still geologically active and featured constant volcanic events on the surface.

The most pronounced danger to Diemnon was its highly elliptical orbit. One revolution took 238 standard EVE days, but its path intersected a dense asteroid belt--the remnants of the planet Diemnon used to be--that rained epic destruction on the surface every 119 days. The Amarrians called this cataclysmic meteor storm "Gruul Shatan", and it transformed the space around Diemnon into lethal kill zone for spacecraft.

But deep beneath the surface of this hellish world were vast deposits of hemorphite. Too deep for the cutting power of ship-mounted mining lasers to reach, the Amarrians drilled and blasted some 30 kilometers into the crust to access the precious ore. To sustain mining operations, a sprawling complex was constructed deep inside of the massive cavity. Billions of cubic meters of material were excavated and hauled away, sometimes only to be replaced by magma vents welling upwards from the mantle or deposited from above by the wrath of Gruul Shatan.

Only Amarrian arrogance--and slave manpower--could make such an impractical venture possible, Viola thought. Without question, if there was such a thing as hell in New Eden, then its doorstep was Diemnon. And it was Minmatar slaves that converted this underworld into a precious resource for an Emperor who considered himself an ambassador to God. The thought enraged Viola, but the chills returned as she realized that the 119 day of Diemnon's orbit was just a few hours away. The Order has eluded me at every turn, Viola thought, reaching for more painkillers. A clue here, something unexplained there...Now this--an offer to meet them in the most dangerous region of space during its most dangerous time of the local year. She chewed the pills instead of swallowing them, but hardly noticed the bitter taste.

"Before Gruul Shatan strikes," Viola recalled from the message as the drugs ran their wicked course through her veins.

Why not? The Atron shuddered as the warp drive engines powered on. I'm dead already.

Viola was right. Again.

Baer's mind was racing as he rushed back towards his office. He hated to admit it, but the task officer's meeting had touched on everything that she asked him to look for. All diplomatic channels between the Federation and

the Minmatar tribes were still severed because of the invasion. But information continued to flow from intelligence assets observing Amarrian and Minmatar movements, and the implications of the latest data were extremely unsettling to DIVCOM.

The meeting focused on an industrial believed to be carrying the first Minmatar prisoners taken from Eanna. Shortly after that ship's arrival at the Diemnon mining complex, a riot erupted which claimed the lives of several Paladin guards--a completely unheard of occurrence given the brutal effectiveness of slave control methods used by the Amarrians. Most interestingly of all, Diemnon was about to make an orbital pass directly through the Hahyil System's largest asteroid belt. No ships would be able to approach the complex until the resulting meteor storm passed.

That was just too much of a coincidence, Baer thought, wincing from the stench of cigarettes and sweat as the front door to his office opened. The ELINT task officers at the meeting stated that `chatter' on known Minmatar military frequencies spiked right after that riot took place, and the amount of chatter was already elevated because of the Eanna invasion. Viola had asked about the Elders several times, and this series of events implied that someone extremely important to the Minmatars--"elder" or otherwise--was taken to Diemnon.

The desk console buzzed the moment he reached his seat.

"This is Baer."

"Lieutenant Colonel, we just isolated a voice intercept from a Matari Tribe military channel that you need to listen to," the voice said. It was one of the junior analysts from the ELINT desk. "It's about an hour old. Parts of it are missing, but the conversation triggered some keyword alarms. Standby."

Baer made sure his own electronics were recording before the playback started.

"...brought to Diemnon...care about the risks anymore, we don't have time for...rapid-response team we have...Valklears...back from their current...Talon squad--...as quickly...death sentence...what choice do we really have..."

The recording stopped abruptly with a burst of static.

"That's all of it," the analyst said. "We're working on the voice print now. Call you if we get a match."

"Alright, thanks." The line clicked off.

Holy shit, Baer thought as he fumbled for a cigarette. They're really going to try and get someone out of there! The Valklears were a legendary special operations force composed of the best warriors from the Minmatar tribes, and their involvement all but guaranteed that a rescue mission was either in the late planning stages or already in progress. And that mission would certainly fail, no matter how good those Valklear commandos think they are, Baer thought as he brought up the telemetry data from Viola's frigate. Replacements for the Amarrian guards killed during the riot are probably already on their way to Diemnon, and...

Baer stopped in mid-thought when he saw the destination locked into the Atron's navigation system. The unlit cigarette fell from his mouth.

"Fuck," Baer muttered as he tapped furiously into the console to remotely disable the Atron's engines. But it was too late. The holographic display flickered as Viola's frigate entered the stargate that would take her into the Hahyil System.

The Federation intelligence officer stared in disbelief. How the hell could she know about this already, he wondered. There are more subtle ways for her to chase a death wish.



"Zakara saw the danger to his brother, and did not hesitate; without weapon or armor, he hurled himself at the beast, attacking with his bare hands. Enraged, the beast turned and struck Zakara, opening a terrible wound in his side. Seizing the moment, Garum ran his sword through the beast's heart, thus ending the battle victorious. But Zakara, mortally wounded, cried out in pain. 'You sacrificed yourself for me,' Garum said, taking his hand. 'We are brothers,' Zakara answered, just before breathing his last. 'And in God we shall remain brothers for all of time...'"

Book of the Prophet Junip, 10:25 - 30, The Scriptures

"I will tell you how this madness is born: A man peers over the edge of chaos, into the event horizon, where light can never escape. Then he turns and sees the remnants of his shattered life, of what was taken from him without pause or remorse. The soul decides, because the man is already dead, and it craves chaos for this purpose: To kill the god who did this to him."

The Thukker Testament, excerpt from Volume III

Derelik Region - Bedaleya Constellation
The Irshah System: Valklear Talon Squadron Rally Point
Typhoon-class battleship "Hellwraith"

My son...

Decades of unrelenting guerilla warfare carved severe lines into the face of the Valklear Admiral known as Karth Mutana. The long, narrow mane of hair that grew from the center of his scalp was streaked with bands of gray, but his muscular frame still possessed the size and strength of a Krusual tribesman half his age. Today his eyes were darker than usual, and his expression betrayed both anger and sadness instead its prevailing fortitude.

They killed my only son...

The crewmen seated in the trenches alongside the bridge took note of his grim demeanor, and felt the heavy burden on their shoulders grow unbearable. The reality that Eanna was lost to the Amarrians was just too difficult to absorb, and many were receiving news of loved ones lost--or worse, not hearing anything at all. The Admiral was always a pillar of strength for them, but seeing him like this was bitterly demoralizing and added to the depth of their own sorrows.

My hatred of them is all that remains now...

All of the Hellwraith's officers stood beside their Admiral, listening to the Valklear mission planners explain the roles of each squadron in the rescue operation. A large screen built into the bulkhead above the forward bridge windows was divided into four sections, one for each commander in the briefing. Karth heard his name mentioned several times as the planners talked, but his mind never wandered from the memories of his son.

Before he was a soldier, he would watch as I spilled the blood of Amarrian sons...the blood of Amarrian fathers...and he would say to me, 'You are what I want to become...'

"Admiral?" The planner mentioned something of the mission to him directly, but was ignored once more.

I am Karth Mutana, freedom fighter of the Krusual Tribe, Valklear warrior of the Minmatar people, wretched father of a dead son...

All eyes focused on the grizzled veteran seated in the captain's chair of the mighty Hellwraith. The scowl on Karth's brow deepened, but he remained transfixed on the space directly in front of him. No one dared to press for his attention. The mission planner cleared his throat, and then continued.

This will be my final battle...

"...Talon Squadron will warp into the CZ first to engage all Imperial forces in the area. Surface-based defenses must be neutralized before any spaceborne threats. You'll only have a few seconds to declare a 'go, no-go' for Omicron, and anywhere from three to five minutes to egress from the CZ before the meteor storm pulverizes everything in the area..."

My last vendetta...

"...the jump-in point will put you directly on top of Diemnon, matching her orbital velocity and trajectory around the Hahyil System's sun. Omicron must be protected at all costs. If Omicron fails to enter the primary vent cavern within two minutes of your arrival, the odds of this mission succeeding--"

History will remember me as a godslayer.

"Omicron will reach the cavern," Karth interrupted, snapping out of his haze. "The Hellwraith and her Talons will see to that. My crew and I are prepared to give our lives so that Omicron may succeed. The question is what odds are you giving Minmatar to succeed?"

The mission planner shifted his weight. "I'm sorry Admiral, but--"

"The Valklears could not help Eanna, Colonel. All the strength assembled here was powerless to stop the Paladins from laying waste to one of our civilization's most sacred planets. Did we not have a plan to defend the world that most of us here called 'home'?"

Karth's officers remained at attention, making every effort to hide their shock at the Admiral's words. The mission planner was flustered, and tried to answer the question candidly.

"We did, sir, but the sheer size and strength of the invasion force overwhelmed--"

"Colonel," the Admiral interrupted again, as the lines in his face deepened. "They killed millions of us. Tens of millions! Please tell me that the plan to defend those people was the best that the Valklears could offer. Tell me

how that plan accounted for the odds of facing a larger than expected attack force." His voice lowered to a whisper. "Or the odds my son faced as tachyon beams fell from the sky above him."

The mission planner was speechless. Every precious second that passed brought the deadly meteor storm closer to Diemnon, and the window for rescuing the Elders--if they were even alive--was closing fast.

"Admiral, you have my deepest sympathies for the loss of your noble son, but the Amarrians must have secured below the surface by now, they won't detect Omicron's entry if we attack just as the first meteors impact--" Karth flew out of the captain's chair in a rage. Thick veins bulged from his neck and temples as he roared.

"We failed to save Eanna because of a miscalculation of `odds', Colonel. The Elders are all that remain of that world, perhaps of our entire culture. And you dare to speak of `odds' like this is some sort of game? Navigation!"

One of the officers besides Karth snapped his boots at attention. "Yes, sir!"

"Set your course for the Hahyil System, and make sure your final jump point is set against the coordinates that the Colonel has provided!"

The officer's expression beamed sheer determination. "Nav course to Diemnon, yes sir!" He leapt into the trench and started barking orders to the crewmen seated inside. Karth glared at the cameras above the screen.

"Omicron, you have your go. Lock in your course and meet us at Diemnon."

The Omicron flight leader stared quizzically at the screen.

"Now!" Karth screamed. "Move it!"

The mission planner tried to speak, but was cut off again by the furious Valklear Admiral.

"You mention the word `odds' one more time, and I swear, I'll crush your skull if I live to see you again. There is nothing left to chance! Do you know what we are fighting for now, Colonel? The right to bury our own children. Because of odds, saving them is no longer an option!"

The Hellwraith started its turn as dozens of Minmatar warships positioned themselves alongside. Omicron wing--comprised of two Rifter-class frigates loaded with one squad of Valklear commandos each--moved away from the main fleet. The group was just seven jumps from Hahyil, and although most of the crew did not yet know their destination, they sensed that fierce combat was imminent.

Another bridge officer approached Karth and spoke quietly. "Sir, I have the information you requested."

Karth turned towards the officer. "Tell me."

The man hesitated before answering. "The Gallentes provided us with real-time information as the Imperial fleet moved into position above Eanna. Comparing it with reconnaissance data of damage placement on the surface gives us a high level of confidence that--"

"I trust your information, Lieutenant," Karth interrupted. The floor grating underneath both men's feet shook as the Hellwraith's warp drive engines powered on. "Just give me a name."

"Yes, sir," The man was beginning to sweat. "The Imperial flagship positioned over the city where your son was lost...it was the Impervious, sir. It was Commodore Faus Akredon."

Derelik Region - Bedaleya Constellation
The Irshah System: Valklear Talon Squadron Rally Point
Rifter-class frigate "Omicron-One"

The Valklear squad captain focused on the sound of the Rifter's engines, allowing its steady hum to drown out the replay of the Operation Tempest mission plan. Years of combat experience taught him to seize these precious moments of rest whenever he could. He leaned back, closed his eyes, and allowed his mind to wander back to the hopeless days of his youth, and to a moment that he revisited often:

"I see that you used a Kri'tak to murder them. Why use this weapon?"
"Because it's quiet."

"Slitting the throats of four Nefantars is hardly quiet, boy."

"I set them down gently so that no one would hear."

"Not gently enough. I tracked all of your movements. I saw everything. And when their master discovers what

happened to them, the Paladins will come looking for you."

"Let them come. They won't take me alive."

"Do you enjoy killing, Vlad?"

"How the fuck do you know what my name is?"

"I said, do you enjoy killing, Vlad?"

"I'm indifferent to it. Who are you?"

"Were you being 'indifferent' when you murdered those men?"

"I'm indifferent to killing traitors that betray us to the Amarrians."

"I'd believe that if you didn't rob them as well."

"Pull the trigger or stop wasting my time."

"You're not intimidated by this gun I'm pressing into your forehead?"

"The only thing that intimidates me is being alive long enough to become a slave. Now pull the fucking trigger or get out of my face."

"You're going to do well as a soldier, Vlad."

"What are you doing--"

"We're going to make you a better killer, Vlad. For Minmatar's sake. Sweet dreams."

The excited voice of the Rifter pilot blared through the speakers, breaking apart a distant memory that was as painful as it was treasured to the elite soldier.

"Valklears, we are a 'go', repeat, we are a 'go'. ETA to CZ nine minutes, seven seconds...six...five...mark. Flight engineer, secure all gear and fix for battle stations, this ingress is going to be hot."

The cabin lights switched to red, and Captain Vlad Kintreb snapped fully out of his daydream. The flight engineer entered and began working his way along the two benches of soldiers facing each other, helping to snap their four-point harnesses into place. He worked silently, mindful of the relative peace that these men were enjoying. He knew that it would not last for much longer.

Twenty years, Vlad thought, running through a checklist of the equipment strapped all over him. Twenty years since I was taken out of those filthy alleyways by that crazy Valklear recruiter. I wonder what he would have to say about this suicide mission.

The engineer approached and pulled the straps firmly over the combat pack fastened to his shoulders. Captain Kintreb, along with every other Valklear commando, was bristling with weaponry. Each one was armed with an assault rifle, pistol, extra ammunition, grenades, and a combat knife known as a "Kri'tak". Some carried additional equipment and weapons for more specialized roles, but for this mission--which favored stealth over brute force--traveling light was mandatory. The flight engineer checked to make sure that the rifle was fastened securely across Vlad's chest, and then padded down the rest of the gear strapped to his legs and sides. Satisfied that everything would remain in place, the engineer moved on to the next commando.

The soldiers were quiet, each one handling the pressure a little bit differently. Some sat serenely with their eyes closed in meditation; others were concentrating on the holographic mission briefing hovering before them. How many of us will be here for the trip home, Vlad wondered. If there even is a trip home. A three-dimensional map of the Diemnon mining complex was projected on the floor grating at the center of the cabin. The vent cavern entrance that Omicron wing would descend into was labeled "Hell's Gate".

"Study the map," Vlad instructed. "Know every detail of it. There are copies in your mission packs, but you should commit those schematics to memory."

One of the soldiers spoke up: "Any last minute changes to the plan?"

"Negative, Thumgar," Vlad answered. "As of now, Tempest has no changes."

"What about the Elders that are missing," another soldier asked. "Any word on their status?"

"Negative, Krughan," Vlad answered. "But the assumption right now is that they're still alive."

Some of the soldiers exchanged looks, and Vlad made a mental note of the ones that did. He decided to address their unspoken concerns before they could cause more doubt.

"I know what you're thinking, but if there's even a chance that they still breathe, it's worth giving up our lives to find out," Vlad said. "Without those Elders...I don't think I have to explain what the consequences are."

All of the soldiers agreed, except for Thumgar. This one is going to be trouble, Vlad sensed. I must take care with him in front of the others.

"We are Minmatar's blade," Vlad started. "And the spirits of Eanna are with us. This mission will be difficult, but Tempest is not a desperation effort. We will succeed."

Thumgar was still defiant. "Success even without the Elders?"

The uncertainty in this one will kill him faster than Amarrian bullets. "Tempest's primary mission is to determine if the Elders taken from Eanna are still alive, Thumgar. If they are, then our secondary mission is to bring them home." Vlad paused for a moment and then added: "Are you up to the task?"

"I'm a Valklear," Thumgar growled, reacting as if insulted. "Of course I'm up to the task."

The soldiers felt a slight lurch to their side as the Rifter accelerated to warp speed.

"So am I," Vlad answered, this time with more resolve in his voice. "And so are all the warriors on this ship."

Derelik Region - Aguh Constellation
The Hahyil System: Diemnon Planetesimal

The planets of the Hahyil System shot past the bubble canopy as the Atron accelerated into the final leg of the journey to Diemnon. Adrenaline overwhelmed the drugs coursing through Viola's veins as she contemplated the extraordinary risks of the situation. It's all worth it, she thought, slowly crushing another pill in her mouth. Especially if the fall of Eanna explains why the Order is making direct contact with us. She double checked that the recorders were functioning properly, running tests on frequencies across the electromagnetic and subspace spectrums. Viola did not know what to expect, and for reasons that included everything except proving the Order's existence to the F.I.O. or anyone else, she wanted to be certain that the full details of the encounter were preserved.

Viola skipped a breath as the warp engines started to power down. A tiny, reddish dot appeared at the center of the warp core, growing steadily until the hideous face of Diemnon completely filled the bubble canopy. The Demon's Stone, she thought, staring at the lava flows slicing fiery pathways across the elongated, shattered world. Immediately, the frigate's sensors warned of the incoming meteor storm, and Viola noticed that the space beyond Diemnon was sparkling with sporadic pinpoints of brilliant light. Gruul Shatan, she thought. Sunlight reflecting off the tumbling faces of countless boulders traveling at hundreds of meters per second. One of the commlink lights was blinking wildly, indicating Baer's desperate efforts to reach her. She contemplated answering, then decided against it. Why bother with him at all, she asked herself. The recorders alone will answer all of his questions...

Viola suddenly felt herself float off the seat into the shoulder straps, and every electrical system on the Atron shut down without warning. The panels, screens, and indicator lights inside the cockpit went dark, and the temperature inside the frigate started to drop. Fearful for her life, Viola scrambled to strap the oxygen mask over her mouth, then looked downwards to check that all of the seals on her survival suit were properly fastened. A flash of light illuminated the ship, and her eyes instinctively darted towards the view outside.

A Bestower-class transport was adrift just a few dozen meters in front of the Atron, so close that Viola could read the Amarrian religious inscriptions etched into the ship's hull. The vessel appeared abandoned; no navigation lights were active, no portholes were illuminated from the inside, and the entire ship was rotating slowly along its axis. Two dead ships out here, Viola thought, desperately trying to coax her own frigate back to life. What the hell am I supposed to do now?

She suddenly felt a strange sensation erupt from deep within her skull, which spread quickly to the base of her ears. Releasing the controls, her hands reflexively snapped back to grab at her helmet.

"Two deaths with sublime purpose, Viola Antionnes."

Viola's body twitched in terrified reaction to the wicked voice that assaulted her eardrums. Without electrical power, it was impossible for anything inside the ship to generate that kind of audio. And yet the voice sounded like it was spoken from inside of her.

Her eyes locked onto the weightless vial of pills floating against the canopy shielding.

"Addictions," the voice hissed. "You and the hopeless addictions of your species."

Viola tried to calm herself, accepting that the Order was fully in control. She could sense biting anger in the voice, and decided that it would be unwise to interrupt.

"Addictions to power, to greed, to lust, to gods...all drugs that falsely satisfy a need. Do you understand what that need is?"

The temperature inside of the Atron continued to plummet, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Viola abandoned her attempts to restart the ship's systems and stared at the Bestower drifting outside.

"The need to be free of fear and uncertainty, child. The Minmatar Elders controlled their fear of the unknown by nurturing patience in their quest for understanding. That quest united an entire people! Their tribes were acting as one, even without the awareness of a single nation to define them. No other race was on a surer path towards achieving what we have than they. But the Amarrians..."

An inscription on the Bestower's hull caught Viola's eye: "The Will of God: Amarr Invincible."

"The Amarrians and their fear, the Amarrians and their addiction, the Amarrians and their ignorance! Eanna was all that remained of the example that humankind desperately needed to evolve, to rid itself of fear once and for all, and to embrace the enlightenment that has preserved us for millennia!"

It sounded like grains of sand striking metal at first, and then the occasional pebble smashed into the bubble canopy. That storm is close, Viola thought, craving a painkiller more than ever. She could see that the glitter beyond Diemnon was starting to take on the distinct shape of asteroids.

"Too many times. Too many times have the addictions of man destroyed the progress of ages. History is about to fail us again, and deny us the right to walk among you once more."

The vial of painkillers crashed against the console and spilled its contents everywhere as the Atron suddenly powered back on. Tiny ripples of light pulsed throughout the bubble canopy as the frigate's shields absorbed the impact of debris from Gruul Shatan.

"Not since before the New Eden gate collapsed have we seen darker days than these! Will you find the strength to restore what was lost with Eanna?"

With a shrill alarm, the sensors onboard the Atron registered the arrival of seven Imperial Navy warships. Viola watched in horror as each of them began to actively target her ship.

"Or will this be the legacy of humankind forever..."

Viola shrieked as the Bestower exploded in a blinding flash that showered the Atron with shreds of scorched wreckage. Alarms warning of danger screamed with relentless urgency while she fumbled to locate the controls that would activate the frigate's warp drive.

The ghastly visage of eight corpses floating among the Bestower's remains caused her to hesitate for a few seconds too long.

Derelik Region - Aguh Constellation
The Hahyil System: Diemnon Planetesimal
Armageddon-Class Battleship "Impervious"

Faus Akredon could not believe his eyes. The corpses of eight Amarrian high priests were all that remained of the Bestower that he took upon himself to protect. One of them belonged to the beloved Apostle Taj Rukon, the man who had pleaded for help in the distress call. And the Gallente Federation is responsible for this treachery, he thought. My God, I have another enemy to slay in your name!

The weapons officer spoke in a voice tinged with anger: "Range to target, fifty-eight kilometers, radio crystals loaded, designate November-One. Your orders, my lord?"

Before Faus could answer, the tactical officer interrupted. "New contacts at three-five-zero, z-plus 17,000 meters, range 71 kilometers! Minmatar rebels, my lord!

Faus looked at the tactical display and counted thirty enemy warships. Regardless of the odds, he made a decision to avenge the murdered holy men before pulling his fleet out. There was time for just one shot.

"Weapons command, assign turrets one and two, track November-One and open fire."

Derelik Region - Aguh Constellation
The Hahyil System: Diemnon Planetesimal
Typhoon-class battleship "Hellwraith"

The crewmembers on the bridge all saw it at the same time: Two red beams slicing across space, impacting the aft section of the Atron and sending it into a violent spin. Without any sign of provocation that they could see, the Amarrians had just shot down an unarmed Gallente Federation ship.

But Karth was not interested in the tiny frigate spiraling out of control towards the surface of Diemnon. He was fixated on the long, golden contours of the Armageddon-class battleship on the tactical display. The mighty Impervious, he thought to himself. Perhaps fate is not as unjust as I once thought.

Essence Region - Crux Constellation
The Renyn System: Planet IX - Moon 4
Federal Intelligence Office Headquarters

Baer watched in horror as the telemetry readings foretold of Viola Antionnes's imminent death. The Amarrians, he thought incredulously, reaching his trembling hand towards the intercom switch. The goddamn Amarrians attacked her!

"What's the problem," the sharp voice asked. Baer spoke quickly as he monitored the telemetry.

"An Amarrian battle fleet just attacked Viola's ship over Diemnon, Colonel."

"What was she doing there?"

"Most likely investigating the same rescue mission theory that we discussed earlier." Her ship is on fire, Baer noticed. And spinning so fast that she has to be unconscious by now.

"`Most likely', Lieutenant Colonel?"

"She switched off comms before I could ask her," he answered, staring in horror at the data. "A Minmatar strike force witnessed the attack on Viola's ship. They're engaging the Imperial battle fleet as we speak."

"Right now? At Diemnon?"

"Correct. But we're about to lose telemetry, Viola's ship is just moments away from--"

Baer never finished his sentence as the proximity sensors on the Atron registered two Jovian Wraith-class frigates uncloak within meters of the doomed frigate.



"War is not the dreadful end to all things as mankind fears. Conflict brings balance to nature as it adapts, mutates, and transforms itself into something stronger than before. Mankind is the master of nature because we can choose those mutations on our own accord. We can accelerate the inevitable dominance of a species. Through war, we can make ourselves stronger at the time and place of our choosing. War is not hell, far from it. War is beautiful. War is divine."

Grand Admiral Mekioth Sarum, excerpt from a commencement speech to Paladin graduates of the Imperial Academy, 23215 AD

"It took the indifferent cruelty of a Glaive-collar to make us forget which tribe we came from, and the horrors of war to unite us as Minmatars."

Isinnur Urlbrald, Vherokior Council Historical Archives, 23217 AD

A single point of light broke through the shroud of darkness that fell over Viola's bloodshot eyes, dilating slowly into an elongated tunnel. Every muscle in her body was contracted tightly, battling against the dangerously high G-forces induced by the Atron's spin. A dizzying blur of orange and black filled the growing lens at the end of the tunnel as the frigate careened towards the surface of Diemnon; the blare of alarms and the smell of smoke forewarned of the fiery death that awaited her.

Viola fought through the immense pressure driving her into the seat and managed to squeeze the flight stick in her right hand, moving it side to side. There was no response from the frigate's systems, no way to eject from the doomed spacecraft, and no means to call for help. Letting go of the controls, she wondered if her death would even be noticed by anyone, and found in these final moments that her intrigue for the Order had been replaced fully by a seething hatred of them.

But then the orange-black blur changed to bluish-white, and the tunnel vision effects started to fade quickly as the Atron's rate of spin slowed. The alternating view of Diemnon and space leveled off into a distinct horizon, and Viola's tightly contracted muscles started to relax. The spacecraft's alarms continued to blare ominous warnings of damaged or inoperable systems, and yet the frigate was somehow flying straight and level in a controlled descent towards the planetesimal's surface.

In a final conscious effort that drained the last remnants of her physical strength, Viola turned her head slightly and saw a Jovian Wraith flying just meters away from the bubble canopy.

"How did they do that," the pilot of Omicron-One muttered, toggling a switch on the throttle control. Her heart was beating faster than it would be if she were running. "Talon command, this is Omicron lead, be advised, the Jovians have stabilized the Atron and are towing it in."

A static-laced voice answered in the headpiece. "...again, Omicron, did you say...were towing it?"

An asteroid the size of a cargo container tumbled past the canopy. "Shit! I mean, affirmative, I just overshot them, the whole rear quadrant of that frigate is gone, and it's still keeping up with the Wraiths. Omicron-Two, can you confirm?"

"Talon Command, this is Two, confirmed...Atron...crippled...the Jovians are using...kind of tractor beam tech...towards the surface...Goddamn asteroids, this is...ing edge...storm..."

The pilot of Omicron-One grimaced, understanding exactly what the pilot of Omicron-Two was trying to report despite the interference. The leading edge of Gruul Shatan was upon them, and her peripheral vision spotted the expanding shockwaves of meteor impacts on Diemnon's surface dozens of kilometers below.

Another asteroid tumbled by, triggering a proximity alarm on the Rifter. The canopy was shimmering in a red aura as thousands of smaller stone projectiles started peppering the frigate's shields. Hell's Gate was still over 100 kilometers away, and their approach put the incoming storm at an angle that was almost directly in front of them. The idea, the mission planners thought, was to align Omicron headfirst with the obstacles to reduce the possibility of being blindsided. That was a flattering assumption, the pilot thought as she nudged the throttle up to gain more speed. Thinking that actually seeing these fucking things makes them any less avoidable.

The radio broke the pilot's concentration again. "...one, check your six, those Jovians..."

The Omicron pilot dared to glance off-center from the canopy towards the rear-view camera display. In her determined effort to avoid colliding with the incoming asteroids, she had lost track of the space behind her ship. And in combat, that was almost always a deadly mistake.

"Admiral, the Jovians are directly behind Omicron-One," the tactical officer said, incredulously. "And the Atron is flying in tight formation with them!"

Karth paced the bridge impatiently. Why the hell are they here? The Wraiths and the crippled Atron were all within range of his fleet's guns, but that was changing by the second. There can be no witnesses to his rescue effort!

"Send orders to the cruisers Al Haquis and Sarkos: Target the entire group, but hold fire until I give the word."

"Yes sir, designate Wraith targets Sigma-One and Two, Atron target designate Gulf-One."

Goddamn Jovians, Karth fumed. If they aren't shooting, then what are they doing?

"Navigation!"

"Yes sir!"

"Close range on the Impervious, best possible speed! Tacklers!"

Another static-laced response echoed through the bridge speakers: "Tackler squadron, standing by."

"Your primary target is the battleship Impervious," Karth hissed. The tactical display indicated that the storm was almost on top of the Amarrian battle group, and that their escape window was narrowing quickly. He was never more bloodthirsty in his entire life than he was right this moment.

"Get into scramble range as quickly as possible. Our gunners will neutralize their cruisers in just a few moments. I want that ship's momentum stopped, do you understand?"

"Affirmative. On our way."

The six Slasher-class frigates that made up the Tackler squadron broke away from the main group, heading directly towards the Impervious. Their progress was marked with six black triangles on the tactical display.

"Admiral," the tactical officer interrupted. "The Sarkos and Al Haquis report null targeting solutions for Sigma or Gulf--the Jovians are too close to Omicron-One!"

"Rifter captain, this is the Jovian frigate at your six," the voice started. "You cannot navigate this approach. Requesting permission to commandeer your flight controls."

The pilot of Omicron-One was just as furious as she was terrified. "Back off or I'm opening fire!" she shrieked. The crippled Atron was flying alongside of her, and a Jovian Wraith was easing towards the front of the formation, perfectly matching the Rifter's speed when its tail section was positioned over the canopy. The second Wraith remained directly behind the group. Every ship in the pack was ten or less meters away from each other. It was, unequivocally, the most skillful flying the pilot had ever seen, but this was not the time for compliments.

The voice spoke again, in an eerily calm tone. "Rifter captain, we have the skills and technology to safely navigate your ship through this storm and into the Amarrian compound. Allow us to help you."

"I said get the fuck out of here!" she ordered. "You're going to get us all kill--" The pilot gasped and yanked backwards on the flight stick as a giant asteroid rolled into view. The Rifter barely cleared it, and as she pointed the nose back towards the vector indicator on the canopy, the Atron and Wraiths immediately took the exact same positions around her ship as before.

The same voice spoke again without urgency or emotion. "Captain, you cannot do this, and you have no choice but to trust us. We are taking your flight controls right...now."

She flipped open the safety that would activate the frigate's gun turrets, and then screamed as more asteroids tumbled towards the canopy on a direct collision course. The Rifter ignored her frantic yank backwards on the flight stick and instead rolled downwards, smoothly averting a catastrophe.

Domain Region - Throne Worlds Constellation

The Amarr System: Planet Oris

Emperor Family Academy Station: Imperial Navy Virtual Command Center

Grand Admiral Mekioth Sarum rested his hands on the circular table, observing a holographic tactical display of the situation above Diemnon and listening to the report from Commodore Akredon.

"...the Jovians interfered with my...justice...saved the Gallente...the Minmatar battle group warped in...the same time, my lord.

An interesting opportunity presents itself, Mekioth thought, focusing his eyes on a small cluster of dots moving away from the main Minmatar force. "Where are those frigates going, Commodore?"

"Directly towards...complex main port. We cannot raise anyone on the inside...warn them because of the meteor impacts on the surface...My lord, my fleet is...great danger because of Gruul Shatan...permission to disengage...return when the storm passes."

This opportunity shall not be wasted. "Permission denied, Commodore. The Gallente ship must be destroyed, as with the Minmatar frigates heading for Diemnon's surface." Mekioth thought for a moment. "And the bodies of the priests must also be recovered, no matter what the cost."

A loud burst of static resonated throughout the darkened chamber, and the tactical display on the table flickered. Mekioth looked around the room and allowed himself a smile. Divine protest, perhaps? I think not.

"Did you hear me, Commodore?"

"Yes, my lord, but what about the lives...my crew?...must understand that what you're asking--"

Mekioth became enraged. "Are you questioning me, Commodore?"

There was a pause. "No, my lord."

"Good," Mekioth answered. "I shall inform Emperor Heideran of the Federation's treachery, and of your heroic promise to return the corpses of our holy men for proper burial."

The display flickered again. "It will be done, my lord."

The cluster of red circles on the display marking the densest concentration of asteroids in the belt was closing in on Akredon's battlegroup.

"It had better be, Commodore."

Faus Akredon could not believe his ears. The officers on the bridge were ghastly pale, understanding just as well as he that Grand Admiral Sarum had just ordered their deaths. Faus stared at the tactical display and silently acknowledged the hopelessness of what he was just asked--or rather ordered--to do. There was no longer enough time to warp the ship out of harm's way.

My God, Faus thought, have I just been sacrificed? Or betrayed?

"Navigation."

"Yes, my lord?" The officer--a younger man in his late twenties whose last name was Derovan--snapped to attention. Faus could sense that he was afraid to die, but would remain committed to his duty until the end.

Have faith, lad. Paradise is waiting.

"Turn forty-five degrees to port and put us broadside to the asteroids. Sound the evacuation alarms. All non-essential personnel are to abandon ship immediately." Faus paused for a moment, observing the shocked expressions of his officers. None of them ever imagined a day when their blessed Admiral would give such an order. "Instruct the crew that only starboard-facing life rafts and escape pods will be jettisoned. They'll stand a much better chance of survival by ejecting towards Diemnon than they will into that meteor storm." Lieutenant Derovan's eyes glassed over. Then he started barking orders to his own subordinates.

Alarm klaxons rang throughout the Impervious as the 'abandon ship' orders were announced across all decks. Thousands of crewmembers left their battle station posts and started the evacuation procedures that none of them ever imagined they would need for real. Lights were starting to appear along the right-hand side of a schematic detailing the Impervious, projected on the forward bridge screen. The first life rafts--each one holding up to fifty crewmembers--were already away.

Faus grimaced at the line of cruiser-sized asteroids bearing down on his fleet. "Engineering!"

A gruff voice responded: "Standing by, my lord."

Ah, Donuvus...you will be missed. "I'm giving you two-thirds of the capacitor reserves to generate as much shield strength as you can. The more punishment they can absorb, the more time we have to get people off this ship."

"Anything for you, my lord."

Faus fought back tears. As more lights began dotting the schematic, only a skeleton crew remained to man their stations for the Impervious's final battle. These men are prepared to die for me, and this is where I lead them to! He turned his attention to the Minmatar attack frigates speeding towards his battlegroup. "Maller One, do you copy?"

"...by, my lord."

"Send your fastest ship to recover the bodies of our priests in the wreckage. Then they are to disengage and return immediately to the Throne Worlds. Send the remaining cruisers to intercept the Minmatar attack frigates--you are weapons-free, engage at will!"

"Roger...engaging."

Faus watched the display as a solitary cruiser broke away from the main fleet while the remaining ships moved towards the Minmatar battlegroup, filling the space in between with missiles. "Weapons, range to November-One!"

"Sixty-eight kilometers, my lord!"

Too far away for a direct hit, Faus thought, running mental calculations as he concentrated on the tactical display. Unless the salvo is perfectly placed... "Assign November-One to turrets one through seven, radio crystals, dead-reckoning solution plus a three-second look-ahead. One broadside only, do you understand?"

"Affirmative, dead-reckoning plus three ticks, one broadside only..."

"Weapons, as soon as you fire, swing your guns to port, switch to multispectrals and target the largest asteroids bearing down on us. You are weapons-free after this shot, understood?"

"Yes sir, weapons free after broadside to November-One..."

The officer directed the men and women below him as the enormous tachyon cannons mounted on the Impervious began tracking slowly in the same direction. "Tracking, my lord!"

"Fire!"

The terrified pilot of Omicron-One watched as seven bright red beams lanced across the space directly in front of the lead Wraith. Five of them struck an asteroid the size of a cruiser and broke it into three main chunks plus a hail of smaller debris. The Rifter rolled and dived, just barely avoiding a collision with the two largest fragments as they careened past the canopy. Then a brilliant flash illuminated the asteroids in front of her as the same fragments slammed into Omicron-Two, destroying the frigate instantly.

"Admiral, Omicron-Two is down..." the Hellwraith's tactical officer said.

"Ignore it," Karth growled. It was over for them before this even started. "Range to those Mallers?"

"Forty-seven kilometers, designate Mike-One through five," the weapons officer answered.

"Put the turrets on Mike-One and the launchers on Mike-Two. Give each two salvos and work your way through the others as necessary. All guns open fire, all cruisers engage at will!"

"Yes, sir, engaging..."

The floor underneath the bridge shuddered as the Hellwraith's artillery cannons hurled 1400-millimeter shells at the first Maller, easily overwhelming the cruiser's shields and pulverizing the Amarrian vessel on the first salvo. As his weapons officer changed targets, Karth turned back to the Impervious.

"Tacklers, range to target?"

"Activating stasis webs...warp scramblers now, sir."

From his vantage point on the bridge, Karth could see the Impervious glowing in a bluish-white aura. All of the battleship's forward momentum was quickly negated as it passed through the stasis webs, slowing down steadily until it was completely stopped. The turrets along the warship's portside hull were arcing white multispectral beams across the massive asteroids hurling towards her, and the contours of her shields were clearly visible as smaller meteors and fragments broke through the tachyons in an epic fireworks display. The Impervious was in her final moments, and it was just a matter of time before she became the victim of a fate worthy of the Amarr Scriptures: Literally being stoned to death.

All Karth could see were those same exact tachyon beams incinerating his son on the planet Eanna. His enormous hands curled into tight fists, and he became so angered that he began to tremble. The destruction of the Impervious could not happen soon enough. Die, Akredon, he thought. Die the horrible death that you deserve, you fucking Amarrian coward!

The voice of a Tackler pilot broke his vengeful fixation on the Impervious:

"Sir, we can't hold this orbit for much longer...incoming asteroids will kill us..."

Karth was indifferent to the pilot's plea. "You are prepared to die a good death like the rest of us, Valklear. Hold that stasis web on your target until I say otherwise."

He had barely finished speaking when four signals disappeared from the tactical display. Two of them were Amarrian cruisers, the latest victims of the Hellwraith's awesome firepower. The other two were Tackler frigates, blotted out of space by asteroids more than twice their size. But Karth was oblivious to their loss. His sharp eyes--wide with sadistic delight--were locked onto the Impervious's deathblow, now just moments away from impact.

Faus saw the behemoth asteroid--more than 3,000 meters across, in his estimation--and started to prepare his

soul for the afterlife. The seven tachyon beams converging on its gray surface did little more than burrow deep craters and ravines as the weapon's officer tried desperately to ward off the inevitable. Faus realized that it was time to clear his conscience.

"Save yourselves! Get to the escape pods, now!"

The officers--all drenched in sweat and sharing a desperate disposition--exchanged glances that raised an alarm in Faus. None of them moved towards the bridge's exit. Lieutenant Derovan took a step towards him.

Faus withdrew his pistol. "Did you hear what I said? Please! Save yourselves! You have at most thirty seconds...my place is with this ship--"

The officers all rushed towards Faus, who was so unprepared for their actions that he merely dropped the gun. Grabbing him firmly by the arms, they started to rush him off the bridge.

Clamping his hands firmly around Faus's wrists, Lieutenant Derovan spoke first. "Forgive us, my lord, but this must be done..."

Faus struggled against them, but they were just too strong. "Stop! You are my responsibility, you have a chance to go on--"

Donuvus was waiting for them at the bridge's exit, pointing towards the officer's ejection pods located just aft of the bulkhead doorway. Another officer returned the pistol that Faus dropped, forcibly thrusting it back into his holster.

"Tis you that must go on, my lord," Donuvus said. "These orders come from the Emperor himself. If anything were to happen to you on our watch, he would certainly have us killed. You are like a son to him, and to us you have been a father."

The men shoved Faus headfirst into the escape pod and sealed the doorway. Getting back to his feet, he lunged back into the seal, banging his fist on the portal. "No! Save yourselves, I beg you!"

Donuvus clicked the intercom button. "We're nearly on top of Diemnon's main port. Your escape pod will autopilot there--may the hand of God steer away any asteroids in your path. The guards inside the complex will look after you until help arrives, after the Gruul Shatan passes. It has been an honor to serve with you, Commodore Akredon. For the sake of Amarr, live on!"

Darkness engulfed Faus as the outer seal closed.

The lead Wraith abruptly veered upwards, slipping in between a cluster of asteroids and then tipping back over into a vertical dive towards the surface. The entire canopy view was filled with the site of an enormous crater some twenty kilometers wide, with steep ridges along the perimeter that jutted upwards from the surface for at least three kilometers. The pilot could not tell how deep it was, but far below the surface were tiny orange pools of magma, and the frigate group was descending directly towards them. Finally, Hell's Gate, the pilot thought. And only half of us survived.

"Talon command," she said. "This is Omicron-One, we're inside, repeat, we're inside Hell's Gate..."

The pilot suddenly regained control of the Rifter, but then saw the two Wraiths abruptly reverse directions and accelerate back out of the cavern. Struggling to keep her eyes on the pair through the rear view display, the twisting, turning Jovian frigates vanished into the meteor storm.

Faus watched in horror as the goliath asteroid slammed into the forward section of the Impervious, crushing the bow superstructure and breaking the battleship's keel cleanly in half. For a moment, the two segments of dashed vessel drifted away from each other, spraying a stream of fiery debris into space like gushing arteries before exploding in a blinding flash of light. Faus, his eyes stinging from the brightness of the blast, turned away from the disaster and collapsed to his knees. He whispered a prayer for the helpless souls who were left onboard, and lamented to God that he should have met his fate on that ship as well.

A loud, metallic clank turned the blood in Faus's veins to ice. Scrambling to his feet, he squinted through the portal, expecting to see asteroids but instead finding the greenish-black hull of a Jovian Wraith.

'Impervious', Karth mused, spitting towards the forward bridge portals as the explosion faded. My work here is finished.

Two more Tackler frigates disappeared from the tactical display as the meteor storm intensified. He toggled a switch on the captain's chair. "Attention all ships, this is Talon Command. Warp to fifth moon of Hahyil Four. Regroup there and wait for my command. Tactical! Any word on the status of Omicron-One?"

"Yes, sir, they just entered Hell's Gate."

One last detail to take care of before we leave this forsaken place. "Quickly, patch me through to them..."

Vlad could not believe that he was still alive. Glancing around the cabin, he could tell from the other soldier's expressions that they shared his amazement. But their eyes also betrayed sorrow for the Valklears who met their sudden fate aboard Omicron-Two. It was instantaneous for them, he thought. What a tragic waste, losing them like that. Warriors such as these deserve to die with weapons in their hands, not strapped across their chests.

The radio earpiece buzzed. It was Admiral Karth Mutana. The transmission was barely audible with all the static, but the instructions were clear.

"..cron-One, make sure that you secure...landing pad first...Captain Kintreb, I want the Jovians killed...be no witnesses to this operation...your discretion with the Gallente pilot...gets in the way...authorized to terminate...as well...Elders...top priority...make myself clear?"

The transmission was lost before Vlad was able to answer. The frigate lurched forward with a light burst of speed, and the cabin lights turned red as the harness straps securing all of the soldiers unlocked.

Objective One:

Kill the Jovians, Vlad thought, motioning quickly with hand signals for the soldiers to fix silencers to their weapons. I don't think that's ever been done before.

Domain Region - Throne Worlds Constellation

The Amarr System: Planet Oris

Emperor Family Academy Station: Imperial Navy Virtual Command Center

The tactical display fizzled and then abruptly vanished. As the words "Signal Lost" hung over the console, Grand Admiral Mekioth Sarum contemplated the consequences of his actions. A martyr's death for the beloved Commodore, he thought. Killed while attempting to rescue a Council Apostle. Amarr will mourn, but in time his memory shall pass. Faus Akredon's bloodline connection to the Kador family made him a legitimate candidate to succeed Emperor Heideran. Alive for more than four centuries, the Emperor's death could happen at any time, even if the machines sustaining his life were capable of doing so for hundreds of years more. Time would catch up with him eventually, and whenever it did, Mekioth wanted the Sarum family prepared to seize power.

Akredon would have been Kador's most worthy champion, Mekioth thought, toggling a starmap of the Aguh Constellation. Even in martyrdom he is dangerous. Several Imperial battle groups were converging on Hahyil, guarding the stargates leading in and establishing blockades in the neighboring systems. The hunt for the Minmatar strike force responsible for the death of Amarr's greatest hero was on, and once Gruul Shatan passed, a battalion of Paladins would raid the mining camp to deal with any rebels inside.

Martyr or not, the Sarum Family will claim the throne someday, Mekioth thought. The map panned out, then moved across to the vast expanse of stars beyond the Jovian border. He ran his hands through the image imagining the riches waiting to be tapped there. Faus Akredon helped me to conquer the Minmatar. In death, he will help me to conquer the Jovians as well.



"Which test reveals more of the soul--the test that a man will take to prove his faith, or the test that finds the man who believed his faith already proven? If you know this answer, then you also know which of these challenges bear the greatest penalty for failure. The gates of paradise will open for you one time only; woe to the soul who dares to knock twice."

Book of Missions, 5:14, The Scriptures

"Throughout history, the militaries of civilizations have created soldiers from the ranks of the able-bodied in their societies. The Minmatar, having lost most of their able-bodied to death or slavery, tried this approach and found the results unsatisfactory for their own special needs. Instead, they took their most notorious villains--their thieves, schemers, and murderers--and turned them into soldiers. They called these men `Valklears'."

Federal Intelligence Office Archives (classified), Document NJ-F22, "History of Minmatar Infantry Development"

Jumping down from the ramp, Vlad sprinted away from the Rifter's landing skids and moved towards the rock outcrops along the tarmac's edge. Behind him, the other Valklears spread outwards in groups of two, seeking cover that would give them a clear line of sight with the immense tunnel leading back outside to the docking vent. Some began darting up the steep rock face of the hangar's walls, quickly nestling into ledges and disappearing in the shadows cast by the floodlights high above them.

Vlad found a spot behind some rocks well above the tarmac, across from the hangar seals leading into the complex. The Rifter was resting on the pad with its boarding ramp intentionally left open. The hope was that the Jovians would assume they had already entered the complex, thus drawing them out from the safety of their own ships and into the crosshairs of Valklear rifles. Several clicks in his earpiece indicated that each of the soldiers was in place, waiting for his orders.

They were more than thirty kilometers below the surface, yet Vlad could still hear muted rumbles from the crash of meteors high above. To conserve resources, the Amarrians were not replenishing any of the air that escaped whenever the outer airlock opened for a ship to enter the hangar. For now, a man could still breathe inside without the aid of a mask, but any exertion would wind him immediately. The next time the seal opened--which it would at any second to allow the Jovian frigates inside--what little air remained would escape.

Peering through the scope of his rifle, Vlad scanned the area. The hangar was an enormous cave carved into Diemnon's mantle by Amarrian explosives and the backs of Minmatar slaves. Three sets of stabilizer rigs spaced about 700 meters apart were built into both walls, one for each of the Bestower-class industrials that could dock here to unload cargo and haul unprocessed ore back outside. The hangar's dimensions were designed specifically to accommodate this ship; it was impossible for anything larger to get inside.

Moving the crosshairs towards the Rifter, Vlad noticed bloodstains scattered all over the tarmac. That prison riot must have ended here, he thought, taking note of the different kinds of patterns. There were darkened pools marking the graves where maimed victims bled to death; the fine mist spray patterns caused by gunshot wounds; the heavier droplet patterns indicating blunt impacts delivered by fists or heavy objects. Without question, this place was the scene of gruesome violence that claimed the lives of dozens of people. A good death for these slaves, Vlad thought, attaching the scope back onto his rifle. To meet death while killing Amarrians was the most those people could ask for.

A gust of air blew some dust up from the ground as two sets of lights pierced the blackness at the end of the tunnel. Vlad spotted Thumgar a short distance from him in the ledges, swinging his CLAW (Combat Light Assault Weapon) over the side and propping it against a stone. He better handle himself well early on, Vlad thought. Or else we're just going to become another stain on the tarmac.

"Time to awaken, Viola."

The voice came from one of the faceless souls surrounding her in the barren field. The crypt was just ahead, with the corpse of its unidentified hero waiting inside. A hand from the crowd reached out and touched hers. Terrified, Viola took a step backwards.

"Open your eyes, slowly..."

She turned in the direction that the hand reached out from, and as she opened her eyes, a face began to take shape on one of the spirits standing beside her: Jet black eyes surrounded by pale white flesh, marred with dark veins that originated from the scalp and branched all the way down to the jawbone. Viola startled, taking a short breath. The creature's hand moved gently over her mouth.

"Your first encounter with a Jovian, I see." His voice had a synthetic tone to it, with a pitch that was as eerie as it was soothing. "A difficult sight for your breed to absorb. It is understandable."

Viola realized she was lying on her back, and that the Jovian was standing over her. As he removed his hand, she noticed that his skin did not feel like organic tissue. Glass, she thought. It looks and feels like wet glass!

"My name is Grious, and I am here to protect you and to assist the Minmatars with their mission to rescue the Elders."

What the hell, she thought. Protect me? Taking a quick inventory of her body, Viola felt some mild soreness in her chest and legs. But it was her eyes that hurt more than anything else.

"You were subjected to enormous G-forces when your ship lost control," Grious said, helping her off the table. "Some of the capillaries in your eyes burst, which explains your appearance. I lack the equipment needed to repair them here, but I was able to repair numerous ruptures to the muscle lining along your diaphragm, abdominal wall, and the blood vessels in your legs."

"What's wrong with my appearance?" Viola asked, getting to her feet slowly. The room was small, but packed with strange equipment that was unlike anything she had ever seen.

Grious waved his hand, and a screen materialized from the wall. "I know this obsession your kind has with appearance. Come this way, please."

Viola took a few hesitant steps forward. The Jovian was slender, and stood less than 180 centimeters tall. His entire body, save for his head and hands, was covered in an armored suit. She began to feel uncomfortable at the sight of those bottomless orbs staring through her. Turning towards the screen, Viola gasped when she saw her reflection: The whites of her eyes were blood red.

"They will heal with time, and your vision should remain unaffected," Grious said, taking her gently by the hand once more. "You have the pilot of this ship to thank for saving your life."

I'm on a ship? she asked herself, resisting the urge to pull her hand away. "You mean you're not the pilot?" Viola asked, running a finger along her eyelids.

"No, but he is listening," Grious said as several doors slid open in front of them. "You can speak to him if you wish."

This is crazy, she thought, looking up towards the hallway lights. "Thank you?"

A voice just as eerie as Grious's resonated through the hall as the door behind them closed: "You are welcome, Viola."

"May I speak with him directly?" she asked. "I feel like I should express my gratitude in person." Another door opened, leading into a cabin with higher ceilings than the hallway. The room was illuminated with red lights, and the metallic walls were covered with ominous markings and electronics.

"Not here, I'm afraid," Grious said, tightening his grip slightly. "Step where I step, Viola. This chamber is different from the others."

The back of her neck began to tingle as something caught her eye. The walls, she realized, were distorted. Either I'm still high, she thought, or I swear we're not the only people in here.

The pilot's voice echoed through the cabin. "Prepare to disembark." Grious handed her a mouthpiece with two small cylinders attached to the sides. "Put this in your mouth and breathe through it. Avoid taking air in through your nose for the time being. Speak through it as you normally would--it will stay in place unless you use your hands to remove it."

"Where are we?" Viola asked, dreading the answer. A seal of light appeared at the end of the cabin, growing wider until the grayish-brown surface of a landing pad was clearly visible. Grious led her towards it as she put the mouthpiece in.

"Diemnon," he said, stepping onto the surface. "Inside the Amarrian mining complex."

"What? Wait--" Viola hesitated, but was gently pulled towards the tarmac by Grious. I was just on a goddamn Wraith, she thought, recognizing the distinct hull shape above her as she was herded down the boarding ramp. No one has ever been this close before, let alone inside of one! Two hundred meters in front of them was a Minmatar Rifter, also resting on the tarmac. Viola noticed immediately that its boarding ramp was lowered as well, but did not see anyone else nearby. She sensed that the air was thin, and took several deep breaths to become adjusted to the mouthpiece.

"You don't need one of these to breathe?" she asked.

Grious was staring at the rocky cavern wall far beyond the Minmatar ship, his head tilted slightly to one side. "Our anatomy differs from yours in more ways than just appearance," he answered. "Come with me. I have something else to show you."

As they walked around the boarding ramp section of the frigate's hull, Viola saw the remnants of the Atron about one hundred meters away. The aft segment of the ship was gone, and the rest of the hull was blackened. Some sections of armor plating were missing; others hung from the crippled ship by a few strands of twisted metal. The only part of the battered frigate that appeared intact was the bubble canopy.

"How the hell did I survive that?" Viola's voice was enhanced through a speaker in the mouthpiece. Grious was leading her along the length of the Wraith, away from the Rifter and towards the direction of the tunnel. She suddenly felt a sharp longing for one of her painkillers.

"The odds of surviving a direct hit from a tachyon beam in that ship are exactly zero," he answered. Viola could see the fuselage of a second Wraith a few meters ahead. "You survived because the Amarrian

gunners were inaccurate."

The Amarrians took a shot at me! Viola remembered the Imperial Navy battle fleet that showed up right after...

"I didn't kill those people," Viola blurted, recalling the gruesome visage of the corpses floating in the debris of the Bestower. "My ship wasn't even armed--"

"We know you did not," Grious interrupted. "But it was made to look that way by design."

The Order, Viola thought. But do the Jovians know--

She stopped dead in her tracks as the second Wraith came into full view. Like the one they had just emerged from, its boarding ramp was also open. But lying at its base was a full-grown man, bound with his hands behind his back. His head and shoulders were covered in cloth, and he was resting on his knees.

"Grious, who is--"

"He has not been harmed," Grious said, ushering her forward. "Tell me, what do you call them? The cryptic ones who lured you to this place?"

Viola paused. "'The Order'. I'm not even sure what they call themselves."

"We have been pursuing them for some time," Grious said. "They are elusive, and extremely dangerous. Is there anything more you wish to tell me about them?" The question sent a chill up Viola's spine. That was a command, not a question.

"There's nothing more to tell," she answered, looking towards the captive. He seemed unaware that they were standing so close to him. "They first contacted me years ago, giving me perfect information about Amarrian movements and operations in Minmatar space." Viola heard a distant rumble that sounded vaguely like thunder. "Ever since then, they would contact me randomly with leads that were priceless--"

"Priceless for whom?" Grious was facing her directly, staring with those soulless black eyes.

"For the Minmatar," she answered nervously. He already knows the answers to these questions. "I passed along everything that I felt could help them to avoid this 'Reclaiming' debacle."

Grious turned towards the Rifter again as more rumbles echoed through the hangar. "The man kneeling beside you is the one who gave the order to destroy your ship. Would you like to know his name?"

Viola was caught off guard by the question. "I'm sorry?"

"Commodore Faus Akredon of the Imperial Navy," Grious said. "I imagine that you know much of him."

"What?" Viola exclaimed, whirling around towards the hooded prisoner. "That's impossible! How could--"

"The Elders are also here, somewhere in the catacombs below, and hidden in those rocks are the Minmatar soldiers sent to rescue them." Grious paused. "As we speak, they have their weapons trained on us, and are waiting for the right chance to kill us both."

The blood left Viola's face. "Kill us?"

"Do not fear," Grious said, clasping his hands behind his back. "At no point since arriving in my care have you been in any danger."

"But shouldn't we get back inside of the ship?" Viola asked, taking shallow breaths through the mouthpiece. "Someone needs to tell them that we're trying to help!"

"That is the plan," Grious answered. "But it will take more than negotiation skills to convince them of our good intentions."

Viola looked towards the rocks. There was absolutely nothing obstructing her line of sight with the Rifter or the massive cavern walls surrounding them.

"Well, then who's going to do it? You?"

"Viola," Grious said, again turning his black eyes toward her own. "You and I were not alone when we left the ship."

Vlad heard a series of clicks in his earpiece, each of them a separate request to open fire. The Jovian and the woman were standing out in the open, talking casually and seemingly oblivious to the danger surrounding them. But who the hell is that prisoner, Vlad wondered, clicking back an order for the soldiers to wait. Just a few minutes earlier, two Jovians had descended the boarding ramp of the second Wraith, deposited a prisoner onto the surface, and then walked back up. There has to be more of them, he thought, moving the scope's crosshairs back towards the first Wraith. Patience is key, but we have to get inside of the complex soon!

As the crosshairs moved across the boarding ramp, Vlad saw something dart across the viewfinder that made him flinch. Looking off the scope towards the tarmac, he saw four separate distortions that reminded him of roiled air over a hot surface. Danger, Vlad sensed, just as Thumgar's CLAW fired several rounds that kicked up debris from the surface below. The earpiece erupted with shouts as Vlad snapped his rifle towards Thumgar's position.

"What the fuck is he shooting at?" Krughan demanded.

"There's something coming right towards me!" Thumgar screamed, putting the CLAW into full automatic and spraying rounds wildly in front of him. Vlad spanned his rifle left and right, desperately seeking a target but finding none. More machine gun bursts illuminated the cavern wall as the other soldiers shouted and fired their silenced weapons into the shadows. Just as Vlad took a breath to speak, he saw Thumgar's CLAW inexplicably throw itself from his hands. The giant man appeared to freeze for a moment, then drop--gently, as if hands were guiding him--face down onto the ground.

Then Vlad felt it--a draft of air on the back of his neck that shouldn't have been there--and reacted solely on instinct. In one fluid motion, he thrust the rifle backwards as hard as he could, and felt the stock slam into a man. Ignoring the strange sounding grunt, Vlad whirled 180 degrees to his left, unsheathing the Kri'Tak in mid-spin with his right hand and exploding forward in a lunge. There was nothing in front of him that his eyes could see, but Vlad's senses told him otherwise. His left forearm caught something heavy on its way up to block an invisible counterstrike, but his right hand--clenching the knife tightly and keeping the blade parallel to the ground--continued unobstructed in a wide arc until it punctured something thick, right where a man's rib cage would be.

An ear-piercing howl filled the cavern as a Jovian soldier materialized at the hilt of the knife. Just as Vlad commanded his wrist to twist the blade, he felt something strike his lower back, and then all of the muscles in his body went numb. Panic overwhelmed him as he fell backwards, completely paralyzed. He did not feel himself hit the ground, but saw the silhouette of a second Jovian standing over him a moment later.

Domain Region - Throne Worlds Constellation

The Amarr System: Planet Oris

Emperor Family Academy Station: Saint Kuria the Prophet Cathedral

Grand Admiral Mekioth Sarum moved past the Royal Guards and entered the great cathedral. Its vaulted ceilings stood more than fifty meters high, supported by dozens of massive columns lavishly carved with scenes depicted from the Scriptures. Seated at the center of the cathedral was Emperor Heideran, adorned with religious pageantry and affixed permanently to his throne. Numerous cybernetic devices were visible on his head, neck and shoulders, all of which were required to keep him alive. More than four centuries old and he still lives, Mekioth thought, approaching the altar. With any luck at all, Amarr will not have to suffer under the incompetence of his rule for much longer.

"My lord," Mekioth said, kneeling before Heideran and bowing his head as hooded priests looked on.

"Arise, Grand Admiral," Heideran said, motioning with his ancient hand. The priests moved silently towards the antechambers at each corner of the floor.

"You summoned me?" Mekioth asked, standing slowly.

Heideran's voice was old, but steady as he spoke. "I have heard terrible news about the Impervious, Mekioth. Why was she sent to that dreadful place?"

Mekioth took a deep breath before speaking. "My lord, surely you know of the disappearance of our Apostle Taj Rukon and his disciples?"

"Of course," Heideran answered. "Have you found them?"

"I loathe bringing you such bad news, but they are dead," Mekioth replied, feigning dismay. "Commodore Akredon received a distress signal from their ship, and set out immediately to rescue them."

"Ahh, Faus," Heideran breathed. "Tell me what his role was in this!"

"He followed the signal to Diemnon, where he witnessed their murder firsthand."

"What?" Heideran nearly coughed. "Who dared to do this? The rebels?"

"The act is inconceivable, my lord, but this savagery was committed by the Gallente Federation."

Heideran paused, his eyes widening in shock. "You have proof of this?"

"We have the footage taken from the Impervious," Mekioth said, disciplining himself to convey shock and anger. "It clearly shows a Federation frigate in attack position just as the Apostle's Bestower exploded. Moments later, Minmatar rebels appeared--their so called 'Valklear' fleet--escorted by Jovian ships."

"Jovians!" Heideran's throne detached from the locking braces and floated down from the altar. "You are certain of this?"

"Yes, my lord. The Impervious successfully attacked the Gallente ship, but the Jovians intervened and prevented its outright destruction. I ordered Commodore Akredon to retreat immediately, but he..."

"He what, Admiral? Tell me!"

Mekioth looked downwards. "He insisted on recovering the bodies of the priests, saying they deserved a proper burial in preparation of their passage to heaven. He was hopelessly outnumbered, and the Gruul Shatan storm was upon him..."

"No," Heideran said. "Don't tell me..."

"My lord, the Impervious was destroyed, along with her escorts. We cannot launch a search and rescue mission until the storm passes."

Heideran was devastated. "Faus...my son..."

"We have not abandoned all hope, but given the violent nature of the storm and the number of rebel ships involved, it seems...unlikely that..."

Mekioth did not have to finish the sentence. Emperor Heideran wept, taking shallow breaths and convulsing intermittently with wheezes. There were no tears, as his ancient body was no longer capable of producing them.

"My lord, I am sorry. He was a hero of Amarr, and the best captain I have ever known. We must avenge his death."

"What...do you think must be done?"

"We are hunting the rebel fleet as we speak, and the Hahyil system is quarantined. But I must ask your permission to fire upon any Gallente or Jovian ships that we encounter around Diemnon."

Emperor Heideran flinched. "I object to that. The Gallente could have been a rogue, and we must not haste--"

"My lord, the Federation is engaged in a full scale war with the Caldari State that they are winning. This act, rogue or not, is in itself an act of war, and your subjects will demand action. We cannot afford to tolerate such aggression within our own borders." The throne turned away from Mekioth and faced the great statue of the Prophet Kuria, surrounded by angels in a depiction of paradise. "And what of the Jovians? How do you propose we deal with them?"

"I am preparing battle plans, and once I can determine the full extent of Jovian involvement with this massacre, I shall make them known to you."

Emperor Heideran turned to face Mekioth again, looking him over slowly. "Very well, Grand Admiral. You have your permission to fire upon Gallente ships, but only in the immediate vicinity of Diemnon, and only against any ships that attempt to run your blockades."

Mekioth bowed his head. "Thank you, my lord. I will not rest until the murderers are brought to justice."

"Find him, Mekioth," Heideran whispered. "Bring his body back to me."

"I will do everything that I can, my lord."

They bounded down the cavern walls, effortlessly carrying the incapacitated Minmatar commandos across the tarmac and setting them on their knees at the base of the first Wraith. Viola stared in amazement at the pure strength and conditioning of these Jovians--she still could not bring herself to call them 'men'--as they made trip after trip to recover the bodies. In little more than a few minutes since the first shots were fired, there were now

eight Minmatar commandos bound shoulder to shoulder, hands behind their backs, and kneeling directly across from the Amarrian captive.

Grious disappeared with the wounded Jovian into the Wraith. Viola stared at the captives, all of which were slowly regaining sensation in their limbs. Valklears, Viola thought, looking over their faces and studying their appearance: Overly muscular, no identification or rank insignia, tribal markings strewn across the arms, neck, and face. Minmatar's best soldiers, each of them a converted sociopath or murderer. The only woman among them was the pilot--several years younger than herself, with dark hair, light colored eyes, sharp features, and just as physically robust as the others. She was breathing through a device provided by Grious, as was one other soldier in a flight suit. The rest were still wearing their own masks.

"What happened to your eyes?"

The deep voice startled her. The strongest of the group--the one who had somehow managed to stab a cloaked Jovian--was staring at her.

"They were injured when my ship was shot down," Viola said, turning to face the Valklear. Even kneeling, his head was level with her chin. The man was enormous. "The Jovians saved my life--and yours as well."

The man grunted. "So you were the pilot of the Atron," he said, raising himself more upright. "It seems we share a common enemy. What is your name, Gallente?"

Viola looked the man over before answering. "Viola Antionnes, and I'm with the Federal Intelligence Office. Do you have--"

"I know that name," he said, narrowing his eyes. Other Valklears were beginning to squirm against the restraints. "You are the one they call `Jarua Kil'tra'..."

Viola's eyes opened a little wider. She understood the translation well. "`Seer of Horrors'," she breathed. The soldier appeared surprised.

"You speak our language," he said. "What they say of you is true, then."

"Va'nachr, kra tua chinak?" she asked. What is your name, Valklear?

The man paused, and the slightest beginnings of a smile formed on his lips. "You can call me Vlad. We are all in your debt."

Then it's time to go on the offensive. "I've spent almost my entire life trying to help your race," Viola said, raising her voice slightly. "And yet you were prepared to kill me just a few moments ago. Why?"

Some of the soldiers looked towards Vlad. "I did not know who you were, and was unsure of your intentions."

"I know about the Elders," Viola snapped back, suddenly feeling another sharp pang for drugs. All of the soldiers fixed their stares on her. "As do the Jovians. It's no secret to us how important they are to you. We are all here for the same reasons--to help you to get them out."

The pilot of the Rifter spoke up. "We don't need your help, just release us and leave this place--"

"Ziara!" Vlad shouted, glaring at the pilot. She shot the glare back, then slumped back down and turned her frown towards Viola. "Please forgive her tenacity," he said, lowering his voice. "She should not take that tone with you, but with all due respect, we prefer to go alone from here."

"Such a proud race," Grious said, emerging from the Wraith. He was holding Vlad's Kri'tak, and three of the four original Jovian soldiers who had subdued the Valklears flanked him as he walked. "I see now why the Elders are so crucial to the survival of your kind."

"We're here because of what happened to Eanna," Viola said, looking towards the hooded Amarrian. Best to keep his identity quiet for now, she thought. Even though I'd love to leave him alone with these Valklears for a few minutes. "This is the endgame for the Minmatar, and the Elders were on the brink of uniting all of the tribes into one Republic. You need them now more than ever, so stop being so goddamn stubborn and let us help you!"

"Viola, a word with you in private, please." Grious said, motioning for her to walk up the ramp. Puzzled at her own outburst, she complied, leaving the surprised Valklears to themselves. I need a fucking pill right now, she thought, contemplating asking the Jovians for something, anything, to satisfy the need. Grious peered into her eyes as he spoke.

"You are addicted to painkillers," he said matter-of-factly. "Are you even aware that your hands are shaking?"

Viola looked at her hands. A visible tremor was running through the both of them.

"The Serpentis lace their drugs with chemicals designed to enhance addictive properties," Grious said. "Typically, withdrawal symptoms for someone with your physical characteristics would not begin for several hours at least. But in your case, with your repeated ingestion due to habit, they have begun already."

Well, shit. "Look, we don't have time for this, but if you do happen to have any more pills--"

"We do not, Viola. You are already at the threshold level of drugs that I can safely administer to treat your pain without risking incapacitation, and we cannot detoxify your bloodstream here."

"So what are my options?" she asked.

"You are a liability now, as you will continue to display increasing agitation until you reach psychosis-- assuming the high blood pressure and heightened body temperature do not cripple you first."

"Then leave me with Akredon," Viola answered. "I want to have a few words with him."

Grious tilted his head to one side. "What do you expect to gain from doing so? You are not a trained interrogator, and he will only repeat his name, rank, and prayers when addressed."

Viola looked behind her at the slumped figure under the cloth, and could see that the Valklears were becoming impatient. "I can't explain why," she said, rubbing her forehead. "I just want to get inside the mind of this...zealot, to try and understand the thinking that goes into the decision to bombard a planet."

The Jovian stared at her for a moment, thinking about what she said. "So this too is also by their design--the ones you call the `Order'. A confluence of events orchestrated to produce an outcome desirable to them." He paused for a moment to look down the ramp towards Akredon. "No coincidence at all that we were permitted to save him. He has a role in this scheme. And so do you, apparently."

"Grious, what are you talking about?" Viola asked, craving the soothing rush of a painkiller. "This is about the Elders, about helping the Minmatars. Everything the Order has ever given me was intended to help them."

"Only because it suits their interests to do so," Grious said, starting down the ramp. "At least for now."

"What do you mean?" Viola asked. "The Order is threatened by the Amarr Empire?"

Grious stopped. "The `Order'--we call them `Enheduanni'--do not fight their own wars. They have the Empires fight for them, which they achieve by controlling the influence of those who rise to power. But the Minmatars were not supposed to collapse so quickly, and it appears they have also underestimated the impact of Ammarian religion on society. So now they have successfully involved us to reset the balance that is most favorable to them."

Viola became angered. "So sympathy for the Minmatar has nothing to do with your involvement here at all?"

"The Enheduanni are our greatest enemy, and that makes them your greatest enemy as well. We cannot sit idly while they selfishly interfere with the history that is yours to decide, no matter how destructive, or how often you wish to repeat it."

Grious and his three companions walked down the ramp as Viola glared at their backs, trying to ignore the tremors jostling her hands. He used the word `yours', she thought. He sees no distinction at all between any of the races, except for his own.

"Hey, Grious," Viola called. The four Jovians stopped and turned. "What does `Enheduanni' mean?"

The Jovian thought for a moment. "There is no translation in your language."

"...for you are a merciful God, the sole devotion of my life, true to your most faithful servants in their time of need. Amen."

Faus completed the prayer for the hundredth time, and listened once more for an answer from above. Hearing none, he started to recite the prayer again, and then stopped as the images of Eanna seared through his concentration. He shut his eyes, opened them again to the black shroud over his face, and still could not shake himself free of the torment assailing his soul.

This punishment must be deserved, Faus realized, arching his back and trying to dismiss the pain radiating from his knees. The loss of my ship, my crew, becoming a captive of this monster Jovian--all of it, rightful punishment for...

He could think of nothing else to warrant this destiny, except for not believing deeply enough in Grand Admiral Mekioth Sarum's orders to bombard the planet Eanna. His actions merely reflected the wishes of Emperor

Heideran, and thus the will of God. Those sinners deserved their fate, and I have no right to question it. The Scriptures warn every Paladin of this test, that it always comes when the faithful least expect it. My faith will be rewarded, he thought, searching for inner spiritual strength and finding it. For this is a test that I shall not fail--

The cloth covering his head was suddenly removed, and the sight before his eyes made him cry out in horror. Minmatar rebels--eight of them--were standing just a few meters away. In the blink of an eye, one of them unsheathed a knife and hurled it towards him. It was deflected in a bright flash, repelled at the last moment by a protective energy field. The man broke free of his comrade's attempts to restrain him, and onwards he charged, banging his massive fists against the bubble of energy and screaming.

Faus could not hear him, nor could he hear anything else. He simply stared back at his attacker, mesmerized by the hatred radiating from him. Who could blame him, Faus thought, cursing himself for allowing the thought to enter his mind. He watched as they argued amongst each other, then as they pleaded with a slender Jovian who walked to them--the same one who had taken him from the escape pod and rendered him unconscious.

This is what you don't see from space, Faus thought, trying to read their expressions. You just cannot expect these people to believe in a god capable of inciting such profound hatred in men. Again, Faus cursed himself--did he just think that out loud? He closed his eyes, trying to shut the rebels out of his mind. But instead of finding inner peace, he found the images of incinerated cities bellowing out the thick, black smoke of burning flesh and bone.

I must not lose my faith, for this is a test... Faus commanded himself to remain calm, taking comfort in the shield surrounding him. He watched as his captor handed one of the rebels a strange looking knife, which he accepted and sheathed immediately. Three Jovian soldiers approached and began distributing weapons to the Minmatars. Words were exchanged within the group, but then they shifted their attention towards something directly behind him. Some nodded their heads approvingly; others shook them in disbelief. Six of the rebels, now heavily armed and wearing protective armor, ran off to follow the lead of the Jovian soldiers. The other two rebels--pilots, by the look of it--glared at him one last time before running towards their ship.

He watched as the blast doors in the distance slowly opened, and then as the group of rebels filed inside one by one. The Jovian captor remained behind, standing with his hands clasped behind his back and staring with those otherworldly black orbs. The pleasing figure of a female walked past, desperately soothing to his eyes at first, but again he forcefully dismissed the thought as another secular distraction. The two spoke briefly, and then the female turned. Faus noticed that she was holding something in her hand, and was overwhelmed with horror once he recognized what it was:

My God, why have you forsaken me?

Faus gasped as the woman, with her angelic face and demonic eyes, approached and kneeled so close that he could feel her warm breath. Suddenly, his ears felt as though a stone was rolled away from them, and he could hear once more.

"Commodore Akredon," the woman said, placing the Glaive-collar around his neck and switching it on. The points of six needles pressed lightly into his skin. "It's time that we discussed your sins."



"Every crime, no matter how trivial, owes its roots to temptation's murderous stab. The wound left behind by this act is never more devastating than when used as the prelude to betrayal. It bears the mark of the unholy; the wretched; the very bane of all things good and righteous in this universe. God help me, the temptation that exudes betrayal is the uncontested triumph of evil..."

Emperor Heideran, 23216 AD, "Address to the Empire", after the Battle of Vak'Atioth

"I doubt that history will record how fiercely we fought for our freedom. There will be no chronicles detailing the courage of Minmatar warriors or the unity of our tribes during the Rebellion. But historians will go to great lengths to make sure that other Empires take credit for ensuring our survival, and that before we were anything else, we were slaves first. On that point, future generations will be certain."

The Nefantar Paradigm, Unijja Krur

The officers filed into the room quietly, taking their seats as the polarized conference room windows darkened. Baer took a moment to glance up from his datapad to take inventory of the attendees: Ten officers were present, each of them a colonel or higher in rank. Eight were from Division Command, two of which held advisor posts that reported directly to the Senate Intelligence Committee. The last two were from the War Department. They look especially annoyed, he observed. I would be also if I was pulled from the Caldari war effort for this. Everyone shared the same haggard, sleep-deprived appearance that warned of short tempers. Baer was the lowest ranked officer in the room; the wrong answers in here would cause irreparable damage to his career.

Baer's superior, Colonel Tilda Siertro, was sitting to his right. A formidable woman within the agency, she was calmly scanning her own datapad while waiting for everyone to arrive. As soon as the War Department representatives took their seats, she gestured without looking up. Baer understood her cue and inhaled deeply before speaking. She had been very clear about what he was allowed to say.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice," he started. "Approximately 60 minutes ago, one of our scout frigates was shot down by Imperial Navy forces in the Hahyil System. The vessel was unarmed and traveling through unrestricted territory, as stated in the Gallente-Amarr Free Trade Agreement of 23210."

The two colonels advising the Senate Intelligence Committee leaned forward, but no one else reacted to the news. Baer continued his briefing.

"For the time being, we've listed the pilot's status as MIA. We have telemetry recordings of the attack, which crippled the ship but did not destroy it. The pilot was attempting to land the vessel on Diemnon's surface before we lost contact. No other crew or passengers were onboard."

The War Division officers appeared disinterested in everything Baer was saying. One of them--Brigadier General Talin Falgenreau--actually stifled a yawn.

"In addition to the telemetry, we know that several Minmatar ships witnessed the event, although we still haven't been able to reach their government since the bombardment of Eanna. The reason why we brought all of you here is to--"

"Oh, good," Talin interrupted. "I was starting to wonder if you had a point."

Baer felt the surface temperature of his face surge. Colonel Siertro shook her head just enough to be noticed, but kept her gaze locked on the datapad in front of her.

"The reason why we brought all of you here," Baer repeated. "Was to seek consensus on a search and rescue effort for the pilot."

"Who was the pilot?" asked the other War Division officer--Major General Silus Bruce.

Shit, Baer thought. Tilda was specific about not discussing this. "The pilot was in the Hahyil area investigating a possible lead into--"

"That's not what I asked you," Silus growled. "Who was the pilot?"

Baer threw Tilda a desperate look. She casually looked up from the desk and spoke in a steady tone. "Answer the General's question, Lieutenant Colonel."

"Viola Antionnes, sir."

"I knew it," Talin scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Just a matter of time."

"I'm sorry, General?" Baer asked, losing his temper. "Exactly what was `just a matter of time'?"

Talin was about to unleash verbal fury on Baer, but Silus waved him off. "Lieutenant Colonel, do you know how many search and rescue missions are currently underway?"

"No, sir?"

"Twenty six, all because of the war we happen to be in."

"I understand there are resource constraints, but--"

Silus cut him off. "There are no resource constraints when it comes to rescuing our downed pilots, Lieutenant Colonel. All of the Federation's assets are devoted to the war effort. But I will not put rescue crews into harm's

way to pick up junkies who get themselves into trouble, either."

The bottom fell out from Baer's stomach. "Sir, I don't understand what you're--"

Talin produced a datapad and slid it across the desk. "Picture's worth a thousand words, Baer," he sneered. "Not to mention life in prison."

The images were as nauseating as they were shocking: Camera footage capturing Viola taking receipt of vials from a man whose face registered with the F.I.O.'s criminal database as a member of the Serpents drug cartel. Interactions with known felons or their affiliate organizations carried penalties that were twice as harsh during war than in peacetime. The fact she was also a federal agent meant that she could technically be charged with treason.

"There's a lot more where this came from," Talin said. "That scumbag in the picture is going to get some leniency in exchange for his cooperation. Can't say the same will be the case for your heroine."

"She deserves some respect, sir," Baer said, trembling as he spoke. "Her contributions to the agency are profound, and I won't stand for her--"

"Sit down, Baer," Silus ordered. "And don't open your mouth again until you're asked."

Goddamnit Viola, Baer thought, sliding into his chair. I could have helped you! Why didn't you tell me?

Silus scowled at the stunned faces around the table before addressing Baer again. "Now I have some good news for you, and a lot of bad news. The good news is that you somehow managed to not fuck up since we started our surveillance on you--which, in case you were wondering, began as soon as we learned about Viola's drug habit."

Baer turned towards Tilda and stared with an expression that screamed "You knew about this?" She turned to meet his stare with a bone-chilling coldness.

"The bad news," Silus continued. "Is that we now have sufficient grounds to label that woman's 'contributions' around here as wholesale bullshit. And that, Lieutenant Colonel, means your value to this agency is even less than hers."

Silus leaned forward, pointing a finger as he continued to hammer away. "For your information, that loud-mouthed junky bitch was going to be arrested the next time she docked anywhere in Federation space. And then I was going to see to it personally that she was thrown in jail for the rest of her life. Now, I'm only going to say this once: There will be no search and rescue for that woman. The Amarrians get a free pass with this one, because I really don't give a damn what GAFTA has to say, she had absolutely no reason to be anywhere near Diemnon or anywhere else in Amarrian space, period. Is that clear?"

Baer just blinked back at him: Half stunned, half furious, and wholly incapable of speaking.

"I'll take that stupid look on your face as a 'yes'. Now--does anyone else in here have anything important to say, or can we go back to fighting the Caldari?"

There were no answers from anyone.

"Meeting adjourned," Silus said, getting up from the table. "Thanks for nothing, Lieutenant Colonel."

The shaking in Viola's hands was getting worse, but she could not tell if the cause was from anger or withdrawal. Akredon had said nothing to her; his eyes remained shut, even with the Glaive-collar pinching his neck, and the only words out of his mouth were Amarrian prayers. Sweat was pouring down her face and neck; a slight fever had flared up just as Grious predicted. She tore off the upper section of her flight suit in disgust, followed by the dermaprene endoskeleton underneath. A sleeveless base layer was all that remained to cover her chest and back.

Grious approached with water and a headpiece. "Drink this," he said. "And put those on. The camera feed is ready."

She took the device and fitted it over her face. A glass lens extended below the brow strap that covered one eye.

"The eye cam will project imagery directly onto your retina," Grious said. "You can adjust the size of the image using the controls on the rim, plus how much of your cone of vision is obstructed."

"Don't tell me that you don't need one of these to see what's going on," she muttered.

"Our anatomy was genetically altered to accommodate cybernetic devices that enhance our senses," he answered. "Future generations of Jovians will not need them. I have another eye cam for your Amarrian friend. Do you want him to have one?"

Viola reached out and grabbed it from his hands. "Definitely. Maybe I can use it to get this bastard to open his eyes."

"We're going to split up into two teams," Vlad said quietly. "Krugar, you take Velios and Makkar and set up to defend this corridor. Keep the blast doors at your back and place charges every fifteen meters from this point forward. Hold this position until I tell you to leave or all of us get killed. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," Krugar replied. "Thumgar and Dramis, you come with me. We're going follow the Jovians until they spot the guards. Do not make contact unless you have to defend yourself. Let's move." "Roger," both soldiers answered. They started down the corridor, moving quickly without making a sound. Thumgar's CLAW was leveled in front of him; Vlad and Dramis were advancing with their weapons held at eye level. The ground was paved and featured two sets of embedded mag-rail tracks that ran down the centerline for the entire length of the corridor, but the ceiling and walls were pure rock.

We've advanced three hundred meters into the complex and have yet to see a single guard, Vlad thought, watching the Jovian's progress through his eye cam. Every fiber of his nerves was screaming that something terrible was about to happen.

Baer sat alone in his office with the shades drawn and the lights turned off. The ashtray was smoldering with the putrid remnants of an entire pack of cigarettes, the last of which was seconds away from burning itself out in his fingers. A torrent of thoughts raced through the beleaguered officer's mind, all of which were marked by despair and humiliation. Viola is dead or in deep trouble, he thought, taking in the last puff. And there isn't a goddamn thing I can do about it.

There was still just enough lighting in the office to identify shapes. Baer reached out to the desk and found the picture frame that captured the day when he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. Tilda was pinning the new rank's insignia onto his uniform, while a General stood nearby at attention.

Tilda...

Baer slammed the frame onto his desk, leapt out of his chair, and starting beating the picture with his fist. When the glass shattered, he swept everything from the desk onto the floor with a single motion; then he grabbed the furniture's edges and heaved it over onto its side. It fell to the floor with a thunderous crash, sending the two chairs sailing across the room. Breathing heavily and feeling somewhat better, Baer collapsed into his seat. Moments later, there was a sharp knock on the door.

"Sir? Is everything alright in there?" It was one of the MPs stationed in the concourse.

"Yeah, everything's great," Baer answered. "Just doing a little cleaning."

"I have to let myself in, sir. Please move away from the door."

Before he could tell him to wait, the door slid open and the lights were thrown on. Two MPs barged into his office, surveying the mess inside.

"Thanks for coming over," Baer said, gesturing towards the overturned desk. "Did you come here looking for any vials?"

The MPs exchanged serious looks, and then took positions at either side of the door. Baer's glib demeanor changed when he recognized the two men who walked into his office next: Colonels Marc Beatrix and Liam Caille. They were the advisors who reported to the Senate Intelligence Committee, and were present at his briefing. Tilda Siertro was standing behind them.

"Lieutenant Colonel," Marc started, wincing from the stench of cigarette smoke. "Mind if we have a few words with you?" Baer alternated glances between the two officers. "Am I going to need legal counsel for this?" Liam spoke up. "We're not here to arrest you, and General Bruce already said that you haven't done anything wrong. But we need to talk to you about some things."

"Well, then have a seat," Baer answered. The two officers stepped over shattered glass and debris, pulling the chairs in front of the overturned desk. When Tilda followed them into the office, both Liam and Marc looked over their shoulders.

"Colonel, please excuse us," Marc said. "MPs, wait outside--we are not to be disturbed."

"Yes, sir." An MP gestured with his hand for Tilda, who gave the two a dismissive look and slinked back outside. Bitch, Baer thought, still admiring her hourglass figure as the door closed.

"Before we begin," Marc started. "There are two more people I need to conference in."

Liam got off his chair. "Help me to lift this back over."

Baer blinked, moving opposite of Liam. "Conference into what?" Both men grunted as they heaved the desk into its upright position.

"General Bruce was out of line," Marc said. "He had no business humiliating you like that. Viola might be unpopular, but she was right about a lot of things."

"The war machine has changed the bureaucracy around here for the worst," Liam explained. "All this focus on killing Caldari separatists is making us lose sight of the bigger picture, and the populace is keen on that now with Eanna gone."

Marc was tapping instructions into the desk's console. A woman's voice resonated through the speakers.

"GalNet Center."

"This is Colonel Beatrix. Senator Desirou, please."

"One moment."

"Let's get this out on the table right now," Liam said. "We know that you've been given some leeway to run your intel gathering ops. Now we need to see what you've accomplished with that privilege."

"Lieutenant Colonel Gesdeneau," the gruff voice said. The Senator's wrinkled face was projected over the furniture. "You lost someone important today, and I want to know the details. And I mean everything."

The woman's voice interrupted: "Senator Garrett is joining the conference."

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. Lieutenant Colonel," the younger voice said, nodding. "I'm aboard the Federation cruiser Venture."

Baer was dumbfounded to find himself facing two prominent members of the Gallente Senate so soon after the disaster in the conference room. Senator Desirou noticed the bewildered expression on his face and chuckled.

"Relax, Baer," he said. "We know what kind of day you're having. Believe me, we're going to deal with General Bruce separately. While you gather your thoughts, let me tell you what's been going on with the masses. If you don't already know, there are vast numbers of displaced Minmatars living in Gallente space, and both of our districts have significant concentrations of naturalized citizens from Minmatar origins. When you consider that we're drafting from this same population to fight in the Caldari War, you can see how failing to support the tribes directly hurts morale for us here."

"There are also serious economic consequences to contend with," Senator Garrett said. "The Hror System is a huge trading partner for the eastern regions of the Federation. I can't tell you how many requests we've received from people begging for information about what happened there. The Minmatar government has been offline for days, and hundreds of thousands of people have stopped their daily routines just to try and get information on their own. Shipping ports are overloaded with goods that should have left last week, and businesses are scrambling to replace inventory that never arrived, which in turn is creating regional inflationary pressures...I could go on, but suffice it to say that the economic ripple effects are significant."

"We are winning the Caldari War," Senator Desirou said. "And the populace has already become complacent about our success. The Amarrians are taking center stage in the media now, and people are finally starting to realize just how much of a threat they really are."

"We want to help the Minmatar directly," Senator Garrett said. "And for now, I'll define 'help' as everything short of sending troops. General Bruce was only half right when he implied that all of our resources are devoted to the war. That's definitely true with our spaceborne assets, but not with planetary equipment. We have excess supply due to overbudgeting, and we have an abundance of brand new, state-of-the-art weaponry that the tribes could be using to liberate themselves."

"What kind of weaponry?" Baer asked.

"Small arms, artillery, body armor, tanks, air power, you name it," Senator Desirou said. "And we have plenty of 'advisors' to lend who can show them how to use that gear to maximum effect."

The Senator paused, then narrowed his eyes at Baer. "But before any of that can happen, you need to tell us everything you know about Viola's work, beginning with what she was doing at Diemnon."

Baer looked at everyone seated across from him. Politicians were always the enemy...until now. He took a deep breath, wishing that he had more smokes.

"Let me start by saying that I think Viola is still alive," he said, tapping on the desktop console. "And this telemetry playback will show you why."

"He won't fucking talk," Viola said. "All he keeps repeating are those goddamn prayers!" she screamed, directly into Faus's ear.

"Try to remain calm," Grious said, keeping his eyes focused on the blast doors. "Remember, he was trained to withstand interrogations much more severe than this."

"Well, why don't you give it a try?" She slumped down to the ground besides the shackled Amarrian, who continued to rock back and forth, quietly chanting scripture.

"I have no desire to do such things to him," the Jovian replied. "Nor is there a compelling reason why I should."

Viola wanted to claw her eyeballs out, which throbbed with each breath she took. Everything about her physical existence was tortured in the absence of painkillers. Looking away from Faus, she noticed bloodstains all over the tarmac for the first time, and remembered the gory events that had started everything.

"Grious," she panted. "Do you know anything about the riot that happened here?"

The Jovian remained motionless for a moment, as if to consider whether or not to tell her. "I know that it was the Enheduanni's creation."

Viola was trying to keep her voice steady despite the shivers. "How did they start it? Was it because of the Elders that were brought here?"

"They activated a sleeper agent," Grious answered. "One with Matari genetics that was allowed to be captured and imprisoned here years ago."

"Sleeper agent?" Viola looked over at Akredon, and took note of the Glaive-collar around his neck.

"They were placed throughout all of the empires, and none of them are aware they are agents."

"How is that possible?" Viola exclaimed, easily irritated at everything Grious said.

"Their mastery of genetic engineering unlocked the precise workings of the human brain," he answered, manipulating a datapad as he walked back towards the ramp. "They can create minds with memories and skills burned into their medial temporal lobe, and set mnemonic devices to trigger them."

"Well, who are these agents? How do we find them?"

"You can't," Grious answered. "They are untraceable. They are born as adults, from cloning vats with complete memories of fabricated backgrounds and accompanying identification with the empire they are created for. These agents are bred with specific purposes programmed into their minds, and although it may take years for them to reach the stature or position they were intended for, they have yet to fail."

"Invisible," Viola muttered. And right in front of us all the time. "But what about that subspace burst? How could the sleeper agent do that?"

"Hyper-advanced implants," Grious said. "Many are self-assembling, so they cannot be physically detected until the agent is activated. They are designed primarily to stimulate adrenaline production, deaden pain receptors, and accelerate healing processes, among other functions. But in the past they have also been used as transmitters."

"Did the sleeper agent activated here use one of those transmitters to contact us?"

"Not only us," Grious answered.

"According to Viola, the Elders are literally the wisest members of the seven tribes," Baer continued. "They allegedly possess intimate knowledge of every other tribe including their own. But their existence is officially denied by the Minmatars. Instead, they're treated as legends, like mythical beings, all for the singular purpose of keeping their real identities secret."

"But someone must know who they are," Senator Desirou said. "Or else they wouldn't have sent in their Valklears to rescue them!"

"They were tipped off," Baer replied, tapping into the console again. "By this."

The men watched as the recorded ambient readings detected by Viola's Atron spiked across the subspace, gamma, and x-ray bands, then faded back to normal. "Look at the time on the mission clock. That burst originated from Diemnon, and it occurred within minutes of two key events: One was the prison riot inside the mining complex, and two was the reported disappearance of the Apostle Taj Rukon and seven other high priests. Care to guess where they eventually found their bodies?"

"Don't tell me Diemnon..." Marc said.

"Correct. And here's the worst part--"

"The Amarrians think Viola is responsible for their deaths," Senator Garrett said, leaning back and rubbing his temples.

"Exactly," Baer said. "Viola's ship wasn't even armed. But the burst is what lured her to Diemnon, probably thinking it was a clue about the Elder's location. It seems likely that the same burst was recorded by the Amarrians and the Minmatar, but as completely different messages."

"But who sent it?" Senator Garrett pleaded. "And that still doesn't tell me who else knows about these Elders!"

"That," Baer answered. "Is where Viola's theory about the `Order' becomes relevant."

"The Order?" Senator Desirou asked. "Who the hell are they?"

"How did they take control of my ship," Viola asked, shivering as though freezing, but glistening with sweat. "And those voices in my head, when they were talking...I felt so violated by it..."

"We also have the technology to commandeer ships," Grious answered, placing his hand on her forehead. "Empire vessels--such as the Minmatar's Rifter, for example--are not yet equipped to defend themselves from such attacks. But the Enheduanni's ability to remotely stimulate neural pathways assigned to the audio functions of a human's brain...that is science beyond our comprehension, at least for now."

"Beyond your comprehension?" asked Viola. "You Jovians are supposed to be the goddamn technical geniuses of our age!"

"The technology of the Enheduanni is much more advanced than our own, Viola. They possess absolute mastery of quantum physics and particle science, and the telltale sign of their presence is non-linear teleportation."

"What?" Viola asked.

"Transporting matter instantaneously across space without the use of wormholes, stargates, or jumpdrives," Grious answered. "It can be done, but not by us."

"I don't care what you can or can't do," Viola pleaded, becoming desperate. "I just want to understand those voices, Grious. What science gives them the ability to just invade my consciousness like that?"

He paused before answering. "A mutation."

Viola thought about his response for a moment, then found the Jovian's pitch black eyes staring at hers. "Grious...are the Enheduanni human?"

"Not anymore."

"What about the Jovians?" Liam asked. "The telemetry clearly showed Wraiths uncloaking just before the recording stopped."

"If Viola has been in contact with them, she never told me about it," Baer answered. "But it doesn't surprise me that they have a hand in this." "Do we have any diplomatic channels with the Jovians?" Liam asked. "Our contact with them was always tenuous, but they completely disappeared once the Caldari War started," Senator Desirou said. "None of us understand why."

"Reach out to them," Senator Garrett said. "They came to her aid, so they might be willing to answer our questions."

"If that's the case," Baer said. "Then you won't have to worry about contacting them. They'll come to us on their own time, after they get whatever it is they want from Viola."

"I've heard enough," Senator Garrett said. "I'm going to Diemnon right now, and I'm not leaving there until I find out what happened to her."

"Bad idea," Baer said. "The Hahyil system is blockaded by Amarrian warships, and they're hunting down the remnants of the Valklear fleet. You'd be flying into a firing range. Don't do it."

"I concur," Senator Desirou said. "Right or wrong, Viola is a wanted criminal over there, and any Gallente ships in the area are likely to be considered hostile."

"I don't care," Senator Garrett said. "The information that she has is priceless to the Federation, and we have to

do everything we can to protect it. And let's face reality here--the Amarrians aren't going to fire on a Gallente Senator."

"Senator, with all due respect, I think you're wrong," Baer said. "Viola is accused of killing priests, not to mention one of their sacred Apostles. There isn't an act more despicable than that in their culture, and your presence at Diemnon would imply Federation involvement, if not actually endorsing the act. It's a bad idea no matter how you look at it."

"As opposed to General Bruce's solution of just walking away?" Senator Garrett asked. "I don't think so, Baer. I'm going to confront the Amarrians on this and get answers."

"Stop trying to be a hero," Senator Desirou grumbled. "Let's reach out to them through the ambassadors, they're the ones who--"

"Absolutely not," Senator Garrett retorted. "We just don't have the time to go through that process. I'm already on my way to Diemnon. If there's even a small chance that Viola is alive, then we have an obligation to do everything in our power to get her back. As far as I'm concerned, her survival is a matter of national security."

"So is yours, Senator," Baer said. "And the stakes are a lot higher now with you involved."



"The violence that scars the history of civilization is testament to the fact that all men are born slaves to different masters. The Empire's strength flows from the absolute recognition that there is but one true Master; peace will always elude those who deny Him."

Amarrian Ambassador Oturus Feinz, Caille Summit, 23220

"Religion is a terminal illness whose symptoms include the loss of common sense, humility, rational thinking, and in your case, moral decency."

Gallente Ambassador Jacques Allirou, Caille Summit, 23220

The Hellwraith decelerated from warp, trailing long streams of plasma that coalesced into crimson spheres of fire as the crippled battleship slowed to a halt. Moments earlier, an Amarrian cruise missile detonated against the unshielded structure below the main bridge, hurling men and equipment across the command center like insects caught in a storm. Karth, stunned and unsure of his surroundings, found himself lying on the floor grating. The moans of wounded and dying crewmembers brought him back to his senses.

The bridge was thick with the acrid-smelling smoke of burning electrical cables and littered with the debris of shattered bulkhead fittings. Karth slowly pulled himself off the deck, ignoring the throbbing pain at the back of his head and the wet sensation along his neck and shoulders. Since the first battle at Diemnon, the Hellwraith had survived five separate engagements with the Imperial Navy. Hundreds of warships were hunting the Valklear task force, routing them from deep space locations with relentless fury. Of the thirty Minmatar ships that first entered the Hahyil system hours ago, the Hellwraith was all that remained.

"Engineering..." Karth stammered. Coughing erupted from several men as they staggered throughout the bridge to man their posts again.

There was a pause before a static-laced voice responded. "Yes, sir..."

"How many men were still outside when we warped?"

"Forty seven," the voice creaked. "The warp core generators probably killed them before we accelerated to FTL speeds."

Karth remembered how cruel the decision was to warp, having been forced by an Amarrian attack to trade the lives of the men attempting repairs outside for the thousands of crewmembers still onboard. "Did they repair the comm arrays in time?"

Another pause. "No."

"And the fires?"

"Contained, but many decks are inaccessible now." The engineering officer took a deep, labored breath. "The main engines cannot be repaired and had to be taken offline. Attempting to power them back on will destroy the ship."

Karth was feeling faint, but resisted the temptation to collapse. "What about the warp drives?"

"Operational, but with no armor left to protect the generators, one direct hit..."

"I understand. Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Admiral, you're bleeding," the navigation officer said, approaching him.

Aren't we all, Karth thought. "I'll tend to it later. Weapons status!"

"One turret is operational; the rest are damaged or destroyed," the weapons officer answered. "Launchers two through four are online, but we jettisoned ordnance to prevent secondary explosions once the engines caught fire."

"Sir, that gash on your head is serious," interrupted the navigation officer again. "Let the medics have a look."

"I said I'd tend to it later!" Karth snapped, falling to his knees while trying unsuccessfully to support himself against a shattered console. Several men rushed to his aid.

"The Hellwraith will hold together," the officer said, rushing to Karth's side as the medics entered the bridge. "But only if her captain stays in one piece."

No comms, no weapons, no engines, no place to run... "Keep the ship in hyperspace as much as you can," Karth muttered as his vision started to blur. "A window for our escape will present itself sooner or later..."

They knew as well as I that we would die out here, he thought. The Elders are gone, and so is Minmatar. He watched as the medics knelt to lift his shoulders off the metal grating.

I have what I came here for, Karth thought before blacking out again. The killer of my son is dead. Nothing else matters.

Derelek Region - Aguh Constellation
The Aranir System: Waypoint track to the Hahyil System
Celestis-class cruiser "G.F.S. Venture"

Senator Garrett understood the source of his impassioned desire to confront the Amarrians. The reckless act that he was about to commit was fueled by moral outrage, which outweighed all other considerations, including the safety of the Venture's crew. The Amarrians would not dare attack a Gallente Senator, he reminded himself. The notion was inconceivable, and so his conscience was at ease, knowing that the risks were negligible.

He stood impatiently on the bridge, watching the warp tunnel dissipate while his officers stared nervously at the tactical display. Exactly fifty Imperial Navy warships were in the Aranir system, and by the time the Venture's warp drives shut down, half of them were plainly visible through the forward bridge windows. Several Amarrian frigates immediately left their orbit around the Hahyil stargate and turned towards the Venture.

"They're hailing," the navigation officer said. "Linking to intercom."

"This is Vice-Commodore Armenus Teides of the Imperial Navy. The Hahyil System is quarantined by order of the Holy Emperor. Stop your engines immediately and prepare to be scanned."

"This is Senator Vale Garrett of the Gallente Federation, and I will not stop my engines. You have no jurisdiction over this ship and cannot restrict the passageway of--"

"Senator Garrett, if you come within ten kilometers of this gate, I am authorized to destroy your ship and imprison any survivors. Shut down your engines and prepare to be scanned."

The Amarrian frigates flew directly behind the Venture. "Navigation," Senator Garrett fumed. "Set your course for the Hahyil gate, ahead two-thirds."

The officer hesitated. "Sir, I think that--"

"I said ahead two-thirds!"

Senator Desirou's voice boomed through the intercom. "Vale, that's enough. You've taken this stunt too far, and it has to stop."

Senator Garrett remained defiant. "Did you hear what they said? They just threatened us with lethal force! Us! And this after they shoot down an unarmed Federation pilot! We will not back down, and I will not cede to their outrageous demands. Navigation, set your speed to two-thirds of maximum velocity or I'll come over there and do it myself!"

"Vale, this is insane--"

"My ship, my command!" Senator Garrett interrupted, just as the ship started its acceleration. One by one, the four Amarrian frigates started to target lock them. Then the rest of the Imperial Navy ships--mostly battleships and cruisers--did the same.

"Senator Garrett, this is your final warning. Stop your engines and prepare now to be boarded."

"Boarded? Now you listen to me very, very closely," Senator Garrett growled, watching the range counter on the forward display start to decrease. "I am a Gallente Federation Senator, and I am here to recover the Federation pilot that your forces shot down over Diemnon. That was an unprovoked act of war, and this is your last chance to salvage the peaceful relationship that exists between our two nations. Now you will let me pass, and you will assist me in the search for the pilot you attempted to murder in the Hahyil System!"

Every crewmember on board the Venture held their collective breaths, waiting for an eternity to pass as the range counter decreased to the ten kilometer mark, and then continued onwards to nine kilometers.

The four frigates trailing the Venture suddenly activated stasis webs, instantly forcing the cruiser to a dead stop and sending the occupants of the bridge crashing forward. A new voice spoke through the intercom.

"You bear the title of `Senator'?"

"Who is this?" Vale screamed, getting back to his feet.

"Your presence here acknowledges complicity of the Federation government in the murder of the Apostle Taj Rukon and his disciples. For that heinous crime, His Holiness Emperor Heideran condemns you to death."

Senator Vale Garrett's last living act was opening his mouth to object. He, along with all three hundred and forty two crewmembers of the G.F.S. Venture, died within the next few seconds as the Imperial Navy executed the

forged death mandate of Emperor Heideran.

As his corpse was mutilated by the same forces that were tearing the cruiser apart, a tiny device embedded in the late Senator's stomach detonated a split second before the Venture's reactor exploded.

Viola turned quickly to her left, swearing again that someone or something rushed past her. But there was nothing there except for the cavern walls far across the tarmac. Shivering uncontrollably, she continued to rock back and forth, seated on the ground across from Faus Akredon with her arms wrapped around her knees. Then she saw movement again, this time to her right, and shrieked as she caught a fleeting glimpse of her stalker: One of the faceless souls from her dreams.

"Grious!" she screamed in between gasps for air. "Are any more of you invisible freaks walking around out here?"

"You are hallucinating," he answered. "And your withdrawal symptoms are worsening much faster than I anticipated."

"No, Grious, you're wrong...I swear, something else is down here!"

"It is just the three of us, Viola," he answered. "The Minmatar pilots are with their ship, and the injured Jovian remains in medical stasis onboard my own. The rest are deep inside the complex."

The rumbles from far overhead reminded her of thunder. Just like in my dream, right before the corpse takes me inside. She looked at Faus, and her eyes welled up with tears. The man was still on his knees and slumped forward, barely able to support the weight of his upper body. I feel pity for this monster, she thought. I've tormented him every way I can think of, and in the end all I feel is remorse.

Viola moved closer to him, and lowered her voice to a quivering whisper. "I can't blame you for what you've done any longer, and I hate myself for that. We can't choose our beginnings, or the experiences that define who we are..."

"Contact," Grious said suddenly. "We have just moved past several Amarrian guards undetected and are moving into a series of caves. Our search for the Elders will begin there."

She reached out for the radio device that would unlock the Glaive-collar around Faus's neck. "I put this collar on you, and I'll regret that I did for the rest of my life." The device hissed and clicked. Faus wheezed, but still kept his eyes shut. Viola leaned forward and pulled the collar off, casting it aside. "I didn't kill those priests," she said, as the shaking worsened and more ghosts darted across the corners of her eyes. "I can't hurt anyone, I just can't..." She slumped to the ground, curling up tightly. "I forgive you, Faus...for what you've done, for who you are...I forgive you."

Faus remained silent, but was breathing heavier than before.

"Grious," Viola whimpered. "Let...let him go. Take off his bindings and just let him go."

The Jovian did not answer.

"Grious?" Viola asked, laboring to turn herself over. "Please, just take off his--"

The sight of Grious startled her. He looked as if he was frozen, and his face was contorted into a ghastly expression that she could not interpret. Then she toggled the switch on her headpiece.

"Why'd they stop signaling," Thumgar whispered, approaching Vlad quietly. The Amarrian guards were chatting near a cavern entrance two hundred meters downhill, unaware of the three Valklear rifles aimed at them. The Jovian squad leader had been signaling every few meters to keep Vlad informed of what to expect ahead. But ever since moving past the guards, the signals had ceased.

"I don't know," Vlad answered, shouldering his weapon and producing the headpiece that Grious had given him. "I'm not going to hail them until I have a look."

"Roger," Thumgar answered, settling prone and lining up his own sights with the guards.

Vlad removed his helmet and slipped the headpiece on. He felt a slight tingle in his right eye as the device powered on, and again as the imagery was superimposed over his view of the guards. Resisting the urge to reach out and touch the picture, Vlad adjusted the dials on the headpiece, unsure of what he was looking at. The image looked like a series of sand dunes as seen from high above, like alternating bands of light and dark ridges that ran parallel to each other.

"What do you see," Thumgar asked.

"I'm not sure," Vlad asked, fiddling with the dials some more. "It almost looks like..."

His fingers found the zoom controls and panned the image back.

"Like what?"

The dark ridges that Vlad was looking at gradually formed into the gaunt rib cage of a starving Minmatar child, whose hollow eyes were staring directly at him.

"No!"

Viola exhaled in a gasp of horror, shutting her eyes and wishing all of her might that this was just another nightmare. But her experience with the cruel reality of war, having seen the images of rampant death and destruction throughout her entire career, told her that this was as real as the tears rushing down her face. The corpses of dozens--perhaps hundreds--of children and elderly Minmatars that had died of disease and starvation were strewn all over a cave. Some of the carcasses were still alive, crawling among the foulness and stench to find their own place to die. Grious appeared utterly incapacitated, as if what he was seeing struck something deep inside that he was completely unprepared to deal with.

Viola slowly got up to her feet.

"Grious," she asked, stumbling towards him.

The Jovian opened his mouth and moved his jaws as if to speak, but no sounds emerged from his throat. He thought he had all of the answers, Viola thought. Until he saw this.

"Please say something," she said, reaching out with a trembling hand to touch his petrified face.

It took several attempts, but Grious finally managed to heave a single word from his lungs.

"...why..."

"Slaves exist for one purpose, Grious," she said, trying to ignore the whispers of ghosts in her ears. "If they cannot fulfill that purpose, for any reason at all--lack of strength, sickness, anything--then they are disposed of."

Grious convulsed through several more attempts to say another word.

"...children..."

Viola pursed her lips, resisting the urge to sob. "Yes," she whispered. "They're too small to help in labor camps, and only healthy Minmatars are permitted to breed outside of them." She remembered hearing that Jovian embryos were grown in fetus tubes, and that the embryos were the closest approximation of divinity in their society. The tubes represented the lifeblood of their race, without which they could not reproduce. To see children intentionally left in this state, malnourished and dying, was likely something that the Jovians had never seen in their entire history.

"Do you understand now, Grious? Do you see why I want him to open his eyes?"

Grious looked over towards Faus.

"He does not want to face what his soul knows he is partially responsible for," she continued. "This is what I've spent my entire life trying to make others see for themselves."

With a tremor, the Jovian's head rolled ominously upwards, and Grious stared at the sky for a moment before marching directly towards the Glaive-collar on the tarmac.

"Two of them started moving again," Vlad said, hoping that the tears resting on his eyelids stayed put.

Dramis and Thumgar remained silent. Of all the indecency and outright cruelty that the Minmatar race was subjected to, this was by far the most horrific scene these men had ever witnessed. Vlad watched as two of the Jovian soldiers finally moved away from the cave, carefully sidestepping rotting corpses and moving silently around the masked guards standing outside.

But the third Jovian soldier stayed where he was.

Grious's hands worked with swift precision, locking the Glaive-collar back into place around Faus's neck and adjusting the dials on the headpiece strapped to his scalp. The Amarrian was breathing quickly through his nose, as if to brace himself from the pain he sensed was imminent.

"You are going to open your eyes," Grious said, manipulating the controls on the radio transmitter. "Whether you

want to or not."

Faus screamed as all six syringes broke the skin on his neck.

"The Glaive-collar has six different chemical compounds that can be administered, none of which require an actual injection to apply," Grious said. "But the Amarrians still prefer to use the threat of pain as their primary means of intimidation."

Faus started to pray again, at which point Viola heard the syringes withdraw, rotate slightly, and then reinsert into his neck. Droplets of blood formed at the old wounds as another ear-curling scream echoed throughout the hangar.

Grious continued as though nothing happened. "Amarrian guards wear these transmitters, which can be set to administer any combination of the drugs based on proximity. If a slave gets too close to a guard, then this needle--" A syringe withdrew from Faus's neck and reinserted in quick succession three times. "--will inject a toxin that will kill the wearer of this collar instantly."

Viola became very afraid of the animal that had been unleashed in Grious, and her damaged heart started to beat even faster.

"The collar is primitive but effective for its purpose," Grious continued, repeating the gruesome act for each syringe. "For example, this syringe injects a generic anti-infective to help curb the spread of disease within the mines. This one injects a pain-control agent to quickly subdue the screams of those who are maimed in accidents or beatings. This one is a truth serum so that no secrets can be kept, and this one is a serum that induces euphoria, to make slaves more compliant to their master's wishes."

Faus's screams became sobs, but he still refused to open his eyes.

"One syringe remains, Viola. Do you know which one it is?"

Shivering uncontrollably and feeling faint, Viola sat besides Faus and started to rock back and forth again. I am going to die down here, she thought. Buried in the graveyard of an asylum.

"Fear," Grious said. "The sixth syringe injects an agent that induces fear. When used prior to applying a pain stimulus like a shockwhip, this agent also briefly paralyzes the muscles and hypersensitizes nerve endings, making the victim especially vulnerable to--and fearful of-- pain."

Viola leaned over towards Faus, who was moaning in between quick gasps for air.

"Tell me, Faus...Where is your god now?"

The soothing sound of her voice, coupled with the blasphemy of her words, combined for a diabolical contradiction that seemed sadistically appropriate for the wicked hell of his existence. In truth, he wanted to open his eyes so badly, if for no other reason than to gaze at the only beautiful thing left in the remnants of his mortal life. But to do so would condemn him to fail the most important test of his soul.

The needles piercing his neck delivered bolts of lightning across the back of his eyelids, reminding him of the cataclysmic explosions that blossomed beneath the beams of a tachyon surface bombardment. Thousands of prayers, Faus thought. And still I cannot escape from the memory of what I have done, of what I was commanded to do! One brutal act of cruelty after the next, delivering and receiving agonizing pain all to demonstrate my eternal devotion to you! Deny a man water for three days and the foulest water will taste like the sweetest elixir; saturate us with death and destruction and a mere painless existence becomes the dream of paradise! Is this the promise you have for us, Father? Is your grand plan just a sadistic scheme to lower our expectations enough to make the end of life seem like your greatest gift? Is this what I am to worship? Death and suffering? Is it, Father?

Faus cried out, scraping his head against the rock tarmac. That is the devil talking, tempting me to abandon Him. I will not give in! Forgive me Father, for I know that this will pass!

"If you will not open your eyes," the demon's voice said. "Then fear will open them for you."

Oh dear God no, don't let him--

Faus felt the needle thrust deeply into the back of his neck and push a hot liquid through his veins. Sheer panic engulfed him, and his eyes opened wide in horror. Still face down on the tarmac, a gruesome image started to materialize on the stones beneath him.

Viola watched as Faus writhed against the restraints and threw himself over onto his side, trying desperately to escape the apocalyptic vision projected onto his retina.

"Look at it, Faus," she said. "Goddamn you, look at it!"

His eyelids were peeled completely back, his mouth locked open in terror beneath the breathing apparatus, gasping for air that his lungs refused to allow him to take in. She could see his limbs trembling, and could hear faint garbles coming from his throat. It was the sight of a man breaking, of a man scared out of his mind, of a man faced with a bitter truth that he had hoped to never discover.

"No!" he said, his eyes darting back and forth.

Two horribly malnourished Minmatar slaves were stacking the corpses of children onto a mag-rail car as Amarrian guards watched, shockwhips dangling ready at their sides.

"There are your sacred Paladins," Viola said. "Defending the will of God."

"No...no, no!" Faus said, flipping onto his back.

"This is what you've dedicated your life to defending," she said, bursting into sobs as one of the slaves collapsed from exhaustion. The sparks from two sets of shockwhip strikes against his raw flesh followed. "So look at it, goddamn you...look and accept the monster that you've become!"

"No! No! No!" Faus screamed louder than he ever had before, shaking himself back and forth as though someone were physically attacking him. Viola broke down at the sight, while Grious stood by impassively, his cold, black eyes not showing any trace of pity or remorse.

Then Faus uprighted himself, leaned back and arched his neck at the sky.

"I renounce you!" he bellowed. "I renounce you and your wretched kingdom! You are dead to me! Do you hear me? Dead to me!"

The collar hissed as Grious approached Faus and removed the device, smashing it into the ground with terrific force. As it shattered into pieces, Faus started to mutilate his own face, smashing and scraping it against the tarmac surface. Viola reached over, straining to pull him over onto his back.

"What have I done," he sobbed, repeating the question over and over as blood poured from the jagged cuts and scrapes on his face. "For the love of all things good, what have I done..."

"Viola," Grious said suddenly. "Switch channels on your eye cam."

Vlad watched as the imagery moved past several teams of slaves blasting away at cavern walls with their lasers, off the main pathway and into a labyrinth of half-completed metallic housing structures. Stalagmites hung from the rock ceilings in this part of the complex, and unfinished power cable tracks were set into the walls. The Jovians were moving in complete darkness, aided by night-vision optical equipment that yielded imagery with better clarity than anything the Valklears ever used.

The movement slowed suddenly, and the lead Jovian soldier with the camera turned back a few steps. The image panned left into one of the structures, and then stopped.

Eleven motionless figures were standing inside, but the image did not advance any further. The soldier produced a UV flashlight and placed the beam on the figures. Vlad realized that they were corpses tied upright to steel posts.

"Shine on their faces and zoom in," he whispered.

Vlad's heart sank as he recognized the decomposing faces of the Nefantar, Starkmanir, and Thukker tribe Elders.

"That's them," he said. "Can you inspect the bodies?"

"Negative," the Jovian soldier replied. "Pull your team out right now."

"Say again?"

"The entrance to this room is set with trap charges. The Amarrians know we are here. If you want to live, move your team back up to the hangar immediately."

Vlad was about to ask why when the distant howls of slavers--carnivorous, canine beasts trained by the Amarrians to watch over Minmatar slaves--turned his blood into ice.

"Captain, look!" Dramis said. The two guards downrange from them suddenly crouched and ran inside the cave entrance.

"Fall back," Vlad said, pulling on Thumgar's backpack. "The Elders are gone, back to the ship ASAP, move, move, move! Krugar, do you copy?"

Vlad could see muzzle flashes illuminating the caverns through the eye cam as the Jovians fought for their lives against the powerful four-legged predators charging at them from every direction.

"Standing by."

"We're coming back up, get ready to blow those charges!"

"Roger."

Through the eye cam, Vlad saw one of the beasts rip the arm off of the lead Jovian soldier as if it was his own. The last image to filter through was a set of razor-sharp slaver fangs descend onto the camera.

"Run!" he shouted, standing up and firing two grenades from his rifle launcher downrange into the cave entrance. The three Valklears turned back up the hill in a full sprint as they heard a muffled thump...thump followed by the sounds of collapsing rock behind them.

Distant shouts, gunfire, and the growl of beasts followed. Vlad figured they had less than a minute before the first pack of slavers made it past the debris and caught up with them.

Grious muttered a word in the Jovian language that sounded like a curse.

"What's wrong?" Viola asked.

"I said betrayed. The Enheduanni betrayed us to the Amarrians," he answered, moving towards the ramp of the closest Wraith. "And the meteor storm outside will end shortly. Captain Kintreb!"

Viola recognized the Valklear captain's voice on the device in Grious's hand.

"Not now, Grious," he panted.

"Order your Rifter crew to board my ship immediately if you want to save them," Grious said, pausing at the Wraith's ramp.

"Omicron-One, abandon ship and follow Grious," Vlad said. "Leave the Rifter now!"

"Abandon ship, yes sir," the Valklear pilot answered. Viola looked across the tarmac and saw two tiny figures descend down the frigate's ramp.

"Look out!" a voice yelled, followed by the staccato of automatic gunfire. Grious switched channels on the device and started moving upwards quickly, speaking tersely in Jovian. Viola could hear two other voices in the conversation, presumably those of the two Wraith pilots.

"Stay here," Grious said from inside the ship. "I'm not leaving. I will return in a few moments."

Before she could answer, the ramp suddenly closed, leaving her alone with Faus. The Imperial Navy Commodore had not spoken in some time.

Thumgar was mowing down slavers with his CLAW when the first Amarrian guards got close enough to return fire accurately. Vlad loaded his last three grenades into the rifle launcher.

"Both of you get ready to move!" he shouted, as bullets ricocheted against the rocks over his head. Vlad got up to one knee and fired his grenades in quick succession, aiming for the cavern ceilings above three separate spots downrange. As soon as the first one detonated, Dramis and Thumgar jumped up and ran.

Vlad counted only two detonations as he turned to run uphill. An Amarrian guard directly beneath the spot where the dud should have exploded launched his own spread of grenades.

"Get down!" Vlad shouted, throwing himself face first into the ground as three deafening explosions buried him under rocks and debris. Fighting through the ringing in his ears and ignoring the pain in his back and legs, he flipped over and fired several bursts from his rifle back downrange.

"I'm hit!" Thumgar shouted, pouring machine gun fire back at the Amarrians. "Fuck me, I'm hit..." Vlad pulled himself off the ground and limped towards the sound of Thumgar's CLAW as it continued to thunder away. Momentarily puzzled that he was sitting upright on the ground, Vlad dropped down besides him and helped to return fire.

"We have to keep moving," he said. "I'll cover, you go."

"I'm not going anywhere, Captain," Thumgar said, looking downwards.

Vlad finally noticed that Thumgar was sitting in a pool of his own blood, and that both of his legs had been severed. More bullets ricocheted overhead as the dying Valklear dumped all the grenades from his own belt in front of him.

"I think they got Dramis, too," he muttered as blood flowed from his mouth. Then he pulled the pin from one of the grenades.

"Run, Captain. Run like hell."

Vlad leapt upwards and sprinted as fast as he could, nearly tripping over the shredded remnants of Dramis as he did. When he saw Krugar waving at him from the top of the hill, now just 100 meters away, Vlad dived into the ground once again.

Thumgar's CLAW stopped firing for just a moment, and Vlad thought he could hear the growl of more slavers when the grenades finally detonated.

The explosion startled Viola, and the blast doors across the tarmac opened. She could see three Valklears crouching in the doorway, their rifles spitting out fire.

"I can't help you until I see them," Faus said suddenly.

Viola was starting to feel sharp pains in her chest. "What are you talking about?"

"I want to help you," he said, looking into her eyes for the first time. "You and the Minmatars. But I can't unless I make contact with the guards!"

Another explosion--much louder than the first one--startled the both of them.

"There's nothing I can do," she said. "Grious might be able to, but--"

"Viola, listen to me," Faus said. "Whatever happens out here, I swear on my life that I will do everything I can to protect you. I know what must be done now, and I have you to thank for it!"

The Wraith's ramp suddenly descended to the tarmac. Grious stumbled down, collapsing onto the ground and then quickly picking himself back up. The Jovian was bare-chested, and his skin color had changed from its original pale complexion to a muddled gray that reminded Viola of rotting meat.

"What the hell happened to you?" she asked, just as another explosion rocked the hangar. Viola turned and saw four Valklears running towards them from the direction of the blast doors. One of them had a noticeable limp.

"They won't make it," Grious stammered, ignoring Viola's question. "And neither will the Rifter pilots."

Gunfire erupted as all six Minmatars dropped to return fire at the doors. Several packs of bloodthirsty slavers sprinted through the opening.

The bolts around Faus's legs and wrists suddenly detached, and Grious grabbed the kneeling Amarrian by his uniform and yanked him up to his feet. Then he handed Faus back his own Imperial Navy service pistol.

"Grious!" Viola shouted.

The ramp on the Wraith retracted, and the engines on both Jovian frigates roared to life.

"Viola...Antionnes," Grious said, taking her by the shoulders and speaking just inches away from her face. "If what Faus said to you is true, then I will see you again. When that day comes, do not tell me how I met my end. Do you understand? Do not tell me how I met my end!"

The Wraiths lifted off from the tarmac and flew into the tunnel, disappearing within seconds. Viola was too stunned to answer.

"Kill me," Grious said as he turned towards the bewildered Faus. "In plain view of the guards, quickly. Do it!"

Bullets kicked up chunks of tarmac around them, and the screams of Valklear soldiers being torn apart by slavers filled the hangar.

Before Faus could react, the Jovian grabbed his wrist and thrust the pistol into his own chest. "You could save the lives of at least some of them if you act now!"

Faus squeezed the trigger once, and Grious stumbled backwards as the bullet passed through him.

"Kil nat tra fahule!" Faus screamed. All of the slavers stopped dead in their tracks--some of them with chunks of human flesh hanging from their mouths--as they recognized the command from an Amarrian master to heel. Then Faus extended his arm, pointed the pistol directly at Grious's sternum, and fired six more times.

"No!" Viola cried, as the Jovian fell to the ground dead. A pack of slavers trotted over to the corpse, growling as they sniffed the remains of Grious before snarling at Viola.

A group of armed guards approached, and upon recognizing the uniform and rank emblazoned on Faus's sleeve, snapped to attention.

"Are you alright, sir?"

"I'm fine," Faus said. "Are there any survivors among the rebels?"

"One for sure," the guard scoffed. "Although it doesn't look like that will last for very long."

Faus narrowed his eyes at the man. "Do you know who I am, Paladin?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then you will listen to these orders very carefully: Any Minmatar survivors, in addition to this Gallente woman, are to be given the best medical treatment that you have available here. They are my prisoners, to be treated as my personal property, and they must be kept alive at all costs until help arrives. Is that understood?"

The sight of Faus barking orders to the Amarrians guards, coupled with the ferocious slavers sitting obediently at his side, suddenly melted away. Viola was once again surrounded by faceless souls, but the demons that usually whispered to her were no longer speaking.



"Nothing could have prepared us for that battle. No prophecy foretold of that destiny, and no sage or priest could find meaning in its cursed aftermath. Ever since that dreadful time came to pass, a powerful demon has come to haunt the faithful of Amarr, and its name will always be Vak'Atioth."

Rear Admiral Galvrek Konst, ret., "The Wake Behind", 23270 AD

"In my dream I was visited by a warrior spirit, who said nothing but pointed towards the gate, where I saw daylight when I knew there should have been darkness instead. The next morning, the slaver that guarded the barracks we lived in lay dead at the entrance, and the Glaive-collars around our necks had been mysteriously removed. Then we noticed the weapons arranged on the dirt upon which we slept, begging to spill the blood of the one who made us call him `master'."

Anonymous, "Glaive Wars", Krusual Archives

Domain Region - Throne Worlds Constellation
The Amarr System: Planet Oris
Emperor Family Academy Station

From the darkness of his personal chambers, Grand Admiral Mekioth Sarum observed the procession of Imperial Navy warships as they approached the hangar. Against all odds, Faus Akredon had survived both the ambush by Minmatar rebels at Diemnon and the deadly meteor storm that should have finished him earlier. Akredon's triumphant return to the Throne Worlds so soon after the loss of the Impervious was being hailed by the Navy as a miracle, and Emperor Heideran was anxious to hear about his ordeal firsthand.

As a man who had faced danger countless times before, Mekioth Sarum was unaccustomed to fear, especially when considering the outcome of his decisions. For the first time that he could remember, fear was stabbing at his soul, penetrating deeper and deeper with each warship that disappeared into the station. It was a calculated risk, he kept reminding himself. Worth the opportunity to secure the power of my lineage forever.

But the harsh reality was that Faus still lived, and it seemed inevitable that the truth of what happened over Diemnon would be revealed. The real danger was whether or not the two accounts became public knowledge, thereby pitting his own word against the much more popular Akredon's. The Council of Apostles would undoubtedly side with Akredon because of his well-known piety and devotion to the Reclaiming. At best, that scenario would raise concern over the House of Sarum's allegiance to the Emperor, and tempt the other royal families to conspire against him.

"My lord, the Emperor is waiting."

The Paladin's words turned his blood to ice. Without acknowledging, he turned and walked past the guards to make his way towards the cathedral. Behind him, the last ship of the procession taxied into docking position outside the hangar entrance. The warship was, appropriately enough, an Omen-class cruiser.

Essence Region - Crux Constellation
The Renyn System: Planet IX - Moon 4
Federal Intelligence Office Headquarters

Baer took a long pull from a cigarette, his head screaming with a vicious headache, as the men and women in the conference room stared dumbfounded at the monitors arranged high along the curved walls. Moments earlier, the scene was a cauldron of heated, vehement exchanges between politicians and military officials as they argued bitterly over how to deal with the Amarrians. There was only one point that the participants reached consensus on: Under no circumstances was news of the attack to be released until they agreed on the appropriate response. The Federation could not afford to appear weak or disorganized during wartime, not to its own citizens and certainly not to the Caldari State.

There were eight large screens in the conference room, one for each news network in the Federation. Every one of them was broadcasting the recorded camera footage of the Venture's destruction, taken from the perspective of a ship that was there when the attack occurred. With the exception of Baer and Senator Desirou, there should not have been any non-Amarrian eyewitnesses to the event that were still alive. And yet that footage—including a full audio transcript of the exchange between Senator Garrett and the Imperial Navy—was now on public display for every Gallente citizen to judge for themselves.

One of the news anchors was midway through delivering a scathing commentary on the "barbaric, unprovoked assassination of Senator Garrett" when Baer's messenger buzzed. He nearly choked when he saw who it was. Abruptly excusing himself from the room, Baer stepped outside and ran as fast as he could down the hall. Bounding into his office, he closed the door behind him, ignoring the shouted demands for an explanation by Colonel Sierto.

Taking a moment to compose himself, Baer took a seat and inserted the messenger into the desk console. The most recognizable face in the Gallente Federation appeared in a holograph before him.

"Yes, Mr. President?" Baer asked.

Domain Region - Throne Worlds Constellation
The Amarr System: Planet Oris
Emperor Family Academy Station: Saint Kuria the Prophet Cathedral

"How could you be so foolish!" Emperor Heideran demanded, flanked on either side by hooded archbishops and military advisors. "Do you realize what you've done?"

Mekioth forced himself to repress the utter contempt he felt towards Heideran. No one dared to take that tone with the Grand Admiral of the Imperial Navy. "My lord, I acted in strict accordance to the instructions you gave to me."

"You murdered a Gallente Senator!" the Emperor wheezed. "One ship, clearly immobilized and outnumbered fifty to one was no threat to your blockade, Admiral!"

The blood flowing through Mekioth's veins turned to fire, and he was slowly losing the battle to control his temper. "He was instructed to stop his engines several times, and--"

"We needed time, you fool! Time to consolidate our gains and convert the masses in the new territories to our faith! Instead you handed a formidable adversary due cause to interfere directly with the Reclaiming!"

Mekioth was about to shout, when a familiar voice called out from behind him.

"The Reclaiming grows stronger with each passing moment, Your Holiness," Faus said, walking past the mighty rows of columns behind them. "If anything, Grand Admiral Sarum has demonstrated that the strength of our conviction to God will not be deterred by butchers."

"Faus, my son!" Emperor Heideran gasped, his throne brushing against Mekioth as it floated past to meet the Commodore. The ancient man reached out with two quivering arms.

Faus leaned forward to return a delicate embrace. "It's good to see you again, Father."

"What have they done to you, son," the Emperor asked, grimacing at the sight of his mutilated face. "Who is responsible for this abomination?"

Faus took the old man's frail hand, leading his throne back up the aisle towards the altar while Mekioth looked on impassively.

"The Gallenteans," Faus answered. "With direct assistance from the Jovians. They killed our priests andn tortured me, all in a foolish attempt to force me to deny my faith...in many ways, those two despicable races make the Minmatar seem more civilized."

Faus turned away from the Emperor and approached Mekioth, standing before him at attention. "And to you, Grand Admiral Sarum, I apologize deeply. My insubordination cost me my ship, the lives of my crew, and my entire fleet. If only I had obeyed your orders to retreat from Diemnon, the Impervious would still be intact. I take full responsibility for my actions, and I am prepared to face the consequences."

Mekioth was caught off guard, and could find no words to answer him with. What are you doing, Faus? Why are you not seizing this opportunity to slay me?

"Pardoned," Emperor Heideran said, moving up the altar. "There will be no disciplinary action by order of my decree. Is that understood, Admiral?"

Mekioth decided to go along with this most unexpected turn of events. "My lord, if ever there was a test of faith so harrowing and cruel as the one that this man just passed, then who am I to question him?"

"Well spoken, Grand Admiral," Emperor Heideran said, as his throne anchored back into place at the top of the altar. "Tell me, Faus, what you think of the Admiral's decision to kill the Gallente Senator?"

"A fitting response for the murder of an Apostle," Faus answered. "They are animals, Father. Barbaric, scavenging animals that prey on the defenseless. And the Jovians! They are barely human, and not nearly as powerful as we were led to believe."

The comment surprised Emperor Heideran. "Is that so? What makes you say this?"

"Throughout my incarceration, they kept challenging my faith, insulting everything that I believe in," Faus said, looking downwards as he spoke. "They are godless creatures, Father, just like the Gallenteans...blind to

God's creation even as it surrounds them. And they are weak, so much so that I was able to kill one of my captors with surprising ease."

"You killed a Jovian?" Mekioth asked. "How did you do this?"

"They bleed as easily as any other creature. When the opportunity presented itself, a bullet was more than enough to dispatch my Jovian captor."

"So I have heard, Faus," Emperor Heideran said. "The guards on Diemnon reported how easily the slavers were able to rip the Joves to pieces, despite their cloaking technology."

"The guards also reported that you are holding prisoners," Mekioth said, his eyes narrowing. "What are you doing with them?"

"Purification," Faus answered. "Purging their demons and cleansing their souls, in preparation for their eternal service to Amarr."

Emperor Heideran chuckled. "Excellent! Faus, seeing you here now and listening to your words reinvigorates my faith. Grand Admiral Sarum, share with us now your plans for reclaiming the Jovians!"

Mekioth hesitated. "My Lord, they were completed such a short time ago, are you certain that--"

"Have you heard nothing that this man said?" Emperor Heideran interrupted. "The Jovians are much weaker than we thought! For weeks the Council has been proclaiming the urgency to purge the regions alongside our borders of the heathen Jovians and their diabolical ways. At last, we are poised to rejuvenate the Reclaiming by ridding humanity of them once and for all!"

"Grand Admiral, there has never been a better time," Faus said. "Have faith in your plans, for they will shatter the myth of Jovian power once and for all."

The influence of this man on the Emperor astounds me, Mekioth thought. One moment Amarr must consolidate her gains, the next she must expand her borders faster!

"You are so certain of this," Mekioth said, studying Faus's swollen eyes and lacerated face. "For years, the Jovians have avoided direct contact with us, revealing little of themselves or their capabilities. Yet you can stand here before us, on this very altar, and say with unquestioning faith that you believe--that you know in your very soul--that we possess the strength to reclaim them?"

Faus dropped to one knee and set his gaze on the great statue of the Prophet Kuria behind the altar upon which Emperor Heideran sat. "Mekioth, my brother, my faith has never been stronger. The Jovians will fall before the might of Amarr, embrace the Lord our Father, or be struck down mercilessly by His wrath."

Vlad forced himself to open his eyes, a simple act that required an alarming amount of exertion. After a few moments, the soldier realized that he could do little else. The slightest movement produced unbearable pain everywhere throughout his upper torso, which he actually welcomed. What terrified him was that he could feel nothing in his legs, not a single hint of sensation to indicate if they were even still attached. The markings on the ceiling above him were Amarrian, triggering the awful memory of how he had been reduced to this physical state.

The soft sound of a woman's cry filled his ears, followed by heaves of shallow breathing. Summoning as much strength as he could gather, Vlad spoke.

"Who's there?"

There was a pause as the breathing stopped. "You're not real," the quivering voice answered. "The whispers stopped hours ago."

Vlad's heart sank as he recognized Viola's voice. "It's me, Vlad...we met on Diemnon..."

"Yes...yes, I remember now. You survived..."

"Where are we? What place is this?"

"They killed everyone, except for you and I...and then Faus took us in...I don't know where we are."

A bolt of pain shot through Vlad's midsection. "Akredon? The Amarrian?"

"Yes," Viola answered. "He's...looking after us, trying to smuggle us out, to get us...help."

Vlad breathed as deeply as his punctured lungs would allow. The utter indignity of failure, he thought. What tragedy that those slavers missed the jugular in my neck.

"The Elders are lost," he gasped, staring at the markings of his mortal enemy on the ceiling. "What have we gained from all this..."

"Closure," she answered weakly. "And new beginnings all at once."

Colonel Siertro was still shouting outside of Baer's office, bellowing various threats of punishment for his abrupt departure and blatant insubordination when the door suddenly flew open.

"Back into the conference room," Baer said. "Now."

"If you're withholding information from me," Colonel Siertro started. "Then you just better consider telling me right--"

"Tilda, shut the fuck up and do what I tell you to for once," Baer snarled. "And until this knife is taken out of my back, you'd better start watching yours. Keep your mouth shut when we go back into that conference room.

Got it?"

Baer turned away from his dumbfounded boss, stormed down the hall and threw open the glass doors. As everyone inside turned their attention towards him, Baer noticed that all but two of the large screens were blackened. Of the two monitors that were still on, the President of the Gallente Federation was visible on one, and a Jovian on the other. Colonel Siertro walked in behind Baer, saw the images on the screen, and turned pale. Without saying a word, she took a seat.

"Welcome back, Lieutenant Colonel," the President started. "I'll get right to the point: The Jovians have approached us with a 'retribution' plan for the Amarrians. Senator Desirou and the late Senator Garrett have been lobbying for a similar idea, and I think you'll find their recommended course of action highly appropriate. After you, Mr. Grious."

"Thank you, Mr. President," the Jovian started. "As indicated to us earlier, your Defense Appropriations Committee overbudgeted for the ongoing war with the Caldari State. Senator Desirou and the late Senator Garrett once proposed that the surplus of military equipment be awarded to the Minmatars. On behalf of the Jovian Directorate, I am offering the full services of our armed forces in the delivery of that equipment to the rebels. I believe they will know exactly what to do with it. No additional involvement from us should be necessary."

"Excuse me," interrupted Major General Silus Bruce. "But Senator Desirou was out of place for commenting on any matters related to the war effort, and there is no surplus of equipment as far as I'm concerned. This matter is an internal affair, and I think we've got it from here."

The President's face contorted into a scowl. "General, this isn't the war room, and the Jovians are here at my personal request."

"Mr. President, with all due respect, I strongly object to allowing the Jovians to participate in these discussions, and I think that the notion of pursuing a joint operation with them is absurd."

"General Bruce, you are exactly one comment away from being asked to leave," the President growled.

"Mr. President, the Jovians have been completely absent throughout this war and removed entirely from the political process. But you're still receptive to letting them guide us right into a second war? Have you lost your mind?"

"Get out. MPs, escort the General out of that room right now!"

"I'll excuse myself," General Bruce said, getting up from his seat. "I'm not participating in this stupidity. You've all lost sight of the big picture, and it's going to come back to haunt you."

"I beg to differ," Grious said, his black eyes glaring at General Bruce through the screen. "The big picture has never been clearer."

"They are dying, my lord," the Nefantar physician whispered, nervously looking back and forth. "The blood vessels around the female's heart and brain are so constricted that ruptures are imminent; she needs medication to control her blood pressure and withdrawal symptoms, which is only available through the medical bay!"

Faus inhaled deeply, also taking a look around to make sure no one was listening. "What about the Brutor?"

"I've never seen a man take such punishment and survive," the physician said. "I removed as much of the shrapnel along his back and legs that I could, but I can't reach the deeper fragments. Both of his lungs are partially collapsed, and he's paralyzed from the waist down because of the slaver bites near his lower spine. All I could do was give him anti-infective agents, painkillers, and fluids, but that just prolongs his suffering..."

"Lucian, you have my thanks," Faus said, taking the man by the shoulders and looking him square in the eyes. "You have family in Kazna?"

The Nefantar man became confused. "My apologies, sire, but I don't understand--"

"Lucian, old friend, you've been my physician for how long now--twenty, maybe thirty years?"

"Yes, but--"

"Do you want to see your family again?" Faus tightened his grip on the man's bony shoulders, shaking him slightly. "Yes or no, Lucian! Answer me honestly!"

"Of course I do," he answered, trembling. "God help me, I miss them so..."

"Listen," Faus said. "The Emperor has commissioned a new ship for me--an Imperial Issue Apocalypse--and my last medical officer was lost with the Impervious. I have designated you as his replacement."

Faus pressed a card with the Imperial Navy insignia emblazoned on it into the man's hand. "Take this card and bring it to Deck 43 East, to the Naval Armaments Desk. Present the card, and you will be given a uniform and unrestricted access to every part of the ship. The vessel's name is the Redemption, and she's being prepped for departure this very moment."

"Is this a test of faith, my lord?"

"No, man!" Faus nearly shouted, tightening his grip and resuming his forceful whisper. "The god who made you my servant is dead to me! What I ask of you I do on my own free will, and not because some ancient text compels me to!"

The man looked both horrified and amazed all at once. The implications of what Commodore Akredon was doing were now clearly understood by the physician. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because everything in my life has been a lie," Faus answered. "And failing to recognize that earlier is something that I'll regret for the rest of my life. This single act won't atone for the evil that I willfully embraced. I've been wrong about everything, Lucian. Everything."

The Nefantar was about to speak, but Faus quickly placed a hand over his mouth. "You need to understand that there is no turning back now. If you attempt to betray me, I will destroy you. A slave's word will never win merit over my own, Lucian. Never."

Faus removed his hand. Lucian considered all of the facts quickly, like a good physician always does before committing to a decision that would have drastic consequences, regardless of the outcome.

"Tell me what I must do to see my family again."

"So then it's settled," the President said. "We'll provide you with a list of stations containing the equipment to be transported within the hour."

"Good," Grious answered. "Jovian industrials are already approaching your nation's borders and will hold until they receive final destination waypoints from you."

"Harbor Control at each of these stations will be instructed to pass your industrials through as our own Iterons," Baer said, checking his notes. "The yard engineers will load the equipment onto the re-designated industrial types and clear your departure as soon as they finish. After that..." Baer exhaled, tossing his datapad onto the table and leaning back into his seat. "...the rest is up to you."

"I would like a word with the President, Senator Desirou, and Lieutenant Colonel Gesdeneau in private, please," Grious asked, as the rest of the people in the room exchanged glances. "We have some personal matters to discuss that do not concern anyone else."

"Certainly," the President answered. "If your name wasn't mentioned by Mr. Grious, please excuse yourself and get to work on your assignments right away."

Baer watched as the group gathered their things--some with urgency, others with reluctance--and made their way towards the exits. After a few moments, Baer was alone with Senator Desirou.

"Viola Antionnes was alive as of two hours ago," Grious started. "But her physical condition was grave, and we have not been able to determine her whereabouts since. The three of you should know that it was her efforts which convinced us to intervene on behalf of the Minmatar, and that despite her imperfections, she is by far one of the most impressive individuals we have ever worked with of any race. She has...restored certain beliefs we once held about humanity. Our concern for her well-being is as sincere as your own, and we will do everything we can to return her to you safely."

Baer felt a mix of emotions assault him as the words of the mysterious Jovian set in: relief, amazement, admiration, and above all, vindication.

"You also need to know that the Elders taken to Diemnon are dead, and that a Minmatar Republic consisting of all seven united tribes will be impossible. All of the Elders representing the Starkmanir, Nefantar, and Thukker tribes are lost. We have been in direct contact with the remaining Elders, discussing with them how the weapons that you procured will be distributed. They share our sentiment for Viola Antionnes, and they asked me to relay their indebtedness to the Gallente Federation for the dedication of her talents to their cause."

"Who killed them?" Senator Desirou asked. "The prison guards?"

"It appears that the Elders were murdered either during or immediately after the riot was put down, but not by the prison guards. They did not discover the bodies until after the Valklear rescue operation was compromised."

"But then who tipped off the guards to their presence?" Baer asked, realizing the answer right after finishing the question.

"The Order," Grious answered. "Like the Ammarian priests they murdered just to incriminate Viola, the Elders on Diemnon were murdered by the Order, despite all of their visible indications that they were trying to help them."

"Wait a minute, what's this 'Order' all about?" the President asked.

"I'll brief you afterwards," Senator Desirou said. "It's the biggest state secret you'll wish you never knew about."

Baer was stunned. "Why would they do such a thing?"

"To draw the Gallente Federation into a war with the Amarr Empire," Grious answered. "The Order's immense power is a menace even to us, and yet the expansion of the Amarr Empire appears to have threatened them directly--"

Grious stopped in mid-sentence, tilting his head to one side.

"Please excuse me," the Jovian said. "We've located Viola."

Faus leapt backwards from the screen, recoiling from the image that his soul refused to accept.

"You should not be living, Grious," he stammered. "I saw you--"

"Stop. Do not tell me how I met my death, Faus," Grious warned. "In time, reanimation science will reveal itself to the other races. But until then, we will seem as demons to those who hold religion accountable for immortality."

Those beliefs are dead to me, Faus reminded himself. "I have Viola Antionnes, and the Valklear soldier known as 'Vlad'," he started.

"My notes indicate that your intent was to help them," Grious said. "Has this changed?"

Faus's head was starting to spin as he struggled with the reality of having a conversation with someone that he executed just a few hours earlier.

"Faus?"

"No...no, Grious, I'm trying to help them. But they're not doing well, and I can't get them the medical attention they need without revealing to all of Amarr what I intend to do."

Faus produced a tiny disc and inserted it into the console. Pausing for just a moment, his fingers hovered over the control that would send Grand Admiral Sarum's complete battle plans for the Reclaiming of the Jovian Directorate to Grious. Event horizon, he thought. The words he spoke to Lucian rang through his memory: No turning back. He studied his reflection on the screen for just a moment.

Amarr is dead to me. The encrypted data was transmitted.

"Read that."

Grious appeared to be reading quickly, his pale face moving back and forth in twitching motions.

"Vak'Atioth?" the Jovian asked. "When?"

"It has begun already. Warships are en route to the rally points along our side of the Geminat border. The Emperor himself has asked me to lead the attack. Right this moment, the docking gantries are being removed from my ship. Once I reach the Odebeinn rally point, my orders are to jump into the Atioth system and destroy everything in our path...your outposts, your stations, your planetary settlements, all of it."

Grious's black eyes seemed to stare through him for a moment before he spoke again. "How will you save yourself when the time comes?"

"A Nefantar physician is aboard doing what little he can to keep both Vlad and Viola alive. All I ask is for ur fleet to spare my ship until near the end, to maximize the illusion of divine leadership. When you see the cargo container jettisoned from my ship, we'll be inside," Faus took another deep breath. "And then our lives will be in your hands."

Grious continued his devious, cold stare. "My associates have just confirmed the movement of Imperial Navy warships in precise accordance with the plans that you delivered. We are convinced that you are being truthful."

"I don't know what that means anymore," Faus said, as the lines in his brow deepened. "You take what I'm telling you however you like. I'll be at Vak'Atioth within the hour."

"As will I, Faus. To give you the thanks of Jove in person after we move you to safety."

"There's one more thing I need."

"Ask, friend."

"A Minmatar battleship is stranded in the Hahyil system. Her name is the `Hellwraith'. I know they're still being hunted, and that it's just a matter of time before the Navy destroys them."

Faus thought back to the relentless attack that ship had unleashed, remembering how determined the Valklear force was to destroy the Impervious no matter what the cost. It was personal, he realized. Ship captains don't put their crews at risk like that unless it's personal.

"Please, Grious...do what you can for them."

Far below the entrance to Emperor Heideran's cathedral, powerful beams of light broke through the plane of the hangar doors and pierced the dark veil of space beyond. Behind those beams, the goliath warship Redemption--more than 1600 meters long from bow to stern--slowly began to emerge from the station. From the perch of his personal command center, Grand Admiral Mekioth Sarum admired the majestic vessel for a moment, and then turned his attention back to the holographic star map. The locations of 200 ships--the total number of vessels that his Atioth battle plan called for--were displayed as a myriad of golden dots scattered across the command center. One by one, the dots were converging on a point that sat directly on the Jovian border in Metropolis.

From here, he thought, I shall secure my family's place at the head of all tables.

Mekioth could not remember a time when he felt more certain of the outcome of a battle. The exuberance of the crews, the blessings of the Church, and the excitement of the Amarrian populace was overwhelming. And, of course, there was the irony that the man he tried to destroy would now be handing him the key to an Empire.

Perhaps I misjudged him, he thought. Or his faith blinds him so completely that he fails to consider all of the possibilities, including the unthinkable.

Fully clear of the station's main structure, the Redemption started its turn into history.

Baer found himself wandering through the great halls of the station, passing aimlessly through every section that his clearance level would allow him to. More than 26 hours had passed since he last slept. Considering the magnitude of the events he'd helped set into motion, sleep was the furthest thing from his mind.

Already there were reports of "unidentified spacecraft" arriving at various stations across the Federation, all of which were casually dismissed by government officials as the imagination of drunks. There was nothing more that could be done, except to wait and find out if the culmination of years of struggle--of proving to the Federation just how dangerous it was to ignore the evils of mankind--finally proved worthwhile.

Pausing in a great corridor lined with windows, Baer took in the majestic view of the bluish-green gas planet of Renyn-Nine and its celestial background of distant nebulae and countless stars. His thoughts kept wandering back to Viola, of the tumultuous past they shared and the differences they'd failed to reconcile until this moment, when everything they believed in hung in the balance.

I'm sorry that I ever doubted you, he thought.

Lightning fired across the blackness again, and Vlad could feel the muscles in his face reflexively wince from the pain that awakened him. Struggling past the drug-induced haze of his consciousness, Vlad managed to open his eyes.

The blurred image focused into the unmistakable outline of an older Nefantar standing above him. The man caught his cloudy stare, and then reached forward to place a gentle hand on his forehead.

"Be calm, Vlad. I'm changing your wound dressings. We're going to get you help very soon."

The Valklear warrior remembered that he was supposed to hate Amarrian corroborators. "Ne...Nefantar?"

The elder man looked up for a moment, then continued his work. "Yes."

"I once...I once killed...Nefantar traitors..." Vlad remembered the images, of his knife passing cleanly through the

necks of the men who had betrayed his tribe to the Paladins.

The man lifted a bloody bandage, tossed it to the side and then examined the wound with an electronic eyepiece.

"Traitors..." Vlad was starting to realize that hatred was all that remained for him to draw strength from

With delicate hands, Lucian began to place fresh nano-gauze strips onto the slaver wounds gouged into Vlad's abdomen. Then he asked a simple question:

"Do you have any children?"

The image of the corpses in the Diemnon mines came back, and Vlad felt pangs of sadness piercing his heart.

"...traitor..."

Lucian stopped working for a moment. "If you did, then you would understand that as a father, you would be prepared to do anything to make sure that they outlived you."

Vlad was barely clinging onto consciousness as Lucian cut away the excess strips of dressing. "Even if it meant a life of servitude. You would sell your soul, Brutor. As a father, you would understand that. You would."

The Valklear's eyes closed again. "No...not like...this..."

Lucian checked the soldier's heart rate. It was weak, but steady.

"Attention Hellwraith, this is the Jovian cruiser Listhos broadcasting from ten-fifty-nine megahertz. Do you copy, over."

Karth looked up from his haze, stared at the mangled bridge and wondered if he was hearing things.

"Hellwraith, we see that your subspace comm arrays are disabled. Please acknowledge on ten-fifty-nine megahertz, over."

The navigation officer scrambled to his feet. "Admiral, that's a radio frequency broadcast! Look!

Just a few hundred meters from where Karth was slumped over, four Jovian Phantom-class cruisers were uncloaking within plain view of the forward bridge portal.

"Hellwraith, we are here to evacuate your crew. Please respond."

The navigation officer made a conscious decision to overstep the well-defined boundaries of naval command rules. Karth saw the officer reaching for the console-based radio transceiver and became enraged. He opened his mouth to scold the man, but it was too late.

"Listhos, this is the Hellwraith," the officer said. "We are standing by to receive your assistance, over!"

"Lucian," the intercom squawked. "I'm coming in."

The cargo door seal hissed open, and Faus strode into its darkened confines.

"How are they?" he asked.

The physician was about to answer when Viola awakened with a loud shriek. "No! I have to warn him!"

Lucian moved quickly towards Viola, who was struggling against the restraints attaching her to the stretcher. He pressed his fingers into her wrist, feeling for her pulse. "Easy, Viola...don't exert yourself."

"I need to see him," she breathed. "Where is he? I know Faus is in here!"

Faus approached her, placing his hand on hers. "I'm here, Viola. It's going to be alright--"

"No, no," she gasped, hysterical. "I know who it is now, in the nightmares I have! I know who lies inside the crypt!"

It was becoming difficult for Faus to retain his composure, seeing her like this. "Viola, you need your rest, it will all be--"

"Listen to me!" she screamed. "All this time I thought the person in there was me, all those times when I was pulled inside, but now I know it's not me at all, and I'm scared of what they'll do once I tell him!"

"Shhh...be still, Viola," Faus said, feeling such strong compassion for her that it was nearly unbearable. "It will be over soon, we're going to get you some help..."

"The demons! Can't you hear them? They're whispering again, Faus, they don't want you to know..."

"Don't want me to know what, Viola?"

"They don't want you to know it's you. All this time... you."

Faus stood on the bridge of the Redemption, observing the perfect formation of Imperial warships stretched across a staggered line nearly sixty kilometers long. His bridge officers stood at rigid attention by their posts, while junior officers in the trenches below him remained fixed on the screens before them. This is their great moment, Faus thought. Men who dreamed of the day when they would serve under command of the greatest Navy hero in Amarrian history. Paladins whose faith in God blinds them to the fact they are following the orders of a fallen angel, of a traitor whose betrayal will eclipse all others in the history of our race.

Though outnumbered two to one, the Jovian fleet amassed directly across from them remained motionless. Defiant, Faus thought, repressing the urge to smile. Daring us to strike first. Those Jovians have much more heart and emotion than the Empires give them credit for.

"Weapons!" Faus commanded. On this day, God will abandon Amarr's side....

"Yes, my lord!"

...and stand firm with the Minmatar.

"Assign turrets one through seven, radio crystals, designate target Omega-One!"

"Target Omega-One locked!"

Faus allowed himself a smile. "For the Emperor!"

The entire bridge replied in emboldened unison. "For the Emperor!"

For Viola, Faus thought. For restoring my sight.

"Fire!"

Omega

"Some look back at the worlds we lost, at the places where great cathedrals once stood, and grieve for the glory that could have been. To them I say this: Reclaim your faith. As God is my witness, those worlds which were taken from us shall be ours again, and on holy ground I shall build cathedrals that no heathen can tear down!"

Jamyl Sarum, Amarr Succession Trials, 23342 AD

"Civilization looks away while we deploy ships to guard borders beyond which Minmatar slaves still toil for Amarrian masters. How else are we to interpret this complacency as anything but indifference? How long are we to exercise restraint, in accordance to your definition of decency, while this evil is allowed to exist?"

Karvour Thorel, Brutor Representative to the Minmatar Republic Council, CONCORD Assembly, 23343 AD

Essence Region - Crux Constellation
The Renyn System
Unknown deep space location

Baer emerged from the shuttle ramp into an alien world that inspired him with fear and awe. The massive cavern was host to dozens of Jovian warships, suspended or perched in docking bays that reminded him of larvae inside a great insect hive. Every structure had a distinctively organic appearance; there were no sharp angles or defined edges to any surface that he could see. If not for the pinpoints of navigation beacons and soft glow of idling ion engines, the vista would disappear into a darkish-green labyrinth of endlessly spiraling curves and ridges. The entire base seemed to breathe as if it was one, single living organism.

Almost, Baer thought, like a slumbering beast.

"Come this way, please," said one of the Jovian guards waiting at the bottom of the ramp.

Baer hustled the rest of the way down to catch up. The two guards studied him for a moment before turning towards the main structure.

"What station is this?" Baer asked, craning his neck to follow the path of a frigate docking high above him. "The shuttle didn't jump through any stargates..."

"Not a station," Grious said, emerging from the opposite side of the walkway. "A mothership. This one just returned from Vak'Atioth to collect the remaining industrials in Gallente space. Then it will depart for Amarrian territories to assist with the armament of Minmatar rebels."

Baer blinked. This hangar is inside a ship?

"We must hurry," the Jovian said, motioning with his arm. "The commanders want to move as soon as the jump drive capacitors are fully recharged."

Baer followed Grious into the structure as a door sealed behind them. He was making every effort not to stare at the Jovian's pitch-black eyes.

"How is Viola?"

"Alive," the Jovian answered. "And in the process of being transferred to medical personnel at the Renyn F.I.O. base, under the direct supervision of Senator Desirou."

"What is her condition?"

Grious paused for a moment as the door reopened to a darkened chamber with several views of space. Baer was not even aware they had been moving. "Physically, we did everything we could. But I suspect the emotional wounds will take much longer to heal."

Baer's heart sank. "Do you think she'll ever recover?"

"For now, let us focus on what we know for certain," Grious answered, walking to the middle of the chamber. A holographic image of an Imperial Navy battle line formation filled the entire space of the room. Baer could see hundreds of the gold-tinted Amarrian warships facing down a much smaller group of Jovian ships. An Imperial Issue Apocalypse-class battleship was firing its tachyon beams towards them.

"This is how it began," Grious said. The stationary image panned back so that Baer could see the beams striking a Jovian cruiser. "The name of the ship firing those tachyons is the Redemption, commanded by Commodore Faus Akredon. These were the opening shots of the engagement, and the signal for our own forces to begin their attack."

The battle imagery moved quickly, playing forward at five times normal speed. Baer flinched as an enormous, bright green beam sliced through the room, passing directly in front of where he was standing and slamming into an Apocalypse. His stomach turned to ice as the beam--at least 80 meters in diameter, in his estimation--passed cleanly through the massive battleship.

Grious paused the image and zoomed in on the doomed vessel. Green fire was erupting along the seams where the beam was exiting through the hull. "Observe, Lieutenant Colonel, that the use of this weapon was not required to establish battlefield superiority. We want you to have this imagery in case Emperor Heideran attempts to suppress the truth of what really happened at Vak'Atioth."

The image panned back again and resumed play. Baer had to cover his eyes as explosion after explosion blossomed beneath the awesome destructive power of the Jovian superweapon.

"I understand," Baer said. "What of Faus Akredon? Is he alright?"

"We do not know for certain, but we fear the worst for him," Grious answered. "Observe the following sequence of events."

Baer could see that the Amarrian formation was breaking apart. As battleship hulls engulfed in flames drifted away from the main line, many of the remaining ships were turning away from the Jovian attacks and attempting to escape.

"Keep your eyes on the Redemption," Grious said as the image focused on the Imperial Issue Apocalypse. The gun turrets on the mighty battleship were firing at Jovian warships when it was suddenly hit by several white beams.

"Oh, no..." Baer breathed. "Did the Amarrians fire those shots?"

Grious remained silent as the image panned back. Baer watched in horror as several Amarrian warships turned against the Redemption, hitting the battleship from close range with multispectral laser fire.

"We know that just before this attack occurred, there was some kind of disagreement between Emperor Heideran and Grand Admiral Sarum," Grious said. "It appears that conversation triggered a mutiny aboard the Redemption."

The image froze and then zoomed all the way in to a close up view of the Redemption's midline superstructure. The windowed frames of several decks were plainly visible. "Focus on the portals while I play the footage at normal speed," Grious instructed.

Alternating flashes were illuminating the window frames on several decks. Baer cringed, recognizing immediately that he was watching a running gun battle on board the Redemption. Suddenly, an explosion from inside the ship blew out several of the portals. Dozens of bodies were tumbling through the gaps into space.

"Dear God," Baer muttered, turning away from the image. "He told them, didn't he..."

"That, or he was betrayed by the Order," Grious answered. "We may never know."

The image panned back again, and Baer saw a container eject from one of the battleship's cargo bays.

"Right after the explosion, this container was jettisoned. We were then faced with a difficult choice: Faus instructed us not to destroy the Redemption until this explicit point in time, with the understanding that he would be aboard the container. But after observing the mutiny, we could no longer be certain of his safety. Then the Amarrians made the decision for us."

The Redemption's turrets abruptly turned towards the tiny container and opened fire, narrowly missing. Three Phantoms uncloaked, shielding the fragile structure from a torrent of multispectral pulse fire directed by nearby Amarrian cruisers.

A bright green beam impaled the Redemption, and the Phantoms and container both disappeared.

"Faus Akredon was not inside," Grious said. "Only Viola, the last surviving Valklear from the Diemnon raid, and a Nefantar physician were onboard. It is highly probable that Faus was dead before the Redemption's guns attempted to destroy them."

Baer shuddered as the Redemption exploded in a blinding flash, its shattered remnants hurling towards the murky atmosphere of the planet below.

"Who was the Nefantar on board?"

"A medical practitioner named Lucian, one of Faus's most trusted servants. We are honoring his wish to be

transferred to the Kazna System. He asked that you be given information on his whereabouts, with the condition that it not be shared with anyone."

"And the Valklear?"

"Currently in surgery to restore the use of his legs," Grious answered. "We are in awe of his physical conditioning. Nothing else explains his survival, and I intend to monitor his recovery closely."

Baer watched the final explosions of the epic battle, unable to deny feeling pity for the Amarrian crews as the brutal slaughter came to an end. The Jovian fleet flew back towards their deadly mothership, leaving behind a graveyard of charred wreckage ominously set against the backdrop of distant nebulae tinted the color of blood. As the burning remnants of Imperial dominance fell towards the roiling atmosphere of Vak'Atioth I, Baer realized that the memory of this fateful event--a miracle for some, a nightmare for others--would become a legend, never to be forgotten.

"We will keep you informed of the armament operation's progress," Grious said as the holographic imagery disappeared. "The first rebellions are intended to draw the bulk of the Paladin invasion force away from the Hror System and scatter their divisions throughout their Empire. By then, the Minmatars will be ready to take Eanna back from Amarr, and we will lend our assistance to the rebuilding process if the remaining Elders wish it."

Baer looked at the mysterious Jovian and studied his alien-like features, wondering what secrets the man knew. "Will the Jovians ever send official representation to any of the governments?"

"No," Grious said, handing Baer a small disk. "The war against the Order demands all of our efforts. And to restrict their manipulation of power within the races, we are going to withdraw from the Geminata and Vale of the Silent regions. Then we will destroy the stargates bridging faction space with our own."

Baer was stunned. "You're going to withdraw and destroy the gates?"

"Amarr's thirst for power is far too easy for the Order to exploit. This is the only way to remove that option from them, and to ensure they can no longer use us in their schemes against you."

"But what is their motive?" Baer asked. "What do they want from us?"

Grious thought for a moment before answering. "Their interest lies in reshaping the course of mankind according to their own design."

"Their design?" Baer said, angered. "Why not just conquer us outright by use of force?"

"Because they desire for you to embrace them on your own free will," Grious replied.

"And they hope to accomplish this by forcing us into wars with each other?" Baer scoffed.

"If need be, yes," Grious answered.

Baer was deeply troubled by the answers that Grious was giving him. "But waging war against something so powerful--"

"They are not without weaknesses," Grious said. "But for now, all we can do is work to thwart their efforts at operating within the empires as best we can."

Baer turned his weary gaze towards one of the portals, staring into the endless expanse of space surrounding the colossal Jovian mothership.

"Evil with no boundaries," he murmured. "From within and without, everywhere and nowhere. How can we face this enemy without your help?"

"By finding the strength to face the evil within first," Grious answered.

Ruthless

An EVE Online Novella
By
Tony Gonzales

Chapter One In The Depth Of Space



C8 - CHY VII: "Drenali Seven"
Fade Region
Kaurikou Junction

Counting the blue pills and exile packs for the third time, Vilamo reflected on how much he hated himself for what he was doing. He sealed each of the plastic bags and placed them inside his jacket pocket, pausing to take a long look at the Rist-11 on the counter. He despised guns, and had never handled one before getting involved in this ugly business. But it no longer mattered what his personal distastes were. Those needed to be set aside in order to survive. He tucked the weapon into his belt, making sure the heavy jacket concealed it. Opting for warmth instead of weapon accessibility, Vilamo buttoned the coat right up to his neck. As dangerous as this line of work was, he had yet to find himself in a situation that required him to even draw the sidearm. Besides that, it was -10 degrees Celsius outside. The odds of trouble were slim on a bitter day like this.

Walking outside of the decrepit tenement building that he called home, Vilamo passed by a homeless couple huddled over a small fire in the street. Their faces were expressionless, as if beyond despair and far past the point of feeling sorry for themselves. It was a reminder to Vilamo that the sale of the drugs in his jacket pocket was imperative. The rent was due in just a few hours, and currently there wasn't enough money in his account to cover it. He knew that if he missed that payment, Ishukone Watch agents would evict him immediately, and electronically seal the door to his own apartment before giving him or his son a chance to gather their belongings.

As always, the contact was anonymous, and the location was in one of the most dangerous sections of Kaurikou Junction. Vilamo had done this enough times already to know that the client was a corporate-type from the wealthy section, where all the city officials and Ishukone reps lived. They always seemed to pick the darkest parts of town to meet in, presumably to minimize the chances of being discovered by their own peers. Vilamo felt the bitter cold pierce through his layers of clothing as he walked past another group of shivering homeless people. No one had any business being outdoors on a day like this, unless you couldn't afford to be indoors. Or, Vilamo thought, if you happen to have a nasty drug habit.

One of the planet's 200 atmosphere scrubbers loomed beyond the city's skyline, a solitary mountain of metal surrounded by a vast expanse of snow and ice. It took almost one hundred years to terraform this icicle, Vilamo thought, and look at all the good it's done. Vilamo shook his head while crossing the street, avoiding a Snow Cat rumbling by from the opposite direction. Ishukone had bet that the vast deposits of heavy metals beneath Drenali Seven's thick shell of ice were the only source of such commodities in the Fade Region. When the planet's atmosphere had finally become breathable and industrial-scale mining operations took hold on the surface, Kaurikou Junction became the premier economic hub for Ishukone operations in the region.

Miners, entrepreneurs, bio-engineers, and construction specialists flocked to Kaurikou by the thousands, shuttling back and forth to various planet-side project sites and orbital stations. Ishukone's massive investment soon

began yielding huge returns, and the business opportunities for new arrivals seemed limitless. But the bubble had burst much sooner than anyone anticipated, and the consequences were disastrous. Astrogeologists employed by Ishukone's competitors discovered equally abundant sources of heavy metals in adjacent constellations. The reality uncovered by science was that the entire region was, in ancient times, the site of a dense nebula where supernova explosions and the heavy elements they fused were commonplace. As more deposits were discovered, the price of the commodities plummeted, and the costs of maintaining operations on Kaurikou quickly outpaced revenues.

Ishukone responded by scaling everything back, stopping just short of abandoning the system completely. Now, the only ships that landed in Kaurikou were police vessels and the occasional supply ship. The Fade Region's immense distance from Empire space accelerated the economic collapse of the Drenali System. With the prospectors and venture capitalists gone, all planet-side projects were placed on standby or cancelled outright. Soon afterwards, people could no longer afford to hire transports to get them off the planet, let alone out of the system.

As was typical with Caldari society, Ishukone's decisions for Drenali Seven were based purely on numbers, not conscience. The corporate philosophy was applied equally to both the pursuit of risk, and the retreat from it. Thus, Ishukone offered neither aid nor comfort to the contractors affected by the radical turn of events. The risk of failure while pursuing success was an accepted reality of Caldari culture, and so Ishukone was neither obliged nor compelled to adhere with the welfare principles of Empire space.

Vilamo Gariushi, an expert geologist and engineer by background, was one of the hundreds of thousands of people who were now faced with a struggle for existence. His story was no more or less tragic than all of the others living in Kaurikou Junction. When asked by an Ishukone senior officer for an estimate regarding an excavation project with an impossible deadline, Vilamo had made the mistake of responding with an honest answer. An executive mandate so obtuse could only have come from someone who knew very little about the realities of mining through several kilometers of ice. But the officer could not be bothered with such mundane "academic" concerns, and quickly replaced Vilamo with someone who would tell him exactly what he wanted to hear.

Reputation is everything in Caldari society, and the major corporations that exist within its rigid cultural framework have zero tolerance for pessimism in the workplace. Vilamo now had an official reputation as someone who couldn't think large enough to suit corporate ambitions, and was effectively ostracized from Ishukone and every other corporation operating in the Drenali system. His great gamble for success had failed miserably and became his complete undoing, culminating with the tragic death of his wife in an industrial accident and the bitter estrangement of his daughter as a result. All that remained of the family that he brought to Kaurikou Junction was his son Otro, who looked to his father to help him make sense of the cruel world around them ever since.

Walking around the corner of a building, an icy breeze made Vilamo wince. Otro still has a chance, he thought, tilting his head downwards as he walked into the wind. His son was now 16 years old, intellectually gifted and ambitious. Otro aspired to join the Caldari Navy, and had a fighting chance of being accepted into the School of Applied Science. The tuition was enormous, but Vilamo always allayed Otro's concerns and encouraged him to pursue whatever he desired. Failing his son was not an option. Vilamo was prepared to do whatever was necessary to provide Otro with everything he needed to succeed. That meant taking extra care to ensure that Otro avoided making the mistakes that he did, the greatest of which was placing his complete faith in the Caldari State.

Someday I'll tell him, when he's old enough to understand, Vilamo thought as he turned left towards an enclosed courtyard. He couldn't bear the thought of disappointing his son the way he had disappointed his wife and daughter. The irony was that Vilamo now depended on that which the Caldari State wanted him to hate--the Guristas Cartel--for his salvation. It was the Guristas who took him in as a dealer and saw his academic credentials as an asset, using Vilamo as a contact for wealthier clients because of his refined manners and intellect. The Guristas hated the Caldari State for all the same reasons that Vilamo now did, and he found the shared resentment comforting. But he could not, would not, tell his son that he planned to finance the boy's dream of becoming a starship captain through the sale of illegal drugs. Vilamo's handler, a Guristas member known only as "Gavriel", swore very sincerely to uphold that request. It still amazed him that these men--these "criminals" --had become the only people in his life that he could trust. Are we really villains, Vilamo thought as he jumped up and down to stay warm, or just honorable men who respect each other's right to exist?

The hovercar passed by twice, as it always did, before stopping to let out a small passenger covered head to toe in winter clothing. A much larger figure emerged from the other door and stood by the car, keeping Vilamo in a clear line of sight. A light snow started to fall, with the occasional gust kicking up powder that stung Vilamo's face. The shorter figure walked deliberately forward and stopped about five meters in front of him, shifting weight from foot to foot.

"Blue stars...red...stars..." The client was female, and she was trying to remember the phrase that Gavriel had instructed her to speak. Vilamo could tell from her accent that she was corporate, that she was new at this, and that she was already dragged out of her mind.

"I think you mean `Blue stars burn the hottest, and red stars grow the largest," said Vilamo. "Then I'm supposed to say `The blue will die young, but the red have grown old.'" He focused his eyes on her, but kept her companion in his peripheral vision.

"Yeah! B-l-l-l-lue stars, they're my fa-a-a-vorite," she answered, looking straight up and trying to catch snowflakes with her tongue. Vilamo wanted to end this nonsense as quickly as possible.

"Who's your friend over there?" he asked. "That's C-r-r-o-w-la, my m-m-b-o-d-yguard," she slurred. "He likes the b-l-l-l-u-e stars, too." She took one step forward. The bodyguard did the same.

"So you know why you're here?" Vilamo asked, squinting through another icy gust of wind.

She shifted dreamily back and forth, with a vacant smile on her face. "You...have a-a-a-all the stars!" swinging her arms out for expression.

"Yes, thirty blue pills and six exile packs, as ordered." Raising one hand over his head to get the attention of the bodyguard, Vilamo slowly reached with the other hand inside his jacket and gently pulled out the plastic bag. The bodyguard had his own coat unbuttoned now.

The client's eyes opened wide when she saw the "stars". "Yum! Gimme, gimme, gimme!" she clumsily lunged forward for them, catching her balance just in time as Vilamo stepped backwards.

"Ah, ah, ah, you have to pay for these," Vilamo said. His heartbeat accelerated as another hovercar drove past the courtyard, but then calmed down after it continued by without stopping.

"I-s-s-s-k...I'll give you lots o' i-s-s-k for the stars..." she reached into her coat pocket. Vilamo's eyes involuntarily widened. She caught his expression and pulled the wallet out quickly, pointing it at him as if it were a gun. Vilamo's face went pale and his heart stopped for a moment.

"Bang bang!" she exclaimed, then began laughing. Vilamo was not amused.

"That's 25,000 isk," he said through clenched teeth. "If you'll please wire the funds." Following the same routine as before with the bodyguard, Vilamo reached into his jacket for his wallet. The device was set to `proximity' and could already detect the client's wallet online.

"Two-o-o....F-i-v-e...Z-e-e-e-r-o..." she fumbled with the tiny keypad. Vilamo was about to lose his patience, but regained his composure as the wallet display confirmed receipt of payment to the Guristas corporate account, followed by an automatic transfer of 2,500 isk to his own personal account. He smiled. The rent would be paid on time, and the next sale would complete the first tuition installment for the School. Vilamo reached out with the package, and she seized it.

"M-m-m-mine!" she said, clasping it to her chest and tearing open the plastic.

"It certainly is now," he answered, pocketing the wallet. "Good day." And with that comment, he walked past her towards the street, away from the courtyard.

"Hey mister!" she called after him. Vilamo was reluctant to acknowledge her, but decided to anyway. It was snowing harder now, and the wind was making it more difficult to see.

"Yes?"

"What kind of stars do y-o-o-u like?" An empty exile pack fell from her hand into the snow. Damn, he thought. That's an awful big hit for a girl her size. The bodyguard started walking briskly towards her.

"What kind of stars do I like?" he repeated again.

"Yeah! What kind of s-t-a-a-r-z-z..." Her head was tilted downward, but she was looking up at him with a strange smile on her face. One hand was in the same coat pocket she had drawn her wallet from.

Vilamo answered without thinking, just wanting to go home. The bodyguard suddenly broke into an all-out sprint.

"Red," he said.

"Wrong answer!" she exclaimed, raising her hand suddenly. Vilamo thought she had pulled her wallet out again, but something didn't look quite right. The bodyguard shouted a warning just as Vilamo saw a bright flash and heard a sharp crack. He never felt the 10-millimeter slug slam into his chest and explode through his back. Instead, he thought it was strange how the girl suddenly dropped from his view, and how warm it had just become despite the snow that was now falling directly onto his face.. In his final moment, he remembered how much he missed his wife and thought of her beautiful smile, and focused on that gentle image as the light outside faded to blackness.

"What the fuck just happened?" screamed Gavriel, as he watched the snow and ice around Vilamo Gariushi's corpse turn crimson.

"Gavriel, what's your status," came a terse response through the earpiece. Unzooming the scope for a wider view, he saw the bodyguard quickly disarm the woman and begin hurrying her towards the idling hovercar. He trained the crosshairs on her, trying very hard not to shake.

"Nest, this is Gavriel, flash morgue, repeat, flash morgue, permission to return fire," he responded. "Flash morgue" told the dispatcher that one of their own was just fired upon and was presumed dead. The bodyguard had lifted the woman up onto his shoulder and was now running towards the car, and had maybe 15 meters of open courtyard to cross before reaching it. Gavriel moved the crosshairs to the vehicle's rear, where the fuel cells were.

A different voice spoke through the earpiece. "The woman fired the shot?" The Nest was looking at the exact same view that Gavriel was through the riflescope.

"Affirmative, Nest," he breathed, wishing so badly to hear the words that would allow him to squeeze the trigger just a little bit harder.

"Permission denied, Gavriel. Stand down."

He couldn't believe what he had just heard. "Say again?" The bodyguard practically threw the girl into the back of the car and slammed the door shut.

"She walks, Gavriel. Stand down." He kept the crosshairs trained on the car until the view was obscured by a building. Then, he lost his temper.

"God damnit, Nest! She just blew him away and you're going to let her walk?"

A third voice now came through the earpiece, and it was one that he knew well. "The order stands. Pack up your gear and report back to base. We have another assignment for you, and your other pushers will be covered by different handlers."

Gavriel was incredulous. "Bane, I don't understand."

"I know about Vilamo's son," the voice said. Some people were starting to gather around the bloody corpse. In just a few more moments, Ishukone Watch officers would arrive at the scene, and they would know that a handler was nearby. He quickly began to dismantle the rifle.

Bane's voice continued. "We're going to make this right, Gavriel. You have to trust me."

He took one last look at Vilamo Gariushi's corpse before leaving the apartment. That dead man lying in the snow down there trusted me.

Trust had always been a risky venture in Fade.

As tumultuous as their relationship was at times, Otro Gariushi viewed his father as the rock upon which his own comprehension of the world was built. Otro had already seen plenty of hardship for his young years, so much so that he considered himself well conditioned for the worst possible outcome of any situation. His father had taught him to be resilient in the face of adversity, which was the key to survival under the harshest of circumstances. As the vague memories of his mother and sister melted away over the years, the two gradually formed a strong bond that included a reliance on each other for predictability. Each knew the other's schedules and routines as well as his own. Otro had his prep classes to attend, and his father had his erratic work schedule with Ishukone. Any kind of deviation from plans by either of them was noted well in advance, which Otro understood as necessary because of the dangers that lurked in the part of Kaurikou Junction they lived in.

So when two men that Otro had never seen before appeared at the door of their apartment at the precise time when he expected his father to return home, the darkest cloud that he had ever known descended upon him. Trying his best not to be distracted by the fear and dread that was now on the verge of engulfing him, Otro silently made his way to where his father kept a gun for home defense.

The door chime buzzed a second time. "Otro, I know you are there," the taller, older looking one said. Keeping his eyes on the view screen in the kitchen, he fumbled with the ammunition clip of the weapon before finally slamming it into place. "We mean you no harm, Otro. But I'm afraid that we have bad news, and we don't have very much time to discuss it."

Otro didn't say a word, but crouched behind the kitchen counter, keeping the gun pointed straight at the door. He watched the two men nod to each other, and then the shorter one pulled a small card from his coat and inserted it into the keypad lock. To Otro's brief amazement, the taller one plugged a small device into a socket

implanted at the base of his skull.

"Otro, you have to trust me," said the taller one, whose deep, raspy voice continued to resonate throughout the apartment as before, only now his lips were not moving. Otro realized that the visitor was a starship captain.

"What I have to tell you would best be told face to face," the pilot said. The shorter man held a device to the door, and then nodded again to the taller one. "Man to man, as your father would have wanted." Tears began to flood down Otro's face. The realization of what the stranger was about to say was just too overwhelming, and he struggled to keep the gun steady.

"It is as you fear, Otro. Your father was murdered today, and we came here to protect you from his killers."

Otro turned away from the entrance and sat with his back against counter, sobbing heavily. He heard the door to the apartment slide open, but he did not care. The shorter man entered first, very cautiously, with his weapon drawn and pointed at the counter behind which Otro sat grieving. The elder pilot followed, and spoke again using his voice.

"I know the pain well, and the anger that will soon follow it. But now, in this very instant, you have a decision to make. You can either come with us, and we will give you a new life and a chance to continue pursuing your dreams, or you can take your chances here, alone."

Otro looked through his tears at the gun still in his hand. There was really only one thing he wanted to know. "How...how do I know it wasn't you?" he stammered.

"I can show you proof, but now is not the time. You can either trust me, or I can leave. I know this is not fair to you, but fairness is not something that you or your father have been accustomed to. You now have exactly 30 seconds to make up your mind, after which you're on your own."

Otro turned the gun around and placed the barrel against his own forehead. It seemed a sensible choice, given the hopelessness of his life. He placed his thumb on the front of the trigger and began to push ever so slightly.

"When I was expelled from the Caldari Navy, I thought about doing that," the elder man said. Otro's thumb froze where it was. "Had I made that choice, I would have denied myself the privilege of being able to lead a meaningful life by helping good men like your father, and now, yourself as well."

Otro's actions were involuntary, and his survival instincts took control. With a sudden gasp, he released his thumb and dropped the gun onto his lap.

"Five more seconds," the elder said.

Otro tossed the gun away from him, along the tiled floor and beyond the counter's edge. As he watched it slide, a boot came down and stopped its momentum. Looking up, he saw the shorter man lowering a weapon of his own. His expression betrayed a kind of resigned sorrow that Otro's young instincts sensed was genuine. Then the stranger reached out towards Otro with his hand.

"Get up," he said.

Otro reached out, and with a solid grip and a strong jolt was hoisted to his feet.

Chapter Two

Hidden Mementos

10 years later
Mara System
Lonetrek Region
Ishukone Watch Vessel IWV-35G15 "Trevani"

Ever so gently, she pushed aside the silk sheets and lifted her toned legs over the side of the bed. Her client was snoring loudly, and did not stir as she quietly slipped a loose-fitting robe over her shoulders and tied it just below the navel. Careful not to knock over the empty spirits bottle on the desk, she sat down at the console and placed her thumb on the ID pad. She smiled as the screen displayed the balance information for both her own personal and corporate account. Recent deposits from the other madams under her employ were apparent, and the man still snoring on the bed had dutifully transferred the correct fee for the services rendered last evening.

She had wondered for her entire life what it would be like to possess such wealth and financial independence. Ironical--but hardly surprising, she thought to herself, that it was gained by practicing the oldest profession known to mankind. "Mankind" indeed. It was such a ridiculous word, and doubly insulting that it was used to describe humankind inclusively. Men were so predictable, so needy, and so pathetically vulnerable to exploitation. She looked down at her breasts, still firm and irresistible after all these years. So many secrets were betrayed to her as men rested upon them. The stuff of treason, greed, ambition and guilt, all told to her either directly or otherwise as they used her to fulfill a need that all their power failed to satisfy.

The man on the bed mumbled something in his sleep that she had heard elsewhere before. "Raven", he said, turning onto his side and resuming snoring. This one was an Ishukone VIP, part of their secretive Research and Development Division. Scientists are so easy, she thought, browsing through the directory that he had carelessly left open from the night before, when he was seduced as he worked. Ah, a project named "Raven". It was a presentation of some sort, and her photographic memory began absorbing the data scrolling past her blue eyes. Phrases she did not understand, such as "long range standoff and suppression platform" and "hyper advanced gravimetric tracking and guidance systems", she would commit to memory for research later on. Another abrupt snort from the scientist distracted her concentration, prompting her to carefully shut down the console. She was at the capacity of what she could accurately remember, and there was no reason to push her luck.

Adjusting the robe so that a healthy portion of her breasts were exposed, she exited the scientist's cabin and walked into the hallway. The galley would be an ideal place to record her thoughts to datapad over a drink, and perhaps a long-limbed roe. Even bad sex made her hungry, and besides, the bill was on the scientist's expense account. As she walked barefoot down the hall, she paused along a stretch of large windows to admire the view of space, ignoring a pair of jaw-dropped crewmembers gawking at her. Setting her gaze on a star-studded nebula outside, she suddenly felt very proud of what she had accomplished with her life. The madams who reported to her all had three things in common: Stunning natural beauty, undeniable sensuality, a sharp memory, and origins in repressive poverty. Today, each of them was wealthier than they ever thought possible, and had accomplished this solely by targeting men's egos and infiltrating their minds. They understood that since the beginning of time, men too easily mistook offers of flesh for admiration, and intimacy for trust. She smiled broadly again, running her finger along the bright edges of the nebula. Appease a man's ego, she thought, and his soul belongs to you.

Flashing a dismissive "caught you looking" glance at the crewmembers, she resumed her stroll towards the galley. Suddenly, the hallway was illuminated with a bright, bluish light, and she was violently knocked off her feet. Landing hard on the arm that she extended to break her backward fall, she could feel the bones in her wrist



snap from the impact. Just as she opened her mouth to scream in pain, a simultaneous blinding flash and deafening noise sent her cowering to the floor in agony. She was stunned, and temporarily unable to see clearly or hear. Eyes wide with fear and confusion, and for the time being not feeling the scorching pain in her forearm, she felt her way along the floor towards a bulkhead wall and tried to get back to her feet. She could feel a pair of hands assist her, and then spin her around. Her vision was slowly coming back, albeit with floating green spots partially obscuring her sight, and she could barely make out the panicked face of one of the crewmembers she noticed before. He was shouting something, and gradually his voice became audible enough to hear what he was trying to tell her.

"...is under attack! Do you understand? You have to get to the cargo area as fast as you can! Move!" She became vaguely aware of other people rushing past her down the hallway, which was now tinted a hazy red from the emergency lighting and smoke. The crewman noticed the bewildered look on her face and shouted at her to follow the rest of the crowd down the hall. The ringing in her ears was disorienting, but she suddenly understood the extreme danger that she was in and staggered past him.

~

Otro willed the comm channel with the crippled ship open again just as the shockwave from the last explosion dissipated.

"Ishukone Watch vessel, this is your final warning. You have exactly 10 seconds to jettison your cargo. If you fail to comply, I'm going to kill you and every other living thing on that ship."

"If it's money that you want, we can negotiate this," replied the Ishukone captain. Otro could hear the trembling in his voice. "I can offer--"

"The only thing that you can offer me that I don't already have is your cargo," Otro answered, taking the time to have his ship's missile launchers reloaded. "And the only chance that you have to survive is by jettisoning it."

"H-H-How do I know that you'll keep your--"

"You don't. Ten seconds." Otro saw Gavriel's Scorpion-class battleship move closer to the crippled Ishukone ship, still maintaining its onslaught of electronic and propulsion jamming systems.

"50 million," cried the desperate Ishukone captain. "Or even 100 million! Please!"

"Five seconds," said Otro.

"Wait! Wait! Alright, here, standby for jettison..."

~

The ringing in her ears had subsided just enough so that she could hear intermittent whimpering and sobs from the other terrified passengers. They had been standing within the pressurized confines of a cargo container for a few moments now, and there was just enough lightning inside to make out the contour of its sloped walls. With her left arm shattered and in grievous pain, she was completely incapable of keeping her robe tied. The scientist that she had slept with earlier was standing by the container entrance, wearing nothing but his boxer shorts.

"You see, Mila?" he shouted, catching her confused glare. He appeared crazed, and was shaking uncontrollably. "It's just a matter of how quickly you want to die!"

"What do you mean?" Other passengers started looking at him.

"You can either die a slow death as their prisoner," he said, gesturing towards the back of the container. "Or you can die instantly when they destroy the ship!" He backed through the entrance so that he was on the ship's side of the door.

"What the hell are you talking about?" she demanded, taking a painful step towards the entrance. "Who's 'they'?"

"Guristas pirates!" he answered. Amber-colored warning lights began flashing around the door. "You see, I knew there was a good chance this would happen! They've been hitting this constellation like crazy lately! Why do you think I spent practically everything I had to hire you for one night?" he asked, just as the door began to close. "Ishukone sent me on a death mission, and I didn't want to die a virgin!"

"Pirates?" she nearly yelled as the door sealed. Mila had experienced such acute dread just one other time in her life. The other passengers began to panic, and some even started banging on the sealed container entrance. An ominously loud, metallic-mechanical noise reverberated throughout the container. Momentary weightlessness followed by an abrupt switchover to artificial gravity left most of the passengers on their backsides. Some of them became violently sick, throwing up all over themselves. Mila found herself unable to stop staring at the

single porthole in the container. The image of the ship she was just aboard rotated diagonally across the window twice.

It would not appear a third time.

~

"That was for making me repeat myself," said Otro, steering his ship towards the debris field where the Ishukone captain's pod was a moment earlier. There would be a corpse floating in its midst that he wanted to keep as a trophy. "Gavriel, are our guests on board?"

"Affirmative," came the reply.

"Then I'll see you at Forward-Six."

"Roger that. Out."

~

Three hours later
Forward-Six
Guristas Deep Space Observation Platform
Tribute Region

Mila vaguely became aware of the fact that she was no longer unconscious. She remembered the flash and cacophony of metallic pings and thuds as the cargo container was peppered with debris from the ship's explosion. She could remember the panic, the pain in her arm, and the warning that someone had shouted to cover their nose and mouth, and of seeing the wisps of gas enter the container through the vents. The confusing part, she realized, was that although her eyes were open, she could not see. Most people count on their eyes to provide their primary sense, and Mila was no exception. The human mind instinctively runs through a checklist of available senses whenever primary sensory input is denied. For Mila, hearing was next on that list, but she could hear nothing. The same results were produced again with her smelling, and then with touch: Nothing. It was as if she had been completely detached from herself. The excruciating pain that she should have felt in her arm was no longer there. In fact, she could not even feel her arms, or any of her other extremities.

She could, however, taste the saliva in her mouth. And, she could sense--barely--that she was swallowing it, and that she was also somehow able to breathe. But it was just enough sensory information to make her realize two things: That she was still alive, and that she was completely helpless.

"State your name," a voice said, as if it came from directly inside her mind. The sound terrified her, and her brain reflexively sent instructions to limbs that were either no longer there, or had become unresponsive to her commands.

"Where am I?" she responded. She could feel her mouth moving, but couldn't hear her own words.

"Far away from anyone that can help you," came the response. It was a machine's voice. "It is just you and I, isolated here in our own universe, completely detached from anyone or anything that you've ever known."

"Who are you?" she thought, stricken with panic.

"Your only companion, your only friend, and your only chance of ever returning to the reality you call home," came the response. "Now, kindly tell me your name."

"Mila Strevanos," she answered.

"You are the owner and CEO of Satelles Enterprises?"

"Yes," she answered. There was a long period of silence. "Hello?" she asked.

"Madam Strevanos, we see that you incorporated Satelles and properly registered with the House of Records approximately eight years ago. While officially designated as an escort service for corporate executives, Satelles is actually a prostitution ring than you and several other madams have presided over for years. Although acting in an executive capacity, we see that you often apply your own physical talents--and those of your other madams-- whenever your clientele possess information that could potentially be sold to someone else. When the accumulated wealth of Satelles passed the requisite amount, you promptly filed your corporation with Modern Finances under the name that you currently claim. Yet we can find no retina scan, DNA record, or fingerprint of a 'Mila Strevanos' registering anywhere in the universe before you originally registered with the House of Records."

Mila dreaded where this was going. The voice continued, but in a tone that was a decibel or two higher than before.

"You are not the first one we have seen with a forged identity, Madam Strevanos. Please state your real name."

"You have no right to do this to people," she said, suddenly overwhelmed with anger. "What difference does it make what my real name is?"

Suddenly there were other voices present. It started as whispers, gradually becoming the audible buzz of a room full of people speaking in a language she did not understand. The voices surrounded her, and occasional shouts and screams hurled from random directions made her heart stop. It became a rising crescendo of laughter, of the most sinister sounding voices she had ever heard, taunting and insulting her. She could not escape them, and she could do nothing to make them stop. She screamed as loud as she could, and then heard the silence once again.

"You can either cooperate," the mechanical voice resumed. "Or I can leave you with them. They are eager to torment you, Madam Strevanos, and will do so for eternity if I allow it. Now, for the third time, please tell me your real name."

"Gariushi," she sobbed, completely desperate to be dead now. "Mila Auvuane Gariushi."

There was silence again, suddenly followed by raging insults of the evil ones. "No!" Mila screamed. "Mila Auvuane Gariushi! That's my real name, I swear!" More silence followed. Mila could feel herself sobbing harder than she ever had before.

"What..." the mechanical voice started, then stopped. "State your home world."

"Isinokka Eight, then Drenali Seven when I was 15 years old." Again, there was a long pause, and she feared the voices would return. "Go to hell, whoever you are!" she screamed hysterically. "You sadistic, sick bastard!" She was so upset that she was having difficulty breathing.

"Kaurikou Junction...?"

"Yes!"

Another pause followed. "Your father was Vilamo Gariushi..." The voice stopped, and suddenly Mila could feel her arms and legs again. She realized that she was submerged in some kind of viscous liquid, and that a mask had been placed over her face. Her left forearm was encased in a nanosplint, and could feel dozens of tubes and wires extruding from a collar that encircled her neck and covered the base of her skull.

Still unable to see, Mila could feel herself being extracted from the liquid, and felt slight pain along her spine as the collar was removed. Too weak to put up any kind of resistance, she could feel a pair of strong hands carefully lifting and placing her limp body onto a bed and then covering her with a blanket. The same hands gently touched the sides of her neck and head as if probing for something, and then the mask was lifted off. A clean-cut man she had never seen before was standing over her with an astonished look on his face.

"What do you want from me?" Mila breathed, exhausted from the entire ordeal and still resigned to whatever fate awaited her. The man took a moment before answering.

"There's someone I'd like for you to meet," he said. Another man with much harsher, uglier features appeared. His head was shaved, and his jaw looked like it had been broken once but never allowed to heal correctly. A skull and crossbones tattoo was on his right cheek, and she could see several scars crisscross his face. There was something familiar about him that she couldn't place. He looked confused, perhaps even somewhat frightened.

She was not prepared for what the other man said next.

"Mila, this is your younger brother, Otro."

Mila was overwhelmed with a rush of recognition that thrust distant memories to the forefront of her consciousness with remarkable clarity. She superimposed the last image she had of her younger brother, then just five years old when she left, with the hideous man standing above her. As much as parts of her both embraced and rejected this moment, there was no question that this was the little boy she left behind when she ran away more than 20 years ago. It was just too much information to absorb.

The last thing Mila saw before blacking out again was her brother look away and say something urgent to the other man, who suddenly appeared frantic.

~

Malkalen V - Moon 1
Lonetrek Region
Ishukone Corporate Headquarters

Ralirashi tried his best to appear impressed as the CEO of Ishukone howled in delight at the flaming wreckage of

a defeated Splinterz combatant.

"Ha! Another million isk in the bank!" the man said, slapping Ralirashi on the back. "You'd be a fool to bet against me. Right, Rali?" The entourage of rented women from Satelles Enterprises giggled around him.

"A fool indeed, sir," he answered, wishing he could return the slap with a steel club. "You sure know how to pick winners." I'd actually be extremely happy if you could just drop dead, he thought.

"Hey, and he's observant also!" he answered, draining the rest of his cocktail in a single gulp. The women laughed. "Guess I don't pay you the big bucks for nothing," he said, handing Rali the empty glass. "Now go take care of that for me, will you? They're starting the next round and I have another million to make, right ladies?" On cue, the women--all of them drop dead gorgeous and acting as if they were completely devoid of any brains--cheered in agreement, following him to the holovid link where his bookie was waiting on the other line.

Rali looked down at the empty glass in one hand, and the disk with the Ishukone financials that he'd spent more than 24 hours preparing in the other. Why did I even bother, he asked himself. The Board meeting was in just two days. As the Chief Financial Officer of Ishukone, it was his job to know the numbers cold and prepare the CEO for that meeting, and to strategize how best to present the firm's financial state to the Board. If the news was anything less than perfect, then they would demand to know exactly what was being done to fix it. There had been a selloff in Ishukone stock recently due to rumors that the pace of its double-digit earnings growth was slowing down. This was completely unacceptable to the Board. For the last two meetings, Les had assured the Board members that "his CFO was on top of things and getting earnings growth back on track". And yet he hasn't followed any of my advice, not even once. Rali knew that his boss--Les Akkilen, CEO of Ishukone Corporation-- would pin the blame squarely on him this time around and suggest a replacement.

Rali watched the Splinterz robots take their starting positions through the holoscreen in Les's luxury suite. So foolish of me to think he'd actually called me up here to talk about business. The Akkilen Family had more money than was imaginable, and their long history of generosity to the Caldari State had even earned them the privilege of having an Empire solar system officially named after the family. Les's appointment as the CEO of Ishukone was purely political, and clearly the result of having a wealthy family with connections in all the right places. Rali silently fumed. Les Akkilen is nothing more than a stupid, spoiled-rotten kid who never had to work for anything in his life, and doesn't know a goddamn thing about running a corporation.

Les also had a son who was now old enough to claim his own place within the elite corporate class of Caldari society. That was reason enough for Rali to believe that he was being set up to fail, and that failure in such a visible position at Ishukone would destroy his own reputation and leave him a ruined disgrace. Les Akkilen would find a way to distance himself from the failure and hail his own son as the fix that the corporation needed to correct its own image, which was Board's primary concern.

The robot gladiators opened up on each other in a gruesome display of raw firepower and violence. Les hooted in excitement for the combatant that he'd bet on while the women rubbed him and cheered. That disgusting picture right there pretty much sums it up, thought Rali. The widely held view of Ishukone in recent years was plainly that if not for starship pod technology--which the Jovians had invented and for some reason granted to Ishukone many years earlier--then the corporation would be practically non-existent. In Rali's view, the critics were right. Despite its uncontested wealth, Ishukone had failed to establish a flagship product that uniquely established their industrial might within the Caldari State. Pod sales were the only viable source of income for the corporation, albeit an enormous one. They were known among competitors as the "Pod Company", nothing more than the lucky beneficiary of technology that civilization could no longer live without. The rest of Ishukone, with the hundreds of thousands of employees on its payroll, was widely viewed as dead weight that participated in the corporation's success without actually contributing anything to it.

While Les threw his wild parties and shrugged off his colossal blunders, which included the multi-trillion isk uranium debacle in Fade, Rali was meeting with some of the brightest people he could find within Ishukone. If it was a flagship product that Ishukone lacked, then he would literally create the grandest flagship of them all: A space superiority battleship capable of projecting power the likes of which no one had ever seen before. Lai Dai had its Scorpion, long the backbone of the Caldari Navy and symbol of Caldari might in space. Ishukone would have to do better than them to establish real credibility. A secret project was born deep in the R&D department of Ishukone, unknown even to Les and the other executive crony "Yes-men" that he surrounded himself with. Its codename: "Raven".

Out of ammunition, the robots that survived the initial barrage of fire attacked each other with giant buzz saws, axes, and maces. The gory scene played itself out in Les's cavernous office as it was broadcast live from the arena on Malkalen Five. Rali watched, and allowed himself a smile. Wait until I tell them that we not only have a prototype Raven built, but that it passed every one of its space trials already. The look on Les's face would be priceless. He'd have to acknowledge his CFO's superior work to the Board in person just to save face, and then I'll finally get the respect I deserve, thought Rali. He was expecting to hear from a Navy representative at any time. If he was lucky, the presentation that his team was scheduled to pitch later today would go so well that the Navy would award Ishukone with a nice sized order, perhaps for a few dozen ships and a blueprint or two.

Another robot fell as its torso was cleaved by an axe and ripped apart by the ensuing explosion. It was down to two gladiators now, and as they tore into each other, Les and his women started screaming for their bet to win. Rali's messenger buzzed suddenly. At last, he thought, the news I've been waiting my whole life for. He set the disk down to pull the messenger out of his pocket. His face went pale when he read the device's tiny screen:

**** EYES ONLY ****

IWV-35G15 TREVANI FAILED TO REPORT CHECKPOINT AT NAV THETA-FIVE. RECON TEAM DISPATCHED TO SITE REPORTS DEBRIS FIELD WITH TREVANI MARKINGS AND SIGNS OF AN AMBUSH. NO SURVIVORS WERE FOUND. CREW AND CARGO ARE MISSING AND PRESUMED LOST. ELINT REPORTS TRACE GURISTAS COMMS TRAFFIC IN AREA. WILL UPDATE AS MORE DATA BECOMES AVAILABLE.

IWCMD

"No!" Rali screamed, just as the victorious robot delivered the coup-de-grace. Les and the women celebrated lustily.

"I win again!" shouted Les. "Ha! Who's better than me?" he asked his audience of hired admirers. As they all said "No one, Les" in unison, the empty cocktail glass in Rali's hand shattered. Several drops of blood fell to the floor.

Les started laughing. "Bet against me again, eh Rali? Observant maybe, but definitely not too bright! Ha!" More uproarious laughter followed from the drunken crowd.

Rali was shaking, barely aware of the glass shards puncturing his hand. "Ex...If you'll please excuse me," he said, turning towards the door.

"Don't worry Rali, I'll have the Watch keep the loansharks away!" Rali turned for just a moment to seethe at the man he despised. All of the women, save for one, were laughing at him. When she caught Rali's glance, she quickly began laughing along with the others. Thinking nothing of it, he left the room consumed with hatred, looking for something to stop the bleeding in his hand.

Chapter Three

Do You Know Where You Are?



Forward-Six
Tribute Region
Deck 30, North Tower

The three of them sat quietly in the darkened lounge, alone and unsure how to begin a conversation that should have started more than twenty years earlier. The tower they sat in overlooked the rest of the base, with one of the hangar bays just a few decks below them. Mila sat back in a chair, fully clothed for the first time since boarding the Trevani more than a day earlier. Otro was seated off to her side, leaning forward with his forearms resting on his knees. Gavriel stood against the window with his arms crossed, staring into space. Everyone was avoiding eye contact with each other.

"Why does he have to be here," Mila finally asked, breaking the silence.

"Two reasons," Otro answered. "One, I asked him to, and he agreed." Gavriel moved away from the window and sat in a chair facing the both of them, looking down at the floor. "Second, he's the only family that I've known for over a decade."

"`Family'?" Mila glared at Gavriel. "How long have you been in the business of torturing people?"

"He was carrying out my instructions and ceased as soon as he realized that you were my sister," Otro answered. Gavriel's face remained expressionless.

"That was so noble of you," said Mila. "And what of the others? How many more do you plan to torture or kill for your... whatever it is you call this savagery?"

Otro looked up at Mila. "As many as it takes for us to accomplish our goals."

"`Goals'?" Mila asked, exasperated. She leaned forward. "What goal could you possibly pursue that justifies the wanton, indiscriminate abduction and torture of--"

"Not indiscriminate. Only Ishukone personnel, and their business associates," Otro said, leaning back as he continued. "Those are my sole targets. The indiscriminate killing is up to the rest of the organization."

"Oh yes, the Guristas. Mother would be so proud," Mila sneered, getting up from her chair and pacing a few steps before continuing. "What the hell happened to you, Otro?"

"Mila, you left before--"

"Don't you dare imply that my decision to leave is the source of this depravity," she said, raising her voice. "You give no quarter to those raised from broken families, and I would think that you hold yourself to the same standard! You chose this path on your own accord, not because a troubled past compelled you to!"

"Don't flatter yourself, sister," said Otro, looking deadpan into Mila's eyes. "We may share the same blood, but you're just as much a stranger to me right now as the captain of your last ship was. He didn't know me very well, did he?"

"How could you say such a thing? Listen to yourself! I watched you cripple and then destroy a ship with dozens, if not hundreds of people on it! Most of them are dead now because of you!"

Otro kept staring at her and nodded his head. "That's right."

"My God," said an incredulous Mila, shaking her head. "When did you become a murderer?"

"When did you become a whore?" Otro replied.

Gavriel flinched slightly, and Mila's face turned ashen red. Just when she opened her mouth to speak, Otro cut her off.

"Are you, of all people, going to cast yourself among the self-righteous, stand on a pedestal and lecture me about choices?"

"How dare you--"

"You think I don't know about you and Satelles Enterprises? About all the 'madams' that work for you, flashing their skin to the rich and powerful and then selling the gossip you call 'intelligence' like some it's some kind of tabloid? Are you really going to stand there and preach to me about morality when you earn your keep in life as glorified prostitute?"

"My keep in life? The choice I made doesn't deprive anyone of their life, you imbecile," she shouted. "What I do doesn't hurt anyone, least of all me."

"'Mother would be so proud'," he shot back. "Don't look at me that way and pretend that you actually respect yourself. So you've made a few isk letting strangers pay you for sex--what is it exactly that you think you've accomplished?"

Mila was quivering. "I don't kill."

Otro stood up and walked to the window, watching as a Guristas warship started its approach to the hangar below them. "You have no idea how dad died, do you."

"Oh, here we go. You're going to try and pin this on--"

"You mean your little intelligence network never revealed the circumstances surrounding your own father's death? How he died selling drugs to an Ishukone executive? How that same executive shot him dead in plain view of several witnesses, and how Ishukone Watch made sure there would never be an investigation? Or, any surviving witnesses, for that matter?"

Mila was caught off guard by that comment. She had looked up the name "Vilamo Gariushi" once, maybe five years earlier, and saw only his name and the caption "deceased" with a date next to it. Although she had the means to look into the details of his death, the fact was that she chose not to. Otro had just implied that her decision not to dig any deeper--while inherently cold--might have saved her life. Still, Mila remained inexorable.

"He died a drug dealer, did he?" she asked. "Oh, that's perfect. We should have been saying father would have been so proud all this time. I can't say I'm the least bit surprised, seeing how you turned out." Mila pointed at Otro as she spoke. "You were too young to understand what was going on, Otro. You have no idea about the things that mother said to me in private, how she absolutely dreaded the move to Fade and didn't understand why it was so important to your father that he succeeded there. It was completely ego-driven, selfish, and unnecessary, and my mother is dead as a result. That, dear brother, was the worst kind of tragedy, the one that didn't have to happen, the one that could have been avoided if only he'd taken one moment to consider the risk to others besides his own, selfish, bastard self!"

It was Otro's turn to be caught off guard. "He told me that she supported his decision..."

"He didn't even ask for her opinion, Otro! His desire to appease Ishukone was more important to him than the wishes of his own family! That's why I left after mom died, because he couldn't handle providing for anyone anymore, and that by staying I effectively increased the chances of something horrible happening to you as well."

Otro looked very distant as he spoke. "Dad was a good man, he was just trying to take care of his family..."

"I'm not saying that he didn't care for you deeply, and that he didn't do his best trying to see you rise above the misfortune that ultimately cost him his own life. But I know in my heart that whatever his imperfections and

whatever his plans for you were, they did not include turning you into a murderer! I have my own issues with his selfishness and I will always hold him directly responsible for mother's death, but god damnit, there is nothing about any of this that justifies the path that you've taken for yourself!"

The room was illuminating softly as the Guristas warship outside approached the hangar. The silence hung momentarily in the room, and Mila caught Gavriel glance towards Otro, waiting for his response. It took another few moments for Otro to speak, which he did very softly at first.

"I've been doing this long enough now to understand something about killing. You don't have to shoot a man to take away his life, Mila. You can kill without ever striking your victim or firing a weapon. All you have to do is take away his hope. Take away a man's sense of purpose in life--the rock that his ego rests upon--and that man becomes the living dead. Ishukone killed hundreds of thousands of people by doing exactly that, and they're still doing it as we speak: By drawing them out to the deep, where they don't have to answer to the State or anyone else, luring them there with promises of prosperity and success and then snatching it all away." He raised his voice nearly to a shout. "Dad was one of them, Mila. Ishukone killed him twice, once by cutting him off from the work he depended on, and the second time with a 10-millimeter slug. But you were an accomplice the first time around. When you left after mom died, that was pushing the knife right out through his chest, you selfish bitch."

Mila glared at him, flush red once again. "Selfish bitch? I'm the selfish one? He dragged us out there for the same reasons as Ishukone--greed! Only you people call it `opportunity'! He was doing just fine, we were doing just fine in Isinokka, but he had to push it, he just had to get that bigger paycheck and pat on the back from the mighty corporation! All of this pain over his stupid, egotistical pursuit of wealth and fame! You call me a whore? Look at you, following in your father's footsteps! You're nothing more than a Guristas bitch, just like your father was an Ishukone bitch!"

Furious, Otro took a large stride towards her and stopped just inches from her face. "You better watch your mouth, sis."

Mila held her ground, sticking her chin out. "Or what? You're going to throw a temper tantrum and murder me? Go ahead! You haven't got the balls! Actually..." And with a powerful upward thrust of her knee, backed up with plenty of muscle in her quadriceps, Mila delivered a thunderous kick to

Otro's groin. The air in Otro's lungs was forcefully expelled in a wet sounding garble, and his eyes bulged from their sockets as the intense pain left him hunched over and temporarily paralyzed.

"That was for calling me a whore," she said, seething. "And this--" Mila followed up with a well-placed roundhouse punch to the side of Otro's jaw, sending him to the floor in a mangled heap. "--is for calling me a bitch!"

Gavriel exhaled a deep sigh and rose slowly from his chair. "Mila, won't you please have a seat."

The adrenaline subsiding somewhat, Mila's right hand was now in extreme pain. She also realized that her left forearm was still encased in a nanosplint. But she still remained defiant. "I love the irony," she said, shifting her weight and settling into a defensive stance. "A polite practitioner of torture. No, I think I'd much rather stand."

The room was flashing with much more intensity than before as the warship filled the bottom third of the window. Gavriel turned so that his muscular shoulders were square with Mila's, and spoke softly once again. "Madam Gariushi, I implore you. Please, be seated. Now."

She could see that the man she was facing was more than capable of handling himself. His short, compact, densely muscular frame gave him a low center of gravity, which not only made him difficult to strike, but next to impossible to strike hard enough to render incapacitation. Mila was certainly adept at defending herself, but she knew her limitations, and taking this "Gavriel" person was well beyond her own capabilities. As angry as she was, the sharply contrasting elements of his persona and actions made him strangely desirable. He is a monster, she thought, but a very attractive one. Powerful, yet humble. For that reason alone, she slowly complied with his command to be seated.

"Thank you, Mila," he said, bowing slightly and then squatting next to Otro to lift him back onto the chair. Otro moaned, still in terrific pain and unable to speak. Gently setting him down, Gavriel walked towards the lounge galley. "I must apologize for our lack of hospitality and manners," he said.

"I did not expect any," she replied. "After all, I am in the company of thieves and murderers."

Gavriel returned with an icepack, handing it to Mila. "For those sore knuckles. On behalf of everyone who works with Otro on a regular basis, I'd like to personally thank you for trying to straighten out his crooked jaw."

Mila suppressed an urge to smile, and accepted the icepack. "He deserved it," she muttered.

"Yes, he did. And I'm sure that underneath the previous facade of hostility and the present bout of agony which keeps him from speaking, he's actually quite happy to see you." Otro looked at Gavriel with a strange look.

"He'll live," she said. "To kill again someday, I'm sure. Which reminds me, why am I speaking so cordially with you? I believe that I should be crediting you for the transformation of my younger brother into the abomination that he's become, so why am I not tearing at your throat?"

"You already have your choice of perfectly legitimate reasons to take my life, Mila," he said, sitting across from her. "The foremost being that your father's untimely death was my direct responsibility, and my greatest failure to date."

Mila's eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about..."

Gavriel told the story about Vilamo's violent end, exactly as he had relived it in his dreams a thousand times over. "And so you see, our rules of engagement prevented me from taking the action that might have saved your father's life, or at the very least, avenged it quickly."

"I don't understand," said Mila. "Since when do pirates and criminals have 'rules of engagement'?"

"Because as clients, Ishukone personnel are important to the Guristas, almost sacred. You of all people should know that every organization has its procedures and, ah, recognizes the value of customer satisfaction." Mila's eyes narrowed again, but she let the comment slide. "Neither Otro nor I knew it at the time, but Ishukone's relationship with the Guristas went far beyond the drug trade."

"Why do you keep referring to the Guristas as 'them'? Aren't the two of you miscreants one and the same with the cartel?"

"Mila, you cannot imagine just how interesting these times are with the Guristas and, from what we can gather, Ishukone as well." Gavriel nodded towards Otro, who was now sitting up straighter but still breathing with difficulty. "Your brother has become the supreme vexation of both organizations. And yes, you could say that he and I have had a kind of falling out with our alma mater. But as far as I'm concerned, he's well on his way to becoming a legend out here."

Mila's mind began racing through information that she had committed to memory. A pattern of data emerged that finally made sense, at least insofar as circumstantial evidence to corroborate the story that Gavriel was implying. Over the years, Ishukone shipping traffic had a remarkable success rate in Fade, as opposed to the dismal 20 percent survival rate of its competitors. And of the competitor vessels failing to make port, the overwhelming majority were shot down while hauling construction materials and heavy equipment for both planetside and space operations--everything that a corporation would need to establish a presence this far away from Empire space. The attacks on those vessels had been ruthlessly precise, as opposed to the poorly organized attacks reported by other convoys. But recently those figures had changed drastically, with Ishukone casualties across all of its shipping operations--both inside and outside of Empire space--suddenly skyrocketing. She thought about the final words of the scientist on the Trevani, and cursed herself for not seeing the pattern sooner. I see what baby Otro has been up to lately, she thought. But not why. Noticing the thoughtful frown on Mila's brow, Gavriel continued.

"Yes, Mila, something very sinister is happening out here in the deep, far from civilization and the watchful eyes of Concord and Empire law. I'm almost certain that once you understand that evil, you will view your brother in an entirely different light."

"Wait, why should I care about any of this? I was nearly a victim of all this madness." Mila got up and began to pace, still holding the ice bag to her knuckles. "Why should I have anything but contempt for you? You claim to have tried to help my father, but you did so by converting him into a drug dealer?"

"Hope," Otro squeaked, with tremendous difficulty.

"As damnable as this is going to sound to you Mila, your brother is absolutely correct. Hope made your father a criminal," Gavriel continued. "Think about that for a moment. A perfectly legal mega- corporation forged in the civilized systems of Empire space reveals its true, corrupt nature far beyond the prying eyes of the institutions tasked with regulating it and protecting us. A man caught in those circumstances can only resort to lesser evils, one crime at a time, trading off little bits and pieces of his soul in order to retain some semblance of hope, of life, and if he's fortunate, redemption." Otro grunted while trying to shift in the chair. Mila suddenly began to feel remorseful.

Gavriel continued. "Mila, there was literally nothing left for your father. Ishukone promised everything; gave him nothing; and meanwhile he had sacrificed everything. Contrary to what you may believe, Vilamo adored his wife, and loved you and your brother unconditionally. Your mother's tragic death, followed so quickly with your own disappearance, nearly destroyed him. It was hope that kept him alive; hope that brought him to us; hope of a better life for his son that turned him against Ishukone, and hope that those selfish corporate executives drugged themselves to death with the products he sold to them."

Mila suddenly remembered parts of her past, of her own beginnings in the profession that she chose, and how sickeningly familiar it was all beginning to sound. For the briefest instant, the memory of her first "client", of how

her desperation for food outweighed her burning reluctance to give herself to him, took hold in her mind. But she refused to succumb to the pain, and as she had done so many times before, shut the memory out again. "This doesn't change anything or justify what you two are doing--"

Gavriel cut her off. "You're right, Mila. In the deep, nothing ever changes so long as those in power are never held accountable for being indifferent to people's hope. Out here, they answer to no one, and there are no checks or balances to curb their ambitions."

"No, that can't be true, it's completely unacceptable--"

"Is it really so difficult to believe? Look out that window, Mila. Do you see that starship out there? Are we not gods when we immerse ourselves inside of one, manipulating them as though they were a natural extension of our own limbs? Billions and billions of people scattered across hundreds of worlds, and only the tiniest fraction of them can lay claim to such awesome power. Those ships are the wings of mankind, Mila. And we are at the mercy of those who control them. Don't you see how that kind of power can be ruthlessly abused?"

Mila thought about how completely helpless she felt when the Trevani came under attack. Gavriel recognized her look immediately.

"Imagine inflicting that kind of pain on millions of people, Mila. Just to make the value of company stock rise a few points."

Grunting again, Otro pulled himself up, nearly stumbling as he did so. Gavriel rose from his chair to support him, but Mila got to him first. She took his right arm around her shoulder and assisted him to the window. He accepted the help, but kept his gaze on the view outside.

"You, your brother, your father and mother, and countless others have paid a terrible price for not acting soon enough. And it is time, far past time, to make those responsible for this excruciating pain to pay for what they've done." Gavriel took a step towards the both of them. "There are hundreds who have joined our fight against Ishukone, Mila. We would be honored to have you with us as well."

Mila looked at the side of her brother's face, now swollen from the punch she had delivered. Old scars long since healed over were now much more noticeable than when she first saw him. So much pain, she thought, as tears welled in her eyes. When she felt him pull her closer, the dam of emotions that she fought to contain finally let go. It was as though she was grieving for lost time, past sins, and the loss of her parents all at once. Gavriel moved towards the door, pausing just before exiting.

"The memory of your parents gives us strength, Mila," he said, stepping outside. "And my conscience will never accept that they died in vain." And with those last words, Gavriel quietly shut the door, leaving the two orphans to grieve alone.

Chapter Four I Saw Your Ship

6NJ8-V VII, Moon 2
Venal Region
Guristas Logistic Support

Three times, Bane thought as his hoverchair locked into position inside his personal quarters. Three times I've asked the both of them, as a father would to his own children, to cease this madness. The guards escorting him silently left the room as mechanical arms extended over his ancient, cybernetic body and inserted nuerolinks into the sockets implanted within his skull. I raised them as my own, taught them as my own, empowered them as my own, and now look at the disgrace they have become. The mental view of his surroundings, as seen through the cameras attached to the hoverchair, was replaced with a virtual, three-dimensional image of the Guristas data network.

Never in my old age did I expect betrayal such as this, least of all from Otro, he thought. His natural vision long since departed, Bane grunted as his mind located and read the decrypted report intercepted from Ishukone Watch. Another one of Ishukone's convoys was lost to an ambush within the borders of Empire space, and there was no question who was responsible for the attack. All I asked of them was to let the Ishukone ships be. The rest of the universe was theirs for the taking, but no, they insisted on carrying through with this absurd ideological vendetta. Bane was not the sort to hesitate making harsh decisions when it came to disciplining military personnel. He was rumored to have destroyed ships in his own fleet whenever captains questioned his orders during combat. The fact he gave Otro three warnings was symbolically identical to being granted life three times. Bane would not extend that privilege a fourth time.

With another thought, the report was replaced with a map of the systems surrounding Mara. Again, the debris field was located within 15 jumps of the Forward listening posts near the three Empire crossings. The predictability disgusted him. Patterns are a death wish, he thought, and those two fools will know the consequences of their own stupidity soon enough.

Despite the reoccurrence, there was something different about this attack. Bane quickly scanned through the latest Ishukone shipping itinerary that Les Akkilen had provided to him as part of their longstanding agreement. The discrepancy was obvious: The Trevani was destroyed while traveling someplace it shouldn't have been. There is absolutely no reason why an Ishukone convoy should have been in the Mara System, Bane thought, unless they were trying to go around something. In fact, the log listed her as "dry-docked for maintenance and refitting", with the next scheduled escort mission one week from today. Ever since the attacks started, Akkilen would call within minutes of every lost convoy to share his pointed opinions about "Guristas incompetence". But not this time, and the report was almost 48 hours old. That was very uncharacteristic of a control-crazed tyrant like Akkilen. Bane could think of several possible reasons for the lack of outrage this time around, but as always, the simplest explanation seemed most plausible: Akkilen just didn't know about the Trevani. That possibility begged all kinds of questions that Bane decided he needed the answers to, very quickly.

He willed the map to display all of the systems around the checkpoint that the Trevani failed to reach. "Nav-Theta" was along a shipping route that ended in Nonni, and only Ishukone competitors had stations in the systems along the most direct--and most secure--route from Malkahen. The only non-competitors were the Caldari Navy and Home Guard, and both were in the Nonni system. No starship pod deliveries were scheduled at either facility for at least one month. Bane's wrinkled brow furled into a full-blown scowl. It had to be Navy, he thought. But why avoid taking the most direct route to get there?

As senior as Bane was within the Guristas Cartel, even he lacked the authority to initiate contact with an agent inside the Caldari Navy. His request would have to be approved by Fatal, who personally maintained a formidable spy network within the Caldari State. But regardless of the answer, Bane would order his scouts to



concentrate their search for Otro and Gavriel around the Forward bases near the Empire border. In the meantime, he would prepare his own strike fleet. Fatal wanted the two renegades eliminated for threatening the extremely profitable relationship that the Guristas shared with Ishukone. Bane wanted them both dead for much more personal reasons.

Forward-Nine
ROIR-V
Pure Blind Region

The base setup was identical to all of the others: Sparsely furnished, but heavily stocked with all manner of supplies for both ships and crew. Hidden along the border with the Caldari State, the "Forwards" were small, unmanned stations built quickly and established as replenishment bases to support Guristas incursions into Empire space. Crammed with sophisticated electronic eavesdropping equipment, the bases also served as listening posts to intercept cross-border communications traffic. Terabytes of data were intercepted each day and relayed to processing stations for storage, and if possible, decryption.

The Guristas had lured some of the best cryptologists in Empire space to their underworld to decipher the mountain of information channeled through stargates, and both Gavriel and Otro recognized early on that their success would lean heavily on having cryptologists of their own. Paying ten times the rate that the Guristas offered, Otro hired them to sift through intercepted data and catalog anything that had to do with the Ishukone Corporation. In the six hours since Otro's fleet had arrived from Forward-Six, Mila had been devouring the information revealed by their efforts with insatiable fascination.

Mila was able to reconstruct the financial history of Ishukone--both the publicly released version and reality--with astonishing detail. Everything from warehouse inventory records to employee payrolls; corporate debt structuring to shipping invoices; executive meeting notes to general account ledgers; and every component of Ishukone's strategic plans for the upcoming fiscal year was revealed to her. A very dark picture began to emerge as she reconciled these findings with the data compiled through Satelles, confirming everything that Gavriel had warned her about and more. Typing furiously, she was constructing an analysis as fast as her brain could absorb and process the information. Peering through the lab window, Otro watched as his sister manipulated the three screens in front of her. "How long has she been in there?" he asked.

Gavriel was beaming. "From the moment we arrived. She has your father's intelligence, and her ability to process information is remarkable," he added.

"She gets that from my mother," Otro answered. "Dad mentioned that she was always a real fast learner. It just comes naturally to her."

Gavriel nodded, admiring the way Mila's hair fell over the top of her shoulders as she shifted her attention from one screen to the next. "It is a miracle that we found her," he said.

"It's unbelievable," Otro answered truthfully. "But we're going to need many more miracles to keep this up."

"You underestimate the strategic value that Mila brings to the table," Gavriel said. "For the first time ever, we can accurately gauge the financial impact of our efforts against Ishukone. In fact, I don't believe that we're fighting a guerilla war any longer. From now on, each of our strikes will be surgical, with anticipated, quantifiable long-term consequences instead of random hit and runs."

"It's Bane that concerns me, not Ishukone," said Otro. "We're being hunted by the very man who gave the both of us a new life, not to mention that he taught us everything we know about naval combat."

"Bane's interest in us was purely investment value," Gavriel scoffed. "Just two more recruits to help turn the Guristas greed machine. You shouldn't view it any other way."

"True, but it doesn't change the fact that he's trying to kill us, and rightfully so. He has the power to bring as many resources as he thinks he needs to get the job done. We don't have sanctuary here, or in Empire space. And I'm responsible for all the men and women who joined us." Otro took a deep breath. "One way or the other, we have a big fight coming our way, and the odds are stacked against us." He nodded towards his sister. "Let her know that she's got about an hour before we have to leave again. I'm going to start making my rounds with the troops." Gavriel opened his mouth to speak, but Otro was already out the door. Without even realizing it, he shifted his weight nervously. It felt strangely intimidating to be alone in Mila's presence.

Between his prowess with financial investments and his enormous compensation from Ishukone, the corporate life had made Ralirashi Okimo wealthier than he could have ever imagined. Earlier in the day, he put his vast fortune to use by secretly replacing the Ishukone property that was lost in the ambush that killed his personal envoy to the Caldari Navy. Most Caldari citizens would have to work for a lifetime to save enough money to purchase a single ship. Rali had just bought five. Among his dealings was the acquisition of a Caracal-class cruiser that he promptly renamed "Trevani", which was now sitting in the dry dock where the Ishukone shipping itinerary said it should be.

As usual, Rali returned late at night to his luxury station home to find it empty. His wife had long since stopped bothering to leave notes indicating where she was going with the kids, or for how long they'd be gone. As far as she was concerned, such an effort would be a waste of time. It was obvious to her that Ishukone responsibilities were far more important to Rali than family matters, and that was that. She had long since given up trying to persuade him otherwise.

Rali took a long look at the bed that he was supposed to share with his wife and decided that he would never be able to fall asleep. The Board meeting was in less than six hours, and there was nothing more that he could do to prepare for it. He couldn't tell them about the Raven, not without an inked deal to justify the costs. All he could do was hope to survive the meeting without losing his job. Not wanting to be alone with his anxieties to torment him, he left and wearily made his way down the concourse towards one of the station's lounges.

Rali was fairly certain that he was once genuinely happy, madly in love, and determined to work as hard as he could to support his family. On that last point, he had succeeded. But he had failed miserably as a husband and father in the process of advancing his career, and the relationship with his family deteriorated accordingly. His marriage was typical of the Caldari corporate elite. Both husband and wife felt unappreciated in their perceived roles as providers; both viewed each other as incapable of understanding the responsibilities which accompany their roles; and both became accustomed to assuming that the lack of understanding was, in fact, pure indifference that betrayed just how fragile their relationship was. If Rali and his wife of ten years were not officially separated, then it was just a legal technicality that would put a title on the true state of affairs with their marriage. The emotional separation had already taken place long ago.

On the eve of the most important--and perhaps final--Board meeting of his career, the contempt that Rali held towards Les Akkilen had become an intense and dangerous distraction. Thinking about his family made it even worse. He had to try and unwind as much as he could, lest the anger become too obvious to the Board members tomorrow. There were only a few patrons in the lounge, and no one noticed him walk in. Choosing one of the many barstools with a good view of the space outside the station, Rali took a seat. Although he was never much of a drinker, Rali decided against his better judgment to order something that would get him intoxicated as quickly as possible.

"I'd like a Minmatar Chest Wound, please."

The bartender looked at him as if he was crazy, then shrugged and started preparing the drink. While Rali waited, he startled at the sound of a yelp followed by a crash. When he turned around, he saw a young woman dressed in a business suit laying face down on the floor, with a mess of datapads and research papers scattered everywhere. Rali jumped out of his chair to assist her.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Damnit," she said angrily, pushing herself up to her knees. The first thing Rali's eyes found was the immense cleavage that sat between the lapels of the woman's business suit. She never looked up at him, but instead started to gather together all of the datapads around her. "I'm such an idiot," she muttered.

"Here, let me help," Rali said. Now his eyes moved upwards of her chest, and he saw that she was positively gorgeous, almost shockingly so. As he reached down to pick up some of the papers on the floor, she reached out quickly and slapped him on the hand.

"Don't touch those!" she scolded, looking up at him for the first time. "I'll get them myself--" She stopped in mid-sentence, and her angry expression suddenly changed to recognition, then shock. Her jaw dropped, and she covered her mouth with her hand.

"Oh my, I'm so very sorry, sir," she stammered. "This is so embarrassing, I really do apologize."

Rali was confused. "It's okay, really." He had no idea why she had the sudden change in attitude. "Do you mind if I give you a hand?"

She placed her hands on her temples. "This is so typical. I can't believe how stupid I am," she muttered, clearly

flustered. She started scurrying about to collect the datapads. "I mean, of course you can help. Or, you don't have to. That's...very gracious of you, sir" she stammered, then shook her head as if she was disgusted with herself.

Rali laughed a little. "Why are you calling me `sir'?" he asked as he gathered papers.

She stood up slowly, placing the datapads on a chair. The pin stripes on her suit accented the curves on her voluptuous figure. "Aren't you Ralirashi Okimo, the Chief Financial Officer of Ishukone?"

Rali was shocked that anyone could be so humbled in his presence. "Yes, I am."

She took a clumsy step forward and extended her hand. "It's an honor to meet you, sir."

Rali took her hand and shook it. "Nice to meet you, Miss--?"

She smiled, completely awestruck. "Henjska. Capri Henjska. I just started here at Ishukone a few days ago."

He couldn't remember the last time he felt this good. "That's fantastic! Judging from all the papers, I'd say you're in R&D." He placed the stack of papers onto the same chair as the datapads.

"Yes, sir," she blushed, looking away. "I'm an analyst there. My job is to look at declassified military technology and find markets for it within the commercial and retail sectors." She gazed at him with the most adoring look he'd ever seen. "I've always wanted to meet you, sir. I even wrote a paper about you while I was at the Science and Trade Institute."

Her stunning looks aside, Rali decided that enjoying every moment of this young woman's company was exactly what he needed. "Please, call me Rali," he said, motioning towards the bar. "Can I get you something to drink?"

She smiled. "I'll have whatever you're having," she answered.

~

Gavriel sat staring in stunned disbelief at the three screens. Mila was beside him, resting her hands against her forehead and appearing exhausted. After hours of pouring through the data, her initial analysis was finally complete. Gavriel had been speechless since the moment she finished presenting him with a summary of her findings. Stifling a deep yawn, Mila waited patiently for him to absorb the shock of everything he had just learned.

Les Akkilen's tenure at Ishukone was tumultuous right from the start. Appointed CEO during the height of the Fade mining boom, the move caught corporate insiders by surprise since Ishukone was excelling financially under the previous leadership. Needless to say, shareholders were not impressed with Les Akkilen's credentials. Aside from the celebrity status associated with his immensely wealthy family and powerful political allies, it was also widely known that Les wasn't especially bright, and had no business experience to speak of. Investors openly questioned Akkilen's ability to continue Ishukone's surge of growth into industries other than starship pod manufacturing, and the stock began to plummet.

The investor's concerns proved valid. Akkilen's first mandate as CEO was to take advantage of the firm's monopoly on heavy elements in Fade. He initially doubled, and then quadrupled the price of all commodity exports produced from the Drenali System. The move created a huge spike in profits for Ishukone, but also infuriated corporate and private buyers from all over Caldari space. The prices for the commodities were so outrageous that it prompted the creation of a coalition made up exclusively of Ishukone competitors. Each member corporation agreed to share the costs of funding research and exploration into the regions adjacent to Fade in search of alternative sources of heavy elements.

When vast uranium and plutonium deposits were discovered in Pure Blind--which sits right on the border with the Caldari State--the coalition wisely decided against attempting to recover their exploration costs quickly. Instead, they opted to exert their newfound market influence gradually by charging the same prices for the commodities as they were before Akkilen came to power. The effects were immediate: Contracts with Ishukone were voided, and the money flowed away from Fade and into Pure Blind's systems by the billions. Akkilen responded by filing breach of contract lawsuits against every coalition member with the Caldari Business Tribunal, but suffered humiliating defeats in each one of them. To make matters worse, wholesalers and small-cap corporations were collectively filing an antitrust suit against Ishukone for excessive price fixing, citing that the unreasonable hike in commodity expenses caused unfair financial hardship to their own respective businesses. Ishukone was now left with a defunct deep space mining operation that would cost a fortune to maintain, plus enormous legal problems that would further cripple its ability to compete in any markets besides pod manufacturing.

In a maligned effort to compensate for his mistakes, Akkilen sought ways to cut costs as quickly as possible. To start, he reneged on Ishukone obligations to consultants and industry contractors, especially those operating beyond Empire space. Hardest hit were the contractors that had settled on Drenali Seven, which of course

included Vilamo Gariushi. If you included the settling family membersthat the contractors had brought with them, the people directly affected by Akkilen's treachery numbered in the millions. The hardships suffered in the outer regions went largely unnoticed, mainly because of the worker protests and legal issues that were drawing all the attention of regulators in Empire space.

Still unsatisfied with the adjusted results of his bottom line, Les Akkilen contacted the Guristas. While millions of people starved on Drenali Seven, Les plotted even more sinister actions to appease his ego at the expense of countless others: By planning direct retribution against his competitors for their combined efforts to undermine him. Industrial espionage always was--and continues to be, according to Mila--an unspoken reality within the Caldari corporate domain, but Akkilen shattered the delicate rules of that game as well. In exchange for the unrestricted passage of Ishukone vessels throughout Guristas-controlled space, Akkilen would provide the pirate cartel with the shipping itineraries of as many rival corporations that his spies could get. Bane quickly agreed, and the slaughter began. Mila even discovered evidence which proved that Akkilen had requested attacks against specific Ishukone ships. Records indicated that those doomed vessels carried various "undesirables" affiliated with Ishukone whose deaths, while tragic, were conveniently beneficial to him.

The open exchange of information between Akkilen and the Guristas lead Ishukone down even darker paths. Les refined the amnesty arrangement by negotiating a deal with Bane to purchase the cargo stolen from ships that the Guristas ransomed or salvaged at cost. The deal broke Akkilen's profit margin wide open because it reduced his own operating expenses to almost nothing, while escalating his competitor's expenses to a level that was impossible to sustain. Completing the domination of Pure Blind's economics was the establishment of Ishukone Watch as a legendary protective force. While competitors struggled to find industrial freight captains willing to run the perilous shipping routes into deep space, Ishukone's survival rate was close to 95 percent, and thus drew the greatest number of shipping contracts. Naturally, Les started leapfrogging the costs upwards for those services as well.

By the time she was finished, Mila had produced a staggering list of illegal activities committed by the Ishukone Corporation. And these were hardly the paper-pusher misdemeanors typically associated with white-collar crimes. There was enough information to secure indictments for a range of hard-core felonies that would result in the permanent takedown of Ishukone and death sentences for all of its senior-level executives. Each potential indictment was backed up with a mountain of damning evidence. She found employee layoff records from factories that coincided with unusually high spurts in productivity from the same facility, with no evidence of assembly line upgrades or anything else that could account for the increased output. She noticed that Ishukone construction projects across all of its developing deep-space territories were suddenly being completed ahead of schedule and under budget, despite having projected delays just weeks before. And of course, there were the actual transmissions containing the competitor shipping itinerary schedules, all relayed through and capture by the Forward Guristas bases.

All told, Mila estimated that Les Akkilen was responsible for direct competitor losses of more than three trillion isk in ships, equipment, and cargo, to say nothing of the immense loss of life resultingfrom the vicious ambush of convoys in unregulated space. Most, if not all of those losses translated directly into profits for Ishukone in the same period of time. As large as that number was, it still did not include the abstract consequences of losses to competitors, such as in cost overruns, project delays, and consumer confidence. Ishukone stock was finally back to where it was before Akkilen was appointed. Only no one, save for his inner circle of advisors, knew exactly how Ishukone had recovered. The financial analysts reviewing the quarterly and yearly numbers all pointed to "effective cost cutting measures, superior management, and precise resource allocation" as the sole factors behind the newfound stability of the corporation under Akkilen's leadership. And the Board of Directors, obsessed with image and industry reputation, was too eager to see the stock's continued climb to bother questioning the numbers or the methods that made them possible in the first place. The rough start by Akkilen years earlier was conveniently attributed to "first time CEO jitters", and that Ishukone's climbing revenues was proof of his "coming of age" in the corporate world.

Gavriel continued staring blankly at the figures on the three screens. Displayed across them were the names of some of the largest, most powerful corporations in the Caldari State. Each was assigned an enormous figure specifying the amount of money that Mila figured Les Akkilen had stolen from them. Some of the names included Lai Dai, CBD, Prompt Delivery, Sukuuvestaa, and Caldari Constructions.

"So, what do you think?" Mila finally asked. Gavriel just started shaking his head.

"What do I think...let's see," he answered, sitting back in his chair. "I think that there's enough evidence here to start a ferocious war within the Caldari State--at least."

"That was my thinking as well," she said, also leaning back in her chair. "I haven't even tried to figure,out the economic costs of all this, such as how Ishukone's interactions with corporations from other sovereignties weigh into the equation. The repercussions of Akkilen's actions throughout the Eve economy must be staggering, and we should probably figure out how far they go."

"I don't believe that will be necessary, Mila," he answered, suddenly shifting his gaze and appearing more focused. "Tell me, have you uncovered anything about the officers that report directly to him?"

"All of them were appointed by Akkilen and have direct knowledge of what he's doing except for one, who was assigned by the Board of Directors." she answered.

"And who might this officer be?"

"It's funny that you should ask..."

~

Rali downed his third Chest Wound in a single gulp, ignoring the scorching sensation in his throat and stomach. Capri started giggling as he nearly fell off the stool while setting the glass back down onto the bar.

"So you see, Capri, that's pre-e-e-tty much how I became the Chief Financial Officer of Ish-h-h- ukone," he stammered. Then his eyes opened wide in astonishment as Capri also downed her third Chest Wound in a single gulp. "Whoa", he said. "That was m-m-most impressive."

She flashed a coy smile, getting close enough to him so that the tips of her breasts were just barely skimming against his shoulder. Rali was no longer capable of trying to be discreet about staring directly at them. She lifted his chin with two fingers, and got close enough so that he could smell the alcohol on her breath. "A woman can do anything that a man can, Rali. Only better."

Rali just stared back into her green eyes while the rest of the room spun around them. His marriage suddenly seemed very, very distant. "What...are your career aspirations here at Ishukone," he breathed.

"Hmmm, let's see," she said, rolling her eyes thoughtfully before answering. "Well, to be honest, just getting here was such a challenge that I haven't had time to think about what's next." She motioned to the bartender for another round. "I suppose that I'm not all that thrilled about working for my boss. I wouldn't mind being in charge of my department, and giving other recruits the big piles of work to do!" she joked. The expression on Rali's face changed immediately.

Capri caught his look and knew that she had succeeded in setting him up perfectly to get the information that Mila had instructed her to fish for. Feigning a slight cough, she activated the tiny voice recorder sewn into the lapel of her suit.

"So, how do you like working for Les Akkilen?" she asked.

~

6NJ8-V VII Moon 2
Venal Region
Guristas Logistic Support

Bane narrowed the possibilities down to one of three Forward bases: Nine, One, or Two. Otro would be in that general vicinity, preparing for another series of raids against Ishukone convoys. After selecting a staging area that was approximately equidistant from each base, Bane gave the order for the fleet to move out. The location he chose would give him a response time of ten minutes or less from the time his scouts made contact. The attack plan depended on speed--the faster it was over with, the better. Firepower wasn't the problem--he was certain that he had Otro outnumbered at least 8 to 1. But he would also be asking his crew to open fire on other Guristas ships, and possibly to even engage them in a gunfight onboard one of the bases. The longer the fight drew itself out, the more difficult it would be to maintain morale.

Too bad that it will be over for them quickly, Bane thought as he watched his battleship clear the hangar. Otro and Gavriel should be made to suffer for as long as possible.

~

Malkalen V - Moon 1
Lonetrek Region
Ishukone Corporate Headquarters

40 minutes later

Rali was now flat on his stomach in bed, fully asleep and drooling steadily all over his pillow. Capri gently removed the man's shoes and pulled the covers up to his neck. She practically had to carry him for most of the walk back to his quarters, and they made a few stops along the way for him to vomit. He was barely coherent when they finally arrived, and unconscious the moment he collapsed into bed. After setting a glass of water on the nightstand, she hurried out of the room and made for the door leading back out to the concourse. Making a note of her surroundings as she walked, the home reminded her more of a museum than a place where a family lived. Everything was spotless; every item and ornament was in perfect alignment with everything else. Yet there was an undeniable emptiness that stood out more than the priceless statues and works of art that adorned

the walls. The home was a mirror image of Rali himself: Materially plentiful, but utterly devoid of any soul.

The next shuttle off the station was heading to the Caldari Funds Unlimited Investment Bank as Malkalen Four, and she would have to hurry to catch it. Thankfully, it would barely be a five-minute trip. The information she had to pass along to Mila was of epic importance.

~

Forward-Nine
ROIR-V
Pure Blind Region

25 minutes later

Otro stood with his arms folded, listening intently to Mila and Gavriel as they explained the facts to him. When they finished, he took a moment to think before speaking.

"This 'Raven', is it as powerful as Rali says it is?" Otro asked.

Gavriel nodded. "And then some. It's the ultimate standoff weapon. Nothing else in the Caldari arsenal can put that much firepower on a single target in such a short period of time."

"Can it be defended against?"

Gavriel shook his head. "That many launchers would overwhelm any point-defense system. And no matter what kind of shields the target is using, a smart Raven captain still has the valid options of either using brute force against a specific protection type, or switching to a completely different warhead. No one out there is prepared for anything like this. Even if you could jam its targeting systems--and you might need several ships to do it--she could still use friend-or-foe missiles to force you to shut your jammers down and run. This ship is the real deal."

"So what you're saying is that the Raven is a map drawer," Otro stated.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Build a few of them and you can redraw the map," Otro explained. "The Raven tilts the balance of power in favor of whoever owns it. And even if you have less ambitious goals, just selling the technology would bring you a different kind of power, the kind that only money can buy. You say Navy is the only client that Rali was trying to pitch this to?"

"To the best of my knowledge, that is correct," answered Mila. "And from the looks of it, the Trevani was carrying Rali's reps to meet with them." Her thoughts flashed back to her brief time aboard that ship, and how drastically her life had changed since then.

"And you're certain that Akkilen doesn't know anything about it?"

"We know a great deal about Mr. Akkilen and his inner circle, and I can assure you, he doesn't have a clue," answered Mila. "If he did, Rali would probably be dead."

"How was he able to pull this off?"

"Ralirashi Okimo is extremely intelligent, and very resourceful," Mila answered. "It also helps that he's extraordinarily wealthy. Technically, the members of the Raven team are not Ishukone employees. They report directly to Rali and perform all of their work in a fully stocked ship hangar facility that he's kept rented for almost three years. We don't know which station is the host, but it's definitely not on Ishukone property, and we know that it exists within Empire space."

"He funded all that himself just to spite Akkilen?" Gavriel asked.

"You don't become the CFO of Ishukone Corporation without knowing how to disguise a few expenses on a balance sheet," Mila replied. "I'm sure that he passed along as much of the cost as he felt he could get away with."

I'm really starting to like this guy, thought Otro. "Why is Akkilen so tough on him?"

"Because the Board of Directors appointed him to the position. Akkilen has always treated him as an outsider, and warned his advisors to stay away from him. He felt directly threatened by Rali's intelligence, and often times humiliated him in front of others by giving him tasks typically assigned to drones, such as cleaning restrooms, picking up after him, et cetera."

"So he really hates him," Otro mused. Gavriel could see that he was really thinking hard about something.

"The word `hate' doesn't fully describe it," Mila answered, recounting some of the choice words that Rali had used to describe him on Capri's voice recorder. "From what we've learned, every one of us in the room would have killed Akkilen by now. My agent made it perfectly clear that if nothing else, Rali is extremely vulnerable. The Board meeting is just hours from now, and his intent was to surprise them with the Raven and a multi-billion isk Navy contract."

"Just to prove his competence to them..." Otro said.

"Correct. Now--and I don't mean to be vindictive here--but because of you, that scenario is no longer possible, and Rali is convinced that this is the meeting when he will be ousted and replaced."

"Who's up next to replace him?" Gavriel asked.

"If the Board decides to allow Akkilen to fill the position himself, which is likely considering the turnaround in Ishukone's revenues, then he will almost certainly nominate his son Jussal."

"Is your agent still in Malkalen?" Otro asked. The question caught both Gavriel and Mila off guard.

"Yes, she should be," Mila answered.

"Is she reliable?"

Mila frowned. "She's one of my best, but what are you--"

"Tell her not to leave the system," Otro said. "I think it's time that we had a chat with--"

The radios attached to the shoulders of both Otro and Gavriel began squawking simultaneously. A panicked voice came through the static.

"Sanctuary, this is Recon-Six, tripwire, repeat, tripwire, four heavies, eight mediums, many lights...God damn, they just shot my wingman down! I'm locked up and jammed, there's no room out here...Mayday, mayday, mayday! Recon-Six going down! Mayday, mayday..."

Both radios went silent. Gavriel jumped out of his chair.

Mila suddenly looked panicked. "What does that mean?" she asked.

"It means our adversary is within ten jumps of here, and that two of our reconnaissance pilots are now dead," replied Gavriel.

"What it means is that the old man is coming to collect," Otro said. "And that it's time to leave. Gavriel, don't let her out your sight."

"Understood. Mila, if you'll please follow me..." She quickly followed him outside, leaving Otro staring at the Ishukone data still sprawled across the three screens.

I'm sick and tired of running, Otro thought. Enough is enough.

~

Chapter Five

War Relics



Sigma Point
Admiral Bane's Fleet Staging Area
Pure Blind Region

Betrayal, Bane thought, invokes the vilest of human emotions.

He watched patiently as camera feeds from the sentry guns of Forward bases Nine, One, and Two projected images directly into his mind. Surrounding the powerful Scorpion-class battleship slaved to his frail, physical self was an armada of Guristas warships whose commanders waited in angered silence for his orders. Bane told each of his officers that their prey was a man who conspired to betray the Guristas brotherhood, and that by doing so had betrayed each of them and their families personally. Otro Gariushi and all of his deranged followers are to be put down, Bane explained. Like facing a cornered animal, you cannot afford to make any mistakes, he had warned them. Kill as soon as the opportunity presents itself, without remorse.

A voice disrupted Bane's concentration: "Target's reconnaissance elements have been destroyed according to your instructions, sir."

And so it begins. "You're certain they had time to assess the size of the fleet?"

"Yes, sir. Without question."

"Excellent. Hold there and await my command."

"Acknowledged."

Bane focused his attention on the hangar bays. Any moment now the first ships of Otro's pathetic fleet would undock, revealing which of the bases he was using to hide. And then the massacre would begin.

Show yourself, Bane thought. Meet the destiny you've so foolishly chosen for yourself.

~

Forward-Nine
ROIR-V System
Pure Blind Region

"It's done," Mila said as she switched the comm terminal down. "You two had better know what you're doing."

Gavriel looked excited. "She has your entire analysis?"

"Copies will arrive at each of the destinations you specified within the hour, and my agent is on her way back to Ishukone Corporate Headquarters on Malkalen Five as we speak."

"Outstanding!" exclaimed Gavriel, unable to contain his excitement. "Do you have any idea what that means!" He jumped from his chair and prepared to enter the mobile gantry unit (MGU). The Scorpion-class battleship awaiting his arrival loomed in the hangar beyond the thick glass like a floating city.

Mila looked worried. "Just leave my name out of this," she replied, also getting up and hoisting a duffle bag over her shoulder. The boarding area for passengers was one deck below them. "That information might as well be antimatter. There will be dire consequences for many people, to say nothing of ourselves if we're not careful. I admire your courage and determination, Gavriel. I sincerely mean that. But you're in over your head with this."

"I've been told that before," he answered with a wink. "Hurry aboard. There isn't much time."

~

Otro was now looking at the world through the lens of a camera drone. His Moa-class cruiser floated in the hangar, fully crewed, armed, and ready for departure. The fleet commanders had all checked in, indicating their readiness to undock.

"Gavriel, you ready?" he asked.

"Roger that, Otro. Mila is safely aboard. Your call," came the response.

Otro switched comm channels to address the fleet. "Tackler's Squadron, go."

The frigate squadron commander answered immediately. "Tackler's undocking, aye."

~

There you are, thought Bane as he watched a progression of Merlin and Kestrel-class frigates emerge from the hangar of Forward Nine. After giving a terse command to his officers, the warships surrounding him disappeared. They would be within firing range of Otro's fleet in less than five minutes. Of the three bases Bane had selected as possibilities, Forward Nine was the most accessible from Sigma Point. Bane was hardly surprised. His ambush plans were always perfect.

While his own Scorpion accelerated to warp speed, Bane instructed the sentry guns of Forward Nine to acquire passive targeting locks on the ships that he selected. He would not commence blotting Otro's frigate squadron out of existence just yet.

Patience, he thought, is a lesson too easily lost on the young.

~

"Tackler's are out, perimeter is clear," voiced the frigate squadron commander.

"Specters, go," said Otro.

"Wilco, Specters outbound," answered the Specter cruiser squadron commander. Otro switched channels again. "Gavriel, what do you think? The abandoned mining outpost in A-DDGY?"

"Sounds good to me, Otro," he replied. "Course is set, whenever you're ready."

"Standby," said Otro. "One more Spectre is ahead of me."

~

Bane counted ten Blackbird-class cruisers in all, flying a lazy orbit around the station with their frigate escorts following close behind. Then, a Moa-class cruiser emerged from the hangar.

Hello, Otro.

"Admiral, all ships in position, awaiting your mark," announced Bane's attack squadron commander.

"Standby," he said, smiling from somewhere underneath the layers of ship weaponry, electronics, and armor surrounding him. With a single thought, all four of Forward Nine's sentry guns fired twin 425- millimeter antimatter rounds at Otro's frigate squadron commander.

~

The flash of light caught Otro by surprise, seeming too bright to be a navigation beacon from the station or any ships. Instinctively rotating the camera view towards the source, he saw an expanding shockwave and debris field in the midst of the frigate group. At the same time, four flashing threat indicators appeared on his tactical display. Just as the horror of what was happening began to set in,

Otro saw four bright streaks of light converge on the Specter commander's Blackbird. The warcomm channel erupted immediately with confusion.

"Commander! Tackler One is down!" warned a frigate captain.

"What the hell is happen--" The Specter commander never finished his sentence as a second volley from the sentry guns vaporized his cruiser in a sickening flash of blue and white. Otro's stomach turned to ice. Frantic, he switched channels.

"Gavriel! Don't undock! That's an order!" Otro winced as another explosion illuminated the space around his ship.

"Otro, what's going on-- "

"The goddamn sentry guns! Bane has control of them!"

"Impossible! How do you--"

Otro's tactical display suddenly jumped from four threats to more than thirty.

~

Bane surveyed the battle unfolding below him with sadistic ecstasy. With the sentry guns doing most of the work, his own frigates and cruisers pounced on the disorganized force with relentless precision, systematically destroying ship after ship. Otro's fleet scattered in different directions, with no discernable coherence among them. Explosions illuminated the outer hull of Forward Nine, while Otro's Moa twisted and squirmed, jammed into obsolescence, helpless to do anything but watch as his followers were killed in front of him. Leave his ship incapacitated and unable to flee, Bane had told his commanders, so that he will know humiliation and regret before he dies.

But the mayhem did not unravel precisely according to Bane's prediction. Why has the other traitor Gavriel not emerged to assist his dying comrades, he thought to himself. Perhaps he is more of a coward than I thought. It was a possibility that Bane had hoped to avoid, but was amply prepared for nevertheless.

~

"Warp out! Anywhere you can!" Otro screamed, reeling in mental agony as he watched the carnage before him. Everywhere he looked, his ships and crews were being mercilessly slaughtered in a cataclysmic battle as hybrid charges and missiles slammed into ship hulls. Otro's head began to spin as the anguished cries of his ship captains pierced his soul. Somewhere in the confusion he could hear Gavriel shouting orders in vain to bring order to the chaos outside. Otro knew the battle was hopeless, and shuddered at the thought of his sister being aboard a ship that couldn't escape from the station.

Right at the brink of complete panic, he remembered his bitter hatred of Bane, Ishukone, and all the pain of his life that had led to this moment. The frenzied rage surrounding him was drowned out by a swirling vortex of nightmares and dread, taking him deeper and deeper towards complete breakdown, when suddenly, from out of the abyss, a ray of hope revealed itself with absolute clarity. Infinitesimal as that ray was, Otro embraced it in the darkness with desperate ferocity. There is always a way out, he thought as the solution unfolded before him. There is always hope!

Snapping back from the psychological chasm, Otro suddenly found himself imbued with supreme situational awareness. Quickly scanning the battlefield, he instinctively sought out the greatest threat posed by the enemy fleet: a Guristas troop transport moving into docking position with Forward Nine. Otro keyed the commlink.

"Gavriel, be advised that you have one enemy troop transport on final approach to Forward Nine. Gather whatever people that can fight together and prepare to defend yourself. You'll have to hold them off for a maximum of sixty minutes."

"An hour? We don't even know that we'll last five minutes!"

"Gavriel, old friend...you've been like a brother to me all these years. I have more faith in you than anyone I have ever known. Protect my sister. I will return with help within the hour."

"Wait! What do you plan--"

Otro terminated the link and started the self-destruct sequence for his ship.

Bane saw it a half-second too late. A second Blackbird from Otro's fleet had escaped into warp, and he was in the midst of delivering a scathing reprimand to his EW commander when the Moa suddenly exploded. His frigates were unable to lock down the fleeing pod in time, and it vanished.

When the last of Otro's cruisers exploded a moment later, Bane furiously ordered his frigates to seek and destroy the pod. His rage compelled him to openly broadcast a system-wide message to Otro: I did not teach you to be a coward, boy. A few seconds later, a response came:

You did not teach me to be a fool, either.

~

The MGU opened with a metallic sounding click, followed by a hiss of escaping air. Gavriel emerged, still soaked from the ectoplasm inside the Scorpion's pod. Mila was nervously waiting for him, oblivious to the events happening outside the station.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Why aren't we leaving?" Gavriel's dead serious appearance made her uneasy. He strode purposefully towards her, and with a firm but gentle grip, took her by the arm.

"Come with me, quickly. I'll explain along the way."

Six seconds later, they were standing inside a station elevator shuttle, plummeting downwards and away from the hangar. Mila became anxious.

"So? You going to tell me what's happening?"

Gavriel's eyes met hers like laser beams. The boyish demeanor that he revealed during the presentation of her Ishukone analysis was completely gone.

"When it comes to numbers, you've proven yourself to be an exceptional learner," he said.

"Okay...?" she asked, puzzled. The elevator stopped, and Mila gasped when the doors opened. Before her stood two dozen rugged-looking men and women, armed with rifles and other heavy weaponry slung casually over their shoulders. Gavriel turned away from Mila to face the group of mercenary warriors. Without saying a word, one of them tossed him a rifle and helmet.

Gavriel shoved the weapon into Mila's hands. "Well, then learning how to use this should be simple for you," he said.

~

Malkalen V - Moon 1
Lonetrek Region
Ishukone Corporate Headquarters

"Rali..."

He thought he heard someone, but the sensation of his skull being drilled open by a mining laser was so overwhelming that he opted to ignore the voice and continue focusing on his misery.

"Wake up, Rali."

Annoyed, he reluctantly accepted the fact that someone was talking to him who refused to go away. It was a familiar sounding voice. He guessed it was his wife and rolled over to his other side, pulling a pillow as close to his ear as possible.

"Now, Rali."

The pillow was forcefully ripped away from his arm. In nearly the same instant that he became incensed, he felt a cold metallic object thrust against his forehead. A very sobering shiver trickled down his spine.

"Turn over onto your back, slowly."

Rali opened his eyes and found himself staring at the business end of a Rist-11 pistol. He did exactly as he was instructed to.

"There's a glass of water on your nightstand, plus a few supplements that will sober you up." The gun backed away from him, and Rali moved his eyes past the 11-millimeter wide barrel pointed at him and focused on the intruder's face. His jaw dropped. Capri's expression bore no resemblance to the playful flirt that she was the last time they met.

"Quickly, please," she said. "You're going to be late for your meeting, and you're not ready to face the Board just yet."

Rali glanced over towards the nightstand. The water and pills were right where she said they would be.

"What's your reason for being here," he said, his voice dry and scratchy. "Can't you just be gone with whatever it is you plan on stealing--"

Capri pulled the slide of the weapon back and lunged forward, jamming the barrel in between his eyes.

"It should be perfectly clear to you by now that if it was your life or possessions that I wanted, they would both be mine by now. What I am here to discuss requires your undivided attention, and this weapon ensures that I have it."

Rali took a moment to consider just how surreal the situation was. A gorgeous woman pointing a cannon at my face in my own home. How ridiculous.

"You can't escape from here," he said. "What do you intend to do? You have damned yourself and your future by bringing that weapon into--"

"Some things are worth dying for, Rali." She pulled away from him and produced a silencer from the back of her belt, screwing it onto the Rist's barrel. "And I don't plan on leaving until you see what it is that I've come here to show you. Now, swallow those pills and come with me to your study."

"I really don't have time for--"

The glass of water next to Rali shattered as the Rist spit a fiery round through it. The bullet continued on into the nightstand, spraying a burst of splinters across the room.

Rali flinched. "What the hell are you--"

The bedding in between his spread-eagle legs began exploding in little puffs of foam padding as Capri walked the rounds closer and closer to his crotch. He began to scream.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Alright already!"

"Rali, please get up and walk to your study," she asked, calmly.

"Right," he answered, getting out of bed in a hurry.

~

Forward-Nine
ROIR-V System
Pure Blind Region

"Keep running, Mila," Gavriel said. "We're almost there."

Her legs were starting to burn, and the rifle felt like it weighed a ton. Ahead of her were two mercenaries, jogging slower than they would normally just to stay close to her and Gavriel. The rest of the group was far ahead of them.

"Why...can't we use the elevator shuttles," she breathed.

Gavriel talked as if he was exerting all the effort of being seated. "Because Bane's troops are already in the station, and they can control them from any of the commlink terminals on the hangar concourse. To compensate, we sabotaged the most direct routes to our destination. Now the maintenance tunnels are our only way in."

"Only way into what," she gasped.

"One of the station's grid junctions," he answered. Mila heard voices down the hall. "The energy generated by the core is routed through them to supply power to different parts of the station. We're going to see to it that some of those parts are shut down."

"Which parts?"

"The hangar doors, MGU collars, and all the communication relays linking this station to anything outside of it," he answered. "Including ships, other stations, and most importantly, the sentry guns."

They emerged from the hallway into a cavernous, hexagon-shaped chamber with a thick, towering pillar that rose from floor to ceiling in the center. The pillar's base was 15 meters wide on each side and resembled a socket with enormous, gunmetal-gray colored pipes feeding it from the bottom. The pillar's cross section was also shaped like a hexagon, and from the middle of each side extended a thinner pipe that spanned the open space and ran into the walls directly across from them, similar to the spokes of a wheel. Maintenance trenches ran beneath each spoke and terminated at the pillar's base. The mercenaries were working quickly inside of them, setting up heavy weapons along the trench ridges and training them towards the entrances into the chamber. One of the mercenaries noticed Gavriel and jogged up to him.

"Cap'n, we're about done settin' up a perimeter and I'll wait for your word to cut power," he said. "We'll put down traps and claymores when the lights go out."

"Excellent work, Sergeant," Gavriel replied. "You may proceed as soon as Miss Gariushi enters the trench."

"Wait a minute, why are you going to put down explosives with the lights out?" Mila asked.

"Every kind of sensor you can imagine is embedded within those walls," said Gavriel, motioning with his rifle. "Optical, infrared, heartbeat sensors, you name it. Bane's men know exactly where we are because the station is telling them. Showing them where we're laying traps wouldn't be very smart, would it."

"I get the point," Mila sighed, still trying to catch her breath.

"So, you're Otro Gariushi's sister..." The Sergeant's right eyebrow shot upwards. "It's an honor to meet you," he said, nodding slightly before hurrying back down into the trench.

~

Elonaya System
Lonetrek Region
Caldari State Territory

Otro broke his concentration just long enough to consider the irony of his predicament: Hurtling through space in a pod manufactured by the corporation that he declared war against. The routes to and from Empire space were pre-programmed fixtures in the personalized navigation system of every ship he traveled in, with carefully plotted jumps that put him directly on top of the stargates that he needed to travel between systems. The border crossing at Torinos was uneventful--seeing pods come through there was hardly an unusual event for the locals--but the deeper he traveled into Empire territory, the greater the risks. Any Ishukone vessel that spotted him would attack without warning, and Bane had undoubtedly alerted the Guristas operating here to be on the lookout for him as well.

Deciding that Elonaya was close enough, Otro warped to one of the system's moons and started to orbit. Twenty minutes should have been enough time, he thought, opening up the communications link.

~

Shock, disgust, and anger were all evident on Rali's face as the information in the report filed past his eyes. And perhaps just a little bit of guilt as well, Capri thought. With her primary mission accomplished, it was time to start planning her exit. The shuttle bay was the only way off the station, and she wasn't sure if Rali would have to be coerced into escorting her there or not. By far, this was the most dangerous assignment that Mila had ever asked of her. It was also the first time she ever fired a gun outside of a firing range. I have no idea what this is about, she thought, but it had better be worth it.

"Where..." he finally said. "Did you get all of this?"

"It was given to me by my superiors, and I don't know what it contains. My job was just to make sure that you read it."

"What firm are you with?" he demanded, crazy eyed. "Lai Dai? Kaalakiota? Tell me who else knows about this!"

Capri waved the gun. "Settle down, Rali. I don't work for anyone that you've heard of. Think of me as a courier."

"Capri, I know you're the one with the gun here, but being associated with that information in any way puts your life in unspeakable danger," he said. "I sincerely thank you and whoever sent you for bringing it here, but you need to know that what you've shown me could have disastrous consequences if it gets into the wrong hands!"

That sounded earnest enough, she thought. All the more reason to get the hell out of here. As she opened her mouth to reply, the commlink on Rali's desk chirped. When he looked to see who it was, his face went completely pale. He turned back towards Capri and glared at her as if she had just committed an atrocity. "I...should have known you were with the Guristas!"

"Excuse me?" Capri asked, genuinely confused. When she glanced past his shoulders and saw the portrait on the screen behind him, she understood exactly what he meant.

~

Otro's delivery lasted just over five minutes.

"I need an answer," he said.

Rali was visibly distressed. Capri was speechless.

"You aren't giving me much choice in the matter," Rali finally said. "This is unprecedented blackmail, extortion on a scale greater than anything that I could possibly fathom."

"And the scale of Les Akkilen's crimes are the greatest in the history of our race, and possibly all of Eve," Otro replied. "This is an opportunity to set everything right, and you stand to gain the most by taking this chance than anyone else."

"Me?" Rali asked. "What do I gain from this insanity?"

"You'll get your pride back, and the respect you deserve from Ishukone and the rest of the Caldari State. And most importantly, you'll get your family back, if that's what your heart wants. "

Rali jolted upright in surprise.

"That's right, Rali. I know about them as well. It must have been frustrating for you, trading away the privilege of watching your own kids grow up just to keep a bastard like Les Akkilen happy. If you agree to cooperate with me, then I promise that you'll at least get a fighting chance of not having to spend the rest of your life regretting the choices you've made, not to mention the damage that those choices have caused to your family. But before that can happen, that ugly truth is that you have to trust me, starting right now, or else everything is lost."

Rali sat back in his chair, closed his bloodshot eyes for a moment, and took a deep breath. I've worked so hard my entire life, he thought. And now this! The crossroads where all of that work has led!

Otro spoke up one more time. "Seize this opportunity, Rali. Take it. There will never be another time like this." From somewhere deep in Rali's mind, where his analytical thinking and reasoning had no domain, a voice of conscience spoke out to him:

There is something undeniably inspiring about someone who has the courage to stand up for what he believes in, no matter what the cost. The fallacy of Rali's hollow life caught up to him in a sudden, brutal wave of self-awareness:

My God, I've been such a fool.

Rali began a slow nod, and then his expression turned to one of hardened determination.

"Give me a few moments to make the necessary preparations, Mr. Gariushi."

~

Piak IV - Moon 22
Ytiri Storage
Lonetrek Region

"...mix of explosive and electromagnetic pulse heavy ordinance, plus as many thermal and kinetic shield hardening modules that you can accommodate."

The test pilot was scribbling notes down as fast as he could. "Umm, sure, but isn't that a little--"

Rali cut him off. "One more thing: You won't be flying her. A replacement test pilot is en route to your location to relieve you."

The pilot blinked. "I...have I done something--"

"You have performed the tasks that I have assigned to you with a degree of excellence that is unsurpassed, but an emergency situation has arisen, and I need your continued support in a new role that you are eminently qualified to handle. Consider your current rate tripled, plus a quadruple increase in hazard pay."

What the hell is going on, thought the pilot. "Thank you sir, but I don't under--"

"Listen closely to these instructions, and fulfill them with haste: Choose four of your most trusted Blackbird-qualified EW specialists and equip their ships with gravimetric jamming systems and tracking links. They will be flying close escort for the Scorpion-class battleship that I just purchased for you. It is being held in escrow under your name in the same station you're in."

Just purchased? The test pilot started to sweat. "Now wait a minute, this is crazy--"

"The Blackbirds are under your command, but your mission is to provide support for the Raven test pilot when he arrives. Effective immediately, you and your escorts are to follow his orders for the duration of the mission that he assigns you to."

"What's the mis--"

"And captain, you are still bound to the secrecy clause in our contract. You are strongly advised not to break that clause. The contract is not all that will be voided if you fail to comply."

The pilot gulped. "Understood, sir. May I ask one question?"

"Quickly."

"What's the test pilot's name?"

Rali grimaced before answering.

~

Although she was certainly adept at hand-to-hand combat, Mila had no formal training in military tactics. But she was smart enough to understand that Gavriel had selected this chamber to be his last stand. Bane's troops would not be able to leave the station once the grid junction was shut down. And if they were careless with the choice of weapons they used for the assault, the resulting damage could potentially trap them inside the station for a very long time. That conclusively ruled out grenades or rockets, at least not inside of the chamber. It was a brilliant strategy, Mila reflected, with its sole vulnerability being that it had a strict time limit. Otro would either produce a miracle within the sixty minutes he asked for, or they would all die waiting for it to happen. There was no escape from here without his help.

She silently went over the crash-course lesson on how to use the assault rifle in her hands: The gunsight is slaved to the optics system mounted to your helmet, Gavriel had said. The helmet system is electronically linked to the rest of us and has a built-in friend-or-foe targeting system. A targeting reticle will superimpose itself on anything that you're pointing the rifle towards, so long as you keep that helmet on. The system displays "friendlies" with their names superimposed over your vision next to them in green. "Foes" will appear in red. "Unknowns" will appear in yellow. Anything that you point the dot at will be peppered with the 8.5 millimeter tack rounds in the clip of your rifle if you squeeze the trigger, so make sure you know what you're shooting at. Got it?

Mila was too terrified to answer one way or the other at the time.

The mercenaries set the heavy weapons on top of the trenches facing three of the six entrances to the grid junction. These "mini-sentries" could be set to motion-tracking and fire on anything--up to and including smaller objects thrown into the room--that moved inside their cone of vision. The guns were chain-fed and supplied from ammo canisters kept inside the trench. The gunners could view the kill zone through the same weapon-slave optics system used with the rifles, while staying beneath the cover that the maintenance trenches provided. Exactly half of the chamber was a sentry kill zone-- nothing could cross the open space without being shredded by computer-guided machine gun fire. The other half was covered by the mercenaries, who were settling into defensive points facing the vulnerable entrances.

The only way to assault their position, Mila realized, was through trial and error. An attacker wouldn't know which doors were covered by sentry kill zones, and would most likely have to trade his life just to find out. Gavriel had set the terms of this fight, drawing his enemies towards him and trapping them here to prevent Bane from just detonating the station and being done with it. Or, Mila thought, at least making him think twice about it.

When the demolitions specialists indicated they were ready to put the traps down, Gavriel inserted an electronic ID card hanging from his neck into a panel at the base of the pillar. His voice thundered on station's intercom system.

"Attention, Bane's troops: In just a few moments, I am going to cut the main power supply to this station. You won't be able to leave, no ships can come to your rescue, and all subspace communications will be taken offline."

"Before you commence your assault, ask yourself this: Whose will is this that compels you to raise arms against us? If a man is known to have betrayed once, is it wise to heed his call to battle? Otro Gariushi is not the enemy. The man who sits outside of this station, so eager to put you into harm's way, is.

"The Guristas crusade against corporate subjugation is a lie, my friends. This is about greed, hidden under the pretense of freedom. This is about a thirst for power that no amount of spilled blood can quench--not mine, not Gariushi's, not your own, and not the millions of Caldari left stranded on Drenali Seven.

"Their suffering is Bane's betrayal to you! The man you take your orders from embraced Ishukone's treachery and turned it to his benefit. By granting amnesty to Ishukone, he endorsed the abandonment of your brethren and left countless settlers to die, alone and desperate in the bitter cold.

"I am Caldari, and my blood flows through their veins! My fight is for Otro Gariushi and the future of the Caldari race, and the blood that I spill on this night will be in the name of hope. It will be spilled for the death of greed and the end of betrayal. Woe to the man who challenges me on this battlefield. Like the settlers of Drenali Seven, that man will know what it means to have no hope before death comes for him:

"He will be alone in the shadows, with his conscience on one side, and the barrel of a gun on the other."

Gavriel yanked the card out, and with a nod of his head, the mercenaries threw a series of switches in the trenches. Blackness engulfed the chamber immediately.

~

Malkalen V - Moon 1
Ishukone Corporate Headquarters
Lonetrek Region

He's making this too easy for me, Les Akkilen thought to himself as he checked his watch. Less than one minute to go, and Rali's still not here. Fifteen minutes earlier, Les had nearly fired an aide for suggesting to dispatch security guards to locate Rali. This could not have possibly worked out better, he thought, allowing himself a quick smile as his watch ticked off the hour. Bye-bye, Rali. Been great working with you.

The guards stepped to the side in unison as the twin doors of the executive conference room opened. Les Akkilen and the other members of his executive team stood up and watched as the Board members filed into the room, one by one, without saying a word. The acting Board president, Zainou Biotech CFO Raurvoras Umokka, was the last to enter.

"Please be seated," she said. "Let's get started right away, we have a lot of material to cover."

"Wait," interrupted Ahtonen Osmon, the CEO of Hyasyoda Corporation. "Where is Ralirashi?"

Raurvoras looked at the empty seat, visibly annoyed. "Les, what is the explanation for his absence?"

Les did his best to appear disappointed. "The truth is that I do not know where Ralirashi is." Time to set him up for the kill, he thought. "He has not been himself lately, and his performance as CFO lately has been abysmal."

"The Board does not appreciate having its time wasted, Mr. Akkilen," Raurvoras said. "Are you prepared to present Ishukone's financial report in his absence?"

Jackpot. "Indeed I am, Director."

~

Mila was the only one who jumped when she heard the explosion, but a few of the mercenaries swore under their breath. The unmistakable sound of machine gun bursts followed. The Sergeant's voice boomed over the earpiece.

"Sentries offline and hold your fire, specialists comin' over the line!" Breathing fast, Mila held the rifle over the trench ridge and toggled the camera sighting on her helmet. The night vision sensors illuminated her surroundings with an artificial greenish-hue. Moving the rifle as steadily as she could, she began to scan the chamber. She saw someone run out from one of the entrances, sprinting across the open space towards her. The name superimposed next to the running figure spelled "DETRECH". He jumped into the trench with her, breathing heavily. Gavriel approached him.

"What happened?" he asked.

"They're real close, Cap'n," Detriech breathed as two other specialists jumped inside. "Fuckin' minesweeper caught me rigging a trap, I had to blow him away. I set off a few charges behind me to give myself more time."

Gavriel nodded. "Good work, Detriech. Take up position with the others on--"

Two more explosions rocked the grid junction. Mila thought she could hear shouts coming from across the room, towards one of the vulnerable doors. Then, a series of loud machine gun bursts coming from the opposite direction made her heart stop.

"Man down, flatline, Door Six!" someone yelled.

"Cap'n, Specialist Dawson is down!" exclaimed the Sergeant.

"Are the rest of the specialists back in yet?" Gavriel screamed. More gunshots made Mila cringe as she spun towards the trench ridge behind her. Trembling, she raised the weapon over top to see what was happening.

"Dawson would have been the last of em'" the Sergeant replied.

"Sentries back online, gunners take your position," Gavriel yelled. "This is it! If anything moves out there, cut it down!"

Mila moved the weapon in the direction of Door Six and saw Specialist Dawson lying face down on the floor about 30 meters in front of her. Various pieces of equipment and a rifle lie scattered around him. The blood pooling around the corpse looked bright green through the helmet's eyepiece. She was just about to become overwhelmed with horror when the sentry gun next to her blurted out several rounds. The sound was deafening, and she cowered back down inside the trench.

Hell, she thought. This has to be hell.

~

Ibura System
Torrinos Stargate
Lonetrek Region

The excitement is just killing me, thought Lieutenant Menenden Reppola. Sitting up here babysitting a stargate watching industrials crawl back and forth. The Caracal-class cruiser at his command was flying a slow orbit around the gate on a routine patrol. It wasn't a very challenging assignment, and certainly didn't seem to require the years of grueling training that the Caldari Navy subjected its recruits to.

"Inbound," his patrol wingman said. Menenden rotated the camera view and saw the plasma contrails of a ship decelerating from warp.

"Another indy," he acknowledged, for the hundredth time since starting his tour. This is torture, he thought, watching the Badger Mark II begin a lazy turn towards the Torrinos stargate.

Maintaining law and order during peacetime was mostly agonizing routines and procedures. For a lucky few, there would be the occasional adrenaline rush that resulted from participating in an attack versus outlaws. Those encounters were very infrequent these days, especially for the Navy. I suppose that's a sign that all is well here in the Caldari State, Menenden thought.

"Inbound," his patrol wingman said again. "Multiple ships."

Menenden was a little slow to rotate the camera towards the source of the contrails. Why bother, he thought. This rookie keeps giving me the play-by-play on every garbage hauling indy out there.

"Four Ishukone Blackbirds, a Scorpion, and...what the hell is that?"

Menenden was just starting to adjust the camera when his view of space was suddenly obscured completely. For a moment, he thought his ship had somehow vectored on a collision course with the Torrinos stargate. Panicked, he threw his cruiser into an evasive dive, realizing as the nose tipped over that the colossus before him was another ship. The behemoth vessel made no attempt to maneuver and held course, just clearing the rear quadrant of his Caracal. Five more sets of plasma contrails stopped directly above the Torrinos stargate as the Blackbirds and Scorpion decelerated from warp. They settled alongside the enormous capital ship that had nearly run him over. Menenden barely had time to regain his composure when the captain of the unidentified ship hailed him.

"Attention Navy vessel: Please contact your commanding officer and have him set up a video feed from your camera drones to this ship. In a few minutes we'll be conducting live-fire exercises for Ishukone's latest product in cutting edge capital ship technology."

A very shocked Lieutenant Reppola observed that the captain speaking to him had a 25 million isk bounty set to his head.

"Act quickly, Lieutenant," the bountied captain said. "I'm about to turn you into a Navy hero."

~

"I don't care how dug in they are or how many casualties you have to take," Bane fumed. "We are not leaving without Gavriel's corpse, and if I have to destroy that station to get it, I will. Do not fail me, Commander!"

There was a pause before the response came. "Yes, sir."

Bane terminated the radio communication with his troops aboard Forward-Nine and switched channels. "Scouting team, report."

An impatient voice spoke up. "Sir, we have strike teams in position at Niner India, Echo Charlie, and Papa Three. We've covered the entire Empire border with our pattern and are expanding north towards the boundaries of Pure Blind. If he ran south, he hasn't been sighted by any of our assets on the inside yet."

"Continue to expand your search grid and report in ten minutes, Captain."

"Yes--" Bane shut down the comm before the pilot could finish. Then he composed a message to Otro:

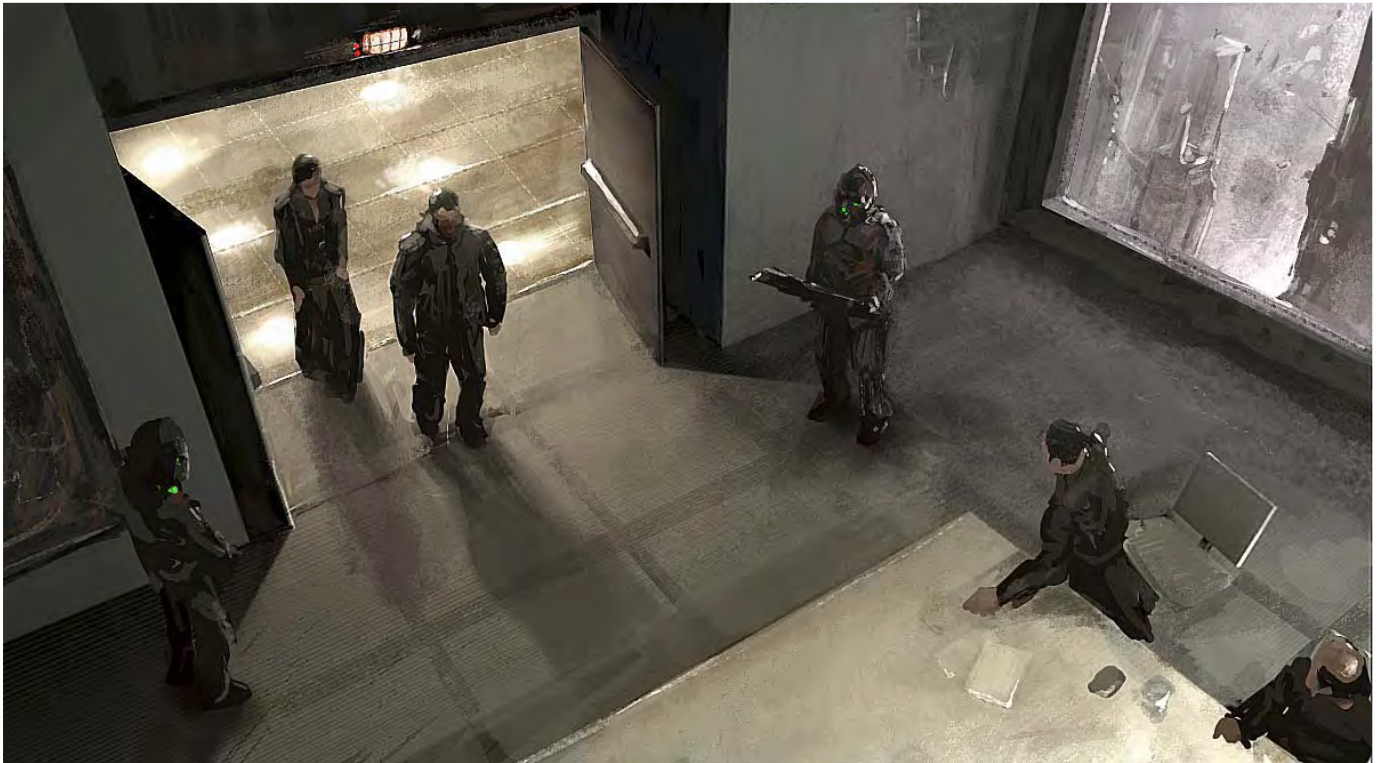
Death is upon your traitorous mentor, boy. He will die remembering you as a coward, who abandoned him in his time of need.

Again, the response came within a minute:

Gavriel is my friend. You were always the mentor, Bane. And death is certainly upon you.

Chapter Six

Omens



Malkalen V - Moon 1
Lonetrek Region
Ishukone Corporate Headquarters
Executive Conference Room, Level 25

Les was just about to complete his ad-hoc summary presentation to the Board when the twin doors suddenly flung open, prompting the guards to whirl towards the new arrivals with their weapons drawn. Rali strode right past them, with Capri close on his heels.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," Rali said, waltzing by his empty chair and marching directly towards the holoprojector controls at the head of the room. "I have some important announcements to make, and time is short. Joining me in just--"

Raurvoras Umokka's temper flared. "Just who the hell do you think you are, Ralirashi," she growled. "And what in the Maker's name is that all over your jacket, why are you twenty minutes late, and who is this person with you?"

Rali looked down and realized that he hadn't changed his Ishukone business uniform from last evening, and that some remnants of his regurgitated dinner were still apparent. He shrugged.

"This is my new personal assistant, Capri Henjska," he answered. Capri waved at the group, looking sheepish. "And these spots on my jacket are something akin to protein delicacies, I believe."

The Board members started muttering among themselves, and both Les and Ahtonen threw their hands in the air in disgust. Les seized the opportunity to go right for the jugular.

"You see what I have to deal with, Director? Personally, I think he should be committed."

"I'm going to put a stop to this right now," she snapped back, her face ashen. "Guards, please escort Mr. Okimo and his `assistant' out of the room. Now."

The guards began moving forward. "Mr. Okimo, please come with us."

Rali held his ground. "I thought I warned you, Director, that time was short."

Just when she was about to reply, a loud tone emanated from the conference table speaker. "Ms. Umokka, Admiral Iella of the Caldari Navy is on the line. He says it's urgent, and that he needs to speak with Mr. Okimo."

The Board members exchanged puzzled looks, while the guards turned back to Raurvoras for an answer. Before she could give them one, Rali spoke up.

"Thank you very much, Maura. Please put the Admiral through on the view screen in here."

"Yes, sir," the secretary responded. To everyone's surprise, the security commander of the Caldari Navy was now an attendee of their private Board meeting. The guards backed away from Rali. Open jaws around the conference room snapped shut as the Admiral spoke.

"Good morning, Ishukone," the gruff voice said. "What's all the commotion about?"

"Good morning Admiral, and thank you for joining us on such short notice," Rali said. "Today is going to be a breakthrough day for Ishukone, the Caldari Navy, and in fact the entire Caldari State, and I wanted all of you to witness this glorious occasion firsthand."

Rali pulled a disk out of his pocket and started waving it in front of the group. Raurvoras looked nauseous.

"The contents of this disk will change your entire perspective of Ishukone, Director. Indeed, it will change all of your views." He stared directly at Les Akkilen. "Oh, how Ishukone has just prospered under your leadership, sir."

Rali placed the disk on the conference room table. "But we'll save the best for last. First, I would like to introduce to you Ishukone's greatest innovation yet: The Raven-class battleship. Lights!" The room automatically dimmed, and the holoprojector began casting a live, three dimensional image of the prototype capital ship as seen from the camera drones orbiting Lieutenant Reppola's Caracal. The Raven's majestic image was almost as large as the table itself. Some gasps went around the room. Les appeared confused.

"Incorporating all of the very latest in cutting edge starship engineering and weapons technology, the Raven is the ultimate symbol of Caldari might and Ishukone pride," Rali said, savoring the astonished looks of the Board members. "When we set out to design her, our goal was to unseat Lai Dai's Scorpion as the State's flagship. It is my personal belief that we have achieved that, and my objective today is to make believers out of the rest of you as well."

The Navy Admiral looked impressed. "That's some damn fine work there, Ishukone," he said. "She looks like she was made to project power. What kind of weaponry--"

Rali took great pleasure in waving off one of the highest-ranking members of the Caldari elite. "Admiral, I'll be pleased to answer any questions after our demonstration," he said. "But for now, I think it would be best to let the Raven's power speak for itself."

The image pulled back to reveal the fleet of ships clustered above the EC-P8R stargate in Torrinos. Rali continued.

"As you can see, our test pilot and accompanying research vessels are preparing to cross the border into unregulated space. In order for us to continue broadcasting, you'll need to authorize Lieutenant Reppola's transit across the line."

The Admiral frowned. "Is that absolutely necessary? Can't a suitable--"

Rali interrupted him again. "The most effective and economical means of conducting live-fire exercises in the name of assessing naval combat prowess is by testing against live enemy targets, Admiral. Would you have me destroy some of the Navy's ships instead?"

It was Ahtonen's turn to look ill, and Capri cleared her throat. Rali didn't flinch, and kept up his persistence. "Admiral, the clock is ticking."

"Fine," he muttered, turning a little red. "Lieutenant Reppola, you are authorized to transit into Echo- Charlie- Papa-Eight-Romeo. Your primary mission is to maintain your broadcast via this feed. You will be acting independently under the Navy's jurisdiction for the duration of this assignment, after which time you will immediately return to Torrinos for debriefing. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," a scratchy voice replied over the conference room speakers. The response was quickly followed by a second interruption from Raurvoras's secretary.

"Mr. Okimo, there's another urgent incoming message from--"

"Put him right through," Rali answered, smiling broadly. A new voice was heard on the speakers.

"This is your Raven test pilot speaking. Lieutenant Reppola will be under my direct command once we cross, and he will follow my orders once 'testing' commences. In the name of both his own safety and that of his crew, there will be no exceptions to that condition. Is that clear?"

Admiral Iella lost his temper. "Who the hell is this? Do you have any idea who I am?"

"Of course, Admiral," Otro replied. "And I'm certain that you know who I am as well."

Jaws dropped around the table again as the name "Otro Gariushi" appeared on the conference call attendance list. No one could believe that Ishukone's most wanted criminal was now a participating member of their Board meeting. Admiral Iella's eyes were bulging out of their sockets.

Otro continued. "Lieutenant Reppola's safety is now my responsibility. You have my word that I'll do everything in my power to make sure that he returns in one piece. For now, your job is to decide if the Raven has a place in the Caldari Navy. Do not take that task lightly, Admiral. The future of the Caldari State rests on your decision."

Otro's name disappeared from the attendance list, and the Board members squinted as the fleet of ships entered the stargate.

~

Forward Nine Perimeter
ROIR-Y System
Pure Blind Region

"Bane," the voice said. "You told me this would be over with quickly."

"I know what I said, Fatal," snapped Bane. "In just a few moments, I'll have Gavriel."

"And the presence of strike fleets at the southern crossings implies that you've lost Gariushi," Fatal growled. "How many more ships will you need to capture one man?"

"As many as it fucking takes!" Bane shouted. The comm channel with his Echo-Charlie strike fleet commander began flashing, but he ignored it so he could continue his tirade against Fatal. "I am nearly thrice your years, boy, and I won't be spoken to like some kind of subordinate piss officer. Now, promised you two corpses, and you will have them both within the hour!"

Bane shut down the commlink with Fatal and switched to the blinking channel. "What is it this time, Commander?"

The voice was frantic. "We're under attack! Combined elements from Ishukone, Navy, and rebel Guristas ships! Please advise!"

"Commander, I specifically ordered you not to cross into Empire space! Who authorized--"

The Guristas commander cut him off. "We're still on the Echo-Charlie side, sir! They came to us!"

Impossible, thought Bane. Ishukone, Guristas, and Navy forces combining and then crossing the border? Clearly this man has lost his mind!

"What the hell is that thing?" the commander shouted. "We are getting killed out here! We have to withdraw, Admiral! Advise, goddamnit!"

"What are you talking about," Bane shouted back. "Get a hold of yourself, man! Report on the situation!"

"It's Gariushi! He's the one leading the strike, and I've never seen that... oh, my God--"

The Echo-Charlie commander's line went dead.

~

Raurvoras drew her gaze away from the holographic display to look at the faces in the darkened room. All wore expressions of amazement, even delight, at the destruction unfolding in front of them. The Raven reminded her of stories in ancient mythology, when warriors known as "archers" ignited the tips of their arrows and launched them from range into the thick of advancing armies to spread fire and chaos among their ranks. Another bright flash drew a series of gasps in the room as a procession of torpedoes launched from the Raven converged and detonated on a Guristas Ascriber, destroying it in a single volley. The battle was brutally lopsided. The Guristas were completely unprepared to face a behemoth like the Raven, let alone an attack from such a diverse force.

And this Otro Gariushi! What was he doing, and for how long has he had the trust of Ralirashi Okimo? I was the one who approved the 25 million isk bounty for his corpse, and now here I am watching him lead Ishukone and Navy ships in an attack against the Guristas! His crimes against Ishukone are notorious, but this display of leadership is remarkable, if not legendary. Regardless of the Raven's power, how else could he unite such opposite forces in combat against such a formidable enemy!

Another flash of light illuminated the room as the detonations from Mjolnir torpedoes shredded the shields and armor of a Guristas Exterminator. A barrage of railfire and heavy missiles from the rest of Otro's fleet pulverized the doomed cruiser moments later, adding another wreck to the graveyard of shattered Guristas warships

littering the space around the Torrinos jumpgate. The battle was over, and as far as Raurvoras could tell, Gariushi's fleet did not suffer a single casualty.

The men and women seated around the table were shaking their heads in awe. All except for Les Akkilen, in whom I sense genuine fear for some reason, Raurvoras thought. Les was always one to take immediate credit for any accomplishment that shed Ishukone in a positive light, and yet he had mentioned nothing about this remarkable technology to the Board during his briefing. She looked over at Rali's buxom "assistant", who had yet to speak and looked just as nervous as Les did. Rali, on the other hand, looked angry. Determined. It was such a sharp contradiction to the Rali that she thought she knew. He had always been so meek, so timid, so subservient to Les and anyone else who managed to intimidate him. And yet today he had put some of the most respected and feared elites of Caldari society in their place, and had done it several times in the same meeting!

Her eyes found the disk lying on the table close to where Rali was standing. What the hell did he mean by "changing my perspective of Ishukone?"

~

Fatal was so angry that he began to tremble. The price I pay for dealing with Bane is far exceeding the worth of his contributions here, he thought. His age is showing with his decision-making. No matter how many cybernetic implants he uses to slow down the aging process, his mind continues to rot.

The commlink began flashing. It was Otro Gariushi, and Fatal just watched it blink, unsure if he should answer it. Letting the comm request hang, a message appeared in his inbox after a few moments:

The Raven just passed its first combat trials in EC-P8R at the expense of a Guristas strike fleet. Are you interested in making a deal, or shall I move on to the next strike fleet?

Stunned, Fatal read the message a second time. His spies had told him that a single Raven prototype was constructed, and was so hyper secret that even the Navy was unaware of its existence. Am I to really believe that Otro simply walked into a hangar somewhere and stole it? Impossible! Another commlink channel began flashing: It was the EC-P8R strike fleet commander under Bane's command. Fatal answered it immediately.

"What is it, Commander."

The voice was scratchy. "Sir, my fleet has been destroyed, and I am in a webbed and warp-scrambled pod near the Torrinos gate on the Echo-Charlie side. I have been instructed by my captors to contact you directly and feed camera drone footage taken from my ship before its destruction to your location. Standby to receive."

Fatal's hands rolled into tight fists. "Very well, Commander. Awaiting transmission."

After watching thirty seconds of video, Fatal answered the open commlink channel with Otro.

~

"I take it you like what you've seen so far, Fatal," said Otro. "Your commander will be released unharmed for his cooperation."

"What is it that you want," came the response. "In exchange for that ship."

"Its fair market value, with the following caveat," Otro replied. "As you already know, this battleship is the only one of its kind, and I have the only blueprint in existence for it. You will never see either if you violate any part of the agreement I'm about to offer."

"I'm listening," Fatal replied.

Otro explained his conditions and execution plan. "Finally, Bane has sent troops into Forward Nine to capture Gavriel and his close associate Mila. I want their assault called off immediately. Doing so will demonstrate your good faith in pursuing this deal."

"Standby." There was a one-minute pause before a reply came back: "Impossible."

Otro's stomach turned over. "Why not?"

"Because the station comm relays have been disabled from the inside, and the only way to communicate with them directly is by radio."

Otro controlled his urge to panic. "Well, why don't you just order Bane--"

"He refused," Fatal answered. "And I'm on my way there right now to correct that."

"You'd better come alone--" Otro started.

"Don't push your luck, Gariushi," Fatal growled. "You've already played your best cards."

The line went dead. Otro set course for the ROIR-Y system and announced deployment instructions to the rest of his fleet.

~

"Absolutely not!" Admiral Iella yelled. "I will not authorize Lieutenant Reppola to go any deeper into unregulated space. This is an outrage! A pirate leading Navy forces into combat--"

"--is hardly unusual considering that the Guristas Cartel is comprised mostly of ex-Navy personnel," Otro said, continuing for the Admiral in mid-sentence. "I would think that this kind of operation is routine for you by now."

Admiral Iella shook his head, visibly angry. "You son of a bitch, when I find you--"

"--you'll shake my hand and thank me for doing the Navy such a great service by field testing its new flagship and collecting the greatest bounty the Caldari Navy has ever issued."

"What the hell are you talking about now--"

"I'm talking about bringing you the head of Admiral Bane, whose command you once served under."

Admiral Iella balked. All eyes in the room were focused on him now.

Otro continued. "Besides Fatal himself, I don't believe that any one man caused more damage to the Navy than Bane did, with his defection to the Guristas, the personnel he took with him, the officers that he betrayed, and the technology that he stole. I think that killing him should be enough to earn your respect. After all, the Navy has been trying to get him for years now, including yourself if I'm not mistaken."

Rali spoke up for the first time since the battle at EC-P8R began. "And how did the Raven perform in combat, Commander Gariushi?"

"I think the decisive outcome of the battle you just witnessed speaks for itself," Otro replied. "She has exceeded my highest expectations. You have done remarkable work, Mr. Okimo. The Raven is a brilliant masterpiece of engineering, and it will command a hefty price tag in the open market."

There were several simultaneous objections in the room. Admiral Iella spoke the loudest. "That ship is classified military technology, you can't sell--"

"--that which the Caldari Navy does not yet own?" Otro interrupted. "It seems that most of the Navy's so-called 'classified' military technology is already for sale on the open market, Admiral. The Raven will be no different."

"That ship is the property of the Ishukone Corporation," Les said. Everyone in the room turned towards him. "The decision of how it is marketed will be determined by this Board, not by--"

"You have no say in any of this," Rali shouted. "I think your supreme incompetence has already done enough to--"

"Not yet, Mr. Okimo," Otro cautioned. Both Les and Rali were livid, and the Board members alternated confused stares between the two. "We'll address Mr. Akkilen's interesting perspective on the financial status of Ishukone as soon as we conclude the final test for the Raven."

"Another test?" asked Raurvoras. "I think we're all thoroughly convinced of this ship's power."

"This one will seal a few deals," Otro replied. "And dispense any remaining doubts among you about my intentions. Trust me, reestablishing Ishukone's preeminence within the Caldari State is my goal here. But a word of advice to all of you: Keep Mr. Akkilen someplace where you can see him. He might already be having second thoughts about staying for the duration of this meeting."

Ahtonen leaned forward on the table. "What is it exactly that you are implying, Mr. Gariushi?"

The commlink connection dropped, and the room erupted into a frenzied discussion. Rali and several other Board members glared at Les, who returned the stares and then focused on the disk.

"Bane," Fatal said. "Effectively immediately, you are stripped of your command. The remaining strike fleets assembled at the Empire crossings have been recalled, and your scouts have been retasked. This is my last warning: Call off your infantry assault on Forward Nine and report back to Six-November. We can talk about what happened later, but as of right now your hunting op is over."

"The day that I obey one of your orders," Bane replied. "Is the day that I decide to end myself. You have no right to interfere in my personal affairs. Those corpses will be mine, Fatal, and nothing you can say or do will prevent me from getting them."

"So be it, Bane." That makes this decision simple, Fatal thought as he dropped the connection. Getting the Raven at the expense of the old man is a bargain.

~

Another mercenary fell in a mangled heap, this one with half of his skull missing. Even as bullets snapped just above her own head, Mila watched in numbed terror as the dead man's leg twitched in spasms. "OSA" was this mercenary's name, and it confused Mila that he was very much alive and fighting for his life a moment earlier. The bottom of the trench where she crouched was smeared in blood, and she found herself unable to remove her gaze from the growing puddle around the dead man's shattered helmet.

The mercenaries were no longer firing their weapons as often as they were earlier in the fight, and she had not felt the eardrum-crushing blasts of the sentry guns in some time. In the fog of her traumatized mind, she accepted the realization that the end was near.

I did the best I could with the time I had, Mila thought. I wish my little brother well.

She felt a wet hand on her shoulder, turned and saw Gavriel slumped beside her. The brave man was saying something, and appeared calm as he spoke despite the hell surrounding them. He was having trouble breathing, and she noticed that the body armor covering his chest was shattered. Blood flowed from beneath it. She had trouble hearing, but she nevertheless understood the words coming from his mouth:

"I am so sorry for failing you, Mila."

Still wearing a helmet, Mila realized there were dozens of red-colored targets surrounding them. She looked at the rifle lying across her lap, long since rendered useless after a mercenary took away its clip when his own ammunition was depleted. These angry men, whoever they are, Mila sensed, are capable of great evil. She saw them drag the Sergeant out in front of where Gavriel and her were seated and drop him onto the trench floor. Both his hands and legs were bound. Lying on his stomach and grievously injured, he managed to turn his head and face Mila. He was bleeding from his mouth, and his expression was one of sadness. One of the red targets stepped onto his back with a heavy boot and pulled out a pistol, taking aim at the back of the Sergeant's head. Once again, she could read the Sergeant's lips and understand his last words:
"Better cover her eyes, Cap'n."

~

Word that the Echo-Charlie strike fleet had been decimated by Otro Gariushi spread quickly throughout the ranks of the Guristas. Admiral Bane's plan to apprehend the traitors had gone horribly wrong, and people were dying unnecessarily because of it. Complicating matters even more were ominous rumors that Gariushi controlled an invincible fleet supported by a new super capital ship with devastating firepower.

Fatal's decision to relieve Bane of his command was welcomed by all the Guristas. Many suspected that he had gone mad, and no one was surprised to hear that the old man refused to abdicate. Fatal gave his officers strict orders to force the issue with Bane once and for all.

At nearly the same instant when the troops aboard Forward Nine restored power, Bane was ambushed by his own escorts. Despite a torrent of vicious threats and a powerful counterattack that claimed the life of a Blackbird captain, the Scorpion's warp drive and targeting sensors were quickly overwhelmed. Moments later, an armada of Guristas warships arrived and completed the total immobilization of his battleship. Fatal's commands boomed on the local frequency:

"Attention Guristas infantry aboard Forward Nine: This is Fatal speaking. Admiral Bane has been relieved of his command. Gather your dead and wounded, return to your transport and wait for my instructions. You are to

leave the two prisoners behind as they are--walk away from them both right now. Failure to comply will result in the immediate execution of both you and your family. Do not test me as you have with Bane. His days as a commander in our brotherhood are over."

Unable to withstand this final act of betrayal, Bane's decaying sanity was at last shattered, and his mind collapsed into a wicked psychosis. Streams of incoherent madness and fiendish laughter were broadcast openly on the local channel. Even as Bane's former escorts maintained their blistering electronic warfare assault, they became fearful for their lives. The twisting, squirming Scorpion reminded them of a rabid animal held in check by a length of chain that ended just short of their necks.

The arrival of a second fleet drew their attention away. Within moments, the camera drones of every ship in the Guristas armada were focused on a mighty vessel that no one had ever seen before.

~

Lieutenant Reppola nearly choked when his Caracal decelerated to impulse speed. Spread out before him were over one hundred Guristas warships orbiting an uncharted station. All four of its sentry guns were tracking his ship. Several enemy frigates took up assault positions just behind him, but did not actively target. Then he noticed a lone Scorpion, bathed in a bluish web, struggling next to the station. Tuning to the local frequency, he was shocked to see Admiral Bane's name and the madness that he was openly broadcasting. Commander Gariushi's comm channel began flashing.

"Make sure you patch this local channel into your camera drone feed, Lieutenant. Listen, you've done a great service for the Caldari State. If I die in the next few minutes, do not make any attempt to save your ship. You can't win against these odds, and you won't be able to run. Instead, plan an escape route for your pod now, and make sure you're in warp the second your Caracal detonates." Otro paused a moment. "It's been an honor working with you, Menenden. If we both survive this, I promise that you'll be taken care of."

The channel clicked off, and the Lieutenant quickly did as he was told.

~

Fatal dialed into the frequency that Otro provided to him.

"So good to be in the company of my fellow Ishukone and Caldari Navy colleagues," he started, pausing just for a moment to enjoy the shocked expressions of the Board members and Admiral Iella. "Let's get down to business, shall we? The only thing keeping me from disposing of Mr. Gariushi and his assorted mix of deranged comrades is the Raven battleship at his command. That ship is the only one of its kind, correct?"

Rali cleared his throat before answering. "That is correct."

"Ah, Mr. Okimo. I'm very impressed with your work, even more so with your ability to hide the Raven's existence from Mr. Akkilen. Isn't that something, Les? Strange that he was able to keep such an epic achievement away from us all this time, don't you think?"

"There is no `us', and I don't know what you're talking about," Les answered, feeling the stares of the room bore into his flesh.

Fatal laughed. "I wasn't aware that you failed to mention our partnership to the Board. Well, ladies and gentlemen, the truth is that Ishukone has been working closely with the cartel for some time. Surely none of you believed that your company's wondrous financial turnaround is due to his alleged business savvy? By far, Les is the most incompetent CEO that Ishukone has ever--"

"I don't have to listen to this," Akkilen said, rising from the table and moving towards the room's exit. Capri stepped into his path to prevent him from passing. Les was flustered nearly to the point of panic. "This is an absolute outrage, and--"

"Guards, restrain Mr. Akkilen and escort him back to his seat," Raurvoras growled. "And make sure he stays there."

"I might add that this relationship has been quite generous to the Guristas," Fatal continued, this time sounding very serious. "However, I believe the time has come to end it. But one final transaction remains: The acquisition of a Raven patent."

Admiral Iella looked as though he might jump through the screen. "Never! I have the legal authority to put a stop to this--"

"Reality," Fatal shouted, then spoke in a calm voice again. "It is a bitch, isn't it? In unregulated space, dearest Admiral, you don't have the `authority' to do a goddamn thing. Now, before you overstep your bounds again, here is my offer: If the Raven can beat Bane's Scorpion in a straight duel, I will pay the Ishukone Corporation no

less than half a trillion isk, cash, payable upon receipt and verification of the Raven patent. And if it can't...well, then this meeting has been a complete waste of my time. Do we have a deal?" Ahtonen looked astonished. "Did you say half a trillion isk?"

"A paltry amount compared to what I've taken from you," Fatal replied.

Admiral Iella was sweating. "I should think that Ishukone would offer the Navy a more reasonable price."

"Don't count on it, Admiral," Fatal replied.

~

The space surrounding Forward Nine was now an arena, and its two gladiators floated 25 kilometers opposite from each other, basking in the glow of warp scramblers. Fatal had all but ensured that only one ship would survive this fight. Otro's fleet was positioned about 30 kilometers away from the station, and about 60 kilometers away from Guristas fleet. All those present were about to become spectators to the final combat trial of the Raven prototype.

"Bane," Otro said on the local. "I'm here."

"My bastard child protg," the deranged voice answered. "Why have you forsaken me?"

"For lying to me all these years," Otro replied. "About giving people hope."

Bane laughed like a madman. "No one told you that I am god? That I granteth and taketh away anything that I choose?"

"You're a sick man, Bane. And I've come to put you out of your misery."

"Can you hear them screaming, boy? Your mother and father are here with me in hell, burning, burning, burning. Their souls belong to me, you know. I can reunite you with them if you wish, for I am a forgiving god. All you need is to repent for your sins."

"The only thing that I will repent for," Otro said as he started to lock up Bane's ship. "Is that I didn't kill you sooner."

"Insolent, ungrateful bastard child, you will be made to understand the err of your ways, for a god can only forgive so many times..."

~

"Wait," Raurvoras said. "Before those two start shooting at each other, what's so important about that disk?"

"Its contents will show you the real financial state of Ishukone," Rali said. "And quantify the amount of Caldari blood on all of our hands."

"What the hell are you talking about, Rali" Ahtonen demanded.

Rali was trembling with rage, and had to make a concerted effort to remain calm as he spoke. "The partnership between that man and the Guristas is real. Les gave them stolen competitor shipping itineraries in exchange for operational immunity and free passage of our ships in the northern regions."

"What?" Raurvoras exclaimed. "Don't even pretend--"

"It's all documented right there," Rali said. "The Ishukone name is tied directly to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Caldari State citizens and the theft or destruction of trillions of isk worth of ships and equipment. This is the financial brilliance of the man that Caldari politics assigned to the post of CEO."

Les's face and neck were bright red. "You can't prove any of this, you little--"

"It's already proven, you stupid son of a bitch," Rali exploded. "Do you ever listen to a goddamn thing I say?"

Ahtonen grabbed the disk and slammed it into the bay on the conference room table. The summary findings screen was the first to display. After a just a few seconds of widening eyes and collective gasps, the Board members all looked as if they might faint. "My God," Raurvoras breathed. "This can't possibly be true."

Rali shook his head. "Every single person in this room shares an equal amount of responsibility. And you, Admiral Iella, will have to deal with the inevitable civil war that will tear the Caldari State apart when this information is released."

"Released? Have you lost your fucking mind?" the Admiral nearly yelled. "That information isn't going to leave this room! I'm going to assign a Navy secrecy mandate to each and every one of--"

"Spare me the legal rhetoric, Admiral," Rali interrupted. "There are copies of that information sitting in escrow at the headquarter stations of each and every corporation you see there, not to mention at the Amarr, Minmatar, and Gallente consulates in Yulai. It's just a matter of notifying any officer in those organizations that the item is waiting for them."

"How much does Gariushi want for his secrecy," Raurvoras asked. "Any price that he wants is accept--"

"Raurvoras, think. It's not money that he's after," Rali said. "He wants this corporation to fix the damage that it's caused to the Caldari State, and to establish legitimacy to the Ishukone name. He's a true Caldari patriot, the kind that knows the steep price that must be paid when making the difficult, but right decisions for the betterment of not just this corporation, but for our entire race as well."

"But what he's doing doesn't make any sense," Admiral Iella pleaded. "Releasing that information to the public is going to make things infinitely worse--"

"That's the plan of last resort, Admiral," Rali said. "I told you already, his goal is to fix this murderous disgrace of a corporation, and he doesn't trust anyone except himself to get the job done. And the honest truth is, I agree with him."

Ahtonen clasped his forehead. "You're not seriously suggesting what I think you just did."

Rali looked right at him with a deadpan expression. "We are all up to our necks in rocket fuel, and Otro Gariushi is the only one with any matches. He wants Les Akkilen's job, and that disk ensures he has it."

A bright flash startled everyone as the 425-millimeter rails on Bane's Scorpion opened fire on the Raven. The exhaust plumes from half a dozen torpedoes began crossing the table in front of the Board members.

Raurvoras looked a little distant at first, but then began nodding her head. "The Board will now introduce a new measure for vote," she said. "The topic is whether or not to relieve Les Akkilen from the post of Ishukone CEO."

All but Akkilen and his aides answered in unison.

~

The angry men had left quickly and without warning just after the lights came back on. Gavriel was unconscious, savagely beaten by the Guristas soldiers right up until the point they were ordered to leave. Mila, covered in blood and pieces of flesh that were not her own, dragged herself to where Gavriel was lying. His face, grotesquely swollen and battered, was no longer recognizable. Ripping her own helmet off, she put her face close to Gavriel's, and felt short, labored wheezes against her skin. Blood continued to ooze steadily from the shattered chest armor, and his pulse was very faint. She knew that the armor shards puncturing his chest were probably keeping him from bleeding much faster, and opted against trying to remove the vest. Death was struggling to take Gavriel away from her, and Mila was desperate to find a way to stop it.

~

Come on, already, Otro thought as he waited an eternity for more torpedoes to load into his siege launchers. With the last of his EMP weapons on their way to detonation against Bane's Scorpion, he was down to the conventional ordinance left in his hold. He hoped that it would be enough to finish the job, and winced as the last of his own shields were obliterated by another one of Bane's powerful rail salvos. For the spectators observing, both ships had absorbed an enormous amount of punishment, and it was difficult to tell which one was ahead in the fight.

The voice on the local channel completely caught Otro by surprise: "Hello? Is anybody out there?"

"Mila!" Otro exclaimed, distracted from the explosions now rocking his ship from a pair of Bane's cruise missiles. "Just hang in there--"

"Otro please, send help," she breathed. "Gavriel is dying, if he doesn't get help quickly--"

Bane began his sinister laughing again. "Let him die! Rip the beating heart from his chest and bring it to me, I want to devour it--"

"Shut your goddamn mouth, Bane," Otro snarled, firing off six torpedoes. "Fatal, there must be medics aboard the transport that you can--"

"--do what, exactly? Allow you to add more terms to this deal, Gariushi?" Fatal chided. "I don't think so. I am adhering strictly to what we agreed to--no more, no less."

Six gigantic explosions blossomed against Bane's Scorpion, violently tossing the ship different directions and obliterating huge sections of its armor. The battleship's mighty shields had finally been breached.

"Fatal, please, in the name of humanity, send the man some help--" Otro pleaded, feeling walls of dread close in on him even as he unleashed another round of torpedoes.

"`Humanity'? As in begging for the life of one man while simultaneously killing another?" Fatal said, his voice as cold as ice. "Very well, Otro. I'll renegotiate: Eject from your ship, and I will dispatch medics to aid Gavriel. Those are my terms, and they are not negotiable."

Otro had never known such rage and despair. "You sadistic bastard, Fatal--"

"An answer, Gariushi," Fatal shouted. "Yes...or no?"

A maniacal scream overwhelmed the local channel as the next six torpedoes ripped into the Scorpion's structure. Bane knew that he could not win, and that he would not live to see either of his betrayers perish before himself. Uncontrollable fires swept across his battleship as it pitched and yawed in a futile effort to remain steady. The next volley of torpedoes, harbingers of death already in flight, would be the last. Otro watched their bright contrails arc through the blackness, reluctantly accepting the ruthless choice that fate had imposed on him. My soul will agonize over this for as long as I live, Otro thought before giving his answer to Fatal:

"No..."

The battered Scorpion shuddered for a moment, then disintegrated in an epic explosion as the torpedo warheads found the battleship's reactor core. A single pod, visible on Otro's sensors for just a fraction of a second, was caught in the shockwaves of the final detonations and broke apart. Bane's corpse, part frozen, part carbonized, floated among the mangled debris. The Raven was victorious.

"You are my enemy," Fatal said. "But you have earned my respect. The terms of our deal stand. I have sent you a station location. Leave the original Raven patent in escrow there for the price that we agreed to."

Otro was shivering too violently to answer. He saw a Guristas troop transport exit the hangar of Forward Nine. The frigates warp scrambling his ship released their targeting locks and flew towards Fatal's armada.

"You have one hour to leave this space, after which time my fleet will consider you and all non- Guristas vessels kill-on-sight. You have my word that until then, no Guristas warships will challenge you for the duration of your journey. And once you cross into Empire space, Otro, do not ever return."

One by one, the ships of the Guristas armada disappeared, leaving Forward Nine behind them. Otro Gariushi, still trembling and feeling much older, set course to dock with the station. The ships of the Ishukone Corporation, Caldari Navy, and ex-Guristas pirate cartel followed in close formation.

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Mila sat in the trench, rocking slowly back and forth with Gavriel's fractured body lying across her lap. As tears streamed down her face, she quietly sang old songs that she remembered her mother used to sing to her as a child. She hoped they were as comforting to him now as they were to her back then, decades earlier when innocence was all she knew.

She did not hear Otro approach, nor did she recognize the uniformed men who were with him. Otro's mouth was quivering, but he remained speechless. In fact, all of the men appeared overwhelmed with grief, for they had never witnessed a scene of such unspeakable carnage and devastation. Otro knelt beside his sister, trying to determine if the blood all over her was her own. Then he looked down at Gavriel, gently taking his wrist to feel for a pulse.

The labored breaths became much shallower, and Otro felt Gavriel's hand squeeze his own ever so slightly. An odd sound came from his throat. Otro leaned closer to him, horrified at the pain that his good friend was in and unable to control his emotions any longer.

Otro heard Gavriel whisper the word "Hope" just before the pulse in his wrist disappeared.

Epilogue

...But Still We Go On

Les Akkilen died less than 48 hours after the Board vote that removed him from power. According to the Ishukone Watch Coroner's Office, the official cause of death was a massive drug overdose. Akkilen's apparent crash addiction was not a surprising revelation to the public, and seemed befitting of a corporate elite known for his raucous celebrations and decadent lifestyle. The news of his demise and its scandalous circumstances caused uproar in the Caldari State, sending financial markets into upheaval. When Jussal Akkilen was passed over by the Board of Directors for the vacant post of CEO, matters became even worse.

Very little was known about Otro Gariushi within Empire Space. The Caldari elite openly condemned the Board of Directors for their unanimous decision to appoint another inexperienced candidate as Ishukone's new CEO. Immediately, rumors of an alleged criminal past and a 25 million-isk bounty for his head surfaced. Renowned bounty hunters interviewed by the press swore that the reward for Gariushi's corpse was real just a short time ago, but had since been rescinded. It was, they said, as if the bounty never existed in the first place. Both Ishukone and the Caldari Navy--who rarely issues public appeals on behalf of corporations--adamantly denied those reports, suggesting they were the work of a "character-smearing campaign launched by one of Ishukone's competitors".

In a moving inaugural address to Ishukone employees that was broadcast throughout the State, Otro asserted himself as a natural leader and announced a new corporate mission to put the State's needs ahead of Ishukone's. The introduction of the Raven battleship during his speech literally reversed the freefall of Ishukone stock, as investors correctly speculated that patent sales alone would net the company billions--if not trillions--of isk in revenue. In the weeks following that historic day, he quickly earned himself a reputation as a "Caldari First" leader, winning the respect of rival corporations and mending the bitterness caused by his predecessor.

Otro's remarkable work ethic continued to impress the Caldari elite. After stabilizing the political environment with competitors, he announced the immediate shutdown of all mining operations in Fade. In the largest cash settlement in Caldari State history, Ishukone paid in full every outstanding contract for work in the remote region, and issued significant relocation funds for all the affected settlers on Drenali Seven. Any tenants remaining in Kaurikou Junction were offered free housing and transportation back to Empire space, courtesy of Ishukone Watch. Those same tenants, plus thousands of other former Ishukone employees, were offered jobs in the Raven shipyards and component assembly lines opening throughout Empire Space.

At Otro's personal request, Ralirashi Okimo stepped down as Ishukone's CFO and accepted a position overseeing the Manufacturing Division of the corporation. Replacing him was another newcomer to the corporate world who, despite the investigative efforts of the media, did not appear to have any kind of past at all. Her name was Kinachi Hepimeki, but to a select few she was known only as "Mila".

All of Les Akkilen's former aides and self-appointed senior-level executives were awarded severance packages that afforded them a comfortable, early retirement. They would never issue any public statements about their dismissal, and refused to allow themselves to be interviewed by the press. Today they live reclusive lives, rarely leaving their homes and maintaining a strict code of silence.

Filling in the vacant CEO post at Ishukone Watch was a former Caldari Navy Lieutenant named Menenden Reppola, the youngest executive ever appointed to head the police force. The ties between the ex-Navy officer and Otro Gariushi were unclear, but by this point the Caldari elite were rarely questioning any of Gariushi's decisions. The Ishukone CEO had more than proven himself already, and all were confident that Menenden Reppola would not disappoint.

The picture of a middle-aged soldier with steel-gray eyes hangs from the wall of Otro Gariushi's executive office on Malhaken Five. Above the picture is a plaque that reads "Hope". When asked about it by passing co-workers, Otro only states that the soldier is a close friend from years past, and that it serves as a daily reminder of what his responsibilities as the Ishukone CEO truly are.

A caption below the picture frame reads "So That Caldari May Live".