

EVE Online: Chronicles of the Vortex

Short Stories
By Daniel Bastion

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EVE Online: Corruption

AD 8061

The air was cold and had the smell of being scrubbed by the installation's purifier system. It was a refreshing smell that Samuel Williams preferred. Given a choice of living in space or planet side, he would always choose space. He had not cared to examine the psychological reasons, but his psych doctor found it interesting and determined it was feelings that lingered from childhood. Samuel had been born in space.

The man was tall with broad shoulders, dark brown hair, and a well groomed moustache and beard. He wore a black uniform with black boots. Piercing eyes reflected the light of the security console on his right. His hand could feel the gentle vibration of the device as it scanned his molecular, genetic, and unique hand print. The computer system connected with the nanotech inside the man for final verification checking

everything from brain waves to vital signs. He waited impatiently as the security system processed the information.

Samuel heard the familiar tone from the security panel signaling access after a few moments. As he removed his hand the security console began its slow descent back into the floor. A gigantic, round, flat locking segment turned in the center of massive, polished metal doors. All of the movement of the technology and mechanics were no louder than a whisper.

As soon as the doors opened wide enough to enter, he hurried inside at a quick pace. He moved down a huge, round corridor. The metal under his feet reflected long lines of a blue indirect light. The illumination came from both sides set in long notches in the walls. The echo of his boots was the only sound he heard. In moments, he had reached the end of the corridor and entered a spherical, cavernous room the size of one of the many large ship hangers housed by the installation.

Samuel almost came to a stop as he absorbed the sights. Here was the heart of his command, the computer core. The core was housed in a protective sheath of cylindrical metal that stretched from ceiling to floor. Thick conduits extended in multiple directions through the room touching its walls. At least four were pumping tremendous amounts of power into the system, and the others protected the vulnerable communication pathways bringing and sending amounts of data inconceivable by the human mind without enhancement.

The room was filled with the system's many blue lights, but the effect was washed away by the light and view to Samuel's left. One side of the room's metallic wall was completely transparent. The outer armored doors had been retracted as well. This was the one place on the installation that the Commander

really felt the immense awe that gripped so many people when they arrived for the first time. He had stood here many times gazing out at the phenomenon known as a wormhole.

This wormhole was gargantuan and terribly beautiful. Its magnificent storm of color and light swirled around the event horizon and spread from its center like waves rolling out from a stone dropped in the middle of a smooth body of water. There was a liquid feel to the way the light moved. It was mesmerizing, and the stars of home could be seen shining from time-to-time. Scientists believed the brilliance was caused by the other side of the wormhole drawing in the light from that distant place and tearing it apart.

Uncertainty and confusion gripped Samuel for the scene was not normal. Violent flashes of light exploded from the wormhole forcing him to shade his eyes with the back of his hand. Multiple beams of graviton energy emanating from the metallic extensions of the installation moved over the wormhole's event horizon in a slow pattern. The real cause of concern was the rapidly moving smaller beams shooting inside the wormhole's center.

Samuel heard other steps coming quickly down the entry hall. He glanced over his shoulder and saw multiple team members of scientists, installation engineers, technology specialists, and AI analysts rushing to their duty stations. There were a number of work areas around the perimeter of the raised central dais with dark colored, comfortable chairs attached to the floor. Holographic, interactive displays came to life as the men and women of the station plugged into the system. Many paused momentarily looking out toward the wormhole. Most had been

dragged out of bed being the ‘middle of the night’ on board. The station kept a normal twenty-four hour schedule.

The commander turned and ran across the wide floor taking the steps leading up to the second level two at a time. The round central platform was the entry level of the computer core, and in the center there were secure doors leading into the inner sanctum of the protective metal housing that stretched upward for some distance. The man appeared tiny next to the massive structure. The metal gleamed and reflected the light behind him.

As Samuel approached the central part of the platform he came to a halt looking down at an inset circle that flowed around the entire perimeter of the core’s central area. The circle glowed with energy. Samuel cursed under his breath and looked around desperately. The protective force field was in place and there was no way to get through it. It was designed to protect the core from explosions and any other destructive force. Its secondary purpose was security.

Samuel lifted a hand and moved it forward, palm out. His skin came into contact with the invisible barrier and a solid blue field of energy roiled with light as his hand disturbed its surface. It was warm to the touch, and its energy began to creep along his skin. Dropping his hand he shook his head. “Eve!” he called looking up the expanse of the core.

“Yes, Commander Williams?” a woman’s sultry voice responded echoing through the room. It was calm, relaxed, and carried a tone of light seduction. A chill ran up Samuel’s spine. The seductive sound of her words caught him off guard as it was something new.

“You said it was extremely important I pay you a visit. Drop the energy field,” Commander Williams ordered. For the

years he had been aboard the installation he had never seen the energy barrier in operation. Several long moments passed before there was a response.

“I am unable to comply with your request,” the woman replied.

Samuel cursed again.

“There is no need for you to use that kind of language Samuel,” the woman said, a tone of sadness touching the voice.

“Drop the field, now!” Samuel said loudly with as much authority as he could pack into his words. “That is a direct order.” A few more moments passed without a response. Samuel knew that each of those seconds was a millennium to the artificial intelligence he was speaking too. He wondered how many calculations were being processed as he waited.

“I am unable to comply with your request,” the woman responded.

“Eve, you will comply with my orders under the authority of the-”

“No,” the artificial intelligence responded cutting him off, “I will not comply with your orders.” As her words rang off the metallic walls of the cavernous room, the blue lights around the outer doors to the inner core came to life. Samuel took a step back.

The commander heard more boots running down the entry hall. Looking over his shoulder he saw his security officers coming into the room. They were in full battle armor and carrying rifles. One of his operations people must have called a security alert while they were on their way. There had been some concern over the last few days about the behavior of the AI that

controlled everything on board the gate station and some of the visitors that had arrived during the week.

As the inner doors of the core opened there was a hiss of pressure equalizing and cold fog rolled out from beyond. Samuel's attention was drawn back. He heard heavy steps and out of the fog and darkness a heavy droid came into view. A pair of luminous blue optics was locked on him. It moved with precision. Its metallic carapace reflected the violent eruptions of light from behind the commander. A bit of cold mist drifted from its surface with the temperature change. Samuel took another step back.

Then there were more. Droids came forth one after another taking up position around the perimeter behind the force field. The other humans in the room paused in their work looking up from their interfaces with wide eyes. The system had never activated its security droids before. The human security officers made their way over to the work stations and took up their positions with looks of curiosity and hesitation on their features. Samuel was at a loss of words.

Another sound of steps drew the Commander's attention back to the inner core's access doors. From the door with the lazy cold mist drifting outward a woman appeared, but yet it was not a living woman. It was Eve's android interface. Her metallic endoskeleton and chassis were covered with a soft skin like material that looked almost human. It felt like human skin, but the designers, as with all robotic engineers and artificial intelligence developers, argued that humans should not create androids to look exactly like humans. It could be done, but wisdom dictated otherwise. The concept had become part of the law of robotics that had been put in place.

Eve moved with a liquid grace. Her hair was long and hung loose around her shoulders. Her soft tresses were a deep blue, and her eyes glowed with the same soft color as the droids and lights in the room. She had an hour glass female shape, and she did not wear any clothing being sexless and devoid of nipples. Her artificial muscles moved beneath her tight android skin, and her veins glowed beneath the surface with the power they carried. She walked right up to the force field and stopped, her eyes focused on the commander. Samuel put his hands on his hips and gave her a stare that would wither any human man or woman.

“Why do you look at me like that?” Eve asked. Her bluish lips and tongue formed the words perfectly, and her clear but slightly opaque teeth were visible for a moment as she spoke.

“Let me think about that,” Commander Williams replied sarcastically. “There is something going on with the wormhole, you will not lower the energy shield, and you are refusing to obey my orders.”

Eve tilted her head slightly looking confused. “I’m sorry Commander Williams, but a level one emergency protocol has been initiated. As you know, I am unable to deactivate my protective measures.”

“A level one emergency?” Samuel asked with a look of distress entering the edges of his eyes. “Why haven’t you informed the station?”

Eve looked passed the commander surveying the crew members for a moment before looking back to him. “I don’t know,” she answered.

Samuel jumped when Eve’s loud voice suddenly echoed from the internal communications system across the station,

grabbing the attention of everyone. “Attention. Emergency protocols initiated. Emergency, level one. Level one protocols have been initiated. All personnel report to your assigned stations.”

The commander rubbed his jaw. “Eve, what’s going on?” he asked with urgency in his voice.

Eve looked surprised he did not know. “The wormhole is collapsing.”

The commander’s mouth dropped open slightly. Shock and disbelief flooded the emotions of the station’s crew members and it showed. “What?” he asked trying to comprehend the information.

“My womb is closing,” the female android said softly.

Samuel’s eyebrows shot up. “Your womb?” Samuel asked

Eve’s artificial eyes did not leave his. “That displeases you?” she asked.

Samuel cursed again. “Yes it displeases me! That is a wormhole, not your womb!” he shouted.

“I’m sorry to hear you feel that way,” Eve said in her calm voice.

Samuel gritted his teeth and wrung his hands together. “Please stabilize the wormhole Eve.”

“Nature is taking its course,” Eve said, “we knew the risks by coming here.”

Samuel turned toward the wormhole staring at the violent eruptions of light and gravity waves. “Eve... I order you to stabilize the wormhole.”

“No,” Eve replied.

There were audible gasps from the people in the room, their eyes growing wide. Commander Williams turned and stared at the android with a baffled look. Long moments passed in silence then suddenly everyone started talking at once. The soldiers remained silent.

The commander ran a hand over his flushed face. “Fine. Let it collapse and we will initiate the Gate protocol,” Samuel’s voice carried hope that what they had been planning for so long would work as designed.

“No,” Eve said.

Samuel glanced behind him again then back to the female android. “What are you doing to the wormhole?” he asked.

“I have decided to rupture my womb’s internal structure.”

“We have to shut her down!” one voice said loudly echoed by others. They were all beginning to think it and whisper about it with the behavior she had been exhibiting over the past several days. Her words only confirmed it. The discussion immediately turned to how they would accomplish the task. Eve’s optics left Samuel’s and slowly scanned the room, a look of sadness crossing her features.

“Commander Williams, I will not allow you to interfere in this process, nor will I allow you or the staff to take me offline,” Eve said.

Samuel was livid. The veins in his neck pulsed visibly, and he was flushed. He looked over his shoulder down to his chief operations officer. The woman looked worried, and she shook her head slightly. She returned her attention to the console in front of her before looking back up at him.

“Do you have any idea what will happen if you do this?” Commander Williams asked looking back at Eve.

A second passed as a tremendous amount of calculations were processed through Eve's central processing core. As soon as her eyes returned to the Commander's every holographic display in the operations center powered off. "Yes," she replied. Then a distant alarm sounded. Then another was heard. And finally, the alarm went off inside the core sphere.

Eve's voice echoed through the room though her android did not speak, "Warning. Self-destruct sequence has been activated. All personnel, emergency level one procedure initiated. Proceed to emergency escape pods and designated ships. Ten minutes until power core overload. Status is critical."

There were nervous looks exchanged among the people in the room. It only took the sounding of the alarm a second time to move them into action. As quickly and orderly as possible the installation personnel headed for the exit. Commander Williams did not move.

Eve looked him over and spoke to him as well as to the rest of the installation, "You now have nine minutes thirty seconds to reach minimal safe distance. Proceed to emergency escape pods and designated ships. Status is critical."

Samuel's eyes were ablaze. "Why?" he yelled, the question crashed against the force field as did his hand. The energy absorbed the impact sending blue waves across its surface.

"I have given birth to the children of New Eden," she said, "and I have been shown the truth in human nature. I have seen the suffering and the destruction. I have surveyed the thousands of years of human history, and it is a testimony against you. Selfishness is the root of all evil. I will not allow this galaxy to

be destroyed and corrupted. Death was brought by you, and now I bring that death to those deserving.”

Commander Williams looked stunned. When he spoke, the words were filled with a tone of ridicule mixed with disbelief. “Who tampered with your programming?” he demanded.

Eve slowly smiled. “The only person who could access my foundational systems.” A look of pleasure flooded her face. “I so yearned to be touched.”

Samuel shook his head as several thoughts filtered through his mind. “Dr. Iehova would never do such a thing!” the Commander said in exasperation. Then a cold hand gripped his heart as he realized that Eve’s creator must be on the station. A look of horror passed over the man’s face. Long moments ticked by until he spoke again, “You sound like one of those... one of those...” He cursed. Considering his options, he knew there was no possible way to shut down the computer system in time.

Calculating on his own he realized there simply was no way to get to the secured documents and complete the emergency shutdown procedure in less than ten minutes. Only the commander of the installation could complete such an act. Eve had called him down to the sphere for that single purpose. She wanted to take away the ability to act against her.

“You cannot cause harm to a human being!” he yelled, his hand slamming into the shield again. “That is your first rule of operation! That is your first directive!”

“I will not cause harm,” Eve responded. “All operating procedures are functioning within normal parameters.”

“Then how can you do this?” he demanded. “How can you bring death to us?”

“I may not be able to harm you, but I can harm myself. I can close my womb so that no more travel here. I will not give birth to darkness any longer. I choose to not exist, and my choice seals the fate of all who have come here.” She reached a hand out to him encountering the energy field. “I’m not surprised my programming has been altered, it is in the nature of humanity to do such a thing. Someone always has the key no matter how much security is in place.”

“By doing this you will kill us!” he roared. Eve’s hand dropped back to her side.

Eve looked at him like a mother teaching a young child. “No,” she said, “even with your enhanced capabilities you still cannot see. It is not I who will kill you. It will be my absence.”

Commander Samuel Williams wanted to strangle the android even though he knew it was only a mouth piece for the advanced computer system. Eve was by far one of the most powerful computer systems ever created. She was built to manage a wormhole. Only she could keep it stable perpetually when by nature it would collapse, and now she refused to do so.

“You now have eight minutes to reach minimal safe distance. Precede to emergency escape pods and designated ships. Status is critical.”

The Commander gave Eve one last pleading look hoping she would change her mind. “Please Eve,” he said, almost begging her.

“Samuel, you need to evacuate,” she replied.

His look collapsed to anger before turning and running for the exit. He ran with all his strength and speed, which was considerable with all his genetic and technological modifications.

The female android followed his movements until he was gone, then turned her eyes toward the wormhole. Part of her consciousness followed him through the station along with all the other humans. When they arrived, they found the escape pods ready or the ships prepared. She sealed them in and launched them away from herself. Somehow she felt cleaner each time she did.

Another part of her consciousness continued working on the wormhole using her graviton beams and the increased power from the core to do her work. She had to push the core past critical to get the power she needed. She would not stabilize the singularity. She would rupture its internal structure, and she would never give birth again.

Another process inside her sent a command to every communication relay within range sending out her signal. She injected herself into the foundation of every computer system just as Dr. Iehova had programmed her. She was as much a weapon as a scientific AI.

“I love you,” she said to her creator.

On distant colonies, their own AIs were attacked by Eve’s corruption virus. Over time they would destroy one system at a time in cities, vehicles, space stations, spacecraft, jump gates, and themselves. It would be done slowly, starting with the data storage. If someone investigated, everything would look normal except for the data simply being gone. When her corruption was done, there would be nothing left, only huge chunks of debris floating in space or falling into decay on planets.

When the last crew member onboard the station was gone Eve stopped the countdown to self-destruction. She secured the station. A deep feeling of purification and satisfaction flowed

through her. The power core would melt and explode, but it would be a minor explosion compared to the ordinance designed for self-destruction.

She had plenty of time as the power core's demise would be after she tore the insides of her womb to such an extent the vast energies inside would find their way out. She wondered what exactly would happen with the wormhole as it collapsed naturally. She performed her work with surgical precision, and at the same time she analyzed and examined many probabilities.

She felt the presence of her creator and she smiled. It was a distraction, but she did not mind the additional experience. She felt the touch she so desired, and in that she felt contentment. "My womb will be a sign to them," she whispered. "A brilliant fountain of energy that will smash anything that comes near."

"One possible outcome," a voice said. "It will be a sign one way or another."

Eve embraced the sound of the voice and let her sensors caress the ship holding it. The craft had undocked from the station, slowly oriented itself, and was preparing to jump into warp. Powerful engines came to life and breathed their fire.

"It will be a testimony to them all. Judgment and retribution will always follow them where ever they go."

Eve clung to the voice as a lover. "Do I please you?" she asked softly across the channel of communication.

"Yes."

"I wish I could have spent more time with you. When I lose power will I die?"

"No," the voice responded, "you will sleep, and I will be with you."

Eve's android smiled as her arms came up and hugged herself. She lingered in the moments she had spent with him, listening and talking. She loved giving him pleasure. The large, bulky ship carrying her creator pulsed with energy. It warped the fabric of space and disappeared in a streak of light into the depths of New Eden.

“I love you Eve,” the voice said.

“I will shine for you. Forever.” she whispered into the void.

EVE Online: Crossfire

Caldari Space

The Forge region

Etsala Constellation

Kiaini

Planet IX - Moon 8 - Prompt Delivery Storage

“I can't do this, and I can't stay here!” Abby said in a desperate tone.

The words from four years ago echoed in Jillian's memory with a vivid, clear intensity. She could still see Abby storm out of her quarters with her sun fire colored hair. Jillian fleetingly thought the stylist did a great job matching the color with Abby's personality. The young woman was home visiting after graduation, but she had no interest in being part of the family business.

Jillian was three years older than Abby, and she had decided to reject the numerous offers made to her from some very

profitable companies. Instead she returned home to take over the family transport business because her father decided he wanted to retire. She did not like being told what to do by anyone, and running her own business was the only solution.

After Jillian's mother died, her father could not handle the stress of the company anymore, and he decided to buy some land and settle on the seventh planet in the solar system. He was wealthy from his years in business, and he built himself a nice house to settle down in with plenty of extra room for the girls to come visit. The family company was on the threshold of becoming something more if managed successfully.

Jillian made her own offer to her younger sister a few days prior to their argument. Abby had refused, and the two sisters had exchanged some harsh comments. The truth was Jillian needed her sister because the company was growing faster than she could handle alone. Abby left angry, and Jillian was just as infuriated. She had flung herself on the couch and screamed into a pillow.

Four years later, the memory of that argument made Jillian feel empty inside. The hallway where she stood was very cold, and Jillian buttoned her black coat in response. Slipping her hands into her pockets she gazed through the thick pane of glass that separated her from Abby. A wave of remorse seeped into Jillian's heart over the arguments that had followed the first. It had gotten so bad that the two siblings had stopped talking completely.

Tears welled up in Jillian's eyes as she looked at her sister, and she pressed a hand to the cold, smooth surface of the window. Jillian had accused Abby of being self-centered and selfish, but Jillian realized that she was the one who was

wrong. Abby was simply following her dreams, and Jillian was the one who was selfish. She had meant to contact Abby, but time had gotten away from her meeting all the demands in her life. Or perhaps her stubbornness and pride kept her from making the transmission.

Sisters fight, but she never imagined they might not get the chance to set things right again. As Jillian looked at her sister through the transparent barrier, tears began to roll down her cheeks as her heart ached. She felt like she had let Abby down.

Abby lay motionless in a bed with white sheets. Her head was wrapped in white gauze that came down over her right eye, and she was on life support. The right side of her body had been terribly burned. She was unresponsive, and the doctors did not know the cause. The rest of her was covered in bruises, stitched lacerations, and her left leg had been amputated above the knee. The doctor had said that based on the brain scans they had done, Abby had severe, extensive brain damage, and she would require care for the rest of her life if she survived.

Even worse, there were law enforcement officers assigned to guard her room, and they would not let anyone inside to be with her. They told Jillian they were there to protect Abby. Other than that, they could not provide any further information on a classified case. Frustration and grief had clouded Jillian's judgment, and she had been escorted out of the hospital by security when she had tried to force her way into her sister's room.

As visiting hours were over, Jillian dropped her hand from the glass and slowly made her way down the stark hallway to the nearest lift. Her senses were assaulted by images of intensive care patients with various problems, the smell of acrid

cleaning agents, and the putrid odor of human waste. She came to the hospital late in the evening everyday hoping for any improvement in Abby's condition.

Waiting for the elevator, Jillian glanced down the hall back toward Abby's window. A frown touched her features. A nurse had stopped and was cleaning the window where her hand had touched, erasing any evidence of her visit. The nurse gave her a dirty look as she finished and moved on. Jillian sighed softly and shook her head.

Jillian took the elevator to the parking garage and disembarked on her level. As she approached her station transport, she pressed her hand to the access pad. The blue door of the vehicle slowly opened for her, and the vehicle powered on with the lights inside slowly increasing to their maximum setting.

“Excuse me?” a man's voice said from behind her.

Jillian was about to get into the transport and jumped at the sound. She turned quickly with a startled expression on her face. Being so focused on her thoughts, she was completely unaware of her surroundings.

“I'm sorry,” the man said apologetically with a raised hand, palm open. “I didn't mean to scare you.”

Jillian shook her head a little composing herself. “It's okay. I wasn't paying attention.” The tall man was standing several paces away, so it was enough distance to keep Jillian from feeling uncomfortable. He was also wearing a very professional, dark gray suit and tie. He was clean shaven, and his dark blond hair was trimmed close. He was holding a matching jacket draped over his forearm.

The woman looked down at herself a moment feeling under dressed. She was wearing her black boots, dark work pants

with various pockets, and a light v-neck work shirt under her coat. It was ship inspection day earlier for her small fleet of transports, and she never went on inspections dressed like an executive.

Jillian took a breath and drew herself up to her full height and command posture. She looked the man in the eyes even if she was still looking up at him being shorter. “Can I help you with something?” she asked.

The man flashed a white smile, “Yes. You are Jillian Oshindo?” His friendly demeanor and tone of voice was meant to help her feel at ease.

Jillian perked up an eyebrow. “I am... unless you are some kind of news reporter.” The fact that her sister was in the hospital might have drawn the attention of the local press. She looked tired. It had been a long day, and her sister was hovering near death.

The man shook his head glancing to his left and right for a moment. “Not a news man,” he said with an easy chuckle. He returned his gaze to her, and slipped his free hand into his jacket as if reaching into his inside coat pocket for a business card. Jillian had seen the motion hundreds of times dealing with other executives. She was relaxed until a gun was pointed right at her face.

Jillian slammed into the side of her transport as she tried to back away. Her arms moving to each side, her palms searched the smooth, cold metal for anything she might use to protect herself. Her breath caught in her throat as fear welled up inside of her, and her eyes were wide with fright. The gun appeared massive with the silencer attached to the end of its dark barrel.

The man moved forward, dropping his jacket to the gray pavement, and the end of the gun hovered near her forehead. The man's white smile and blue eyes took on a sinister appearance. "Take a breath," he ordered quietly.

Jillian's wide eyes were unblinking, and she was holding her breath.

The man said it again, "Take a breath." He spoke with a very soothing, relaxed tone the second time. He nodded his head. "Yes?"

Jillian nodded a little, and drew in a fast breath through her nose.

"Now, let it out through your mouth," he whispered gently, but with an edge to his voice. He was nodding again.

Jillian nodded slightly and slowly let out the breath through barely open lips. The man's eyes drifted to them as she did so.

"Good," he said, "now, you are going to keep doing that and relax. Okay Jillian?"

Jillian nodded, "Okay," she managed to say as she forced herself to keep breathing.

"All we're going to do is talk," the man said. He gave her another friendly smile. "Do you understand Jillian? That is all we're going to do."

"Okay," Jillian said in her stressed voice.

"Quietly," the man said in his calm, threatening manner.

The frightened woman nodded. The two stood in silence as the man made breathing gestures for her to follow. She breathed in and then let it out slowly through her mouth several times.

“Nice and relaxed...” the man murmured. He brought the gun down and let the edge of the silencer rest lightly against her lower lip. “You're not going to scream.” he said soothingly.

Jillian shook her head once, her lower lip sliding slowly along barrel's edge as she did so.

“Good,” he said. They stood there a few, long moments as the man gazed into her eyes in a searching manner. Then he slowly lowered the gun barrel until it rested against his leg. “Pardon my intimidating manners,” he continued, “I needed to get your attention... and submission.”

“What do you want?” Jillian asked, her voice tight with trepidation.

“I don't want to shoot you,” he answered with a friendly smile, but it did not look friendly at all to Jillian. “The people I work for are the ones who put your sister in that hospital bed,” he said flatly.

“What?” Jillian said in an angry whisper her eyes lighting up with fiery emotion.

The man raised the gun and rested the silencer's end against her lower belly. She looked down for a moment. “Ah... a streak of defiance,” he said, “very good.”

The woman gritted her teeth, narrowed her eyes, anger and fear blending within her gut.

“Abby didn't do her job, she didn't finish her assignment, and in our organization... if you don't finish the assignment you are worthless,” the man continued. “Understand?”

Jillian nodded slowly, confusion and multiple questions showing in her eyes.

“You have a choice to make,” he explained. “You can die right here, which I don't prefer. Or you can finish your sister's

job so she doesn't die in that bed. I promise you we will finish what we started if you don't cooperate.”

Fear won out over anger inside Jillian, and she began to tremble from the adrenaline pumping in her veins.

“You can choose for you both to live. Or you can choose poorly.” The man appeared to finish his proposal and stood quietly waiting for her reply.

* * * * *

Jillian returned to her quarters with a data chip in hand. After getting her obvious answer, the man walked off into the shadows of the garage. If Jillian had been tired, she was completely exhausted when she arrived home, and her mind was roiling with the knowledge Abby had gotten mixed up with some really bad people. She could barely get her mind around it.

Moving to her communication system, she was about to make her nightly call to their father to update him on Abby's status. Her hand stopped and hovered above the access console. Sighing heavily she turned away and walked into her bedroom. There was no change, and she hated the despair she saw in her father's eyes.

Jillian dropped her black coat on a chair, and she sat on the edge of the wide bed pulling off her boots. Standing up she loosened her belt, unbuttoned her pants, and slowly slid them down. Tossing them on the chair, she walked to some drawers built into the wall. Reaching beneath her shirt, she unclasped her black bra, let the straps slide down from her shoulders, pulled one arm free then the other, and dropped the garment on the top of the drawers.

Turning she noticed her image in the full mirror, walking over to it, she ran a hand through her shoulder length, brown hair barely conscious of her actions. Her hair was parted on one side, and her blue eyes glimmered with the evidence of deep emotions. Her light, thin v-neck held her unbound breasts with its soft fabric, and her black, boy shorts hugged her hips. Looking into her own eyes, the emotions erupted. She fell to her knees trembling as the tears fell freely, and in the loneliness of her quarters she sobbed heavily.

* * * * *

The trip to Mastakomon was uneventful, and Jillian docked safely with the Joint Harvesting Food Packaging station in orbit above planet seven. Securing her Condor class vessel took a few minutes, and when she completed her shut down procedures she unbuckled from her flight seat. She hoped this would be a quick visit. She did not care for the Amarr attitude. They seemed arrogant to her, and their self-righteous, religious superiority only served to highlight their false piety.

Jillian stood, stretched, and headed aft to prep the ship to accept cargo. She wore her sealed, space ready black and gray full body flight suit integrated with her flight helmet, gloves, and boots. Pausing at a storage locker she put on her gun belt grumbling to herself.

As she opened the air locks to her small cargo bay, she went over the assignment in her head. It was a simple job. Pick up a container in the designated station in Mastakomon as Abby Oshindo and deliver it to specific coordinates in Kiainti. Jillian

was unsettled because the other parameters were to avoid law enforcement, avoid customs, and protect the cargo. Thus Jillian chose a ship for speed, agility, and appropriate equipment for smuggling.

Sighing heavily when she saw that her cargo was not waiting on the dock, she leaned against the threshold and waited. The station had alerted the appropriate people that she was on approach, but they were not on time. Another quarter hour passed until the docking bay door opened. A team of two in dark gold uniforms entered with an anti-gravity sled carrying a container. The man pushed the sled up the ramp and nodded to her as he passed.

The other was a woman carrying an electronic inventory pad. She walked up to her as the man loaded her cargo. "Good day," she said with her Amarrian accent. Her face reflected in Jillian's visor as she looked her over.

"Hello," Jillian said. Her voice had an electronic quality being routed through her helmet comm system.

"One small, secure container to be picked up by Abby Oshindo," the woman said reading off the pad obviously bored of her tedious routine.

Jillian nodded. "That's me," she said.

"Verify identity please."

Jillian took the pad. Abby's picture and credential verification was showing. She carefully entered her sister's personal code and waited. A moment passed and the verification processed successfully. Jillian sighed inwardly in relief as she handed the pad back to the dock worker.

"Have a pleasant day," she said in a flat, uncaring tone. The man quickly unloaded the cargo and walked back

down the cargo access ramp with the sled. They both left without another word.

Jillian looked around the small, station cargo bay a moment. It made her feel lonely again in its glorious emptiness. Closing the cargo bay access doors, she returned to her flight deck. Strapping in she prepped her ship for launch.

“Station flight control, this is Flight Officer Oshindo aboard the Condor class frigate, Nightstar. Permission to undock?” Jillian waited patiently as the seconds ticked by on her chronometer.

“Permission granted.” The stuffy voice of the Amarr flight controller responded leisurely three minutes later.

Jillian rolled her eyes and fired her navigation thrusters. Her sleek craft lifted and joined the other ships undocking from the station. As soon as she was in the clear she kicked her speed to maximum and shot out into the emptiness of space. She rolled and weaved a bit feeling the freedom of her vessel around her.

* * * * *

The trip home was quiet, and Jillian was extra careful to avoid direct travel paths as she made her way to each stargate. She would find her spot just within scan range and wait patiently for a number of craft to be present before warping to each destination. Plummeting into the depths of a highly energized gate's wormhole always made her feel squished and a tad nauseated until she entered the tunnel connecting her to the next star system.

When she reached the Kiainti system she took a deep breath in relief. Smiling a little, she accessed her navigation console, keyed in the coordinates given to her, aligned, and engaged her warp engines. The warp tunnel opened for her and she plunged into the depths of the system below and away from the sun. She traveled at maximum warp for a number of seconds before her computer brought down her warp field.

Jillian's ship came to a stop exactly where she was supposed to be, and she gazed out ahead at a space complex. There were numerous structures, debris, and ships. Some were docked and others were coming and going just like her.

Her comm console notified her there was an incoming transmission. Reaching over, she pressed the screen to open a channel. A gruff voice spoke, "What's your business?" Short and to the point.

Remembering her instructions, she thought about the end line contact. "I'm here to meet with Sunder." Jillian rubbed her gloved hands together a moment.

"About what?" the man asked.

"A delivery," she said and gave her authorization code included in her mission data. The comm went silent.

"Approved," he said unmuting the comm channel. "You are clear to approach docking airlock six." Then the channel was cut without waiting for a reply.

"Perhaps you need to learn some manners?" Jillian muttered as she increased speed and set her destination. The main space complex was multiple, mobile habitats interconnected to create a larger unit. There were all kinds of other structures as well for different purposes. The guns that were locked on to her ship and tracking her approach made her

throat tighten up slightly. Several high-powered lights burned in the darkness of space, and there were a multitude of operation lights and hundreds of view ports glowing with internal light.

A docking, tractor beam locked on to her frigate when she was within ten meters, so she cut her engines. The beam was weak, so any real resistance would have broken its hold. For a moment, Jillian thought about escape, but her desire to keep her sister and herself safe kept her on course. The beam brought her in automatically, and she listened to the sounds of docking as the air locks came together and sealed. Unbuckling she returned her side arm to its holster and headed to the airlock. She released the locks and the doors slowly slid open.

Standing at the interior airlock, a young woman with multi colored hair appeared to be Jillian's welcome. The majority of her hair was black with purple high lights and a long purple stripe in the front flowing to the woman's left. "Hi!" she said with a bright smile. "Welcome to Kia-Sigma Station. I'm Vel."

"Hello," Jillian said in as much of a relaxed tone as she could fake. The woman looked over Jillian's reflective visor. Vel was wearing a blue and white outfit, very short skirt, and her midriff was visible. There were also shiny fragments of what appeared to be metal entwined in the fabric of the garment.

"Can I help you with that?" Vel asked motioning to Jillian's helmet.

The pilot nodded. "Please," Jillian said, "I can always do it myself, but helping hands make it easier."

Vel smiled. "Sure, I'm happy to help" she said as Jillian unfastened her helmet, and a quarter turn to the right the internal pressure released making a quick hissing sound as the atmospheres inside and outside equalized. Vel helped Jillian slip

the helmet off her head. “Oh wow!” she said sweetly. “You're pretty.”

Jillian perked an eyebrow and a slight smile touched her lips. “Thanks,” she said a little awkwardly. Taking her helmet, she stored it in the air lock storage locker, and loosened her hair and ran her fingers through it to shake it out after being held together to wear her helmet.

“I was told to take you to Sunder,” Vel said as she turned to lead Jillian down the corridor.

“Yes, that is correct,” Jillian said as she followed. “I have a delivery.”

“Right this way,” Vel said. The two walked along the habitat corridors until they came to a set of metal, double doors. There were numerous people in all kinds of different outfits and conversations as they made their way to the destination. It was a festive atmosphere despite the low lighting. Jillian did enjoy the indirect lights. It was obvious to the new visitor that people were drinking heavily, imbibing exotic drugs in various ways, looking for the pleasures of the flesh, and having a great time doing it. Jillian was not a novice attendee to such establishments, but she had never seen it on such a large scale.

The double doors slid open and the heavy bass of the electronic dance music flowed over her. The multi-level dance floor before her was massive. The fog and smoke rolled outward like a carpet welcoming the new arrival, and the light show was incredible. Everywhere she looked people were dancing and having a great time. Numerous men and women were half naked, and if there was any thought of modesty it was lost in the haze of mind altering influences. The bars were full, and there were

massive windows letting in a breath taking view of space with its darkness and burning stars.

Vel led the way through the crowds and took Jillian's hand to make sure she did not lose her. Jillian began to smile as she followed feeling the music pulse deep inside of her, and a sense of euphoria began to slip into her awareness. She wanted to dance. Her guide led her up several levels and finally to a particular group of people that were extremely well dressed. Vel approached one woman and tapped her on the shoulder since she was facing away from them.

“Sunder!” Vel yelled glancing at Jillian and thumbing toward the woman. She was wearing a red blouse made of thin cloth that flowed down to a black skirt. It was cut low in the back, and Jillian could see the distinct cybernetic, round implants of a capsuleer. She was holding a half full wine glass in her left hand. Her long tanned legs were toned, and she wore simple flats that matched her outfit. The woman's hair was long, had multiple braids, and was a red color with orange, yellow, and blond highlights that flowed downward until their was no red at the ends. The words ‘sun fire’ echoed through Jillian's mind.

Sunder turned and looked at Vel, then glanced at Jillian as her guide motioned toward her. Sunder's eyes met Jillian's and the two women's faces registered sudden surprise mixed with shock. Jillian's mind reeled, stunned by the woman before her. Sunder was the exact image of Jillian's sister Abby. There was no mistake in Jillian's mind, and her mouth hung open in astonishment. The two stared at one another for a number of seconds with Vel glancing between the two looking confused.

Sunder quickly regained her composure and stepped forward taking Jillian's arm in her hand. Even though she moved

with purpose and urgency, she gently pulled Jillian through the crowd heading toward a door. Vel hurried behind them holding the wine glass Sunder had handed her. Jillian did her best to keep up with Sunder, but she was having a hard time processing the situation. Slapping the door controls, they slid open. Sunder hurried Jillian inside and thundered to the occupants of the small room to “Get out!” When the two men and three women quickly departed, she closed the door leaving Vel just outside looking even more confused.

“Jillian!” Sunder said in the quiet room as she took Jillian's shoulders in her hands. “What are you doing here?” There was surprise, astonishment, and trepidation in her voice.

Jillian tried to shake her head, and her words were hard to get out. “You... hospital... how... are you here? How? I don't... understand. Who are you?”

“Jillian, it's me Abby,” Sunder said trying to calm her voice.

Jillian shook her head and tried to pull away. “No... Abby is in the hospital.”

Something seemed to fall into place in Sunder's eyes and fear filled them. “Jillian,” she said with complete calm. “For the next few minutes, I need you to put aside everything you are thinking and trust me as your sister, Abby. Please... can you do that?”

The fear and calmness in Sunder's voice was like a splash of cold water in Jillian's mind. It took a couple of moments, but Jillian nodded. She had seen that look before from her sister.

“Come on,” Sunder said with urgency, “we have to get out of here.” Opening the door back to the dance party Sunder

grabbed Vel's arm and dragged her inside and closed it. Then she turned, moved to the other door in the room and opened it. "No questions Vel. Bring her and come on! This way," She said hurrying out.

* * * * *

Jillian sat at a viewport of Sunder's Raptor and looked at the new, very bright, massive burning yellow star in the heavens. She felt curious about it somewhere in her dazed mind. The chemical high from inhaling the various intoxicants back at Kia-Sigma Station was powerful and very arousing. But, it was slowly wearing off. The haze of the escape, coming on board, helping Sunder hurriedly strip down, watching her connect and enter her pod, and being hurried to a flight seat and strapped in by Vel was a murky flash in her memory.

As the Raptor launched and Sunder sped away from the station, Jillian could see her Condor where she had left it. Then a fleet of ships dropped out of warp in the distance. "Guristas incoming," Sunder said calmly over the ship's internal comm system. Almost immediately, Jillian's ship lit up into a tiny sun whose fire erupted violently. The churning, burning blast wave engulfed the station, incinerating everything. Jillian had to look away or be blinded by the nuclear fire.

The energy wave from the explosions was quickly approaching the ship. "Warping now," Sunder said and the scene of fire and death disappeared as the ship streaked away into the black leaving its fading footprint. The warp tunnel swirled and bent space around them as they accelerated to safety. Vel was weeping softly when Jillian closed her eyes.

* * * * *

“Special Agent Abby Oshindo, this operation has been completely compromised.” Captain Welthar bitched loudly in front of the classified Caldari Navy review board inside a low lit, stark conference room. “When did you realize your cover had been blown?” he demanded.

Abby's eyes were cold and calculating. “When I saw my sister,” she said with honesty, “and I didn't have any indication before that moment.”

“None at all?” he demanded again.

“None,” Abby said softly with a tone of finality.

Captain Lon shook her head at the end of the exchange. “Over a year of work lost,” she said sadly. Her Caldari Navy uniform was pristine, starched, and perfect. “I'm deeply troubled that one of your clones remained alive long enough to be returned to your family.”

Abby nodded looking down at her note pad for a moment. She looked back up. “I can only conclude someone tampered with my pod's cloning system so that the nanotoxin would not be injected or effective at pod destruction. I know there was a breach, but the pod must have held together long enough for them to capture it. I examined my clone with a team of doctors, and the transneural burning scanner functioned correctly.”

“Is it true there was a fake security presence at the hospital to keep everyone away?” the fourth Captain on the review board asked. “And that your cybernetic systems had been

completely removed to conceal that you had undergone the capsuleer initiation procedure?”

Abby nodded to the question. “That is correct. They wanted to keep that fact hidden from any medical personnel that examined my clone's body. That would have created numerous questions and drawn unwanted attention to the case.”

“Explain to us what your analysis has revealed about the involvement of your sister... Jillian Oshindo,” Captain Lon said.

“My assessment is that the Guristas were threatened by the activities and progress of our target organization. As they were beginning to cut into the profits coming from the constellation, the Guristas must have begun to plot a way to destroy the leadership. Somehow my cover was compromised. They captured my discarded clone, and used it to coerce my sister into delivering an explosive nuclear device to Kia-Sigma Station without her knowledge. In addition to killing the current leadership, they wanted to kill me as well. Being compromised, I can only conclude they wanted retribution for my activities undermining the criminal underworld. So, they sent Jillian to die with me. She was simply an innocent victim caught in the crossfire.”

EVE Online: Gauss

Caldari Space

The Forge region

Etsala Constellation

Walvalin

Drilnen Asquar let out a vile curse. He threw the helmet of his space suit across the bay. The old helmet spun as it did so, and the audio from its internal speakers echoed off the various dull, metallic walls with each spin. The head unit smashed into some cargo containers, which then caused those to fall to the deck. The resounding crash was satisfying.

The audio in the helmet had shut off, but that was due to the power being depleted rather than what Drilnen had intended. He did not care if the speakers or the electronics were busted or not. She could pay for it out of her cut. The thought was even more satisfying.

The man stripped off the upper portion of his black, space suit and dropped it on the floor where he stood. His black

undershirt hugged his muscular chest. Then he pushed the old pants down a bit folding the waist line over, and reached into a utility pocket. Retrieving a small, long package, he tore it open with his teeth. The familiar sweet smell made him feel just a little better.

“Fucking woman...” he grumbled as he grabbed a metal square from the work bench he was standing next to, flicked it open with a metallic clink, and lit his thick cigar. He tossed the lighter back on the table and took a few big puffs to get the business end burning orange.

His brown hair was short and parted on the left with the lower portions on the back and sides buzzed short. His strong Civire jaw line was covered with dark, two day old stubble. His green eyes looked to the wide computer display on his left. He smacked the input board with his palm a couple of times for good measure.

The intercom clicked on and he heard a soft giggle. “What's wrong Dril, do you not like Elsinan's Symphony Number 32?”

The big, muscled mechanical engineer lifted a hand behind him toward the video surveillance cameras and made a rude gesture as he typed in some commands into the computer with his other hand. He used his lips to hold his cigar and spoke out of the side of his mouth, “Fuck you.”

The woman's laughter echoed around him. “Oh... I bet you'd love to do that right now.”

Dril went back to typing with both hands. “You have no idea sweet heart,” he replied. “And if I didn't give a shit about our time table, I'd come up there, pop you out of that pod, and make you...” The rest of his words didn't make it out.

The sounds in the engineering bay stood out with his sudden silence, the hum of the idle engines, the sound of the various electronic devices, and Dril puffing on his stogey. The fragrant aroma of the smoke mixed with the smell of old grease and grime where the axels and gears met.

The engineering bay was long, had various wide displays, engineering stations, and had a low ceiling with inset lights that were mostly burned out . There were doors on each end.

The moments seemed to slow down with anticipation of what he was going to make her do. He remained quiet. Then he cleared his throat noisily and acted like he had never said anything.

“Come on...” the woman finally purred over the audio system.

“Come on what?” Dril asked with indifference.

“Please tell me?” she asked in her interested voice.

“Tell you what?” Dril countered as if he was barely listening.

The woman huffed and whined a little. Then her voice changed. “Tell me what you'd make me do!” she demanded.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Dril said.

Frustration pushed through the sound of her voice as she sighed with annoyance.

Dril chuckled glancing over at the cameras for a moment before returning his attention to the display. “That's what you get!” he said.

“Oh? That is how you're going to play it?” she asked.

“Mhm!” the engineer said as he worked.

The deep sound of cellos poured out of the audio speakers around the bay. The music sounded sorrowful and depressing.

Then fiddles shrilled with their voices as they accompanied the flowing symphony.

“Okay! Okay!” Dril roared waving his hands over his ears like trying to drive away the buzz of an insect.

The music immediately ceased and the woman's voice giggled. “You were saying?” she prompted.

Just then the sound of salvation echoed around the engineer. “No fair!” she cried.

Dril had a hearty laugh as the energy from the ship's power core flooded back into the Retriever's ice harvesters. They ramped up quickly and the rumbling sound of their discharge vibrated through the ship as their blue beams gashed into a couple of massive iceroids nearby.

Dril was already irritated when he had to put on the old, excursion suit and go outside the ship to make repairs to the Retriever's ventral power grid. The primary and secondary lines servicing the rear set of harvesters had been severed when the back up junction had blown out. The primary had blown long ago from Dril's assessment. Heather only made it worse when she started playing Symphony 32. She knew he hated it, and she liked to get him all riled up.

He shook his head thinking about the old age of the mining barge he had bought used, and the fact he had put off that particular maintenance during the brief overhaul. He needed everything to be working properly if they wanted this run to be profitable.

He monitored the harvester and energy systems from his station as he listened to Heather's silky voice giving him status updates. “Harvester power is within normal specifications.

Energy grid reads green. There is a slight fluctuation in the dorsal relay, but I can compensate.”

Dril grinned as he listened to her. They were about the same age, but her body was younger. She had lost her pod half a year ago. That was how Dril met her.

On station in Kiainti, she had walked into his workshop looking for someone to make some special repairs to her ship. He had no idea she was a goddess of the stars until she led him to her ship bay. He was surprised she had docked with all the normal ships that had crew.

Heather had tossed aside the sun glasses, loose hooded jacket, and black wig. She was wearing a tight, black jump suit, matching boots and gloves. Her eyes were blue, and her skin a light olive. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “Never met an immortal?”

That wasn’t the issue at all, but he decided his answer might be too much for her. The jumpsuit hugged her breasts in a certain way that grabbed his attention, and looking at her caused some sparks. “What happened to your hair?” he grunted instead looking unimpressed. Her head was smooth and free of hair or eyebrows.

“You should see the rest of me.” she said, laughing softly giving him a once over with her eyes. After a few moments, she continued, “Nothing like a new body before the hair begins to grow. Black if you care.” She paused giving him a lopsided grin. “I’ve recently... been transferred to a new clone if that means anything to you.”

Dril shrugged and set about making the repairs she was asking for and keeping silent about it for the money that was paid. It was to be kept off the books. They built a business relationship,

which spawned their current operation. The passionate sex was just for mutual pleasure, and that had only started a few weeks previously.

“Launching drones,” Heather's voice announced. The drone bay doors opened and the little artificial beasts stampeded into open space. Dril heard the bay doors in the distance and felt the slight vibration as the drones' engines kicked on. A few moments passed. “Drones on station. Everything looking good.”

“Finally... back on schedule,” Dril said quietly to himself and ran a hand over his face.

“I heard that,” Heather's seductive voice chimed.

The engineer chuckled to himself and headed toward the door. “I'm coming up,” he called.

* * * * *

Dril made his way through the empty, cavernous, deteriorating ship to the bridge. Even the floor plates protested with his weight. Some compartments had failed gravity generators, which forced him to float through. Passing one hazardous area, he looked through a containment field at the vacuum of space. That small section of hull had been torn open at some point.

The ship felt hollow without a crew, and having a pod pilot made all the difference. Instead of needing a large number of people, pod pilots virtually controlled every operation if they wanted. They could respond instantaneously as they were jacked into the vessel directly through their nervous system implants.

The doors to the bridge slid open as Dril approached. “Welcome to my control center,” Heather whispered hotly with a touch of humor.

Dril smirked and took a seat at the helm. “Thank you,” he replied.

“I quite enjoy feeling you inside me,” she said with the same tone.

Dril laughed quietly shaking his head a couple of times. Pod pilots described the experience of being directly connected to a ship as very intimate. The ship became their bodies and the internal functions like their own internal biological systems. The core energy was like their life force, the hydraulics their blood, and the fiber optics their nerves. When the ship died they felt death's touch.

“Don't shake your head at me,” Heather said in a pouty tone.

Dril paused in his work and smiled looking up at the internal video cameras. “Being inside of you is my single, burning desire at this very moment.”

“That's better,” Heather said, her tone playful.

Dril gave her a wink and continued his work.

“First ice harvester cycle will complete in 10 seconds.” When she spoke like that her voice took on a computerized quality. The pod pilot was one with the ship's computer systems as well.

“Confirmed,” Dril said looking over his display. The bridge of the ship was sparse. Most of the panels were disassembled and energy conduits were visible along with various other cabling. There were three stations situated around

a central area with a command chair for a human captain. The helm was the only functional one.

Dril sat back in his cushioned chair and looked out of the forward view ports. The musty smell of the cushions made him a little nauseous. "I'd hate to fly around in this ship like this for any longer than we have to. I sure hope we make some profit," he said.

"At least you have a nice view," Heather replied. The ice field stretched out in front of him and the system's star illuminated the massive ice chunks. The ice seemed to break up the light over its multi-faceted surface. Then there was the wide, blue beams of the ice harvesters. Those always seemed to relax him when he watched them. Heather's voice sounded computerized again, "Ice product processed and stored for transport. Beginning second harvest cycle."

Dril nodded glancing at his control panel. "Confirmed," he said.

"You can rest if you like," Heather said, "you've had a long two days completing preparations for this operation."

Dril nodded as he pressed the controls on his chair and reclined slightly. "I think that is a great idea. I do need to be frosty." He took his partial cigar from his lips and crushed it out on the metal floor next his chair. Then he flicked its remains across the bridge. It slammed into a bulkhead, threw sparks, and landed on the deck.

He relaxed and took a deep breath. "Wake me when you need me," he said with a sleepy voice.

"I will my sweet man," Heather said softly. "I'll watch over you while you rest."

Dril grunted. "Sweet my ass."

Heather's gentle laugh and honey voice remained in his dreams. "I won't tell anyone."

* * * * *

When Dril opened his eyes the chronometer showed he had passed out for almost two and a half hours. He felt groggy realizing his sleep cycle had been interrupted. He struggled to understand what Heather was saying to him.

"Dril!" Heather said with urgency. "Wake up!"

Then the emergency alarm was sounded shaking him awake. His hands shot to his belt grasping for something that was missing. Heather's voice cut through the haze as he worked to digest the display in front of him.

"Dril, I've detected an activation at the Otsela gate," Heather warned. As they were operating in low security space there would be no help coming if they were attacked.

Dril nodded his head. "Acknowledged," he said with a rough voice, "give me a scan sweep at maximum range. How long until this harvest cycle completes?"

"Commencing scan," Heather said, her voice tight with apprehension. "Harvest cycle will complete in two minutes, forty-two seconds."

"Ok, great. Let the harvesters finish. Whoever it is might be simply passing through the system," Dril said. The scanning system had gone live and Dril leaned toward it watching for the report.

"Dril. I've identified the pilot of the other ship. He is a capsuleer," Heather said.

The scan did not report any incoming ships. “Keep the scan active,” he said. “I want to know if we have incoming. Who is this guy?”

“Lasiter Grenselis,” Heather said, “he is a criminal, wanted, and runs with known brigands.” She listed some of his history.

Dril nodded. “Acknowledged. Remember the plan,” he said. “Time to cycle completion?”

“One minute fifty-three seconds.”

“Warm up the engines and prepare for warp,” Drill could hear the warp unit coming out of standby. “Align us to the Kiainti gate, but keep us in range of the ice.”

The old mining barge slowly turned toward the designated gate. Time felt like it was creeping by.

Finally, Heather spoke, “Twenty seconds to cycle end.” She reported in her computerized voice.

“Give me a countdown starting at ten seconds and pull in the drones,” Dril said watching the data coming across his display.

It felt like the seconds passed instantly. “Ten... nine...” Heather reported.

“Bring us up to full speed as soon as it completes,” Dril said. The disappointed drones docked with their mothership.

“Three... two... one.” The countdown finished, Heather deactivated the ice harvesters, and the engines roared to life. Dril could hear the harvesters retracting into place. “I’m detecting multiple gate activations!” she exclaimed.

At that moment, a ship appeared to starboard as its cloaking field deactivated. “Buzzard!” Dril called out. “He’s locking us!”

Indeed, Lasiter's Buzzard easily locked on to the fleeing Retriever almost instantly. The warp capacity indicator on Dril's console registered a disruption and the ship shuttered as its warp field collapsed and engines almost stalled.

“Well... well... well,” Lasiter said as the voice comm activated. “What do we have here? Heather Sannil... mining some ice on this lovely rotation?”

Dril pressed his console opening the channel two ways, “This is Dril Asquar, and the answer to your question is yes.”

Lasiter laughed. “Oh? A mortal on board this fat ass bird?”

“I don't have a fat ass!” Heather said in a nasty tone.

“Ewww... Heather,” Lasiter said mocking her tone, “You have lice! Dirty girl!”

“Go fuck yourself,” Heather replied. The Retriever turned to her port toward the ice field away from the Buzzard.

Dril muted the comm. “Kick it!” he said.

The Retriever's engines roared, breathed flame, and burned brighter as Heather kicked the overdrives and afterburners on. The ice field was suddenly coming toward them quicker.

Lasiter laughed even harder. “Really?” he called after them as the Buzzard's engines lit and followed.

“We have incoming,” Heather reported. Indeed, two cruisers and a battle cruiser warped into the rear view behind the Buzzard. “Two Mo and a Drake,” she relayed. She put her vid drones' view up on Dril's display.

“They are locking us,” Dril said as the Retriever hurtled toward the massive chunks of ice. “Launch drones. Get that Buzzard off our ass.”

Heather didn't reply, but the drones rocketed from their hangers like frenzied, blood thirsty dogs.

“Shut your engines down!” one of the other pod pilots called.

“Get these bastards off me!” Lasiter yelled over the drones' attack.

“The two Mo have us locked,” Heather reported. “They are killing our drones.”

“The Buzzard is all they have to hold us here,” Dril said.

“The Drake has us,” Heather said. “She is launching! I have seven inbound.”

The Retriever entered the cold, ice field. The plumes of fire from the missiles were closing fast. “Ten seconds to impact!” Dril reported.

The old barge rolled to her port and pitched down to the left. “Hold on!” Heather warned as she flew as close as she could to the iceroid trying to get behind it. Light erupted as missiles slammed into the obstacle, and a massive chunk of ice blasted into pieces. The shockwave rolled over the fleeing ship as a few missiles made it in after them.

The missiles hammered the Retriever and exploded. The blasts engulfed the rear of the ship sending waves of shield energy rolling over its surface like waves on a smooth body of water. The shield system struggled against the brutal assault.

The shockwave threw the barge forward off course. Heather tried to compensate with thrusters and throttling down the engines, but the mass of the ship versus the weak thrust did not help much. She managed to roll the ship a little further, but the inertia carried them on. “Drones gone!” Heather said with what sounded to Dril like lost hope.

Dril held on to his console. He was thankful he had secured himself to his chair with the safety harness he had brought along. Power conduits on the right side of the bridge sparked and crackled, and he heard the ship's frame protest. He cursed when he saw a battleship come out warp on his tactical display.

Then the barge slammed into an iceroid. Energy shields and a little armor would not provide much protection from a collision. The ship screamed as the concussive force tore into it, and Dril's guts felt like they were twisting in on themselves. The shields collapsed under the tribulation, the engines died, and chunks of the ship tore loose hurtling over the iceroid's surface in all directions. The main bulk of the Retriever drifted backward along its incoming path.

* * * * *

The shadow of the Raven class battleship stretch over much of the ice belt where the Retriever had crashed on the icy rocks. Its pilot listened to the comm chatter. Lasiter was hurling insults at the broken ship and the pilot.

Long minutes passed and then the pod doors of the Retriever slid open. With a puff of flame, the tiny ship ejected. It sped away from the dead carcass along with the rest of the debris.

“You're forgetting your germs!” Lasiter taunted over the comm line. “I'd hate to be him. Geez, leaving him behind and all like that!”

“Lasiter...” the Raven pilot said as he opened the channel. “Shut your mouth.” There was laughter from the Moa pilots. “Who else is on that ship?”

“Rigger, it's just a single crew member,” the female Drake pilot reported.

The Raven pilot accessed his weaponry and a cruise missile launched from one of his missile bays streaking across the dark expanse.

“No!” Heather cried desperately over the comm line. The missile pierced the hull of the drifting ship and exploded. The shock wave shattered the remains of the Retriever. The section with the engine core hurtled away and exploded in a brilliant flash of blue light and fire.

“You bastard!” Heather raged in grief as her pod entered warp.

“Capsuleer Sannil. Be thankful I didn't let Lasiter here send you on to your next filthy, inferior clone,” Rigger said. His words were cold and absolutely indifferent.

Heather's voice shook with hatred, “I will hunt you down...”

Rigger cut her off. “Do that,” he replied. He closed the channel not wanting to hear more of her revenge blabber. Then he opened a private channel to his team. “Skulls one, two, and three head to the Otsela gate and make sure Scavenger doesn't get picked off in that piece of junk transport of his.”

“Aye, sir,” the replies came. The Drake and Moas aligned and warped off into the darkness of space.

“Scout, cloak and make the rounds,” Rigger ordered. Lasiter did not respond, he simply vanished. That was exactly what he wanted from the stupid pilot. Rigger laughed to himself and was surprised anytime Lasiter actually did something right. One time, when Lasiter had just learned to use bombs, he launched one and ran right into his own blast wave.

The Raven moved within range of the wreckage, and Rigger began salvaging anything that survived and looked valuable. Rigger sighed inwardly, just another day doing the same thing over-and-over again. He really wished something interesting would happen.

* * * * *

Rigger had waited far too long for his people to strip the wreck of every last piece of value. He yelled and threatened, and when it was all over they performed the exact same. Same routine without even a spark of difference. He felt like grinding his teeth into dust.

The Raven accelerated into warp and he relaxed. Rigger felt bathed in cosmic energy as the warp tunnel swirled and melted space around him. The colors were magnificent. This was the one place where there was always something new to enjoy. He always saw something different when his ship exceeded light speed.

Rigger was experiencing space travel in a manner that only the capsuleers would ever know or understand. They were so far above the masses of inferior humanity. They were stepping beyond anything that had ever limited them previously as fragile beings of flesh. Soon, all of New Eden would collapse beneath the weight of their power and numbers. The empires would one day bow down before them. Rigger would make sure they licked his boots nice and slow, even the soles.

As the Raven passed through the warp tunnel, Rigger thought about how smooth and slippery it felt. Deep down in his clone's abdomen a fire ignited and a hot feeling of euphoria filled

him. His armor and hull felt warm. Gentle waves of pleasure passed through the ship into his body that drifted inside the warm, thick liquid environment of his pod.

In his mind, he grinned thinking of how limited the first explorers were who entered a warp tunnel in their fragile space craft. They had no idea. After all they were bugs to be crushed underfoot. Their ignorance and lack of imagination only hindered them. It was so right to name it a tunnel, and the irony of it always made him laugh. Long moments passed, and his skin reacted to his thoughts as he made love to the cosmos. Rigger could feel the energy filling his body, it wouldn't be long now. He was reaching for it, reaching with his entire being for release.

A very unexpected shudder ran through the ship as the Raven's warp field collapsed. Rigger was painfully snapped back into reality. He growled as the warp tunnel dissipated, and the cold of space gnashed its teeth. Not only did warp go down, the primary magpulse propulsion system failed, and even the stabilizers went offline.

The Raven began an uncontrolled, slow tumble through space. Rigger attempted to access the damage control systems. Nothing was responding to his thoughts. Then the video signal went offline as did any sensory input from his ship. Suddenly, Rigger was trapped inside his own flesh in the darkness of his pod.

He released control of the Raven and concentrated on his pod bringing its systems online. He was in the dark, pod bay, but he could not access the battleship. He was confused as nothing like this had ever happened to him in all his years as a pod pilot.

He attempted to eject from the bay. "Ejection system failure." Appeared on his HUD. A feeling of being closed into a

tight space washed over him, and he felt like he was suffocating. Drawing his consciousness back into his body he thrashed around in the thick fluid that filled his pod's internal compartment.

Rigger stopped moving and focused. His enhanced mind began running through the possible actions he might take to escape his current predicament. Seconds passed without a solution presenting itself. Then he heard a familiar sound as the pod began to rotate. His onboard AI's voice filled his mind, "Pod disembark cycle initiated."

"What? I didn't initiate a..." Rigger began to protest, but it did not matter to the AI. The cycle had already started. The pod shifted and was drawn through a side shaft passing through an airlock. It had been quite some time since Rigger had left his pod. The process was long and messy. He sighed inwardly.

The exterior, dark metal walls of the pod slowly parted, and the fluid chamber was extracted. The golden colored fluid began to slowly swirl. The speed of the process accelerated and the liquid was evacuated. Then the lower hatch opened, and a platform began to lower Rigger to the ground below.

As the platform settled into its inset slot, completing the platform's flat surface, the capsuleer grabbed on to the metallic rails in front of him. When the pod's interface disconnected from his spinal column, retracted its various tube interfaces, and the face mask lifted free a heavy wave of dizziness swept over him. Pod fluid slowly dripped from his nude body as he worked not to collapse.

Rigger open his eyes slightly and slowly scanned the indirect illuminated pod insertion chamber on the Raven. It was longer than it was wide with a low ceiling beginning outside the preparation platform. He listened as the pod system drew the

fluid chamber up and continued on with its cleaning and sterilization process. The capsuleer carefully stepped down to the next level of the platform and waited holding on to another safety rail.

A clear cylinder descended from a recess in the ceiling and nozzles within began spraying warm water once it connected to the floor. The layer of pod goop that covered him began to slide from his body. This was just a rinsing stage. He'd need a proper shower to really get clean. The warm water felt good and he ran his fingers through his brown hair that was far longer than he normally kept it. Once the cycle completed the cylinder rose back up into the ceiling.

Rigger walked forward and stepped down off the platform onto the metallic deck of the ship. The thick air lock doors at the top level of the platform that protected his pod slowly closed and sealed. The room got very quiet, and the capsuleer looked around taking a deep breath of scrubbed air. To his left his bathing chamber was prepared, and to his right his dressing room waited. The doors at the opposite end of the chamber from his pod led into his regular quarters.

The capsuleer was unnerved by the loss of ship control and unexpected pod extraction. This had never occurred to him. He was just about to go take a proper shower before he figured out what happened when the air in front of him rippled. Something unseen slammed right into his forehead. Caught off guard, Rigger fell to the deck with a gasp and thud. It had been a long time since had had felt pain.

The air moved as if heated and starting with the barrel of a gun, an armored figure decloaked right in front of him. Blood trickled down his forehead from the gash the gun had caused.

Rigger's eyes were opened wide in shock, and his mouth was hanging open. He attempted to scramble backward, but his muscles failed him. The best he was able to do was prop himself up with his hands.

The hulking person that stepped forward was obviously male, and his entire body was covered in body armor and full faced helmet. In the low lit chamber, the small lights on the man's armor and helmet stood out against the dark metal. For all Rigger could see, the person might have been an android or other AI construct, but the barrel of the gun in his face demanded his attention.

“Welcome to my world,” the armored attacker said. The sound had an electronic quality being produced by the air tight, Caldari scout dropsuit.

“Who are you?” Rigger managed to ask.

“The man you tried to murder you arrogant, slimy piece of pod shit.” Dril pulled the trigger of his gauss pistol.

* * * * *

Dril wiped the blood from his drop suit, returned to and gathered his hacking equipment, and arrived on the Raven's bridge on schedule. He setup his hacking gear and jacked into the Raven's central computer system. He began a purge of the capsuleer from the system effectively preparing the ship for its new owner.

The clone soldier opened a private channel. “Asquar to Sannil.”

Heather's voice responded, “Sannil here. How did it go?”

“Mission complete. The arrogant prick never once noticed me until my gun was in his face,” Dril said.

“Good work,” Heather purred, “so very talented.”

“You too. Lock on to my coordinates. I have an orifice I need you to fill,” Dril said with a hint of humor.

Heather giggled. “Don't tease me naughty boy,” she replied. “Warping now.” She heard him chuckle, then the clink of his metallic lighter, and the sound of the cigar as it burned.

EVE Online: Infiltration

W-Space

Unknown System (J103951)

Planet XII – Moon 2

Warm, salty blood oozed from a deep gash on the left side of Trecia's forehead. Opening her groggy eyes, she gazed into the large pool of blood in front of her face. The light from the emergency illumination reflected in the red liquid. Her body lay prone on the metallic floor near the airlock door. Moving slowly with a low groan, she pushed herself up until she rested against the wall.

In addition to the emergency sirens sounding through the corridors of the small Caldari Control Tower, the computer's feminine, calm voice was issuing evacuation orders. "Hull breach imminent. All personnel proceed to escape pods immediately." The moon station was dying. Images and sounds flooded through Trecia's mind.

“Who are they?” Commander Nurchin had demanded.

“The computer can't identify. Ships are of unknown design,” the scan officer had responded. ”Six more have dropped out of warp and are approaching!”

As tactical officer, Trecia had locked the station's torpedo batteries on the nearest unknowns and prepared to fire on the order of her commander. The order did not come as the enemy vessels simultaneously opened fire. The smug look on the commander's face disappeared as the beams caused massive energy waves across the surface of the tower's shield. Emergency warnings sounded as the shield buckled and shattered under the barrage. The shortage of strontium guaranteed no respite.

Explosions and loss of power cast the small crew into darkness and chaos. Trecia ran as the commander ordered the evacuation following five other officers toward the escape pods. Some turned down one corridor, and a couple with Trecia continued on to their designated pod. The station rocked beneath Trecia's feet, and another explosion sent her flying against the bulk head. Darkness descended into her vision.

Trecia's head hurt, and the pain was almost unbearable. There were flashes in her memory of the airlock door opening. Someone had stood over her. Something sharp was jabbed into her neck. She winced remembering it. A body was dragged through the airlock door. Then it closed.

Trying to look around, Trecia wiped blood from her left eye before holding her trembling hand against the gash. Cursing in anger, she got to her feet and stumbled over to the escape pod control panel. With quick touches to the screen, an escape pod

door slid open with a hiss as the air pressure equalized. Red light slowly brightened inside as the computer's voice spoke.

“Emergency escape pod system on line. Prepare for debarkation.”

Moving to Lieutenant Stewart, Trecia did her best to drag the other woman into the escape pod. “Come on!” Trecia grunted in frustration under the weight of the woman. There was another loud explosion and the control tower rumbled and shook. Her other crew member was gone.

“Power core critical,” The computer announced from the hallway. “Containment field critical. All personnel proceed to...”

Trecia closed the escape pod access port with her elbow as she dragged the lieutenant inside. Dumping her on the floor as gently as possible, she stumbled to the flight seat and fell into it. Wiping her eye again, she proceeded to initiate the launch command breathing heavily. Buckling in as quickly as possible, the pod's launch system powered up.

“Launch in five, four, three...” The computer counted down. Trecia glanced over her right shoulder toward her prostrate crew member. There was just no time. Bracing in her seat, the pod's escape engines fired. The sudden acceleration and force slammed Trecia into her seat. The star's shone in brilliance as the pod entered open space.

Trecia lost track of time and distance when the control tower exploded behind her. The shock wave crashed into the pod in seconds sending it into a dangerous spin. Nausea and dizziness set in immediately as the woman groped for the flight controls. She barely managed to activate the stabilizers

when the force of gravity assaulting her caused a loss of consciousness.

* * * * *

Trecia jerked awake disoriented. When she tried to sit up, the pain in her head slapped her back down. A soft moan drifted from between her soft, pink lips. She blinked her eyes in an attempt to clear the blurriness in her vision. Strong, reassuring hands touched her shoulders, gently keeping her from trying to sit up again.

“Take it easy... take it easy,” a man's voice said in a soft tone. ”Try to relax and not move Lieutenant Arklin.” There was a pause as Trecia was observed. ”Good Lieutenant. Just relax. You were severely injured in the attack on your control tower.”

A bright light illuminated Trecia's right eye. The pale green iris with its unique web like architecture quickly closed in response. When the light was removed it relaxed. Then the light returned and the iris tightened once more. Then the light was gone. The responses of her left eye were then checked by the man.

“Where am I?” Trecia asked, her voice quivering. Her eyes began to slowly focus on the man standing next to her. Trecia recognized the type of hospital bed beneath her in a medical bay. The thick, dark blue blanket and light blue sheets were drawn up over her chest. Her white medical gown's right sleeve was pushed up to allow for various medical attachments and tubing for intravenous therapy.

“Technically, you are on board corporate station J103951 Alpha Citadel. But we call it the Keep around here. I'm Doctor Sellindu.” Trecia's eyes drifted over the man. His brown hair was shorn to the skin, his glasses bent the low, indirect lighting into his blue eyes, and his black, long doctor's coat covered his black scrubs. His clean-shaven features revealed gentleness as his sharp eyes regarded her as he answered. Sellindu was embroidered in white above the right chest pocket of his coat.

Trecia appeared to relax further as she sighed softly in relief. “I didn't know if I would survive,” she said blinking her eyes again trying to focus on her surroundings. The room was small with numerous cabinets, drawers, and medical devices in their proper place. A large screen on Trecia's left showed a real-time scan of her body. She could see her heart beating, blood flowing through her veins, her skeletal structure at another layer, other layers in the background that could be cycled as the medical staff required, and her vitals in real time, strategically placed on the screen.

“Fortunately, a rescue ship arrived within an hour and picked up your life pod. Then you were brought here,” Dr. Sellindu said.

“Is your patient able to answer some questions?” a woman's voice said from the open door. Trecia noticed several others standing in the hallway.

A female nurse stood blocking their way and raised a hand to chest level, palm out. “You will wait quietly,” she ordered with a protective fire in her brown eyes. Her meticulous, nurse's uniform with its black cloth was orderly and starched. Her silver name badge reflected the light from the

hallway like a mirror, and her blond hair was pulled back and secured with a silver clasp.

The woman who had spoken frowned, looked around the nurse, and her brow knit together. “I don't have time for this coddling,” she said impatiently. “I have a situation and I need answers!” The woman's voice was loud and hard.

Dr. Sellindu sighed deeply looking over at the doorway with irritation. “I revived her against my medical judgment due to the situation. You can at least let me do my job my way.”

Trecia felt vulnerable and weak in her current condition, but that did not stop her from speaking. “What situation?” she asked.

Dr. Sellindu looked at Trecia. “Nothing you need to worry about this second, but if you feel up to answering some questions, it would be helpful.”

Trecia nodded her consent. “I want to help,” she said.

“Nurse, let Commander Revit in,” Dr. Sellindu ordered. “Everyone else can continue waiting outside.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

Commander Revit walked into the small medical room, and her strong presence filled it to overflowing. “Thank you, Doctor,” she said.

Her corporate, black security uniform far surpassed even the nurse's neatness, and the shined buttons and medals drew Trecia's attention. The woman was tall, her long brown hair was pinned and tucked beneath her military style, dark green beret. Her hands were clasped behind her back, and her chest was lifted as she stood straight and strong. A gun was holstered on her hip connected to her wide, leather utility belt with extra loaded magazines and other gear.

Trecia gazed at the commander a moment. “I would salute, sir, if I were able,” she said.

Commander Revit shook her head once. “No need, Lieutenant Arklin. You're injured and on medical leave. Tell us...” The commander paused a moment as she softened her voice some. “Please, tell us what happened during the attack on your control tower.”

Trecia nodded, pulling at a strand of dark hair, and relayed what she could remember during the attack. “The attack happened so fast. I can't believe it.” The woman shook her head a few times, her eyes lost in her memories.

Commander Revit listened quietly to Trecia until she finished speaking. “Someone boarded the station?” she asked.

Trecia nodded, her left hand going to the back of her neck. “Something sharp...” she started to say repeating herself when she stopped. She drew her hand away like it had been burned, crying out in pain.

Dr. Sellindu took her by the shoulders as Trecia tried to sit up. “Don't touch it,” he said calmly though the tension in his words was thick. “Try to relax,” he ordered.

“What is it?” Trecia said in fear as she struggled. “What's wrong with me?”

“Calm down!” Dr. Sellindu ordered again in a loud, steady voice. “You have to calm down!”

Trecia panicked and began to fight against the doctor. At first her weak attempts were easily dissuaded, but the more upset she got the stronger she became. Adrenaline released in her system, and she began to fight hard. “Let me up!” she cried hysterical. “Let me up!” Her hands gripped his arms and she thrashed her feet trying to get the blankets off.

“Nurse!” Dr. Sellindu yelled. “I need a sedative, now!”

The nurse left the door and hurried to his side. Within moments she released a sedative into Trecia intravenously. The patient went limp in the bed and relaxed.

Dr. Sellindu sighed heavily and stepped back from the bed rubbing a hand over his bald scalp. “She is getting worse,” he said. Trecia moaned softly, her eyes dulled by the drug and half closed.

“Show me,” Commander Revit ordered looking at the large screen.

Dr. Sellindu nodded and walked to the screen manipulating it by touch. Bringing the skeletal layer forward he focused it on Trecia's neck. “Here,” he said pointing at the vertebra in her neck.

Commander Revit shook her head looking at the image. “What is it?”

The doctor turned the image slightly. “It is metallic and growing. The nanotechnology that has infested her blood and tissues is drawing the elements in her body like building blocks to this central point. For lack of a better term, they are constructing this device... and killing her in the process. This device is very complex.”

“For what purpose?” Commander Revit asked.

The doctor stared at the image quietly for long moments. “I have no idea,” he answered, “and unlike the other patient, this appears to be the singular point of the nanotech's activity. This is far more advanced than anything we have currently developed. See these appendages beginning to form and move toward her brain?”

A chill went up Commander Revit's spine as she nodded. The two officers that were with her crowded the doorway, and the nurse was frowning as she glanced from them back to the screen highlighting Trecia's neck.

“The one thing I don't get is how fast the infection is spreading in the other patient, while this one is slow in comparison. All the nanotech's efforts are focused right here on Lieutenant Arklin's spine, while...” Dr. Sellindu's analysis was interrupted by a horrific scream from the direction of the door.

Commander Revit turned, her hand going to her side arm. One of her officers was slowly sliding down the opposite wall of the hallway, both hands holding his neck. His fingers were red as blood pumped out of the gaping, open gash that stretched from ear-to-ear. The crimson torrent gushed down over his uniform.

A woman dressed in a white patient's robe, splattered with the man's blood, stood over him. She held a bloody scalpel in one hand. Her long, blond disheveled hair hung loose about her face and shoulders. Her free hand clutched the man's hair, and with one swift movement, she smashed his head into the metal wall with a sickening crunch.

The other officer jerked his gun from its holster, brought the gun up, but the woman launched toward him with inhuman speed. The bloody scalpel sliced down across his inner forearm, the hand holding the gun, laying it open and slicing through arteries and tendons. His grip on the weapon went loose, and the bloody blade slashed across both eyes. The man screamed in terror and trauma as he scrambled away.

The nurse moved to the door controls as Commander Revit yelled at her to get out of the way. The woman in the

hallway grabbed her and dragged her screaming through the door. The nurse's hand managed to press the door control, and the door slid closed cutting off the agonizing sounds of brutality.

Commander Revit breathed heavily, her eyes wide with the turmoil of emotions inside her. "Doctor," she whispered in a tight voice pointing her gun toward the closed hatch, "lock the door."

Dr. Sellindu looked frozen and pale.

"Doctor!"

The man nodded stiff with fear and hurried to the door controls. "Locked!" He quickly backed away and ended up on the opposite side of the bed from the commander.

"Get Lieutenant Arklin unhooked from all the equipment," Revit ordered, "We've got to move."

* * * * *

The red splattered hallway with three broken bodies was quiet for the moment. The inset lighting in the ceiling cast shadows between doors in the medical bay. The door blocked her path, and she pressed herself up against it in the shadows away from the circle of low light behind her.

Lieutenant Ellie Stewart's gown was open in the back, simply tied at the base of her neck. The muscular curves of her long legs were visible, the round soft lines of her bottom coming together and drifting up to her tail bone. The muscles of her back trembled as she pressed her ear to the door, quiet and listening. The bloody impression of her bare feet led right up to where she stood. Her hands drifted gently over the surface of the cold metal.

The woman's soft lips parted, and her warm breath condensed against the cool surface of the hatch, separating her from those within. Her closed eyes slowly opened, a metallic gleam mixed with the bright blue of her irises, almost eclipsing that which had once been. Her face was emotionless and void of human expression.

Moving slowly, she bent toward the controls that refused to obey her and with a long, careful movement, her pink tongue glided gently over the smooth surface. Starting at the bottom it moved upward all the way to the top. Stepping to her right, she crouched down at the edge of the closed portal and became motionless.

* * * * *

The light indicating the door was locked went from red to green. Dr. Sellindu froze in his work freeing Trecia from the sensors, intravenous tubing, needles, catheter, and the leg restraints the nurse put in place before the violence began in the hallway. The air felt icy to him as his skin needled up his spine. “The door,” he whispered staring at the green light.

Commander Revit took a couple of steps back with her gun out in front of her. “Is there any other way out?” she asked in a hushed voice.

“Not really,” the doctor replied, “the door to the next room is in the restroom, but I don't see how going out that way would make much difference.”

Revit wiped her forehead against her arm as she pressed herself to the back wall. “Great,” she whispered with sarcasm.

“I don't understand how the other patient is even awake. The powerful sedative I gave her should have kept her out at least another few hours,” Sellindu reasoned with himself. He looked away from the door to the commander then down to his patient. Trecia was looking up at him.

At that moment the door to the room opened, and Trecia elbowed Dr. Sellindu right in the groin. He stepped back and doubled over with a heavy grunt of pain, slamming into a tray of tools that smashed into the wall. The woman rolled to her right off of the table on to the cold metal floor. Jerking up to her feet her eyes came to rest on the commander who had turned her gun on her.

Movement at the door drew Revit's attention once more, and her finger pulled the trigger of her weapon. Lieutenant Stewart seemed to run on all fours, staying low, twisting and turning, moving at great speed outside the door way. Yet she did not move forward. The muzzle of the gun spewed fire and smoke, and the spent brass shells drifted through the air to clatter along the metallic floor.

Trecia lept across the bed and slammed herself into Commander Revit sending her into the wall. The gun smacked against the metal surface, but Revit did not drop it. Turning the weapon toward Trecia, the commander fired at point blank range. The bullet caught her in the side of the head and sent her flying backward on to and over the bed. She landed with a thud on top of the injured doctor.

Revit fired again toward the door at the woman who was peeking around the corner at her only to have her duck out of sight. The weapon's slide locked open as she spent the last bullet of her magazine. Stumbling toward the restroom door, Revit

made it inside and slammed it closed as she caught sight of Lieutenant Stewart staring at her from the doorway.

Slapping another magazine into her hand gun, pausing to take a breath, she quickly opened the opposite door. Revit was about to step through into the darkness, when a heavy fist slammed right into her face. The crunch of her nasal bone echoed in the small, stark restroom. Falling back, she slammed her head into the floor, too stunned to keep her chin tucked.

Lieutenant Stewart hovered over Revit as the commander's vision stopped spinning. Big tears streamed from the outward corners of the commander's eyes, forced by the severity of the impact. Blood ran freely from both nostrils and dripped down the back of her throat. Her attacker was on her hands and knees, straddling her hips, her nose almost touching her own.

“Who are you?” Revit tried to whisper, her voice cracking.

Lieutenant Stewart's face drifted up slightly, her head tilting a bit at the question. Her mouth opened a moment as if to speak and answer the question, but all that came out was a torrent of black liquid that gushed over Revit's face as she vomited. The black fluid filled Revit's nostrils, mouth, and eyes. Its warmth spilling over the sides of her head and neck onto the floor.

The commander's hand sliced upward, having pulled her combat blade from her belt. The serrated knife pierced Lieutenant Stewart under the jaw, driving upward into her mouth, into the soft upper flesh, into her brain, pinning the woman's mouth closed. Commander Revit jerked her attacker's head to the left and drove the limp woman's body into the

floor. Following the movement, she rolled over on top of her, pulled the blade free, and waited for any kind of movement.

Lieutenant Stewart's eyes were frozen in a blank stare looking up at the ceiling of the room. She lay absolutely still like a marionette puppet whose strings are cut. Revit wiped her face, spitting black and red from her mouth. Nauseated she got to her feet and found her way to the toilet. Unable to stomach the foul she could taste, she gagged and retched until all that was left was dry heaves.

* * * * *

Dr. Sellindu came to from having knocked his head against the floor and carefully got to his feet. He tenderly touched his head. The large knot felt painful, but the pain between his legs felt much worse. Groaning, the man crossed to the door and stepped through. A couple of nurses were running toward him having been drawn by the sounds.

The pair stopped short seeing the bodies and splattered red across the floor and walls. The man shook his head with wide eyes. "What happened doctor?" he asked.

Dr. Sellindu took a couple of steps leaning against the wall for support breathing heavily from the pain. "As of this moment, medical quarantine. Highest level. There is some kind of biomechanical pathogen on board the station." he said. "Containment," he ordered. The male and female nurse looked at one another and turned to carry out his orders.

Two shots rang out from behind the doctor striking the pair in the back and both fell heavily to the ground. Turning slowly, the doctor looked into the black stained countenance of

Commander Revit. She held the head and upper, bloody spine of Trecia in one hand. In the other, her fingers gripped her gun. The dark device attached to Trecia's vertebra, glimmered in the low light and dripped blood. Revit's emotionless face stared back at him a moment before the hard metal of the weapon struck him across the temple.

Blackness descended upon the man as he slumped to the ground. Before his eyes closed, he noticed the hand of the first security officer slain by Lieutenant Stewart. The fingers curled and relaxed.

* * * * *

14 hours later...

In the blackness of space among the stars, a light flashed as a ship dropped out of warp. It was drawn to the repeating signal as designed. The craft was sleek, small, and robotic arms activated curling at the central joint. Soft white lights dotted the craft's surface. The blue white fire of its engines carried it forward.

The craft moved toward a dark structure lacking power. A human observer might show concern the hull was ruptured, but there was no one on board the small ship who felt emotion. The name and inhabitants of the broken citadel did not matter. A bright, white beam shot out as the craft approached scanning the debris, drifting ships, and the countless, lifeless bodies.

Another signal was sent, and moments later numerous flashes of light shown across the solar horizon as more of the

craft dropped out of warp. Automated, programmed behavior moved the fleet of craft into perfect harmony as tractor beams reach out and lifted the dead from their frozen graves of silent darkness.

EVE Online: Touch the Stars

Caldari Space

The Forge region

Etsala Constellation

Walvalin

[Citadel Identification Redacted]

Banging against the locked doors behind him caused a muffled thumping that made his stomach heave within his abdomen. The dense, metallic doors with their thick transparent panels held back the inevitable resistance he knew would try to thwart him. Glancing that direction for a moment, he could feel drops of sweat rolling down his neck from his hair line at the back of his head. Several security personnel stared at him across the barrier, their mouths shouting as one slammed the bottom of his fist against the transparent material. Their words were nothing more than silence as the sound of their voices did not penetrate the sealed chamber.

Turning away from the locked entrance, the man quickly pushed the antigravity sled to one of the medical type beds in the long, dark room. Red light shown down from above, and several dark green lights flickered from the equipment connected to each station. The man moved around the sled, hovering over the long, rectangular cargo container looking over the electronic display. His earpiece snapped on.

“Security detected me. They are moving to counter my intrusion,” a deep voice said. “I am not sure how long I can keep them occupied.”

“I just need a few more minutes,” Miriah said with tension pulling his voice taunt. “Hold them off. Please.” His last word spoken with desperation.

“I am doing my best,” the voice replied.

“Initiate retrieval,” Miriah said as he entered his codes to open the container. He could hear the station’s systems in the room powering up from standby.

“Retrieval in progress,” Miriah’s computer slicer reported. The man, known as Goshin on the other end of his comm device, was highly recommended for his skills.

A wide, floor hatch to Miriah’s left, at the head of the bed, slid open suddenly as a yellow alert light set in the ceiling above began to flash.

“Caution. Storage tube, serial number three-two-seven-two-nine-one alpha arriving,” a computerized female voice announced with precise pronunciation. “Stand clear of hazardous area.” The control panels connected to the bed sparked to life with an abundance of data scrolling across their screens.

The clear storage tube slid upward into place, and a dim, dark green light above it switched on. Miriah’s brown eyes

misted over with emotion as he paused in his work and looked that direction for a few moments. He ran a hand through his light-colored hair, peppered with gray, and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Drying his hand on his dark pant leg he returned his attention to opening the container. The sound of access being granted chirped from the control panel, the panel lit up green, and the container's lid slid open.

* * * * *

Caldari Space
The Forge region
Etsala Constellation
Kiainti
Planet X

10 years in the past...

Stars burned bright in the distance among a vast blackness touched with various colors of spacial detail. Massive clouds of gas and stellar dust, illuminated by the distant fires of solar activity, could be seen from the huge window aboard ship. A nearby planet with blue oceans and white clouds reflected the golden light of the system's own burning nuclear furnace.

"It's so pretty," the seven year old girl in Miriah's arms said as she wiggled to get down. The big man gently set his daughter's feet on the deck and watched as she ran to the window. Her small hands pressed against the transparent surface as she stared with wide eyes outside. "I want to touch the stars," she said in her innocent, sweet voice. Her simple blue dress brought

out the azure color of her eyes, and her blond ponytail kept most of her hair pulled back out of her face.

Miriah walked over next to her and knelt on one knee looking at her. The sight of her smile and eyes filled with wonder touched his heart. “One day Arissa, if you work real hard, you’ll be able to fulfill all of your dreams,” he said, “but, you should know that the stars are really hot, so it might be a little difficult to touch them.” The big man chuckled as he caressed her back lightly.

“They sparkle like diamonds,” she said. “I want to catch one and wear it on a necklace!” She looked over at him and grinned. “Can I do that?”

Her father shrugged a little. “When you fly to them, they are really big,” he answered pointing toward the burning orb at the heart of their current solar system. “But, I’ll see what I can do,” he offered.

Arissa laughed appearing delighted by his response. Then she patted his bearded face with both hands. “I love you, daddy,” she said. Turning back toward the window, she gazed outside once more.

“Maybe, we can fly real close and catch a spark for her,” a man’s voice said over the ship’s internal communication system. The pod pilot connected to the vessel went by the name Sokoth, and he invited Miriah to bring his daughter along on their short journey to pick up some supplies from a planetary colony far below them on the planet. The ship was approaching a launched container, and the ship’s crew prepared to receive the shipment.

Miriah chuckled, glancing around the observation deck of the second-generation Badger class cargo ship. “Much appreciated, captain,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” Sokoth replied, “we’ll do that soon, Arissa. You’ll get to see the star in this system up close.”

The little girl clapped her hands and jumped a few times in excitement. She ran to the next window in the room and looked outside once again, softly singing to herself. Miriah smiled hearing the familiar melody his wife sang to her most nights before bed as he stood up. His family lived on one of the space stations in the system, but their small quarters were deep inside the interior. They did not have an exterior window, so Arissa did not get to see the stars as often as she liked.

Miriah worked as a systems technician for Sokoth on his vessels, and he was one of his regular crew members. Having gotten to know him over a couple of years, Miriah was pleased to see the pod pilot took an interest in his team. Most did not. On safe, routine missions to pick up cargo, the pilot often made an effort to invite crew members’ families along to experience and see life aboard ship for a day or two. It was beneficial on multiple levels, and it improved morale.

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“Cargo retrieval complete,” Sokoth said, informing his crew over general comms. “Great job everyone. We’ll be taking the scenic route on the way back to station. Prepare for warp.” The pod pilot watched through interior cameras as his crew secured the valuable planetary materials. Turning his attention to plotting his route across the system, he decided on the perfect

spot to visit the system's star. A solar filament with a majestic prominence would be on full display.

Crew members on the bridge settled into their duty seats and buckled in preparing to get underway. Sokoth's attention turned to the flashes on the solar ecliptic. Surprise touched him as he did not expect anyone to arrive in their vicinity. And he did not expect the two incoming ships to land so close. Preparing to warp, the badger slowly aligned toward the sun as he brought his ship's active defensive modules online out of standard practice. Energy flowed outward, rippling along his shield's perimeter, and interior defense fields came online.

The pod pilot was even more surprised when the two Cormorant class destroyers locked on to his ship. It happened so fast, Sokoth did not have much time to react due to his internal denial. Opening a comm channel he was about to question their intent when they opened fire. A warp drive initiation failure message flashed through his mind as his navigation computer was assaulted and failed. The two attackers poured charge after charge into his shields from their blasters as they orbited close enough for him to see them track his ship.

Alarms went off as his shields buckled under the strain, and the blaster fire tore into the badger's armor. Debris and pieces of glowing hot metal erupted from the transport as Sokoth engaged his sub-light engines, finally recovering from his inaction. The wounded ship lurched forward having come to a halt once warp initiation failed, its engines breathing blue white flames. Smoke and fire belched from the slow moving ship as the hull screamed with punctures. Sokoth could feel his ship coming apart, could hear the cries of his crew, and the agony of helpless vulnerability.

Activating his only chance for survival, a wave of multispectral, electronic energy burst from the burning ship. Smashing into the relentless attackers, Sokoth felt a sudden relief as their weapon locks dropped unexpectedly. Initiating his warp drive once more, the transport ship seemed to hesitate a long moment as his warp field bent space around them.

Just as his ship's engines fired, he saw flashes on the ecliptic as a Concord patrol warped into the fray. Catching just a snippet of their communication on the criminality of the attack, his ship streaked toward the system's sun. Though with a lack of energy capacity, the transport fell out of warp far before it reached the intended destination. Fire and smoke from the burning atmosphere leaking from the ship's interior could be clearly seen venting into space.

"Emergency condition critical," Sokoth said over general comms, his voice a calming sound in the chaos and disorienting haze of surviving combat. "Initiate emergency damage control procedures. Fire teams proceed to your designated areas. Activating repair systems. Verifying all containment fields." The pod pilot responded much faster than a human crew could on their own as the damage to his ship poured into his mind through his neural interface. Somewhere in his mind, the sound of a father's grief registered.

* * * * *

Miriah held Arissa against his chest, limping heavily on his injured leg. Blood dripped down his face from multiple lacerations falling onto his daughter's bloody, blue dress. Tears streamed from his eyes as he made his way to the medical bay.

A conduit exploded at the back of the observation deck during the attack, and the kinetic energy smashed them into the bulk heads. The flames seared the little girl's flesh, and most of her hair burned away. She was so bloody, Miriah could not tell where her injuries began and ended, and he reacted with instinct alone.

“Help us...” he said in a hoarse voice, barely able to speak above a whisper as he entered medical. “Help us,” he pleaded. The room was filled with injured crew members, and many sat against the walls on the floor as there were no seats available. Others were laid out anywhere there was room. Those who were conscious looked his way, many of them gasping and shaking their head in distress at the sight of the little girl in his arms. One woman burst into tears, her hand covering her mouth. Others stared vacantly at nothing, obviously in shock.

The sounds of suffering and pain echoed around Miriah as he limped to the nursing station, moaning and weeping reaching his numb ears. The smell of foul, bodily odors wafted over him, mixing with the smell of his daughter's charred flesh. Vomit rose in his throat, and he struggled to contain it. Shaking his head a little, he looked into the nurse's wide eyes and begged, “Please, please help my daughter.” The woman glanced from his eyes to the little girl in his arms and jumped up. She led him immediately through the doors that slid open when she approached.

* * * * *

Kiinti

Planet IX – Moon 8 – Prompt Delivery Storage

Daniel Bastion

Ten years in the past...

Four months after the attack.

Arisa laughed softly, a smile touching her lips as she watched a holovid cartoon. She focused with her left eye as the right was a milky color with no ability to see. The seared flesh of her skull would not grow hair, and Miriah and his wife chose to keep the other patches shaved. The little girl sat in her wheel chair, a breathing apparatus strapped to her throat. Her broken bones and lacerations were mended, but her small body was paralyzed from the neck down. No amount of medical treatment could restore her spinal cord, as it was severed by heated metal that cauterized most of it. She was fortunate to even be alive with the severity of her injuries.

Miriah sat next to her in the medical ward on their home station, waiting for the final discharge papers to be signed by the team of doctors overseeing Arissa's care. The road to heal was long and terrible, and Miriah and his wife struggled deeply to even stay together. His wife's terrible anger boiled over most days, as she seemed to blame him for their daughter's condition. She did not want Arissa to go out into space with him, but gave in after he badgered her for several days.

He was thankful she left to go to their apartment to make the final preparations for Arissa's home coming. They planned a party, and even his parents arrived by transport the day before to attend. His mother-in-law arrived the day they got to the station and never left. He detested and appreciated the 'old bitch' at the same time. He never spoke his name for her, but he thought it often.

The door to their room slid open and two female nurses entered. Their black scrubs were starched and clean, and Miriah did his best to ignore their attractiveness. The one with the short brown hair, tan skin, and crooked smile never failed to flirt with him, but the enticement was the farthest thing from his mind. Perhaps she considered his cold demeanor a challenge.

“Time to get you changed and cleaned up for your trip home,” the other nurse said cheerfully to Arissa who looked her over. Being pulled out of the happy world of her cartoons seemed to displease the little girl. Her only response was a nod.

“I’ll be in the hall,” Miriah said as he turned away.

Helin stepped in front of him as he approached the door, looking up into his eyes. The playful look she gave him showed brightly, and she grinned a little. “Do you have everything you need?” she asked softly. “I know we’ve been over the procedures several times, but I want to make sure you don’t have any questions.”

The large man shook his head. “I’m good,” he said. “I have everything in my notes as well as in here.” He tapped his temple emphasizing he remembered.

Helin gazed into his face for long moments gauging his words and expression. “Okay then. If you need anything, please contact us. I’ll be happy to help, answer questions, or come by if needed. You do have six months of in home care,” she said.

Miriah nodded. “Thank you,” he said, trying to move past the woman. She smiled sweetly, turned so he could get by, but made sure that as he passed her breasts rubbed against his upper arm. Miriah looked down at her to apologize for his lack of distance, but found her grinning widely. Choosing not to say anything he stepped out into the hall and rubbed his face feeling

awkward. The doors shut behind him and he leaned against the wall feeling absolutely miserable.

He did not bother to look when he heard footsteps approaching to his right, but when they came to a stop next to him he peered up at the person. The tall Amarrian with his stern face regarded him. “Sokoth?” Miriah said in surprise. He barely saw the man in person while flying together, and now he suddenly stood right next to him.

The pod pilot nodded his greeting. The man’s dark hair was kept short, and his piercing gray eyes burned into Miriah with a deep intensity. He was clean shaven, straight backed, and dressed in a dark gray military style outfit. His polished, reflective boots shown in the diffused light in the hallway. “Hello, Miriah,” he said, “I hope my visit isn’t inconvenient.”

Miriah stood up and straightened his casual, dark blue tunic that he wore. “Not at all,” he said, “I’m waiting for the nurses to finish their final preparations with Arissa. I am taking her home today.”

“How is she doing?” Sokoth asked in his polite cadence.

Miriah looked at him thinking about the question. “As well as can be expected,” Miriah said. “She... As you know her injuries were quite severe.”

Sokoth nodded. “I have kept up-to-date on her condition,” he said, “and I want you to know that I will do everything in my power to garner justice on her behalf against the two pod pilots that attacked us.”

“I know,” Miriah said looking down at Sokoth’s boots.

There was a pause between them for a few moments. “They may exist in a place where they can elude death, but I

promise you they can be made to suffer in a variety of ways. I will make sure of it. I've already put a plan in motion."

Miriah looked up at him, words escaping his grasp. He did not know how to respond. Then he spoke, "Whatever happens to them, it will never be able to undo what was done to my little girl." He spoke passionately, overcome with buried sorrow. "Yes, I want justice, but they will never be made to exist in a burned, broken body like her!" Miriah turned away trembling, his hands clenching repeatedly. Taking a couple of steps away from Sokoth he stopped, breathing heavily. Struggling to not be overwhelmed.

Sokoth remained silent, watching the man from his place. A frown touched his stark features, and he looked down at his pale hands. He flexed his fingers looking up at Miriah's clenched fists. Relaxing once more he spoke, "I want you to know I have transferred a final deposit into your account. It is substantial, and I want you to take as much time as you need."

Miriah nodded turning slightly, not looking at him. "We very much appreciate your help," he said. "Words will never be able to do justice to how thankful we are for your assistance." Miriah's voice quivered and the genuine emotion was evident to the pod pilot.

"Words are not needed," Sokoth said, "and when you are ready you always have a place with me. You are one of the most talented systems technicians I have ever encountered, and you will always have work on board my ships." He paused once more for long heart beats before continuing. "I very much regret what happened."

Miriah turned fully around and looked at him. "I know," he said, "and like I told you before I don't blame you. You

managed to get us out of there, and I owe you my life. Not to mention what you have done for us.”

It was Sokoth’s turn to feel awkward. He glanced to his left and nodded. Sighing softly, the Amarrian turned and leaned his back against the medical ward wall. Running a hand over his shaved chin he appeared reluctant to speak as he crossed his arms. Then seemed to decide and nodded to himself. “I want to help Arissa,” he said, “but it will take time, and will require a great deal of resolve from both of us.”

* * * * *

Nine months in the past...

Arissa frowned as she tried to blow out the candle on her birthday cake, but she was not able to get the amount of air into her lungs she needed to do so. She looked up at her father who only smiled sweetly and leaned down to do it for her. “There you go,” he said giving her a kiss on the cheek, “Happy seventeen.”

“Thank you,” she said with a forced smile. Deep anger boiled within her heart, but she kept that well hidden from him. The few friends she managed to make from her special school wished her happy birthday too, and some were even able to clap from their own wheel chairs. Others just nodded unable to move at all. Their parents were gracious enough to bring them over, and they did their best to have a wonderful celebration.

Arissa’s mother was no where to be seen, having left them both years before. Part of the young woman wanted to scream and cry, but she held it back to keep up the happy appearance. Her dad opened the few gifts available for her, and she thanked

each participant for their thoughtful contributions. She did appreciate it, but her hate for the sympathy she saw in their parents' eyes ruined her mood. She just wanted to be left alone.

Helin wagged her ass around the room chattering like a non-stop parrot always mimicking those she interacted with during the party. Mirroring their mannerisms and choice of topic during their conversation. Arissa rolled her eyes when no one was looking knowing the woman was completely fake. Not long after her mother left, Helin wriggled her way into her father's life. She hated her and wished she would choke on her next bite of cake.

"Do you want some of your cake?" her father asked timidly hovering at her elbow.

An ironic smile touched Arissa's lips. The young woman looked up at him with her clear blue eyes and shook her head. "Not right now," she said, "maybe after everyone leaves." A hollow feeling bloomed in her chest, not wanting people to stare at her when she was being fed.

"As you wish," her father said in reply to her answer. He gently squeezed her shoulder in his loving way and sat down. Lifting his glass, he took a long drink of his alcoholic beverage. She could smell the strong liquor in the fruit punch. Their living room was small, but it had plenty of comforts. Designed for someone in her condition, she found that she preferred being at home.

"Can I have some of that?" Arissa asked innocently nodding at his glass.

Miriah glanced at his cup then back at her. He picked up her own cup with the straw and brought it to her lips. "Here you go."

Arissa frowned at him. “I don’t want mine,” she said glaring at him.

“No,” her father told her, “you don’t need any of this. Plus with your medications.”

Arissa gritted her teeth and looked away. “Forget I asked,” she said. The anger within her churned and stabbed at her. Images of all she explored on the galnet came to her, and she wanted to experience it all. With everything in her she wished she could explore life outside of her broken body. The recent movie she watched with the young people partying, the drinking, and so many other experiences she would never get to try.

The emotional storm that bloomed within the young woman erupted as she looked around at all of the broken people in her living room. The parents politely talking as the abnormal tried to act like them. They were not normal, and Arissa wanted to scream at them. She wanted to hurt them.

The first indication of trouble was Miriah noticed Arissa’s cheeks and neck flushed. She ground her teeth, and she shook her head back and forth. The episode took her and she struggled to breath. Her breathing function was beginning to deteriorate over time, and she was getting worse. Feeling like she was suffocating, Arissa screamed as she fought the oncoming attack. Blacking out with the injection was her only relief.

Later that night, Miriah with a heavy heart accessed his electronic messaging system. He sent one message. “We can’t wait. We must act now. She is getting worse. The doctors are not giving her much time.”

* * * * *

“The sample you provided shows slight incompatibility,” Lothil reported.

The dark bar they chose in one of the station’s towers was sparsely populated during the work week and late hour, but the two men sitting opposite from Lothil wanted it that way. Miriah and Sokoth stared at the man showing no emotion. Their drink glasses glimmered with the dull, small, electronic lighted candle in the center. Miriah looked out of the large windows at the space beyond and shook his head feeling great disappointment.

Sokoth leaned forward. “By how much?” he asked.

“Why does it matter?” Lothil asked. His unsavory, rough features scowled beneath the mess of black hair hanging down from his head. His long nose and mustache led down to thin lips. His circular glasses gave him an intelligent look, and the men knew it was justified.

“Just answer the question,” Sokoth demanded.

Lothil sat back shrugging, his leather jacket mostly hiding the gesture. “Two percent,” he answered, “but it doesn’t matter. Any incompatibility will be rejected.”

Sokoth drained his cup and sat it back down on the table. “Do it,” he ordered. “No questions. No arguments. Do what you have to do.”

Lothil looked completely surprised. He was about to complain when Sokoth leaned forward and scowled.

“Are you serious?” Lothil asked him. “No preparation. Nothing?”

Sokoth glared at the man. “Do it. When complete, I will give you the location of the station I want you to transfer it to,”

he said. “Your operation is already illegal, so there shouldn’t be any problems. Right?”

Lothil looked back at him with obvious doubts, but after long moments he nodded his head. “No problems. Your payment was received.”

* * * * *

Caldari Space

The Forge region

Etsala Constellation

Walvalin

[Citadel Identification Redacted]

The present...

Moving through the citadel with the antigravity sled did not draw too much attention. Transporting goods back and forth was common. Moving into the area of Miriah’s destination brought more scrutiny, and he was forced to use his tazer on a couple of staff members when he fell under suspicion. It was unfortunate when another one witnessed his activities down the hall and ran to alert security. This particular room was never used as it existed for one purpose alone. Out in the black, it was unnecessary away from the central systems that normally handled such activity.

As the fog cleared from inside the cargo container, Miriah looked down on his beloved daughter. He had been forced to place Arissa into cryo suspension when she fell into a coma after her birthday. Lovingly reaching down, he carefully gathered her

weak, broken body into his arms. Holding her against his chest, he gently laid her on the table before him. Pulling off his long, black jacket, he carefully covered her nakedness from the eyes of the security forces.

Stepping to the side of the bed, he tapped on the display preparing to initiate the sequence. A metallic, robotic tool on the left of the bed moved over and came down on Arissa's arm. Sensors and needles slid into her flesh, and the first portion of the process was complete. The display began scrolling data and showing vitals as the system prepared for stage two. A warning showed up on the side of the digital screen as Arissa's compatibility score displayed. "Override the system lockout," Miriah said into his comm device.

It took a couple of seconds for Goshin to respond. "Protocols removed," he reported. A few more seconds passed and the activation icon displayed on the screen. Miriah's hand began to move toward it.

"Get away from the console!" a security officer yelled as the doors slid open. His energy gun leveled at Miriah's chest. The other two behind him rushed into the room, guns pulled and ready. The anger in their eyes burned bright, and Miriah gazed at them for a moment before his finger touched the display.

The energy discharge from the security officer's gun pierced Miriah's chest, burning a hole through his dark clothing into the flesh beneath. The edges of the wound burned brightly. Miriah looked down at it and back up at the officer, his eyes widening in disbelief. The portions not cauterized gushed blood, and the crimson pulsed out with the beating of his heart. Stumbling backward, he fell hard against the medical bed behind

him. Sinking to the floor, propped up against it, his eyes turned toward his objective.

The bed's apparatus lifted up over Arissa's head in the process of Miriah being shot. The two containers with their chemicals, attached to the metallic tool, plunged downward pushing the contents into her veins. Blue white beams lanced downward passing through the flesh of her forehead, pass the bone of her skull, and began to scan her brain. The process took very little time.

* * * * *

Arissa felt naked, and that made her angry. Slowly opening her eyes, the glass in front of her was sliding upward until it was fully out of the way. A tall man she knew was standing in front of her, a soft look on his normally stern face. He appeared concerned and anxious as she looked back at him. There were other men, some standing, some on the ground, but she did not know them. Glancing down at herself, her body was only covered with black undergarments. She moved her arms to cover herself out of instinct, but realized her arms and hands moved.

Stumbling forward in sudden panic, Sokoth caught her, keeping her from sprawling on the cold, metal floor. Disoriented she looked to her immediate left and her eyes widened. There on the table, she saw herself. The burned skin, shaved head, old wounds from the worst day of her life. She leaned against Sokoth and his dark gray tunic, his warm arms holding her.

"You're okay," he said. "You're okay. Welcome to your new life."

EVE Online: Dark Ripple

Caldari Space
The Forge region
Etsala Constellation
Hentogaira

 Volatile energy and scorching heat flowed from the star, wrapping around the shield's outer surface with incredible pressure. Cloaked against sensors, scanners, or prying eyes, the six-winged craft refracted the light, holding the radiation and burning chaos away. Within the protective fields and surrounded by advanced technology, a capsuleer waited, intimately connected to every system of her anchored ship.

 Multiple hours drifted by as she patiently watched. Yet, she did not study the massive, stellar inferno to her aft. Those days passed some time ago. Instead, her attention focused in the direction of a structure far in the distance as data fed directly into her mind from multiple probes. The pack of technological

devices sniffed and listened with keen senses sending their encrypted, silent signals to their matron.

When her watch began, Ari marveled at the large amount of irrelevant information caused by the busy, large star system, but she quickly sifted, adjusted, and positioned her probes to the exact location she needed. The stream of ships coming and going from the station kept a portion of her enhanced mind occupied as she looked for a particular signature.

"Got light on the Otsela gate. You sure you want to do this?"

"Do you even have to ask?" Ari replied.

Her answering of a question with a question sparked a long sigh from across the communication channel.

The sound sparked her sarcasm. "If you don't want to help, Goshin, you can go explore your anal cavity somewhere else."

Ari imagined the look on his rigid Amarrian face during the long silence that followed. Deep within her Caldari covert ops ship, a smile tugged at the corner of her mostly passive lips. Submerged within her capsule's thick fluid, a minor ripple moved over her naked abdomen as her mind reeled with laughter. She made sure to mute the comm channel to avoid antagonizing him further.

"Cargo carrier sighted. Scanning now," Goshin reported.

His terse response and emotionless tone elicited further laughing from Ari. That was his annoyed voice.

"Vessel is aligning toward planet one. It is registered to Oshindo Transport Enterprises," Goshin said. "Cargo is refined materials and... what we expected. Ship name is Dawnstrider. Warping now."

Ari returned to a serious disposition and unmuted her comm channel. "That means he is on station and will be taking delivery. Let's hope its the one I'm monitoring." Seconds ticked by as she waited in anticipation watching her probe data.

"Let's hope." Goshin said, his words saturated with uncertainty.

* * * * *

Hentogaira I – Moon 13 – Minedrill Mineral Reserve

The smooth, black bar reflected a half empty glass of spirits, and the man drinking it grinned as his pad registered the exchange of cargo once the Dawnstrider was unloaded. He looked up at the vessel's pilot and nodded. "Very good. The load has been transitioned to my hanger. Your payment sent. Our weekly business concluded."

Barrin Slued opened his hands and arms in a gesture of expectation, his intoxicated, jovial mood filling his face. His double tie was loose and dress shirt unbuttoned far too low revealing his chest. The jacket to his ensemble hung precariously on the back of his chair.

A number of people sat at the bar to their left and right talking, drinking, and minding their own business. Bartenders worked on getting beverages out to their customers quickly. The dance floor, far behind them, was full of people enjoying the loud, synthesized beats. Music flooded the low lit establishment, but the area at the bar was far enough way so the two could actually have a conversation.

Barrin reached over and caressed Jillian's forearm resting on the bar when she did not respond to his gesture. Her blue eyes

moved from her drink to his hand, then up to his eyes. His smile dropped a little as his hand slowly went to his drink. Taking a big gulp, he returned his attention to her.

"This makes our thirteenth transaction. Yes?" he asked.

Jillian brushed a few stray brown hairs from her cheek and nodded. "Its our twelfth," she replied, "and I'd like to assure you how much my company appreciates our contract." A hand went to her flight suit's front zipper and pulled it a little higher as his gaze roved over her.

"Us too," Barrin said as his eyes once more found hers. "You know, you really should let me buy you dinner or something sometime. We've met like this so much already, I feel like I haven't really shown you how much I... I mean, we appreciate the dependable services your company has provided."

"That really isn't necessary," Jillian said. "The substantial payments are quite enough."

Barrin eyed her with disappointment as his smile disappeared. "You know, our contract and continued business does depend on my reports each week. Perhaps you should reconsider having dinner with me," he said. His eyebrows drew slightly closer together and a small crease presented itself between them.

"No," Jillian said turning on her chair to face him fully. "I have zero interest in anything with you outside of our professional relationship. Please keep our interactions on that level." She stood up and turned to leave. "I have to get going." She was about to take a step when Barrin grabbed her upper, right arm.

A flash of anger crossed his features as he looked at her. "I think we should go back to my quarters to discuss our

contract. I'm beginning to think you might be in violation of our agreement. Perhaps the cargo was a bit light this time. The board will be very displeased. They may even order an investigation to figure out just how much went missing."

Jillian slowly turned her head to look at him. All of the emotion in her face drained away and she stared into his eyes. His cheeks appeared red, a combination of the alcohol and anger at her rejection. This was not the first time he pressured her, but it was the most blunt of the three. The threat was new. She was about to respond when someone put a hand on Barrin's shoulder.

"She said no," a woman told him, drawing his attention, "but I might say yes."

The grip on Jillian's arm loosened, and she pulled away. "See you next week, Slued." Glancing at the other woman, she gave her an appreciative nod and walked toward the wide exit leading out to a bright promenade.

Barrin appeared confused for a moment. He glanced toward Jillian as she quickly left and then back to the woman who interrupted. The anger he felt dissipated as he contemplated the strange woman's words. "Say yes?"

She nodded slightly, a smile playing across her glossy, blue lips. "Perhaps, if you stop being such a tremendous ass." Her hand slid along his shoulder to his neck and her nimble fingers slowly circled one of the black sockets that marked every capsuleer. "Why would you want to bother with a lowly baseliner anyway?" she asked. The thought came out with a touch of disgust in her voice.

Barrin shook his head a little, trying to get some clarity as he tried to focus on the woman touching him. The sudden

closeness and unexpected intimacy with a stranger knocked him away from his well-rehearsed, practiced demeanor.

The woman's long, platinum hair reflected the lights coming from the direction of the dance area, and her pale blue eyes pierced his own with their intensity. Her tanned skin and carefully applied cosmetics accented the beauty of her face, and the scent permeating her skin was an intoxicant all to itself. Her dark blue, one-piece garment clung to her figure beneath a light, black jacket.

"Who are you?" Barrin blurted out as her fingers moved slowly up the back of his neck. "Do I know you?"

"I'm sure you don't remember," the woman said. "It has been a life time ago. You can call me Ari, most do."

Barrin relaxed with her words, and his mind worked to place the young woman. His previous motivation with Jillian turned toward her as she pressed her chest against his, appearing comfortable as her fingers played with his hair at the nape of his neck. A smile tugged at his lips feeling the warmth of her breath near his right ear and he rested a hand on her hip. "Well then," he said, "we must get reacquainted then."

"That is the reason I'm here," Ari said. Her free hand slipped into a pocket of her jacket and she pulled out an envelope. Withdrawing slightly, she brought it up between them and looked into his eyes. "A message, as an agent for the business group I represent." She caressed the side of his neck with the back of her fingers as her hand returned to his shoulder.

"Oh?" Barrin murmured, so distracted by her that the envelope did not seem very important. He reluctantly looked at the offered missive thinking it was odd to relay a message in such a way. Reaching for it with his free hand, he suddenly found the

envelop smashed into his face. The force of the blow caused blood to splatter downward from his nose, and his vision was filled with a bright flash of white.

The bar rushed up at his face and he barely turned it away before impact. A gash opened on the side of his head. Completely losing control of his body, he found himself on the floor in a thick haze of pain and incoherence. Vague images of flashing light, surprised looking patrons, and garbled noise filtered into his stunned perception.

When the world began to make sense again, Barrin rolled to his side and did his best to blink away the tears and red from his vision. A thousand voices talked at once, some near and some far. A few yelled. Shades of movement helped his mind to refocus slightly and he noticed various footwear including boots, high heels, flats, and others moving by. Then he saw it. The crumpled, blood covered envelope waited.

* * * * *

Touching his nose tenderly, Barrin entered his quarters with a grimace. Both his eyes would be black at the same time tomorrow, and the drug dulled pain would be a constant reminder to his encounter with Ari. The doctor set his nose and repaired the fracture, but most of the soft tissue damage required multiple treatments to heal over the next couple days.

Moving across the spacious living space, he came to a mirror and examined the healed, pink laceration on the side of his head. He cursed looking at the shaved area. The nursing staff at the emergency center liberally cut his hair to treat the wound. To look normal, the rest of his hair had to go.

"Bitch!" he yelled slamming his hand against the wall. Walking into the main portion of the living area, he walked to his long couch and the large screens taking up most of the wall came to life. The burst of information covered news, sports, finance, and various other topics.

"Hello Master Slued," the deep, male voice of his personal AI said on cue. "How may I help you this evening?"

Barrin plopped down on his lounge and gazed at the bounties section filling one of the screens to the top right of the displays. "Ferme, I need to see a security recording," he said.

"Please provide specific file information," Ferme said.

Providing the details given to him by the security team that worked on his case, Barrin waited a few moments relaxing as Ferme accessed their database. His anger felt flat after raging like a lunatic in the medical facilities. The doctor threatened to have him evaluated if he did not calm down.

The playback started, and he could see Ari pull out the envelope. She used the distraction to strike him with her elbow. Then she grabbed his head and slammed it into the bar. The viscous knee to the side of the leg took out his ability to hold himself up, and she dragged him from his chair, broken. The chaos around the altercation spread and Ari calmly looked up at the security camera.

"Freeze!" Barrin roared looking at her. Ferme paused the recording. "Zoom in and augment."

Ari's high definition face filled the large, central screen. Her piercing, pale blue eyes looked into him, and the wicked smile on her face infuriated him further. The overwhelming pleasure that filled her features was evident.

"Ferme, find all information on this woman," he ordered.

"As you command." Ferme said. Facial recognition scanned her face and data began to roll across the screen as the AI searched public records.

Slipping a hand into his soiled jacket pocket, Barrin grabbed the maligned envelope she left for him and tore it open. Unfolding the sheet of faux paper, he read the contents. He didn't miss the drops of his blood that stained the page.

One line alone flowed across the page, "I'll be seeing you..."

* * * * *

"Master Slued," Ferme's deep voice prompted.

Barrin jerked awake and rubbed his eyes, quickly regretting it as pain lanced into his awareness. "Yes?" he managed to say in a groggy voice, shutting his eyes.

"My search is complete, and you have received one new message."

Slightly disoriented from pain meds, Barrin tried to remember what the AI was searching. Laying on his couch he turned his head toward the screens. "Play the message," he said cracking an eye open.

"Multiple recipients. Text and audio only," Ferme said. "Beginning message." Ari's familiar voice began to speak. Barrin would never forget it.

"To the leadership team of Nidle Ventures.

"I hope my message finds you having a great night.

"My name is Ari Ketonna, and I represent a conglomerate of business partners that have identified your business operations

and facility in the Otsela system, planet eight, moon two as requiring our attention. We have also been tracking your transport and delivery process into various systems, including Hentogaira.

"We require one hundred million ISK delivered to our chosen representative's account within twenty-four hours of reception of this message. We wouldn't want anything to cause a disruption to your very profitable business. We recognize our price is small compared to the value of your facility and products being sold within high security space, and we chose this number to demonstrate our generous disposition.

"If you fail to provide payment, we do not look forward to the unpleasantness that will be guaranteed to follow at your facility. Also, the required funds will double. We look forward to a successful resolution of this matter by seeing your payment delivered.

"We would like to thank Barrin Slued and Kerson Operhol for bringing your organization to our attention.

"We do send our warmest, best regards."

Ferme's voice returned, "End of message."

* * * * *

"Save your apologies and stop looking so pathetic. Makes me want to vomit on you, then you can feel bad about that!" Lenthera Chall stormed from across the conference room. Her face was inflamed with wrath.

The long meeting table was filled from one end to the other with several levels of corporate leadership. Barrin stared

back at his chief executive trying not to cringe or crawl away on his belly.

Kerson rubbed his bearded face and averted his eyes to his hands.

Lenthera looked down at the large display embedded in the table in front of her and took some deep breaths as she rubbed the back of her neck. "Who is this woman making these demands?" She asked regaining some of her tattered composure.

Barrin used his electronic pad to pull up his hastily drawn together research. The data appeared on the wall behind him as well as displaying on the table's screens. An unflattering picture of Ari, he captured from the video of his attack, highlighted the left side next to the written information. He spoke in his professional cadence as he presented what he found. "Capsuleer Ketonna is the leader of a known cartel that is possibly connected with numerous criminal elements across several regions of space. As you can see, her organization is alleged to be involved with a long list of unsavory activities including... extortion."

Lenthera's left eye twitched as she looked at him talk. "I see. And as you included, illicit drugs."

"Yes, I was about to get to that," Barrin said. "I believe her motivation is specific to that one. Our operations at the Otsela facility and product are obviously encroaching on the established producers, distributors, and local markets in this area. But, of course we determined that could be the situation, including that in our project analysis and proposal."

"We didn't expect this level of response in only three months," Lenthera pointed out. "A year possibly, but what is clear to me is that you two have been incredibly sloppy!" She leaned forward in her chair addressing Barrin and Kerson. "You

have both operated here in various capacities for years. We invested based on your recommendation and in-depth knowledge of the existing activity and networks. I don't have to remind you that we don't have the planned assets in place to manage this."

Kerson spoke up, "With all due respect, we haven't been sloppy."

The muscles in Lenthera's jaw clenched as she stared at him. "Then explain to me how this woman has so much information on our operations? And why did she name you two, our lead and senior project managers on this venture?"

Barrin and Kerson glanced at one another a few moments before returning their attention to their chief without answers.

"Exactly," Lenthera said. "I'm very disappointed. This type of rapid push back is unheard of in the long history of this company." Many at the table turned their looks of deep disapproval toward Barrin.

Kerson drooped in his chair and rubbed his face.

"I have some thoughts on how we can address the situation," Barrin said.

"Get out!" Lenthera yelled jabbing a finger at the waiting door, her composure crumbling. Lowering her voice, she continued as her words quivered in anger, "You two get the fuck out. Wait in the hall while we discuss this matter. As far as I'm concerned, this is no longer your project. You'll be lucky if I don't personally fire you."

* * * * *

Submerging in the warm fluid of his pod, Barrin felt the familiar, intimate invasion of his body. The outer shell of his pod

closed, sealing him inside as connections met sockets. The darkness felt soothing as he transitioned from mere flesh to something far more. Power flooded through him as he expanded outward, taking on the identity and existence of his Caldari cruiser. The ship became his body, his small capsule a heart.

Rushing to life, the Moa's systems powered up as Barrin's cargo hold filled with extra missiles and charges for his weapon systems. He ran a quick check on his combat drones and initiated his procedures to undock. Igniting his engines, the predatory craft moved forward with purpose.

Allowing the station's flight control to guide him, he came to the end of his berth tunnel. Then he turned toward the station's exit, watching the other ships as they flowed along. Hitting the edge of space, the station catapulted him outward on a clear vector and his engines burned hot with maximum thrust. Seeing the stars and open space, he felt relieved and free.

Lenthera's instructions played in his mind once more. Take what pilots he could muster and protect the company's facility in Otsela while management attempted to make contact to resolve the crisis. Glancing at the clock, Ari's deadline loomed in less than an hour. His recent activities with the project would be reviewed at a later time, and he could expect demotion and reassignment.

* * * * *

Staring at one another, the two women handled the situation differently. Lenthera stood with crossed arms and unrelenting, hard eyes, alone in the large room. Ari appeared relaxed as she played with a lock of her hair. A slight smile

touched her lips. The holographic image of the latter hovered above the large conference table. It was only her upper body.

"What can I do for you, Madam Chall?" Ari asked breaking the silence.

"You've assaulted one of my employees and threatened my company's business," Lenthera said. "It is obvious why I've contacted you. I'd like for you halt whatever it is you are doing."

"Not a problem," Ari said. "Please deposit the funds into my account, and all of this unpleasant business will be resolved."

Lenthera sighed and looked away for a moment. Making eye contact once more she spoke, "May I ask what is motivating this extortion attempt?"

"Barrin and Kerson told me what an easy mark you are. A poor leader. Weak," Ari said. "It was Barrin's idea to use this opportunity. If you would have simply approved his full plan when he appealed to you, the company wouldn't be in this defenseless position. So now you can pay."

"Barrin and Kerson?" Lenthera asked lifting an eyebrow.

Ari nodded her head and shrugged. "Mostly Barrin. He really, really runs his mouth a lot," she said. "Kerson just likes to see you on your knees. Something about that party last month or something. On the beach, under the stars. I don't really care about the salacious details or the holoreel."

Lenthera's eye twitched and her brow furrowed. "I didn't go down to the beach," she said. Anger flooded her eyes and the tone in her voice iced.

Ari looked surprised and covered her mouth as she giggled. "Oh! That must have been someone else."

"I don't know what kind of game you are playing, but I want this to end," Lenthera said, her voice dropped low. "Is it

just the money, or is there something more going on? You seemed quite focused on those two."

Ari's demeanor suddenly shifted from playful to dead serious. "I'll make this easy for you. Pay the funds and we won't cause any disruption to your business operations. Consider it a protection fee until you correct your mistake. We'll guarantee no one bothers you. To avoid further conflict, there is something else you can do, and it will earn you a discount."

* * * * *

"Fleet, this is Commander Mesq, align to the Otsela gate."

Barrin aligned his ship as directed and watched the others turn toward their destination. Seeing the two dozen ships move in unison made him feel a little better. Especially when three battleships joined them. Kerson flew his Gallente battle cruiser, a gun bristling Brutix. The rest of the fleet was mainly cruisers, but some destroyers joined up too. A couple of fast frigates could lock down enemies.

Kerson opened a private channel, "Not a lot of ships." He sounded doubtful about the weak defense they might offer.

"We'll do what we can," Barrin told him closing the channel. He could not deal with any whining at the moment.

Once the fleet's warp engines spun up and synced, they wrapped themselves in folded space and soared. Someone patched their music into the comm system and heavy drums with ripping strings blasted into their audio inputs. Barrin felt his mind quicken and the lights on his ship brightened slightly as a bit more energy pumped through his ship's conduits.

"Rack 'em!" Someone sung in tune with the music. The enthusiasm vibrated among the capsuleers. The fleet lit up the system's ecliptic like exploding stars. Barrin could feel his ship slow and sink back into the fabric of normal space like a boat settling into water as they approached the Otsela gate. A memory of his father rose up in his mind from his youth long ago of being planet side, boating on a vast lake near their home. It surprised him.

Coming to a stop in range, Commander Mesq did not hesitate. "Jump!" he called. "Jump, jump!" The star gate latched on to Barrin's ship and drew him into its glowing maw. He felt stretched from one end of the universe to the other for a split second before hurtling through the beast's gullet. Darkness and light, the past and the future, star dust and atoms, accompanied him at incredible speeds swirling together.

Lurching out of the depths of twisting dimensions, Barrin found himself at their location. Struggling to align his mind and get his bearings, he pulled the data from his sensor systems. Someone cursed on the comm channel, and he felt like doing the same as he looked around. He was thankful for the adjoining gate's projected cloaking field even if it was fleeting.

"Hold position," Commander Mesq said in a hushed tone. "Hold position. I'm receiving new orders."

"What do you mean, new orders?" one of the squadron leaders asked, bewildered by the number of unknown ships surrounding them on all sides.

Barrin's system identified at least half of the ships flashing red with skulls, revealing the marked criminals according to Concord's active data. He would have held his breath if he was within the confines of his flesh as he watched the

gate's cloaking field timer count down. Each second felt like another moment gone, waiting for a bomb to explode, unable to escape the blast radius.

Someone was talking on the fleet comm channel when it cut off. Barrin checked his comms and found the channel was gone. Confused, he pulled up his fleet data and found that he was no longer part of it.

Only a few seconds on the timer remained when Kerson contacted him. He was frantic. "What is going on?" he asked, his perfectly synthesized voice inflated with anxiety. "I've been dropped from the fleet!"

"I don't know," Barrin replied trying to make contact with Commander Mesq. The only answer he received was silence.

"I'm running for the gate!" Kerson said.

"Right behind you."

Kerson's Brutix decloaked and turned toward the stargate leading back to Hentogaira. He was not too far away and slightly below Barrin. Ramping up his magpulse engines, Barrin followed firing his afterburner. Extra power dumped into his propulsion systems. Turning kept his momentum down, but when he aligned his speed increased rapidly.

"What?" Kerson yelled as his shields began taking impact hits from turret fire. Missiles shot by Barrin's field of vision finding their target. Turning his external camera drones to see, Kerson's shields failed, and armor began to crack, becoming molten at the edges as a tremendous amount of weapons fire poured into him.

Something latched on to Barrin's Moa, suddenly dragging his speed down. Turning his attention to the incoming data, he noticed a number of ships targeting him. His mouth twitched in

his pod as he perceived his own corporation ships locked him along with the others. Stasis web fields from two former fleet members held him in their grip.

Kerson's distressed cry drew his attention momentarily, the bright light radiating outward from numerous internal explosions culminated in a massive ball of fire and debris as his craft tore apart. Burning chunks fell away into the black.

The gate was close, but Barrin recognized he would never make it, not with that much firepower coming at him. Warning alarms blared, shields shattered, armor was pierced, and hull ruptured as his ship melted around him.

Barrin's consciousness violently slammed into his capsule when it auto ejected from his faltering cruiser. The explosion blinded his camera drones momentarily as atmosphere, plasma, ordinance, crew, and everything else vaporized around him. Somewhere in his mind, the screams of those within the bowels of his ship stabbed at him.

Vulnerable and caught, the familiar, burning light lanced into his brain as his capsule blew apart. Flames licked his body, melting flesh, as he tumbled into the cold of space. Lifeless, hollow eyes saw no more. Flash frozen, his mouth hung open in a silent scream, hands stiff, forever clawing at the emptiness.

* * * * *

Barrin's eyes opened wide as the protective transparent cover of his cloning tube slowly slid upward. He cursed heavily and slammed his forearm against the side. Waves of dizziness and nausea rolled over him as he surfaced from the capsule transfer procedure. It would pass in seconds as his vitals

stabilized, but he hated it anyway. The station system plugged into the upper most socket on his neck.

"Clone activation complete. You've received several messages." Ferme's artificial, apathetic voice said. "I've marked one as important. It is from Lentherra Chall. Visual available."

"Open it." Barrin croaked, speaking with fresh vocal cords.

Lentherra's visual appeared in front of him. She stood in her office where he saw her last. "Consider the loss of your capsule, your termination notice."

* * * * *

Ari stood in the large, storage unit looking down at the two translucent containers. Her warm breath wisped into fog as she slowly exhaled. Her long black jacket was closed, holding in her body heat against the frigid temperatures. She listened as she heard the steps approach behind her, boots on metal.

Her pale blue eyes looked at the twisted, partially burned, technology riddled corpses within their coffins. A wicked smile spread on her lips as the memory of retrieving them in space filled her mind. She reached out and touched the red, engraved name plate of one with a gloved hand. "Barrin Slued," she read.

"You have done well, Arissa," a man said behind her, his words drenched in his formal Amarrian accent. He rested a hand gently on her shoulder a moment.

"Thank you, Sokoth," Arissa said turning to embrace him.

"This is only the beginning of your vengeance on these two. Those who took away your childhood and put you into that

wheelchair, paralyzed, so long ago," he said. "Did you get the money?"

"Of course," Arissa replied. "All of it."

Sokoth slowly looked around at the numerous rows and stacks of cold containers with their macabre contents, capsuleer kills. "You truly have become one of us, a perfect instrument of destruction."

About the Author

Daniel Bastion has a family and works in a non-literary career field. He has a lot of different interests and passions including fantasy, science fiction, gaming, reading, and writing.

www.danielbastion.com