

EVE Online: Dark Ripple

A Short Story
By Daniel Bastion

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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.

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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.

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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..."

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"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."

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"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."

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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.

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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."

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"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.

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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 Lenthera Chall. Visual available."

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

Lenthera'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."

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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.

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