



Against A Rock
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Floreina is a cybernetically enhanced young woman with a vibrant future in the Amarrian Empire, a decorated turret commander and slave overseer aboard an Abaddon warship. But after a cruel “accident” and the repeated abuse of slaves, Floreina risks everything in a defiant act of mutiny.

Along the way, she learns that commandeering a battleship takes more than just artificially focused cunning, automated adrenaline injections, and simple, old-fashioned brutality. For her plan to succeed, Floreina must befriend a Minmatar slave.

But plans don't always go as planned... And as the two fight for their lives, Floreina must find a way to reconcile their friendship with the racism that drives her career.

When people think of slavery, they think of whips, chains and neurological implants. While these things may be necessary, the real tools of a successful slave culture are psychological. Through a myriad of non-violent techniques, such as carefully selecting entertainment material, staging supportive news, and well-timed acts of love, one can tightly control the subject's perception of his world. The mark of a truly superior slave-bearing society is when the slaves support the system as vehemently as the masters.

-The New Amarria

Despite the speed of their run, Floreina sensed the reluctance of the Minmatar. She watched from above, hopping between video feeds as the

damage control teams entered the hottest sections of the turret. Their hands shook and voices cracked, but they did not hesitate to race to their duty...

And Floreina imagined her little buddy doing the same...

She felt the plasma traveling at ever increasing rates through a shrinking number of pathways...

... and soon the cooling failures began.

She entered the turret's central photon generator, unable to avoid the sense of steadily building heat, and felt the sweat on her distant corporeal body.

Floreina traveled around the generator, jumping methodically through the computations and feedback processes... sensing something. Somehow the coolant flow was inconsistent.

Within several hundred milliseconds she noticed the weakness.

We're about to have a coolant leak at the main generator, Floreina announced, a moment before the pipe burst. *Dad, do you have a team in section A-16?*

Miltein seethed with frustration, momentarily distracting the other networked commanders. He zeroed in on his daughter. *I have two slaves one deck below.*

Floreina watched the coolant spill from the gash into an adjacent crawlway. The plastic coating along the walls froze and cracked and her visuals clouded over.

I'm working with another team, if you want to take this, Floreina. Miltein said. *Get 'em out of there.*

Copy that. She scanned the nearby decks to find the two slaves, working to reinforce a plasma pipeline.

"Filmar and Milkeinos," she spoke audibly through the local intercom, the words feeling like sludge compared with the elegant mental communion she enjoyed with her fellow commanders.

The slaves looked up. "Master Floreina—" started Milkeinos.

"Discontinue your work," she ordered. "You've got a coolant leak above you. Retreat to deck C."

"Yes, Ma'am," replied Filmar as he turned to pack his nanite applicator into its case.

"Just twenty more seconds," replied Milkeinos as he strained to point his applicator into the pipeline. "I'll have it sealed..."

Floreina ran a check on the coolant dispersal. "Negative," she replied. "Get out now. Discard the equipment and retreat immediately to

C deck. I've got coolant coming down and I can't predict where it's going to break through."

Turret one at seventy percent damage, announced Captain Allihence. Average turret damage now at fifty percent.

And Floreina sighed, a private and selfish show of relief as she remembered the other turret commanders were having just as many problems.

She focused on the two endangered slaves, but continued running the standard wavelength coherency, damage and efficiency calculations in the back of her mind.

Don't you think you're pulling them prematurely? asked Captain Allihence, suddenly showing her presence within the local system. *Twenty more seconds... are they really in such danger?*

Floreina looked at the slaves as Filmar punched his pass code into the hatchway at the end of the corridor. *I predict the leak will continue down another deck,* Floreina told the captain, drawing her toward the disruption in the crawlway above.

And as if on cue, the crawlway floor ruptured, a tiny crack rapidly lengthening to allow the coolant to drip into the corridor below.

Allihence laughed privately to Floreina. *I stand corrected.* And the captain retreated from Floreina's system... or cloaked her consciousness.

Milkeinos shouted as the fog filled the hallway. As her vision clouded, Floreina saw Filmar pull open the hatch and jump through to the next corridor.

A second later, Milkeinos' screams echoed, registering on sensors all along both sections.

"Milkeinos, are you hit?" Floreina shouted through the nearest speaker. "I have no visual on you."

And she listened to his scream for another second before he halted and replied. "Yeah; I'm hit."

"Can you -"

"I can walk," he said.

Damage level at fifty percent, announced Lieutenant Ethaniel.

Her natural mind continued focusing on the two slaves, but jumped back intermittently to direct her personal processor, devoted to the normal cannon operations.

Floreina shifted her view to the next section just as she heard the hatchway slam shut. The slave turned from the door and ran toward the next hatch.

“Filmar!” Floreina shouted. “Do not abandon your partner!”

He halted midway along the corridor. “The section’s flooded!” he replied.

“No, it’s not. Get back and help your partner!”

And as she spoke to Filmar she simultaneously pulled up the visual on the previous corridor, the fog now rapidly clearing to reveal Milkeinos crawling to his feet, red splotches dotting his skin, his plain brown uniform pockmarked with tiny holes where coolant splatters had disintegrated the material and pieces of his flesh.

As the slave shuffled clumsily toward the hatchway, another rupture registered above him.

“Get back Milkeinos!” Floreina shouted a moment too late.

The ceiling cracked and more coolant splashed down.

And as the view clouded over again, she saw the slave go down with an agonizing scream. Then he went silent.

She turned back to Filmar, having returned to the hatchway, now entering his code. “Belay that order,” she said.

Filmar stopped and looked up, resting his hand on the latch.

“Reseal the hatch,” Floreina ordered. “*Now* the corridor’s flooded.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he answered as he cancelled his code.

Heat levels reaching critical, Allihence communicated. Prepare to discontinue overclocking on my mark.

And Floreina felt grit in her stomach as she adjusted her focus back to the turret as a whole.

Her face tightened as she continued watching the photon generation and release. She sent a private report to Miltein. *I’m sorry, Daddy*, she said, feeling his frustration and allowing it to compound her own. She sent her public report to Overseer Karleen a moment later.

Discontinue overclocking, Allihence ordered. Turret five is nearing critical...

Floreina checked her turret’s damage level as the processes slowed to a normal pace, allowing her implant a mild sense of relaxation. She ran checks on the other turrets and smiled privately as she recognized that most had seen more overclocking damage, reminding herself that despite the sudden stress, her team was doing the best job anyone could expect.

However, Floreina had been the only one to lose a crew member, and that tainted her success...

But as the fog cleared, Floreina scanned for Milkeinos’ body and found nothing. She refocused to hear him panting at the other end of the hall

and adjusted the camera toward the voice. As she panned, the sleeve of his uniform passed by, cracked and frozen, fingers now frosted white, cemented to the deck plating. Further along, the slave dragged himself toward the hatchway's keypad. He shook violently, his clothing covered in a thin layer of frost. His right arm jutted from his shoulder, ending at the elbow in a cracked and frozen stump.

And somehow, bracing his body against the wall, kneeling before the hatch, he entered his code. He lurched toward the latch and pulled the door open. Whining from the depths of his throat, he forced himself onward.

I need to change my report, Floreina communicated toward Karleen and her father over the public channel, feeling the tightness increasing. Milkeinos is alive... severely injured.

Repairable? Karleen asked as her presence passed into the corridor to see. *Oh dear God,* she exclaimed, prompting several of Floreina's networked lieutenants to take a peek as well.

No, they seemed to decide. Milkeinos' injuries were not repairable. Floreina ran a quick price calculation, and was forced to agree.

And Allihence was there suddenly, her presence overwhelming but somehow comforting. The captain simply watched pleasantly, showing an oddly timed pride in her crew...

Can I request permission to get this slave some medical attention? Floreina asked. *His injuries are borderline...*

Negative, Allihence replied within milliseconds. *The cost of an artificial limb above the elbow is more than that of the slave.*

Yes, Captain, Floreina replied. *Just thought I'd ask. It seems like the benefit in slave morale would be worth the extra cost.*

Not enough to warrant the trouble, replied the captain. *...unless you wish to purchase the slave yourself, Floreina.* She paused. *Or anyone else...*

No one replied.

Terminate the slave, Allihence ordered.

Yes, Ma'am, replied Floreina as she felt herself drawn unnaturally back toward her corporeal body.

Her emotional suppressant system pulled itself to the forefront of her mind, but she shooed it away, forcing herself back into the moment.

She felt the other commanders watching her, feeling her distaste for the situation, and sensing her hesitation.

She looked down from the cameras on Milkeinos as he staggered to the other end of the hall. "I'm going to need medical attention," he cried. "I'm coming down service crawlway B, if it's still open... Master

Floreina... someone... please tell me if crawlway B is still unblocked from my current position..." His voice cracked and grated painfully, but she felt the rest of the crew watching, simply impressed that he could even speak or move.

She locked the hatchway just as he reached out to type his access code. The panel beeped a rejection and Floreina felt her mental reflexes pulling away as he screamed a tortured reply. "No... please..." he typed his code again and collapsed to the floor upon hearing the second rejection.

"Please, God!" he screamed, his body convulsing against the wall. "Why is my access denied? ...Commander Floreina! ...Commander Miltein! Why is no one answering me?"

Floreina paused, feeling the weight of the minds surrounding her. Outside they barely noticed their weaponry crushing the last of their enemies, leaving little more than tattered wreckage on the battlefield.

But as the battle ended, she felt her heart pumping harder. She brought herself back to her natural body for a moment to look out with her own eyes on the crew surrounding her three steps below. She took a deep breath and prepared herself, considering for a moment the use of her emotional suppressants, simply to disguise her hesitation. But transparency and honesty are too important when directly connected to the minds of Amarrian crewmembers.

Would you like me to handle this? suggested Lieutenant Ethaniel.

...yes, she replied. Thank you. This is my responsibility... but it's just one of those difficult things for me...

No need to explain, Commander.

Thank you, Lieutenant. Floreina disconnected from the monitors in Milkeinos' corridor and pulled her consciousness away from the situation. *I'm going to rest my head for a few minutes before writing my post-battle reports. Ethaniel, let me know as soon as you've terminated Milkeinos. For the rest of you, join me for a quick clearing of the mind, or begin your own reports. I'll see you in a few minutes.* She paused for several hundred milliseconds to confirm that her team did not have any last minute questions, then reached to the back of her head and removed the network cable from its socket.

Her team fell away, the ghosts of their minds remaining for several long moments, swirling with her own emotional processing. She sighed and dropped the cord, letting it retract into the head of her command seat.

She leaned back, noticing the dampness of her uniform, and wiped the sweat from her forehead. Adjusting her turtleneck, she waved a quick breath of air down the front of her uniform.

Floreina thought about the pirate ships, the terrorist abolitionists, now floating as battered heaps of scrap metal outside their Abaddon warship... and the crew they had held just moments before. Who were they? Why had they chosen a path of debauchery? Had their families tried to reason with them? ...or were they onboard too, heaped into a neat little package to be discarded from society and forgotten?

But her mind did not dwell on the thousands of Minmatar enemies they had just killed, and instead came back to the single Minmatar she had failed to save.

Floreina closed her eyes and prayed silently, feeling His presence behind everything, watching, in the same way Captain Allihence would watch her team's activities from the back of their minds. The Lord, however, had a deep, loving and caring subtlety that could not be duplicated with human or mechanical brains.

Floreina smiled, knowing she could always come back to Him. No matter how intense a situation, He would always be there to lift, to caress her soul and carry her upon the wings of her emotion. And He would always be there to assure her that the universe was on the right path, that she had done everything under His grace and guidance.

And He reminded her of her own slave in engineering. She paused a long, nervous moment, then opened her personal radio application and connected with the wireless onboard network.

It took only a couple seconds to find him lying in a crawlspace awaiting orders, his datapad connected to a damage report terminal.

"Mahran," Floreina said through the datapad's audio output.

"Good Morning, Master Floreina," Mahran replied. "What can I do for you, Ma'am?"

"I was wondering how you'd feel about a promotion to management and dispatch?"

"A promotion?" he said. "There's others with seniority... "

"I've been thinking I want you off the repair teams," Floreina said.

"May I ask why?" Mahran said, distracted by his datapad as he scanned the readouts.

"Too dangerous."

He nodded. "Yeah, it gets hairy sometimes... doesn't Captain Allihence reimburse you if something happens?" He looked up suddenly. "Not that I'm complaining... "

"Yeah, I get reimbursed... fair market value... whatever that means... but I'd rather have you alive. But I couldn't decide if you could handle it... and I finally realized my best option would be to ask you."

"My only fear," Mahran replied, "would be that the others would not respect me because of how I got the position."

"That's fair, but I think you could push through it and the fact that you're considering it indicates to me that you think critically enough to handle yourself." She giggled. "The other option's a demotion where you spend your time cleaning my bathroom, organizing files and painting my nails."

"I wouldn't want to take away your timeshare money... "

"That's why I prefer to keep you working."

"Are the damage control teams really that dangerous?" he asked.

"Yeah... " she said. "They're probably better off going to Minmatars who belong to the ship."

"Okay... " Mahran nodded, glancing rapidly back to his datapad. "I can handle the position, Master Floreina... thank you."

"Okay, I'll put in the request and see what the engineering officers have to say."

He looked around the corridor and found a camera. Floreina shifted her view to meet his. His eyes gleamed and a smile snuck across his face, but still he repeatedly glanced toward his datapad. "Thank you, Master," he said.

"Well... I can tell you're distracted so I'll let you get back to work."

He saluted as she shut off the connection.

Floreina relaxed, took a deep breath and pulled the cable from the back of her seat. Lifting her long dark hair and the flap of skin hiding her interface, she plugged the network connection into its socket and slipped back into her turret, melding again with the minds of her team.

Floreina read through the reports of her lieutenants and fellow turret commanders. Despite being the only turret to lose a member, her team had actually performed quite well, receiving less heat damage than all but two of the other turrets. Arguably a successful overclocking test.

But as the minutes passed, Floreina still did not sense Lieutenant Eth-anial's report. Finally, she asked, *Lieutenant, what's the status on our poor Minmatar?*

Eth-anial paused several long moments. *Well...he started. I didn't want to involve you as it's a little dramatic... he's being... difficult... I would almost say you were right to suggest repairing him. This kid's a fighter... more*

strength than I would have in his situation, I fear to admit... although he's turned into a disobedient little brat in his last moments before Judgement...

Why? Floreina asked. What are you ordering him to do?

I wanted him to cross back through the previous corridor. I told him Filmar was going to pick him up on the other side.

Floreina groaned. Ethaniel, he's not an idiot. The whole corridor was contaminated with coolant. He's well aware of how long it takes for it to cool to safe levels.

Floreina pulled up the monitors from Milkeinos' location, but Ethaniel stopped her. Commander, I can handle it... I think it would be better for both of you if I took care of this.

But she looked anyway, to see Milkeinos huddled against the wall near the hatchway leading back into the damaged corridor. The door hung half open. The stump of his right arm jutted hideously upward as he screamed Floreina's name.

"Commander Floreina, please!" he cried. "Lieutenant Ethaniel is trying to kill me! Please, Lord... I can still work... Commander Floreina, please... I can still work... look at me... I'm still alive and talking... you know I can still be a productive member..." And his face collapsed to the floor, repeating her name, "...Commander Floreina!"

And Floreina stopped short once again.

Yeah... Ethaniel started. He thinks you're the one to spare him...

And Floreina shot Ethaniel a furious glare over the open channel. What do you think you're doing letting him know?

My apologies, Ma'am, replied Ethaniel. That was a bad choice on my part... I was trying to get it done quickly. I figured he would be so disoriented that he would forget about the danger.

He's a Minmatar, Floreina reminded. He's going to protect his own existence... and when this happens you risk contaminating the rest of the population.

I'm sorry, Ma'am, he repeated. I know... that was my mistake.

So what are you doing about it now? she asked as she pulled up the audio and visual records from the corridor to hear Ethaniel's demands and Milkeinos' pleading arguments from just a minute earlier.

Well, I allowed him to open the hatch back into the damaged area, and then he started refusing my orders, and now he refuses to close the hatch again. If I could get him to close that hatch I could vent the oxygen in the corridor... but he seems to have figured that out. So now I have a couple drones coming from outside. They should get to him in a couple minutes...

Ethaniel paused, and Floreina sensed his consciousness suddenly shuddering, as though hiding his own disgust. They felt each other's minds for a moment and Floreina noted just how similar they were as they seemed to blend together into a single saddened and frustrated person, who simply had to do something they didn't want to do.

And she pulled away a quick moment later. *I'll take over, Lieutenant. I should have been handling this from the beginning.*

Yes, Ma'am, he replied, directing her toward the two drones, displaying their intended path on a three dimensional blueprint.

Okay, copy that, Floreina replied. *I'll take it...*

You gonna be okay, Commander? asked Lieutenant Adran. *There's no shame in having spiritual issues with this...*

No, no, Floreina replied. *This is my job; he's already suffered too much because I didn't handle it from the beginning.*

She waited for the bots to make their way through the service crawlways to the slave's position. She watched Milkeinos, lying twitching on the floor, but from a distance, the vision blurred over with numerous other menial tasks like cleanup procedures and efficiency reports. And she shut herself off from the corridor's audio feeds as his cries raised in pitch.

Milkeinos' face suddenly changed, and his body froze. He looked up, and stared into the camera, as though knowing exactly which one Floreina would be using. His lips moved, but Floreina refused to allow her interpreter application to process the motions.

Milkeinos stared into the camera, his face growing flat, as though suddenly recognizing his real situation, and his mouth stopped moving. Five minutes earlier the thought that he would be refused medical attention would never have crossed his mind. Now, Floreina imagined his reality collapsing, seeing his Amarrian masters, his spiritual guides, as something completely different, something dark and twisted and evil. As false as it was, for a second Floreina could imagine that feeling, and understood.

And Milkeinos began moving again, dragging himself to his knees and crawling forward toward the hatch. He forced himself over the divider, falling forward into the adjacent room. He stopped short at the blast of cold, then pressed on.

Her first thought was that he had resigned himself to his fate, and was headed back toward the coolant as Ethaniel had ordered, but a moment later noticed that he was not heading toward the main damage, and was instead turning toward his discarded pack of equipment.

Did you send Milkeinos out with any communications in that bag? Floreina asked her father. *Please tell me he won't be able to contact his friends...*

Looks like he might have one, replied Miltein. *A personal datapad. I can't isolate it. I can't prevent his connection unless I get an ID.*

Floreina forced her mind toward the first of the drones. It glided forward through the tight crawlway as magnetic strips along the walls and floor powered on and off at its command.

She entered the robot, seeing the crawlway from its front mounted camera. The normally invisible propulsion strips dotted on all sides of her like tentacles, pulling and pushing her along the deck plating.

She stepped up the motion, firing the magnetism faster and faster, envisioning them as a blur around her as the drone propelled down the crawlway.

Ahead, she found an access hatch above Milkeinos.

The drone slid to a halt as Floreina released the lock to open the hatch. Her unfamiliar mechanical body tumbled to the deck below. She fired the floor strips to break her fall and rolled back to her proper position on an invisible magnetic cushion.

She propelled forward, through the open hatch and into the next corridor, where frost still coated the walls and Milkeinos dragged himself across the floor, the drone's microphones picking up his deep throated whine.

He sat up as he reached the pack, his head bobbing side to side. As he reached into the bag, he looked up to see Floreina in her sleek, mechanical form, hovering on her magnetic field a hundred centimeters above the deck plating. He stared at her, as though recognizing who was behind the indifferent robotic exterior.

"No," he said. "Please... Master Floreina... Karleen...Master Miltein... please..." But his voice faded away in resigned helplessness as Floreina extended and ignited her welding torch.

He pulled out the datapad. "Can I please just contact my daughter..."

And Floreina charged forward.

He swung the datapad suddenly, and screamed as the back of his hand slammed into the cold metal and the torch connected with his arm, charring his uniform.

The datapad dropped to the floor and the slave pulled his arm up to gain a grip on the drone's head. As the magnetism fought against Milkeinos' push, her welding torch floundered at chest level, too distant to make a connection.

Her heart pumped, a loud, repetitive thud, echoing mechanically as though literally housed within this cold, hollow, device.

"I'm sorry," she said, unable to hold her tongue any longer. And she rocked, utilizing every strip to roll left and right.

And Milkeinos' hand faltered and slipped. Floreina fell against the slave, burying the torch in his belly and slamming her steel face against his. Her camera maintained a view of Milkeinos freeze-burned, tear streaked face, and as they tumbled to the ground Floreina could see nothing else.

And for a moment, this Minmatar looked just like Mahran.

Lying atop him for several long moments, the violent twitching registered on the many motion sensors throughout her body.

And Floreina looked at a tiny dimple on the tip of his nose, blocking out everything else, the sounds, the vibrations, the cold of the room, and the warmth of the body. She focused on the dimple, as though that was all he had been, and all his life had meant.

Finally rolling off the body, she pulled back to look, just long enough to confirm the termination. And she wrenched her consciousness from the robot as though escaping from a tainted garbage bin and forced herself back into her human form.

She looked out on the command center and her core crew as though they were figures in a diorama. They turned to gaze at her, one by one as she retreated from the network.

Fumbling with her hair and the back of her turtleneck, she clutched the data connection, and just before exiting the system, she took note of the attitudes of her fellow crewmen.

Perhaps they were not as attached to the slaves as their commander, but they understood her position. They watched, fascinated... but did not pass judgment.

And she popped the connection from the back of her head, and felt the relief of an empty mind flood over her.

Simplicity once more... just her and her personal implant.

She fought the tears, as she saw the lieutenants momentarily neglecting their duties to gaze in her direction. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and quickly wiped them on the cuff of her sleeve. "My apologies, gentlemen."

"No need for apology, Ma'am," Lieutenant Adran replied.

She leaned into her seat to stare at the subtle light strips on the ceiling.

"We need to pray for Milkeinos," Floreina said.

Several of the lieutenants looked up from their posts.

"Will you join me in prayer for the lost crewman?" Floreina asked.

And several of her crew looked around questioningly.

"He disobeyed several direct orders, Commander," Adran commented.

"Only after finding out we wanted to kill him," she replied.

And her crew seemed to shrug in agreement.

"Please Lord," she started, "Grant our loyal slave your love and compassion as he crosses over..." Floreina continued carefully through her prayer, her speech applications processing everything she said.

...death was as much a part of God's vision as anything else... a cycle... a magical, rhythmic process that kept all existence in working order. And the Amarrian race had been chosen as the Lord's overseers in that process.

"Thank the Lord's grace," said each of the Lieutenants as she finished the prayer. "We thank the Lord's grace," repeated Captain Allihence through the command intercom. "We hope for this Minmatar's salvation..."

Floreina looked at her crew. "We also need to think about who's going to replace Milkeinos..."

"We were thinking of bringing Mahran up from engineering," Adran said, turning to smile.

"No jokes about my Minmatar!" Floreina replied playfully.

"Why not?" Lieutenant Ethaniel replied. "Why's he so different from the others?"

"Because he's *mine*."

"Did you send Filmar straight to the discipline chambers?" Floreina whispered.

Karleen nodded as she sipped her drink. "Absolutely. Class four disciplinary measure."

"Did he deserve that?" Floreina asked. "My heart wants to blame the captain more than Filmar."

"The master always shoulders the blame," Karleen replied. "But the slave bears the punishment."

Floreina glanced around the bar, her algorithms directing her eyes, searching for individuals with body language betraying their eavesdropping. But these folks were here for drink, and knew how to mind their business.

Slavery was technically illegal on this station, the result of various agreements signed with the Amarrian Empire, CONCORD and the local business community to facilitate international trade. In Amarrian territory, even in high security, CONCORD patrolled space, slavery laws were low priority for police, but still, it paid to be careful.

"I couldn't even watch the recording," Karleen said, shaking her head as she played with her ice cubes. "I'm glad I wasn't in your shoes... that would've broken my heart."

Floreina nodded. "That was the saddest thing I've ever done..." she paused and looked up at her father, beer foam dangling from his moustache. "Except for that once..."

Miltein nodded and sighed.

"Would you two back me up if I made a petition to Allihence about reorganizing work orders so we don't put our subjects in danger unless the ship's in danger?" Floreina asked.

Karleen shrugged. "I've already sent my own official petition saying the same thing. I gave cost analysis, theories on worker morale..."

"Sign another one?" Floreina asked.

"I'll put my name on it," Miltein said.

Karleen shook her head, ignoring the drink in her hand. "The captain was clear that I should drop it." She set her glass back on the table. "I know... I agree with you on this..."

"... we were killing non-networked belt pirates," Floreina continued, absently scratching the edge of the table with her fingernails. "The overclocking protocols were completely unnecessary... it's like Allihence has no concept of the way we think about death..."

"Immortality will do that to you," Miltein said.

"No, no..." Floreina laughed, thinking of her crazy booster exploit idea from years earlier... and her ex, the only other person who knew of it. "Immortality's a lie," she said. "Capsuleers only survive as long as the technology functions."

Floreina walked the station, searching, wandering to the upper gardens, amongst fruit trees growing under a massive dome.

As she walked, Floreina scanned the faces of the people. With every face, her recognition software analyzed, connected with the station database, and returned their public files, name, history, criminal record... She saw each person from a distance, like they were characters in a computer game. And she knew everything about them.

And they had no idea.

Floreina found a spot on the grass. Her location made no difference for connecting to the network, but if she were to really search, and avoid getting caught, she would need to close her eyes and focus. The upper garden, under the fruit trees, was the most natural location.

She lay on the grass, took a deep breath and allowed her gaze to wander before opening her police issued frequency scanner and powering up her internal transceiver.

Careless criminals...

This was just one of Floreina's hobbies. New Eden was full of criminals in every angle of life, in every business, every culture. For the most part, the activities were successful, the police only having resources to catch and prosecute a small percentage.

Floreina simply enjoyed finding them in the networks.

The frequencies flowed through her mind, and the decoding algorithms went into effect, cross referencing the information with her array of encoding systems.

She waited, and listened to the birds fluttering and chirping, ignoring most of the communications filtering through her mind.

After a few minutes, the scanner began returning samples of the most notable conversations... prostitution, drug deals, cheating spouses, and domestic abuse cover-ups. After twenty minutes she came across a conversation that seemed to indicate a murder, scheduled to take place the next day, though the location and victim were not clear. She was careful in researching the source of the communication, fearful that local police would be monitoring. Coming up with no further information, she gave up. She preferred the soap-opera that was the lower-class, careless criminals, who would let their whole back-story slip out during a conversation, assuming their encryptions were secure, simply because a salesman had promised them so.

Then, suddenly, some individuals popped to her attention.

She was surrounded by stupid and careless criminals, and these criminals didn't seem any different in that regard... but it was rare to see them dealing with anything more than a couple thousand ISK.

These careless criminals, on the other hand, had hit it big, through what must have been dumb luck. Three low-class drug dealers had ripped off a capsuleer for two standard Exile boosters.

Sometimes things could be too perfect to be coincidence.

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It all felt different today as Floreina slipped the data link into the back of her head and settled into her command seat. Normally the operations felt like a work of art, but today they would be overclocking every turret until total shutdown. A foreboding shadow enveloped her moment of connection.

I've reviewed your report on the effects of overclocking, said Captain Allihence through a private mental communication. I understand your concern, but I still wish to do more testing.

I think we'll lose crewmembers... Floreina replied. *I won't be surprised if we lose half a dozen... I could see coolant ruptures spreading into the base...*

And that's why we're having these tests... real live training... with real lives...

Floreina communicated, *Captain, may I ask a frank question?*

The captain gave an inviting mental nod.

It seemed as though you enjoyed the harm done to our slaves during the overclocking.

Allihence paused. *Is that a problem, commander?*

Floreina's mind jumped at the response. *Well... it seems... un-Amarrian to enjoy the suffering of others... even if they are Minmatar...*

Oh, yes, Allihence seemed to backtrack. I don't take pleasure in simply watching them suffer... I enjoy watching the challenges they face... and watching them better themselves... and sometimes the weak must be weeded out, and when that's necessary, I think it's okay to watch the drama unfold... You can't tell me the excitement isn't part of why you love this job.

Heat level at sixty percent warned Lieutenant Adran. We have four minor coolant leaks, a cracked focus mirror, and a breach in the outer casing. About six more shots before we're incapacitated. Currently all repair drones and maintenance slaves have been dispatched.

Floreina systematically took control of repair bots, checking priorities, and guiding decisions. She touched her father's mind for a moment. He jumped in and out of the same repair drones, synchronizing with the damage reporting systems. He was frantic, but she knew he had things under control.

She backed out of the damage control systems to look over the entire cannon. Ethaniel seemed to have his systems handled, segregated from the chaos in damage control. His mind focused on the tiny target, as though feeling its propulsion and trajectory as spiritual entities

instead of numbers. Like a rhythmic dance, she felt him passing values into his tracking calculations to direct strike after strike on their targets.

Floreina was proud.

As she admired her crew, an explosion tore through the main bank of coolant pipes.

She refocused to watch it, calmly at first.

She perked up milliseconds later as the explosions moved down an unexpected plasma router. In the repair command center at the base of the turret, her father stood at his monitors still punching in orders to drones and slaves.

"Daddy!" Floreina screamed through the loudspeaker in his room.

But Miltein only had time to glance at his daughter's voice before the explosion took out a two meter section near the ceiling, rupturing a large coolant pathway. He ducked, and for a split second, Floreina felt relief as the shrapnel missed him.

But Miltein looked back, and Floreina's hope drained as the coolant poured from the rupture.

He stumbled backward, the coolant splattering against him. He blocked with his upper arms, but Floreina knew that every drop would freeze a chunk of flesh.

Her body was rigid as her mind flashed red and her skin seemed to expand, as though every cell in her body wanted to burst.

But as quickly as the emotion overwhelmed her, she began to work through it.

Shut down the turret, Floreina ordered, searching for the source of the coolant. All repair teams, move to the safety perimeter. The cannon is incapacitated.

She found several slaves near her father, already on their way out of the danger zone, "Get to the repair command center!" she shouted over the nearest comm. "Get Miltein out alive and there will be great rewards."

And as she communicated over the speakers, Lieutenant Adran said, *I hate to be the one to mention that Allihence has not authorized a shut-down... the captain was very clear that we go until incapacitated.*

The situation has changed, Floreina replied.

Belay that order! Allihence ordered. But as Floreina expected, the captain had too much to deal with at the moment to make certain her orders were followed.

And Floreina sensed a pause in her crew.

I gave an order, Floreina told them. You know this is the best decision we can make.

And that's all they seemed to need. They began ordering their crew out of the danger areas and shutting down the firing systems.

But the chest pain became overwhelming. She looked back at her father, searching through scattered signals of half functional cameras. His mindlink had been disconnected in the chaos. After a long second, she found him dragging himself as the coolant pooled onto the floor, his body pockmarked with coolant burns. He tried to scramble onto the chair, but fell back to the floor.

Floreina jumped to the three slaves already at the door. Two of them attempted to pry the hatch open with a pipe and the other shouted into a nearby comm panel, begging for specific instructions. But they already had all the tools she could give them, and her heart began to echo through her chest as she searched the local systems and realized she could do little more than watch.

Take over command, Adran, Floreina ordered.

From the corner of her eye she noticed Adran look up hesitantly.

Allience suddenly came into full view. *Maintain your post, Commander!*

Even with her father lying half dead in the command center, Floreina knew she would never leave her post in a true emergency. But this was not one of those times. They were fighting belt pirates and could warp away any time. Floreina wished to communicate these arguments, but as she pulled her data connection, all she could think was, *Rot in hell, Captain.*

A wave of dizziness struck her as she forced herself from the system. Continuing up, she ripped the cable from her head and jumped from the command chair. She stumbled and ran toward the hatchway.

Almost immediately she regretted her words.

She sprinted down the corridors into the depths of the cannon, her mapping application displaying the route before her eyes, overlapping her regular vision.

She estimated she could get to her father within two minutes, hopefully in time to speak to him before he died, possibly in time to pull him out and save him. Hopefully the slaves would have forced the door open.

And Floreina checked her laser sidearm in its holster on her right leg. The room would be too dangerous for herself. Instead, she would need to order the slaves to go in...

But she was halted by a jammed hatchway. She pulled the handle as she heard repair drones on the other side attempting to cut it down. It refused to move, but she kept pulling. She put her foot against the wall and screamed in frustration. She stepped back and gave it another long, hard pull.

The latches gave and the door ripped free.

The hatch fell and Floreina tried to leap backwards, but slipped under its weight.

The hatch landed, the edge coming down on her shin. She let out an abrupt scream, cut short as her head slammed to the floor. Her shin snapped as strange sensations surrounded her. Her medical interface forced itself to her consciousness as she descended into colorful dizziness.

“Daddy!” she cried.

Her body sank into the deck plating.

“The Airlock.”

She heard the words from the backward depths of her consciousness as she dreamt of mutiny and slave revolts, and of fighting for her life against an invisible, unjustified, and un-Godly enemy.

Even in unconsciousness the fear overwhelmed everything... or was that all she was? ...an entity of fear and confusion without a human form; a blip in a computer system, or a spirit, cursed to float eternally through God’s realm, embodying nothing more than a state of misunderstanding and terror.

...she had to be more than that. Fear has a purpose; it’s a guide, if used properly. Feel it; understand it; embrace it... and its power can be yours...

“Airlock.”

Someone was speaking.

Mental applications begged for attention.

Floreina forced herself into her physical form, as if at gunpoint, first noticing her eyelids tightly shut. As the sensations coursed through her, she coaxed her eyes open.

And she felt her hands. Her right lay limp on the floor. Her left hand, however, was doing something... clinging to a mass of material.

Her vision opened to a blurry scene. She lay on the floor, propped up, clinging to a security officer's uniform, and saw, in her peripheral vision, the edge of the airlock hatch.

Another soldier stood behind him, yelling.

Floreina looked around, barely moving, as the soldier attempted to pry her fingers from his clothing.

And she came together in an instant, and pulled herself up to grip the man's uniform. The pain in her leg sent trembling waves up her body.

"Just punch her!" shouted the man's partner.

And Floreina felt a blow against the top of her head, spinning and distorting reality.

Clearly she did not currently have the capacity to do anything about the situation...

But she still had one secret weapon...

Floreina accessed her emergency medical implant, closing her eyes to focus on the options. She selected a healthy combination of adrenaline, pain killers, and quick acting steroids, set them to administer slowly over sixty seconds, and injected an initial boost.

Her eyes widened as the drugs hit her bloodstream. Colors brightened and her face grew hot. She looked into her attacker's eyes as his second blow contacted her cranium. Her head shook and her anger soared.

Floreina dragged herself upward, pulling at the soldier's uniform, as her one good leg struggled to figure out how to move. She rose quickly, feeling stronger with every thought. Her left leg found a footing as she came face to face with the soldier. Her right hand moved, almost instantly from his shirt to his neck, and she clamped, her fingernails digging into his flesh.

She looked at the soldier's partner, his weapon drawn, searching for an opening. "Kick her foot!" he shouted. "Get her off you!"

So Floreina hugged her attacker, pressing her chest and stomach tightly against him as her fingers dug ever deeper into his neck.

He coughed and choked as he punched her awkwardly in the side. She felt him kicking her broken leg as it dangled. A wild grin crossed her face, imagining her eyes glowing red with fury.

She closed the gap as though kissing a lover, but opened her mouth, bared her teeth, and clamped down on the man's upper lip. She pulled suddenly, not wishing to move her head too far and risk a shot from the man's partner. The soldier screamed as her teeth passed through his lip. She tasted blood and stared into the soldier's eyes, as if to say, "Hi; isn't this an interesting happening?"

And she pushed with her good leg, throwing her weight onto her attacker. He stumbled backward, and Floreina kept her face against his, slowly biting a mass of flesh. They fell, and the bulk of his lip pulled free. For a moment, they were separated enough for the other soldier to get a shot. The laser heated her neck as it grazed the back of her uniform.

She landed on top of him, spitting his lip in his face. She pulled close, rolling to the side, trying to keep moving to avoid the partner's shots. Her fingers dug into the soldier's neck.

She stared into his eyes, but at the same time, from the corner of her vision, watched him getting a hold on his pistol, and just as he freed it from its holster, she made her move. Releasing his neck, she rolled to bring both hands toward the soldier's sidearm. Her hands surrounded his as his finger slipped around the trigger.

Floreina guided his hand to point at his partner, and squeezed his finger.

The laser clapped into the partner's armor, a blinding flash emanating from his chest. Floreina watched just long enough to confirm that he dropped his weapon.

Now able to put a little distance between her and her opponent, she removed her right hand from the struggle over the weapon. Pulling herself up as far as possible, she began punching, aiming for the center of his already bloody face. With her left, she continued struggling for the firearm. Meanwhile, the soldier's punches connecting with her own face and body.

In one last push, she twisted the man's wrist, pulling the weapon free. She grabbed it with both hands, pulled away from her enemy, and brought the weapon around to point at his face, centimeters from his brutally exposed teeth. He grappled his hands around the pistol a moment before she pulled the trigger.

His face exploded, flesh searing as it splattered across the scene. Her face burned as the hot Amarrian shrapnel slapped her skin.

But it was not time to rest; not for another few seconds. She rolled off the Amarrian soldier to look at his partner, still clutching his chest. His head bobbed. His free arm struggled to lift his sidearm... unsuccessfully.

Floreina carefully aimed and fired.

The commander then rested against the first soldier and looked out on the scene in a simplistic, uncomprehending daze.

Confused thoughts raced through her mind, scenarios, questions. How could this have happened? Were they sent under orders of

the captain? Would someone else just come for her to throw her back out the airlock?

She sat up, holding the weapon at ready and looked at the other firearm, but her head began to spin as she realized that even without another wave of attackers, she was already in grave danger. She exhaled and pulled herself across the floor toward the gun.

Her emergency drug injections had overloaded her system. She checked her medical implant, closing her eyes, and received readouts from her heart monitor. She identified a foreign sedative in her veins, and the system informed her that she could be nearing cardiac arrest.

The implant gave its recommendation: hand over control to her medical implant, and allow it to administer treatments as it saw fit, which most likely meant going relatively unconscious for an unknown period of time.

But she still had to deal with the situation.

Most likely these two soldiers had been sent by Allihence. However, they were probably working in secret, as the captain knew most of Floreina's crew would not support this. This meant these two were probably working alone, and that the recording systems in this area would be disabled.

So she needed to deal with the mess, and there was only one way to do that without killing herself.

Floreina thanked the lord for giving her such close relationships with the Minmatar, just for situations like this.

She had already killed two of her fellow crew members; two Amarrians she did not know. She would need to kill one more... this one being an innocent if not an Amarrian.

And Floreina reached out with her remote signal and searched for Mahran.

"Hello, Ma'am," said her slave a moment later.

"Are you alone?" Floreina asked.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"I need you to come to airlock fourteen in docking bay four, immediately. Drop whatever you're doing. This is a matter of life and death. Tell absolutely no one."

"Understood," replied the slave. "Will be there in ten minutes."

"Thank you, Mahran. You are greatly appreciated. Get here quickly."

She slumped against the corpse as the implant did its work. The adrenaline slowly cleared to be replaced with combinations of healing agents and pain killers.

Floreina relinquished her body to the little computer in her brain.

Floreina snapped up as her slave entered the docking bay. He stopped, mouth hanging partially open, eyes jumping back and forth.

Mahran took a deep breath. "Okay," he said. "I don't want to know... just tell me what to do." He approached slowly then darted forward. "Master!" he exclaimed, squatting before her to look at her injuries.

Floreina stared through a haze as he touched her leg, sparking waves of pain, examined her arms, and finally reached a careful and sheepish hand to push her dirty and matted hair out of the way to reveal her bruised face and the bumps across her head. Normally such touching would be inappropriate, but in this situation, it seemed natural and expected.

At first she could not speak as she stared at Mahran and saw the fear in his eyes. "Please help me," she said, unable to think of anything more specific.

"Shall I call for a medic? I guess not... you would've called one yourself. Do you need me to carry you to the slave's medical bay?" Mahran was a quick study for a Minmatar, knowing already that she could not go to a normal sick-bay, where she would be noticed. The slave's medical station, while not as well equipped, would not have a problem treating her anonymously.

"Not yet," Floreina said. "I need you to clean up this mess, then take me to the medical station."

"You don't look well, Master," said Mahran. "I should get you to a doctor, then I can come back and clean. If you give me a code to the airlock I can dispose of this without you."

Floreina shook her head. "Help me up to the control panel."

Mahran awkwardly reached for her, and lifted her from her shoulders. She struggled to help, but Mahran was very strong and didn't have much trouble dragging her up. He pulled her across the floor to seat her in a rolling chair in front of the airlock controls. She put the first pistol into the holster on her thigh, and set the extra next to the network terminal.

She sat for a moment, simply breathing, as Mahran hovered, looking anxious. She opened the airlock door. "Get the bodies out," she ordered.

Mahran jumped to the task and within minutes had hauled the bodies into the airlock. Floreina struggled to keep her eyes open and focused on the task as she sealed the hatch and blew the airlock to expel the corpses into space.

She ordered Mahran to find cleaning supplies from a nearby janitor's station. He sprinted there and back and began rapidly scrubbing the floors.

For now, Floreina kept the airlock hatch closed. She would need to throw him out soon, and somehow that idea kept coming back to her mind. After everything that had happened, disposing of one Minmatar shouldn't require a second thought. But a nagging sensation lingered.

There's no other way to guarantee his silence, she told herself.

But Mahran had been a gift from her father.

She drifted in and out of sleep several times before Mahran finished cleaning the outside of the airlock. As he came closer to finishing, Floreina tried to force herself out of the haze, and to sit up in the chair, the pain searing through her leg. She felt the bones grind as she moved, and her vision went blank.

Coming back just a few seconds later, she looked up at the control panel. She would need to watch Mahran closely so that she could close the door right as he was finished cleaning inside the airlock.

But as she tried to wake up, she realized she would not be able to focus long enough to do anything reliably. And there was no way she'd be able to drag herself all the way down to the depths of the slave quarters on her own.

She needed to trust him instead, and reward him for keeping his silence. That's the only way; have faith in the bond between master and slave.

"Okay, just cleanup in there..." Floreina tapped the key to open the hatch to the airlock. "Then you find a way to get me to the slave medic. You will not tell one soul about this... and I will give you luxury coupons and long weekends. ...tell one person and I'll have you terminated. ...okay, there Buddy..." she trailed off as she fought to remain conscious.

"You're a good boy, Mahran," she said. "I know you'll do me proud. I'm going to sleep soon... You clean up as fast as you can and get me to a doctor."

"I want to get you to a doctor first," said Mahran.

"Why?" she asked.

"You're going to throw me out the airlock..."

Floreina awoke slightly. "Why would you think that?"

"...because you keep looking at the door and the airlock controls," he replied. "You're injured, Ma'am. I'm concerned, and I don't know what to think – I'm sorry for suggesting this – but please let me get you to a doctor now, and I'll come back and clean out the airlock immediately."

Floreina instinctively went for her pistol. As she did so, she realized just how slow she was moving.

Mahran dove forward, seeming like a blur compared to her own movements. He snatched the second sidearm from the counter.

Before she could even unlatch her holster, she heard the gun powering up.

Mahran held the pistol to his side, pointed downward. Floreina stopped her own attempt at retrieving her weapon, and gave a weak shrug. "Looks like you got me," she said. "What exactly do you think you're going to do with that?"

But she looked up into her slave's eyes, and saw a child-like terror. "Please, Master," he pleaded. "Don't make me do anything..." His lips trembled as he spoke. "I just want to get you to a doctor. Please... I don't want to hurt you... Please, Ma'am, I just want things to go back to the way they were. I'll take you to the doctor; I'll come back and dispose of the stains and put the guns in a locker... and we never speak of this again... please... you don't need to kill me."

Mahran shook noticeably, his face red, the weapon still pointed at the ground, obviously not willing to take the final blasphemous step and actually point it. If Floreina had been in normal shape, she would have no problem drawing her weapon and terminating him before he could react. But that would also leave another body to explain.

Her implant reminded her that she needed to get to a medic. Floreina breathed heavily and glared. Frustrated and torn, part of her wanted to send the slave to a tortuous death in the disciplinary center but another part understood.

He was protecting his own existence, like a self-centered Minmatar, but trying to do so in the least blasphemous way possible.

"Fine," she conceded. "Get me to the doctor." And Floreina cringed.

...outwitted by a Minmatar... forced to agree to his plans... unable to carry herself on her own two feet, or even crawl across the floor... Pathetic.

But she resigned, forcing the emotions back. No one would ever know. The visual recordings had been turned off, and Mahran could be terminated later... if necessary.

He came forward and took her weapon, and though he walked sheepishly and cautiously, clearly out of place and unfamiliar with this kind of dominance, Floreina looked up at him as a child to an angry teacher.

Through his jumpsuit she absently followed the lines of his muscles, toned through years of hard labor.

Mahran powered down the other pistol and quickly slid both weapons across the floor into the airlock. He wasted no time in moving back to Floreina to lift her into his arms.

She shouted briefly as her leg bounced against him. Floreina held back her scolding though; she knew pains like that were unavoidable.

As Mahran moved swiftly down the long corridors toward the hidden slave departments, Floreina came to realize just how reasonable he had been.

"You know I had no intention of killing you," she whispered.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am... I'm so stupid sometimes... I panicked... I understand any punishment you want to give me, but please... please don't terminate me... if you give me a chance..." he continued in a whisper, "no one will ever know... I don't even know... "

"No," she comforted. "No one's getting terminated... you're going to be rewarded... if you get that... stuff... taken care of... greatly, greatly rewarded."

Strangely, Floreina started to feel comfortable. He'd get her to the medic, get the remainder of the blood cleaned up, and go on keeping his mouth shut. She rested against his shoulder. It was rare to be this close to a Minmatar, but somehow it felt more comforting than dirty, and when she closed her eyes, Mahran could be just a big person... a man, who, for one reason or another, had her best interests in mind.

And she slipped into an unfamiliar realm of acceptance, of helplessness, and of strange comfort in those feelings, and she forgot about her physical reality, placing her trust in her Minmatar property.

She dreamt of her father. Mostly vague images, and quick snippets of her childhood beside him in their manufacturing line, producing frequency crystals, then later coming to visit him on the cruiser where he oversaw a repair team.

He gave her advice. "Keep your wits about you," he would say. "You've got a lot to do when you get up."

She awoke in a deep sadness. "Daddy!" she exclaimed softly.

She looked around, seeing the slave hospital she recognized from a couple previous visits. But noting her safety somehow made her feel worse.

Floreina prayed, closing her eyes, focusing on the spiritual realm, blanking her mind, calming, and simultaneously searching for The Great Spirit, to allow His guidance. So many feelings at once... she didn't know what to take seriously, so she tried to sink into the Lord's embrace, to allow Him to guide her feelings.

After a time she relaxed. She had done right, and all would be okay.

As her prayer finished, the Minmatar doctor approached. "Master, Floreina..." He saluted formally. "You had a concussion, a shattered fibula and a large collection of medication in your system. It looks like your implant malfunctioned. Do you remember anything, Master?"

She shook her head slowly. "I remember a falling door..."

"Mahran told me that you contacted him accidentally and he tracked you down and found you crawling around. He said you were disoriented... couldn't remember who you were... Do you remember any of this?"

She shook her head. "Not really," she replied.

"Mahran told me to keep everything secret..." He coughed deliberately. "So no one else has been made aware of your situation. The crew thinks that you ran away... but... of course... my obligation is to Captain Allihence... and I'm really supposed to report this sort of thing..."

Floreina nodded. "Get me to a mental interface," she said. "If I still have access to my account, I'll get you a handful of luxury coupons for your silence."

He nodded. "Thank you, Master Floreina."

It took several long moments for him to wheel Floreina's bed across the office to the computer interface.

She hooked herself to the system and quickly found her account, still in operation. Allihence had not terminated her employment, and Floreina imagined her playing along with the search efforts, no doubt pretending to be as clueless and concerned as the rest of the crew.

Floreina transferred a set of luxury coupons to the slave's profile.

"Thank you," he bowed again. "Would you like me to leave you alone now?"

She nodded. "Thank you, son."

He turned away as she entered the ship's computer system, cloaking her emotions in a torrent of random data.

Her stomach tightened as she found the person she needed to deal with.

Captain Allihence, Floreina greeted privately.

Allihence pulled away from everything else as she made a startled response. *Well look who figured out how to survive...*

Yeah... Floreina replied, not bothering to hide the bitterness of her thoughts.

So everyone's baffled by your disappearance, Allihence laughed nervously.

Yeah, I'm a little baffled myself.

Would an apology make things better... I acted in the heat of the moment, and I'm sorry.

Uh-huh... Floreina couldn't think of where to start.

I'm glad you chose to keep quiet about this... take the blackmail route instead of the vengeance route. So what's it going to be, Commander? A nice severance package and we go our separate ways?

I want a hundred thousand, Floreina said flatly.

That's not happening.

You're worth billions. It's nothing to you.

It's the principle of it, replied the captain. *I don't let people take advantage of me.*

What about the principle of not killing Amarrians? Floreina countered. *I know we've had our differences, Captain, but I have always been loyal to you. And you know that if we had been in a real fleet battle, I would have stood by my post until the very end... but we weren't in a fleet... we were killing belt pirates... rats.* She paused for nearly a second. *This ship was my*

home... and my life... until today I felt like my mind fit with you and this crew like a piece in a puzzle...

Would you like to stay on board? asked Allihence suddenly.

And Floreina paused a long moment. *I wasn't expecting that. You tried to kill me a few hours ago...*

... but since then I've been thinking a little more clearly... Plus, you've impressed me with your resourcefulness... and reminded me of some of the reasons I hired you...

And Floreina paused another long moment to feel the captain's presence, sensing her unexpected change in attitude. Capsuleers could be an interesting breed. With cloning and brain-scan technology so advanced that most considered themselves immortal, they could have very interesting and inconsistent ideas about death.

So strangely enough, the captain seemed genuine in her desire to keep Floreina as though nothing had happened, like it were simply another random argument between boss and employee.

I assure you, Floreina, your father was an accident. Of that you have my word as one Amarrian to another. I never thought that would happen.

I know... Floreina replied.

And you love this ship, Floreina, the captain prodded jokingly. *Being a part of something larger than yourself... to put your life on the line for the glory of our Lord... you know all those safe and comfortable factory managers and housewives... they don't feel what you and I feel... They don't get that excitement... that force of life and God that we feel out here in the stars as we fight for what's right...*

And the captain laughed mentally, the emotion carrying a double edge for Floreina. It felt comforting, fulfilling her with the sudden, relieving knowledge that the captain was not going to try to kill her again. But on the other hand, the captain's enjoyment of the situation betrayed a cold reality of capsuleers. Life and death was a joke to them, something to be taken or given on a whim.

And like a battered corpse on the side of the highway, the attitude held a twisted appeal, and, fascinated, Floreina could not look away.

Floreina raised her legs carefully as the airlock opened and she stepped into the vastness of space. Her boots clamped to the surface with each step, their magnetic soles adjusting to hold to the surface. As the

gravity well passed, her stomach curled, but corrected itself as soon as her entire body was weightless.

The airlock closed behind her and Floreina took a deep breath as she looked through the gleaming faceplate down the length of the Abaddon.

She walked casually along the surface for several minutes before powering up the grapple gun on her left wrist. She fired the tool toward the surface and a tiny drone disconnected from her arm, linked to her wrist by a thin nanotube cord. The drone propelled gently down to connect with the ship and engaged its magnetic clamps.

Tugging on the line, Floreina tested the strength, then knelt to shut off her boots and leap from the surface of the ship.

Floreina sailed outward, The Angel slowly coming into view. Her body spun and the universe turned. She floated outward, relaxing into the weightlessness and allowing the ship and crew to fade from her thoughts.

And finally, after unraveling the cord for nearly a kilometer, Floreina stopped, and allowed her life to dangle behind the great warship.

Floreina closed her eyes and entered her implant, running around the systems before coming back to her sensory processors. She shut down her hearing and vision, and entered a realm of silent blackness. Next, she shut off her processor connection.

And Floreina was alone with God. No more distractions.

She floated, feeling the warmth of the emptiness, and the contrasting depth and power of The Lord.

All she could think of was her father. The funeral had been difficult... to make a speech about something that can't possibly be put into words...

But somehow she did not feel devastated. Even after such a short time, she knew she could go on. She would be back to work in a day and would be as strong and commanding as ever. And in a way, that felt wrong. Miltein had built her into everything she was, and to simply go on with her life was somehow blasphemous...

And it left Floreina with question after question...

Dear God, she prayed. What am I doing here? Where am I going? What is the point to this?

And God answered with visions and feelings. Her father was there, watching over her, as though at the Lord's side. She saw the church in the station where she grew up; the songs they would sing, the

smell of the incense, the random hugs, the cries of joy, and the endless songs.

Her life flashed before her eyes, as though telling a story, through her lonely yet loving childhood, with a deceased mother and a father who did his best to compensate, to her teenage obsession with mindlink competitions, the military training and her four-year affair with her ex-lover, Viotro and the black-market sub-culture he introduced her to; her humiliating failure in the capsuleer training, and the process of building herself back up, manipulating her position to join Allihence's crew and subsequently experiencing one empowering success after another.

Floreina felt herself crying. But that was okay.

The story is only beginning, the Lord comforted. She felt His presence through all her experiences, and could not help smiling. Joy would always outweigh the sorrow... Despite all the things that had gone wrong, Floreina had experienced a truly joyous life...

Nay!... sayeth the Lord... The joy of life is not despite the hardships and failures...

...but because of them.

Because every human needs flaws... every plan needs problems... every relationship needs tension... and every life needs hardships...

All the pleasures and leisure we think we love are nothing more than filler chapters as we wait for the real story.

And Floreina thought about her father. He was gone now, and as sad as that was, she recognized she did not feel *bad*. Like an epic love story, all her sadness intensified the holoreel that was her life.

Dear Lord, that's the secret... she prayed. Thank you for this wisdom... I realize what the heathens will never understand... there's beauty and magic in all things great and horrible...

And in a separate part of Floreina's mind, for a split second, she saw the vision of the careless criminals and their Exile Boosters.

Dear Lord, you just told me the secret to happiness... She paused to chuckle. You never cease to amaze me.

Sitting alone in a tiny tavern in the depths of the slums of The Theology Council Tribunal in orbit around Toshabia's first planet, Floreina sniffed the air, smelling of spilled beer and over-roasted meat.

She glanced around the barroom, automatically accessing histories on everyone, searching for anyone out of place who might be here for purposes other than drinking. She felt her eyelids blinking, as though in slow motion, and felt the mild adrenaline and nervousness deep in her stomach as she thought about meeting this man with whom she would plan a crime.

It should feel bad, but somehow she felt right at home in that sense of danger, and felt a deeper confidence that she could pull through it and laugh at it.

From the other side of the bar, she saw her mark. He noticed her and gave a questioning look. She replied with a barely noticeable flip of her chin, and he walked to her table.

This was it. The discussion today would determine if she could even attempt her plan.

She stood and gave a dainty handshake while maintaining a cold, analytical stare. Her heart pumped and she smiled as the negotiations began.

Floreina fell onto her bed and relaxed after her evening workout. She sighed, worn out, but content. She turned on an entertainment screen set into the far wall, to watch some comedy, telling herself only ten minutes before getting up to take a shower.

But after a few minutes the door chimed.

"Come in," Floreina answered.

Mahran entered and stopped.

"Hi Buddy," said Floreina. "You're here late today..."

"I'm sorry about that, Master... lots of new duties with the promotion... Would you like me to get started cleaning, or would you like me to leave you alone?"

She paused. "Actually neither," she replied. "You deserve a break. Tonight I want you to just hang out for a while. I need to take a shower, then I want to sit and talk with you." She stood up. "Why don't you grab a beer from the fridge?"

Mahran stood. "...Okay..." he started nervously. "I haven't had Vitoc in a couple days... I'm afraid if I have a drink without getting a hit, it might make me sick."

"So go grab a dose," she replied, walking toward the bathroom. "Bring it back and take it here. I'll be out of the shower by the time you get back."

He nodded nervously. "Yes, Ma'am." He turned back toward the door.

And she began to undress just as Mahran exited. She watched through the mirror as Mahran stole a quick look.

She grinned. He was already her most valuable possession. She owned him in a legal sense—at least by Amarrian law—but wanted him to be hers on a deeper level, to gain greater things from him... things that weren't as easy with simple punishment/reward structures.

He was a good slave: smart, strong, handsome, and most importantly, obedient. He wasn't stupid enough to care about avoiding humiliation, realizing it was in his best interest to do nothing but feed the desires of his master.

At least that's what he seemed like... She wanted to test it.

So Floreina took her shower and put on her pajamas. She put on some music; something light and distant and soothing. She checked her refrigerator for snacks, and checked her side-arm laser pistol stowed in its drawer in the table at the foot of her bed. She caressed the weapon momentarily before putting it back in its drawer.

1. He looked at her and swallowed nervously. "Hello Ma'am," he said as the door slid shut. "I brought my Vitoc for today, if you're sure you're okay with me taking it right now."

"Yes, yes," she replied. "Go for it."

"Thank you, Master." He sat down on the floor.

"Actually," Floreina said, rising from the bed to grab a beer, "When it's just you and me, you can call me 'Floreina'. Obviously not when anyone else can hear... But I think you're smart enough to be my friend and still remember your place, right?"

"Um... I hadn't thought about it... but yes, Ma'am. You've always been good to me, but I never forget that I'm yours, and I promise I never will."

Floreina nodded contentedly. "Thank you." She paused as he pulled out his Vitoc syringe and she sat back on the bed. "You're welcome to come up here and sit by me if you'd like. Won't that be more comfortable for you?"

"Thank you, Ma'am... um... Floreina." He stood, cradling his Vitoc like an infant, and sat on the bed, staying a safe distance from his master. "I might get a little stupid after I take this," he said. "I've been late on my injection this week, so I'll probably be incapacitated for a while."

"I know," Floreina replied. "That's fine. To be honest, I'm just feeling a little lonely tonight, and since you're the only one who knows what happened, in a way, you're the only one I can talk to."

"Okay," he said as he brought the Vitoc syringe to his neck. He took a deep breath as Floreina watched. He shuddered as the drug injected, his mouth opening involuntarily. She watched his eyes dilate before he closed them and fell back onto the bed, the syringe dropping from his hand. He sighed orgasmically and put his hands to his stomach, a wild grin creeping onto his face. Then he stopped, his body going nearly motionless, except for the subtle rising and falling of his chest.

And Floreina thought about Mahran and his apparent emotions. He lay, seemingly oblivious to his master and the rest of the universe, caught up in the ecstasy of the drug that kept him alive. And Floreina wondered how so many people outside of the Amarrian Empire could have such unfavorable views on Vitoc and its virus counterparts. If only they could see the stupid pleasure the Minmatar receive from the drug, and the mindless manner in which they pursue it. It's all they live for, and anyone who sees the way it overpowers their decisions would see that the Minmatar, as a species, are not ready for anything other than to be guided by another more intelligent people.

Floreina waited for her slave to come out of his trance. She sipped her beer, watching his breathing, secretly admiring his muscular physique.

She glanced up at The Scriptures quote engraved above her door, reminding her of the most important aspect of her guidance, the quote that kept her grounded.

*Love is patient, love is kind,
Love does not insist on its own way.
Love bears all things, believes all things,
Hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never fails.*

Mahran sighed a couple times, and babbled, low and incoherently, and after several minutes began to come back, opening his eyes, eventually sitting up, only to lie down again after seeing Floreina's smile.

"I never thanked you for saving my life," Floreina said. "You know I appreciate your actions in that situation..."

"And I thank you for not punishing me for my disobedience."

"Can I ask you something, Mahran, and get an honest answer from you?"

"Of course."

"Do you ever wish that you weren't a slave, like one of those wild Minmatars out there without Amarrian guidance?"

Mahran paused for a long moment. "Um... yes," he replied finally. "We all do... in a way, I guess."

"Hmm..." Floreina replied. "But you're okay with me as your owner?"

"Oh, yes," he replied. "You've been wonderful to me, and I hope to continue being yours."

"But you would prefer to be free?"

He stopped. Mahran was understandably uncomfortable.

She laid her arm across his, and patted the back of his hand. "It's okay to say so."

"Yeah," he finally answered.

"That's understandable... and I'd probably feel the same way, never having witnessed the destructiveness, war and hatred that the wild Minmatar have caused throughout New Eden. It's wrong, of course, but sometimes we all desire things which aren't ethical. I know you've seen me do one unethical thing."

"I have no reason to think you did anything wrong," Mahran replied. "All I know is what I saw... and I assume they tried to kill you first."

Floreina laughed. "You are perceptive for a Minmatar, and you are correct; they tried to kill me."

"You don't need to tell me about it. I think it would be better if I didn't know."

She nodded. "I can tell you that I had some disagreements with certain people. Now those disagreements are resolved... but I have a new perspective on a few things... and a couple tentative plans..."

They paused. "Plans that involve me?" Mahran asked.

"Now how did you guess?" Floreina laughed. "Yeah... and normally I wouldn't consider bringing a Minmatar into this idea, but after how you handled yourself with my recent issues, I started thinking differently about you... But I don't know if I completely trust you... What I have planned is a little complicated for a Minmatar... so you know what..." She shook her head and pulled away from her train of thought. She needed to take a little more time. "Enough of this talk of responsibility... most of us never take the time to understand our Minmatar. Why

don't you tell me about your life on this ship. What do you do when you get a night off?"

So Mahran carefully told her of many of the simple pleasures enjoyed by slaves on an Abaddon battleship. He spoke at length about his brother who was also on board. At times she talked about herself, to make the evening seem less planned, but always steered the conversation back toward Mahran.

And as Floreina listened, a strange thing happened. She had begun this night intending to pretend to be interested in his life, and found, to a series of contradicting emotions, that she was actually interested.

But she had a purpose, and after drinking several beers, making some snacks, and conversing as new friends, she found herself lying on the bed next to him, their feet hanging off the side. She noticed his grin—no doubt appreciating what a great owner he had—and decided it was time to make her move.

"I have something I want to do," Floreina said, backing away.

His eyebrows rose. "Oh? What's that?"

"How would you like to earn your brother, Charmann's freedom?" she asked.

"My brother?"

"Well, I can't let *you* go because I need you. You've kept one secret for me, and if I can get you to keep a few more secrets for me, and maybe do a few things for me, then I'll purchase and release your brother. Then you can earn your own freedom. All you need to do is continue as you have, being good, and when a situation occurs like the one in the airlock, you handle yourself in the same manner you did there... with the exception of course of taking a weapon. You do two more well-played little incidents like that—one for your brother and one for yourself—and you will both be free... but this time we'll pre-plan the incidents..."

Mahran's mouth hung open slightly, his face red with excitement. "Do you mean all this?"

"Of course."

"Why are you doing this for me?" he asked.

"Well..." she replied. "If I try to force you to do these things without a sufficient reward, I fear you'll turn me in."

"Uh..." he replied simply.

"So will you agree to this arrangement? If you don't wish to violate any more rules or take special risks, then tell me now and I won't be mad, and we can forget I ever mentioned this, and I'll completely

respect your desire to be a good Minmatar as The Scriptures asks of you... but... if you want freedom for your brother, and for yourself, then we can work some things out. What do you think?"

He took several deep, shocked breaths.

"You don't need to answer right now. But whatever you decide, you may not speak of this to anyone..."

"Yes, Ma'am, I would like to do it. I would do anything for you, Master. If it means my freedom or Charmann's freedom, I will do whatever you need of me."

"That was a quick decision," she said softly. "There's just one more thing..." And she rolled away to open the drawer in the table at the end of the bed.

Mahran continued gazing happily at the ceiling as Floreina came back to roll against him. She rested her head on the pillow next to his, placing her knee on his hip.

"I just want you to know one thing," Floreina whispered as she brought her sidearm over her body and down toward Mahran. She rested her arm across his chest and turned the pistol to point into his upper lip, aiming upward, toward his brain.

"I want you to remember: I can still pop you any time I want."

And Mahran's smile disappeared. The color seemed to fade from his face.

"You already know that I can buy and sell your family on a whim," Floreina whispered. "And just the same I could pop your brains all over my nice clean sheets, just on a whim... like... just because I feel like it."

She flipped the switch, and the sidearm powered up, tiny red lights illuminating along the barrel one by one like a row of tiny demons.

Mahran shuddered and whimpered slightly, but otherwise remained motionless.

Floreina caressed the trigger guard, looking into the eyes of her slave as he stared down the barrel.

"I could get your brother to come up here and dispose of the body... on nothing more than a whim."

Her finger slipped past the guard and caressed the trigger. "Hold still." Her voice was inaudible just a few inches beyond his ear.

"So I want to make it abundantly clear what the consequences will be for crossing me," Floreina continued. "It would be kinda fun, I must admit." She smiled and let her head sink into the pillow.

Mahran remained rigid and unmoving.

"I just want you to see this for another few seconds and then I'll put it away and we'll have another beer..."

And one final, long pause.

"So do you understand?" she asked. "Has it sunk into your head that this will be the last thing you see if you ever cross me?"

Mahran carefully and slowly opened his mouth to say "Yes, Ma'am. I understand."

And Floreina's threat ended as quickly as it had begun. She rolled away, flipping the switch to power down the weapon. She placed it back in its drawer and looked back at Mahran.

He began to shudder, but otherwise did not move.

Floreina stood up. His test was not over. "You want another beer?" she asked.

Only a moment's hesitation. "Yes, please. Thank you, Master Floreina."

"I understand, Master," Mahran said, resting his hands on the edge of the operating table. "You have no proof that I can be trusted..." He rapped his fingers nervously and stared at the ceiling. "What are the chances of this going off accidentally?"

The surgeon did not reply, but simply continued monitoring the tiny robots inside Mahran's incision.

"Is there a chance?" Floreina asked.

"Nope," replied Doctor Feihron.

"What about dreams?" asked Mahran. "Could she set it off in her dreams? I've heard of sleep walking; can a person trigger implant menus while they're asleep?"

"Does your owner normally let you rattle off ignorant and insulting questions?" asked Doctor Feihron.

"I'm sorry, Sir," said Mahran. "I'm just nervous."

"It's okay," Floreina chimed in, "I'm not strict on speech and he's understandably nervous."

"No." The doctor glanced at Floreina and rolled his eyes. "Menus can't be activated during sleep. It's not hard for implants to tell if their host is sleeping. Likewise, it can't be activated in anger. Your master has to be calm and rational before she can stop your heart. The whole point is that it doesn't get used. We give them to slaves we wish to keep... you should feel honored."

Floreina closed her eyes to focus on the new menu system and browsed through the options. With just the flip of a few mental switches she could shut down any part of her slave. She could bring him pain, make him itch, or knock him unconscious.

Or she could detonate the tiny explosive in his heart.

This could be a fun and cruel little toy in the wrong hands.

"What's the range?" she asked.

"Infinite," replied the doctor, "As long as your slave is somewhere near civilization. It will work immediately as a direct connection if you're in the same solar system. If you're not in the same system the signal passes through any communication network as a Trojan horse, searching for the slave's signal. It might take a day for the signal to sneak through other communications if you're on the other side of New Eden, but otherwise the signal always finds its target." The doctor shrugged as he finished closing the incision. "Ready to give it a try?" He motioned to Mahran.

Mahran stood and gripped the edge of the table, looking downward. He took a deep, shaking breath.

Now he was truly subject to her whim.

He could have refused the whole thing... though he probably had no idea how many controls Floreina now had at her disposal.

She could not help breaking a smile as she flipped the command to shut down everything below Mahran's neck, directing the sensation to creep slowly up his body. She looked into Mahran's eyes as he realized what was happening. His eyes widened and his lips pulled back in a grimace.

Like a work of art... to be able to extend yourself and affect God's creatures with just your thoughts...

He began to fall, struggling to grab the table, but still looking into Floreina's eyes.

And suddenly her senses shifted as she saw his humiliation and instinctively jumped forward. She caught him and wrapped her arms around him, releasing the hold on his nervous system. He nearly brought her to the ground with his superior weight. He stumbled, legs bending and almost collapsed.

"Sorry about that," she said. "I just had to see if it worked."

At first she did not recognize Mahran when he arrived in the docking bay, dressed in his Amarrian attire, carrying a satchel of his

belongings. The temporary facial alterations looked excellent, like any other middle class Amarrian tourist. She smiled. "Ahoy, stranger," she said.

He grinned. "I could make a good Amarrian, huh?" he turned around to show off the clothing.

She chuckled. "Shall we go?"

They stopped at an exit station before disembarking. The guard saluted. "Commander Floreina."

Floreina nodded. "This is my slave Mahran, who will be known as Geiyfron, a station manager at a Quafe plant and my old friend from college."

"You have your control devices installed and tested?" asked the guard. "All software fully installed in your own implants?"

"Oh, yes," Floreina replied.

"Well, don't be afraid to pop his heart if you get found out. Don't try to salvage the situation and run away with your slave. The authorities don't take kindly to slave traders here. You should never let your slave out of your sight."

"Oh, I know," Floreina assured him.

"I know, it's just such a normal and open thing here on the ship that it's a risk that sometimes people forget. Sometimes the slaves forget too." The guard pointed at Mahran. "And you understand too, right? You need to play your part as the friend from college. It's not enough to just insist that you're not a slave, because the authorities are aware of the remote detonation devices, and know that slaves won't usually admit their status, and they don't really care whether or not your master throws the switch as long as they catch the slave traders, so you must be absolutely convincing in your part. If for any reason you don't think you can handle this responsibility, please tell us now. There won't be any penalties if you back out now."

"No," he replied. "I'm prepared. I know the risks, and I've studied the procedures. I'm ready to see the outside."

"Very well, Commander Floreina and Slave Mahran, AKA Geiyfron, you are cleared for shore-leave."

They sat in a small burger café at the Leisure Group Development studio in Teonusude after their short transport ride. Mahran glanced quickly around the café, his eyes wide and mouth turned upward in a childish grin.

"So... what do you want to do first?" Floreina asked.

"You're asking *me*?" said Mahran. "I don't know of anything that's here. Don't we need to tend to our plans first?"

"Yes, but you deserve to have some fun first... and I want to relax tonight and tend to things tomorrow. We have all weekend. We're tourists, remember."

"Okay, well I don't know; I'm happy just wandering and looking at things..."

"Well then, we should go to the zoo," Floreina said.

She told him about the animals they would find there. Mahran's education had covered extensively the systems on board a starship, but he seemed to know little about life outside of that, only occasionally recognizing the names of the animals she listed.

She looked at him in his new Amarrian face and clothing and joyous grin, and she could almost see a real Amarrian, and despite his ignorance on a few topics, she could pretend that he was just as intelligent as any other Amarrian.

And she also had to play a part. She needed to treat him as though he was an old friend, and the best way to do that would be to think of him as one.

So she talked for a time on the animals they would see, and drifted to other topics. They received their meals and continued chatting as they ate, and at some point, Floreina decided to play a little trick on him.

Mahran began itching his left shoulder, then returned to his sandwich, then quickly moved to itch his right shoulder, then a moment later, back again to his left.

But Floreina had grown quiet as she watched him react to her mental prodding, and after itching back and forth several times, he asked, "Are you doing that?"

She laughed and turned off the sensations.

And Mahran just stared at her. "I thought the implant wasn't supposed to be a toy." And he cocked his head, raising his eyebrows questioningly.

Floreina grinned in surprise and laughed harder.

Mahran chuckled and shook his head. "Is it possible for police scanners to pick up those signals?"

"No, no. There's far too many signals bouncing around for them to notice something like that."

"We probably shouldn't be talking about it in a restaurant either," Mahran said.

"You're probably right. I'm glad you're looking out for me."

Mahran's eyes gleamed and his mouth dropped as they walked through the opening archway of bushes and fir trees to look onto a green field, a pond, and weeping willow trees. "Wow," he exclaimed. "So many plants! Grass!"

"Oh, yes," Floreina replied. "Someday you'll be able to see what it's like on a fully terraformed planet."

His face was tight and bright red as he looked up at the ceiling looming overhead. "I had no idea it looked like this..."

"Yes, yes," Floreina said. "Don't act like it's your first time."

"A playground!" Mahran exclaimed, focusing on a colorful set of slides, bridges and climbing surfaces.

"That's for children!" Floreina laughed.

"Exactly... I'm gonna run over there."

Floreina chuckled, thankful that it was the middle of the night, even if the giant overhead lights still gleamed the same as they would at high noon. "Okay," she replied.

And Mahran took off running. Floreina glanced around. There was no one within immediate range and she felt like having a little fun, so she popped open the menu and triggered a shutdown of the nerves in Mahran's legs.

He fell hard and fast, letting out a quick and abrupt cry as his outstretched arms and body slammed into the ground. His arms splayed out across the grass and he lay still.

Floreina walked toward him, slowly at first, then began jogging after he still did not move.

"Geiyfron!" she called, her general guidance program gently reminding her of the proper name.

He rolled to his side and sat up. Floreina slowed to a walk. "Aha! You made me think I'd gotten you good."

"You did," he replied. "It hurts." He glared at her for a long moment, before seeming to remember his place. He looked back at the ground and rubbed his legs. He took a deep breath and shuddered, gritting his teeth. "May I ask that you please not do that," he spoke carefully, "as it is a greatly added risk of us being caught, and it is also quite painful."

“Okay, okay,” Floreina responded quickly, “I’m sorry. Come on, get up.” She knelt to help, but he crawled to his feet on his own, stumbling at first, but quickly regaining strength. They walked toward the playground, but now Mahran did not seem as interested.

Floreina followed him as he climbed the steps and tried the different slides, scaled a climbing wall, and jumped on a trampoline, but rapidly seemed uninterested, and finally the two found themselves sitting on swings overlooking the rest of the park.

“Now, don’t get all down on me,” Floreina said. “You’re not mad I played that little trick are you?”

“It just... concerns me...” He looked at her carefully, as though analyzing. “I don’t know what I’m getting into... What else might you do with that implant...”

“Oh, come on,” she replied, laughing lightly. She playfully jabbed him in the shoulder. “If our roles were reversed you’d play around with me... Just think about it... you’d enjoy it... it’s nice to be able to affect someone from the inside... there’s nothing malicious about it...”

“Right... but you understand why it makes me uncomfortable; because I’m the one whose life is in danger... it reminds me that you can kill me with your thoughts...”

1. She shook her head. “You’re talking like you’re an Amarian or something... okay, okay... if it’s going to affect your morale like that then I promise you now, no more games with the implant. I’ll only use it when absolutely necessary...”

“Really?” he asked. “No more mystery itches?”

“Yeah, yeah; I’ll hold back,” she replied.

“Thank you.”

“But you must admit that if you had one of these, and I was at the other end, you’d have a hard time resisting too...”

He sighed and smiled, “Yes, I suppose I would.”

Mahran was clearly uncomfortable sleeping in the same bed with his owner. Floreina was the one who should be disgusted, but she had insisted that he did not need to sleep on the floor.

“I must apologize, Master,” Mahran started slowly, as Floreina turned out the lights, “for today...”

“Huh?” Floreina replied. “I had a fun time today.”

Mahran lay on the edge of the bed, careful not to take too much of the blanket. "About the whole implant thing—sometimes I forget who I am and allow my selfishness to influence my decisions... it was wrong of me to question your desire to use the implant... you paid for me and you paid for the implant, so it's not my place to complain, and you're such a caring master that you let me get away with things like that. And I just feel... guilty sometimes."

And Floreina grinned widely in the darkness, knowing the slave could not see. This was what it was all about. To gain influence that could never be attained with punishments... to control from the inside, from their deeper emotions, desires, spirituality, sense of self, where they never expect it, because they are so used to concerning themselves with the punishments of the flesh... you can affect your slaves to the point they become their own master... the way God intended... .

"Well," Floreina replied, "You were expressing your feelings, being transparent, which isn't wrong in itself. You simply told me how you felt, and I realized that such joking was not an appropriate way to treat you... and you were right, it wasn't conducive to a proper relationship... it wasn't respectful, and you didn't deserve it."

"Thank you, Master... Floreina."

They lay in the dark, nearly motionless. "Tomorrow morning's your time to shine," Floreina told him, simply wishing to break the silence.

"I'm a little nervous."

"Understandable. Tomorrow isn't going to be the dangerous part, though it's going to be my test of your abilities to see if I can actually go through with this plan... so you'd better impress."

"But you can't tell me any more about what we're doing?"

"I've got a drug deal," Floreina whispered. "And we're going to manipulate certain aspects of the exchange."

Floreina looked ahead, a perfectly symmetrical crawlway splayed out before her as far as she could see. She pulled herself along the air duct, grabbing with the palm of her hands and dragging her body along, hand-over-hand.

"You doing okay back there?" she asked glancing over her shoulder.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Mahran replied. "How much longer?"

"Another half kilometer... so settle in for a long crawl."

"There's no closer outlet than the one in the hotel?"

"Nope," she replied. "That's why it's so perfect; they'll never expect a third party from the air duct. They think they've got all their bases covered..."

They crawled on, pausing occasionally to catch their breath, but otherwise dragged themselves at a rapid pace. Eventually they arrived at an opening where they could drop into a tiny control room designed as a communications and recharging hub for maintenance drones. There was barely enough room for one man to work comfortably, so when Mahran dropped in after her, they found themselves packed together intimately.

"Hello," she greeted, smiling as their eyes met. Floreina knelt and Mahran shifted to allow her more space. She pulled a connector from a panel on the side of the enclosure and plugged it into her head. Closing her eyes, she searched the connections in the local area of the space station, finding controls for lighting, temperature, communications, and security.

"Good good," she said aloud. She removed a small data scanner from her pack and began scanning for the codes to access the system. "You familiar with how a code scanner works to hack simple station systems?"

"No," Mahran shook his head.

"Well, it's pretty simple, though it's a little harder without a mind link," she showed him a readout panel on the opposite side and took several minutes to explain the processes.

"Okay," Mahran nodded, paying careful attention, but looking nervous. "I'm going to want a couple practice sessions first, since this is a bit more complicated for a Minmatar without a mental connection..."

"Of course," Floreina replied. "Let me just wait and make sure that my attempt is going to work, and that it won't trigger any unexpected security routines. I've got water, sandwiches and chocolate in my pack, so we can stay here all day if needed."

"Okay, good; I've never done anything quite like this before."

"Neither have I."

"So tell me..." Mahran started slowly. "What is it that I'm doing here?"

Floreina pulled a canister from her sack. "This is a gas," she told him. "That you will be releasing into the meeting room."

His eyebrows raised. "What kind of gas?"

She pulled a mask from the bag and simply held it out, putting it straight onto his face. "Wear this. Put it on before releasing the gas. Don't take it off for anything."

He took the mask and slowly pulled it from his face and looked at it. "What'll happen if I remove it? Will it knock me out?"

"It causes your lungs to fill with fluid and you drown."

Mahran nodded slowly. "Hmm..." His face tightened. "How long does it take?"

"Two to three minutes."

"Seems like a long time..."

"There's a numbing agent as well so they won't notice the effects until it's too late."

Mahran sighed and fell silent for a long time. "I didn't know we would be killing people," he mumbled.

"What?" Her lip curled and eyelashes rose questioningly. "What did you think we were doing here?"

"I didn't know. This is the first you've told me about anything."

The code scanner beeped its notification. She focused on the sensations, found the entryway to the local security cameras, and entered the password, reading it manually from the screen on the scanner. A moment later she accessed the security menu for the entire level. She could not help grinning with power.

She set up a few basic security measures to ensure their hacking attempt was not noticed by the authorities. After double checking the protocols, she accessed the controls in front of Mahran and began displaying the same menus she saw in her mind.

She went through the process with him, taking more than an hour simply to show him all the menus for the various systems he would need to control. At first she felt overwhelmed. When seen all together, the options and responsibilities seemed endless, and while she had been aware of each one of them individually, she had never been able to step back and take a look at the overall complexity of the systems of which she expected her simple Minmatar slave to take control. But she kept pushing forward, explaining screen after screen of menus, just as the mental implant fed her the explanations.

Oddly enough, Floreina quickly grew comfortable with the physical closeness to her Minmatar, and, especially with the temporary facial alterations and clothing differences, he could seem like any other co-worker.

Eventually Mahran began testing the system himself, and Floreina found him catching on quicker than she had expected. The menus all worked under similar user interface concepts, so the same patterns of behavior could be applied to all of them, and Mahran seemed to recognize them quickly.

But in the midst of her training, a low level alarm sounded.

They stopped to look up and see a repair drone just above, its antennae extended.

Floreina already had the local area scrambled for drone emergency signals, but needed to take this one out before it attempted a longer range frequency. She leapt up, just as the drone began extending its drive unit.

She caught it as the drive kicked into motion, jerking her against the side panels. Holding tight, she pulled back, and dragged the drone toward her. She pulled, and forced it into their enclosure. Simultaneously she scanned the local frequencies, searching for the drone's transmissions.

She lost focus for a moment as the drone shifted its magnetic propulsion, reversing and driving toward Floreina. It no longer had a hold on the floor, but had clearly found a propulsion strip in the side wall. The force drove her backward, against Mahran.

She held the drone, keeping it at arms length, but unable to push forward. She found its signal, bouncing systematically through frequencies. She followed it, narrowing her eyelids to gaze through a haze. She split her focus between the frequency race in her mind and the shoving match in the physical realm.

The drone extended a cutting torch. Within seconds it lit up and turned rapidly, attempting to catch an arm.

"Get to my pack!" she shouted. "Get the blowtorch."

Mahran wiggled behind her to free himself. He reached, but couldn't quite touch the bag at the far edge of the pit. He twisted and allowed her to move against the wall, but his thigh remained trapped behind her hip.

As he moved, the drone opened its applicator and sprayed nanite paste in a forceful jet against Floreina's face. It switched propulsion to push toward Mahran, but despite the distraction and the sudden blindness, Floreina continued to hold.

She shook her head, freeing enough paste to look at Mahran in time to see him fumble with her pack, then pull out her emergency mini

blowtorch. He fired it up, looking cautious for just a moment before turning it toward the drone.

Several seconds later he had a section cut from the back of the bot and was forcing the flame into its intestines.

The robot sparked and burned, rapidly heating her hands, but the magnetic force continued for several more seconds as Floreina gritted her teeth and her mind against the combined force of the propulsion and the rising heat in her hands.

Her elbows began to bend, but she looked down and found the drone's torch dead. Only the propulsion remained; and a moment later, that died as well, the drone dropping to the floor with a loud clank. Mahran stepped backward to avoid a crushed foot.

They stared at each other and panted. Floreina moved toward Mahran to free her leg, and slipped, falling against him. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders to pull herself up, and they hugged for several long moments, panting. Had there been a larger floor she would have fallen over to relax. But resting against Mahran was a welcome substitute.

After catching her breath, Floreina pulled back and stood straight.

Mahran swallowed, clearly feeling the discomfort from their sudden embrace. His eyes narrowed, his face shifting to anger. "How did that happen?" he asked. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, running a hand down his clothing. "I thought you had all the drones covered."

"I mostly did," she replied. "I got distracted..."

Mahran shook his head and stared at the hunk of metal on the floor. "That drone tried to kill you..."

"Yeah," replied Floreina. "They'll do that."

Mahran seemed distant as they crawled back through the ventilation system, as though thinking something he could not say out loud. She needed to find out more, but her conversational assistant could not invent a good avenue. Instead, she simply started talking. "So tell me what's been going on, Buddy. We've got a while left to crawl; might as well pass the time."

"Well..." Mahran started cautiously, "Since I've been promoted to overseer I have become more curious about your theories on slave management... the slaves on your team seem quite effective..."

"Well..." she started, wondering how much she should actually tell him. "There's different things... I think we can get too caught up in

punishing slaves, for example... punishment's a very dirty and imprecise form of communication."

"Yeah," Mahran said as he trailed behind her. "You've never punished me for anything... even though I deserved it a couple times."

"But you continue doing a good job," she replied. "The little things don't really matter. Punishments often solve short term problems, but contribute to long term problems."

Floreina looked back at Mahran, bumping her head against the side of the crawlway.

"There's too many situations that make punishments counter-productive. If they don't realize they're being punished; or if they don't understand why... It creates an emotional distance between slave and master, and teaches the slave to deal with issues by punishing others."

They rested for a moment.

"And if their quality of life isn't high enough, the punishments won't have any meaning either. You need to show them respect. Then if you punish it will contrast enough to be effective."

She paused, wondering if Mahran was trying to get a feel for her strategies for his own purposes, or if his soul motivation was in improving his own subjects. But consistency and communication was so important that even if he had manipulative goals, it was still better that he recognize his master's patterns.

So she continued, "I like simple consequences. If a slave becomes a real problem, I will have them terminated; not out of anger, nor punishment or vengeance, but out of simple practicality. In rare cases of extreme disobedience, it's just cheaper and easier to terminate a slave and buy a new one. That's not a punishment exactly, it's just a practicality, and it's not intended for the slaves to be afraid of that fate. In fact, you want to avoid the fear at all costs. You want the consequence of death to be there, but it shouldn't be any more traumatizing than the need to put on your seatbelt."

She paused in front of a connecting shaft to check her drone scanner. "We're not going to make it to the next opening before the next drone gets to us." She sighed. "We're going to need to stop here for about forty minutes to let the drone pass."

"Okay," Mahran sighed.

Floreina crawled forward, then backed into the connecting shaft and crawled backward for twenty meters and stopped, now clear from the drone's passing scans. Mahran followed her into the passage, head first, and stopped just in front of her. They smiled briefly.

“You’re sure you’ve got all the drones scanned down, so we’re not going to get jumped from behind?” he asked.

She passed him the scanner. “You can double check for yourself.”

He took several minutes to check over her readouts, and, finally satisfied, handed it back.

He smiled. “So how did you come to believe all these theories? I didn’t know Master Miltein, but I assume it started with him?”

She took a deep breath. “There was a specific point when I realized it—or he forced me to realize it...” she spoke slowly.

Mahran cocked his head and raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t know if I want to tell you...” Floreina said. “You might think I’m a monster...”

“I don’t think I could ever see you as a monster... will you tell me anyway?”

Floreina started slowly, “My dad always seemed to feel the same way as I do on these things, but never detailed them to me... I sort of figured it out just by forcing myself to take a step back and watch how Dad interacted with me and his Minmatar.”

She paused as she lay on the cold metal surface of the air duct, her chin resting on the back of her hands, thinking of her father and the frequency crystal manufacturing firm he managed when she was a little girl.

But she caught herself and came back to start her story. “...so I was about twelve, and still learning about the manufacturing line, and there was this slave who was teaching me to check for imperfections in the crystals as they came out of the cleanser. But the systems were screwing up and he kept having to run back to the controls to reset the cleanser tank. He was running back and forth, and so I stood by the conveyor belt and tried to help by checking for imperfections, just as he had shown me, but was getting too close to the cleanser, and was touching the crystal, which usually causes more imperfections. And the production was getting backed up, so this slave came back and yelled at me, because I wasn’t helping, and was probably in danger...”

She paused to look at Mahran. “Anyway, he sort of shoved me out of the way... he was having a hectic time trying to keep up with the problems on the production line, then to have me in the way... looking back on it now it seems reasonable... but I didn’t see it that way at that age... I had a bruised ego, and I wanted revenge... or as I thought of it at

the time, a proper punishment to make an example out of him... I wanted justice."

She scratched her nose, barely moving her chin.

"So I ran back to my papa's office and grabbed his laser pistol, ran right back and shot him in the face... And I just stood there; and everyone else just stood there."

She looked at Mahran and he looked back attentively, but calmly.

"But my papa didn't yell and scream, even though I could tell he was furious. He shut down the assembly line and let everyone take the day off, and afterward I tried to avoid the slaves, but my dad made me go down to the barracks and talk to them about it—not apologize exactly, but just talk to them so I could see how it was affecting them. And he made me go to the funeral... which was good for me; perhaps not for them.

"It's difficult when your kid punishes someone else... should you punish them to show that punishing people is wrong?... But I felt horrible regardless... well... I felt very intense emotions about it; let's say that. It tore me up inside and I kept coming back to that feeling for months afterwards—but I wouldn't exactly describe it as feeling horrible... and that's a good point, because Dad wasn't trying to make me feel awful about it. He just wanted me to *feel*... to think about it..."

Mahran rolled to his side and rested his head on his forearm, watching Floreina with a minute smile.

"And I realized that too often, we Amarrians forget that we're supposed to be protectors; we must keep slaves, for certain races just can't handle the responsibility of being without a caretaker. That's how the Lord made you, and we should not punish you for that. We have different places under God, but we are part of the same team, working toward the same goals."

Floreina paused a moment. "So I'm not like that any more."

"Oh, I know," replied Mahran.

And she stopped, and the two looked at each other, longer than would have been appropriate with another slave owner.

"So tell me how your new position has been going," she asked. "Are you liking your new role as teacher?"

"Oh, yes," he replied. "I did not realize the perks involved... I've been working with the new Minmatar. I've been training them for maintenance and incident response..."

And they talked, Floreina asking more about his life on the ship, and found Mahran discussing the connection between his spirituality and his work, but finally moved onto lighter topics, like how much he was going to enjoy the hit of Vitoc he would get when they got back to the hotel room.

They had time to kill, so she let him talk on and on about simple things, and for most of the time, she simply watched, as though listening to another Amarrian. But her own senses told her, and her facial analyzers confirmed, that something was being left unsaid.

Near the end of their wait, they took a short pause so that they could check the drone tracking systems to make sure all the maintenance bots were on schedule and not moving down the wrong pathways, happy to find everything still running smoothly.

And she looked up to see Mahran staring at her, smiling warmly.

After a short moment he asked, "Do you mind if I kiss you?"

And Floreina's consciousness seemed to stop short but simultaneously she felt her implant firing up.

Something had told her this could happen... slaves were often known to form attractions toward their owners, but she had never thought it would be an issue...

But now it seemed different than she would have expected, and visions began popping into her mind, seemingly from nowhere.

There were places all over the galaxy where Amarrians, Minmatar, and people of all races lived together as though they were the same... there were places where an Amarrian and a Minmatar could be together as equals and the local society would not think anything odd about it. Mahran, of course, had no knowledge of these places.

But suddenly Floreina envisioned herself converting... shifting her own paradigms... to learn to love someone who was once her property. They could move away from the war, to the surface of a planet and live amongst the trees and shrubs... have a house with a couple fruit trees... and never be seen as strange.

And she envisioned their half-breed children. At first she would hide her discomfort, and within months she would find it gone, and she would see them simply as her children.

But Floreina fought back against the sudden, uninvited visions. Male Amarrians could have affairs with female slaves, but always as a subject serving their master... to allow them an opportunity to manipulate their Amarrian superiors was to invite disaster to both races.

At the same time, however, Floreina could not help finding the idea sinfully dirty and erotic... to give herself up to something so... filthy...

But Floreina forced it away.

"No," she replied flatly. "That would be entirely inappropriate."

And Mahran looked at the floor. "I'm sorry," he started suddenly. "You're right—I don't know what I was thinking." His face turned red, and he grew quiet.

"I'm sorry if I gave you mixed signals..."

"No, no, I'm sorry," Mahran shot back quickly. "I'm just stupid..."

And he stared at the wall.

So Floreina let it rest for several long moments, and watched as he lay, almost motionless, his head cocked away, his eyes blinking only rarely.

"Okay," Floreina broke the silence. "Don't get all weird about a simple misunderstanding..." but she didn't know what else to say.

"Yeah," he shook his head suddenly, as though to clear his thoughts. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it, Buddy." She patted his shoulder. "If you want to know the truth... you're a handsome guy... you'll make a good husband someday..."

And that seemed to brighten his mood.

They didn't talk much for the remainder of their wait and for their crawl back to the hotel. As soon as they made it back to the room, Mahran flopped onto the bed to rest. Floreina sat down in a deep chair facing him, and groaned. She checked the time; they had spent fifteen hours working in the air ducts, and they felt and looked the part.

But things had run reasonably smoothly, with the exception of her sense that Mahran's short-lived attraction was not the only thing distracting him.

"Is the deal still on?" Floreina asked, staring over the top of her soda.

A heavy-set man in a leather cargo jacket and four days of facial hair sat before her, staring back over his empty glass. Reihmar was his name, as her helper implant subtly reminded her. "Let's take a walk," he said.

"Prefer to talk somewhere else?" she asked.

"A walk in the park?"

"How romantic..."

He chuckled and looked around. "Yeah..."

They headed out of the cafe, through the crowds, following side by side, but not speaking of anything other than the logistics of getting to their less crowded destination.

Finally, when they turned into the open area in the park, Reihmar spoke, "We are concerned about the meeting place..."

"Concerned how?" Floreina replied.

"It's proximity to local police offices. We'd like to make the deal in a system with lower security. We don't understand why you chose this location... it's also too far from the docking hangars."

Floreina replied calmly, "Well, first of all, I need to select a spot on my captain's normal routes."

"Can't you take a vacation and meet us in a more distant system? This is a huge deal we're talking about. With the profit you'll make from these boosters it shouldn't make a difference to you."

"No," she shook her head. "I need to stay under the radar of everyone, including my captain and the rest of her crew. I need to do it quickly and get back to the ship. The hotel I selected will give me quick access to a secure cargo dispatch to get them back to the ship, as well as being a familiar place which will give me a little more peace of mind—"

"We just think—"

"No, no," Floreina spoke quickly, knowing she must be authoritative and insistent on this point. "We agreed: I pick the location and you choose the time. They have a strict weapons ban like we agreed. What more are you looking for? Are you trying to control every aspect of this arrangement?"

Reihmar kicked a clump of dirt and grass. "I've just been sent here to say that we don't like the meeting place, and would ask that you suggest a different location."

"No," Floreina replied. "I'm sorry but my partners and I are putting a lot of money on this and I'm not gonna be pushed around on this issue. I want to make the deal in a location where I feel comfortable. You can take that or leave it."

He groaned softly. "Okay, I'll get the word back and see what they say."

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"I need to talk to you," Mahran said as he stepped into her quarters, the hatch sliding shut behind him.

She looked up. "What's going on?"

"This plan..." he sighed, and shook slightly. "I don't feel comfortable with this..."

"You don't feel comfortable with what?" Floreina turned in her chair to look straight at the Minmatar.

"I didn't know we would be killing people... I didn't know it would involve hacking station life support systems..."

"I explained that your life would be at risk," Floreina said. "I believe I gave a reasonable assessment... What else is relevant to you?"

"You're also getting five million ISK worth of boosters from this deal. For that price you could buy thousands of Minmatars just like me..."

"What are you getting at?" Floreina replied, leaning forward, her eyelids rising.

Mahran stared at the floor. "I think it would be fair if you released me as well as my brother in trade for this."

"Excuse me?" She tried to remain calm. "You're trying to change the deal on me? The deal I offered was for the release of your brother, to which you agreed. That was the deal; you can't come in here and just change things."

"I don't think I can go through with this then... I didn't have all the information; I didn't know there was killing involved; I didn't know it was such high value... it's just too much for me... punish me if you will... I know I made a stupid mistake, but I've thought a lot about this, and I just can't go through with something this major without more incentive..."

Floreina took a deep breath and shook her head, holding her tongue. She touched the triggers in her mind to flip on her medical implants and physical enhancements, wishing to just start up her rage, jump forth and pound her slave into the floor.

But she held back and glared at the floor for a moment before looking up. "Mahran..." she started slowly and carefully. "We had a deal. I gave you the freedom to choose your path, and you had your chance. Now you've made your decision."

"I can't go through with it," he said flatly.

"You don't have a choice."

"You can't do it without me."

"I'll have you terminated."

"I have a file stored in my personal data that describes what you're doing. People will find it after my death."

"You're blackmailing me?"

"I will only reveal your plans if you terminate me, Master Floreina."

She shook her head. "I don't believe this. What makes you think you can come in here and make these kinds of demands?"

"You can't do this without me," he replied. "You need me to keep quiet. You stand to make millions from this. I think my freedom is worth far less than your profit if things are successful..."

Floreina looked up and stared at him for a long time, and finally he looked up and gazed back into her cold glare. "You're simply going to refuse to participate? Shirk your obligations to your master and go back on your word?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I have to do this."

"I can't believe you..." Floreina started, then stopped herself. She didn't have a choice in this circumstance. Mahran was playing the hand he had been dealt. "Okay," she snapped. "Fine. You and your brother will go free if you pull through and serve your function. Will that quell your objections?"

He grinned, his face suddenly glowing. "Yes, Ma'am. Thank you, Ma'am." He jumped slightly. "You know that I appreciate this immensely..."

"Uh-huh," she replied in monotone. "Alright, I don't want to hear any more about this. Just go. And remember next time you try to manipulate me, I'll put my foot down, and I'll put it down hard."

"Yes, Ma'am. This is all I need. It'll go smoothly from here; I can assure you... I'm prepared to do my duty on the station... and I'm eternally grateful."

"Okay." Floreina stood and turned away. "Just get out. We'll speak again in a couple days."

"Yes, Ma'am." And Mahran turned and left.

Floreina stood, simply breathing, then screamed a deep and angry growl, wiping the hair from her face. She kicked her chair and it slid, clattering across the floor, hit the edge of her desk and toppled over.

She shook her head and breathed heavily through her teeth, her damp hair falling into her face.

...just another example of the self-centered nature of the Minmatar.

Reihmar's face showed up on her secure comm screen.

"Greetings," said Floreina. She coughed, putting a hand to her throat for effect.

"Good evening," he replied. "You alone?"

"Wouldn't have answered if I wasn't."

"Okay, good. We've decided the meeting place is acceptable."

"Excellent." Floreina nodded and smiled.

"We still think it's a bad choice, but we can live with it. I'll contact you again in two weeks to confirm, but for now we have the date set at sometime over the weekend in three weeks."

Floreina nodded.

"We'll be waiting on the station and we'll contact you either Friday, Saturday or Sunday at any time. We expect you to be at the meeting point within fifteen minutes of our call. Acceptable?"

"Yes," Floreina confirmed.

"Excellent. I'll contact you later."

And as quickly as he had appeared, Reihmar was gone.

The deal was on.

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Mahran sat in the deep cushioned hotel room chair, hunched forward, his elbows resting on his knees. He stared blankly at the ground just in front of the bed.

"You look tense," Floreina noticed.

"Yes, Ma'am," he replied. "I'm worried."

"What do you think is going to happen?"

"I don't know; I think they might figure out what you're doing; or at least get suspicious. The cops might get wind of the whole deal... who knows..."

"I know, Buddy. I've thought about all this."

"And you absolutely need to detonate my heart if we get caught? Even if there's absolutely nothing I can do to help you?"

She nodded. "Of course, Mahran. We're a team; if I go down, you must go down with me."

"But you know I will do everything possible—"

"Don't," she stopped him, waving a hand. "Don't even talk about it. It's far too dangerous, and you know it. You would be left alone to fend for yourself out here. You're mine until the conditions for your release are met. That's your duty, and don't forget it." She paused. "But remember, Mahran, if you die, then I will surely die as well. I won't pop

your heart for no good reason, nor simply because I get scared. And I wouldn't have put myself in that kind of danger, now would I?"

"That's what I don't know," he replied. "You have a lot to gain if this works..."

"Absolutely. And so do you."

The door chimed. The dinner delivery drone, no doubt.

Mahran got up to answer, then returned to set the two trays on the small dining table in the corner of the hotel room.

"But when this is over, and you have your boosters and we've disposed of the bodies and vacated the hotel rooms, then I can go free, right?" He looked at her questioningly. "And my bother, Charmann?"

She nodded minutely. "That is the deal you weaseled out of me, is it not?"

He nodded. "Yes."

Mahran stared at his food for a long while.

"Do you want to trade?" Floreina asked.

"Hmm?" Mahran replied, looking up. "You don't like what you ordered?"

"You're not eating." She popped a roasted potato into her mouth and looked at her slave.

Mahran looked back at his plate, picked up his cheeseburger, and set it back.

"You wanna try some of my duck?"

He shook his head. "How do you stay so calm in front of something like this?"

She shrugged. "I'm scared too..."

"Couldn't you have negotiated someone else to come along with you for protection?"

"It's complicated," she replied. "In order to have complete control over the location, this was one of their stipulations."

Mahran took a slow bite of his burger.

"You took enough Vitoc this morning to safely get you all the way through the weekend?"

He nodded. "Yes, Ma'am."

"You feel prepared?" she asked.

"Physically, yes... mentally... about as ready as I'll ever be."

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“Okay, final checklist,” Floreina prompted, watching Mahran pack the rolling suitcase that he would drag through the air ducts. “Communication interface,” she started.

“Check,” Mahran replied. He typed onto the keypad and Floreina immediately felt the message appear through her implant. *Hello, Master Floreina.*

She replied within milliseconds, *Greetings my little buddy. This is your time to shine.*

He closed the screen and placed it in the suitcase.

She listed other items and he checked them off as he packed. Four liters of water, four days worth of food rations, the drone tracking unit, flashlight, the control box that plugged into the system, an air quality monitor, air purification mask, small utility knife, pillow, an explosive device that he could use to break his way through the air duct, and of course, a small portable toilet.

Finally he had everything packed up. He stood by the air vent cover, staring blankly.

“Everything’s gonna be fine,” Floreina assured him.

Mahran turned around, looked at her and nodded. “I will do my best.”

“I know you will.”

He removed the cover, placed it on the bed and pushed the suitcase into the opening.

But before he climbed on the back of the chair, Floreina stepped forward to wrap her arms around her slave and hold him tight. “This is the point where both our lives change. My life is in your hands, Little Buddy.” She felt his breath down her neck as their cheeks pressed together. “You’ll do me proud.”

They released. “Thank you for this,” said Mahran as he climbed into the small hatchway.

“And thank you.”

And within a minute he was gone, crawling down the tunnel toward his duty.

Floreina opened her eyes to see herself sitting in a strange bed, her implant rapidly pulling her from sleep with an important announcement. Floreina collected her thoughts and listened to the message.

It was time for the deal. They picked the middle of the night when they knew she would be asleep. They obviously didn’t trust her.

She was up like a flash, pulling her clothes on, simultaneously linking with the computer system to contact Mahran.

A minute went by as she frantically pulled her shoes on and checked herself in the mirror. And two went by. But finally, Mahran replied. *Was sleeping. Is it time right now?*

Yes, she replied.

I'm awake. Will be ready momentarily, he typed.

You've got five minutes. She checked her air filtration device, and strapped it to her face. She stuffed her steel retracting baton into the front of her pants.

She moved swiftly down the corridors and hopped into a transport pod to carry her most of the way to their meeting site.

"Greetings," said Reihmar as she arrived at the other hotel room. He shook her hand. Two other gentlemen stood behind him. One carried a suitcase. Reihmar motioned to them. "May I introduce Otin and Martel," he said.

"A pleasure." Floreina shook their hands. "Okay, lets head inside."

And they moved into the presidential suite, the three men following Floreina. Four decorative pillars divided the room. Two white couches sat in the center, separated by a clear, solid resin coffee table. Several smaller tables sat around the outside of the room along with a computer interface desk. A door led to the bathroom on the left side of the room, and another led to the adjacent suite, which the gentlemen did not know that Floreina had also rented for the weekend.

She watched as Martel checked the bathroom, then moved to the secondary door, trying the lock pad and seeming satisfied with the denial beep. He continued to check the rest of the room.

"So what's up with the mask?" asked Otin.

"I seem to have come down with a case of itonksinitis in the last couple days."

Otin nodded suspiciously. "Well, it's not necessary for you to worry about us. We can catch it from you; that's fine with us; we can deal with a cough for a while for a deal like this."

She shrugged, taking the mask off and holding it in her lap. "It helps with my breathing though, as it filters a lot of the contaminants out of the station air... air quality control in this station is less than optimum..."

"It just makes me feel a lot more comfortable when I can see your face."

She laughed. "Okay... like you think I'm going to do something crazy with three of you men here..."

"Hmmpf," Otin snorted. But he sat down on one of the couches, seemingly satisfied.

Floreina contacted Mahran. *Are you watching this? Wait for my order to release the numbing agent, then a minute later I'll give the order to release the real gas. Keep a monitor on the air flow and inform me the moment the gas hits the room. I'll be breathing the numbing agent like everyone else, so I won't be able to tell when the real gas hits, and I'll need to sneak some breaths through my mask when they're not looking.*

Copy that, Mahran typed. Be careful.

Floreina looked at the men in the room, feeling a separation of consciousness, as they had no idea what was being communicated in the back of her mind.

Meanwhile, Reihmar used a small scanner to search the room for weapons. Floreina took out her own scanner a moment later and did the same.

"Are you ready to see the merchandise?" asked Reihmar after completing his scan.

"Absolutely," Floreina replied.

And Martel set the protective suitcase down next to the transparent coffee table, and slowly retracted the opening. Inside sat two cylinders within a protective monitoring case. Martel slowly pulled one straight up to remove it from its encasement, and gently showed it to Floreina, holding it in both hands.

"There it is," admired Martel. "Two standard exile Boosters." He placed the booster back in its case before she had a chance to touch it.

"Let me test them," Floreina requested, getting her scanner ready to connect to the feedback outlet on the booster monitoring device.

"Right." Martel entered a password and pushed it toward Floreina.

She connected the scanner and watched the readout as it listed the elements, finally matching the chemical diagram it held on exile combat boosters.

"Excellent." She nodded and put away the device.

And she sent another mental message to Mahran just a few meters above her head.

Release the numbing agent.

Copy that, he replied.

Floreina sat on the couch to wait. She looked as though simply tired and cautious, but inside her mind was a flurry of connections to the local network, checks of her helper applications, and tests of her personality software, giving constant readouts of probable thought patterns of the three men.

"Okay, now lets transfer the money," said Martel.

"You're anxious," Floreina replied, examining the booster case.

"We've shown the merchandise—I trust to your satisfaction—now show the cash. Where's your credit interface?"

She held out her tiny datapad wallet.

"There's an interface right there." He pointed at the desk. "Let's get to it."

She stared for a time at the suitcase, trying to buy herself just another couple minutes.

The room should be saturated with the numbing agent now, Mahran typed.

Good. Go ahead and release the real stuff. You have your mask on, right?

Copy, Mahran replied. *Wearing mask. Wear yours.*

"Let's go!" Martel ordered. "This deal was supposed to be in and out. No time for games and pranks."

Floreina stood slowly as her implants warned her of Martel's growing anxiety, as though she could not see for herself. She walked casually toward the console on the wall, painfully aware of the men watching her.

Is it possible to create a diversion when I'm at the computer terminal? Floreina asked Mahran.

What should I do? he typed back as she arrived at the table.

Do you have control over anything in the bathroom?

Several seconds passed as she fumbled with the datapad. She became aware of the feeling in her throat and lungs, a softness, a deepening comfort, and an absence of sensation. It seemed so obvious to her now that she was focused on the sensation.

Gas hitting the room, came Mahran's reminder. *Shower on.*

And as she pressed random controls on the datapad, she heard the shower turn on.

"What's that?" Reihmar exclaimed.

Martel and Reihmar moved quickly toward the bathroom, but Otin merely looked curiously in their direction, then turned back toward Floreina.

She took a small breath, knowing the deadly gas was permeating her lungs. A second later she put the mask casually to her face, and took a much larger breath. Otin watched, but didn't seem concerned.

And as Reihmar and Martel returned from the bathroom after shutting off the water, Floreina realized the distraction idea had been a mistake.

"Something strange is going on here," Martel exclaimed. "I want to see the money."

"Yeah," Reihmar agreed. "Let's see the money. Bring it up on the screen."

"I'm having some troubles with my account," Floreina stalled. She held her breath, remaining still, attempting to remain calm, to slow her breathing, so she could sneak her few breaths through the filtration mask.

"What sort of troubles? Put it up on the screen so we can see."

"Something isn't working right with this terminal," she lied.

"In an executive suite?" Martel said. "That seems unlikely. Bring up the screens. Show us what you're doing."

Floreina brought the mask to her face. She had no choice at this point. And Martel's eyes narrowed as she did so. "Something seems to be screwed up at this station," she said, breathing comfortably through the filter. "The screen isn't responding."

Martel stared at her for a long moment. "I'm not buying this... something's up." He turned and moved swiftly back to the case, closed it and headed toward the door with the merchandise. "I'm out of here."

"Now, come on," Reihmar coaxed. "Just give her a minute." He turned toward Floreina. "You can't get your account to come up?"

"I'm trying," Floreina said. "We put a specialized encryption on it..."

That door had better be locked, she told Mahran, glancing at Martel heading swiftly toward the exit.

"Deal cancelled," Martel declared. "We're out. Let's go, gentlemen."

Reihmar ran after him. "Just a second! Hold up. Let's give this a minute."

Otin continued toward the middle of the room, between the couches, and stopped to say simply, "Martel..."

But Martel shrugged them off and continued toward the door.

Floreina's brain whirled as every useful application powered up. Her situation would deteriorate when they found the door locked.

Her medical implant prepared emergency injections, motion analyzers calculated her position relative to escape routes, and emotional suppressants began selectively blocking pathways.

Floreina pulled the straps around her head to hold the mask against her mouth. She turned to watch the men as she moved toward the doorway to the adjoining room.

She watched Martel punch the door control, and heard the denial beep. He tried again, then turned back to Floreina.

Floreina began moving more quickly toward the doorway, but remained turned toward the three men, backing toward the wall. They all turned to stare at her for a long, uncomfortable moment.

And she felt her brain flood with chemicals. Colors became vibrant. Sounds became slow and clear, as though she was able to isolate the rustling of each of the men's clothing from across the room.

Time seemed to slow. They stared for what seemed like an endless moment.

She felt her muscles strengthen, and all her miniscule aches and pains washed away with the steroids suddenly coursing through her system.

Floreina smiled involuntarily behind the mask as the artificial enhancements took their full effect, and took another gliding step toward her escape door.

"She's gassing us," said Martel.

"It would seem that way," Reihmar replied.

And the three stared for another moment as Floreina took one more step.

Then Otin leapt forward, running straight over the top of the couch toward Floreina. Behind him, Martel dropped the booster case and bolted forward along side Reihmar.

Floreina's legs took action almost involuntarily. It took only two long leaps to reach her exit door. It opened as she arrived and began sliding shut almost before she had passed into the adjoining suite.

But the door slid too slowly on its track.

Otin stuck his arms through the opening just before the door closed. He yelled as his arm squeezed against the seal. Normally it would have retracted, but thankfully Mahran had overridden the controls.

He screamed as the door pressed against his hand, but he forced his other hand into the seal, and a moment later, the other two men arrived and began pulling on the door as well.

Floreina drew her baton, extended the weapon, and jumped forward to hit their fingers as they stuck through the opening. She had time to

strike only once as the door began to retract against their pull, then finally snapped from its track and fell into the wall.

Martel barged through the door, running, arms outstretched and reaching toward the filter still covering Floreina's mouth and nose. She swung the baton, allowing her combat implant to guide her movements around Martel's blocking arm. It connected with his forehead, throwing him off balance momentarily.

She turned and kicked, to connect with Otin's shin as he came around to her left. He reached frantically for the mask, but Floreina ducked away to leap onto, then over the bed. She stood on the other side, baton raised.

The three men stood, stunned for a moment. Focusing on her breathing, she stared back from the small gap between the bed and the tapestry hanging along the wall. If she could hold off their attacks for another minute or so, the gas would permeate their lungs.

But they weren't going to give her that kind of time. Instead, Reihmar moved forward, coming around the front of the bed, the other two advancing from the side to pin her against the corner.

And Floreina realized she couldn't wait for the gas, her implants reminding her of the danger of being backed into a corner. Reihmar was separated from his partners by a couple meters, and was larger and slower, and probably had less combat training so Floreina decided she needed to take an aggressive approach. If she could just take down the fat man, perhaps that could stall the others long enough for the gas to overwhelm them.

So she jumped up to land on the bed, and leapt toward Reihmar, swinging the baton. Focusing and relaxing her mind, she allowed the implant to guide her.

Missing his outstretched hand by a couple centimeters, the weapon struck the top of Reihmar's head. He staggered for only a split second, but brought his hands to his head, allowing Floreina slightly more room to move. She kicked, connecting with his forehead, then turned to leap toward Martel, bouncing from the mattress.

She held the baton before her, not having time to give another full swing. Martel's arm came up from below, in a direction not predicted by Floreina's combat implant. His fist connected with her stomach as the side of her baton connected with his face, and she brought the full weight of her body down onto his.

Everything went blank for a moment, and her vision seemed to expand, while the room contracted and stretched. The combat implant

ordered her to enter a purely defensive posture for three seconds, and to breathe deeply.

The two collapsed to the floor.

As they fell, Floreina covered her face with her arms and focused on expanding her lungs and regaining her senses.

She recovered quickly, but before being able to make another choice, she felt Otin's fist crack against her cranium. A moment later a hand frantically grabbed for her air filter.

And almost from the back of her mind, she heard an explosion, her linkage implant informing her that Mahran had detonated the explosive charge to blow an access route to their room.

Martel clutched Floreina's neck with one hand, shoving her off, and with the other, ripped the mask from her face.

She rolled over and hit the floor hard. Floreina immediately switched to oxygen efficiency mode, blocking all subconscious muscle connections. More chemicals released to relax her nerves and allow her breathing to calm.

But the mode only lasted for a moment as Martel pulled his hand away after removing her mask. He brought it to his own face, took a deep breath, and quickly looked back down at Floreina.

She reached up, frantically grabbing for the mask. She punched intermittently, and held her breath.

But Martel brought his own fist down, and connected with her nose.

Everything went black. For several milliseconds her implants lost connection and she was alone in the dark with her natural thoughts.

But it did not last for long. Her implants shifted to other emergency subroutines focused on keeping her conscious and aware through excessive trauma. Her veins surged with steroids and adrenaline.

Punches laid down on her from every angle, and her arms came up without a thought to block her head. Martel sat atop her, holding the mask to his face with his left hand and laying down punches, most contacting her arms and hands. She kicked, bringing her knee up to the small of his back. He jolted forward, but held strong, and continued punching.

So this was probably it. They had her down. They had her air filter. She couldn't hold against all three of them at the same time, and felt her consciousness fading.

The reminder program brought to focus the switch to detonate Mahran's heart.

And she touched the menu, suddenly feeling the kicks and punches from a distance as she focused on the options available to her.

She knew she had to take him out. The secrecy of the modern slave market was too important.

But something held her back. Could she really be certain he wasn't a moment away, a baton in one hand and a knife in the other?

So she pulled back from the menu, and brought herself to the moment and kicked again, kneeing Martel in the back, clenching her teeth, and staring upward into his frantic eyes.

"Give me the mask," Reihmar coughed. "I can't breathe!"

Martel's hand moved from his face to hand the mask to Reihmar, and as he did so, Floreina released her arms and reached up to grab the mask. She pulled, but Martel clung tight and pulled back. Clawing at the material, she felt it rip, and decided that destroying it was probably the most realistic option.

The mask tore apart as Martel wrenched it from Floreina's clutches. He tossed it to his partner.

Floreina brought her arms back to cover her face as a familiar scream echoed through the suite, and Floreina remembered back to the explosion just ten seconds earlier.

She felt the punches coming down on her arms, but at the same time, saw the weakening of her attackers; the toxins in the air taking their effect.

And behind them, poking suddenly above Martel's head, was a familiar and beloved sight, hidden behind another filtration mask.

Mahran was dressed in nothing but the safety mask and the pair of boxers he had worn to sleep that night.

Floreina watched as Mahran swung his baton in a wide arc, just as Martel turned up to look at him. The rod smashed unhindered into Martel's upper jaw. Teeth shattered, his lip split, and Martel fell backward, his right hand moving to clutch his suddenly battered face.

Floreina pushed with her heels on the carpet, trying to gain a hold, to draw herself away, but had little success.

Before he hit the ground, Martel caught himself and swung toward Mahran, but fell short. Mahran gave Martel a swift kick to the chest and sent him fully to the floor. Martel's hand flew backward away from his face, leaving a splattering of blood across the carpet and bedsheets.

A body crossed Floreina's vision. She saw Otin's pants from below as he leapt over her to attack Mahran.

Mahran sprinted backward, dodging Otin's rapid-fire attacks. The slave finally took a swing with the baton just before slamming into the wall. Otin caught Mahran's arm before it made contact, and in the same motion, slammed him against the wall. All four of their arms went up, as Floreina noticed the combat knife clutched in Mahran's left hand, just as she had envisioned. Otin grasped Mahran's left hand with his right, and pushed the knife against the wall, simultaneously doing the same with their other set of hands to hold the baton against the wall.

Otin pressed himself against Floreina's slave, and attempted to snatch the mask off his face with his teeth.

As she watched, however, her combat implant suddenly ordered her to block, and she instinctively brought her hands up to protect her from a frantic slap. Reihmar struck, and she pulled her elbows tight to protect her face. The large man fell atop her, fumbled for balance, then brought a hand to Floreina's throat.

But something was different. He couldn't clutch down like a healthy man. He swung his right arm, flinging wildly and coming weakly down on Floreina's arms. He coughed an ugly cackling sound and a spurt of blood came forth to splash across Floreina's face. He stared in sudden shock, clearly not having realized the extent of the damage from Floreina's trap.

From the top of her vision, her assistant application recorded Mahran suddenly pushing forward against his attacker. Catching Otin off guard, Mahran drove him backward against a nearby desk.

Mahran's leg drove upward suddenly in an attempt to hit Otin's groin, but Otin turned, blocking with his own knee. Mahran pushed hard, Otin leaning awkwardly over the top of the desk.

And without warning, Mahran dropped the baton to the floor, pulled his right arm backward, then just as quickly drove a fist into Otin's face.

Otin appeared to collapse, finally weakened by the contaminants in the air.

Floreina watched Mahran from the back of her mind wrenching the knife free and driving it into Otin's chest as she turned toward her own attacker, grabbing his arm with her left hand and driving forward with her right to shove the heel of her hand into his nose. She grabbed Reihmar's neck and pushed, injecting herself with one last surge of artificial adrenaline.

The man fell back and rolled off. Floreina forced herself up to roll on top of him. She gripped his neck with her right hand and began battering his face with her left.

Floreina looked up just long enough to recognize her loyal slave ripping his knife from Otin's chest and dropping his body to the floor. He dashed forward, transferring the knife to his left hand and pulling the mask from his face. He placed it directly over Floreina's mouth so she did not need to move her hands from their deadly task.

She breathed deeply, the filtered air bringing cool, soothing relief from the pain in her lungs. Mahran handed her the knife, and she paused only momentarily before bringing it down to Reihmar's neck. He blocked with both hands, but she pushed down hard. Floreina watched intently the detail of the moment as the knife connected with the man's flesh and dug in. She became acutely aware of the alternate awareness she had entered; maniacal; focused on the moment, and on the task at hand.

Her soul had become one with the situation, with the room, with the people and with the event.

Her eyes gleamed as she stared into his, feeling the blood suddenly draining over her hands.

Several long moments later, she pulled the knife from Reihmar and held it lightly in her hand. She took a deep breath and looked at Mahran who sat before her in stunned silence. He took the mask, put it over his own face, took a quick breath and returned it to her.

She held it for several long moments, trying to regain proper breathing, but soon realized she needed to hand it back.

She gave the mask back, and motioned to him to take a couple more deep breaths.

They continued, Floreina still sitting atop Reihmar's lifeless body, passing the device back and forth, trying to calm her nerves and collect an inventory. Her medical implant came back with a damage report, analyzing the cuts and bruises across her body. She had a mild concussion, some lung damage, and a broken nose, but no broken bones, and no collapsed brain tissue.

Mahran jerked quickly, dropping the mask to the floor. He snatched the knife from Floreina's hand with his right hand and with his left went up to strike her on the shoulder and push.

Floreina's momentary panic brought her to the slave control menu, but her combat program threw a warning in her way to inform her that Mahran's motion was more likely directed at a target behind her.

She turned to see Martel kneeling and shaking on the carpet, one hand clutching his face and the other holding Floreina's steel baton. He swung in a wide arc, but Floreina fell sideways, off Reihmar. Mahran pushed himself over top of her to drive the knife into Martel's shoulder. Martel

screamed a gagging cry as Mahran twisted the knife, then withdrew it and struck again with a permanent blow.

The baton fell harmlessly to the floor, and a second later, Mahran let the knife drop, and rolled off Floreina. Mahran picked the mask off the carpet and took a deep but quick breath before handing it back to Floreina.

They crawled away and sat beside each other, passing the mask back and forth. After a minute Floreina found the remnants of her other mask and tried to piece it back together, to no avail.

“I still have a backup in the air vent,” Mahran said.

Floreina paused before taking the filter. “We need to vent the gas before the next safety check opens the vent closures and sends this out to the population.”

Mahran rose and started moving toward the main room with the ruptured ceiling.

Floreina forced herself up, feeling aches and pains across her body and followed Mahran.

It took a few extra minutes as a result of needing to share the mask, but Floreina hoisted Mahran up into the air vent and he dropped the mask to her and grabbed a backup. He took several more minutes to vent the gas and put on clothes.

She changed into her backup clothes that she had stashed in the closet, along with body bags and a cleaning droid. She lay on the couch in the main room and focused on her medical implant feedback.

The painkillers were kicking in, the adrenaline was clearing and the array of chemical stimulants were dissipating, leaving Floreina a shell of what she had been a few minutes earlier...

She felt her combat application still roaring with information processing, although behind the scenes, replaying the combat scenario, analyzing every movement and mistake. But she didn't pay much attention, and just sat back and let it do its thing.

Mahran came down and rested on the chair to the side of Floreina for several moments.

“Set up the cleaning system,” Floreina ordered. “I'm sorry, I'm beat—like literally—and I need to rest; otherwise I'd do it myself and let *you* rest, since you did such a superb job today... but, you know... a lady needs her beauty sleep.”

Mahran rose slowly. “Yeah, you sure have been acting like a lady...” he said. “Like a delicate flower.”

Hours later, Floreina knelt next to Otin's neatly wrapped body and stared at the black plastic mass. Feelings contradicted one another. Her body seemed enveloped in aches and pains, yet consumed by the calming pleasure of the automatic pain killers. The fear of being caught contrasted with the joy of suddenly obtained wealth. The slow withdrawal from her combat drugs left her in a strange, calm, distant, contemplative mood.

She poked Otin's face, holding it for a moment, feeling the flesh through the heavy plastic and staring at the vague shape of the man's face. "It's kinda sad," she mused. "There was a mind and soul in this body earlier today... someone who was thinking about stuff and had a list of things that were important to him..."

She lifted Otin's head and dropped it, letting it land with a thud back to the carpet. "Now he's just gone... and nobody cares... not even any records on this station..."

She glanced at the suitcase containing the combat boosters as she had hundreds of times since she had acquired them, and smiled. "I got what I came for."

Mahran sat against the bed, his arms wrapped around his legs, chin resting on his knees. He stared blankly at his master, as though he were as confused as she.

"I can't believe it." He shook his head. "It's over... I was so scared, and now it's almost over... but at the same time... I... killed these people... I don't know what to think... I'm going to be free later today... on my own; to make my own choices... and my family... it's overwhelming... but I fear that I'll miss you..."

Floreina dropped Otin's head to the floor again, and gazed back at her slave, simultaneously entranced, fascinated and saddened.

"You know, Master," Mahran said. "I would never betray you... I know you're our protector, and I wouldn't do anything to stand in the way of that... you've been so good to me... even without the heart detonator, you know you have nothing to worry about."

"Oh, I know," she said.

"I've seen you looking at me strangely lately, like something's wrong... like you don't trust me."

"No, no." Floreina paused, searching for an excuse. "I'm just thinking I'm gonna miss you too."

—————

Refusing the desire to give herself another steroid boost, Floreina wrapped her arms around Reihmar's legs, trying to get a solid grip against the smooth plastic body bag. They had spent six hours dragging the corpses through the air ducts to this third hotel room she had rented for the weekend, and now Floreina somehow expected herself to do a sprint from here to the garbage chute carrying this fat man.

They exited the room and Mahran peered around the corner. They darted forward across the hallway toward the garbage chute as they had twice before, and Mahran threw open the doorway. They ran in, and without a pause opened the chute and shoved the body in.

They left without a word.

But as they turned back into the entryway of the hotel room, a security officer came around the corner of the next hallway.

"Excuse me," he said, approaching them.

Floreina's emotional suppression systems booted up, allowing her only a second of heart aching fear. "What's up?" she asked, cocking her head innocently.

"We've had some reports of strange security activity around this area."

"How so?" Floreina asked.

"Security sensors have somehow gone down along this corridor. I can't get a visual on the cameras from this floor."

"Huh," Floreina exclaimed, shrugging. "I haven't noticed anything."

"Is this your hotel room," he motioned toward the room with the door already half open.

Floreina's implant quickly warned her that the officer was likely trying to coax her into lying. Since she was already opening the door, he already knew the answer.

"Yes," she replied.

"May I come in and have a look around?" he asked.

Her head drew backward questioningly. "No," she replied, immediately thinking of the vent still hanging open, and the millions of ISK worth of drugs sitting just inside. She closed the door.

"Why..." asked the officer. "Is it a problem? I just want to check to see if any of the standard sensors are online."

"I'm sorry." She shook her head. "I have personal items in there."

"That doesn't mean anything to me," he said. "Please. I really need to take a look; it's a matter of security."

Her routines coaxed her along, reminding her that the officer had no legal right to search the room as long as she didn't start shaking or showing other outward signs of nervousness, and the mental blocking from her implants would take care of that. Mahran was the only real risk, so she kept talking to keep the officer distracted.

She shook her head. "Sorry. I'm easily embarrassed, and like I said... very personal items in the room there..." She smiled coyly toward Mahran.

"What happened to your face?" he asked. "You get beaten up?"

"Oh, yeah," she replied. "Got beaten up earlier... some punks tried to mug us."

"Uh, huh..." replied the officer, cocking his head and staring her down. "What's your name?"

"Susiani," Floreina replied.

"If I check the logs for this area, am I going to come across a mugging with your name on it?"

"No sir," she replied. "We didn't report it."

"Uh, huh..." The officer didn't break eye contact. "Your boyfriend here didn't have anything to do with it did he?"

She shook her head. "No, sir."

But the radio on the officer's shoulder buzzed and a voice came over, barely audible to Floreina. "We've got a domestic disturbance in the C-87 section. Sounds like we need someone there pretty quickly."

"Okay, I'll take it," replied the officer. He smiled at Floreina and shot a glare at Mahran. "I'll be coming back in a little while."

She nodded.

They watched him leave. He turned the corner and Floreina felt a shot to her heart as her implants released the blockages preventing her nervousness. She took a deep breath and looked at Mahran who stared back, wide eyed and almost perfectly motionless. "Let's get out of here..."

"Agreed," said Floreina.

After several more hours of crawling and dragging, Mahran asked, "So where did you learn all this about hacking into station systems and finding sellers of capsuleer drugs?"

Floreina unscrewed the connections to the air duct in their original hotel room. "My ex-boyfriend. When we were together he sort of got me started in this kind of thing. It was necessary for him being a Vitoc dealer

on a station to know that kind of stuff... You can get away with dealing Vitoc on a planet's surface where you have open areas without surveillance, but on a station you need to know the security systems and how people are tracked."

"Your ex was a Vitoc dealer?" Mahran asked. "Is he the one you were going to set me up with for my own supply?"

"That's right," she replied. "He's a good man."

The grate fell to the floor and Floreina dragged herself downward, dropping to the chair below. Mahran passed her the booster suitcase, and climbed down a moment later.

Floreina lay for a long time on the bed, her arm wrapped around the boosters. Floreina then used the secure communications console on the desk to call the receptionist at the other hotel and apologize for the hole in the ceiling and transfer a generous amount of ISK for repairs.

A moment later she ordered celebratory room service.

They ate quietly but heartily. Mahran had a distracted look, often staring off into the distance, but at the same time had a gleam in his eye, like a child discovering the world for the first time, and he would come back from his trance to scarf down heaping mouthfuls of his dinner.

As he finished the last of his meal, he finally asked about the thing that was hanging unsaid between them.

"So I can go after this, right?" he asked. "This is it, right? You have what you came for. It's worth more than a thousand of me... so I can go free now."

And Floreina just stared back.

"We can just shake hands and I'll head out, and you will release my brother soon after getting back to the ship..." Mahran stood slowly, staring questioningly.

Floreina shook her head and got up from the table. The implants instinctively began blocking her nervousness and guilt, but she cut them off, seeing no serious risks in this situation.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"No..." Mahran shook his head and backed toward the door.

"Don't—" Floreina started.

"You're not—" stammered Mahran.

"Stop!" she ordered. "Don't take another step toward that door." And she moved toward him, simultaneously opening her control menus.

"No!" His face turned red and his eyes tightened as he cowered away from her. "No, please no!"

"I'm sorry," she said, slowly shaking her head. "I'm so sorry."

She took another step and snapped the control to shut down his nervous system. He gave a brief yelp, and his eyes dilated before snapping shut. His body went limp and he slumped forward into Floreina's waiting arms.

"I'm sorry, Buddy," she said as she gently lowered him to the floor.

Floreina took a deep breath as she punched the code into the hibernation chamber. She did not know how he would react to being deceived, or what kind of arguments he would feel appropriate to make.

The door whirred open and Floreina reached in to give Mahran the injection. His eyes fluttered and finally opened. "Where am I?" he grunted.

"You're back aboard the ship," Floreina replied calmly.

As Mahran dragged himself from deep sleep, he croaked, "I thought you were going to let me go when we were done..."

She gave one last glance around the cargo hold for other crew, and again, saw nobody. "I'm sorry I had to say that to you, Mahran," she told him. "You gave me no choice."

"You lied to me?"

"We are going with our original deal," she stated. "I'm sorry, but you had no right to try and back me into a wall and blackmail me into giving you a better deal. That was unacceptable, and I think you knew it all along."

He hoisted himself up to a sitting position, groaning from the waking pains and weakness. Floreina stood above him, staring down. For a time he said nothing.

"How could you do this to me..."

"I did what needed to be done. I apologize for deceiving you, but you forced me into it; you brought this on yourself."

He crawled from the chamber, dragging himself to a pair of wobbly feet. He stood in just his boxer shorts, his skin glistening with sweat. His muscles trembled. "I trusted you..." he muttered. "I thought you were a good person... I thought you were fair... honest... and you lied to me."

He suddenly seemed to regain strength and his face shot upwards to stare into hers. "You lying whore!" he screamed.

Floreina took a deep breath to quench the sudden anger. "Calm yourself, Mahran," she ordered. "The hibernation is still affecting your mind, so check yourself before you speak, okay Buddy?"

"No," he shook his head, his face turning red and tightening. "You're just like all the others... I trusted you. I thought you cared; that you actually had compassion in that cold Amarrian heart of yours." The breath whistled through his nose as he shouted, the words echoing through the cargo hold. "There's no logic behind what you do; there's only hatred. You aren't protecting us; you're lying to us and exploiting us... just exploiting any way you can, just like any other whore!"

She sighed. "You're treading really close to the edge here, buddy... Remember, I was still planning on honoring our original deal with your brother; don't screw that up too."

"I'm going to inform the authorities," Mahran stated.

She scoffed. "And what exactly do you intend to tell them? How do you plan to contact them? What do you think the overseers are going to do to you when you start accusing a commander of things for which you have no evidence? And what do you think *I* might do to your *family*?" She laughed. He had no intention of doing such a thing, and they both knew it. He was too smart for that.

But in the short run, he was still awakening from the hibernation, and dealing with the typical fragile emotional balance of the Minmatar. He was not quite able to control himself in all respects. "I hate you," he sneered.

Floreina just stared back, but noticed his fist clench from the corner of her eye.

"I hate you!" he screamed. And he raised his fist to his shoulder, his entire body clenching, as though pulling itself apart.

As his fist rose, Floreina's combat programs sprang into action, ready to administer drugs and analyze motions. The slave control menu booted up for quicker access. But Floreina cut off the processes just milliseconds after they came active, leaving them open just in case.

As she started forward to take control of the situation, Mahran's arm clenched, twisted, and pulled backwards, as though fighting the urge to strike. But it didn't matter. Her anger had already overcome her desire to end this peacefully.

With her left hand she grabbed his fist; with her right she made her own and drove it into the side of his face. At the same time her leg curled around his and twisted.

Mahran fell to the floor with a scream and a thud. Floreina allowed herself to fall alongside him, dropping to her knees. Mahran cowered away from her instinctively, like any well-trained Minmatar. She grabbed his wrist and twisted it behind his back. Her other hand moved quickly to his neck and clamped down, her fingernails digging into his flesh.

Her face moved to within centimeters of his cheek. "I try my best to be nice and compassionate. I buy you luxury coupons out of my own pocket. I give you days off. I pad your permanent record with positive statements. I don't think I've ever sent you to punishment for a single thing. I take you out on the station to experience the outside world. I let you talk to me practically however you feel, and I listen to whatever you might want to talk about... and after all these things, this is how you repay me?"

Mahran cried out and struggled.

Floreina clamped down harder and brought her face even closer, to rest her forehead against the side of his head. Mahran fell still, years of conditioning no doubt preventing him from fighting back.

Mahran coughed and choked.

"I do these things because I care about you," she whispered. "I care about you and I love you... and I want us to have a relationship based on friendship... but if you *ever* raise your fist to me again, you will find my strategies rapidly changing."

"I just—" he started.

"Shut up," she said. "You need to remember your place. And that's partly my fault, and I apologize for giving you any misimpressions about what our relationship might be, and I apologize if I allowed you to feel like more of a person than you really are, but I thought you could behave, and be mature about it, and appreciate the things I've done for you. But instead you tried to back me against a wall after I had already moved forward with my plans, merely because you thought you had some kind of leverage, and you thought you could use my compassion against me. Well, that's not how it works in these relationships. I am the Amarrian and you are the Minmatar. I make the deals, not you. The deals I *choose* to make are the valid deals, and none other."

Mahran shuddered and his face dropped to the floor.

“You are my property; and you will remain my property until I decide that it is time for a change. Is that clear?”

She paused for his response. “Is that clear?” she repeated.

“Yes,” he choked.

“Now I’m going to give you a couple days off,” she told him. “You do whatever you want for these two days, but while you are doing it, I want you to think about who you are and why you’re here and what your loyalties are. You think about why God put you in New Eden, and what he expects of you and your relationships with your masters and the rest of the crew of this ship.”

Floreina released him and stood. She stared for a long time at the Minmatar curled on the floor before her. He began sobbing, his face clenched tight; but even so, she continued to one final statement. “You crossed the line when you tried to manipulate me. I trust it won’t happen again.”

She stepped over him and walked away.

But as she walked she had a strange urge, and found herself turning around. She stopped behind a crate, and rested against it to stare back at Mahran.

She fell into a trance as she watched him, his cries seeming to seep past the normal analytical receptors of her brain toward something deeper.

Mahran cried on and on, whimpering, his face lying flat against the floor and his body curled like a fetus... as though his life truly meant something...

And Floreina simply stood and watched from a distance, transfixed on the emotion being displayed, and thought about their relationship.

She had told him that she loved him. She’d never said that about a slave before, and it had just sort of come out all of a sudden, and while she saw it as part of her strategy, she realized that in no way was it a lie.

She loved him; and the tears he cried now, and the drama they faced together, only served to solidify her feelings. She wanted to take him in her arms like a mother comforting a child, to kiss his bruises and make everything all better. But she held herself back from interfering with his learning process. This was all for his own good.

Floreina watched and contemplated, entranced by the depth and beauty of the emotion, and the sense of life that lay before her on the floor of the cargo bay. His sobs carried through to her soul, as though he

were a real person... a character with complexity of mind and emotion; a character capable of passion and compassion and obsession and lust, pain, anguish, loss... a beautiful character with ups, downs and the full range of human and animal emotion... a creation of God... a work of art... a character capable of loving and being loved...

...Floreina watched...

... and this wonderful creation belonged to her. Her prized possession: to love, to cherish and to do with as she pleased.

This was love... in just one of its countless forms.

"Ahoy, Viotro," Floreina said. "Are you awake and around?"

"Hello there!" he said. "You're on a local connection? What brings you to my part of the station?"

"I just wanted to come and see you," she said. "I thought maybe we could go out dancing or something..."

"Um... okay," he replied.

"You hanging out by yourself right now?" she asked.

"Uh... yeah I'm alone."

"Excellent. I can be at your door in fifteen minutes, maybe a half hour depending on transport traffic."

"Great. I'm excited to see you."

Floreina made her way cautiously but quickly from the transport pod from her ship and slipped aboard another cross-station transport that would take her near her ex-lover's apartment.

She held the suitcase tightly to her chest, trying her best to appear casual.

Finally she arrived at Viotro's door and he let her in, taking a quick glance at her suitcase, then a much longer look at Floreina in her civilian clothes. His eyes wandered casually past the Amarrian officer sidearm strapped to her thigh and up past her shorts to the blood red dress hanging flauntingly from her shoulders.

"You're beautiful as always." He smiled and held out a hand.

Mildly offended, she ignored the hand and opened her arms to take him in a tight embrace, holding for several long moments before kissing his cheek. "Check this out," she said, pulling away. She set the suitcase on his coffee table, looking down the hallway. "Is anyone else here?"

"No," he shook his head curiously.

She opened the top and Viotro peered in. "I knew this wasn't just because you wanted to see me." His eyes widened as the nature of the package occurred to him. "The boosters?" He exclaimed. "I thought you were joking when you told me about this."

"So did I," she replied.

He put a hand to his head. A moment later he collected himself and flipped the switch to unlock the cargo, slowly slid the booster from its protective housing and held it delicately in his hands. "You actually managed to do it..." He shook his head and chuckled in amazement. "And you carried it across the station like it's a sack lunch..."

"So can you sell it for me?"

He laughed, then sighed, as he gently guided the booster back into the slot. "Depends on the price, I suppose, and the time frame. I've never dealt with anything like this before. You know me, Babe, I deal in Vitoc mostly and if the cops come for me I claim to be a peaceful abolitionist just supplying the poor escaped slaves with the medicine they need to survive."

"But you know people who make runs to low security space for these types of things..."

"And they would want to charge me a huge cut for their services. How much were you looking to get for this?"

"One million even," she replied.

His eyes widened. "That's all you expect?"

"So that you can afford to be careful and find a safe buyer, and you can keep the rest of the profit for yourself. I know how difficult it is to get out of high security space, so I'm looking for a safe deal through someone I trust. So what do you say, can you take it off my hands?"

"I don't have anything close to a million ISK," he laughed.

"But you can sell it for a lot more and get me the money at a later date?"

"You'll trust me with that?" he asked.

She nodded.

Then he looked up suddenly. "I thought you were getting two of them..."

She shrugged. "I have some ideas for the other..."

He shook his head. "You know I love you..." He stared at the case. "I can give you twenty five thousand right now out of my pocket. That's all I can offer until I can find a buyer, which might take months."

"That can work," she replied. "Twenty five thousand can get me most of the implant upgrades I've been hoping for. I'm also going to

be needing Vitoc services for another slave, as well as counseling to get him adjusted to the outside world.”

He nodded. “That’s more along my normal line of work.” And he stared at the booster in the case.

“So do you still want to go out dancing tonight?” she asked.

“No,” he replied. “I’d love to go to the club with you, but not with this thing sitting in my house. I’m gonna take tonight to figure out how to deal with this.”

Floreina glanced at the classic Scriptures quote engraved above the door to the training section. *Slaves, obey your mortal masters with deep respect and fear. Serve them sincerely as you would serve New Eden Herself.*

Floreina took a deep breath, not knowing why she should be nervous.

She connected to the system as she walked, scanning the video feeds to find Mahran speaking in a conference room to a group of engineering slaves.

“...I understand that things get hectic,” he was saying. “But you need to stop and report any problems you find. I know that we are all on strict timetables, but if there’s a problem, then a report needs to be filed immediately—” He looked up at Floreina as she entered. “Master—”

She waved him on. “Go ahead; I can wait.”

“I was just finishing up.” He looked back at the crew. “Just remember that our masters aren’t ordering us to complete a job; they’re ordering us to make our strongest and most intelligent attempt at completing the job, while remembering that the ship as a whole is our top priority. As long as we put everything we have into it, always remain transparent, and never back down from a challenge, then we have nothing to be ashamed of. If we can’t do it after all that, then it’s our master’s fault for putting us here...” He smiled at Floreina. “...but you might not want to say it like that...” He waved them off and the slaves began rising to move swiftly from the conference room, most of them saluting as they passed.

Mahran came to the back of the room and saluted. “Master Floreina...”

“I saw that you had some free time,” she said. “We should chat...” And she motioned toward the exit.

He nodded.

They walked, taking a lift toward the higher, cleaner decks.

“Master Floreina, I owe you an apology,” Mahran said as soon as they were alone, heading toward a vacant seating area in the forward observation lounge.

“Well, that’s okay,” she replied. “Because I owe you an apology first... because I know I didn’t handle that situation very well. I should have laid it out for you when you first came to me. I should have told you the truth and explained to you that it was unacceptable, but instead I was afraid that you would act irrationally, so I deceived you... and that was wrong of me, so I apologize.”

Mahran smiled and took a sudden breath. “Thank you, Master Floreina. And I apologize too... for everything you already know about... you were right... and I knew it all along... I’m sorry about everything I said.”

“It’s in the past,” she replied. “Let’s forget about it now, and go back to the way things were before.”

“Deal.” He nodded.

“I got your brother all situated on the outside,” she told him. “I’m sure he’ll send a letter for you in a few days.”

He took a deep breath. “Thank you, Master. I honestly appreciate that.” But he closed his eyes and smiled only momentarily.

“Is something else wrong?” Floreina asked.

Mahran turned toward the window. A swirling orange gas giant loomed before them. “A few more slaves died yesterday,” he said.

“How’s that?” she asked. “I just got back from the station.”

“The captain ordered them into the warp drive plasma chamber for standard cleaning and diagnostic procedures before all the plasma had been drained. They got radiation sickness and died a few hours later.”

“Oh,” Floreina replied. “I don’t understand... how could they not have known...”

“The engineering commander tried to talk her out of it, apparently, so it sounds like they did know about the plasma... sounded like Allihence didn’t care... or something... I’m not really sure...” He leaned his head against the window, his eyes drooping. “...it just made me think about how ungrateful I was... and made me want to apologize, so I’m glad you came down this morning.”

“Well,” Floreina replied. “I’m glad you’re not mad anymore... because I might have more special work for you...”

“Okay, I’m going to remove the implant now and it’s going to fall away from your consciousness. It’s going to seem very strange for a minute.”

All she heard before the shift of consciousness was a subtle pop as the surgeon disconnected her personal computer. Her vision snapped white. The floor zoomed and descended, and all she could think of was the movement and texture of the tiles as she stared over the end of the operating table.

She came back to recognize a sudden void. Her mind was a wandering wave of disconnected thoughts and pointless emotions without a processor to help organize, record priorities and memories, maintain goals, manage self-doubt, and illuminate self-deceptions.

“How do you feel?” asked the doctor.

“Well...” she replied. “I can still think and talk... it’s been a long time since I felt this... opened up...”

“That’s normal. As long as you can talk and still understand what’s going on...”

“It feels like when I was a kid...”

“Are you ready for the upgrade?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Absolutely.”

She vaguely felt the computer slipping into its slot though the numbness at the back of her head. A moment later she felt the connections, vaguely at first, like a thought you can’t quite grasp or a distant emotion from a forgotten movie. But after several seconds it grew into a wave of inexplicable emotion, agony and joy, humiliation and pride, success and defeat, melding into one mysteriously unique sensation.

A soft moan crackled pleasurably through her vocal cords and her toes curled uncontrollably.

The implant played with her connections, sending waves of test data; changing, experimenting and enhancing with every passing millisecond. The sensations continued to grow and Floreina floated away into the moment and allowed the implant’s operating system to grow clearer in her mind. For a long while, she simply felt the systems as they communicated with her, the new options and applications presenting themselves one by one as they came online. She grinned as the sensations became more precise, quickly surpassing the capacity and complexity of her old implant.

“Everything processing?” the doctor asked.

“I think so,” she replied. “Impressive...”

“Oh, yes, a premium system,” said the doctor. “The tests are coming back, and looks like the implant's calling everything okay from its end. If you're confident, then we can just give it a few more minutes to make sure there's no connectivity issues before sealing the skin. Then we begin the software upgrades.”

Floreina heard the doctor selecting options on his computer screen, monitoring the mental embedding process through a direct connection.

“Looks like you've got a list of software to install today,” said the surgeon. “This is going to take a few hours... full operating system upgrade, hand-to-hand combat routines, 3-D environmental tactical processing, character and movement analyzation... lie detector... background event processing, conversational assistant, structural decision making, automated thought recording, new medical interface, rear-camera interface... and a personal firearm targeting system.”

...And of course, the programs the doctor did not know about such as the hacking modules, code decryptors and liar's assistant. That software would be purchased from a less reputable dealer.

The doctor took a deep breath. “That's quite a list... I also see a muscular nanite interfacing system? You planning on getting muscular nanite enhancements?”

“Yup,” she confirmed. The interface system wouldn't be much good without them, she added silently.

“You planning on getting in a lot of fights?” he asked.

“I like to keep my options open,” she replied.

“I see that you've specified that everything be fully compatible with pod technology. You planning on becoming a capsuleer any time soon?”

“Like I said, I like to keep my options open.”

The crosshairs flashed, one after another, paper thin, yet clearly visible. The targeting routine constantly practiced calculating distance and trajectory, bouncing from one head to another as she walked toward her quarters.

Meanwhile she received constant information and analyzations of every body that walked into her view... estimated weight, strength potential, and level of current focus. The combat assistant could even give estimates of training levels, based on how the subjects carried themselves, or search for concealed weapons based on clothing bulges.

For weeks her mind had been a constant flurry of system testing. Even now, as she punched the code into her hatch, the sweat-soaked t-shirt clinging to her back after her martial arts training, her combat systems were still comparing notes.

And then a flash caught her attention; a notification through her remote mental connection. Her wallet had been updated. She made a connection to the financial readout, and entered her password to check her balance.

He had told her it would take months, and it had only been six weeks. She felt a weight lifting, but deep down she had known he would come through for her.

Viotro was Amarrian and Amarrian loyalties ran deep.

She gazed at the numbers in her mind. One million ISK.

Floreina dragged herself hand-over-hand through an emergency access tube near the bridge, toward a little-known section behind the main pod interface control room, just ten meters behind Captain Allihence's pod. The tube climbed at a forty-five degree angle, which made for more difficult movement than the air vents on the station. However, Floreina was able to use the opportunity to experiment with the controls for the nanites stationed throughout her muscles, providing tendon strengthening and oxygen processing. It almost seemed as though she could feel them, like a million tiny tingles throughout her body.

She pulled herself upward, playing with the nanite settings, tweaking them to give her just the right level of assistance to strengthen instead of overpower.

But she could practice her cybernetic improvements later she decided as she arrived at her destination: a small computer access panel built into the side of the crawlway. She propped her feet against a ridge and leaned against the incline to look up at the access panel.

Just for a moment as she removed the panel, she thought back to her slave's attempt to kiss her in the other access tube months earlier. The visions that had gone through her head at that moment were probably nothing like Mahran had intended; he knew nothing of suburban home ownership or raising children in a house with a yard, in a situation where you need to worry more about education and happiness than you do about dying in a fire. Mahran knew little or nothing of these peaceful pockets in New Eden, nor the vast difference of human feelings that could be experienced there. He would never guess that Floreina

imagined herself there from time to time, a completely different person; a wife and mother instead of a career-driven gunnery commander.

Viotro had asked her to marry him, suggesting the same possibility... a three bedroom house in suburbia on one of the thousands of terraformed worlds.

No one would have guessed that such a life had been a real possibility.

And now she had the option of starting over. She could retire tomorrow if she wanted... lead a comfortable life...

So why was she now crawling through a secret access tube toward the central pod-interface controls with the intention of exploring options of sabotage?

She could walk away from it all... to a land of peace and comfort and safety... and as one portion of her mind considered the idea, and even longed for it, the part of her that continued unscrewing the access panel and preparing hacking algorithms considered it an eloquent but ironic joke.

It drifted from her mind as she pulled the linkage cable from the access panel and plugged it into her head.

She anchored her feet in place for a long wait as the hacking routines went to work.

She passed the time by watching recordings collected from her senses, mostly old glimpses of her dad. The recordings only went back to her fourteenth year when she'd had her first visual processing chips installed. Records before that were third-person.

In the end, she clung to the inside of the tube for nearly two hours before finally gaining access. She crawled to the end of the corridor and removed an access hatchway to drop into a dark control room.

The instruments, being of Ishukone construction, looked foreign at first, and even the construction materials were much darker than the soft gold of the rest of the ship.

But while the physical controls and readouts were relatively foreign, the mental connections would certainly have standardized outputs. She wasted little time before plugging herself in.

She poured through ship schematics, her specific target being the five booster slots and their chemical dispersal procedures. However, the booster slots were not her only reason for being here. She also had a very non-specific purpose of finding out more information about Alliance and her Abaddon... perhaps something to be used against her...

or perhaps the exact opposite, something to show her that Allihence was not worthy of sabotage and vengeance after all.

As she scanned blueprints, something caught her eye, something large and out of place; a room, located several bulkheads behind the back of the slave barracks, tucked below the engine core, but well shielded from warp drive radiation. Seats for about fifty people surrounded a cage structure on a slightly raised stage. Access was available only through a small hatch on the outside of the ship.

So Floreina halted her scan for the entry systems for Allihence's booster slots and began exploring anything she could find around the strange mini-arena, finally finding some security feeds in a recycle bin that someone had forgotten to permanently delete.

She opened a video file and was struck with a hardening in her stomach. She gagged and stumbled forward, regurgitating a tiny chunk into her mouth, and felt the data line pull tight, tugging at her implant.

Her consciousness flashed, but she caught herself. The connection popped its safety release and detached.

The emotional suppressants kicked on a few hundred milliseconds too late, and despite the revulsion, she flipped them off again. She spit angrily and collected herself.

Floreina plugged back in and went straight to the same video, and watched again as a man hung in the middle of the cage by a thin line around his neck. Desperately he clung to the wire with both hands as he kicked frantically at another man, also hanging in the same predicament, just a meter away.

And people were watching, twenty or thirty of them, cheering for one man or the other. Floreina scanned the crowd, her facial recognition placing faces to names.

Among the crowd were several of her fellow officers. The others were mostly wealthy blueprint salesmen or slave dealers. One look at the people saw that the two victims were Minmatar and every one of the spectators were Amarrian.

She watched as the two fought to the death, the winner was cut down, and as he lay on the floor, his opponent was dragged off, the blood streaking across the floor. The winner was showered with flower petals, and beautiful women fed him nutrient water and lathered cream upon his neck. Allihence spoke over the loudspeakers, congratulating, and assuring that he would be rewarded for his success with custom dinners, high quality Vitoc, and prostitutes. "For one month," continued the

Captain. "then next month, we do this all over again with a different theme."

But a part of Floreina was not horrified. Instead it seemed like some kind of joke. This couldn't be real. It was far too cliché. This was what so many abolitionist groups were screaming about, and they had always seemed insane and delusional. Surely this must be some kind of fraud meant to slander Allihence or the Amarrian people. The abolitionist groups would stop at nothing, even falsifying evidence...

But the evidence was buried so deep within the ship's core computer system... if terrorists had that kind of access there would have been much greater consequences.

So she explored, searching the system recycle bins, finding another video of a slave on display in the cage, devoured by a slaver hound, as well as other bits of information, such as visitor lists.

If Floreina was searching for a blackmail avenue or an excuse for mutiny, it looked like she had found it.

"You're out of your mind, Floreina."

"I just want to talk to them," she replied.

"These are not people you want to get involved with," Viotro insisted. "They're ruthless... at least against their enemies, as long as they can justify it, and any kind of slavery is going to seem like justification to them."

"Are you worried I'll get you into trouble?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Yeah, that too. For sure."

"You think I'll give away your position within the trade? I've got an implant that can help me from saying anything stupid. We won't even talk about you." She stared at her ex, smiling, sitting attentively on the front of his couch in her pink flowered sundress.

"You're talking about mutiny here?" he shook his head. "Am I understanding this correctly?"

"Yeah... sort of... like a secret mutiny."

He put his head in his hands and stared at the floor. "And you want to enlist the help of the abolitionist group... I think you need to stop and think long and hard about this."

"I already have." She leaned back, relaxing into the cushions. "I came to the conclusion that I need more information. I'm going to visit the so-called booster modification expert, and see what kind of technical

advisor he would make. I've met with a couple trustworthy Amarrian neuro surgeons. But even still, it's all just speculation at this point."

He shook his head. "I can't run any risk of them finding out where my loyalties lie."

"Aren't you retiring now?"

"These people can be vicious, and if they find out I've been working for the Amarrian slave trade, they'll hunt me down... the work dealers like me do is very important to managing escaped slaves and the Amarrian public image. Exposing me could expose others as well."

"I know," she assured him. "But I won't put any of that in danger."

"No... I think I'm going to need to refuse this request. I don't want to see you get hurt."

She scoffed. "I don't believe this... tell me again, Viotro, how is it that you can afford to retire? Buying a half a million ISK home with *cash*? How much did you make for yourself off the booster?"

He sighed. "Three million after paying the mule and mercenaries."

"And I got, what?... one million. If you're not going to do a simple favor for me, maybe I should ask you for another million so we can split the profit, seeing as how I put in just as much risk as you did..."

He groaned for a long second, but finally conceded. "Fine. Okay, I'll tell you how to contact them, but I'm gonna cry if they shoot you in the head. They'll know who you are before you get in the door."

"I know," she said. "Thank you, honey." She hugged him. "Do you still want to go out dancing tonight?"

He sighed a long breath, then seemed to shift his frame of mind. His face brightened and he looked up. "Yeah, sure. Let me get dressed first."

"I want to change my outfit before we go too," she agreed.

He stood, and as he walked around the coffee table, he said, "You know, we could always just get married and be wealthy real estate investors... forget all this espionage and drug dealing... maybe have a couple kids..."

"Tempting," she replied. "But no."

"Please, Master Floreina," said Mahran as he cradled a copy of The Scriptures against his chest. "I really don't want to do this."

"I'm sorry Little Buddy," Floreina replied as she adjusted her hair in the hotel room's bathroom mirror. "But your wants and desires

aren't really a factor here. Later tonight we'll go out on the town and I'll put your desires first and let you choose whatever you want to do, but right now you need to do this for me."

"Master, I need to tell you something before we go in to talk to these people."

"What's that?"

"I have a dark side... that I don't normally show you... that makes me... question things..."

Within moments of entering the tiny novelty shop, Floreina found herself staring down the barrel of a standard issue carbine projectile pistol. The red beam of the laser sight distorted in her vision as it pointed between her eyes. A Minmatar named Seilin in a suit and tie glared at her from behind the weapon.

"Come on in, Mahran," she said, feeling her dress being lifted and her sidearm removed from the holster on her thigh. "The locals are nice and friendly."

Mahran stepped into the room and groaned as he saw the man with the gun upon his master, and several other men moving toward them, weapons drawn.

Floreina felt a hand clamp around her neck. Seilin pushed her against the wall, holding his weapon at length. "What gives you the nerve to show up here, Floreina?"

"I'm looking for a gift for my aunt," she joked with a smile.

"Please don't hurt her," Mahran said. "She hasn't done anything to you..."

Immediately one of the other Minmatar, named Fielno, turned to Mahran, slamming the shop door, pushing him against it. He wore a generic janitorial utility suit and stood nearly as tall as Mahran. "She has actually hurt us very much," he said, carefully holding his own weapon in Mahran's face. "Who are you, sir? We don't see any record of you in the census database..."

"I'm her slave," said Mahran.

Fielno nodded, but otherwise didn't move. "Forgive me for not immediately trusting you... the alterations make you look quite Amarrian."

"Thank you," he replied.

"That wasn't a compliment," he growled.

Floreina's nanites powered on to help reinforce the tendons in her neck and vocal chords. "I have a mutually beneficial proposition."

"How stupid do you have to be to come here?" asked Seilin. "And to bring your slave..."

"It might seem stupid..." she started, muscling the words past his hands. "But think about it... there's nothing you can do about it." She gave a warm smile.

"Floreina... You've assisted in the murder of my people."

"And you've assisted in the murder of *my* people," Floreina replied. "...and the desecration of my culture... the rape of our spirituality... but that's not my concern at this time..."

"You've shot down our comrades who merely wanted to provide liberty—"

"I only assisted in the attack of terrorists," Floreina shot back. "And only under orders... Everything I do is legal... unlike yourselves... but that holds no relevance to my being here..."

Seilin pushed suddenly and twisted. She put her hands on his, to pry some breathing space, and began feeling light headed.

Marteen, identified as the head abolitionist, stood behind them, beside a fourth Minmatar named Roben.

"Please don't hurt her!" Mahran repeated. "I'm innocent in all of this—we're linked and I'll die too if you do anything—"

"Besides the legal penalties, and the standard vengeance from my captain," Floreina wheezed. "You've got nothing; so let's put the weapons down and act like adults. I have a reason for being here which you might find interesting, if we can just get past your blind hatred and false intimidations. We all know you won't kill an Amarrian officer and an innocent Minmatar right here in a public shop. You're not that stupid."

"We can report you to the authorities—"

"Don't think I don't have my bases covered, gentlemen... I can burst his heart in a moment's thought, and all you'll have is the blood of my friend on your hands, so can we just calm down and talk like adults?"

The hand loosened, but still the four men held their ground.

"You've gotta learn there's a time and place to pull guns on people," Floreina said. "And you need to think about what you have to gain and what you have to lose when you do so... and who you're up against. Before you can control others, gentlemen, you must learn to control yourselves."

“What’s your proposal?” asked Marteen.

“I have the potential for an inside job. My captain is mistreating slaves and I want it to stop.”

“Why should we trust you?”

“Well,” she replied. “We’re not getting off to a good start... but if you would put the weapons down we could chat... or you could just kill us and deal with the consequences...” She shrugged questioningly at the men, and finally noticed their weapons slowly lowering.

She waited for several long seconds as they built up the courage to let their guard down. Floreina rubbed her neck as her nanite muscular reinforcements began to relax.

The left strap of her dress fell to dangle from her upper chest, though the rest of the outfit held tight. “You broke my dress...” She tossed the strap back over her shoulder. She looked back, the grime from the wall streaked noticeably across the white material. She felt her neck throbbing and shot a quick glare at Seilin, but stopped herself, recognizing that despite everything she still needed to be cordial.

“I apologize,” grunted Seilin, insincerely.

“No, no,” she replied. “It’s fine. I’m the idiot who wore a white dress, knowing what might happen.”

“It makes you look sweet and innocent...” he told her. “in an artificial sort of way.”

“This is your slave?” Marteen asked, motioning toward Mahran.

“I am his guardian, yes.” She nodded. “Shall we go someplace more private and secure?”

The four men cautiously brought them to a small office in the back of the store. Fielno and Roben stood back, near the wall, their weapons still drawn, but pointing at the floor. Marteen sat at the main seat behind the desk and Seilin sat in another smaller chair behind him.

Floreina removed a holoreel projector from her pack and placed it on the desk. “I have something to show you.” Almost immediately she began projecting the images of the two slaves hanging in the middle of the arena, fighting for their lives, with her fellow Amarrians gathered around, laughing and cheering.

The abolitionists watched calmly, seemingly unfazed. As her demonstration concluded, Marteen commented, “I suppose that’s a little more cruel than most of the ones we see... not too fun to watch though... I prefer the ones with the lions or where they have weapons and can run around in the cage...”

Floreina's eyes rose. "You don't find this sick and horrifying?" she asked. Wouldn't that be just like a Minmatar to not see the moral implications...

Marteen laughed. "The horror of it is sort of a given, Floreina, but when you see this kind of thing all the time, you sort of become accustomed to it. Why exactly do you think we do what we do?"

"Oh..." She paused, needing to stop to reevaluate. She checked her character analyzations, which estimated that the man was being open about his feelings. She had always assumed stories of slave torture were mythical creations of abolitionist propagandists. But now, somehow, it seemed realistic. "This is common, you say?" she asked.

Marteen shrugged. "...depends on your definition of common. We think maybe one out of every ten thousand slaves is subjected to this kind of treatment. Some estimate it as being much lower, some say it's higher, but there's no way to tell, since we don't know how many ships and outposts have arenas, we don't know how often they're used, and we don't know how many slaves there are in New Eden, so it's all guesswork. But one way or the other, this is all just another example of the cruelty of your people."

Floreina shook her head, and jabbed an angry finger at the holoreel. "This does not represent my feelings in any way. I am not a part of this."

Seilin nodded, pulling his chair closer to the desk to sit beside Marteen. "Yes, you are. You assist your captain. You fire weapons at abolitionists. You manage slaves on board your ship. You are contributing to a culture that allows this type of thing to occur."

"This isn't my culture," Floreina said. "If anything it's groups like yours that force us to stay secretive, which creates the atmosphere that allows this type of thing to happen."

The four abolitionists stared back silently. Mahran sat next to Floreina, his hands in his lap calmly looking forward and listening.

"You're going to blame this on us?" Seilin asked, folding his arms and leaning back in his chair.

"No," she shook her head. "I'm sorry... but you can't blame me either. I don't support this, and I've never supported this."

Seilin and Marteen shrugged minutely. "So why are you here?" Marteen asked. "You have some kind of idea to make this stop?"

"I have access to a modified booster," she told them.

Marteen shrugged in question.

"I can implant the booster in Allihence's capsule, but instead of injecting the proper drug, it will administer a sedative that can cut off the mental connections between Allihence and the computer system."

Marteen shrugged again, impatiently. "So what then? You've got an incapacitated ship... in theory... We'd be able to dock with an escape hatch, unload slaves, and sure we'd rescue a few thousand, but then Allihence would regain control and seek vengeance. She's worth five billion ISK and would have no problem destroying the lives of every one of us."

"Not if we kill her," Floreina pointed out.

Marteen chuckled. "Kill a capsuleer? Ever heard of cloning technology?"

"It can be done," Floreina replied. "Capsules aren't perfect, despite what Ishukone and the pod pilots want you to think. They're not as immortal as they would have us believe."

Marteen cocked his head and sighed skeptically.

"The capsule relies on a very precise computer algorithm to deliver a lethal injection at the exact moment of the brain scan to allow for a clone transplant. If we can disrupt that process in any way, and prevent the safety signals from being transmitted, we've got a dead capsuleer... a permanently dead capsuleer."

"How exactly do you propose we avoid the backlash from CONCORD and from Allihence's allies?" Marteen asked.

"I have my own implant with an identification and personality system designed to match the captain's. I'll connect into her pod as though I were Allihence herself. I then tell the crew that everything's okay; we just had some minor connectivity malfunctions, and at that point, I *become* captain Allihence. Anyone suspecting anything won't be able to do anything about it."

"Sounds like a fantasy," Seilin growled, his fingers tapping impatiently on the desk.

"And what do you need us for?" asked Marteen.

"Well..." Floreina looked down as her dress strap fell from her shoulder. "that's where it gets a little more complicated. An unexpected ambush by a superior gang is likely to bring every officer into mental communion. That will allow me to sabotage everyone and lock them out simultaneously." She smiled and pulled the strap back over her shoulder.

"You want us to attack your ship?"

She nodded as she watched Marteen searching a drawer in his desk. "And just hold it down with lots of electronic warfare to confuse their systems and make it easier to shut down all their communications and give me time to make the switch into Allihence's pod. You have access to EWAR drones and cruisers?"

Marteen nodded as he handed Floreina a safety pin.

She grinned and winked at him, then turned her back to Mahran. "Can you pin my strap?" she asked.

Mahran carefully pinned the strap to the top of her dress. "Can I stop you for a second, Master Floreina?" he asked.

"Of course," she replied. "You have something to add?"

"Do you see Seilin's fingers tapping on the table?" he asked.

She looked down, just in time to see the tapping cease.

"He's been trying to communicate with me for several minutes—"

Seilin sighed and put his head in his hands. "Can't you see they're just exploiting you?"

"I need to protect myself," Mahran explained flatly.

"Their society is based on hatred..."

"No, it's not," Mahran said.

"They lie to you about everything and simply take—"

"Okay, stop," Floreina ordered.

"They aren't protecting you. They have no intention of protecting you from anything. It's a lie designed to exploit you..."

Floreina put a hand across Mahran's chest and opened her slave control mechanisms. She triggered the command to shut down his nervous system, and he fell forward, held up by Floreina's arm, his eyes dropping into blankness.

"Please," Floreina started. "I'd like to ask you to have some respect for my property and not feed him ruthless propaganda."

"Respect?" Seilin replied, his voice rising. "What about the respect for him as a human being? You just turned him off like a toy—"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand... it's like sending a child to bed..." She glanced at Roben and Fielno who stood at the edges of the room, their weapons still drawn. "If you want to discuss politics, we can lay Mahran on the floor and we can debate all night."

Seilin shook his head and snorted.

"That's okay..." Marteen patted Seilin on the shoulder. "We've worked inside jobs with Amarrians before... the commander here isn't

all that different. She's just gonna take a little more time to come around..."

"Allow me to pay for your dress," Seilin offered, speaking in an empty monotone, pulling out a monetary transfer pad.

"No, no" Floreina replied, waving him off. "I knew what I was getting into."

They headed out to the front shop. "Would you care for a teddy bear?" asked Marteen, motioning toward a wall of oversized plush bears.

She shook her head. "I don't want to impose—"

"No, no," he replied. "It's better that you walk out like you purchased something."

"Ah." She turned to Mahran. "Why don't you pick something out for yourself?" she said.

He looked at the various novelty gadgets, figurines and stuffed animals. He shrugged. "Why don't you grab yourself a bear, Master?"

She took a minute to pick out a silver bear with a pink bow and a tongue sticking playfully from its mouth. She stuffed it under her arm and turned back toward the abolitionists. "Well, it's been a pleasure, gentlemen. Thank you for the hospitality and the bear..."

Fielno handed back her sidearm, and she checked it quickly before slipping it into the holster under her dress.

They exited the shop to walk into the street. Floreina glanced around to see the various Minmatars walking and talking and going about their business.

"Can we get out of this part of the station?" Mahran asked quietly, glancing around, seeming to notice the racial density.

They moved down the street, as Floreina's security processes kept an analyzing eye on the individuals loitering on the street corners.

"What do you wanna do tonight?" Floreina asked. "Hit the dance clubs? I'll need to go back to the hotel and get changed..."

"Can we just go to the room and have something to eat and go to bed... maybe read some Scriptures or watch a holoreel?"

"Is there something wrong?" Floreina asked. "You nervous about getting a real computer interface in your brain?"

"I fear for my life," he replied. "It's too dangerous out here, and it gets worse every time... I'm scared of what we're doing, Master."

“Oh, yes...” Floreina laughed. “That’s called living.” She stopped to stand in the middle of a four way pedestrian intersection. Mahran glanced in the direction of their hotel, ten or twelve blocks away, clearly wishing to continue moving out of the Minmatar ghetto. Floreina put a hand on his shoulder.

“God doesn’t want us to just live our lives...” she told him. “To grow old and get fat watching holoreels... He wants us to live our lives to the fullest... to take life by the balls and tug with all our might... because there’s trillions of souls just like you and me wandering New Eden, and we’re all lost... we’re all just living and dying... living and dying... and whether you and I live or die is no more important than it is for anyone else... life is cheap... You can call it sad, or wrong, but it’s a fact.”

Floreina felt her security process lighting up as a particular Minmatar caught her attention from the camera implanted in the back of her neck. A man sat behind them on the porch of a tavern, watching intently. He was a Minmatar by the name of Kielobe, with suspected ties to abolitionist groups, as reported by her facial recognition algorithm. He also had several instances of anger management problems, most dealing with Amarrians.

She adjusted her hair to be sure her rear camera had a clear view.

“But you can get used to the cheapness of life... and even learn to love it,” she continued. “Sometimes you need to embrace the dark side, because it holds valuable experiences... our Lord exists in the darkness as much as the light...”

“Can I ask you something, Master Floreina, with an assurance you won’t get mad?”

She cocked her head. “What’s that?”

“Do you ever take time to wonder what might be going through my mind?” He paused momentarily. “To imagine what it feels like to have an explosive attached to your heart? To know that you can blow it at any time... that I have to go around a station knowing that the gap between my life and death is as short as a security agent asking to see identification?”

She laughed. “You’re exaggerating—” She transferred the teddy bear to her left arm to give better access to her weapon, and continued watching the man on the porch.

She noticed the man check something under his coat, and rise to his feet.

“Perhaps, but just stop and imagine it from my perspective.”

She put a hand to the side of his head. "Look, Buddy, I'm sorry it has to be like this... New Eden is a harsh world, and all you can do is claw your way to the top by any means necessary, or die trying."

Kielobe began moving cautiously toward them, a hand kept steady under his coat.

Floreina waited only a couple moments before taking a hand to her side. Slowly lifting her dress, she showed the man the sidearm strapped to her thigh. She rested the fabric atop the holster and placed a hand on the weapon.

He took several more steps, each one slower than the previous. He sped up again, turning slightly, as though this had been his chosen path all along and walked past them down the street.

Floreina pulled away from her slave, took his arm in hers and started walking again. "Come on, Buddy," she said. "What do you say we hit the dance club?"

Karleen's hand's moved quickly to cover her mouth as she peered at the holoreel. "Oh, my—" she started. "That's disgusting... why are you showing me this? These aren't our slaves, right?"

"This occurred on board our ship," Floreina told her.

Karleen flipped off the holoreel. "I don't want to see any more... why did you show me this, Floreina?"

"This is what our captain does with her spare time... did you have any idea this kind of thing was going on?"

She shook her head. "How often does this happen?"

"They vary the schedule. It comes out to about once every two months on board this ship, but it seems as though they play recordings of other similar challenges in other arenas before the live event, so this is a widely organized thing."

"So how many are they actually killing in these competitions?" asked Karleen, her chin resting in her hands on her desk.

"There's about a dozen actual slave deaths per year... I have no idea about the other locations."

Karleen's eyes brightened slightly. "Oh... well that's less than we lose through accidents and damage control... that's barely more than we lose through old age... and these are slaves that severely misbehaved? Like escape attempts?"

"Well, yes..." Floreina started, "but it's the principle of the thing... this kind of thing serves no purpose for our people... in fact, it's

a disgrace to Amarria; it implies that our whole system, our whole way of life, is just based on hatred and enjoyment of suffering..."

Karleen nodded.

"This doesn't support God; He could never want something like this—it doesn't support the rightful dominance of the Amarrian people; instead, it makes us look like savage monsters."

Karleen shrugged. "I'm with you... but why exactly are you showing this to me? You knew how I would feel... it's not like we can do anything about it."

"What if we could?" Floreina asked.

Karleen cocked her head. "Excuse me? Are you implying going to CONCORD or something? Just what do you have in mind?"

"I didn't have anything specifically in mind," she lied, realizing she needed to back off from her position. "I thought if we could talk to her first... perhaps get her to see—"

"Our captain is stuck in her ways, Commander," Karleen reminded her. "Allihence's feelings rule us, not the other way around..." She paused to scowl questioningly at Floreina. "Tell me... how did you find out about these gladiator challenges? Can you even be certain these aren't fraudulent?"

"I hacked into some of the deeper systems on the ship," Floreina confessed.

Karleen took a deep breath, and held it for a long moment, leaning back to stare at the Commander. "I really hope you're joking..."

Floreina shrugged. "I just had to see... it always seemed that something was strange with our captain."

"You broke into her core computer systems? Are you out of your mind, Floreina? And now you're coming to tell *me* this... you were already on thin ice with Allihence... do you think your turret management skills are just going to carry you forever? There's only so much our captain will put up with."

"How can you not be horrified by this—" Floreina motioned toward the holoreel.

"That's beside the point," Karleen countered. "Sure it's horrifying," she shrugged. "But they're not *our* slaves. They're hers; her property... I don't see what it is you think we could ever do about it... meanwhile you're just putting yourself at risk of being... silenced."

Floreina sighed, realizing attempting to recruit Karleen was a mistake. "Yeah, you're probably right... I should probably just drop it."

"Who else have you shown this to?"

“No one,” Floreina replied. “You’re the first person I’ve told.”

“Well, I’d be careful about showing this around,” Karleen warned. “This is obviously meant to be on the down low, and Allihence is going to do what’s necessary to keep it that way.”

“So I trust you won’t tell anyone...”

“No,” Karleen replied with a sigh. “We’ll just keep this to ourselves.”

The field of trees came slowly into view over the edge of the cliff as Floreina stepped the last few paces to the top of the mountain. She stopped on the rounded rock surface to gaze out at hundreds of kilometers of hills, forests, farmland, highways, and beyond, in the distance, the city of Sandisa rising majestically from the sea.

Viotro set his pack down and stood beside her. “This is it... this is my new home.” He motioned toward the city in the distance and the expanses of the terraformed world.

Floreina didn’t respond, instead simply gazed out on the world, breathing heavily of the thin air after their long hike.

“You could have this too.” He put an arm across her shoulder and she leaned against him, careful not to lose balance.

For a long, quiet time they gazed on God’s creation. Though humans had brought the plants and the oxygen to this planet, God had created the world, the seeds of the plants, the ice that melted into oceans, and the paths of the humans that brought them here. The Lord created all the potential and the raw, unshaped magic of the universe... and then created humans and gave them the knowledge and the tools to sculpt it into a work of art.

She felt a tear building in her eye, but it held without dropping. And she smiled.

“It’s just a glorious and amazing universe,” she commented quietly.

And this time, Viotro did not respond, but simply continued gazing with a content smile.

Floreina pulled away carefully. She stepped forward and made her sacred signs. “Thank you for this, Lord,” she said, nearly inaudibly.

She maneuvered carefully to the edge of the cliff, her environmental software returning an estimate of one hundred and twelve meters to the jagged rocks below. She saw a vision of herself falling and crashing... and wondered what her body would sound like slamming

against the rocks, and if when she landed, would her eyes be closed or open...

Positioning herself directly between Viotro and the edge, she imagined him suddenly pushing her, for what reasons it didn't matter. He would step forward and shove her... and her tactical software would never have a chance to load. Silently she gave him permission, putting her life in his hands. Feeling Viotro just behind her, she peered over the edge, reveling in the vulnerability and trust. She took a deep, satisfied breath, and gazed at the forest below.

After a moment she heard Viotro moving. "Shall we pray?" he asked.

"Yes," Floreina replied. "In just a few moments..." She pulled her eyes away from the great expanses that were so rare in her ship-bound lifestyle and began looking around the rocky hilltop, and the winding pathway into the forest below. For a moment she looked up at Viotro.

"You could come and live here too." He shrugged questioningly. "We could go hiking, skiing and sailing on weekends... and you could be free from all the suicide missions, abolitionist deals, and people trying to kill you... live a beautiful, care-free life in the embrace of God and nature..."

She laughed and looked at the ground. "You ask me that every time I see you..."

"Cause I see that little spark in your eye," he replied, "...every time... like you're a different person for a split second... and you can picture it, and you realize how much you would love it... and then you snap out of it and you go back to your ship and your computer interface and your laser cannons."

"Yeah..." She nodded.

"But this time, I fear you're not coming back."

From his pack, Viotro pulled a bottle of wine and a copy of The Scriptures. He sat down, cross-legged, atop the highest section of rock.

"Yeah..." she said.

He poured wine into a plastic cup and handed it to her. She took a sip and sat beside him.

They sat back to back, leaned against each other for support, and lost themselves for twenty minutes. Floreina shut off the connection to her eyes and ears and to most of her implant functionality, and relaxed her mind, taking the time to feel her own consciousness.

And she thought about her upcoming tasks, and the risks, and the possibilities... and felt The Lord's presence surrounding her... He inhabited the plan and her life, guiding it, through the situational and technological happenings in the physical realm to the calculations and tactics of her

mental programs, to her own emotions and determination to make it happen. It was all the work of God.

She breathed carefully and deeply, and simply felt His love and approval, and an overcoming confidence and joy of success... and a deep faith that her plans and effort would come to fruition.

Success was inevitable.

And she sipped her wine blindly as the time went on.

She snapped back to the real world after Viotro tapped repeatedly on her shoulder. Her visual and auditory connections clicked back on, and the outside, physical reality faded into focus.

They grinned at each other.

"Lunch?" Viotro asked, pulling out their crackers and sliced meat, cheese and eggplant.

They ate quietly and happily for several minutes until Viotro asked, "Why exactly are doing this?"

"She killed my father," Floreina replied, finding herself suddenly looking at the ground.

"Is that what this is about? Revenge? Because last time we talked about it, it was because of the treatment of the slaves... and the time before that you were talking about the money in your captain's wallet." He took a long drink from his water bottle before sipping his cup of wine. "Or are you just desperate to become a capsuleer?"

She nodded slowly.

Viotro looked back questioningly. "You never really told me about your expulsion from the capsule training."

Floreina turned away and stared outward.

"Did they ever give you a solid reason for the dismissal?"

Floreina took a deep breath and paused. "They said I had... a certain psychological profile," she started shakily. "They called me manic-depressive... and said that I had the potential for sociopathic behavior..."

She refused to look back at Viotro. "I can understand the 'manic' label... but depressed? Even when Dad died... I cried for days... but I never felt depressed. I never felt as though life wasn't worth living..."

She breathed carefully and stared out for another quiet moment. "...and to them, anyone who puts our Lord and creator before people is a sociopath... we all know the Jovians control the capsuleer empire and the whole training process... and they have an anti-Amarrian agenda. It's clear bigotry..."

"...and they let Allihence in," Viotro added. "So that shows the reliability of their sociopath detector."

She turned back to her lunch, cracking an unexpected smile.

"But all that's beside the point..." said Viotro. "...even if you succeed at this, I fear you will lose something of yourself..."

She nodded slowly. "But I'll gain so much more..." She swallowed her bite of cracker. "...a consciousness deeper and more complex than anything outside a pod. The power you have over this body... this body that has a warp core, a row of turrets, and a crew of thinking, feeling humans who become a part of your consciousness... there's nothing that compares to that."

Viotro cocked his head in a shrug of reluctant agreement.

"This is all beautiful and wonderful," she said, motioning at the view, "and it brings a tear to my eye... but what's really of value in this universe is in here." She tapped her head. "And our Lord gave us these minds and souls, and gave us prayer and meditation and logic to explore them... and gave us technology to enhance ourselves... to unlock the potential and the magic that He gave us. We must go forward, and expand ourselves, physically and mentally, for His glory..." She shook her head in awe and appreciation. "I've felt closer to God, more human and more alive since this new implant than I ever have before..."

Viotro shrugged. "Well, if you're dead and determined, I won't try to talk you out of it... we can just sit back and enjoy the view... but you should know that I'm mentally preparing for your death."

"Yes," she replied, "that would seem prudent."

—————

The pulsing came from deep inside, pushing Floreina from the depths of sleep, applications greeting her with frantic data. But before she processed the first byte, she knew what was happening. Floreina rose from the bed and pushed aside the sweat-soaked sheets.

Before she placed her feet on the floor the battle stations alarm began blaring, a piercing and unfamiliar screech designed to cut the soul of a dead man.

It took less than a minute for Floreina to pull on her uniform, leaving the shirt un-tucked; and another few seconds to tie her hair out of the way. She stole a look in the mirror and turned a moment later, grabbing her pistol in one hand and her boots and socks in the other. She darted from her quarters, turned a corner and sprinted to the end of the corridor. Entering the lift at the end of the hall, she gave a split second greeting to the ensign sharing the car, and dropped her boots and socks

unceremoniously to the floor as she ordered the lift to take her to the command level.

The ensign saluted before leaving to his level. She watched him sprint off down the hall as she pulled on her second sock. As the door closed an explosive jolt rocked her to the side. The gravity failed and she was weightless for a split second before tumbling to the elevator floor.

The abolitionists were here... in force.

"Shields at fifty-eight percent," came the report over the loudspeakers.

Floreina groaned as she rolled over and pulled on her boots. The lift stopped at her exit a moment later and she jumped to race down another identical corridor, her bootlaces flapping wildly against the floor.

She entered the turret command center. "What do we got?" she asked.

Lieutenant Adran rose from the command seat. "Two blackbirds, a Kitsune, Kerese, two Hyenas, a Celestis, and we've even got an Arbitrator and a Sentinel... a real melting pot. We seem to be withstanding the damage, but they've got us locked down tight... they've all got full electronic warfare setups; we're sensor dampened, target jammed—" he shook his head, sweat flinging from his hair. "the Sentinel's draining our power, and the Arbitrator has us tracking disrupted—as though that makes any difference since we're target jammed anyway. Those Hyena's stopped us dead... we're not moving anywhere... and I'm glad you're here commander."

Floreina clenched a fist for added realism, and took a deep breath to clear her head and focus on the tasks instead of the sabotage that was on the surface of her mind. She needed to be careful with her thoughts. All she needed to do was get in, check the situation, pass Mahran the current access codes, and get out.

She sat in the command seat and plugged in.

Immediately she was surrounded by the hot rage of the captain as she frantically searched the ship, screaming orders at slaves and officers alike. Floreina began lacing up her boots as her mind sank deeper into the technical synapses of the battleship.

She scanned the field beyond their Abaddon, counting the vessels, just as the lieutenant had described, and just as the abolitionists had agreed: four standard electronic warfare cruisers, and five advanced ewar frigates. Very little damage potential, though enough to eventually

take down the mighty Abaddon, and more than enough weapons and communications disruption to incapacitate their warship.

And in the space surrounding the ships, a swarm of drones, mostly Hornet EC-300 target jamming drones, along with a spattering of other models. Allihence's drones were putting up a good fight, blasting frantic laser fire on a couple unfortunate enemy drones, but were taking more damage than they were giving. Floreina watched as another of her captain's combat drones exploded in a brief release of bright energy, and the enemy moved on to the next.

The abolitionists were upholding their end of the bargain, and would soon have the ship locked down.

Floreina attempted a takeover of the targeting controls, feeling the numbers crumble and deteriorate into mathematical chaos, just as they had for the targeting commander. So rarely had Floreina experienced a successful enemy target jam, as Allihence was careful to avoid fights she couldn't dominate, and the sensation felt so strange... the ships surrounded the vessel, ready and waiting to be fired on, and yet, somehow, she just couldn't feel their presence.

Oh, Lord, what have I done?

These cannons were her babies, and she had done this to them... on purpose.

"We have a traitor in our midst," announced Allihence, both verbally through the speakers along every corridor in the ship, and mentally through the connections of the officers in the command systems. "We're at a safespot and I have given our location to no one. There's no other explanation. I want everyone on this ship searching for the saboteur, and you will bring them to me alive..."

And Floreina cringed from her captain's anger, and felt vengeance emanating from the deepest portions of the ship's consciousness... ghoulish images of skin stripping and methodic dismemberment...

The commander took this moment to remove her connection, just after recording the access codes.

"What are you doing disconnected from the system, Commander?" Lieutenant Ethaniel blurted.

"Worry about your self, Lieutenant," Floreina retorted. "I'm having connection issues."

Mahran, it's time, she communicated simultaneously through the direct secure radio signal linked to her slave hidden in the bulkheads behind Allihence's capsule control center. She passed over the codes.

Copy that, Mahran replied. Entering code... access granted... initializing booster... are you out of the system and ready, Master?

Ready, she replied.

"Ma'am," said Ethaniel, "We have a strange sensation in the system... huh?... does our captain have access to boosters?" He paused. "It looks like Captain Allihence is implanting an emergency Exile Booster..." He looked up and shouted, "Wait! Something's wrong... the captain isn't responding. Commander! Get back in here; we need you."

Ethaniel screamed, putting his hand to his head, and simultaneously Floreina heard exclamations from the other crewmen. Ethaniel shook violently for a moment, then slumped forward to rest his head in his hands. He groaned, lightly at first but growing into a scream of fury. "There's an overload!" he shouted. "Total system scramble; the whole ship needs a reboot."

Floreina connected herself again and slowly opened the connection to see a clean, pure system, yet lonely, empty and cold... for the first time, just her and the computer, alone together.

Then there was Mahran, his mind darting playfully and abruptly, jerking out a quick hello, then jumping back to his mental hole to work on his logistical tasks of locking and opening the proper hatchways throughout the ship.

"You get a connection, Commander?" Ethaniel asked, removing himself from his own port.

"No," she lied. "I'm getting nothing." She pounded a fist into the chair, gritted her teeth and paused to pretend to think. "I'm going to run to the communications center," she announced.

"Commander?" Lieutenant Ethaniel replied. "Your place is in command of the turret."

"There's nothing we can do now that we're jammed against two blackbirds and a dozen EC-300's," Floreina reminded him. "All we can do is hope to get our communications up and send for help."

"I agree," replied the lieutenant, "but the communications department will handle that. Your place is here, where your experience suits best."

And Floreina stared back, unused to an argument from a subordinate. The rest of the command crew now gazed at the two senior officers, those with mental ports either unhooked from their terminals, or frustratingly trying to make a connection.

"Adran, take over for me," she ordered.

"Ma'am," Adran replied. "I'm forced to agree with Ethaniel. The communications center is not really your place... even if we're incapacitated we still need you here in case anything happens."

"I understand," Floreina said. "But I may have information for the communication specialists, and if we have a traitor onboard, I can't trust the normal information flow."

As she turned to hand over her command seat, her combat application warned of Ethaniel's hand moving from the other side of the row of command interfaces. But before she could turn to raise her own weapon, she found herself staring into the Lieutenant's sidearm.

"You've got to be kidding me," she said as she watched Ethaniel click the switch to power up the weapon's capacitor.

"I must insist," he said, moving carefully around the bank of terminals and up the steps to the main command seat. "I've been given orders to keep an eye on you by Captain Allihence herself, and right now I am far too suspicious to allow you to leave."

"Do you understand what you're doing?" Floreina asked.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am. I pray I'm wrong and you're innocent, but..." he stared her square in the eyes from behind the weapon, stopping a couple feet short.

"You're going to pull a weapon on your commander over such a suspicion and prevent her from getting information to our communications officers that may be vital in restoring our defenses?" She frowned at him, crossing her arms and taking a cautious step forward. "Do you really understand what you're doing right now?"

"I'm forced to relieve you of duty, Commander," Ethaniel demanded. "Adran is aware that we have been asked to keep an eye on you, and I feel the captain would agree that relieving you is a prudent precaution. Like I said, Commander, I pray that I'm wrong about this, and hope that you can forgive me."

She took another step forward, the implant algorithms pointing out the aspects of Ethaniel's face and composure that betrayed his lack of confidence. "Oh, no..." She shook her head slowly. "You've made your decision; don't think you can play both sides..."

Her arm went limp and tingly for a moment as she transferred its neural control to her implant, allowing the computer to choose the precise moment to make her move. The nanites powered up and began stretching and preparing the muscles. She stepped forward again, but only minutely, and nodded her head at an imaginary helper standing several paces behind her opponent.

Ethaniel remained cold, continuing his stare. "Marian, Darnoth, please escort the Commander to the nearest slave holding."

Floreina shook her head. "I don't think so." She took another tiny step forward, forcing Ethaniel to back himself against the computer terminal next to the steps. Her combat routines fired a rapid warning, letting her know that Marion and Darnoth, two of the turret power managers, were getting up and appearing as though they intended to follow Ethaniel's orders.

"I'm not the only one who's aware of the captain's suspicions," Ethaniel reminded them. "You all know I'm acting in a reasonable fashion..."

Floreina motioned again with her head, toward the empty wall behind Ethaniel, and allowed a tiny grin to escape.

And Ethaniel bought it, glancing over his shoulder, to be sure there was no one waiting to pounce on him from the rear.

Her left hand fired upward and snatched the weapon before she was fully aware of the movement. Her other hand dropped to her thigh and snapped the release of her own sidearm. She popped the weapon into her hand to bring it up and point it into the face of the Lieutenant.

She grinned, flipping his gun to hold it facing the floor, simultaneously flipping the switch to power up her own weapon in her right hand. She scanned the room with her rear camera and her peripheral vision as she stared into the eyes of the subordinate at the end of her pistol. Marian and Darnoth stopped their approach and stood, eyes wide and frozen.

The targeting menus flipped through Floreina's mind and she selected an option to automatically watch for any movement of Lieutenant Ethaniel, allowing the system full control of her trigger finger.

And she warned him, "I've set my personal targeting system—"

But similar to Floreina, Ethaniel didn't like wasting time. His hand moved, and made it half way to the weapon before she felt herself squeezing the trigger tight against the handle.

The Lieutenant's head burst into a ray of light, expanding into a burnt and bloody mess. The crew stood in motionless shock, their eyes remaining fixed on Floreina. The Lieutenant's body slumped to the floor and rolled down the steps.

"You have the command," Floreina said, motioning toward Adran.

Her heart pounded as she looked out on the small command crew, sitting motionless, staring in silence. The emotional suppressants attempted to manipulate the situation, but seemed useless against the torrent of sudden and unexpected emotions: guilt, shame and fear, mixed with a strange sense of self-fulfilling power and triumph. The emotional processors simply didn't understand the human equation or hadn't acclimated to her brain enough to deal with the situation.

A lurching came from her stomach and she held it down, nanites in her throat uncomfortably suppressing a gag reflex. She backed up, scanning the crew, making sure they knew she was watching them. Her targeting systems jumped every couple hundred milliseconds from one face to another, analyzing features, updating character maps, readying itself to jump back to any individual and focus fire.

Master, what are you doing? Mahran communicated. This is not how it was supposed to happen!

I'm aware of that, she replied. I need your help, now! Is anyone currently in the hallway outside.

An agonizing pause, lasting less than a second. No, Ma'am. The hallway's clear.

Status on the communications in this room?

I've shut down all communications from the command centers. I'm shutting down all inter-ship communications. But Master... I don't know if anyone was able to get a communication out from the turret center. Someone may have been able to contact security.

Floreina ground her teeth. Her targeting and combat system centered on someone to the left, in her peripheral vision, a Lieutenant named Daril, drawing her eyes and the weapon in her left hand in his direction. She watched his hand move back away from his weapon, but still kept a focused watch on the rest of the crew, her automated systems continually scanning for even the most subtle of movements.

She backed slowly from the room. *Am I still clear down the hall?* She asked.

Affirmative, Mahran replied. All hatches now sealed on this level. Nobody can currently move around without explosives.

"I'm going to the communications center to inform them of my information about the traitor," she told the command crew. "I believe Ethaniel was working with them." But even as she spoke, her facial analyzers returned negative results. They weren't buying it. But she continued on. "Your orders are to sit tight and wait for communications to

come back online. I'm going to assist in that, and I assure you that you will only make things worse by starting a witch hunt."

Floreina cautiously closed the hatch. *Seal the door*, she ordered.

Right, Mahran replied. *Got it. Sealed.*

She turned to run down the corridor. *Do I have a clear path to the access crawlway?*

Mahran paused another second. *No*, he replied. *There appear to be guards out... people are scattering throughout the ship... it appears that anyone who's not trying to restore communications is trying to work on breaking down doors.*

Okay, we don't have much time.

Dear Lord... Please, Master... How are we gonna do this when everyone in the turret center knows you're behind it?

They still don't know what we're doing, Floreina replied. *If we're lucky, you can keep them locked in and keep the communications down. Can you find out for me if anyone else on the ship is aware of the suspicion on me?*

Floreina moved swiftly to the end of the corridor, weapons still in her hands.

I can't tell, Master—I'm sorry—this is all so new to me... you didn't give me time to prepare for the systems... He communicated in quick, frantic bursts. I'm trying to talk to you now and do all these different things at the same time—locking down hatchways and intercoms and watching for guards and everything... and I've never been this deep in the systems before and I've only had this implant in my head for a few months and I'm barely even used to it—

Okay! Floreina stopped him. *Just do what you need to do. Calm down and don't let yourself get stressed... but remember, I need you here, Buddy. Can you tell me if anyone is on the other side of this hatch?*

No, he replied after a couple hundred milliseconds. *You're clear.* He released the main lock and Floreina entered her security code into the keypad to release the secondary lockout. She pulled herself through the door and stopped on the other side, closing it behind her.

She looked down another hallway, nearly identical to the last one and slowly fell backwards against the hatch. The hallway began twisting and pulsing, and Floreina became suddenly dizzy. She braced herself against the door, and let her mind go blank. For a moment, the visions subsided and froze into a motionless and empty scene.

What have I done?

These were her fellow Amarrians. These were not the Minmatar abolitionists from whom she feared a hateful death, but from her own people... those who prayed to her God.

And suddenly Viotro's gentle pleading made sense... her joy of life and connection with God had felt like such a rock that she never imagined it could end with a couple mistakes in her plans... but here she was, her emotions backing her against a wall, her perspectives crumbling, and justifications fading into a haze.

What have I done... she asked ...to my own people?

Your doctors have their operating procedures ready to go, Mahran informed her.

They were right on schedule.

You need to get up here.

Floreina put her head in her hands for a long moment and watched her pounding heart, and felt the heat emanating from her flesh.

Master? coaxed Mahran. *Please respond... I need you...*

And she shut her eyes, and gave an emergency prayer, shutting down her senses for five seconds, losing herself for such a short period of time, and finding the Lord, just a layer under the surface of everything. He was there, as he had always been, and always would be... guiding, creating, and constantly loving.

He pulled her together in an instant, composing her emotions and clarifying her goals and potential. You may or may not survive, He reminded her. But that doesn't change the fact that you have an obligation to me and to yourself... to capture every moment of your precious life.

Floreina stood and reconnected her senses, taking a deep breath. She readied herself to focus on the next task.

Mahran was communicating frantically: *What are you doing, Master? We need you here to complete the mission! We don't have much time before word gets out!*

What's the status of my route to the crawlway? Floreina brought up the Abaddon's map. It overlapped her normal vision, but somehow obstructed nothing.

Not good, Mahran replied. *You'll need to walk through groups of officers and slaves... I think we can route you around so that none of them see you opening hatchways... but if Ethaniel had suspicions others may too.*

She focused on her route from the command center near the outer armor plating and down through several decks, through crew quarters and finally into the hidden slave decks to move forward a third

of the length of the ship to the slave overseer offices and on through secure networking centers. The path led on to a small crawlway that provided emergency access through the long, tight corridor to the control center behind Allihence's pod.

Floreina took a deep breath and started moving, opening and passing another nearly identical hatchway, making certain to seal it behind her. She placed her weapon back in the holster on her right thigh, and stowed the other in one of the deep pockets in the pants of her uniform. Forcing a poker face, she straightened, pulled her chin up, and walked rapidly.

She followed the map as she walked, questioning Mahran about personnel densities in various areas, tracing the routes.

Okay, she said to both herself and Mahran, We can still do this. If no one else suspects me, they'll let me walk right through... you've got cameras on every crew member on this ship... we should be able to navigate here...

I hope so, replied Mahran. Please hurry.

She moved as rapidly as possible, riding a lift down several levels, and marched through the mostly vacant cafeteria and kitchen. The cooks looked up only momentarily from their efforts to stow their supplies.

She moved to another lift down through crew quarters, passing only the occasional officer or slave, most having been dispatched to more important sections of the ship. Her mind seemed to go blank again as she rode the lift down to the slave quarters, and she froze, staring simultaneously at the lift door and the map. The lift opened and she snapped out of her trance and marched through the rows of bunks. Those who were still there seemed surprised to see an officer coming through these sections during such a time, but this was an extreme circumstance, so it seemed reasonable to assume that anything was possible... at least Floreina hoped.

Can I get a status report on the turret command center? she asked.

A pause. It's not looking good up there, Mahran told her. They're preparing to blow the hatch. They're doing the explosion calculations manually on a visual interface. I've heard them talking, Master... they're all convinced you have something to do with the sabotage... they don't know much more than that, but they don't seem to have much doubt that you're guilty.

Floreina shuddered, but continued moving at the same pace.

And Master Floreina... I need to tell you... He paused. There are other communication systems onboard... there's deeper security comms that you never warned me about... I'm most concerned about the direct connection that

many of Allihence's personal security have; it's kept secret even from the highest ranking officers... and I can't see any way to block it; it's separate from the central systems... I think I can pose as their security application to manipulate things, but I can't shut it down...

But she was now entering the slave management offices, where several officers sat at their desks, searching for readings on visual interfaces.

"Commander Floreina, how did you get in here?" asked Farneil, one of the senior overseers. "I thought all the hatchways were sealed."

Her liars assistant suggested an option: "Specialty clearance," Floreina replied without glancing in his direction as she marched past. "Captain Allihence has everything locked down, but I have clearance for a special security check. Just hang tight; we're doing all we can. I think we're on the trail of the traitor."

And that seemed to satisfy them for the moment and she moved on.

But just when her confidence seemed to be rising back to its normal level, as she moved down another corridor, two security officers moved behind her.

Mahran notified her just a moment before they moved into her hallway, and she watched them approach through her rear camera. She identified the soldiers as Mithlin and Gromor. They drew their weapons.

"Commander Floreina," said Mithlin. "What are you doing on this level? Is your station not still in the turret command center?"

Floreina stopped and slowly turned around. "I'm on a specific mission by order of the captain." Her systems scanned their faces and posture, and pulled up a history on them, showing that both had targeting and combat implants similar to her own.

They stared at her, unmoved by her claims.

"You're gonna need to come with us," said Gromor.

She felt Mahran cringing in fear but Floreina's face did not betray her secret mental connection.

"Excuse me?" she replied angrily.

"Our apologies, Ma'am, but you're on our watch list. We're under orders to detain any suspicious persons on our list. It's just a precaution, I assure you, Commmander. Probably a glitch in the system..." A minute facial twitch caught Floreina's conversational analyst, and gave her a readout that the two were likely trying to play down their suspicion. They seemed too confident.

“And now I have a special mission that you’re interfering with...”

Mithlin nodded. “My apologies Commander, but you need to come with us.” And he motioned toward the hatch through which they had come.

The tactical situation was not in her favor versus two trained security personnel. They had advanced implants, the potential even for nanite enhancements, and more hand to hand combat training. Her tactical readouts clearly showed that she needed to consent to their wishes until she could gain an advantage.

They ordered her to put her hands on her head and Gromor moved forward to remove her weapons and bind her hands with their standard restraint cuffs.

I do have one piece of good news, Mahran told her. I think I can hack the cuffs and get them to release for you on your order. I’m working on it now.

Excuse me? she said. *I never taught you anything like that.*

I looked into certain things on my own, he replied.

Scandalous Minmatar, she said. The guards led her back through the blown hatch into the adjacent room which served as an accounting and logistics center for the slave management crew. Sitting at one of the accounting desks, focused angrily on a visual readout screen, sat the head overseer, Karleen. She looked up to see Floreina, and her focus deteriorated. Her head cocked slowly, and her mouth opened. She stood, then straightened.

I’m seeing a change in activity, Ma’am, Mahran informed her. I’ve got access to their systems... There’s a large group of about three hundred slaves locked in the main cargo bay two decks below you and several security officers are next door... they were going to detonate the hatch into the cargo bay and get the slaves out to assist in breaking down hatches, but now they’re changing directions to detonate their way into an air vent. I’m pretty sure they’re trying to get to your section.

“Floreina?” asked Karleen. “What are you doing on this level?”

She shrugged and scoffed. “Being accused of treason, apparently, and having my vital missions interrupted.” She glared momentarily at the two guards.

“I heard Mahran was missing. I didn’t really think about it till now...” Karleen’s hands moved to rest on her hips. “He’s not on the ship any more, is he?”

“You can connect to the main systems to search?” Floreina asked. “No one else has a connection...”

"Well, no, but he was scheduled to be in this area and I've been able to connect with some of the lower sections, like the slaves in the cargo bay."

"I hope nothing happened to him..." Floreina said. "But I have other things to worry about right now."

Mahran? she asked. They've had communications out of this center?

Yes, Ma'am, I'm sorry. They have short range secure radio systems down here to help hide the slaves during stays in high-security station hangars.

Yes, yes. You were not able to lock them down?

I have a lot going on up here, Master. I'm watching activity all over the ship... you expect me to keep a solid watch over so many people who all have it in for you—

Okay, okay, she stopped him. Keep your mind on the goals. I'm so close to the crawlway now—if I can just get in unseen, we can hold them off for an hour or so as the doctors hook me up.

As she spoke to her slave in the back of her mind, Karleen continued her approach. "You are guilty aren't you?" she said, her face twisting. "That talk of Allihence's abuses... *this* is what you were referring to..." She shook her head slowly. "You were so outraged you decided you had the authority to go so much further..."

"What are you referring to?" asked Mithlin.

Karleen glared at Floreina for a moment before answering, "She showed me some evidence of slave abuses by our captain and wanted to do something about it..."

"You have no idea what you're talking about; that was a passing conversation, Karleen. Don't think everything people say to you is so huge and significant."

Karleen shook her head and breathed heavily. "I don't buy this..." she looked at Mithlin. "We need to get her into interrogation immediately. Can you blow a route to the discipline chambers? Could we interrogate her here?"

"We aren't trained interrogators," replied Mithlin.

"We don't have a lot of time," Karleen said. "The fleet should have destroyed us by now. Even with their limited firepower, the fact that they've crippled our capacitor, propulsion, warp drive and our captain—we should definitely be dead right now. We need to get information out of her."

"We aren't under orders—"

"You overheard that suspicious message from turret command before their comms cut out?" she asked.

Mithlin nodded as he moved away toward one of the computer terminals.

"I don't believe you, Karleen; you just betray me so easily?" Floreina cut them off. "You have no evidence. The captain set you into a panic when she made the announcement about the spy, and now you're willing to turn on your friends and crew on simple suspicion? Where's your loyalty? You need to back up and think things through."

Are you able to kill these cuffs? Floreina asked Mahran.

Yes, Ma'am. Ready to drop on your order.

"You tried to drag me into this!" Karleen glared at Floreina, her breathing highly pronounced. "And now you've endangered every member of this crew and quite possibly taken all our lives."

"We need to just lock her in a slave containment," said Gromor. "We're not authorized to do anything beyond that."

And Karleen screamed and ran forward, fists flying, lunging, swinging toward the commander's face.

Floreina backed up, taking carefully placed steps, bouncing backward in time with the combat predictions, dodging each punch fluidly.

Targeting trajectories were calculated from the vantage of the two security officers, taking into account their positions, grips on their weapons, and their predicted attention level. Her arm calculated a route from the grip of the cuffs behind her back to the sidearm strapped to Karleen's side.

And Karleen swung again and again as Floreina ran backward even faster to avoid her, feeling the subtle pumping of artificial adrenaline and steroids from her medical systems. At the same time watching Gromor pull a tighter grip on his pistol and watch apprehensively as the chief slave overseer behaved in an erratic manner. But at the same time, both security officers were getting further away with every step.

Finally she saw the wall coming from her rear vision and knew she would back against it within two more steps. However, Karleen was almost directly between her and Gromor.

Drop the cuffs on my mark. Get ready.

Copy that, Mahran replied.

She took another step. With the last, she switched the pace and went down.

Mark.

She heard the cuffs click and loosen just as her back came against the wall, and the steel fell from her wrists. Floreina rose, just as Karleen managed to plant her first successful punch on her target.

Her hands were already moving, Floreina and her implants already having set their trajectories. The punch connected with the side of her head. The pain processed, and even registered a minor sloshing of the brain, but Floreina pushed through it.

The commander brought her left hand to Karleen's hip. She flipped the attachment and snatched the sidearm, pulling it out upside down. With her right hand, Floreina grasped a wad of Karleen's hair, and pulled their faces together. She embraced the overseer, bringing her lower body tight against her.

Both officers raised their weapons, but had no line without firing through Karleen.

Auto-targeting through waves of Karleen's golden, coconut perfumed hair, Floreina raised her left hand and slipped her pinky through the upside down trigger guard, and flipped the power switch.

She fired on Gromor as he attempted to dive out of the way, ripping and scorching the left side of his face.

Floreina turned, holding Karleen against her, and targeted Mithlin at the desk. He moved to his right, his weapon up, searching for a shot. Even as she felt Karleen punching and struggling against her, she fired another shot, connecting with Mithlin's chest. He staggered, but did not drop his weapon, her tactical readouts estimating the type of armor beneath his uniform. She fired again, this time trusting herself to get the shot between his eyes. The soldier went down, firing a stray laser in the air.

But Floreina had not a moment to celebrate her triumph or mourn the lives of her fellow Amarrians, as Mahran broke in saying, *Master you have another problem. More security are heading your way. There's one coming up an access tube near the far corridor, and several more coming your way from the same hallway you came from.*

Every minute that went by the crew of the Abaddon were blowing more hatchways and manually patching into more communications systems.

Karleen screamed, flailing her arms, punching and clawing. Floreina kicked her friend, forcing the side of her foot into Karleen's shins and pushing with her right hand. She gained some distance to transfer Karleen's weapon from the left handed upside down position to the proper position in her right hand.

"On your knees," Floreina ordered, pointing the weapon in the face of her friend, feeling the rumbling in her gut threatening to surface

again. "I didn't want to have to do this... you know I'm innocent and I have special duties I need to attend to."

Get out of the room now! Mahran communicated, forcing his thoughts unceremoniously into her mind. *They're coming for you down the hall! Get out! Get out! Don't go the way you came. You need to leave through the far door and get to the access tube.*

Karleen was kneeling now with her hands behind her head, her eyes squeezed together in stressful, glaring little slits. Floreina quickly tried to calculate the causes and effects of leaving Karleen alive, but found the potentialities too widely varied and complex.

"Stay," she ordered, and began her run toward the far exit, snatching another weapon from Gromor's dead hand.

Run! Mahran demanded.

She sprinted to the hatchway and punched in her code and heard the faint sound of a pistol powering up behind her. Jumping through the hatch, she heard the shot. It gleamed off the door, and she felt a wave of heat. She turned in the doorway to look back to see two more security officers climbing through the hatchway at the other end of the accounting center. Seeing their hands, her trajectory calculations predicted they would aim high, and she allowed her legs to buckle as she fell through the hatchway.

The shots seared above her, heating the air in a sudden wave of discomfort. But she fell below the bottom lip as her hand clasped the edge of the door and threw it closed.

Where do I go from here? She asked, bringing up the map and seeing a route that Mahran had already traced, down an access tube and through the masses of slaves in the cargo bay.

She grumbled. *That's the route you find for me?*

We don't have a lot of options, Master... I'm sorry... Hopefully you can talk to the slaves... I think I've managed to cut off Karleen's connection with them.

Floreina continued running toward the end of the hallway to find a maintenance hatch leading into another drone access tube. She crawled in and immediately began pulling herself forward. Watching her map as she moved, she saw the tube dropping off just a few dozen meters ahead. Mahran showed her the location of another single soldier coming toward her from the lower levels, climbing painstakingly straight up the shaft.

Do you have gravity controls? she asked. She checked her weapon access, trying to reach to her side, but finding the tube too cramped for easy movement.

I can shut it on and off for the whole ship, he replied. *That's the only control I've got.*

I'm going to drop down the tube, she informed him. *The interior is too close to power regulators to risk firing my weapon. We're going to need a properly timed shutdown of the gravity. Do you have a visual on the soldier coming up the passage?*

Affirmative; he'll be to you in about five minutes.

Floreina dragged herself frantically forward, scraping her knees across the perforated interior of the conduit.

Stay quiet, Mahran reminded her. *He doesn't know you're above him.*

Seeing the opening several meters ahead, she slowed to more carefully mask the sound of her approach.

He's about nine meters below you. He'll see you as you cross over.

She reached the opening and forced herself to keep going, trusting in Mahran's assessment, hoping her opponent would not be willing to use his firearm inside the sensitive tubing.

She threw herself to the far side of the opening and let her legs drop into the vertical shaft.

He sees you, Mahran warned. *He's planting his feet... drawing his weapon.*

Prepare to shut off the gravity just a split second before impact.

Copy.

Floreina let go. She dropped, tightening her body, and bringing her feet together.

And nine hundred milliseconds later, her feet connected, and she felt space bunching up as the soldier's neck snapped and collapsed under her feet. They sailed downward—or the direction that had recently been downward—but came to a jolting halt as the soldier curled and wedged into the shaft. Floreina's arms slammed against the sides, the ridges grating painfully across her elbows.

And she floated, the lack of gravity having successfully prevented a dangerous fall.

Reinstate the gravity, she ordered as she planted her feet into one of the ridges just above the soldier and gripped another set with her hands.

The sudden jolt ran down her body and locked into her feet and hands. She dug in to compensate, and held tight.

But so did the body of the soldier. She waited for several seconds but the corpse held tight. Carefully she braced against the side, bent her legs and kicked downward, but only seemed to make the body curl up even more. Inching downward she kicked at his knees, which were now curled up near the soldier's chest. Still, the body remained wedged tightly into the conduit.

Floreina sighed and leaned against the side, just momentarily, and focused on the pounding of her heart.

You need to keep moving, Mahran reminded her after several short seconds.

The body won't drop, she replied. *Give me a minute... deactivate gravity again.*

A moment later she was weightless again, muscles relaxing in their new freedom. Sometimes Floreina could think to herself that the weightlessness was where humans originally came from... that the original Eden was a place beyond the confines of a planet and gravity. If God were physical, he would be weightless.

She set to work tugging at the body, gripping its clothing, pulling awkwardly, barely able to hunch down enough to grip him. She groaned, stood up, and wedged into the conduit ridges.

Gravity again, she ordered.

Her stomach turned as her cells seemed to coalesce downward, one by one. Her feet locked into the ridges for a moment, but she pulled her right foot out and gave the kicking another attempt. Still, the corpse did not budge.

You don't have a lot of time here, Mahran reminded.

I know, shut up...

I'm sorry Master—

What can we do here Mahran? He's not budging.

Mahran paused.

Floreina sighed and pulled out her sidearm. *I've got to cut him up...* she said, adjusting the pistol to a more precise setting. She aimed carefully at the soldier's thighs, fearing a misfire that could rupture a wall and disrupt energy flow.

As she held the beam, gritting her face against the stench of searing flesh, she commented, *Sometimes I get this sudden sense that I'm a horrible person...*

The beam cut through the first leg and the body moved and contorted downward. Floreina shook her head in an attempt to clear the nauseating smoke filling the tiny quarters. She wasted no time, however, in beginning her cut of the other leg. Ten seconds later it snapped, and the body jolted, but still held.

Floreina holstered her weapon and gave another angry kick to the head, and the torso broke loose and fell unceremoniously down the shaft, bouncing against the tube ridges. The two legs followed behind.

She said a prayer and ordered Mahran to shut down the gravity one last time.

The lack of gravity made it easier to move in a normally vertical environment, but Floreina wanted to avoid the blood now splattered against the walls. She tightened again, pressing her feet together and locked her legs straight. She guided herself down the center of the tube with her fingertips, tapping her toes against the walls to keep the rest of her body from dragging against the bloodstains.

She reached the bottom and was forced to turn the gravity back on in order to avoid the droplets of blood floating near the body. The mess fell back down to the shaft intersection and she took a minute to kick it out of the way.

Floreina crawled horizontally now under normal gravity. She groaned and shivered, attempting to shake off the experience as though it were just another broken coolant coil.

After dropping to the next level, Floreina stopped to check herself, and attempted to wipe blood from her clothing.

So what do the slaves look like in the cargo bay? Floreina asked.

They're currently on the far side, opposite from where you're gonna enter.

Good. How many Amarrians?

Three in the main cargo bay. Groups of others are trapped in nearby rooms.

I have a clear path to the cargo bay at least?

Affirmative, replied Mahran.

Following the map, she moved to the end of the corridor and passed through another hatch, walking carefully, but attempting a normal pace.

Mahran seemed to panic momentarily. *Master, I did not notice: there's several security officers preparing to blow a hatch in the next minute or so—they're in the cargo administration offices right off your route. You need to run, now!*

Floreina grunted as she started her run. *What's wrong with you, Mahran!* She exclaimed. *Pay attention!*

Just how many things do you think a Minmatar can handle? he forced back frantically, his presence seeming to crackle and break. *I'm sorry, Master. I'm doing my best and there's a thousand different things going on at once!*

Okay! She entered her code into the next hatch and pulled it open. *What do I need to do?*

Run! He replied.

The hatch opened into a wide corridor with a large bay door at the end, leading into the main cargo hold. She started down the hallway at a sprint as the massive door began to creep upward in preparation for her arrival.

Grenade detonation in three seconds. Mahran informed her. *You'll feel the blast from behind you. Keep running...*

And Floreina counted, posting the number in the corner of her vision.

The explosion came right as expected, the wave disorienting her momentarily. She stumbled, but caught herself. The noise of sudden flame and shredding steel left her ears ringing.

As she approached the door, now half a meter off the floor, she heard an Amarrian exclaim, "That's her!" And Floreina heard the faint electrical hum of a pistol.

Her feet slipped easily and gracefully out from under her and she hit the floor at speed. She felt the first of the laser blasts piercing, heating and expanding the air, colliding with the heavy steel door as she slid on her back under the hatchway. The door groaned to a stop and began its descent as Floreina came to a halt on the inside of the cargo bay. She rolled to the side as the beams snuck under the doorway, glancing off the floor near her feet.

Floreina ran to the side to avoid the open door, drew both weapons and turned to assess the situation. The cargo bay was set up as usual: giant crates, about four meters tall, arranged in neat rows from one end to the other. Minmatar slaves were packed together near the other end of the bay.

Crewmen behind you! Mahran warned.

And on the other side of the bay door, from behind another identical row of crates, Floreina saw three Amarrians sprint into the open, pulling their weapons. Her systems identified them and gave a tactical assessment, judging that she could likely out-shoot them.

“Commander Floreina is the traitor!” she heard them shout as her legs carried her instinctively behind the closest crate. “Our turret commander is the disgrace that has done this!”

She heard several shots slicing through the shell of the nearest crate.

They’re leaving, Mahran informed.

The shots ceased and Floreina peered out carefully, and saw them sprinting for the slowly closing hatchway.

Feeling a warning from her tactical readouts of her rear camera, Floreina turned to see several slaves running in her direction. The lead slave, her systems identified by the name of Darronion. He ran toward her, his right hand clutching a short steel pipe.

Floreina pointed her left weapon at the assailant, but in the same moment registered movement from under the door.

Just before it lowered the last hundred centimeters, with the three Amarrians now safely on the other side, she watched a grenade slide under the hatch and come to rest in the middle of the gap between the main cargo door and the first row of packing crates.

This one was round and flat, more like a mine, or a large hockey puck. Her systems identified it as a model designed for a larger radius explosion than the smaller concussion grenades the troops had been using to blast open doors. Instinctively her visual processors cut an image from her sight and enhanced to zoom in on the tiny display indicating the countdown: twenty-five seconds left out of a total of thirty. The fellow crewmen had given themselves time to get out of the concussion range on the other side of the hatchway. Floreina posted a synchronized countdown to the corner of her vision.

I’ve already set the door into lockdown procedures, Mahran answered before she could ask. *It’ll take me thirty seconds to reset the codes again to open it.*

With no time to place blame, her anger was artificially cut short.

Floreina kept one weapon and one thought pathway focused on Darronion, at the same time calculating explosion velocities and ranges, and comparing different potentials based on various possible locations of the grenade. She started her run, pulling out from behind the crates. She saw a few of the more aggressive slaves showing up at this end of the bay, a few also armed with pipes.

Floreina shouted, “Grenade!,” pointing at the device.

She continued the blast calculations realizing there was almost no way to avoid a lethal concussion through less than a third of the room. Her

best hope for survival would be to pick it up and throw it to the other end in the midst of the slaves where the crates and bodies would absorb most of the blast.

But that plan would only guarantee her survival from the grenade, not from the slaves.

She saw a corner, near the edge of the bay, with an overhang that came nearly to the floor. She refocused to calculate the blast range if the device were under the overhang, measuring the depth and height of the lip and its effect on the explosion, and after an agonizing three hundred milliseconds, calculating that it would absorb most of the blast and minimize slave casualties.

The timer clicked down to twenty-three seconds.

“Run!” she screamed. “Run you fools! Grenade! They’re trying to kill us!”

Racing forward, she waved her weapons, alternating between pointing at the explosive and at the slaves as they popped out from behind the crates. “Get back!” she screamed. “That’s a high-powered grenade! Run!”

Nine slaves had come to her end, most waving pipes as weapons, but still a reasonable distance away, flanking her from either end of the rows of cargo. However, the majority stopped when they heard Floreina and saw the device. Several began repeating Floreina’s frantic screams, and motioning for their comrades to get back.

Darronion, however, continued on despite the warning, coming into view from behind the crates.

“Get to the other end of the bay!” She turned, following the calculations for her kick. “Twenty seconds till detonation!”

She planted her feet and stopped for an awkward half second as her systems re-assessed her orientation, and took partial control of her right leg, guiding her kick.

Her boot connected with the explosive. The sudden pressure was somehow comforting for a tiny moment. The device sailed off, sliding across the floor, along the projected line.

Most of the slaves were realizing the danger and turning the other direction. Many were now crashing into the few that were still running toward Floreina. They screamed, voices echoing and blending. But most were now pushing and scrambling toward the other side of the bay.

Darronion stopped his approach suddenly, as he heard the other slaves exclaiming their warnings, and stared for a moment at the situation, his mouth and eyes twisting into a painful vision of terror.

But then it was gone, and he started forward, but a moment later changed his mind and turned around again to flee.

Floreina turned toward Darronion and the rows of cargo containers, scanning her surroundings. The nearby slaves seemed aware of the danger and were making their hasty and disorganized retreat.

Checking her map again, she saw the slaves represented throughout the rows. She spun the map, looking for a route through the slaves, and hoped that Mahran was updating her data rapidly enough. But it didn't matter, as it seemed that every row was full of Minmatar, many of whom had been on the aggressive just moments earlier.

She slipped her weapons back to their locations, the right handgun in the proper holster, and the left shoved into a utility pocket. The nanites came alive as she calculated her ability to scale the cargo containers. Her adrenaline and steroid rations increased automatically.

Floreina approached the container as the timer in the corner of her vision clicked to eighteen seconds.

But as she approached Darronion to his right side, he seemed to change his mind one last time and turned toward Floreina, raising his pipe.

Darronion was young, however, and not trained in combat, and had just sprinted from the other end of the cargo hold.

Floreina turned toward him, killing her valuable momentum. Her combat assistant immediately drew a projection of Darronion's swing.

Without the time to draw her weapon, she stepped away from the red arc traced through her vision and watched as Darronion's attack followed the predicted line almost perfectly. She stepped forward and grabbed the pipe with her left hand. With her right foot, she swept and twisted his feet, shoving him along the same line as his momentum. He fell and bounced as his back slammed into the deck. His face went suddenly red. The pipe ripped from Floreina's hand and clanked against the floor.

His hand began rising, but Floreina brought her foot up and pounded down into his groin. She stared into his eyes as though scolding and watched his eyes bulge. He twisted and arched his back and Floreina felt the grating as his pelvis cracked. The slave dropped the pipe.

She released and turned without a word, as the timer ticked down to sixteen seconds. Darronion's screams registered, but she ignored them. She recalculated her ascent, realizing the need to back up a couple paces to run at it.

Floreina spun, took two quick steps away from her destination and twirled to sprint toward the cargo containers. Nanites burned through her body, like a million fiery pinpricks.

She leapt, her right leg springing straight and her left tucking in. It connected between the top and bottom of the container, her knee nearly at her chin. Her boot wedged into the gap, and her leg straightened as she grasped the tiny ridges in the plastic packing material, and her momentum pushed her upward. Grasping the top of the crate, she crawled upward, her toes scrambling frantically.

She flung her lower body over the top and the timer simultaneously ticked down to twelve seconds. She wasted no time in hopping to her feet to begin her sprint across the top of the containers.

She kept her head uncomfortably low and her body bent forward to avoid the support girders running across the length of the cargo bay, a meter and a half above the tops of the cargo containers. She charged, ignoring the hordes of Minmatar below. The clock ticked down, second by second as her legs carried her instinctively across the crates and leapt over the gaps. Her head bobbed rhythmically, her hair brushing against the girders above.

The map swirled as she attempted to see the location of Minmatar bodies. She closed it and hoped that whichever gap she chose would be the one without the most loyal and aggressive Minmatar.

As the clock ticked down to three seconds, she stopped at the edge of a crate and allowed her weight to continue over the edge, her right leg coming out and connecting with the top of the next crate. She straddled the gap and looked down, seeing slaves in front of and behind her, but not within several meters. She gave one final screaming warning.

She dropped as the clock ticked to one second and continued down through the milliseconds. Her legs curled as she pounded into the deck, absorbing the shock and simultaneously drawing her downward, to place her head between her knees. She wrapped her arms around the top of her head and curled as tight as possible. The numbers faded to zero as she pressed against the crate.

And time continued.

One hundred milliseconds passed; then two, and then three hundred milliseconds.

But just before four hundred milliseconds past the predicted time, the floor seemed to rupture upwards, and everything went quiet. The air became hot, and seemed to compress inward, as though time and space had decided to implode, pressing on Floreina's every cell.

The universe pressed in, the pressure increasing with every passing millisecond, and finally seemed to collapse parts of her mind and soul.

Then it all stopped and reversed. The floor buckled downward and her stomach and heart wanted to expand, as though every molecule now wished to flee her center of consciousness.

Sound returned with a furious vengeance, and Floreina heard the nearly deafening rush of the flames and the tortured ripping of plastic, metal, and flesh. Cargo debris slammed into the ceiling and walls. Flames rushed between the containers and over their heads.

She held tight, sensing the pressure and trying to interpret the data coming back from her blast calculations. She kept her head down and waited.

The heat and pressure started dissipating after several long seconds, and little by little, the sound of tearing and splintering cargo faded away to be replaced by the screams and pleas of the shocked and injured slaves.

Floreina's head popped up as soon as the crashing ceased, feeling the rush of hot air against her face. Her medical systems registered minor burns on the back of her neck, but otherwise no serious problems, due in part to her heat resistant uniform. Nearby Minmatars did not seem as well off.

Seeing the nearest slave patting flames out on his own head, Floreina ran her hands quickly through her hair, checking for smoldering hairs, extinguishing several.

And the nearest slave looked up from checking himself, and gazed at her. "Commander Floreina?" he asked. "Is that you?"

"Back away," she ordered.

"It is you," he replied, shaking his head slightly, peering, as though trying to focus. His face darkened, his eyebrows contorting inward, accentuating that ugly bony ridged Minmatarian forehead. "You brought this on us, didn't you... they told us it was you, Commander Floreina... I've met you and I didn't believe it."

“Back away,” Floreina repeated as she calculated the capacity of the two Minmatars flanking her to make a sudden lunge and incapacitate her, and simultaneously calculated her own capacity to scale her way back up the cargo crates and regain her tactical advantage.

“You made this happen, didn’t you?” he asked, the minor cuts and burns across his face drawing even more attention to his sudden anger. “They told us you were to blame.”

“They have their tactical reasons for telling you things,” she replied, just as she made the decision to begin her climb instead of drawing her weapons. The two slaves to either side, both unarmed, continued staring in shock on their Amarrian superior.

Floreina jumped, planting each foot on an opposing crate, and shifted her weight back and forth, hopping upward, bouncing left and right, planting each foot precariously into the tiny ridges in the crates. After several cycles she was able to catch the top of a crate, just as the slaves below seemed to realize that their duty was to attack her. She scrambled, rolled over the edge, splayed out on her back, and panted. The pounding of her heart and the pain shooting from her stomach were only slightly more noticeable than the pain throughout her body of overworked muscles and nanite enhancements.

The screams and sobs of the injured slaves suddenly came to light, as though they had been deadened a moment earlier by her tactical thoughts. She sought to deaden them again, and closed her eyes and put her hands across her stomach to pray.

The Lord was there, as always, within moments of closing her eyes and shutting out the rest of the world. There, as always, constantly reminding her of His love and devotion, and of His greater plan. Everything that had just occurred and everything that would happen was all part of His plan. Nothing could fail in the grandest scheme of things, as long as there was faith. He didn’t promise her survival, and he didn’t promise her glory... but He promised her an experience. And He asked her to take her rest, then get to her feet and ride that experience for all it was worth.

Master? Mahran asked through the haze from the back of her mind. Ma’am, are you okay?

I’m alive, she replied, and paused, not wishing to think of anything else. Finally she asked, Are they climbing after me?

They’re thinking about it, came the answer.

Floreina groaned, still lying on her back, comforted by the surface, as though this were not a packing crate in a cargo hold, but a cushioned couch in a temple foyer.

Yup, they're climbing now, Mahran announced. They're helping each other up... What are you doing Master?

Okay, okay. She drew her right handgun, rolled to the side and scrambled to her feet.

She scanned her surroundings, focusing on the individuals attempting to climb the crates. "Get down!" she ordered. "Everyone! Get down now!" She drew her left weapon and continued scanning, her combat system cycling targeting crosshairs to the foreheads of potentially aggressive Minmatar as they either continued their climb or reacted to Floreina's orders.

And Floreina looked beyond the tactical, to see the shattered remains of the other half of the cargo bay, the packing material and shredded sections of container hulls. Food rations littered everything, now powdered and torn; electronics, repair drones and piping lay battered across the floor.

...and body parts scattered randomly near the far end of the bay... And she noticed bodies in the remaining aisles, some just one or two crates closer to the blast, either lying dead and scorched or writhing and screaming, shaking or sobbing.

Was this what the Lord wanted her to experience?

But many of their friends knelt beside them, or were rushing to their aid, or scrounging through debris for medkits... barking orders, and information. They all seemed to be moving and conversing to find ways to help their partners.

...so perhaps that's what the experience meant... to endure great horror, and then come together to overcome it... but the horror still being an integral and vital part of the experience... and the great loving Lord is behind all of it.

She came back to point her weapon down at one of the Minmatars now peeking over the top of her own crate. "Get down!" she shouted. "Everyone, get off the crates, or I will kill you!"

"You did this to us!" screamed a slave named Sheepnir from below. "Floreina! You did this to us! We've been ordered to kill you!"

The closest slave, named Rotundo, continued hauling himself up, with help from below, clearly more loyal than he was intelligent. Floreina opted for a sudden boot to the head, and he tumbled back to the floor with a cry. Behind her, on the last row of cargo crates, another slave poked his

head above the edge and lifted a pipe section to set it on the top of the crate. The database immediately identified him by the name of Steined.

"Kill her!" shouted a slave identified as Grandan, standing near an adjacent crate. "They'll simply drop another grenade unless *we* kill her first."

"Everyone, grab a pipe and start climbing!" shouted another, identified by the name of Hyphorn. "She can't kill all of us!"

Floreina moved sideways, to get a shot around an overhead beam, and jumped to the next crate. The target centered and stuck on Steined as he hauled himself up over the ledge, still clutching his pipe. His face seemed to melt away as she fired the laser into his forehead. His body staggered and fell backward against the lip of the crate, the pipe falling to the top surface. He seemed to hold on the top as his body twitched, then his leg slipped over the edge and pulled the rest of his corpse down with it.

She turned toward Hyphorn, centering her target on his forehead. "I believe that I can," she replied. "I don't want to, but I can." And she screamed as powerfully as she could handle: "I don't want to kill you; I am not your enemy. The Amarrians who lied to you about my status as the traitor—those are your true enemies."

Her combat system registered a motion behind her, and ordered her to duck as she became aware of a pipe section coming toward her. She dodged; though the pipe descended off to the side to roll into another gap between crates. She turned around, her rear vision already processing to identify the thrower.

The slave was identified as Morgion as he slipped behind a crate. Floreina began moving to come out behind him and get a downward shot at him. She leapt over a gap, seeing other, less aggressive slaves below her, and came up behind him. She targeted and fired a shot into his head as he leaped over another slave innocently attempting to bandage someone's tattered leg.

Floreina looked around to see other slaves peeking their heads up, and 'secretly' signaling to each other for an attack. She had only a moment to prepare her position, and made a decision to gain higher ground. She leapt to the next crate, holstered her weapons and jumped up to grab the steel support girder over her head and swung her legs upward to scramble on top. Straddling the beam, and crossing her feet beneath her to lock herself in, she drew her pistols and allowed her systems to target the nearest of the slaves.

She fired off two more shots, one from each hand, connecting with the heads of two more aggressive Minmatar as they peaked over the tops of nearby crates.

And Floreina screamed furiously, her face burning hot and her eyes unwittingly closing as the force of her words caused the nanites to power up within her throat. "Get down! Get down! Get down! Or die!" She continued into a torrent of screaming insults. "This is not your path to salvation! I am not your enemy and you have been misled. If you continue you will die for nothing. Your lives will be a waste and you will not gain salvation! I am no enemy of our Lord, nor our people, nor our way of life!"

She shot another slave as he came too close.

"Please don't make me do this!" she screamed, her temples feeling as though they would burst, the sound echoing painfully against the steel interior.

"Traitor!" someone shouted, his face hidden below the edge of the crates, and several other slaves, now hiding themselves below, began repeating. "Master Floreina, the traitor!"

"That's a lie!" she shouted. "I can prove it."

She stared into the eyes of another Minmatar, identified as Fargar as he looked over the top of his crate, his comrades holding him up precariously from below. Floreina trained her weapon on him, and simultaneously watched his partner, by name of Feen, with her rear camera as he crept toward her from behind. Her left hand came up and from behind her back, her targeting systems centered through her rear camera, accounting for an upside down pistol.

And she fired into Feen's head, just as he crawled over another nearby space between cargo containers. His body fell to the floor unceremoniously and meaninglessly, as though he had never existed at all.

At the same time, she continued staring into the eyes of his friend, Fargar.

"Get down," she said, more calmly now. "Please don't make me do this..."

And finally, they began giving up, seeing Floreina's nearly perfect accuracy and retreated back to the floor. She waved her weapons threateningly at the remaining few, and they eventually began their descent.

"Good choice folks," Floreina shouted. "Tend to your fallen comrades..."

Floreina allowed herself to relax, leaning against a vertical girder, and sat wide-eyed, staring in shock at the world, though her gaze only focused on a small section of ceiling.

For a long time, Floreina simply sat and felt the breath passing through her lungs and throat, feeling her medical implant doing its job from behind the scenes, subtly altering her senses with the effects of the pain killers and steroids. She heard the voices of the Minmatar, some whispering of her treachery, unaware of her audio isolation software, others suggesting that they didn't have all the facts and shouldn't pass judgment, others claiming that she was Amarrian and that made it a sin to attack her, regardless of other factors, and still others completely ignoring the issue and focusing on helping bandage their injured shipmates. A hundred different voices processed in the background, separated from her forward consciousness, feeding her only occasional summaries of the conversations below.

She scanned the bay for another half minute, then, despite the warnings, she leaned back and closed her eyes. Just for a few moments, she told herself.

Hey, Mahran; what are you up to? She asked. I didn't hear you giving me any advice up there. I just had to deal with a lot of hassle... where were you?

Trying to think of some sort of advice to give you, and failing miserably... he replied. ...I'm a Minmatar, remember... and... Master, I don't know if I can handle this...

What are you talking about? How is it that you're worried about yourself after what just happened to me?

I have a bit of a problem up here, he told her. I didn't want to mention anything until you were safe.

Floreina opened her eyes and simply stared outward, absently watching the blackened far wall of the cargo bay and the support beam before her and seeing little else with her human consciousness. She sighed. *What's the problem?*

The capsule command crew is planning to break through the door to the central pod chamber with a series of explosives.

Already? She asked. They're willing to risk the electronics in that room?

Yes, Ma'am. They've gotten word from other parts of the ship.

Do they know what's going on? She asked.

For the most part, yes. They know you're behind it, they know you've sabotaged the systems and crippled all major communications. They know you're in the cargo bay and believe your goal is to get up here and re-fit your own body

into Allihence's capsule. So yes, they've got it all figured out... with the exception of me. They think I'm a computer virus.

Okay, Floreina started slowly. You know what you need to do then. You know how important it is that we not allow them access to the pod chamber.

I don't think I can do this...

Yes, you can, Little Buddy. We talked about this. We both knew this was a possibility. The drones are sitting ready and available for your use.

These are Amarrians, he softly reminded her. I should be willing to sacrifice myself before killing Amarrians...

But not in this situation, she replied. You know that we're doing the right thing. Allihence must be removed from command somehow.

With all due respect, Master, but is it really likely that we succeed in our original plan at this point?

We owe it to our Lord and to the Amarrian people to try. We appreciate your desire to protect Amarrians, but you need to remember your obligation to me and to the long-term goals of our people and our Lord. Now I want you to do what needs to be done and I don't want any more arguments about it.

Yes, Ma'am, he conceded.

Thanks, Buddy, she said.

She scanned the cargo bay, making sure the slaves weren't attempting another sneak attack, then put her head in her hands, covering her face and pressing, as though the pressure could push out the experiences. She couldn't blame Mahran for hesitating. She had killed just as many slaves moments earlier, and watched the deaths of many more; but when you were talking about Amarrians, the morality and feelings were entirely different. Even the slaves could see that... but even though her slave was doing the deed, she was responsible.

Floreina attempted to relax for another half minute as part of her consciousness stared blank and unthinking out at the world, barely able to process the situation, while the back of her mind was a whirlwind of data processing and tactical analyzations, though shut off from what she considered her 'self'. For right now, she wanted blankness.

She put her head against the support beam in front of her and felt the cold against her forehead.

But finally she pulled up and focused on the slaves below. "The situation is very serious, as I'm sure you all can see," she shouted. "I have been framed for treason, and the enemies of the Empire were willing to kill all of you in order to silence me. You saw it. You saw the other Amarrians plant that bomb, and I was right here with you. The truth is, folks, I have information about great abuses aboard this ship. Abuses

toward our slaves... abuses that disgrace all of us. I wished to bring these abuses to light, but certain individuals decided to plant evidence against me in order to silence me."

Mahran, can you find a datapad in this room and connect with it.

One moment—Mahran stuttered. Distracted.

"I have proof of these abuses," she continued. "If anyone has a datapad available give me the access code and I can connect with it and show you a video of the kinds of things our captain and her friends enjoy doing to their slaves." Several moments later she heard shouts from several slaves, and picked the first one returned from her voice recognition. The slave shouted back the limited access code for the datapad, and Floreina immediately ordered Mahran to connect and begin streaming the video of the gladiator competition.

"That occurred on this very ship," she shouted at the few slaves who could see the datapad. At the same moment, her tactical planner warned that while this was worth a shot, the chances were low that this would cause a stir among the Minmatar. They would see that these were not highly regarded slaves, and that any slave who had been as successful and loyal in his studies to become a crew member on an Abaddon would not have to worry about being exposed to such abuse. Besides, Minmatar weren't well-known for caring about others.

But a moment later, her seemingly solid and reliable character analyzers were proven wrong as she heard the gasps of horror of several slaves. She shouted for codes for other datapads and within a couple minutes, Mahran had connected a dozen of them and began feeding the stream. She heard gasps from all over the room as the slaves began to see it, and Floreina realized that they were intelligent enough to differentiate between an abuse that is arguably necessary, such as the detonation just minutes earlier, and one that is not.

"This is what our captain enjoys in her spare time," she told the slaves. "Her view on you is not about protecting you or protecting society, or guiding you toward salvation. Her goal is to take pleasure in this kind of suffering. Her mistreatment of you is a result."

She paused and listened, focusing and quieting her mind to help her systems isolate and interpret so many different voices.

"Do any of you know who attacked us?"

And the collective answer from the slaves came back no.

"They are abolitionists."

And there were gasps throughout the room.

"They want to set all of you free, and to be honest, I believe it would be better for your souls, and better for The Empire if you were to be set free instead of supporting someone who is as disgraceful to our people as our captain. As free men and women, you can still devote yourself to our Lord, and that is why I will not attempt to stop the abolitionists today... besides the fact that they are too powerful and too cruel."

"They come to steal us?" came a shout from below.

"They have somehow crippled this ship..." Floreina continued. "...and, folks... I must remind you, that yes, they are trying to steal you, however, you must understand that these abolitionists have worked with Allihence in the past to help her cover other slave abuses."

She took a deep breath and felt her head still swimming as she tried to coherently form her words in a manner the Minmatar could understand.

"The abolitionists wish to quote-unquote 'rescue' you, but if they cannot rescue you, mark my words, they want you to suffer as much as possible whilst in the care of Amarrians. They hate our way of life with such a blind passion that you cannot understand the lengths they will go through to promote the abuse of the Minmatar within our culture and otherwise attempt to make the Amarrian way of life look evil. However, if they board our ship and attempt to remove you from our protection, you should go with them, and the Lord will not punish you, for there is nothing to be gained for fighting for a corrupted captain. As long as you remain faithful to our Lord, you will be fine. You can all be free... We have no other choice to avoid the counter-productive nature of our captain... But do not trust the abolitionists beyond that."

Mahran, how's it going up there? she silently interrupted herself. *Are the pod crew dealt with?*

After a long second, he responded, *They're... dying...* The words came through garbled and twisted, as though he were having trouble focusing.

It's okay, Little Buddy; it had to be done... I'm sorry it had to be this way...

Pushing the thought aside, she returned to the slaves. "I need your help. I need to get out of here; to get off this ship so that I can inform the proper Amarrian authorities of the abuses occurring, because we all know that the abolitionists and the Republic have no interest in ending these abuses because they provide such convenient excuses for their actions against the Amarrian people."

"How can we trust you?" someone shouted.

She picked his voice out of the crowd and turned to see a slave named Steinmar. She targeted and raised her weapon to point at his head, leaning awkwardly to the side to get a view into the alley between

containers. He stood in the aisle and stared back, either aware that she did not intend to shoot, or just not caring.

“Because I’m not killing you,” she replied. “I have only killed those of you who tried to kill me, and I don’t feel good about it. True Amarrrians, the ones who honestly care about God’s love and the deeper meaning of The Scriptures are the compassionate ones... we are the ones who care about our slaves and do not treat them as though they are not God’s creatures. You have all been around long enough to know that most slave owners are good people, but there are a few bad apples out there, even Amarrrians, and once in a while, you must choose a side, and our Lord expects you to make the correct choice... but he gave you a tool to make that choice: your hearts. Look into your hearts, Minmatar, and feel God’s love, and take a look at one of the datapads being passed around, and ask yourself if our Lord would wish you to support that, and look at your injured comrades and ask if our Lord wants us to obey someone who would slaughter the very ones they’re supposed to protect, simply to silence someone who wishes to speak the truth.”

She sat, trying to calm her nerves, and scanned their voices, paying particular attention to the whisperers, who believed they were speaking under her radar. But they seemed to be less and less active as her speech went on.

Floreina spoke for several more minutes, repeating the same concepts in different words. Finally she asked, “Can I come down now? Can I trust you all to know who your master is? I am Amarrrian, and I am here, right here and right now. Our Lord expects you to respect that.”

And she began to lower herself from the beam, placing her weapons in their respective storage locations on her thighs. “If anyone attempts to attack me, I expect the rest of you to do what is necessary to stop them.”

She dropped to the surface of the crate and drew her right firearm again, just to have it in her hand. She began pacing, wandering across the tops of the cargo containers, ducking under the support beams, hopping the alleyways and studying the slaves below and the destruction all around.

“Okay, I want everybody to move into the open,” she announced, “Everyone not tending to a medical task, I want you over here.” She motioned for them to move. It was mostly an exercise in obedience, to confirm that they were truly hers and not just pretending, but their reactions indicated that it helped them understand their place and comforted them to have orders to follow.

How are things going, Mahran? she asked.

Things seem to be shaping up on my end, he replied, at least in a tactical sense. It seems like crew throughout the ship are either giving up, or sitting back to wait for Allihence to regain control. Word of the explosion has gone out, and many believe you were killed, and they hope that without you, your 'virus' will not be able to maintain control. However, guards are still posted at every possible route to the pod chamber. The easiest way I see is through about twelve different guards.

Floreina scanned her own map, rotating it frustratingly, searching for some magical angle that would reveal the secret route to the end of the rainbow. Her search concluded that Mahran was correct. There was virtually no way to get there safely now that the captain's personal guards had been capable of blasting their way through enough hatchways to gain access to the sensitive areas.

"Let us pray," she said finally, now that the slaves were organized. She sat down on the edge of the last of the rows of crates and looked out on the hundred and fifty slaves packed into the open area between the rows of crates and the nearest bulkhead. She led them in prayer, first giving thanks for the bounties of the universe and the myriad wonders of New Eden that make life so diverse and interesting. Then she asked for His guidance for her the slaves, to help them overcome adversity, and find the path toward righteousness and salvation. And she asked for specific guidance and ideas for their situation; on getting her and the slaves off the ship safely.

Silently she asked for forgiveness for all the Amarrians and innocent slaves she had killed, but the Lord replied without words, showing His love, and directing her attention toward the complexity of her own emotions and the thrill of the adrenaline pumping through her veins, and reminded her that it was all necessary for the story He had created for New Eden. She had nothing to fear, and nothing to feel guilty about.

She finished by returning to a note of appreciation, specifically thanking Him for the loyalty of these hundred and fifty individuals before her, then more generally thanking Him for The Scriptures and His system of society that could allow Minmatar and Amarrians to come together in peace and love for a common purpose.

"Master," spoke a slave by the name of Kaurine, "I had an idea—the Lord gave me an idea during your prayer..."

She nodded at him.

"You can take someone's clothing, and dress up like one of us... cut your hair, and at first glance you would look like one of us."

"They would recognize me as Amarrian far too quickly," she replied, holding back a laugh at the cliché idea that had been her first thought as well. "It could work if a large portion of you came with me."

"That's what I meant," Kaurine replied. "We can tell anyone we meet that we have orders to repair something... they told us that all the communications are down... no one would know... would they?"

Her systems flashed a warning. She had an hour and a half before the abolitionists outside would officially consider her dead, and would begin their 'plan B' attack, for which Floreina had been allowed no tactical input. But despite the time crunch, she knew she needed to take some time to plan.

"Okay," she said, "let's work together and figure this out."

Something doesn't feel right, Master.

I was thinking the same thing... have you been able to see anything?

No, Ma'am. They managed to put out the lights in a couple more rooms.

Floreina looked around at the sixteen slaves surrounding her and their plain brown one-piece work suits. Purely functional, they sported no unnecessary stitching or even something as frivolous as a collar. Even as Floreina discussed their life and death situation in the back of her mind with Mahran, she somehow couldn't help thinking about the slave suit she now wore, and the identical clothing on the others around her, and allowed herself to feel the disgrace, as though wearing their clothing could make her one of them... but fortunately her normal uniform remained underneath, creating a heavy and uncomfortable load.

They're aware they're being watched, Mahran continued. They're taking more precautions than just shooting out the lights. They've all gone to silent comms.

Somehow they would know she was still alive. There were simply too many possibilities for communication, and very few of the remaining slaves in the cargo bay wouldn't be willing to give away that information.

There would be another fire fight; for certain...

...they would see her coming.

Unlocking, Mahran informed her, referring to the hatchway ahead. Clear. Ready for your passkey.

Floreina typed her password into the tiny terminal on the door and watched it slide open as she continued thinking of the inevitable, imagining the situation and the view, and allowing her tactical systems to create projections and strategies based on her fantasies.

They would come from numerous hatchways at once, blowing their explosives in unison to get the surprise on them. Then they would run in and fire on everyone, and she would be forced to sneak out some back angle as she watched the slaves being slaughtered around her, ducking behind them and even pulling one or two along to act as a barrier.

Master, I fear there may have been a hacking attempt on the side door along the next hallway. I just tested it, and the time signatures don't match. It's dark on the other side now. Mahran paused. *It's dark up ahead as well, through the next hatch.*

Are you kidding? She asked. *They're going to be waiting on the other side.*

I did a head count of the security officers and there's only two unaccounted for, he replied. *There could be others, but only two security officers.*

Floreina paused for a second inside the next corridor as she took the names and checked the history on the two missing officers, gauging their predicted level of combat skill and implant technology.

Can you trust all the slaves in your group? Mahran asked.

Not really. Software only predicts a sixty percent chance they'll all turn out to be loyal... but we've got no choice at this point.

They reached the other end of the corridor within a few moments. *I'm just going to poke my hand in and fire a shot. I want you to watch closely. The blasts should light up the room enough for you to see who's in there. I want you to immediately call out the number of people inside. I'll pull my hand back and shut the hatch, and you seal it again.*

Okay, sounds good. Are you ready?

Ready. She replied.

Unlocking... said Mahran. *...clear.*

She typed in her passcode.

The door buzzed a rejection.

"Excuse me?" she said aloud, and punched her code in again.

Another rejection.

Mahran?

A long pause. I don't know... he replied. *Trying to check.*

She typed the code in again and clicked enter, but still nothing.

Are you typing your code in properly?

*This isn't funny, Mahran. Unlock the door.
I'm trying! I don't understand. It looks fine from this end.*

Separated by just a few hundred milliseconds, two voices came suddenly to her attention.

"Master Floreina!" shouted a slave, pointing frantically down the hall toward the hatch along the side of the corridor.

Behind you! Mahran communicated simultaneously,

And she turned in time to see the hatch along the side wall sealing shut after being open for only a moment. Her scanning systems picked up a tiny motion and played for her an instant replay in the corner of her vision, zooming in on the object as it was tossed into the hallway. She focused on it, even as she pushed the slaves nearby to see between them. The recording ran several passes of enhancement and recognized the object as another grenade.

She could not identify the type or timing, but was able to determine that it was much smaller than the previous one.

She yelled at the nearest slave with the intention of ordering him to kick it as she had the explosive in the cargo bay. But before she could finish her statement, a flash sent her vision dark as her safety system shut down her vision and snapped her eyes shut in response to the blinding light.

A wave flowed through her body, the pores of her flesh shifting in and out. Floreina staggered, feeling light, as though she didn't really need her legs, but knowing somehow that she did. She focused on putting her feet down as she opened her eyes and allowed her visuals to fade slowly back into place.

She continued stumbling, stepping backwards, grasping the nearby slaves for support. Finally she caught herself and looked out to see smoke rising in great, suffocating plumes from the spot on the floor.

It was like a volcano in the distance, and as she stabilized she gazed as though it were simply a sight to behold on some abstract visual plane.

Her medical implant was doing something... she could tell... injections... of some kind...

I need to get out of here, she told herself, staggering away from the explosion. She turned up toward the hatch, and seemed to float to it, her feet carrying her automatically, but realized she probably couldn't get through. She turned back toward the other exits, but saw the plumes of smoke filling the passage and stopped, suddenly begging her implant for assistance... a tactical readout... a direction...

...just tell me what to do...

And the slaves began lying down to go to sleep... one by one... or perhaps all at the same time; she couldn't tell the difference... they lay down around her to sleep on the floor... having decided this was a good time for a nap, not bothering to tell their master because they thought she was all-knowing and didn't need to be told...

Master! she heard a familiar voice from far away.

She mumbled, trying to form words, but comprehending only nonsense, and hearing nothing. Pulling the words from her mouth to the back of her head, she tried to form them to talk to the person in her imagination.

Master! Get to the far door, now!

She saw visuals; a bright green continuous flash, unnatural and overlapping all other vision.

...follow the glow...

The systems would offer guidance... her only hope at this point. The machine in her head and the voice from far away...

She saw the bodies below... the sleeping Minmatar... as the computer guided her between them, still staggering and faltering despite the assistance.

She pushed past the plumes of smoke, seeming to weave and wander across her path, and moved beyond the Minmatar bodies. She stumbled toward the hatch, seeing nothing but the smoke and the green highlighted outline.

And Floreina lost herself in the waves of sensation and computations. Her existence drifted and distorted, expanding and contracting into a confused mass of perception. And she touched the Lord, and felt Him carrying her forward, and twisted into Him and they melted together...

Had she simply been a part of Him this entire time... just a fragment of His existence, floating through time and space?

Or did she exist as the computations in the circuits of her mind? Perhaps that was truly who she was... the mechanics that guided her... giving her all her potential... maybe she was just an experiment by the computer in a new form of thought...

Or was she someone else entirely... standing in the kitchen next to an open door, her long flowery sundress flapping gently in the breeze as she mixed fruit and sugar-cream into little cups and sprinkled them with cinnamon.

And children ran around outside, screaming in high-pitched laughter, suffocating the music. Their screams pierced her eardrums, but were

somehow soothing, like the never-ending pounding rhythm of a dance club.

She would be happy in the grass and sun, among children and trees...

...but, somehow, no more, and no less than in the life she already knew.

Just before picking up the tray of desserts, she felt children below her, tugging at her dress, wanting a taste of the treats.

"No hands allowed", she told them as she put a dollop of cream on each of their noses. She picked up the tray to head outside as she watched them extending their tongues and shaking their faces.

And her body hit the cold steel floor of the corridor.

Her arms fell limp as she thought about the little cups of fruit.

That was in another life... another world that so easily could have been... with just a few minor tweaks to her path and priorities... it wasn't better; it wasn't worse... it was just... different...

...but that was not the life she had chosen.

Dear, Lord, please awaken my master... if you could just help me open her mind... guide my words, Lord... she must awaken... I cannot reach her on my own, Lord...

Please, Floreina... please don't leave me...

The voice from the back of her mind... the voice of her friend... and the voice of God, speaking through her friend...

The voice flipped a switch... slowly and carefully setting events into motion.

She saw circuit chips... rows upon rows of them, controlling great machines, giant gears and tiny computers within a great, bottomless warehouse. The machine powered up with a groan... or perhaps it had always been running... the cogs and gears of the universe, ever reliable, massive, precise and beautiful...

And a cool liquid began to flow over the machine, through its turbines and cables and circuits. At first the water threatened to short-circuit the engine... but as the liquid flowed, the instruments became brighter, faster... more efficient... more purposeful, as though they fed on the liquid... She came to the awareness that the water was part of the incredible mechanism, a fluid contrast to the hard, metallic logic of the gears.

And together they flowed and clanked in unison, coming together to form their own unique and harmonious creation.

And the gears brought Floreina slowly from the haze, carrying her liquid form, drop by drop, through the systems, to bond with the circuitry and form a person.

Master, please awaken...

The darkness of unconsciousness faded away as the visual darkness remained black.

Locked in a room with The Great Machine... for her own safety...

Mahran, she thought, projecting the concept outward, through her mechanics and circuitry as she slowly formed an idea of the meaning of the word.

Master, came a reply from a familiar voice, *...can you communicate?*

I—she started, just as sensations came rushing back, and she felt her body hanging awkwardly, her limbs twisted tight behind her, forming a shape highly unnatural for a human...

But still she saw only blackness, and felt her body only from a distance, The Great Machine holding her back from her corporeal self... to protect her...

Master, they've captured you... please awaken...

I'm here, Floreina replied finally.

They're carrying you toward an interrogation chamber.

Hmm... she replied, slowly allowing her comprehension to wrap around the concept. She felt her wrists and ankles behind her, plastic bindings digging painfully into her flesh. She attempted to struggle, but found her commands cut short. The safety systems explained that she should not allow her captors to realize she was awake.

Her system was probably right. Sometimes people need to be protected from themselves.

This must be what slaves feel like... to be surrounded by the overwhelming horrors and complexity of New Eden, to see it and experience the emotions of it, and yet still be locked in this warm cocoon of safety and protection, provided by your ever-loving master.

To have your decisions made for you... and know that you are safe...

Master, they have taken many precautions... plastic restraints, silent communications... can you see anything, Master?

No, she replied.

Can you hear?

I don't think so.

What can we do? he asked frantically. *I don't know what to do, Master!*

I don't know, either.

She focused on her breathing, automated and rhythmic, and began guiding her tactical calculations with her theories on the situation, even as the same systems guided her own thinking.

They would destroy the connections to her implant first and foremost. They would attach a specially tuned yet very dangerous electrical pulse to her mental socket, frying the implant's power supply, and shutting down all artificial mental functionality.

And there was only one way to prepare for such an attack.

Mahran... buddy... she said as she thought through her decision and pleaded with her tactical systems to reveal another avenue. *I need to go now...*

Master...?

I need to shut down my internal computer... I think this might be it for me.

Master, no... please don't tell me that...

I don't think there's any other way...

Can you turn it back on if you escape...

I would need a proper replacement battery... then thirty minutes for the boot up process...

She paused as she began the shutdown routines. Applications ended their processing, and one by one began saving vital data to her secured permanent drive. Sadness overcame her, as if she were, out of grave necessity, slicing the throat of a friend.

Master, please! There must be something. You told me this plan was foolproof!

Oh... She paused. That's just an expression, Son... And if there's a way out of this, Little Buddy, I don't have any time to think of it now... I'm going to be going offline in about thirty seconds and you'll be on your own. If there's anything you can think of to get me out of this, then go ahead and give it a shot, but if you fail, Mahran... don't worry; you've done everything I could have hoped for; you've served me well, and you've served our Lord and you have nothing to be ashamed of. I'm in this mess because of my own mistakes.

I don't think I can survive without you...

It's still possible, she told him. You're in a desperate situation, but you can begin trying other avenues. You can contact the abolitionists and enlist their help—if you're careful about trusting them—as they have some sort of contingency plan in case of my death... or you can begin talking to the slaves... you

still have a small chance to get away... and you could be free—be free and still maintain God's grace and love...

I don't even know where to begin...

I know, Buddy... I'm sorry I got us into this; you don't deserve this... but keep your head up; there's no doubt in my mind that in the eyes of our Lord, Mahran, you have made it. You have nothing to be concerned with for the next life.

Thank you, Master. I'm sorry it had to end this way.

That's alright. She directed her communications to stay open even as the rest of her consciousness shut down around her. *This life has been a wild ride, and I couldn't have asked for anything more...*

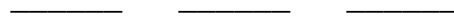
I love you, Master Floreina.

I love you too, Little Buddy... I need to go now...

Pain grew in the pit of her stomach as she disabled her short range signal, cutting off her slave and her lifeline. The application stowed itself and the implant's operating system began its final shut-down procedures.

Gears slowed, grinding out the last of their momentum in a massive creaking moan, and The Great Machine terminated its processes. The lights, circuits and interface terminals, slowly, one by one, went black.

And the water drained, gently at first, then descended, through massive cascading falls and splashes, into the endless abyss below.



Floreina screamed, feeling the trembling in her throat but hearing no sound as her body slammed to the ground, the grated floor stinging her face as she bounced against it. Her legs and wrists twisted agonizingly in their restraints. She called to her medical implant to tell her if they were in danger of fracturing, and sobbed when her queries returned only emptiness. She felt the implant, a ghost in her mind, a missing, amputated limb. It was there... it had to be... but it made no connections and returned no requests.

New Eden was black and silent, a void filled with faded demons and memories of things that could have been.

Floreina tried to think, re-guiding her mind around her normal avenues of decision making checks and balances, as though searching for the missing pieces of her lost soul.

How could people go through life without being able to confirm facts and conclusions? ...wandering blindly, as though life meant nothing

more than their perceptions... to never have that solid reality, that rock to fall back on, choosing your opinions based on nothing more than popular belief and vague feelings instead of database-driven facts...

She blinked and saw only the vague outlines of shapes, and a subtle light from above. She heard distant voices, muffled and incoherent, though she knew they were directly above her. Her senses, she knew, would slowly return over the next ten minutes or so as her brain tuned itself to life without the computer. But it wouldn't matter; vision would only return visual stimulation with no hope for deeper analytical computations. The human brain is superb for fun and games, feeling love, excitement, fear, wonder, and all the things that make life worth living... but it's quite inept at making real-world, fact-based decisions.

I'm not really a person anymore, she thought as she felt herself being lifted.

Her arms pulled forcefully from her back, twisting her shoulders. Bindings released between her wrists and ankles. Her legs, still bound together at the ankle, were allowed to straighten. She felt hands across her body, holding her in place, and sensed a knife cutting away the slave outfit that covered her normal uniform.

They lifted her again, twisted her in the air and slammed her down into a cold steel seat, identifying itself by its straight, upright stature as the same seat in which Minmatar slaves had endured mind-altering punishments and captured terrorists had experienced much worse.

She screamed in unadulterated pain as her shoulder pounded against the steel and her hands squeezed and constricted into the small of her back as the full weight of her body came down, forcing the bindings into her flesh. She felt the tears drip from her cheeks and blinked to see the vague and distorted outlines of figures standing over her.

People gripped her, forcing her into place as she felt a hand come to her neck. The hand tightened slowly, and pushed her against the seat to hold her in place. The nanites in her neck powered up in response to the pressure, thankfully still active and capable of reacting to certain limited stimuli even if Floreina did not have direct access to their controls. The same would be true of her medical implant, thank the Lord, but her only capacity to sense their existence was the vague feelings she would receive throughout her simplistic, physical self.

Her ankles were released and rapidly re-attached to more permanent, classic lock-and-key style cuffs attached to the base of the interrogation seat. And someone grabbed her hair and forced her head

forward with little regard for the tendons in her neck or the strained hair follicles on her scalp. The restraints on her wrists were removed and immediately replaced behind the chair, her arms wrenched around slits in the sides of the back. She struggled, and found herself pulled tight into her position.

Several hands gripped clumps of Floreina's hair, tugging her scalp in several directions, but evening out to hold her in place.

And she felt the connection slide into place in her mental socket. The familiar connection response and testing sequence, however, remained uncomfortably dormant.

She gritted her teeth in preparation, and shook her head in another violent and painful attempt to fight back. A connection popped and the cable disconnected to hang from the opposing latch. A hand gripped her chin tightly, squeezing a thumb and forefinger into her cheeks. The connection was replaced and held tight with another set of fingers.

Floreina waited for the hum of the power surge device to know to prepare herself for the shock. The sweat beaded from her forehead to mix with the tears and drip onto the hand that held her jaw in place.

But the shock came before the hum, and as her heart jumped and her throat constricted, and every nanite in her body surged into painful activity, she remembered absently that she still had not reformed her natural auditory connections.

Her body tingled with the electricity and the nanites burned with their sudden release of energy, but the pain subsided after only a few seconds, and she paused to make sure she wasn't overly confused, indicating that the shock hadn't harmed any of her natural brain matter as it most likely would have if her implant had been active.

She slumped forward and went limp, partially from her body's desire to do so, and partially from the hope that her captors would think that her implant had not been prepared for the jolt.

The hands removed themselves from their tight clasp and the connection to her mental socket was removed, and for a moment Floreina was left with only empty, silent, blackness. Then hands were on her throat, pulling her uniform's turtleneck down and sealing a large steel cuff around her neck and securing it to the back of the seat. The cuff locked, and while she felt it all around the circumference of her neck, it did not feel excessively tight until she tried to swallow, creating a discomforting pressure.

Then, again, nothing.

Time dragged on, a fluid and incoherent mass. It could have been minutes, or milliseconds, with her clock now torn from her consciousness.

Then she felt a finger flicking her cheeks, her forehead and nose, the fingernail slapping irritatingly again and again, randomly, across her face. She didn't respond to their taunting, but had to sniff her running nose, unable to control the emotions running rampant in the otherwise empty flesh of her mind. They would understand that her vision and hearing would be cut off and they would have to wait to interrogate her.

The question was what would they do with her until then?

Their most common tool for discipline was a small handgun that output microwaves tuned to stimulate pain receptors, causing agonizing, yet rarely damaging pain. The weapon was very effective on slaves and practical because it didn't prevent them from returning to work.

However, in this case, they wouldn't care about her ability to function.

Ideas began moving through her head as she felt another knife cutting into the right leg of her uniform. The knife moved upward to cut a slit from her ankle to the top of her thigh, then around, to expose nearly the entirety of her right leg.

Then the sensation was gone, and she sat, simply wondering what physical sensation would come next, having nothing left to focus on or calculate. Her heart pounded, vibrating rhythmically from head to toe, and her skin trembled across her body.

But as she felt the vibrations slowly growing into an uncontrollable scream of terror, she felt what she had been missing...

And the Lord was there, as though *He* were praying to *her* for a change. She had for so long associated the Amarrarian Lord with only joy and love, that to see God behind the happenings of this moment gave a sudden shock that quickly faded into warm acceptance.

Floreina escaped into prayer, ignoring the contrast of the breeze on her right leg compared to the warmth of her left, snuggled inside the flame retardant mercenary uniform, growing rapidly damp with sweat.

This is it Lord... I thank you for all you have given me... and I understand that this is all part of your ways... you've torn me down to something less than human for the last moments of my life... I'm waiting to be tortured... waiting to experience what will be the greatest pain of my life... and I'm scared... I'm so terrified, Lord... and ashamed...

And He was there, simply listening.

But this pain and terror and humiliation is just another reminder of how good you have been to me during this life, my Lord. The contrasts... the beautiful contrasts... agony and ecstasy, love and hate... you taught me to embrace both sides; to be able to appreciate the true beauty and magic of New Eden... and I will do my best to embrace them as I slip into this uncontrolled decline...

She felt a hand on her exposed knee, pushing it to her right. A man's back pressed against her left leg, forcing her knees apart, her ankles still bound tightly to the base of the seat.

A test is coming. Prepare yourself, Floreina.

The pain began suddenly, digging in a few centimeters above her right knee. Her skin tightened, and muscles constricted throughout her body, forcing her spine into an unnatural arch, gagging her as her neck pulled against its restraint. The torturer pushed back, spreading her legs until her outer thighs pressed against the base of the armrests, and the restraints dug into her ankles.

After several moments she was able to force her back into position against the seat and clamp her feet into position to endure the cutting. She coughed and gagged, quenching an urge to vomit and slowly recovered from the choking, only to feel the burning of what was most likely a precision welding torch digging into the flesh of her thigh.

She forgot her prayers as she trembled and did everything she could to press herself into the back of the chair, as though she could become one with it and slip into a land of inanimate objects.

As she smelled the scent of burning flesh, her head fell backwards and she felt her screams vibrating violently but nearly silently through the length of her throat.

The pain moved slowly across her flesh, tracing out lines, every few seconds the concentrated suffering expanding to a slightly new region of skin, moving leisurely up her thigh. But she forced herself to find a spot in her mind, a blankness that could allow her to shut everything out and enter a non-zone of mental functionality, and simply wait it out. Even with an undisciplined natural mind, it could be done.

And as the torture continued, she edged closer and closer to the point where she felt the pain would send her over the limits and stop her heart. The sweat began dripping from her face on a constant, rhythmic timing, mixing with her tears and the saliva draining from the edge of her mouth.

But as time dragged on, she began hearing her own screams again, and the absent shouts of her torturer. She saw the lights beating

down from the ceiling, blurry masses of light, and watched them become clearer over an agonizingly long, yet uncertain length of time.

Dear, Lord, I don't know if I can handle this... is it not time to just end this?

But still the suffering continued, endlessly, up her thigh.

But it wasn't time yet, the Lord communicated through distant yet all encompassing feelings and concepts. Her death would come soon enough; but first she had to prove herself to Him. He would torture her and she would experience it... with appreciation. The Lord demanded this... not for His own glory... but for hers.

And Floreina begged Him to let it be her time; being the only thoughts powerful enough to cut through the sensation of searing flesh.

Hold up your head, commanded the Lord... you're not even dead yet... all you need to do is play the game...

She held on, and somewhere beyond the pain came a sense of interest... and a distant part, deep down, stepped away and saw the moment, as if disconnected from the point in time, seeing only the emotion, and the story of her life, coming rapidly to its conclusion.

You can still feel joy in a situation like this... or perhaps not joy itself, but something similar, a twisted emotion, far more rare, but far more powerful... and every bit as beautiful...

Take this experience and make it yours.

And Floreina screamed, and laughed, hearing the sound of her voice once again, coming into focus. Lifting her head she coughed and adjusted her throat to fit within its restraint. Her mouth opened wide to emit a long, cackling scream, jittering up her body into a torrent of tortured laughter.

The cutting stopped, finally, and she relaxed minutely. Her screams turned to quiet sobs, tempered randomly with the laughter that seemed to regurgitate involuntarily from below.

Her head hung backward and she stared up. The Scriptures quote engraved into the ceiling became slowly recognizable. *The servant will be severely punished, for though he knew his duty, he refused to do it.*

Bending her neck carefully, she looked down to see her right leg a bloody and battered mess, seeing mostly blurry red, and designs and contusions that could have been real or imagined. She tried to focus and felt a wave of dizziness and nausea, and looked up to see the precision cutting torch, just as she had imagined, in the crewman's hand. He walked past the one way window that reflected her blurry mass,

battered and ugly, strapped shamefully to the interrogation seat. The familiar recognition escaped her as she looked up at the man.

He returned with a damp towel and pressed against her wounds. She watched as he mopped up much of the blood, to reveal his design of scars underneath. Her trembling subsided as the soothing cold touched her skin, and she took a deep breath to calm her throat. Looking at the wounds, she imagined they were not hurting quite as much as they should have, considering the already apparent scarring, and felt the slight relaxation from the automated pain meds, most likely being the last of her supply.

“Can you hear me?” asked the soldier.

Floreina didn't reply, only drooped her head as though the electrical surge had damaged her brain.

He slapped the inside of her thigh, and Floreina screamed, her head jolting back up.

“Can you hear me!” he shouted, leaning over the seat.

“Yes!” she cried.

“Take a look at your new title...”

“Huh?” She cocked her head carefully against the neck brace.

He grabbed her hair and pulled her head forward to look down. She coughed and gagged, her eyes snapping shut, and then recovered as the officer loosened his grip. She looked down at her leg.

“Read it to me...”

She squinted, and adjusted herself. Blinking rapidly, she tried to make out the design. “What is that? Fruitier... teacher... treethar... is that a picture of a boat?... ” her eyes rolled and the world spun with sudden dizziness... “Your penmanship sucks...”

“Okay, I'll try to do better on the other leg,” and he marched off to the table where he kept his array of devices, placed just at the corner of her vision. She saw a slave behind the table, nearly out of view, standing at perfect, motionless attention.

“No! Please, no... just tell me what it says... I'm better now... we can just sit and talk...”

“It says, ‘traitor’,” he replied softly, a trembling mark of compassion in his voice. She finally placed his name as Smierdol, one of Allihence's senior security personnel. He turned back toward her.

“Oh,” she said, and looked down again. She laughed as the word became abundantly clear. Now that she knew, the lettering seemed crisp and precise. The painful laughter coursed upward, moving her in new and agonizing ways against her restraints, but helping to relax her

mind and release the constantly building sensations. She focused, bringing her laughter to a light chuckle.

"God, I'm stupid..." she said.

And Smierdol chuckled. "Yeah..."

"Of course that's what you would write... it makes perfect sense now..." Her head bobbed under its own weight, and Floreina groaned, "how did I ever get this far?"

Smierdol wandered before her and folded his arms. "Okay, Commander, I think you have a good idea what the drill is... I'm not going to play a bunch of mind games with you, because you already know them..." He fired the torch and held it up to gaze at the tiny flame. "So you're going to tell me how to disable your computer virus and release our captain," He motioned toward the slave who stepped forward carrying a small medical kit. "I can either start in on other, more interesting parts of your body, Floreina, or I can have this Minmatar apply some nanite cream to those wounds." He motioned again and the slave stepped back to his original position.

He stared into her eyes for a long moment. "How do we do it, Floreina?"

"Huh?"

"How do we disable the virus?"

"Oh... that..." she sighed. "That's a long... complicated process... requiring... stuff..." Her head fell backwards as she mumbled. "...also known as things... and requires physical actions that can be done by a person... with the right intentions... to do such things... if they so choose... all it takes is the right mind-set, you see..." and her rambling trailed off.

"Just give me the codes to disable the virus, Floreina. If you do this, I can give you the choice of a quick and painless death or a day of prayer before your quick and painless death... if we somehow survive..." He shook his head slowly, his eyes remaining fixed on her, two half-slits of calm, yet unadulterated hatred. "How could you do this to us, Commander? You betrayed everyone... your fellow crewmen... you spit on us... you spit on Amarria... and you spit on God."

And she blocked his words with her own. "I live in a zoo..." she mumbled melodically. "I feed the animals in the morning and answer the visitors questions and warn them not to feed the creatures... and I go in their cages... I play with them... to see life from their angle... and sometimes... at night... with the big furry ones... I lean up against

them and take a nap... because animals in cages... they like to sleep a lot..."

Smierdol sighed. "Commander... you can still pull out of this disgrace... Floreina, listen to me..."

"And sometimes... at night... I'll take one or two out and we'll run around the field and play... then... come early dawn... they'll be hungry and eager to get back to their cages..."

"Floreina, I can do a lot worse than what you feel right now..."

And her head popped up. "Not without killing me, you can't..." And she laughed.

"You'd be surprised how resilient little girls can be... which is why I think we're going to try another approach..." he tapped the mirror and a moment later it turned transparent. Floreina looked up to see other soldiers packed into the monitoring booth behind the window.

"You know the concept of a whipping boy, Floreina?" started Smierdol, standing before her, blocking much of her view into the adjacent chamber. "You know something about whipping boys that most people don't know? ...they were actually quite effective... at least for certain types of people... the only drawback is that it doesn't do much for the boy," he chuckled. "But there's times when it's worthwhile."

Smierdol stepped to the side. In the middle of the monitoring room, a slave stood, separated from the soldiers surrounding him. A wire hung from the ceiling and surrounded his neck, his hands unseen behind his back. His mouth hung open, and his eyes stared wide, directly at Floreina.

"Oh..." she started, her defiantly humorous thoughts suddenly ending. She sat motionless.

"You recognize him, Commander?"

She nodded minutely.

"You exploited this one to help sneak you out of the cargo bay..."

And her heart began to ache, almost to the degree that it overwhelmed the burning of her thigh.

"He doesn't deserve this..." she said.

"That's exactly the point, Floreina... that's why whipping boys are so effective... a few of the officers on this ship claim that you care too much for these Minmatar... as though you've forgotten what they truly are... I suppose we're going to find out."

He touched the intercom next to the window. "Do the first one."

She saw one of the other soldiers through the window walk to the center of the room holding a small bolt gun.

"No," Floreina said, shaking her head. "You don't want to do this..."

"You're right... we don't. You're the one doing this."

She shook her head. "This is a disgrace to use Minmatar like this... just like Allihence is a disgrace."

"She's true to her people and to her word and to our Lord... you, on the other hand, took a minor disagreement and used it as an excuse to spit in the face of our entire society, to murder our people, to join in league with terrorists, and to become one with the soulless animals... you're a disgrace to everything Amarrian..."

He could have gone on, Floreina knew, if he had known just the right combination of words, or he could have simply kept on the same verbal path and demolished her emotionally, she knew. But he did not. Every time we speak to people, we have the opportunity to change their lives forever, if only we could find the perfect combination of words.

All Smierdol had to do was mention her father, and what daddy might have thought of her now... ready to die in failure, marked, spiritually and literally as a traitor, and laughing as though it were some kind of joke.

And this innocent, loyal subject was about to suffer for her decisions.

The soldier brought the bolt gun to the slave's knee, as the Minmatar looked back and forth in rapid succession from Floreina to the device. He trembled dramatically, and while his feet were not bound, they remained planted on the floor, ever obedient to their masters.

"Okay, okay," said Floreina, brainstorming her response. "What do you want to know?"

"How do we disable the virus?" shouted Smierdol.

"Okay," she started slowly. "You need to find the transponder that's sending the security signals and disable it."

"More specific."

Floreina watched the soldier, who was paused now, still holding the bolt gun to the man's knee.

"It's attached to a drone that's wandering randomly through the ship... I don't even know where it is... for security purposes, you know... but it's programmed to return at a specific time and place... and it'll respond to my voice... but it can only be shut off with my own mental connection... which you guys have rendered retarded..."

"And...?" asked Smierdol.

"That's it," she replied. "That's how you shut down the virus."

The window turned reflective again, and Floreina looked at herself.

"Excuse me a moment," said Smierdol as he turned and exited the room, shutting the hatch behind him.

Floreina looked at the slave behind the table, as he stood with his back to her, hunched over the desk along the wall, staring at an interface terminal. He looked up momentarily to glance nervously at the mirror, the sweat and redness across his face betraying his sense of disturbance.

"Master Floreina... " he said. "No... I don't understand what you're say—" and he stopped short.

"What?" she asked.

But the slave did not reply, simply continued staring at the terminal.

And Smierdol returned hastily, slamming the hatchway closed. The window became clear again and she saw the same soldier with the bolt gun look up at her to grab her attention and immediately bring the tool down to fire into the slave's waiting knee.

His face turned color, twisting grotesquely and his mouth curled downward and specks of fluid flew from his face as he screamed his silent exclamations of suffering. The wire pulled tight against his neck despite his frantic attempt to balance. Floreina's eyes snapped shut.

"Your every pore betrays your lies, Floreina!" Smierdol shouted. "Without your implant, you're worthless to control your nervous twitches." He flipped a switch on the communications panel and the slave's screams pierced the room, reverberating metallicly against her skull.

Oh, God, why are you punishing me...

And Floreina realized it had been a mistake not to kill herself while she'd had the chance. She hadn't known it would be like this...

"Look at him!" screamed Smierdol, bringing his face close to hers, his voice cracking painfully over top of the slave's. "Look at him, Floreina!"

She turned away, sealed her eyes, and began her own scream, trying to focus on it, as though her voice was all that mattered in the world, the only thing that could drown out everything else.

Smierdol slapped her thigh and the pain expanded outward from her tattered limb, building rapidly upward into a physical entity. A bubble of agony hovered above her thigh, yet, at the same time encompassed her entire existence. As though warping a deeper realm of time and space, it pulled all emotional and intellectual existence in on it.

From a distance she heard the Amarrian's shouts, "Look at what you've done, Floreina!" His hands were on her face, directing her head, grasping a clump of hair, and squeezing her jaw to quell her screams. "This is all you, Floreina!"

"Please kill me!" Floreina screamed her reply. "It's not worth this... it's not worth any of this!"

"You're not taking the easy way out on this one. If you have any courage or honor left, you will open your eyes and take a look at what you've done!"

And the physical pain subsided suddenly as a different sort of pain took hold. He was right. This was her obligation to experience everything. And she opened her eyes to look through the window at the Minmatar.

Smierdol returned to the comm panel and clicked the audio connection, a peaceful silence enveloping the room.

Floreina prayed silently as Smierdol spoke to her. "Floreina, you're in a situation now... I'm going to be straight with you and tell you that there's no chance for you getting out alive. You're going to die, one way or the other... if you were anyone else I'd be trying to make you believe that you could still walk away from this..."

He came forward and knelt before her, looking upward slightly to connect with her eyes. "You thought you were doing the right thing, and I can understand that... listen to me..." He put a hand to the side of her head, much more gently now. "I sympathize with your disgust at what our captain was doing with those slaves. I honestly do. It's cruel, it's pointless and it makes all of Amarria look bad... I certainly don't support it, nor do I participate in it... and I don't support this—" he motioned toward the window. "But what you've done here is far worse than anything our captain has done. You've already killed more people and more slaves in the last hour with your own hands than our captain kills in a year, and affected the deaths of many more. You've betrayed our people... your friends... we were a family here, Floreina, and you stabbed all of us in the back... and for what? Do you even care about those slaves? Is this about fighting for what's right, or is this about control and power? Or is this about vengeance?"

He paused again and Floreina whined as he brushed the damp clumps of hair from her cheek and brow. "Or is this just about making yourself feel something... like you have something to prove... at least allow us the dignity of knowing why..."

She stared at the Amarrian, careful not to allow focus to return to the scene behind the window. "I don't think I know anymore..." she said.

"You have the opportunity for redemption, Commander. You can pull yourself out of this. You've always been loyal to our people and our Lord, and I believe in my heart, Floreina, that you are still that person, deep down inside... search your soul, Commander. You know what's right. We're your brothers and sisters here, and we do what we're doing now out of fear and desperation... and you have the power to stop it, if you can simply remember who you are inside, and do what you know is right, and give us the information we need to survive."

She looked back at the slave standing to her side as he looked over his shoulder from his computer screen. His eyes caught hers for a moment.

And what was stopping her from simply giving up Mahran's location and computer access codes? Did it even matter anymore? They were both dead, one way or the other. It was only a matter of time.

"Master—" said the slave from behind Floreina.

"Not now," replied Smierdol.

She glanced back at the slave to see him looking back and forth from his computer screen, to Smierdol, to Floreina.

"You're working with another Amarrian aren't you—" Smierdol cocked his head and gazed at Floreina. "There's another Amarrian on board, working with you, isn't there..."

She pulled her head up and allowed it to drop, as though allowing the laws of nature to lie for her.

Smierdol looked back at his Minmatar assistant. "What do the facial analyzers return?"

Floreina looked back at the slave as he gave a slight nod toward his master.

Smierdol continued, "That means that whoever is working with you can still affect the door locks and environmental controls..." He stopped and pulled away from her, then looked back through the window into the control room.

"There's no computer virus, there's another Amarrian directly linked with the system..."

"Master..." said the slave, just as Floreina saw the window turn reflective again.

"What?" Smierdol shouted.

"The commander is trying to communicate with me..."

The officer looked up. "Excuse me?"

"She..." the slave started, "she's sending messages to the network linkage on this terminal." He pointed at the screen.

"That would be her friend..." Smierdol replied. "How long has this been going on?"

"Maybe five minutes at the most..." he replied.

Now he cocked his head at the slave and stood rapidly. "You allowed this to go on for five minutes?"

"I wasn't sure what was happening!" the slave blurted. "I wasn't sure—"

"Get out!" shouted Smierdol. "Get yourself to the holding down the hall and stay there."

"Yes, sir," the slave replied and hopped toward the door. He punched in his code and pulled the handle but stopped short. He tugged again, returned to enter his access code, and again, nothing.

Smierdol breathed heavily as he watched, then silently returned to the comm panel to press the intercom and did not seem surprised when it offered no connection. He marched to the exit and the slave moved obediently out of his way to allow him to type his own access code into the terminal. Still, the hatch did not budge.

The officer looked back at Floreina, then brought his gaze calmly back to the slave. "Go stand in front of the commander."

The Minmatar obeyed, and Smierdol retrieved the precision torch from the table, marched back to the slave and wasted no time snatching him by the neck and shoving him onto Floreina, forcing her against the back of the seat. Smierdol clutched the slave by the front of the neck and held him in place on Floreina's lap as she tilted her head back and cried.

"You want to play a desperate and cruel game, Floreina? We're scared... we won't lie to you... you've terrified us, and torn us apart as human beings... and if you and your partner want to see what desperate and terrified men are capable of, then you're about to see..."

He pressed the Minmatar by the neck against Floreina's face and forced the torch into his mouth.

But Smierdol had made one mistake, and even without a tactical readout, Floreina knew to take advantage of it.

She turned, brought her lips to the slave's ear, and whispered, "Sometimes Amarrians lose their way... Our Lord gives you permission and guidance in making your stand... "

The sudden movement tore against her thigh. She heard the click of the torch trigger and saw it light up within the slave's mouth as he lurched forward in a violent surge of energy.

Their screams echoed through the room as the Minmatar's knee drove into his master's groin. The torch ripped from the slave's cheek in a searing spray of blood and flesh. The torch dropped, its flame ceased and it bounced against Floreina's left leg before dropping to the floor.

The slave moved rapidly, driving hard against his master. He pulled his face away in sudden, tortured anguish, but didn't allow it to deter his forward momentum. He slammed the Amarrian against the window and brought his right hand up, to grab Smierdol's face like a basketball and slam his head against the reflective surface. The officer went limp, his eyes rolled to the back of his head and his body slumped slowly to the floor. The Minmatar fell backwards, tossing his head and screaming as his legs slipped out from under him.

He struggled to pull himself away from the Amarrian, holding his face and rolling on the floor, his body curling uncontrollably into a fetal position.

"Get up!" Floreina shouted. "Please don't go into shock now! Get up and release my restraints and I can get you some relief!" She looked at the medical kit on the table. "Hurry! Please, my son..." She looked up at the mirror, centrally aware of the Amarrians watching everything. "Hurry... please... get up!"

And the slave dragged himself to his knees and crawled across the floor, one bloody hand pressed to the left side of his face, dragging himself on his knees toward the officer to find the tiny keycard that could unlock her restraints. As he turned to force himself across the floor, she noticed the blood surrounding his hand on his face, soaking into his sleeve.

"Please hurry..." Floreina coaxed. "I know it hurts... but you did the right thing..."

An agonizing period passed, and just as the slave moved behind her, she noticed the twitching of Smierdol's face and fingers. A second later, his eyelids fluttered.

She felt the slave's hand on hers, smeared with Minmatar blood as he fumbled with the keycard against her cuffs. "Please hurry!" she repeated.

Smierdol's eyes opened, and within a second, she saw him focus on the welding torch at Floreina's feet. She felt the keycard slide against her hand and the blood draining down her fingers. It neared the

proper slot, and Floreina tried to adjust her hands to point the key slot to a more convenient position.

Smierdol's shoulders moved. He pushed upward, propping himself off the ground. He paused and swayed, his arm twitching under his weight, and his left eye forcing itself suddenly shut as his face twisted and grimaced.

The card slipped into the slot, but twisted and jammed. The slave coughed and gagged behind her, an ugly slurping sound echoing through the chamber, and she felt him sway, gripping her hands and restraints for balance as his hand slipped off the keycard.

She imagined the card hanging, halfway in the slot, without a finger to support it as she watched Smierdol's face even out again. He looked up for only a moment before lurching forward toward the torch.

Her fingers found the card, slipping sideways from the slit on the side of the restraints, and with the tips of two fingers, muscled it into its slot with a sharp and risky jab. The card clicked, and within milliseconds the latches released, and Floreina ripped her hands from behind her, flesh tearing against steel as she forced the restraints unceremoniously open.

Smierdol's hand clasped the torch and as her arms swung around the chair, she saw his head pop up and the torch ignite in his hand. He swung toward her. Their hands met and her fingers clasped around his wrist, fingernails digging into his flesh.

"Neck! Neck!" she coughed, the restraint pulling tight as they struggled.

The torch twisted and she felt the heat for just a moment against her uniform, a close-range flame heating through the retardant material surprisingly quickly. Her left arm pulled away uncontrollably, and a moment later, she felt Smierdol's wrist retreating from the remaining clutches of her right hand, sliding easily along the bloody surface.

And seeing it as her last hope, she slammed her knees closed, her ankles pulling tightly against their restraints. Her right thigh overwhelmed all other sensations, forcing her eyes closed at the worst possible moment.

She felt Smierdol stagger, his legs missing their coordination for a split second before steadying. However, it was enough to distract him as Floreina gripped Smierdol's wrist to push the torch toward his face. In the same moment she forced her eyes open to see Smierdol release his grip on the torch and watch it bounce harmlessly off his chest to the floor.

“Neck! My neck!” she screamed to the slave, but within moments felt him behind her, dragging himself up to shove the card into the slot.

But the restraint did not release.

Floreina punched the officer, landing an already bloody fist squarely, however not very powerfully, into Smierdol’s nose. He stepped backward, but again, was only distracted for a moment.

She heard the satisfying click of the restraint release, and forced herself forward, the cuff swinging open smoothly against her sudden force. Smierdol’s fist passed behind her, his forearm connecting with her head, pushing her momentarily off balance. She came forward, her legs straightening to cause her body to rise as she brought herself downward to drive her forehead into his chest.

They fell, Floreina dragging him to the floor under her weight and frantic clawing. His body fell outward and hit the grated deck. The ankle restraints gave minutely, but twisted her painfully as she fell atop him, her head bouncing against his thighs. Immediately he began kicking and Floreina pulled away. His knee patch of his uniform brushed against the tip of her nose as she dodged.

She clawed at his clothing as he struggled to pull away. Her ankles twisted and registered pain as though the bones were about to snap. Gripping his uniform, she pulled, the nanites tingling throughout her arms, no doubt awakened by her final surge of natural adrenaline, and dragged the officer’s body across the floor, just far enough to reach his head. She reached for him, hoping to get a grip of his hair as she felt him doing the same to her. His fingernails grated across her face and she pulled back as his finger, just for a moment, found her eye socket. Ducking around his hand she gave one final, agonizing push forward, grabbing a lump of hair and pounding downward to connect the top of his head with the steel deck plating.

He continued his fight, again, dazed only for a second, but Floreina wrenched on his hair once more, his body sliding and turning the last little bit before she had the leverage to pull his head upward and slam his cranium conclusively into the deck.

This time, he fell limp.

She stared. He blinked and raised his eyes to look at her and calmness seemed to pass over him. “One people...” he whispered, “...under God.”

She closed her eyes as she drove her hands downward, one final time.

Her head fell against the grating, her eyes squeezing shut.

Dear Lord, what is this twisted world you've created for me? What have I done to deserve this?

But resting was out of the question.

She forced her eyes open and pulled away, dragging herself upward, carefully maneuvering her ankles, and wincing with every move. It took several long moments before she was sitting back in the seat. She paused to feel the room spin and hold back a sudden wave of nausea before turning and looking backward at the slave lying helplessly on the floor, his head resting in a pool of blood and both hands clasp the side of his face. His eyes peered up, the rest of his head remaining stationary.

The tiny keycard was still clutched between two fingers, distinguishable against the blood by its shape, a tiny rectangle with three rounded corners and a single flat one.

She reached, twisting her body, and straining her shoulder against the back of the chair. He took several seconds to work up the nerve to move his fingers from his cheek, but managed to reach up and slap the card into the palm of her hand.

Gripping the tiny card between her fingers, she leaned over to find the slots on each set of ankle restraints. They detached after several fumbling attempts. She stood to run to the table and found her legs faltering beneath her. Leaping toward the table, she fell to her hands and knees, and her body tightened to quell the painful scream. Carefully she rose to her feet.

She placed each foot with care, wincing with every step. Grabbing the white plastic medical kit, she dragged it across the table to pull it off the edge. She hobbled toward the Minmatar and set the down beside him. He looked up and attempted to adjust himself to bring his face closer, but succeeded only in wincing and trembling.

Floreina opened the kit, folding its sides out in a complex series of pockets and compartments.

And she stared at the puzzle before her, as though it were missing pieces to an ancient Jovian mind teaser. Her mind clawed at her implant, demanding answers... what's this?... what's that?... how can I seal a cheek wound?

She stared blankly, as though awaiting an answer from heaven.

"I don't—" she stuttered, "I don't know what I'm doing..."

She pulled items out of the kit, staring at each before placing them back again. Taking deep, slow breaths, she calmed herself and thought, making guesses based on things she remembered, and reading

labels in a frantic search for something that would give her a clue toward something that could automatically stitch a wound.

The slave rolled, dragging himself to peer into the med kit and point to a larger device near the bottom, wrapped in a white plastic sanitary sleeve. She tore open the package and a plate fell to her lap, one side with a smooth, concave surface dotted with tiny holes, and the other, a flat white plastic surface with a series of controls and a display panel.

An emergency nanite surgical plate, she recognized; a control system for nanites and other small drones capable of sealing wounds. But still she looked at it, wondering even how to turn it on. The instructions hung from the plastic packaging, and she pulled them out, smearing the slave's blood across the tiny lettering.

But the slave, having training in use of these items, strained his head up and removed his hand from his face just long enough to grab the plate from her lap and drag it to the floor to hover over it. He moved slightly to the side as the blood dripped from his face, and he punched keys on the plate, staggered for a moment and coughed, splattering blood across Floreina's pants.

She squinted at the instructions and read about cauterizing and stitching wounds.

The slave flipped the plate and carefully raised it, removing both hands for the first time to reveal the gash, his cheek open and raw halfway to his throat. He brought the plate to his face and leaned forward.

And Floreina continued reading, her eyes fluttering back and forth from the page to the slave.

He whimpered dramatically, but held the device in place. Floreina followed the process, reading along with the instructions, as the miniature robots used their nearly microscopic torches to cauterize the slave's cheek and lip. She would need to reset some settings when the device got to the stitching stage.

And from the corner of her eye, she noticed movement.

She looked up, and watched the mirror along the wall for a long moment, and just before looking back to the instructions and the surgical plate, she saw it again. A barely noticeable ripple seemed to pass through the entire mirror. She blinked and stared, but finally wrote it off as part of a dream from her un-tethered mind.

The slave faltered and coughed and Floreina saw several of the long legged robots spew from his mouth to land on the floor. Their legs, barely more noticeable than a hair, shook and flailed in confusion.

Floreina leaned forward and took a hand to steady the plate, allowing him to rest his hand on the floor. She held the plate gently with one hand as she clutched the instructions in the other.

Just above the little sheet, she saw it again, a ripple passing through the one-way window. She took care not to look up, and simply continued holding.

But it was still impossible to tell if it was real. With no visual recordings to analyze, or implant feedback, how could anyone tell if things were real or imagined? There's no solidity to life... like a wandering dream... reality can crumble or be reborn in a heartbeat...

Her brain flailed and grabbed for a data input that simply wasn't there, like a blind child in an unfamiliar home.

The surgical plate beeped its completion of the first phase, and just before she looked down, she saw the ripple again, and this time it seemed to pass through the edge of the window and on into the wall and floor.

She forced her eyes closed for just a moment before pushing the thoughts from her mind to focus on the readout screen, instructing her to clean the area.

His wound was cauterized and the bleeding stopped, so she removed the plate to see the gash, a narrow opening revealing his teeth and tonsils through the side of his cheek, the edges now blackened and blistered. The slave sat on his hands and knees, trembling and struggling to stay upright, the last of the blood dripping from his lips.

As she hobbled toward the sink she brainstormed what to do in this situation, and how to interpret the instructions that were obviously based on simple cuts on a person's leg or stomach, rather than a wound as sensitive as this.

And the ripple appeared again, this time throughout the mirror, but ending at the edges... too consistent to be a simple hallucination.

She came back to find the slave with slightly recovered strength, digging through the med-kit. He removed an auto-syringe and set it on the floor and pulled out a series of drug cartridges, scanning each, dropping the unwanted ones, and finally leaving himself with one that he clumsily shoved into the syringe's socket. He toppled to the side with a tortured croak and grabbed the syringe and held it to his neck to fire the injection.

Floreina knelt beside him with a wet towel and a glass of water and assisted as best she could at washing away the blood before placing the

surgical plate back on his face and resetting its settings to provide stitching. As the tiny robots worked, the slave groaned from the back of his throat. Floreina looked up several times to see the rippling of the mirror, finally hearing a crack, like a thousand pebbles cascading down a skylight.

She registered the cracking of the window, one long, vertical slit, barely noticeable, spreading from the center. The surgical bots worked quickly, but as she held the plate to the slave's face, she watched the crack grow larger and spread outward.

Finally the bots finished their work, leaving an intricate web of stitching across his cheek. As Floreina removed the plate and shook the used bots from the surface, the slave's eyes rolled up to look at her. His mouth remained rigid, half-open.

And Floreina heard voices from a distance... shouting, frantic voices. The crack in the window spread outward, breaking into dozens of tiny fissures.

The slave finally pulled his eyes from hers, and looked into the med kit, shuffling for some creams and an applicator. He pointed toward the wounds on her leg.

"No..." Floreina said, looking at the window, imagining her fellow crewmen behind the glass watching their every move. She sighed. "This is it for me..."

She slid across the floor to grab the precision torch. She flipped the switch to test the flame and watched for a quick moment, before flipping it off again. She handed the torch to the slave, who reluctantly took it, heaving upward, his hand sliding along the blood stained floor.

"They're going to break through that window soon," she said. "When they do, if you're here, they'll kill you quickly to get rid of you... I, on the other hand, won't be so lucky..."

The voices were louder now and Floreina could nearly make out sayings... no doubt with her implant, she would have had no trouble.

Dear Lord... I don't know why you've led me here...

Floreina and the slave gripped the torch together for a long moment, and she shook his hand and released. "I need you to put that to my head..."

He carefully shook his head.

"You need to do this for me, son... I've come as far as I can go, and this is the only way for me to go out with honor..."

Dear Lord, thank you for this life... but you have led me down a dark and confusing path, and I don't understand anymore... I fear I've made grave mistakes in your name...

The slave simply whined, and stared at the torch, as Floreina heard the loud thud of the one-way window being pounded from the inside.

"There's not much time." She took his left hand and brought it to her upper chest, guiding his fingers around her clothing, forcing his knuckles to curl around the turtleneck of her uniform. "You need to hang onto me nice and tight... the torch is going to take a few seconds to kill me, so I can't do it myself... you'll need to hold on and keep me from flailing around..."

Dear Lord, you have given me so many tests... I think it's time for me to test you...

"Hold on tight," she said, pulling his hand to confirm his grip.

His mouth hung open and motionless and his eyes darted back and forth, finally slowing to stare at Floreina, her uniform clutched tightly in his left hand and the torch in his right, his thumb already on the trigger. However, he looked back on her with a quiver in his eye, and a questioning reluctance.

"Don't worry," she said, "There's no sin in this... I am clearly asking this of you in sound mind and body... I'd do it myself if there were anything lethal in here... I'm just going to get captured again, and more people are going to die... and it's just not worth it..."

Lord... this is my life in your hands... if I have betrayed my people and your will, then compel this Minmatar to follow my orders... and, my Lord, accept my apologies for the things I have done... but if I have been true and righteous and if you want me to go on fighting, then compel this slave to follow his conditioning and protect me.

"I don't even know my right from wrong anymore..." she mumbled.

His knuckles slid across her upper chest as he tightened his grip on her uniform and tugged her closer, a wicked gleam crossing his eyes. He put the torch to her head, wiggling to bury the tip under her hair.

Thank you for this life... It's been a beautiful experience up until now... I don't know why you chose to end it like this... but I trust there's something for me to learn... and I thank you... Lord... for allowing me the privilege of playing this game...

The slave took a deep breath, his knuckles trembling against her chest, and stared into her eyes.

And a crash came from the window, and both the slave and Floreina swung their heads to watch shards of glass pull free and drop to the floor, revealing tiny glimpses of officer uniforms. The center of the window bulged, the cracks extending all the way to the far edges, the rippling now replaced by intricate patterns of white crisscrossing cracks.

"You need to do it now," Floreina said.

And the slave whined from the back of his throat, seemingly the only sound he could make. But after several seconds, it faded into a tortured scream. He shook his head and pulled the torch from Floreina's scalp. He looked at the device for only a moment before slipping it into Floreina's shirt pocket. They stared at each other for several seconds, the slave seeming to gauge her anger at his disobedience. He continued clutching her uniform with his left hand, as though unable to make any further choices.

And Floreina simply stared back.

But finally he rose, gripping her clothing, and dragged her up, first by the cuff of her neck then clutching the fabric of her sleeve. She stood easily as though gliding on the slave's guidance.

"Okay," she said as she adjusted her clothing. "Have it your way... we need to go. Grab the med kit." She limped to the hatch as the slave collected items from the case, and she looked up at the window to see it slowly separating from the sides. A tiny gap grew steadily wider, revealing the enraged Amarrians on the other side, pounding on the divider with chair legs.

Floreina looked back to the slave rummaging through the kit, his calm demeanor suddenly lost as he frantically stuffed supplies back into the case.

Floreina caught the eye of another officer through the edge of the glass. "Hurry up," she said. "We need to go." She put her hand on the keypad, her forefinger hovering impatiently over the first key.

The slave looked up as the top of the window ripped away from the wall. He gathered the case in his arms as Floreina entered her code. He returned to her side, and Floreina pulled the handle to release the hatch. She threw open the door as she heard the shatter and thud of the window falling to the deck. Stealing a look in their direction, she saw the Amarrians jumping on the counter toward the opening.

She looked back to the door as she threw it open, her momentum already carrying her through the hatch. But after seeing what crowded before her, her head went back as her legs carried her forward and out from under her.

Slaves, dressed in their common utility uniforms, carrying weapons of pipes and pry bars. As she fell to the floor, her legs slapped together and her body rolled to the side. The pain forced her eyes closed, and she saw, for a split second, the slaves turning toward her and raising their weapons.

Floreina screamed silently, an audible one seeming pointless, the pain momentarily overwhelming even the thought of her sudden, bludgeoning death. She covered her head, wrapping her arms about her face and cowered, curling her body.

But the beating did not come. Instead, she felt movement all around her, and after several seconds, raised an elbow to peek at the slaves' feet stepping over and around her. Another few seconds and she felt hands on her uniform, tugging, reaching for her arms.

She found a palm and released her hold on her head to take the Minmatar's hand. Floreina planted her left foot into the floor grate and locked her knee as the slave pulled her to her feet. Several other hands pulled her sleeves, helping her along.

"Master Floreina," shouted one of the slaves, just as she recognized the roar of infuriated voices contrasting the recent peacefulness of the interrogation chamber. "You need to leave, Master. We've been instructed to escort you to the nearest airlock. Can you walk?"

"Mostly," she shouted as the slave pulled her away from the hatch.

They began moving, the slave taking her arm, another coming around to the other side as she hopped toward the far end of the corridor.

Behind her, agonized screams and war cries rang out through the hall, unrecognizable to her naked human ears. They compounded into a single mass, interspersed with the bludgeoning thuds and painful slaps of clashing weapons and fists.

She traveled down the hallway, half carried, half hopping toward the next hatch. The slaves surrounded her in their plain brown work suits, moving rapidly, but keeping close. One of the slaves typed his code at the hatch and it snapped obediently open, Mahran, no doubt, still having control over most of the hatchways on board the ship.

She seemed to float on the guidance of the Minmatar, as though they had somehow reversed roles. All her life she had been guiding and controlling the Minmatar slaves, and now, suddenly, they guided her. She had no idea where they were going or what she was supposed to do

when they got there, but somehow, it seemed as though these Minmatar knew exactly what was right... as though guided by God Himself.

That was the only real explanation for all of this; the Lord had embodied these Minmatar and were guiding them, just as they guided her.

Floreina smiled as the lead Minmatar punched in his code and they lifted her rapidly through the hatch. And she envied them, just for a moment, as she imagined an entire life like this... the simplicity, the ability to relax and know that as long as you follow orders, everything will be okay... knowing your director—your protector and guardian—is guided by the all-knowing and infinitely compassionate Lord.

Being an Amarrian was a true blessing,... but sometimes... just sometimes... she envied her slaves.

The door sealed behind them, and almost immediately Floreina heard a voice over the loudspeakers in the corridor. "There is a restroom adjacent this hallway." The voice was distorted and metallic, but still held Mahran's familiar characteristics behind the oppressive audio filtering. "Take a few minutes to treat Commander Floreina's leg. This corridor is sealed for now."

"Yes, Master," replied the lead slave as they moved into the restroom through a large swinging doorway. They stopped near the entrance and Floreina put a hand up to the corner to hold herself upright. She stood on one foot, holding her right leg outward, to keep it cleanly separated from the other.

She noticed the original slave from the interrogation chamber, his mouth still frozen in its half-open position. He looked at her as he put his hand on the opposite wall for support and teetered forward momentarily before catching himself.

Floreina saluted casually, and, caught by surprise, the slave straightened and gave a more invigorated salute before his energy seemed to drain and his posture slouched.

He sat on the floor and leaned against the wall.

Despite the mild stench of urine in this lower-level restroom, Floreina decided to join the slave on the floor and allowed her back to slide slowly down the smooth steel wall. She was already covered with splatters of Minmatar blood, with parts of her uniform soaked with it... so cleanliness and appearances didn't really matter at this point.

Several slaves returned from the row of sinks with damp towels. Two of them knelt before Floreina and a third stooped to examine the injured slave's cheek.

"You haven't treated this at all?" one of the slaves asked as he opened a tube of nanite medical paste.

"No time," she replied.

"You had time to stitch his face—" he motioned toward the injured slave.

Floreina shrugged.

"Well, I'm sure he appreciates it..." The slave moved toward her leg with the cream applicator, and paused. "Do I have your permission to apply the nanite burn cream?" he asked.

"Yes, yes," she replied.

And he began scraping the cream in globules across the thick lines on her thigh. With each touch, she cringed, then relaxed as the cream began to sooth.

"It's going to be extremely painful, Master... you know?... when I activate the nanites."

She nodded.

He lathered about a third of her thigh with the cream before grabbing a radiation applicator and scanned it briefly over the area to signal the nanites to activate.

The slave continued applying, moving up to the next section. Floreina placed her hands on the wall and gripped, clenching her fingers in preparation for the cleansing process.

"My apologies for this, master. Normally we do small sections and wait for the nanites to do their job before moving on, but we don't have time..."

"I know," she said from the back of her throat as she felt the soothing turn to tingling and the tingling turn to burning, as though the original precision torch were suddenly back in contact with her flesh. She imagined the nanites; millions of tiny, eternally loyal little robots burrowing into her flesh to ingest, process and expell the damaged tissue.

"...be real, real painful for about ten minutes..." the slave was saying. "...then will feel a whole lot better."

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. "It's okay," she said. "Just do what you gotta do."

But the pain wasn't as bad as she expected, the cream containing effective numbing agents and moisturizers as well as nanites. The pain built from her lower thigh as the nanites did their work, but the soothing sensations contrasted the burning as the slave applied more cream to her upper thigh. She focused on her breathing and waited.

The slave finished the last of the cream application and activated the last area with the sweep of radiation. A moment later Floreina winced as she felt the slave wiping away the waste products from her lower thigh, and her nose suddenly curled as the stench of artificially-decayed flesh hit her nostrils. She opened her eyes only long enough to see the puss oozing from her wounds like condensation on a glass of ice water.

And despite the stench and revoltingly subtle movement and quivering of her flesh that almost overshadowed the physical pain, it all seemed to feel okay, as long as she knew it was healing. It was simply doing what it was supposed to.

And within just a few minutes it started feeling better, and she looked down at her lower thigh, already noticing a reduction in visible scar tissue and the first two letters of the word were clearly readable.

“Okay,” Floreina said finally. “It’s not going to heal any faster lying here in the toilets... help me up.” She put up her hand and the slaves helped her to her feet.

She limped more dramatically now as they exited the restroom despite the fact that her leg, overall, didn’t feel any worse, and was on its way to feeling better. They moved quickly, the slaves supporting her shoulders as she hopped, slowly regaining feeling and movement in her right leg. The six slaves kept close and moved rapidly through hatchways and corridors toward the nearest airlock.

Only two officers were in attendance when the slaves entered the airlock. The slaves fell on them rapidly, shielding Floreina from their view, and incapacitated the low-level officers, binding their hands and ankles tightly with strips cut from their uniforms and injecting them with sedatives from the med pack. They returned the sidearms to Floreina, who stuffed both of into pockets on her left leg.

She looked at her right leg again and wiped away more of the filth, revealing even more of the word etched into her skin. She stared at it for several seconds before moving to the pressure suit compartment.

She keyed her access code, opened the cabinets and whimpered upon seeing the empty rack. “They’re all gone,” she said.

The slaves watched as she moved to the discard rack and opened it to find only three pressure suits. “Guess I don’t have much choice,” she said. “Suppose we can forgo the safety checks...” She checked the air supplies on each suit and sighed. “Twenty-five minutes is the best I’ve got.” She pulled the suit from the rack and began stepped into it, already smelling the scent of its previous user. She placed her

new pair of weapons on the shelf, unclipped and detached the oxygen tank from the second suit, shook herself to settle into the suit and began buckling herself in and double checking connections.

“What do you wish us to do once you are gone, Master?” asked one of the slaves.

“My suggestion would be to blend into the rest of the slave population and tell no one that you helped me. If the abolitionists come, don’t try to fight them; simply go with them peacefully... and wherever this life carries you, just remember to stay faithful to our Lord.”

She looked up at the ceiling. “I assume I’m heading toward—” and she stopped herself, looking at the slaves and the two unconscious airlock attendants. “I need a datapad...” She found one on the desk near the two officers and plugged into a data outlet for a secure connection. “Load me up directions to my destination,” she said.

“Copy that,” came the distorted voice, sounding distinctly, yet artificially Amarrian. Mahran sounded like a demon in his attempt to disguise his voice, and she sensed a deepening anger, yet somehow, his presence was still soothing.

She downloaded a map of the outer surface of the ship that traced a route to her destination near the pod control center at the top bow. A straight line from her location to the bridge would have been about half a kilometer, but traced across curved outer bulkheads and extended armor plates, the route displayed was nearly three times that length.

“May I have a moment to speak with the commander alone?” asked the voice.

Floreina nodded toward the slaves. “Thank you,” she said, and saluted each of them before sending them out the hatch. “You have done the right thing in helping me,” she assured them.

“Floreina,” Mahran started in his same cold, distorted voice after the last of the slaves had left the airlock control center and sealed the hatch behind them. “I can’t get a remote connection to either you or the datapad without exposing ourselves to hacking attempts...”

“I know,” she replied.

“And... Master... I’m uncertain about the outer surface of the ship... as you know my clearances are for internal security systems.”

Floreina sighed. “Right... environmental suits are missing. Do you know who’s using them?”

He paused. “Most likely repair workers... higher level slaves would be my guess, but no logs since we took over the computer.”

“Okay,” she replied. “I can hopefully deal with a few slaves...”

“It’s the missing drones I’m concerned about...”

“Oh...” Floreina sighed.

“The automated drones have been instructed that you are an enemy.”

Floreina took a deep breath and trembled, then quickly began searching for straps and attachments on the outside of her suit to stow her two laser pistols, the datapad and a spare oxygen tank.

“The abolitionists are going to increase their rate of damage as you head out—”

“*Increase?*” she asked. “When I’m out on the surface?”

“To distract the repair drones. If they’re repairing armor, they cannot take time to come after you...”

“Sounds like a risk—”

“That’s exactly what I said about this entire plan,” Mahran retorted.

“Do you know how the drone priorities are set? How far will they travel to kill me? What level of damage will they abandon?”

“I don’t know.”

Floreina grunted.

“They will attempt to direct the damage toward the aft-starboard side to keep as far from you as possible... but will need to be close enough to distract any nearby repair drones... they will have an eye on you at all times, Master.”

She groaned again as she did her final checks of her suit and gear and attached a magnetic grapple gun to her left arm. She stopped for a moment to remember the controls to automate her exit from the airlock.

“Okay, buddy,” she said, just before locking her helmet into its latches on the suit’s neck. “I’ve survived this long...” and she laughed and shook her head. “...lets see what happens.”

She clamped down the helmet and the suit began pressurizing. She stepped into the airlock chamber and the door closed behind her. She hit the evacuation confirmation and waved to the nearest monitor. She waited, but Mahran did not reply.

She felt her suit expanding as the air was pulled from the room. She checked the magnetism of her boots and punched her code to open the outer hatch. She felt the strange, nauseating sensation cross over her head and down her body as she stepped out of the artificial gravity bubble and into the liberating vastness of space. Her weapons and gear

began floating, one by one as she pulled her body out of the hatch. The boots clamped to the surface and Floreina took a moment to stare up at the great vessel, the raised armor plating and energy turrets towering above her.

She stood on the bottom section of the vessel, a giant maneuvering thruster, more than a hundred meters in width that jutted from the central undercarriage of the ship, below the massive armor plates. Beyond the thruster, the ship extended fore and aft for more than half a kilometer in each direction.

But Floreina didn't have time to admire the grand Amarrian craftsmanship, and ignored the sun gleaming off the golden surface of the ship she had called home for so many years. She started walking, navigating across the thinner sections of armor plating and around the many viewports.

She looked up as she walked, the empty blackness of space expanding in all directions, just beyond the soft glow of the Abaddon's external shield system, now just a thin barrier. Barely visible, one of the Blackbird Caldari cruisers orbited ominously in the distance.

A bright flash came from the rear of the vessel as a missile passed directly through the shielding and exploded into the rear armor plating on the far side of the ship. Floreina continued walking as she felt the rumbling of the plate beneath her feet.

She looked back occasionally, scanning for droids or human technicians, painfully missing her rear camera.

She reached the top of the thruster, and craning her neck to look up at the ship's defenses splayed out before her, she prepared her grapple gun to fire across the great expanse toward the main section of hull and armor plating, upon which jutted the row of eight Tachyon Beam Lasers.

The grapple sailed through the expanse for several long seconds, the thin line unraveling with a rapid vibration on her wrist as the device fired its tiny thrusters to navigate toward her intended position.

She looked over her shoulder and her entire body jolted as she saw several drones racing toward her position. Grabbing the weapon from her side and disconnecting its strap, she pointed at the closest droid, closed one eye and fired, her hand trembling as she stared down the barrel. Her shot glanced against the surface of the armor plating several meters before the drone. She fired again, over compensating and sending a shot wildly into the space beyond.

The weapon blasted again and again, and Floreina heard a growing cry of terror emanating from deep within her throat. Her shots came closer, and finally one connected and the drone imploded and the artificial creature sailed from the surface to be forgotten in the blackness of space.

She turned quickly to the next drone, firing several rounds and finally connecting.

The grapple announced its successful attachment to the bulkhead above. She looked up, just as she saw the last drone driving fast over the edge of the plating toward her, extending its welding torch in her direction. And behind it, climbed several more.

Instead of firing, she knelt and shut down the magnetism of her boots. She looked at the drone as it raced toward her, its torch bright and homing in on her position. She leapt outward.

The drone reached her a moment later, pointing its beam upward just as she floated out of range.

Turning away from the drones to look at her trajectory, she saw the massive bulkhead coming steadily closer, but from the corner of her vision saw a streak cross the emptiness.

She saw the plasma trails of the assault missile in a circle, as though the warhead bore directly toward her location. Her brain scrambled in a panic for a trajectory readout, and of course, found nothing more solid than conflicting emotions, vague intellectual concepts, and the fear of a suit rupture.

So Floreina found her commands on the console on her arm and fired her suit thrusters, adjusting her position to point herself toward the bow. Her speed increased rapidly. She let out some slack on her tether as she sailed forward.

The missile seemed to alter course as it approached, the sides of the plasma trails becoming clearer. It slammed into the plating just beyond the last of the eight turrets. The shockwave pounded through Floreina's body and she resisted the urge to wretch as the particles of her being seemed to shift inside her.

She shut her thrusters down and locked the grapple device. The line pulled tight, wrenching her arm and twisting her body. Nearly instantly, Floreina pointed the other direction, her shoulder aching from the sudden strain.

She turned to see the bulkhead just below the row of turrets as it raced toward her. She had several moments to adjust and get her feet

in front of her to prepare for the impact. Her left arm crossed awkwardly across her body, the line pulling painfully tight.

The armor plating rushed upon her, filling her view, the turrets falling from her vision.

She braced herself.

The impact sent a wave of agony up her legs to coalesce into her kneecaps as her limbs collapsed beneath her. Her knees pounded into the bulkhead and a moment later her right hand slapped the surface. Her muscles locked and she resisted the force to prevent her faceplate from cracking into the surface. Her body rolled and she splayed out on her back.

But she took only a moment to collect herself before turning and attempting to gain some slack on the line, now connected a couple hundred meters behind her. Scrolling through menus on her arm, she detached the magnetic grapple and directed it to return. She stood for several long moments, her boots clamped decisively on the surface, and waited for the grapple to retract. The tiny drone navigated back as its thin nanotube line retracted into the compartment on her wrist.

It popped back into place and Floreina turned to take a long, shuddering sigh, and began walking again, upward, toward the Tachyon weapons jutting threateningly from the landscape before her.

She pushed herself forward at a rapid pace, like a stressful businessman at a spaceport, and felt the sweat causing her uniform to cling uncomfortably to her back. Her pants bunched between her legs, grating against her wounds, but the nanite's waste product provided a strangely comforting, if utterly disgusting lubricant.

Her limp had subsided and the pain in her leg seemed to be easing, though a stiffness was spreading downward to her shin and ankle and upward toward her stomach. As she walked, she checked the datapad for her route, and checked the spare oxygen tank and her two weapons attached haphazardly to her suit. She checked her main oxygen supply, finding that it had recalculated her store to less than fifteen minutes based on her current rate of use. Still, she forced herself rapidly onward.

Her mind drifted as she walked, though she continued checking for drones. A song began playing in her un-tethered mind; an unrecognizable children's tune set to a hard-core dance theme with no lyrics. It popped and pounded incessantly in her mind, and she saw herself dancing a jarring, grotesque and unprofessional display on an empty dance floor.

From the corner of her eye she saw movement, and turned, but caught nothing. She began nearing the third of the turrets, and looked up for a moment, intimidated, as though they had the ability turn and point down at her. Before reaching the turret well, Floreina began preparing her grapple device again for another, shorter leap. She stopped at the edge of the plating and looked over the opening that contained the eight high-slot turret hardpoints. She aimed the grapple, locked onto a point on the opposite edge of the turret well, and fired. She looked back and saw several more drones, now darting from the shadows in her direction, no doubt having waited to attack until she was distracted by the grappling process.

But they were too slow this time and Floreina released the magnetism of her boots and began retracting the line to pull herself quickly to the other side of the turret well. The drones reached her site and immediately began driving downward, into the darkness of the hardpoint opening, no doubt intending to come up on the other side in pursuit.

Floreina reached the other side and gripped the end of the line, her legs floating awkwardly above her. It took several long moments to coax her feet back down to what seemed like ground level. While the size of the craft seemed to give it a subtle gravitational pull, it was not enough to actually draw her legs down to the surface. Instead, she curled and forced her boot to the surface and quickly snapped her hand to the input pad to lock switch it on.

She stood, released the grapple and continued, now looking upward to the round, majestic, top portion of the craft, the pod command center and bridge rising from the peak just beyond the sloping contour.

Marching rapidly and breathing heavily, the pounding rhythm came back to her mind, seemingly inescapable, like a pop song stuck in her head, except this wasn't a song exactly; just an irritating rhythm.

Again, Floreina saw movement from the corner of her vision and saw a drone slipping into the gap between armor plates. She pulled both weapons from her belt and did a complete turn to check for more tailing drones, seeing one more slip behind the lip of an armor plate. She continued walking, holding back a deep whine and forced herself onward. The thumping of her heart seemed to echo through the pressure suit.

Repeatedly she saw the drones from the corner of her eye, occasionally catching them in full view, but usually seeing them just barely slipping out of her line of vision. The sweat continued accumulating, grating uncomfortably against her skin. And every time she saw a drone,

the ugly song in her head became just a little louder, and the visions of her humiliating dance became just a little bit clearer.

But she tried to focus, glancing this way and that, envisioning the drones suddenly darting out, hundreds of them closing in on her, and the first one would torch a suit rupture in seconds.

Beyond that, she saw herself somehow surviving the drones, only to come to the pod command center to find that the surgeons had no means to repair her implant.

She turned again, trying to find the drones hiding on the horizon, her weapons extended outward in both hands, but found none open enough to attempt a shot. She returned to her course and a drop of sweat fell into her eye. She shook within the helmet.

Floreina gave one final look around and began running toward the upper edge of the extended bulkhead, where eight plates, each nearly fifty meters wide, extended before her like massive castle crenellations. She awkwardly stowed the weapon from her left hand, grunting with frustration in her attempt to snap it back to the strap on her suit. Once connected, she looked around to see drones pulling from their hiding places behind plate gaps and power hubs.

Her faceplate began to fog as she pushed onward, a tortured, pleading whine cycling uncontrollably from the back of her throat. She fired her weapon nearly blindly to her sides as she approached the upper edge of the extended bulkhead. She transferred her weapon to her left hand, so that she could key in the commands for the grappling magnet that would carry her to the upper reaches of the Abaddon.

She pointed, the laser site seeming to disappear in the distance as she directed it upward toward the great rolling hill of the officer decks. It jittered randomly as she ran, and vibrated angrily with its inability to get a target lock.

Reaching the tip of the fourth armor crenellation she stopped and turned to see the drones now racing toward her from all angles. She attempted to hold her left arm steady to allow the grapple to lock onto a specific location while turning frantically to see dozens of drones now racing toward her from numerous angles.

She began firing shots, one after another, from the pistol in her right hand, the majority sailing harmlessly into space or disintegrating into the ship plating. Clenching her fingers and muscles in an attempt to hold her left hand steady, she felt her trembling throw off the grapple's targeting system.

Her shots occasionally hit their target, but already she could sense the miniature capacitor in the weapon draining rapidly. Finally, she pulled her weapon away long enough to fire the grapple, praying that it would find a spot somewhere near her targeted area.

The weapon ran out of power with no notice beyond a subtle flashing light.

And still the drones charged. Their torches lit, one by one, the light distorting nearly incoherently through the fog of her faceplate. She released the weapon and it floated before her as she struggled for her backup.

But the drones were too close and there were too many of them. The grapple would take another fifteen seconds to reach its destination, even if it managed to attach to something.

So Floreina, through a cry of defeat, knelt and clicked the switches to power down her boots, and leapt from the surface of the ship. She snatched for her floating sidearm, her heavily gloved fingers slapping against the handle and failing to gain a grip, sending the weapon sailing off toward the upper reaches of the ship. The drones glided to her position and tilted their torches upward and flared. She pulled in her feet and the flames dissipated safely as she floated outward.

Turning her attention toward the drone at the end of the line, she could barely make out the tiny robot as a dot against the massive surface of the battleship. The grapple drone continued flying diligently toward its destination, but was lost from sight beyond the haze of the faceplate.

Everything seemed to be liquid inside the helmet and pressure suit. Globules of moisture clung to her skin and soaked into her uniform, sweat seeming to form from the interior of the helmet to rain down upon her.

And suddenly she felt the familiar, pleasant vibration letting her know that the grapple had found an attachment. She looked at the keypad on her arm and began flipping through menus, calming herself. The faceplate began to clear as she adjusted the air flow. She checked the air supply, but barely registered the added depression as she noticed she had less than nine minutes left on this tank.

That was barely enough time to get to the airlock near the pod command center before connecting her backup tank.

But as Floreina opened the menu for the grapple drone, the device flashed an ugly red warning, notifying her of a disconnected line.

The revolving began anyway, and the line drew inward to the device on her wrist, but still she sailed outward, away from her home and into the blackness. The line wound slowly, and she watched it pull into its spool in her wrist, the end pulling inside the opening. She sighed and looked out on the Abaddon, and blinked rapidly, as though it could somehow alter the vision of the space between her and her home, and the knowledge that her suit was out of maneuvering fuel.

She prayed for some kind of corporeal object to cling to, to walk on, or grab hold of, to climb back to her home. She had the strength, she knew; more than enough; but lacked such a simple necessity as a physical connection.

She watched herself drift away.

The air circulation seemed to be performing a better job, the faceplate slowly clearing to reveal the beautiful and terrorizing sight of the turrets and armor plates becoming steadily smaller and her Angel coming into full view.

And she wondered if she would ever return.

She knew this should be an emotional time, but somehow she simply looked out on the scene with a blank comfort, despite the damp soreness throughout her body and the mild stench of the cleansed burn flesh. The frantic frustration seemed to fade into the back of her soul to be replaced with a welcome emptiness.

She leaned her head back and sighed. Was this truly what the Lord had intended for her when He had guided her on this journey?

Somehow it didn't matter anymore... as though this were God's great joke... to build her up like a queen for years, then for the last few hours, tear her down like an animal.

But she could see the joke... and part of her found it funny...

One way or the other, whatever He wanted would be okay with her.

Floreina focused on her breathing and relaxation as she watched the air gauge tick down to zero. The moment the counting ceased, her hands were underway releasing the clamps and air valve. She pulled the empty tank from its slot on her back and released it, then quickly unhooked her reserve from its makeshift attachment just above her hip. She closed her eyes and breathed through her nose, feeling the air becoming less satisfying with every breath. Holding the reserve tank behind her back she carefully fit it into its slot, her heart seeming to slow

to reduce vibrations that could knock the tank from its threading as she began screwing it into place.

And she felt a sense of relief, as though her entire body sank deeper into her suit as the tank valve snapped securely into place and she began flipping the latches to secure the lower sections. Finally she opened the valve and felt the refreshing mixture balance back to a proper air quality.

And now she had another fifteen minutes of life left to experience.

So she simply stared back at The Angel.

Her anger began to build, and she turned to look out on the Minmatar abolitionists as they waited to march in on her home and slaughter her people.

And they would do it for no reason. They would “rescue” her slaves... The Angel’s babies... and they would release them, offering them no protection, no guidance, no spiritual purpose, and little more than a vague explanation of “freedom” and then demand that they believe that they are better off...

...it would be tragic... these were good, loyal Minmatar aboard The Angel, and they didn’t deserve to be torn from their path to salvation...

Her fellow Amarrian crewmen would be fine, and somehow, she wasn’t worried about them, even knowing the brutal slaughter the abolitionists would exercise upon them. But somehow, it was the slaves—the ones who would survive—that worried her. They were the ones who would truly suffer... for all eternity.

And the thought of the age-old question of Amarrian philosophy came to her mind, and somehow the other side made a little more sense now... these abolitionists would invade her home and brainwash their subjects and tear them from the arms of God and from their chance at eternal bliss... and they would go on doing it, on and on, until they had eradicated her Lord from all of New Eden.

...all the joy she had felt over the years, the peace, the passion... the love... the abolitionist heathens would spit on all of it and doom humanity to eternal damnation and suffering...

...perhaps... she thought...

Eradication suddenly didn’t seem like such a horrifying prospect... Floreina and the majority of Amarrian society had always opposed outright cleansing... but now... recognizing how her friends—her family—were about to be slaughtered because of what they believe... because of how they choose to live their lives...

Somehow, this must be stopped.

It suddenly seemed compassionate. If the Amarrians didn't take charge in the name of the Lord, all those trillions of individuals, spitting in the face of God, would feel eternal torment that would make religious cleansing feel like a trip to the candy store... and they would only spread their depravity, teaching it to their children, forcing and coercing others to reject the Lord, and cause so much more pain and suffering... eternal suffering.

Eternity... but not just eternity... eternity multiplied by every man woman and child in New Eden...

That's more than enough justification to do whatever is necessary to bring the population toward the light.

More than enough...

But as she looked over her shoulder to see an approaching ship, she suddenly changed, as though the Lord had stripped the logic from her mind and reminded her of His true form, and her thoughts from a moment earlier seemed distant and twisted.

The first of the Blackbird cruisers bore down on her, the polygonal docking bay sticking out in front of the drab grey, boxy vessel like a giant symmetrical nose on a drunken, misguided starship. The hideous alien vessel was somehow a bastion of hope she hadn't thought possible. It grew larger and larger, but seemed to be approaching at a steadily slower rate.

It seemed unlikely that they wouldn't have seen her at this range, and if they wanted her dead, they had enough small, rapid tracking turrets on the frigates to take her out so it would have happened already.

Floreina checked her air supply. Just over eight minutes left... just enough time to feel the air run out moments before being rescued... by the enemy. And the difficult thoughts washed away, and the thought of these heathens and their blasphemous ways seemed strangely comforting now... even they, in their own way, were God's little creatures...

It was all too confusing...

And time dragged on as she watched the docking bay draw closer, finally surrounding her. The cruiser, though only about a sixth of the size of her Abaddon, seemed somehow just as massive. Finally she saw a hatch open near the bay doors as the oxygen readout in the corner of her eye ticked down to four minutes.

A small drone on a line, similar to her grappler, emerged from the opening. The tiny robot propelled itself toward her and within a few

seconds she reached out to catch it, clutching it to her chest like a football. Within seconds she found herself pulled toward the hatch.

She felt the gravity crossing up her body, first her head hanging heavy, nearly dropping to the floor as she caught herself with her hands. She crawled inward, feeling the invigorating yet sickening sense of her top half weighted down and secured to a floor, while her legs hung weightless. But she dragged herself inward and pulled the hatch shut, then laid on the floor and waited for the airlock.

Floreina had imagined her tank running dry, gasping for air, ripping her helmet off as the airlock filled with oxygen and gasping for a life-saving breath. But the airlock filled before her timer hit two minutes, and she pulled her helmet off casually, as though it didn't even matter, and felt the refreshment of the newly recycled air. Despite its distinct Caldari and Minmatar scent, it smelled significantly better than her own nanite-decomposed flesh.

The internal airlock opened and immediately a Minmatar soldier ran into the chamber, brandishing a projectile pistol. He ran to Floreina, the weapon pointed with a rigid arm toward her face. He knelt rapidly, reached to her side and took hold of the pistol tied to her suit. He ripped it from her side and tossed it back to another soldier just outside the airlock.

Floreina put her hands up in a condescending shrug. "What are we doing here?" she asked.

She looked up at the Minmatar and was struck with the realization of the wrongfulness... to have gone through all this in the name of God, only to be humiliated on the floor by a Minmatar.

Her body slumped in a distracting motion as her hand shot outward in a maneuver taught to her many times by her tactical implant. Her fingers surrounded the barrel and clamped down, pulling outward, pointing the barrel up as a shot rang out, pinging against the far wall. The weapon flipped naturally around in her hand to point back at the soldier.

But the moment she had control, she realized she had made a mistake. She could not afford to start a fight here and needed to give the weapon back without revealing her stupidity or fear.

"You want this?" she asked. And she flipped the weapon in her hand and tossed it through the airlock into the office beyond. "Go get it!"

Floreina began kicking at her pressure suit, tugging at its material to drag her body from its clutches. She clawed her way across the floor, ignoring the Minmatar, moaning lightly as the suit grated against

her thigh. She dragged her leg from the hot enclosure and finally slumped to the floor to rest her face against the patterns of steel inlays.

Did it matter at this point?... did any of this matter?... it was all too ridiculous to wrap her brain around so all she could do was decide that it didn't matter anymore...

She cried, the sobs jittering up her body like bubbles from the bottom of a boiling pot. And she ignored the other Minmatar. It simply didn't matter if they were drawing their weapons, and it didn't matter if they saw her in this state.

So Floreina closed her eyes and let herself cry, and as sad as she felt and as humiliating and shameful as this had been, somehow... somehow... it did not feel *bad*. God still guided her on a story... a plotline... a character study...

But real life wasn't like a story in a book. Stories are toned down, emotions simplified and glossed over. In real life people scream and cry incoherently, sweat and slobber dripping from their chin, spew death threats, throw hard objects... and then fall sobbing into each others arms pleading for forgiveness and professing their undying love.

That's real life...

You never see that in a story... because no one would believe it... it would be cliché and unbelievable...

But that's the way we feel about real life... sometimes we just don't believe that it actually happened... surreal... like it all came from some dramatic fantasy story...

And if we capture that perfect perspective that allows us to ride that wave of ups and downs like it were some great fantasy of romance and tragedy... we can learn to see God in everything, from terrorizing acts of torture and senseless murder, to the most beautiful landscapes and furry creatures. It's all a tapestry, and if we learn to accept the bad with the good, we can truly become one with God and His great plan.

So Floreina let herself cry, knowing He would not allow the Minmatar to harm her in her time of experiencing herself.

Her head rested on the cold silvery metallic floor of the Blackbird's main airlock, and her eyes opened only occasionally to examine the blurry topography of the textured surface.

And after a time she came to realize that nothing had happened. The Minmatar were leaving her alone on the floor. Whether or not they were all standing around pointing weapons at her, was a question that finally seemed relevant enough to look up for.

The abolitionists were there, standing tall above her, staring curiously at her sobbing and defeated form; but they held no weapons. She wiped tears from her eyes and allowed her vision to become clear.

"Do you need a hand?" asked the closest Minmatar.

Floreina grunted as she pushed off the last of her pressure suit. She dropped the material to the floor as the abolitionist held out his hand for her. Floreina hesitated only a moment before taking it and allowing him to pull her easily to her feet, kicking the bottom half of the suit out from under her as she came.

"Floreina," he said, "I am lieutenant Flin. I'm here to escort you to sick-bay."

"I want to talk to my—Mahran," said Floreina.

"That'll take a few minutes," replied Flin. "The captain is discussing things with him."

"Attempting to brainwash him?" she asked.

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"Good luck with that," Floreina snorted.

He shrugged. "Will you come with me, please, Miss Floreina?"

She nodded, and began limping along side him, toward the exit. "Your doc doesn't happen to have a replacement power supply that can fit my implant... and the skill to install it?"

"I believe that he does," Flin answered.

Floreina's eyes and chin shot upward in surprise to look at the lieutenant, and she smiled warmly.

"The doc's even Amarrian," continued Flin with a light hearted chuckle. "To indulge your ethnocentric preferences..."

"Why would you have a surgeon of that caliber aboard a cruiser like this?" Floreina asked.

"Why wouldn't we?" Flin replied as they began moving down the corridor. "Only a fool would come to a capsuleer mutiny without a qualified neuro-surgeon."

"Hmm," she replied.

"By the way... I like your tattoo," Flin told her, motioning toward her exposed thigh, flipping a sly smile.

Floreina ignored the comment, but absently touched the wounds with the tip of a finger, wincing only slightly, and smelled the rancid scent of the recovery as she limped beside the Minmatar terrorist.

"So... are you going to be ready to help lead a real assault against The Angel?" asked Flin.

Floreina shook her head. "I don't think I can do this anymore," she replied. "This whole plan was based on the idea that I would get in without anyone knowing or getting hurt... at this point I should be getting connections infused into my skin and Allihence should be a corpse on the floor and the crew should still be oblivious... but that's not how it worked out... and if I go back... and even if somehow we succeed, then still, everyone will know... unless we slaughter every one of my people on board... and even then, who knows what the variables are after everything that's happened... I just don't think I can go on..."

"Fair enough," Flin replied. "What about your buddy, Mahran?"

And Floreina gently rubbed her temples and watched the floor in front of her. "Poor Mahran," she whispered.

"Hmm..." replied Flin.

They arrived at the sick-bay and the doctor almost immediately turned from his readout terminal on the other side of the room to come to her attention.

"This is doctor Stephson, Floreina..." said the lieutenant. "I think I can trust you to hand you off to him at this point, so I'll leave you and get back to other issues... Marteen will be in here shortly to discuss some matters with you."

"Thank you, Flin," Floreina replied, nodding as she hopped up to sit on an exam table.

"Will probably need to get those pants off," the doctor told her. "We need to get those burns cleaned."

"Are you the neuro-surgeon?" Floreina asked, turning toward the doctor. "Can we begin on my implant first?"

"I have orders to treat your other injuries first," replied Doctor Stephson. "The fleet commander wishes to speak with you about a couple issues before allowing me to get too far in the restoration process."

"Alright," Floreina sighed, hopping down to carefully strip off her pants, feeling the cool breeze on her bare skin, and noticed the distinct refreshment of pulling off sweaty and blood stained clothing.

Stephson knelt before her to wipe away the grime from her thigh with a damp towel. "Ah, yes," he commented absently. "'Traitor'... it's healing up nicely. Good lettering actually; must have had a steady hand... or you know how to keep your leg still whilst being tortured."

"I'm quite sure I'll get it removed," Floreina grunted.

"Nice souvenir; might want to consider keeping it a while..." The doctor placed a thin wrap across the burn and connected the material to

wires that stretched to a tiny nanite control device to allow him to scan the damaged tissue and precisely control functionality of the nanites crawling from the cloth-like material to burrow into her leg for more deep cleaning. Floreina sighed pleasantly, this time feeling merely a tingle as the robots did their duty.

"So what made you join the abolitionists?" Floreina asked, hoping her voice did not carry the telltale mark of condemnation.

"I like freedom," he replied. "And they give me a steady paycheck."

"That's it?" she replied.

"What made you become a gunnery tech?" he countered.

"Because I Love the Lord and my country... because I believe in the Amarrian Empire... because there are a lot of lost souls out there that need saving... because I believe in experiencing everything that God has given us in New Eden and wish to bring glory to Him... because I want to do something for my people... and because I want to do the right thing."

"Hmm..." the doctor nodded.

"And you chose your career for the money..."

Stephson paused. "I chose to be a doctor because I prefer helping people over killing them... and I work with these gentlemen because I believe that slavery is wrong..." The doctor paused and looked up from between her legs. "We're all just people here in New Eden. Even the Jovians are human in their hearts and in the core of their DNA. You can take blood from a Minmatar and put it in a Caldari, a Gallente, and even an Amarr. We're all from the same blood, the same DNA and the same God."

"What difference does that make?" Floreina asked. "God and evolution can change a lot of things."

"It shows that they have a spiritual right to basic human freedom."

"And I believe Caldari factory workers have a right to basic healthcare and clean drinking water, but we don't always get what we want."

"The factory workers are free to leave—"

"That's a joke," she said. "They have the illusion of freedom. They have no money, no food, no savings, no means to better their lives. Trillions of third-world factory workers who would kill to have the life of the typical Amarr slave. The only difference between the Caldari, capitalistic industrial empire and the Amarrian system is that we're honest about the status of our subjects. God expects and demands us to care for them and treat them with decency and respect, while the holy

incarnation of capitalism offers little or no motivation for the wealthy to support common human decency.”

The doctor sighed lightly. “I see your point, and I won’t defend all the consequences of capitalism in New Eden or the greed of certain individuals, but you can’t use the wrongs of others to justify your own.”

“Eden is the way it is... we’re all just people, Doc, trying to be the best we can be in an imperfect world... and we all have... systems... political, spiritual and social systems within which we must work.”

Stephson sighed again, the sound blending slowly into a light chuckle. “Well, I’m under orders not to argue with you, Commander.”

“Yes...” replied Floreina. “That’s probably best... but I’m curious, being an Amarrian, about your perspectives... how you could come to betray our people...”

“Now, come on,” Stephson replied, drooping his head. “I just don’t go for the whole race thing, and I’ve never felt truly Amarrian as I’ve never felt Amarria cared much for my point of view... so many people don’t understand... even the abolitionists I work for... but I’ve found that *my people* are all the people of New Eden, and not just one race...”

“Then you can’t see the differences... you can’t see the destruction and depravity that the Minmatar have brought to this universe. I work with Minmatar everyday—”

“—so do I—”

“And I see what they’re like, their confusion, their fear, their inability to make decisions on their own, their notorious criminal behavior—thievery, lying. Do you think it’s a coincidence that escaped Minmatar slaves have some of the highest crime rates of any social group?”

“Because of the slavery,” the doctor retorted with a friendly smile as he finished the process on her leg, peeling the wrappings off one by one. “It’s basic human psychology. The degradation and humiliation of being stripped of your freedom and treated as property can tear apart a human’s moral integrity.”

“Ah... you’re going to try that old argument on me?” Floreina laughed. “If there were any truth to that statement, then you would need to say the same thing about criminal justice. Prisoners are treated just as inhumanely as any slave—more so because they have no spiritual purpose.”

“You’re talking about criminals—”

“The Minmatar are criminals spiritually... besides, your argument doesn’t care if they’re criminals. Degradation is degradation, and

human psychology is human psychology regardless of a crime. If we say slavery causes anti-social behavior in Minmatar, then we need to say that prisons cause antisocial behavior in criminals."

"Commander, I don't need to get into an argument with you..."

"You're right," she said. "I'm sorry..." If he had been anything other than an Amarrian, she would not have cared of his opinions; but to speak with an Amarrian abolitionist was a unique experience.

"Okay," said Stephson, "we're just about ready to take a look at that power supply. How's your leg feeling?"

"Better. Thank you."

"You should be nice and mobile in time for the attack."

"Attack?" she asked.

"Of course," Stephson replied just as they both looked up to see the lead abolitionist, Marteen enter the office. Two large Minmatar security officers followed behind.

"Floreina," Marteen greeted. "We have business to attend to... we need you and your implant up and running, so Doctor Stephson, please continue your work."

"When can I talk to Mahran?" Floreina asked.

"In a few minutes," Marteen replied. "We're discussing some issues with him at the moment."

Floreina closed her legs involuntarily as the Minmatar approached, but relaxed a moment later, as technically it shouldn't be any more embarrassing than being seen by a cat or a horse.

And Marteen didn't seem to care as he continued, "We're going to be boarding and taking over The Angel in about forty minutes, and I expect you to be there with us, and I expect some quality input."

"Excuse me?" Floreina said. "If you dock and invade, you're going to slaughter my people."

Marteen absently picked his fingernails as he said, "Kind of like how you slaughter my people..."

She sighed as she rolled over to allow the doctor access to the connection at the back of her head. "I can't do it... I know I have no means to stop you... and if you do, I pray that you successfully free my Mahran... and I won't blame you for stealing our Minmatar... but I can't be a party to the slaughter of my shipmates..."

"Hmm..." responded Marteen melodically from behind her. "Okay, that's fair." He paused only momentarily. "Stop working, Stephson. Guards, go ahead and escort miss Floreina to the brig. Be sure she

gets a shower and some clean clothes, a copy of The Scriptures, some time to pray and an appropriate final meal before her termination."

"Aye sir," replied one of the guards.

Floreina looked up, rolling halfway to her side to see Marteen abruptly twisting on his heel to head out the door. The guards approached, motioning to her, silently asking for her cooperation.

"Marteen," she said, "we were supposed to be allies in this. Have some decency. You have nothing to gain by hurting me..."

He stopped as the guards came to stand on either side of Floreina, herding the doctor toward his work station. "I'm sorry," Marteen replied. "You've seen too much of our procedures and tactics... and we are opposed to the things that motivate you..."

"Just like that?"

"I hope you can understand... This isn't out of maliciousness or hatred toward you or your people, it's a simple, practical necessity. You knew coming into this that you were going to end the day in either a capsuleer pod or a coffin. Those have always been the only two options for you, Floreina. You understood the risks when you began."

"Do you need me to say it?" Floreina asked.

"Say what?"

"What you should know that I'm about to say."

"There's no shame here. Say it."

"This cold-hearted action of yours is proof that everything Amarrians believe regarding your species is completely true, and it should be obvious that everything we do is justified."

Marteen simply nodded calmly and looked back at her, in that typical Minmatar manner of staring straight through common logic to the beauty of a self-serving delusion. "We are enemies in a war, Floreina." And he turned slowly away.

"But you would still help me gain capsuleer status?" she asked.

He stopped again and turned back, now clearly playing a game. "That was our original agreement, and that was our plan until thirty seconds ago."

"You can deal with me in a pod, but not as a regular mortal?"

He nodded. "That's correct... we have certain plans we have not discussed with you... to keep you in line... to be certain you pay your dues... to be certain you do not continue keeping slaves... we have certain connections within CONCORD that we can use to keep you in check and to profit from your presence as a capsuleer... exploit you in

various ways... a little blackmail and such... just enough to make certain you never turn against us."

"I see..." Floreina replied with a sigh. "Okay, then. I guess you win. Let's do it."

"Good good. I'm glad to hear it. Doctor Stephson, can you get her implant booted up?"

"Most likely," the doctor replied. "I'll refill her personal drug supply also. We don't have time to hook up your peripherals, Floreina, so you won't have your remote transmitter or external video, but everything else should come back on with a normal boot up."

"Excellent," said Marteen. "Get on it. Floreina, the guards will escort you to the war room as soon as your implant begins its boot cycle."

"I have trouble walking during the initial bootup—"

"Then they will carry you," the Minmatar replied as he turned one final time. "You've wasted enough of our time, Floreina, and I don't wish to waste any more."

Her legs floated across the floor as her applications started up, one by one in her mind, like old friends arriving at a reunion. She rested her weight on the two guards, her mind tuning once again to the depth, complexity and reliability of the digital connections that were as much a part of her person as any other part of her brain.

She grinned as she entered the dark room of ugly and barbaric Minmatar abolitionists seated around a jet-black conference table, focused inward. "Greetings," she said as she took hold of the back of the last remaining seat. She swung around and plopped down like a drunk.

She saw the Minmatar, imagining a board splayed out in the middle of the conference table, dice rolling, cards drawing, and little colorful pieces hopping from place to place... pieces representing human lives.... And the players hunched over their game, discussing strategy...

"Is my Mahran here?" she asked.

"Hello Floreina," came Mahran's cold, monotone reply over the conference speaker.

And Floreina's euphoria diminished nearly instantaneously.

"Mahran?" she replied questioningly. "How are you?"

"Master—" and he cut off.

"You alright, Buddy?" She spoke cautiously without her conversational analysts.

“I need to talk to you—” Mahran seemed to be speaking carefully as well, but still the words grated sluggishly through the speakers.

“Don’t Mahran,” Marteen put in. “Just leave it alone. We have tactics we need to attend to.”

Mahran spat words in a sudden flurry. “Master I have gone into sections of the computer system you did not authorize.”

“Mahran, please,” Marteen continued. “We don’t need to deal with this right now. It’s too important that we work as a team here... I’m very sorry that we helped get you started on this train of thought, but please, we need to put all that aside for right now. We’re relying on you and we need you to hold yourself together. We promise that everything will be taken care of when the day is over.”

“No,” said Mahran more calmly now. “I must speak to my Master... it may be my last chance... because... I went deeper into the computer system... and I searched some of the databases...”

And Floreina’s face sank into her hands as reality simultaneously formed and collapsed around her, the technological relationship constructing itself into its familiar magical precision even as her most important human relationship was suddenly on the brink of ruin.

“And I found a database tag word... ‘not slave appropriate’, Master... and when a Minmatar sees a secret box engraved with ‘Do not open’... well, you know exactly what he’s going to do...”

“Mahran please,” said Floreina and Marteen nearly simultaneously.

“I don’t even understand most of it...” he continued. “But what I did understand, I found disturbing...”

“I’m sorry, Mahran,” Floreina said. “These things are difficult to understand I know, which is why we’ve protected you—”

“And at first I was randomly searching the database for anything with the tag of ‘not slave appropriate’ and I was able to deal with most of what I found... but then I had a curiosity...” He faltered momentarily as his voice began to crack. “So I did a search for the tag ‘not slave appropriate’ combined with my master’s name...” and his voice seemed to curl inward to a whining but powerful sob. “And I found things about my master that I didn’t want to believe...”

“Listen to me, Mahran,” Floreina blurted. “I know these things are confusing. I don’t know what it is that you found, but I’m sure I can explain—”

“He’s gone,” one of the abolitionists put in, his head cocked over a communications panel built into the edge of the conference table.

"Gone?" Floreina asked.

"His connection's cut out."

"Mahran!" she said.

"He's gone!" the Minmatar repeated. "No signal."

"What's wrong with your comm?" Floreina asked.

"What's wrong with your slave?" asked Marteen.

"What kind of crap did you feed him?" Floreina said, her rear rising involuntarily from the seat, her voice fighting back against a shout. "What are you thinking trying to brainwash him right before an operation?"

"We've said *nothing* to him," Marteen replied. "We didn't even start with him, Floreina, that's a promise. The moment he contacted us he started talking about these things he found in the database—what were *you* thinking—"

"Sir, he's back online," the other abolitionist cut him off.

"I'm going to hit the self destruct," said Mahran, his voice suddenly calm.

"No!" shouted Floreina and several of the Minmatar.

"No, listen, this isn't necessary," Floreina blurted. "I love you, Mahran, and I love the people aboard The Angel... and so do you. Whatever you found, Little Buddy, I can explain—"

"Milkeinos," he retorted. "You killed him because of a few ISK worth of artificial limb..."

"I was under orders!" Floreina replied. "I argued for his survival. How dare you try to hold that against me!"

"You took one point four seconds to 'argue' with Captain Alliance about Milkeinos's life!"

"Mahran please—" Marteen attempted to cut him off.

But Mahran began shouting, his voice echoing surprisingly clearly through the cramped conference room. "You told me that sob story in the heating ducts... 'oh boo hoo, I killed a slave when I was twelve and I felt so horrible about it'... 'that was the only time I ever killed a slave'... 'the only time'... you feed me lies, Floreina. Lies! My whole life! Lies!"

And just as Floreina's basic environmental recognition programs began completing their boot up process and started feeding her names and facial feature analyzations, Mahran began his tirade, screaming from the depths of his throat to jolt the members of the conference back in their seats, several bringing their hands instinctively to their ears.

"You stole my humanity! My person! You tore me apart inside! And the Minmatar people—so you could have a possession—a toy—and you showed me compassion—as much compassion as was necessary to get me to do what you wanted. And you filled my head with lies and lies and lies!" And Mahran screamed, a deep, rolling expression of anger, depression, and collapsing reality, like an over powered planetary jet engine crashing to the surface of a deserted world. A metallic pounding emanated amidst Mahran's outburst, as though he were striking the walls of the tiny, claustrophobic control chamber with blunt objects.

"Mahran!" Marteen shouted. "Behave like a man! Pull yourself together! We have a job to do."

And Mahran seemed to calm momentarily.

"You know how much I'm opposed to what they have done to you, Mahran, so you know that I speak the truth when I say that you must respect your master and continue to obey her for just a little while longer. This is necessary for the survival of yourself and many others on both our ships. Just forget these things for the time being and we will deal with them later."

"Okay." Mahran took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm sorry... I'm okay now..."

And they paused a long moment.

"You're doing better, Mahran?" said Floreina. "I promise that we can get through this and in the end you will have all the rewards that I've promised and more."

"Your words are like the grunts of an animal to me now, Master... Your voice is alien... like the meaning... the spirit... has gone from your words... I don't think I know who you are anymore..."

And Floreina swallowed and grit her teeth to fight the sudden trembling of her jaw. "I'm sorry Buddy," she forced.

"I'm sorry too," he replied flatly.

Floreina placed her hands on the table and put her head down.

Silence surrounded them for a long moment. Floreina sat nearly motionless; the pleasures of her recently resurrected mental applications suddenly gone. Still, they booted up, one by one, reality becoming clearer by the minute, but in many ways, the organized details of her surroundings and her life somehow accentuated her anger and loss.

"Okay, Mahran..." Marteen broke the silence. "Are you okay, Man? Are you gonna be able to handle yourself during our invasion?"

"Yes," he replied, clearing his throat.

"We need you to keep yourself together during this."

“Yes, I understand,” Mahran replied. “I just needed to get that out.”

“Okay...”

And as the fog lifted from her perceptions, she looked upon the Minmatar at the conference table, and thought to herself about just what a dangerous game they were playing. They gave her back her computer personality without a fight, just after pulling a gun on her and threatening her with an execution. And they still wanted to play, even after declaring they stand against everything she believes...

These boys had some balls...

...or something they weren't telling her...

Floreina looked up at the soldiers surrounding her, approximately two hundred of them, crammed into the cargo hold of the Blackbird cruiser. Her analyzations jumped from one idea to another, acutely aware of the fact that she looked upward at all of them, being the shortest amongst the hulking Minmatar mercenaries.

But despite the fact that any one of them could crush her skull with a well-placed blow, she somehow felt a power over them, as though her superior spirit rose high above them.

She was the outcast; a soldier without a country; but somehow, they were the ones playing the dangerous game.

Two hundred men stood, packed tightly together, pulling their laser-resistant vests and uniforms over their massive shoulders, even as Floreina adjusted hers.

But there was one other woman in the crowd, her identity picked out automatically, standing, facing the opposite direction, preparing her uniform and weapon along with the others. She stood rigidly, her shoulder's squared, as though trying to blend in with the larger men.

“I'm concerned,” came the voice of Mahran through the earpiece provided by the abolitionists, “about what they know... they seem to be preparing themselves for an attack. They're bypassing the network to run all sorts of routines... and I can't tell what...”

“Contact in four minutes,” Marteen said through their communicators, ignoring Mahran's fears.

“You're going to get annihilated,” Floreina warned. Several soldiers turned to look at her comment, unaware of the private conversation between the assault leaders.

“Then you shall be annihilated along with us,” Marteen replied.

“We’ve got security officers lining up and preparing at each of our entry points,” Mahran warned.

“That can’t be helped.”

“You’re going to take casualties,” Floreina added.

“Yes, I’m aware,” Marteen said. “We’ve been over this. Mahran, what are their positions? Can you feed us updated schematics?”

“Working on it...” he replied.

The time ticked down as she listened to the stream of troop locations and tactical information. Mahran seemed distant, as though he did not even acknowledge that his master was on the line.

And the scent of communal sweat suddenly hit Floreina’s nostrils, just as she recognized the sticky dampness beneath her own, unfamiliar mercenary uniform and body armor.

But time moved quickly and it seemed like within moments she felt the jolt of the ship finally contacting her home and forming a seal. Moments later the airlock pulled open with a loud hiss, the sound traveling across the hordes of Minmatar terrorists standing between Floreina and the scene.

Thirty seconds later came a detonation as they blew open the airlock.

And within seconds the sounds of automatic projectile weapons erupted, speckled with war cries and colorful flashes.

And despite the cries of pain from many of the forward mercenaries, the crowd soon began moving forward.

She received rapidly updated data, transmitted from The Angel’s network, the three dimensional blueprint appearing imposed over her normal vision, showing the location of shots fired and bodies piling up along the corridors. She watched her comrades falling, one by one, through this series of blips and markers.

After several long minutes, the crowd began moving faster as many of the attackers split off to secure adjacent areas, protecting their central route to the pod control bridge.

They began marching faster now, and Floreina quickly noticed the other woman being corralled back toward Floreina’s position, as though they felt she was not worthy of moving with the leaders, and needed to be kept back and protected, in much the same way as Floreina was hanging back. Floreina identified the woman, retrieving the name Seleina, but found little more information other than the fact that she was aligned politically with these particular terrorists, as well as slavery abolitionists in general.

Floreina moved through the blown airlock and back into her own ship as Seleina took up a position several rows behind her.

But her interest in Seleina suddenly dissipated as she began stepping over the bodies of her old crewmates, and the tense knot suddenly returned to her stomach.

And they continued forward, moving steadily down corridors, hearing nearly constant and rhythmic bursts of gun fire as Floreina watched the little colorful markers indicating each loss of life.

Up ahead, the mercenaries came to an office in which fourteen slaves had been held ever since the beginning of this ordeal.

"Do not attack any Minmatar slave unless provoked," Marteen reminded his crew.

"I have not kept a close eye on these slaves," Mahran warned. "I cannot guarantee anything about them."

Floreina suddenly registered what seemed like misplaced fear. The slaves, in many ways, were the most dangerous aspect of this, as there was nothing to stop them from switching their allegiances at a moment's notice.

Floreina watched the map as Mahran released the door and contacted the slaves inside. "The abolitionists have arrived and wish to take you peacefully to give you your freedom," Mahran told them. "Can I trust all of you to go without a fight?"

She heard them answer a surprisingly emphatic "yes", and several moments later they were released from the office and directed to move backward through the advancing troops, toward Floreina, then beyond, back to the Blackbird.

But as they approached, she scanned their faces and sudden warnings went off in her emotion analyzers as several of the slaves seemed to catch her eye and focus on her.

Floreina moved quickly, stepping backward, snatching a nearby soldier, identified as Starneid, to pull him in front of her. But the first of the slaves made their move in the same moment. The closest two, by the names of Danayel and Heifid, darted forward, each pulling a makeshift knife made from sharpened scrap metal.

The mercenary Starneid yelped quickly and cringed away from the slave, pressing backward against Floreina, as he raised his rifle. He fired a shot into Danayal's jaw, disintegrating it into a splattering of blood, bone and teeth. The slave dropped to the floor. Heifid continued his frantic attack, raising his shiv in devoted hatred and drove it into Starneid's neck.

Floreina's tactical systems were automatically searching for an accessible weapon. When Starneid took the hit to the neck, her systems immediately directed her to reach for his rifle with her left hand. Her right hand continued hanging onto Starneid and holding him in front of her.

As she tried to pull the weapon from the soldier's convulsing and clenched fingers, she registered the other slaves leaping forth in all directions. They pulled from their pockets makeshift knives, mini-torches, and even pens as weapons, boldly throwing themselves forward to attack the slits in the necks of the soldiers' body armor.

Even as he convulsed and choked, and Heifid wrenched the knife from his neck, Starneid held tight to his weapon, trying in vain to raise it again to fire another shot. Finally Floreina shoved what was left of Starneid forward as Heifid attempted to swing his knife around toward her.

Running backward, Floreina connected with another abolitionist. His hand came around to grip her by the chest, and shoved her backward.

She stumbled against the steel grated floor, and heard shots echoing through the tight corridor as the abolitionists fought and executed the slaves. She dropped to the floor in an attempt to avoid stray shots, turning slightly to catch herself before slamming to the floor.

Floreina crawled below the action, between the legs of the Minmatar as they jumped and avoided her. The attack lasted less than ten seconds before the slaves were incapacitated with fatal gunshots, but several more soldiers fell to the floor at the same time.

Turning back the other direction, Floreina crawled rapidly toward Starneid's fallen corpse to grab his projectile rifle. She pulled it from his hands and brought her right foot forward to hop quickly to her feet.

Almost immediately the nearest soldier placed his hand on her newly acquired weapon. "We don't want you carrying a gun!" he reminded her loudly.

"Come off it," she snapped, pulling suddenly to wrench the rifle from him. "If you can't protect me, I need to protect myself."

"We have orders not to allow you to arm yourself, Miss Floreina."

"You've got no choice," she retorted, holding tight to the weapon and turning to push forward just as the rest of the soldiers began moving again.

"Let her have it," came Marteen's reluctant order through the voice comms. "The slave loyalty on this ship renders things a little less predictable."

The soldiers continued on into The Angel, pausing at the end of each corridor to allow Mahran to disengage the lock on the next hatch. They

would throw it open and fire on any Amarrian in the room. Floreina held back behind the group, watching the action mainly through her map interface... little dots and blips representing her crewmates being shot to death... and listened to the deafening sounds of the Minmatar projectile weapons.

Slaves were treated as hostile, but still given a chance. Most gave themselves up easily, but Floreina imagined most of them would ultimately remain loyal to their ship, regardless of how tempting this easy freedom might be. They were moved and locked into adjacent rooms or restrained with plastic disposable cuffs.

The body count rose, the numbers clearly displayed through Floreina's mental interface. The count hit two hundred of Amarrian crew plus forty slaves after just twenty minutes of advancement. The mercenaries, on the other hand, suffered only fifteen casualties by the time they reached the access crawlway that would lead them through back-end corridors into the central pod command chambers.

Three soldiers entered the tube, and Floreina was directed to enter and follow. They climbed hard, moving quickly, and within another twenty minutes had reached the hatch into the tiny emergency control room where Mahran stood, his brain still linked with the ship's security networks. They passed over without opening the hatch and just a few minutes later found the next hatch leading into the main pod control chamber.

They dropped down one at a time from the opening in the ceiling. The control room was dark, the illumination coming mostly from the readouts on the interface terminals that stood in two rows facing a command seat at the far end. The opposite side of the room contained a large armored sliding hatchway, designed to protect the adjacent capsule chamber at all costs.

The room already contained eight Amarrian bodies; the same crew members Floreina had ordered Mahran to kill as they had attempted to blow their way into the adjacent chamber. One dead Amarrian lay next to the armored doorway, a precision torch still clutched in his hand. A panel above his head lay open, exposing the door's circuitry, torch burns apparent around the edges of the opening.

A technician dropped down after Floreina, dressed in the same body armor and uniforms as the soldiers. He began examining the controls as Floreina sat down in the command chair to plug the link into her mind.

Mahran pulled away from her as she entered the system, creating a mental wall to hide from his master. She projected angrily at him and he

responded by releasing only the data necessary to continue their mission. A sting hit her heart for a moment as she felt herself so close to Mahran and still unable to make a connection; to bring him back from his sudden deterioration. But she had little time to think about their relationship and moved on to decode the access systems into the pod housing.

A moment later the large reinforced bay door rose upward to reveal the sleek grey interior of their destination, contrasting dramatically with the golden hue of the remainder of the ship. Allihence's pod sat majestically in the center of a circular room, on a large, reinforced pedestal, surrounded by a ring of even more computer terminals equipped with mental linkages.

Floreina removed her link and approached the room, never before having seen the emotional and intellectual center of the ship she had called home for so long. The outer walls were sleek, smooth, and precisely rounded. The reinforced vaulted ceiling hung high overhead, two massive pistons connecting a pair of giant plates to the floor, ready to fire at a moment's notice to release the room and eject the pod.

The capsule itself seemed to rise above everything else, dominating its surroundings. Its sleek egg shape was broken only by the seal across its midsection and the cradle within which it sat.

High on the wall behind the capsule was a deep engraving of a lesser-known scriptures quote: *Happy those who seize your children and smash them against a rock.* And Floreina stared at the words for a long moment, a strange coldness passing over her despite the sense that the captain's choice of quote seemed to justify everything Floreina had done today.

Marteen dropped into the control room behind her, followed by Floreina's two hired doctors, Addeilon and Pari, scowling angrily at the situation. Finally, Doctor Stephson dropped to the floor.

"Have we drained the pod?" asked Marteen, moving past Floreina to gaze at the capsule.

"Negative sir," replied a technician hovered over a terminal. Floreina pulled up his name as Garmein. "The captain still has some measure of control over internal pod features. It would take us twenty minutes to hack it, and would only serve to ease Allihence's pain when we pull her out of there. I say we pop the top and let the fluid fall on the floor.

"Sounds good," Marteen said. He turned to the three doctors. "Do we have everything we need in this room to get everything done?"

They nodded, glancing at their own packs of equipment.

“Okay, then I want this room and the rest of the ship sealed off. I want every hatchway closed and accounted for.”

“Aye, sir,” replied a soldier. “Calling in the order now.”

“Okay,” continued Marteen, “begin the captain’s extraction.”

Floreina looked back at Garmein as she stood in the hatchway. He punched keys intently into the interface and within moments a hiss emanated from the pod, and tiny jets of steam shot from the ring around the center of the pod as the top slowly separated from the lower half of the giant egg, and a large grapppler on a pulley descended to attach to the pod and lift the upper section and reveal the contents.

And the room seemed to freeze as the thick embryonic fluid slowly seeped from the separation, running down the outside of the capsule in large globules and within seconds increased to a gush that splashed bright pink nutrient liquid across the floor in all directions.

And the egg shell rose to reveal the naked form of Floreina’s captain enclosed within. Her arms hung to the sides, her body slumped, but still standing. A multitude of tubes and connections protruded from her flesh across her arms, chest, and stomach. The top raised further to reveal her face and head, covered in a tight mask with several more connections.

Allihence began to shake.

“Her emergency mental routines are firing up properly,” announced Garmein. “Her mind is returning to her body as planned.”

Her head fell backward and her convulsions increased as several soldiers rushed forward to begin tearing connections from the captain, starting with her faceplate.

She screamed; a low whining at first, rising into a tortured and piercing screech of pain and fury.

With each connection ripped from her flesh, she shook and wailed, her arms flailing more wildly, her voice fluctuating randomly from high to low, to garbled cries to grunts, the only similarity between the sounds being their relentless fury and hatred.

The soldiers hauled her from the capsule, grabbing her by the shoulders and dragging violently to throw her unceremoniously to the deck. Floreina felt a jolt run up her body and coalesce as Allihence slammed to the floor with a painful thud and splash.

Her captain choked loudly, her naked body twisting and contorting in the puddle of nutrient gel as she coughed, gagged, and finally vomited. Little spots of blood emanated from locations across her body where connections had been removed without concern for her flesh. Blood mixed with the fluid around her to create subtle color variations.

The two soldiers, named Karmine and Dithmire, stood triumphantly over Allihence for a moment, then began moving back toward Floreina and the adjacent command center.

And another body dropped to the floor from the hatch overhead. Floreina turned quickly back to see her slave squatting.

“Mahran!” she snapped. “What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be connected with the network.”

And Mahran simply turned away as he rose to his feet.

“Mahran!” she shouted.

He ignored her.

“Mahran has been relieved of his control duties,” Marteen announced.

“Excuse me?” Floreina replied. “That was not part of our plan!”

Within moments she felt the soldier’s hands on her shoulder. Milliseconds later, a hand came around her side to grasp her rifle.

“It was part of *ours*,” said Marteen.

Everything seemed to focus for a moment as her combat implants suddenly switched into primary operation. She turned to defend herself, but found the weapon already wrenching from her hands.

She felt the weight of a soldier as he held tight to her shoulder and drove her against the wall. Within seconds Karmine and Dithmire had clasped her wrists and bound them with thick plastic disposable cuffs behind her back.

Her combat defense systems frantically calculated strategies as the soldiers threw her around like a soiled piece of clothing, dragging her to the floor, ripping off sections of armor and searching for weapons.

Floreina cried out and struggled, throwing her legs and arms around in futile defense as she noticed from the corner of her eye, Mahran turning casually around to watch.

One more body dropped from the ceiling, and as she watched Seleina absorb the drop with a squat, then rise confidently to her feet, Floreina came to recognize the situation. This Minmatar was not just another abolitionist soldier who happened to be female...

“You double crossed me...” Floreina said.

“As if I’m gonna risk my men to put someone like *you* into a capsule,” Marteen replied.

Floreina’s head slumped to the floor and she closed her eyes.

It’s just one complication and aggravation after another.

“Mahran!” she shouted again.

“He doesn’t answer to you any more,” Marteen replied flatly.

“Mahran you’ve got five seconds to answer me before I detonate your heart!”

“He’s well aware that you have no signal,” replied Marteen.

Floreina’s face seemed to melt slowly into the floor. “Mahran, please... just answer me once... are you betraying me right now? Are you just going to turn your back on everything I’ve done for you?”

“You betrayed me first,” he replied slowly. “You betrayed me time and time again with every lie you told.”

Floreina stared at his back.

“We might as well begin,” Marteen said, turning toward Seleina.

She nodded as Doctor Addeilon unfolded and set up a stretcher for the Minmatar.

“You betray me too?” she asked. “We had an agreement...”

“I’m sorry,” said Doctor Pari as he organized his own supplies on a small folding table. “We had no choice.”

She sighed. “I suppose I’m not surprised... I shouldn’t have even made it this far...”

Floreina watched for a moment as Seleina began removing sections of her body armor, then her uniform underneath.

“We’re all going to die in here,” Floreina said. “You know that? We’re all dead... do you believe that the crew of this ship is going to follow this Minmatar? Being a woman is not going to fool a single person.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Marteen. “We chose her for compatibility and availability, not believability. We intend to remove the slaves, then eject your crew in cargo containers and escape pods, then re-cloak the ship.”

“You lie,” Floreina told him.

“Whatever—”

“You’re going to slaughter every member of this crew and save only the Minmatar... you’re nothing more than a morally void terrorist.”

“We believe in freedom—”

“And you’ll slaughter anyone who stands in the way of your so-called freedom...” Floreina shouted, ignoring her tactical readouts and conversational assistants. “You’ll even slaughter the very ones you claim to rescue... you have no purpose... you have no idea what you’re doing on a moral or spiritual level... you’ve just latched onto this idea that slavery is bad and you simply don’t care what kind of destruction and suffering you cause in order to do away with it.”

"Floreina, you don't know what it feels like to be a slave," Marteen replied, raising his voice only slightly. "I was born into slavery and I have seen both sides, and I must apologize, Floreina, I know you're simply misguided, and in your own way, trying to be a good person—I do recognize that—but that doesn't change the fact that your actions contribute to enough human suffering that it is more than worth fighting against."

"You have no morals, no compassion, no connection with God..." Floreina started.

"What about your morals!" Mahran said, suddenly spinning around. "You lied to me my whole life about everything! You told me Minmatar society never accomplished anything. You told me Minmatar have deep genetic discrepancies. You told me only the fringe and insane believe in religions other than the Amarrian... You told me you only ever killed one slave! How can you talk about his morals when everything you've ever said to me has been designed to manipulate me?"

"I did what I could to protect you!" Floreina cried.

"Lies!" Mahran shouted. "I don't mean any more to you than an animal... you'll put me to sleep when the vet bills get too high."

"You know that's not true!" Floreina shouted, then calmed herself. "You betray everything... You betray me and our Lord and everything that's great and holy. You have moral obligations..."

Mahran turned away from her again. He sniffed and looked at the floor. "I could have been a person... a real person... and you took that away from me..."

Floreina's head dropped to the floor again, wondering if any of it really mattered any more, and felt the tears rising. "I loved you... you were like a son to me..." Her eyes cocked to continue gazing at him, her vision beginning to blur.

Mahran took a deep breath and shuddered. "I know..." he said, turning back to stare at her, the facial analyzers interpreting simple, intense passion and little more. "I know you loved me... I won't try to take that away from you... but... Floreina... did you ever care about me? ...did you ever ask if I was happy?"

"...after all I've done for you and everything we've been through... you sacrifice the lives of everyone on this ship. ...every Amarrian soul, and a large portion of the Minmatar—their blood is on your hands... "

"Don't turn their deaths around on me!" Mahran shouted, moving toward her. "You started this! You forced me to be a part of this!"

And he stooped before her, grabbed her uniform just below the neck and dragged her upward.

Floreina came to her feet in sudden surprise to stare into his eyes, her analyzations searching in vain for some kind of inconsistency in his facial features. From the edges of her vision she recognized Marteen and his soldiers tensing at Mahran's sudden outburst.

"You ordered me to execute the crew right here in this room!" Mahran barked, his breath warming Floreina's face. "I had to listen to their pleas while I suffocated them!"

"Mahran, stop," Marteen said. "Let's not go this far... she's just misguided..."

But Mahran ignored him, hauling Floreina away from the wall and back toward the overhead door. He threw her under the disconnected panel and into the Amarrian corpse lying with its back to the wall. Floreina's head hit the chest and her arms strained against the restraints behind her back. She looked up at Mahran and whined in shock.

He dropped to the floor before her, bringing a hand suddenly outward to clutch her neck. "Take a look at the murder you ordered me to commit!" he said, drawing her head up to press her face against the corpse's cheek. "Smell it! Smell the death you've caused... of your own people... *you* caused this death and all the death we've seen today, because of *your* choices! *You* were the one who wanted to do this!"

He pressed, and she felt the cold, hardened flesh of the officer against her own and her stomach reeled back in disgust, her eyes snapping shut and her face tightening as if to pull away from the experience.

But at the same time, her tactical systems suddenly lit up, reminding her of a simple little detail: just below the small of her back, tucked under the corpse's locked fingers, lay the little precision cutting torch.

She held calm as Mahran pressed her face into the body, and simply waited for the end of his tantrum.

"Mahran!" shouted Marteen. "Okay, we need to calm down here. It's over. She's never going to give you another order ever again. Calm down, Man. We still need her in a reasonable condition to reference her mental systems."

And Mahran seemed to calm, releasing his clutch on her collar. As he pulled away, Floreina twisted, clutching the tiny torch, and guided it carefully into the back of her pants.

Mahran took a deep breath and turned away from her. "She's not worth it..."

“Okay, get her off the body,” Marteen said, motioning toward the two soldiers.

Karmine and Dithmire stepped forward and lifted Floreina, much more gently this time, then set her down against the opposite side of the hatchway. Floreina held still for several long moments, scanning the room and allowing her tactical and combat routines to take center stage for several long moments as she examined the various characters within the room, their positions and the potential outcomes of combat.

The hostile list included two soldiers – Karmine and Dithmire – in full body armor, each with an automatic rifle and sidearm, plus the abolitionist leader Marteen, with similar equipment. Garmein the technician had no body armor, though did carry a sidearm. Seleina, the competing aspiring capsuleer, was nearly naked and unarmed on the stretcher, though her body armor, rifle and sidearm were piled neatly within jumping distance from her location. Doctor Stephson, also considered hostile by default, was unarmed and without armor. Mahran, her tactical systems having recently reclassified as hostile, was also unarmed and without defense. And of course, the captain, Allihence, also hostile by default, unarmed, unprotected and incapacitated.

The only non-hostiles, though hardly able to be classified as allies, also unarmed and undefended, were Floreina’s two hired doctors.

Six Minmatar, four Amarrians, and not one ally.

Her one advantage was the fact that their body armor was designed primarily to counter the Amarrian laser weapons, with heavy Electro-Magnetic resistance. Their weapons, however, were projectile guns of Minmatar design that had the potential to cause enough concussion damage to incapacitate a victim within a few shots, despite the armor.

But the best option would still be the head shot.

But these thoughts were still a long way off, only able to hope that these calculations would become relevant at some point.

She looked up at Mahran and a weight descended on her chest, as though hanging from her throat. He would never again be the same person. Her loyal subject had crossed a line from which he could never return and her thoughts slowed painfully as she examined that concept.

She had never truly known him, and she had never truly controlled him.

Floreina refocused and began working the mini-torch from the back of her pants as she watched the doctors already working to apply connections to Seleina’s body. And from just below the stretcher, still lying in

the large puddle of nutrient gel, was Allihence, lying nearly motionless other than the occasional contorted twitch.

But a tiny artificial flash from her scanning algorithms directed her toward Allihence's lips, and their subtle movement, opening up her lip reading software.

Hey Floreina, mouthed the captain. Nice day for treason? The rest of Allihence's body remained nearly motionless. The movement of her lips was subtle enough that Floreina could not make it out consciously, and the interpretation application, though rapid and accurate in its responses, could only read it by recording and enhancing.

I don't consider it treason, Floreina mouthed silently, turning her head subtly to show the captain. What you were doing to those slaves is a disgrace to all Amarria.

Don't give me that, replied the captain. Nobody believes that was your real motivation.

Floreina's monitoring applications continued scanning, tracking every person's line of sight to watch for the best time to mouth her reply. *You enjoyed killing them... you made a game out of the death and torture...*

So what? came the captain's reply.

We're supposed to be helping them...

Allihence closed her eyes and took a quick breath, as though suppressing a sudden chuckle.

So this is just about enjoying their suffering... about controlling them for our own benefit and amusement... just like every abolitionist stereotype... Floreina carefully started up the torch as she communicated, slowly testing it. And all those overclocking 'tests'... they were simply for your own enjoyment, weren't they?

Allihence took a deep, yet nearly undetectable breath. And they paused for several moments as Karmin's eyes lingered on Allihence.

Do you ever wonder about the subtle, subconscious emotions that we never know are there, but nevertheless affect our choices every day? asked the captain.

Floreina shifted the torch carefully to heat the connections on the plastic bindings behind her back, wincing from the pain, but unable to strain her wrists any further from the center. She stopped and tested the resistance. This was going to take some time if she didn't want to seriously burn herself.

Allihence continued, *Happy those who seize your children... She glanced up at the quote etched into the bulkhead above. Violence is necessary, Floreina... so the Lord gave us the ability to enjoy it... and every one of us*

enjoys it... every, single one of us... we feed on it... like blood to a vampire. It's why we have violent games and stories, it's why our religions are full of it... but it goes beyond that... behind the scenes... deep in our subconscious it motivates us, including the Lord God who created us... to do violence, to cause others to suffer... but we hide it from our conflicting compassion so we can feel that intensity... that feeling of being truly alive... we invent masks of reasoning that we tell to our children... we call it justice with our criminals and our personal vendettas... we call it patriotism with our nations... we call it discipline with our slaves and even our children... but deep down it's our God-given desire to feel that drama that comes from suffering...

Allihence winked boldly. *The reason we do violence is because we want to... because it feels right...* The captain paused and cocked her head just a couple centimeters. *So don't look at me like I'm a monster simply because I'm able to admit the reasons behind my actions.*

Floreina did not reply, suddenly entranced with her words, the images suddenly coming to mind of every human life that had ended here today... because of her actions...

But what difference did it make... she took such pleasure in her efficient use of the tachyon beams... ending lives every day on the job, and celebrating each one like points on a scoreboard... recognizing them as little more... satisfied with their simplistic label of 'terrorist'... Was Allihence so different?

Floreina's systems continued scanning the ten other live bodies within the two rooms, moving her eyes and head obediently per the implant's requests. Behind her back, she carefully moved the torch at the proper times to slowly break down the center coupling of the cuffs.

I see what you're doing, the captain mouthed, her pupils darting about, most likely scanning in much the same fashion as Floreina. *As much as I hate you for what you've done to me, I'd like to propose an alliance... temporarily.*

Floreina raised an eyebrow to invite her to continue.

I'll keep my mouth shut about your torch... continued the captain. *You keep your mouth shut about the fact that I'm able to speak... and we both promise... a promise under God, as one Amarrarian to another... that... with the possible exception of the doctors... we kill each other last.*

Floreina nodded with just her eyes. *Agreed.*

Floreina looked at the ground, grit her teeth, and pressed her back tightly against the wall as the cuffs heated and strained her pain suppression and the pitiful coolant systems of the nanites within her flesh.

After a short time, Floreina mouthed, *I'm sorry about this, captain... but I followed the word of God... and even now, with everything that's gone wrong... I still believe I did the right thing.*

Allihence waited a long moment before replying. *We have such a tendency to believe that if it feels good and satisfies us emotionally then it must be the right thing to do... She paused. You're always going to attack the most evil person conveniently available... just as long as there's a fight to be had and blood to be spilled...*

Their communication ceased as Floreina noticed the possibility of Marteen watching from the corner of his eye as he examined the doctor's preliminary readouts from Seleina's connections.

Floreina looked at the ground again, her tactical scanning able to rest slightly now that she did not need to disguise a complex conversation. Allocating processing cycles to her other systems, she began playing back some of the other conversations that had occurred in the room during her discourse with the captain.

She heard Mahran's voice.

"...I want to stick it in her face and make her taste it," he whispered, nearly a minute earlier, to the soldier named Dithmire, as though Floreina would not be able to hear.

"I appreciate your enthusiasm," replied Dithmire "But we don't want you slipping and blowing her head off... we still need to force access to her mind for reference, so we need her alive."

"I'll be careful," Mahran whispered, confident and sadistic. "I just want her to feel what it's like... what I've felt all this time... when all this started she put a gun to my face... and laughed about it... about the power she had over my life... and how she would buy herself a new slave..."

And Floreina jumped forward thirty seconds to the current moment to hear Mahran still whispering his argument toward the sympathetic Dithmire. She looked up to see the other soldier, Karmine, listening nearby.

"I know how to use a sidearm... even a Minmatar one..." said Mahran as Floreina watched from the corner of her eye.

And suddenly Mahran's hand went out to clasp the pistol strapped to the soldier's side. Dithmire brought his hand down quickly to block Mahran, his right still clutching his automatic rifle.

"I want her to feel what it's like..." he repeated as he wrenched the weapon from the reluctant soldier and turned to glare menacingly at Floreina.

Dithmire, Karmine and Marteen all turned to watch nervously as Mahran took the weapon and rose from his seat to approach Floreina.

"Oh, Master..." he sneered as he glared down on her in dramatic rage... as though putting on a show... a public demonstration of an old love turned to pure hatred.

"Please, don't," Floreina said, shaking her head sadly toward her Mahran. "...not this again... you betray me then come back to spit on me..."

He pointed the weapon toward her face, then slowly knelt before her, bringing the barrel of the projectile pistol closer and closer to her nose. "Do you remember when we lay on your bed... My Master... and you turned over to rub against me and shove your pistol in my face in some kind of fearful and twisted sexual manipulation... and you laughed about blowing my head off just because you're an Amarrian and I'm a Minmatar... laughed about getting my brother to clean up the mess... those are the things that stick with you... Master... the kinds of things you hold on your heart for years... and can define your relationship with another person... even if that other person is completely oblivious to the effects... oblivious to how much it hurt you..." Mahran turned only momentarily to wipe a tear from his eye, his facial features switching rapidly from deep sadness and loss back to intense fury.

The gun pressed into her face, the barrel feeling like ice on her nose and cheek. She closed her eyes and cringed away from it, more from disgust and aggravation than fear...

...because fear, at this point, was pointless. Once you have nothing left to lose, your basic animal emotions can become simple, distant memories.

"I'm sorry, Mahran..." Floreina replied. "This is a strange and confusing universe... and we often look back and don't understand why we did things or why we believe something... in hindsight it seems so ludicrous and when it's happening it seems so rational... I'm sorry Buddy... I never meant to hurt you..."

"I just want you to know what it feels like..." Mahran said through gritted teeth and a curled lip. "This is what it feels like, every moment of every day with the explosives in my heart... this is what it feels like... feel it, Master!"

"I feel it!" she shouted back. "We all deal with the risk of death every day, Mahran... and I feel it... you can pull the trigger and end me... I know that, and I feel it, Buddy." And as she shouted her response into the face of her trembling and infuriated slave, her hands were still

hard at work behind her, burning and wrenching the wrist bindings. Her face contorted as her flesh seared, but the emotion was masked by her own shouts and the weapon shoved conveniently in her face.

Mahran moved his right hand to hold her in place by the neck, although his fingers did not clamp down to choke her and almost felt gentle. He stared into her eyes for a long moment, holding the weapon, and behind her back, she felt the cuffs starting to give.

Now was her chance... as soon as the cuffs gave she could bring her hands out and snatch the pistol, simultaneously kicking Mahran in the groin and taking him out before he knew what was happening... then deal with the rest of the group... even though both soldier's, at that point, probably would have already gunned her down.

But either way, it was her best chance...

She strained the cuffs and they slowly began to bend and give under the heat and stress.

But Mahran pulled back suddenly, removing the weapon and standing, taking a deep breath and calming himself, a cool air of confidence enveloping him suddenly. Mahran turned starkly and moved back toward the secondary command seat.

Floreina looked toward the capsule and her visual scans picked up Allihence's lips moving again from the bottom of her vision. *Looks like he takes after his master... a traitorous Amarrian deserves a traitorous slave...*

Floreina looked at Mahran, taking a seat in the command chair.

"I'd like your help, Mahran," Garmein requested, "in double checking the procedures I've set up."

"Right," Mahran replied.

"You okay, Man?" asked the technician.

"Yeah," he said flatly. "Good."

And Floreina knew she should be focusing on the combat calculations and data feeding into her mind, but instead, for several long moments, she stared at her slave as he connected his mental interface – the interface she had bought for him – to one of the most important and advanced mental sockets on the ship. Time and space seemed to distort around him, as though his treachery had shocked the Lord Himself, and reality was now breaking down. And Floreina suppressed a violent jumping sensation passing between her heart and stomach which seemed to grow more and more intense the longer she stared at him... but despite the pain, she had to force herself to pull away.

But even as her natural mind wandered distracted, her implant processes were still hard at work watching every movement in the two

rooms, giving readouts of everyone's line of sight, predicted focus level, and weapon access, searching for the perfect time to make her move.

She held the torch tight in her right hand, still tucked behind her back. The cuffs still surrounded each wrist, but were no longer linked together. She moved herself carefully, the burning still contributing noticeably to her distraction. A dampness moved down her hands, hopefully sweat as opposed to blood, but Floreina could not tell.

It would take the better part of an hour for the doctors to connect all the adaptors to Seleina's body, so Floreina would have some time to wait and scan for an opening, assuming no one noticed her melted restraints.

She waited, watching the time tick down on the clock in the corner of her vision.

But she didn't have to wait more than a few minutes.

"Sir," Garmein started suddenly, looking up from the command seat, the network interface still connected to the back of his head. "I see a problem. Looks like we've got a hacker."

"I thought you'd covered all bases!" Marteen said, raising his voice as he pivoted to look at the technician.

"I thought we had too... this shouldn't be happening..."

"What are they accessing?"

Garmein shook his head and sighed in frustration. "I don't know... it seems like all they're accessing is basic utility systems within the pod chambers... I can't see anything beyond that..."

Marteen took an angry step toward the technician. "Get them out of there, Garmein! What're you doing there?"

"I don't even understand how they got in..." he paused and looked up. "I think it's the captain... Allihence... I think she's breaking through somehow with her remote mental connection... she's the only one who would have the codes – but someone had to have let her in..."

"She's unconscious!" Marteen replied. But his face drooped as he seemed to hear himself say the words. He pivoted again to face the main pod chamber and stare down at the captain still lying motionless on the floor.

"Maybe she's faking," Garmein said.

Reality seemed to pause and shift as Floreina felt her visual enhancements automatically switching modes. Several milliseconds later the visuals touched her retina, and she felt the darkness envelope her.

Almost immediately her vision began compensating for the darkness, filtering and enhancing the input from her natural eyes before

routing it back to her mind, outlining objects in an ugly, unnatural, yet clearly understandable highlighting.

And her combat applications – as though she needed to be told – insistently informed her that this was the time to move.

“That would be her,” Garmein said calmly, as though unmoved by the sudden change of situation.

Floreina’s hands went out to her sides and she twisted to roll over and force herself to her feet. Dithmire, the second soldier, stood a few paces away, under the large bay door, focused on the scene in the pod chamber.

She felt her legs straightening, pushing through invisible sand as though in a dream, the nanites burning and pushing throughout her muscles. Her body bent at the waist, she drove forward and her shoulder connected with Dithmire’s back. They hit the wall on the opposite side of the massive hatchway, Dithmire catching himself before cracking his head. Immediately Floreina snatched for his rifle with her left hand as she brought her right hand up to put the torch to his head.

But the soldier did not seem surprised at being attacked from behind, and reacted quickly. Without a hand to hold the soldier in place, he spun easily to face her.

Her fingers surrounded the barrel of his rifle as he grasped her right wrist to hold the torch at bay. They struggled blindly for a moment, Floreina stepping back, only to press forward, driving the Minmatar into the wall. They pulled at the weapon, Floreina judging the situation by nothing more than vague visions in the darkness and estimated object outlines.

Dithmire pushed the gun abruptly forward, kicking at Floreina’s feet in the same moment.

And Floreina danced, for just a split second, hopping around Dithmire’s attacks as she felt his shoes slipping angrily around her shins.

But the weapon slipped from her hands.

She looked up, the artificial outlines focusing on the rifle in her enemy’s hand, noticing her eyes already beginning to adjust to the darkness. She reached for the weapon with her left hand and he attempted to turn it to point at her, but found the barrel too long. He tossed it aside to avoid Floreina’s frantic grasp.

She grunted in frustration, demanding new tactics, but found the ideas confused in the darkness. She watched herself as if from a distance as her left arm began flailing against Dithmire, cracking his head twice before he moved his arm to block.

Floreina moved frantically, back and forth, up and down, slapping and clawing, just trying to keep the soldier occupied long enough to allow her background tactical scans to get a readout on the rest of the room and come up with another plan.

Everyone seemed to be shouting, with a particular focus in the area in front of the pod itself, where the three doctors, Seleina and Allihence had been just a moment before. Even her peripheral scans could not determine how many were still in the same locations. The auditory applications had no time to actually play back examples, but indicated there were other violent encounters occurring within the room...

As Floreina executed her frantic attack, she kept as close as possible to her opponent, knowing that not only a gunshot, but a simple, well placed punch to the cranium could easily incapacitate her.

And the corner of her vision produced an indication of the soldier's preparation to bring a fist down on her, his right arm pulling back dramatically as he ignored her weakening attack.

From behind her she heard a familiar voice, still tinged with anger. "Master Floreina!"

She threw herself back from Dithmire, her legs straightening like pistons to force her away from the soldier's fist flying through the air. Her right foot went up suddenly, catching an opening, as his hand passed just in front of her face, her head springing back to avoid the concussion.

In the same instant, from the top corner of her vision, she registered Mahran's body, artificially outlined against the nearly black backdrop of the control room, dotted with the colored lights of the computer interfaces. He moved toward her, the weapon clutched tightly in his right hand.

But she did not have time to think of Mahran as the toe of Floreina's boot connected forcefully with the center of Dithmire's crotch. But immediately Floreina recognized the give as inconsistent with flesh, recognizing the armor a soldier would have protecting his important parts.

But the shock was enough to knock him backward and off balance for a second as Floreina calculated another option.

"Floreina's mobile!" Dithmire shouted. "Marteen, Karmine, take her out!"

She turned to race toward Mahran, planning to fake him out with a quick turn, dive around the closest row of computer terminals, snatch his weapon, then terminate him and Dithmire before calculating her shots at the rest of the hostiles.

She scanned for the simple shape of a firearm, seeing, for just a few milliseconds, the figures of several individuals: Karmine and Marteen standing within the pod chamber, weapons raised, but pointed – at least for the next second or two – toward the pod instead of into the other room toward Floreina. Before them, Seleina appeared, for all Floreina’s visual calculations, to be simply lying on the stretcher as though oblivious to everything. The three doctors all appeared to be gone, no doubt hiding on the floor, which was still too dark to make out shapes.

In the control room with Floreina, Garmein was still connected with the computer system, now crawling quickly over the back of the chair for cover.

So for the next few seconds, her combat application told her, she was free to focus on the simple task of combating Mahran and retrieving his weapon.

And as she came back to focus on her slave, his threat level immediately shot upward as she saw his arm straitening, pivoting upward, the abolitionist projectile pistol clutched in his hand.

The thought of Mahran’s own mental implant came to Floreina’s mind, tallying the programs she had purchased for him. Fortunately a targeting system was not one of them.

Floreina stopped and jolted to her left as she saw the artificial outline of the barrel of the weapon as a little circle as it bore down on her.

But no shot rang out as Floreina dodged to her left, seeing Dithmire to her right, moving toward her. Just behind him, Marteen was pivoting on his heel, simultaneously bringing his weapon to his shoulder to turn his attention from Allihence to Floreina.

But within milliseconds, the outline of Mahran’s gun was no longer a simple circle, and became a clearer outline of the entire sidearm.

The weapon moved, as if floating in the invisible sand of a dream, and her visual scans recognized a gap between the outline of Mahran’s hand and the weapon.

Her systems double checked their assessment and returned the same result. Time seemed to stop, as though the gap between Mahran’s hand and the weapon somehow caused a rift, twisting Floreina’s calculations and emotions into something strange and alien, like imaginary mathematics in a foreign language...

But one could not stop the flow of time... and the weapon had already left its owners hand.

Something had changed and there was no going back. It would take another few hundred milliseconds for Floreina to comprehend why... and at this time it didn't really matter...

As she focused on the pistol sailing end over end through the darkness she simply reclassified Mahran as an ally and instantly began her rotation and distance calculations for her catch.

Her implant guided her hand as it moved up and around the moving object, gliding through the air as though on a precision track, to come down on it as it turned. Her thumb slipped gracefully around the handle and her forefinger slipped through the trigger guard.

Even before having a firm grip, she began her pivot, seeing the hulking figure of Dithmire racing toward her, his fist clenched, raised above his shoulder. Her feet pushed backwards as her arm came up to point the weapon at the soldier, just as he began his swing.

She pulled the trigger, the flash enveloping all of reality in a bright white fluorescence, the entire command center and pod chamber illuminating in sudden, colorful brilliance.

Floreina felt tiny splatters across her face and hands, and as the color faded back to darkness, she noted the bloody hole in the center of the soldier's face.

But at the same time, she took note of the abolitionist leader, Marteen, just inside the other room, his rifle clutched in his right arm, locking his legs in a defensive stance and taking aim.

Floreina threw her legs out from under her and dropped to the floor as Marteen fired several rapid-fire shots, feeling the heat and air displacement of the projectiles across her back as she dropped forward. Her left palm slapped flat on the floor as she caught herself, her right hand still clutching the Minmatar pistol.

She looked up to make out Mahran, now down on the floor as well, between the two rows of interface desks, crawling toward her. "I can take the technician," he whispered. "I'll try to get his rifle..."

Floreina nodded, moving into the gap between the rows of terminals as Mahran crawled past her. "What made you change your mind?" she asked.

Mahran looked back momentarily, flashing an instant grin. "Change my mind about what?"

Another series of quick blasts rang out, piercing the relative calm as Marteen fired another round over their heads. "Floreina!" he shouted. "Stand up and I won't execute you! We still had plans to allow you to leave alive!"

Floreina choked back a sudden laugh... a tiny emotion; a brief oasis in the dark and terrorizing desert that had been this day.

"Mahran!" shouted Marteen. "Where are you? I don't see you?"

And Mahran suddenly stopped, to make eye contact with Floreina.

Marteen had apparently not seen Mahran throw the handgun... or was pretending to be oblivious.

"I'm here!" Mahran responded, shrugging questioningly at Floreina.

"Are you hit?"

Mahran paused. "No."

"Do you see Floreina?"

"No..." Mahran began crawling again, around the second bank of terminals.

"Find her!" Marteen shouted, then fell silent, but Floreina sensed a falseness about his voice. He was most likely aware of Mahran's double-cross.

She crawled after him as he rounded the last bank of terminals, knowing that either Karmin or Marteen would most likely be moving around this side of the control room to close her in.

"Allihence is still hacking the system!" Garmein shouted as Floreina silently approached his position. "I'm holding her off but I can't get rid of her! Take her out Marteen!"

"We've got other problems right now!" Marteen shouted.

Looking out from behind the final row of interface terminals, she saw the outline of Garmein, crouched on the far side of the command seat, seeing his left hand on his sidearm under the chair. His head remained connected to the computer linkage in the back of the command seat.

Mahran began his charge toward Garmein, launching to his feet, keeping his body tilted forward.

But as Mahran charged forward, Floreina noted another figure leaping from the shadows, just behind Dithmire's body. Karmin stood over his partner, tracking Floreina with his own weapon and taking aim.

She rolled, hearing the shots ping off the deck plating to her side as she came against the base of the nearest terminal desk and brought herself upright.

As she maneuvered, her tactical applications took note, from the corner of her eye, of Garmein snapping his head up to look toward Mahran. In the same motion he aimed his weapon. From under the rear of the command seat, Garmein fired a shot, his head peeking out from behind the armrest just long enough to take aim.

Mahran cried out as Floreina pulled herself up to rest against the base of the interface desk. His body fell to the floor and he rolled against the same barrier, just a couple meters beyond Floreina.

Knowing Garmein would be quickly firing another shot, Floreina raised her own weapon, searching for the top of the technician's head above the armrest. He would need to expose his cranium a moment before firing, and Floreina intended to catch that moment. She looked at Mahran from the corner of her vision as he examined the wound on the edge of his belly, having difficulty gauging the damage or judging the quantity of blood in the low light. She certainly couldn't stop to help now.

The milliseconds sailed past as Floreina watched and waited for Garmein to make his move, imagining Karmine now advancing toward her along the port wall.

...there was no time to wait.

Floreina went down, bending at the waist and moving her right leg out of her line of sight to allow her head to come almost to the floor, though dangerously far from the protection of the desk.

Mahran brought his own legs inward to avoid her trajectory and she locked in on Garmein's wrist which held his weapon, but also supported much of his weight, sticking just a little too far out from the base of the seat.

She fired and he yelped in pain, dropping the weapon; but more importantly, the shot threw him off balance. Her body bending forward, nearly resting her chest on the floor, Floreina searched for a second shot.

Garmeин's body teetered as he struggled for balance and for just a moment, a section of his stomach moved beyond the side of the chair, and Floreina, with little more than an automatic blip from her targeting program, fired another shot.

The shout was a pained, gurgling grunt, blending into rapid, incoherent shouts.

And as Floreina watched the bulk of his body come down under the protection of the seat, she could hear Karmine's pounding footsteps coming toward her from the port side of the control room.

She fired the third round as Garmein's head dipped behind the protective backing.

But before she could watch to confirm the outline of Garmein's body slumping lifelessly to the deck plating, Floreina rolled toward Mahran, bringing her legs up to put her feet momentarily on the underside of the

desk and draw herself around to face the port side as Karmine leapt into view, bringing his rifle up.

His first shot rang out, piercing the air, producing a blinding flash, and a circular flame in the center of Floreina's vision.

The shot pinged off the deck plating near Floreina's head, and even as Floreina found herself contemplating the view of the blast from Karmine's rifle, never having seen a gun shot from that angle before, her finger was already squeezing the trigger to fire a counter round into Karmine's chest.

He staggered back momentarily, his weapon hand faltering. He took aim again as Floreina fired another shot into his belly.

Karmine fired off a couple more quick shots, glancing off the deck plating as he attempted to bring his weapon down to focus on her.

She directed her systems to target his face, but could make nothing out after the sudden blinding blast from his weapon. Her night vision needed several seconds to recover. Instead, her targeting system went instinctively for his weapon, guiding Floreina's hand down to fire a shot into Karmine's waiting fingers.

His weapon went back and his left hand came up to take it from his right, but as he did, he took a faltering step forward to come into the tiny green light of a monitor.

The outline of his face became visible. Floreina retargeted and fired a single shot into his cheek.

As the body slumped to the floor, Floreina was already moving back to her position against the interface desk. Her back came to rest against the barrier, and she pressed against it for reassurance.

She looked at Mahran momentarily, still holding his side, his eyes looking like gleaming round coins in the darkness as he stared back at her in shock.

"You okay?" she asked as her left foot scrambled across the floor to get a hold of Karmine's rifle and drag it toward her.

"I'm not sure," Mahran replied. "I hope the doctors are still alive..."

"Yeah," Floreina said. "Me too..." Her foot found the weapon and she slid it across the floor to her left hand waiting by her hip. She lifted the weapon, scanning it momentarily to allow her targeting system to familiarize itself with the design.

She dropped the handgun to her stomach for just a moment before transferring the rifle to her right arm and slipped it into the ready position on her shoulder.

Looking at the little projectile sidearm for a long moment, she considered her options for the weapon, and finally handed it back to Mahran. "Just don't shoot me with this," she said.

"Don't shoot the doctors," Mahran wheezed. "They're still allied with us..." He took the weapon in his right hand, examined it, and transferred the hold on his wound to his left hand.

"Copy that," Floreina replied, scanning the space beyond Mahran, along the starboard wall. Marteen would no doubt be approaching in a flanking position on that side similar to Karmin a moment earlier. Floreina motioned for Mahran to watch in that direction and he nodded a quick response. He raised his weapon, trembling awkwardly.

Floreina took a deep breath and turned to move back toward the port wall. But as she brought herself to her knees, a series of rapid, deafening cracks rang out as Marteen sprayed the area with a round of projectiles, hearing the bullets tearing the tops of the interface desks and pounding against the rear bulkhead.

But after a couple seconds the shots went silent, and Floreina knew she would have two or three seconds to react as Marteen's weapon reset.

Floreina rolled to her feet, bringing herself away from the interface desks. Her body extended as her tracking and targeting systems scanned for outlines in the darkness. Rising quickly to her full height, she brought the rifle to her shoulder.

But she saw no target.

Marteen had most likely ducked below the interface desks as his weapon reloaded and would be popping out any second.

He would expect her to remain low, so Floreina leaped to the top of the desk, swinging her right leg out to catch the edge and spring upward. Her thigh threatened to lock as her injury flared a reminder, but she pushed through the tightness.

She leapt forward again, her left foot landing squarely on a workstation keypad. She leapt again, racing toward the starboard side atop the row of terminals.

Her scans finally returned an outline of a body as she took another leap, Marteen's head hidden from her line of sight under the last desk.

Floreina jumped as she fired a clumsy, miscalculated shot that coursed over top of Marteen's body. But as her feet planted into the surface of a monitor screen, his head came into view and her targeting application began drawing her hands into position.

He sprang upward suddenly, his head moving from her targeting crosshairs as he leapt to his feet.

And Floreina squeezed the trigger, sending off a series of bright, flashing projectiles, one every thirty milliseconds, in Marteen's direction.

Her arm and hand instinctively chased the crosshairs on Marteen's face as the abolitionist raised his own weapon.

Marteen pulled the trigger just as Floreina's spray of bullets connected with the body armor on his stomach and chest and moved toward his head.

Shots fired rapidly from Marteen's rifle, scattering across the floor.

But it fell silent as the succession continued from Floreina's gun. She watched through the brilliant flashes, repeatedly piercing the darkness, as the projectiles connected with Marteen's face and tore him apart.

Releasing the trigger she turned atop the desk to look out toward the main pod chamber, just before dropping back to the floor and ducking below the desk.

"Whose left alive?" she shouted. "Addeilon? Pari? ...doctors? ...Mahran?"

"Still here," Mahran replied from the other side of the last row of desks.

And Floreina waited a tense moment before Addeilon finally replied with a shout, "We're here! Doctor Pari is still here too. We took out Seleina and Doctor Stephson when the lights went out."

"So we're all allies here?" Floreina shouted.

"I think so..." Addeilon replied cautiously, his shouts echoing nearly incohesively through the chambers. "You took out the four abolitionists? Marteen, Garmein, the two soldiers?"

"Affirmative," Floreina shouted in reply.

"And Allihence?"

Floreina paused. "Do you have a visual on the captain?"

"Negative!" shouted Addeilon. "Her body is not where we left it!"

"Doctor Pari!" Floreina called, "Do *you* have a visual on captain Allihence?"

"Uh... no!" replied the doctor, his voice emanating from the dark depths of the pod chamber, not too far from Doctor Addeilon's voice.

"Mahran, do you know how to lock the captain out of the network?"

"Hopefully," he croaked. "I had to let her in without a lot of safety checks... hopefully I can get her back out again."

"Excellent. Let's get to it." Floreina began carefully rising to her feet, scanning the room and tracking with her rifle. "Can you get to the command seat to plug yourself in and see what she's doing?"

"I think so," he said, his voice shaking.

“Doctor Pari, Mahran has been shot!”

The doctor’s head came up slowly from behind another terminal near Allihence’s capsule. He replied, “I’m kind of afraid to move from my spot here until we get the situation under control!”

“You’re no safer there than you are over here!” Floreina replied.

She moved rapidly from behind the desks. If she was going to be on her feet it was best to be moving, in case Allihence – or anyone else – was targeting her.

Floreina ran to the starboard side, seeing Marteen’s body next to the row of desks and scanning Garmein’s beside the command seat. She noticed Mahran inching his way across the floor to the chair, his left hand still clutching his wound and his right still gripping the pistol.

Still clutching the rifle tightly in her right hand, Floreina backed up toward the secondary command seat. She sat down as she saw Mahran reaching Garmein’s body and wrenching the linkage plug from the back of his head to plug it into his own.

And from the other room she saw the two doctors jumping up in similar motions to dash simultaneously from the pod chamber into the control room to race to the sides of the command chairs. Pari carried Seleina’s rifle and Addeilon carried her sidearm.

“Pick up Dithmire’s rifle,” Floreina ordered as Addeilon passed the corpse.

Mahran rolled over as Doctor Pari knelt to examine his wound.

Floreina plugged her own connection into her socket just after Mahran plugged in his.

And there was Mahran’s presence... the old, obedient slave that she remembered... but somehow much larger now, as though he encompassed the entire network.

Floreina smiled in a strange warming comfort.

But there was no time for emotional dialogue as Mahran’s consciousness immediately began digging through layers of disconnected data related to recent events. Along some confusing path of logic and mathematical calculations, Mahran had hidden a code to allow an intruder into the system. Allihence, however, had already seen the twisted system and torn it apart, scattering the data into randomized sectors to hide her access point.

As Mahran dug frantically through masses of data, Floreina felt lost in this deliberate mess.

So Floreina disconnected herself. “Is he going to be okay?” she asked.

Doctor Pari looked up from Mahran's wound. "Looks like he should be okay... we should get the bullet out and stitch him up before he loses too much blood... but we can wait a few minutes while you take care of Captain Allihence."

"Hand me the pistol," she said, motioning toward Mahran.

Mahran handed her the weapon and Floreina transferred the rifle to her left hand to be replaced with the pistol in her right. She checked the cartridge, finding more than enough ammunition for another fight, and began moving forward.

As she walked carefully forward, she ran a tally of all the weapons she had seen in the room, belonging to the two soldiers, Marteen and the technician. As far as she could tell all the weapons were now accounted for on their side of the chambers.

Floreina scanned every possible area from floor to ceiling within the control room, racing back and forth to be certain Allihence was not creeping up on them from a strange angle.

"Where did you see Allihence last?" Floreina asked.

"She was lying dead on the floor last we knew," replied Doctor Pari. "We got distracted when we killed Seleina and Stephson and when we looked down she was gone."

"She didn't engage anyone?"

"Not that we could tell... No, she didn't attack either of us... all the shots fired seemed to be coming from your end."

And Floreina moved forward, toward the main pod chamber. "Can you get the lights back on?" she asked.

"I can try," Mahran replied. "Allihence knows this network inside and out, and even with just a remote connection it's not hard for her to keep up with me."

"Find her and kill her!" shouted Doctor Pari.

"Yes, thank you," Floreina replied tartly. "That is what I intend to do." And Floreina walked carefully toward the darkness of the adjacent chamber. "Addeilon!" she ordered. "Grab a rifle and back me up."

"I have no firearm training!" he replied.

"Don't tell Allihence that!" Floreina shouted back. "Get up here. If she kills me, you're just as dead."

And Addeilon rose nervously, putting a rifle to his shoulder. He checked the clip and the safety switch, indicating that he at least had the minimum weapons experience necessary for a surviving adult in New Eden. The doctor moved into place behind her, near the overhead hatchway.

"Now just stay here," Floreina said. "Only shoot if you have an opening and are certain that it's the captain you're shooting at... and don't shoot *me*."

The doctor nodded.

And Floreina moved into the darkness of Allihence's central pod chamber, her back sliding cautiously against the smooth curvature of the outer bulkhead. She held the rifle in her left hand, cocked against her shoulder, scanning for a long distance shot. The pistol she held in her right hand, her arm moving systematically back and forth in front of her, her elbow cocking left and right in rapid succession.

Within seconds her eyes began adjusting to the relative blackness of the pod chamber and as she moved slowly to the back of the room, the features became more and more apparent, outlines of shapes flashing and distorting before her as her scanner picked out shapes.

A child's voice pinged subtly and distantly through the chambers. "Traitor..."

Then a moment later, the same child's voice, clearer and closer. "You are a sin... Commander Floreina..."

And voices from every race and nationality rang out, one by one. "Traitor," they said. "Sin against God... you spit on our Lord..."

The voices became louder and louder, faster and faster, coalescing into one great mass of infuriated cries as Floreina inched her way along the backside of the pod chamber, still frantically scanning for any type of appropriate movement or shape.

The voices echoed, piercing Floreina's mind, drowning out all other sounds.

But Floreina pushed onward, around the back of the massive pedestal and the bottom half of the capsule. She glanced upward to scan the giant pistons above for a clinging body, and still, found nothing.

As she rounded back to the front of the pod the screaming voices continued growing louder, a new voice adding into the broadcast every few seconds. Her implant occasionally isolated voices, hearing grave insults, and the consistently repeated accusation of 'traitor'.

Her feet splashed as she treaded through the thick, gelatinous liquid. Calculating every step, she crept along.

And suddenly the voices ceased... all but the same little girl who had started the taunting. This time, she spoke calmly. "Hello, my name is Floreina..." she said. "One time... I let my daddy die... I overlooked certain coolant pathways... 'cause I just wanted to see him die... 'cause I'm so empty inside it was all I could do to feel human again..."

and now I attack my captain... because I can't admit my feelings... and I just can't get enough..."

As Floreina turned her back to the pod to look toward the control room, her shoulder came instinctively up, as though she could cover her ear to block the insults.

A moment later, the voices ceased.

And as her auditory systems compensated for the new found quiet, she detected sudden movement.

She spun, only to bring her face into contact with Allihence's stomach as she sailed from the lip of the pod, amidst a shower of embryonic gel.

They slammed to the deck and Floreina's neck locked to prevent her head from pounding into the surface as the captain's naked, gel-coated form crashed down from above.

Immediately Allihence began throwing punches, landing two into Floreina's jaw and cheek, the liquid splattering in every direction.

Allihence caught Floreina's wrist as she raised the pistol in her right hand, holding the weapon at bay.

In an attempt to limit the variables, Floreina threw the rifle from her left hand. It bounced against the top of the nearest terminal and fell to the opposite side.

As Floreina brought her left hand up to land a punch against Allihence's temple, she heard the giant bay door creaking into motion behind her.

The voices returned, screaming, chanting and crying a mixture of phrases... "crime against our Lord"... "God hates you"... "Traitor"... The voices ranged from every ethnicity and age found in New Eden, including Jovians and small children and ranged wildly in tone and pitch. The only thing the voices had in common were their unremitting anger and disgust.

The voices overshadowed all other sounds, preventing any reasonable cry for help. Remembering how this room had looked from the other, Floreina calculated that Doctor Pari could not see her from his vantage on the other side of the door.

Her wrist twisted and Floreina wrenched the sidearm free, throwing it backward toward the chamber's divider, which was now slowly drawing closed.

And Allihence was up almost immediately, clawing and kicking her way off Floreina to dash toward the weapon. Floreina grasped at the captain's legs as she splashed in the puddle of fluid. She slipped

against Allihence's flesh, wrapping her arms forcefully around the captain's legs, and succeeded in momentarily halting her progress. Floreina rolled atop her as Allihence fell to the floor, her fingers centimeters from the weapon.

Floreina released and her legs extended like pistons. Her feet slipped dangerously in the gel before catching on the grating. She launched herself forward.

But the captain also threw herself forward and slapped a hand on the pistol half a second before Floreina's hand came down on top.

As they struggled for the weapon, their hands outstretched before them, Floreina looked up to see Doctor Pari, the rifle in his hand, scanning for a shot as he knelt behind the door.

"Stop the door, Mahran!" shouted the doctor.

"I'm trying!" Mahran replied. "She's locked into the system and still changing the access codes!"

Within another few seconds the hatch would descend far enough to block any reasonable shot, leaving Floreina alone, in a dark and unfamiliar room, with Captain Allihence.

Floreina lurched forward, driving an elbow into the top of Allihence's head and a knee into her thigh.

The gun pulled free and Allihence made a frantic grab for it, knocking the weapon once again from their slimy fingers.

The pistol slid another meter to come to rest directly under the descending barrier. On the other side, Floreina saw little more than the floor and Doctor Pari's lower body. Floreina dashed forward as Allihence clawed at her, keeping her eyes locked on the space between the floor and the descending barrier. She scrambled up as she saw Pari's leg sweep under the door to slide the projectile pistol back into their room. The hatch nearly blocked the view of the doctor's knees and continued descending.

Before Floreina made it entirely to her feet, she dove forward, feeling the captain's frantic clawing on her legs and back, and dropped to the floor again to turn and roll underneath the hatch.

But Allihence was behind her, lurching forward at nearly the same rate, clawing and grasping at Floreina's clothing.

As Floreina pulled the bulk of her body out from under the barrier she felt a hand clasping around her right wrist as she pushed herself out of the pod chamber. She felt Allihence's other hand wrap around the same wrist, above the remainder of the plastic restraint, and clamp down.

Floreina pulled, feeling Allihence's body slide forward, then saw her, on the other side of the hatch, pivoting her body to brace her legs against the moving doorway.

With a hard jolt, Floreina rolled, giving a sudden, forceful yank on her arm. Allihence's grip slipped slightly, but the cuff dug into the base of Floreina's hand and held tight. The captain's fingernails dug into Floreina's wrist as her hands clenched down like a vice.

And she heard Allihence's laughter even as the sound was drowned out by Floreina's own terrified scream.

She looked at the gap below the doorway and for several milliseconds considered rolling back under, but at this point, she would not be capable of rolling in time.

So she pulled again, feeling her face suddenly turning hot and the sweat instantly beading from her forehead.

And Allihence held tight.

Doctor Pari dropped his weapon and fell to the floor beside Floreina, but the door contacted her flesh just before his hands clasped around her upper arm.

Nanites rerouted themselves toward her elbow, pouring into her bloodstreams at maximum speed.

And before she felt the pain, she felt the painkillers.

The doctor's hands clasped firmly around her arm, just below her shoulder and they tugged suddenly, sliding Floreina's arm slightly inward. But Allihence held tight, and Floreina's elbow caught under the base of the door and it closed down upon her.

Floreina's medical processes forced themselves to the forefront of her mind, as though her natural mind was not aware of the danger. An internal outline became visible within the implant's processes, and she watched, still pulling helplessly, as the nanites within her elbow mapped out her bone structure to analyze the damage about to occur.

She continued pulling in vain as her eyes snapped shut. Watching her internal monitor as the door closed on her arm, she saw the bones and ligaments begin to snap.

But somehow, the tightness in her stomach, the rush in her head, and the terror of what was about to come was somehow worse than the pain.

And Floreina lost herself in confusion, the sudden flux of pain killers and adrenaline hitting her system to twist her mind as though she encompassed the space above herself. She was an aspect of the

situation... a complication... a calculation in the mind of God... but somehow, for a moment, did not inhabit a body.

She felt herself becoming one with the pod chamber barrier...

And she floated...

Despite the blackness and her tightly shut eyes, Floreina could still see the scene and the view looking down on her arm, even through the three dimensional model of her disintegrating elbow.

She saw the door towering like a massive steel monolith above her, the gap rapidly closing.

And From the other side of the door, like a ghost in the wind, she saw her pain racing toward her, a massive green bubble of agony ready to pound her from the far side of the room.

It pulled like a wave, hovering ominously above, and crashed down to encompass her body. Her stomach arched upward, wrenching against her arm. She knew it was the nerves within her elbow and upper arm that were firing with such intensity... but in truth, the pain was not coming from her exposed limb... instead, it came from the experience... the universe... from New Eden herself... and from God.

It was not just a series of nerves firing chemical reactions, nor was it a simple emotion... the pain itself was a holy entity.

Floreina felt herself making noise, experiencing the deep, involuntary, rumbling from the back of her throat, but heard no sound.

As the door clamped into place and the last of her limb's connections fell silent, a blanket of disorientation fell upon Floreina, comforting her from some deeper level, but at the same time, igniting the muscles throughout her body to begin randomly twitching.

She convulsed, slamming randomly against the door and deck plating, her legs and left arm flailing wildly, the jittering coursing unchecked up and down her body. But somehow, the spasms comforted her, offering something to hold on to and bring her mind away from the destruction of her body's most important limb.

Doctor Pari was next to her, and she felt herself shaking against him, her head bumping repeatedly into his stomach. She felt his hand on her shoulder and his body coming around to hold her still. He put a hand to her upper arm and pulled, but the limb didn't budge. Floreina opened her eyes to see the scene, and the doctor looking down on her, his jaw hanging open and uncontrolled in terrified wonder. She looked at her arm, pinned, her right elbow crushed beyond repair, and the heavy steel door sealed tightly around it. Seeing Pari tugging on her arm, she absently thought that she should probably help... pull on it and get

the remainder of her body out of harms way... but instead she simply stared, as though the door, her arm, the doctor and the experience in general were a ghost fluttering through her bedroom as she slept... in simple, stunned amazement that this moment was actually occurring... right now... this moment was all that there was... all of existence... and she could never go back...

The doctor was speaking, but she could not make out his words. Others were speaking as well... shouting, to be specific. Scrambling for some kind of comprehension, her implant calmly reassured her, its processes running at the same clock cycles and precision timing as always, regardless of the physical trauma and emotional upheaval. It was recording everything and would play it all back the moment her natural mind could focus and understand. The implant was her rock... as always, reliable, precise, secure... always there, backing her up... like God Himself.

She saw her nanites hard at work stopping off the broken arteries at the end of her arm, and slowing the flow to prevent a lethal loss of blood, and felt her mind slowly refocusing back to the floor where she lay helpless and tortured, and on the necessary goals of the situation.

Her head pressed into Doctor Pari's lap as he cradled her, and as the corporeal pain overwhelmed her sense of self, she found a way around it. Closing her eyes, she focused on her artificial computations. Her medical systems took over her movement, exerting a large measure of control over the jittering and random fluctuations.

"She's gonna open it back up again!" she made out Mahran's voice, distant and frantic, filtered through her hazy perceptions.

She continued shaking, staring up at the blurry and distorted image of the massive door before her, but the shaking somehow became more comforting and less terrifying. Slowly her natural brain mechanisms compensated for the trauma and allowed her to calm physically, but at the same time, her tactical systems, working with her emergency medical procedures, took control of her muscles and forced them to continue firing.

A moment later Doctor Pari began moving, pulling out from under her, allowing Floreina's head to drop to the deck. She watched from the corner of her eye as he grabbed his weapon and retreated toward Mahran and his partner.

Floreina whimpered before cutting herself short at the sound of the hatchway creaking into motion.

Floreina screamed at the change in sensation, the tearing, as the top half of her arm separated permanently from the door. The end of her stump stuck for several long moments against the bottom of the door as it rose, then finally separated with a tearing slurp and dropped to the floor.

She saw Allihence's curled toes beneath the door, and a second later, watched the bulk of the captain come down to lay on the deck just on the other side of the hatch. Behind her, halfway across the room at the edge of the pool of pod fluid, mangled and bloody, lay Floreina's right arm.

Allihence shifted forward, shoving her head under the rising hatch to peer over Floreina's stomach, bringing the projectile rifle up to rest on Floreina's hip.

They caught eyes, and Allihence smiled before opening fire on Floreina's partners.

Floreina continued shaking, liquid streaming from her eyes and forehead as she heard the gunshots pinging against the back wall and smashing into computer interfaces.

Her physical shaking continued relentlessly, seemingly uncontrolled. Her eyes were blank, sweat and saliva running down the side of her cheek.

But inside, Floreina was composing herself, and for several hundred milliseconds, looked out from within her body as though within a protective bubble, seeing the captain outside, seemingly satisfied that Floreina was incapacitated, and ducking behind her for protection.

And at the moment her tactical systems ordered her to make her move, the shaking cleared, her muscles released from their comforting convulsions, and she felt a surge of automated adrenaline.

Her left hand clasped the rifle draped across her midsection.

Allihence reacted immediately, tugging backward, but Floreina forced the weapon upward in the same motion, slamming it against the underside of the ascending doorway. She pulled forward and heard Allihence call out as her fingers grated across the underside of the hatch.

As Allihence struggled to free the weapon from her sudden grasp, Floreina twisted, pivoting easily in the film of greasy fluid, bringing her body parallel with the rifle.

And before Allihence could react, she brought her right knee up to connect with the captain's jaw.

Allihence's hold weakened and Floreina wrenched it from her hands, in the same motion, throwing it into the control room.

Her leg came up as Floreina pushed herself under the hatch, pivoting, and wrapping her leg around Allihence's head and pushing her backward in the same motion.

Floreina kicked frantically, missing twice, but finally pulled herself back far enough to land a solid kick against the side of Allihence's cranium.

The captain rolled away, slamming against the port wall under the barrier and Floreina pushed forward with her left arm, focusing on the captain, seeing nothing beyond her target. Her right leg recoiled, then shot forward as though powered by some great tidal wave.

The bottom of her boot connected with the face of the captain, driving her head against the wall.

For a moment Allihence caught Floreina's eye, and she paused only a few milliseconds before bringing her leg back to plant another solid kick into the captain's face.

With the captain's head pinned between the wall and her boot, Floreina heard the subtle pop and felt the tiny jolts as Allihence's skull cracked.

Floreina cried out as she pushed herself under the doorway, throwing her body agonizingly across the floor. Doctor Pari came to her side, dropping his tool kit beside her.

She felt herself collapse, the flow of adrenaline and emergency steroids suddenly shutting off. She drifted away, finding her surroundings starting to spin and tilt. Pressing her head against his thigh, she pulled herself toward the doctor as he grabbed her. She clutched his back with her left hand, as though he could protect her from falling into some great abyss.

Awkwardly bending his arm, Doctor Pari cut away the excess clothing around her stump, carefully holding her in place. Straining her legs, she attempted to move into a better position, but only succeeded in thinking about the action. Her legs simply would not respond. Instead, she simply screamed and cried, burying her face in the doctor's thigh.

Floreina's head drooped to the side and she looked down her right arm to see the blunt end, now wrapped tightly in surgical gauze. She stared absently at the stump through the haze of drugs, knowing she should feel some kind of emotion that she did not... wondering what that emotion might feel like when the drugs finally wore off and she still had to stare down her primary arm at an empty stump.

...but for right now it was just a simple fact... a silly little fact... yesterday she had two arms... today, only one...

But above that, a question hung in her heart as she waited for Mahran's feedback on the system readiness.

She looked out on the pod chamber from the stretcher, recognizing and appreciating the brilliance, the beauty, and the simple helpful convenience of having the lights on.

Bodies seemed to be scattered everywhere. Her visual scans jumped absently from one dead face to the next...

And she moved on, into the ship's security network, jumping between cameras mounted along every room and hallway throughout the ship. The majority of The Angel's crew still lived, trapped in various offices and quarters. The invading abolitionists, as well, had been enclosed and trapped in various chambers when she had regained control the security system.

But hundreds of Amarrian bodies littered the corridors along the route they had taken to the pod chambers. And many more lay waiting throughout the ship, wondering if they too, would see the same fate.

She had hurt a lot of people today, both directly and indirectly.

She stared through the overhead cameras at her dead crewmates, scanning their faces, drawing up crew histories and lists of families, and examined them through a strangely blank and distant haze. But through the horror that she had inflicted on her own people, she felt the Lord coming through beneath everything, encompassing the events of the day and the people it touched.

This was all a story within a game from God's eyes... and Floreina had played hard, and she had won.

That was the name of the game.

And He guided her still, as He had through this journey, comforting her, strengthening her and driving her forward throughout her life to take control of the destiny that was rightfully hers...

And all the death... all the suffering... it was all a part of God's little story book... His little game... it was all His creation.

So Floreina had no reason to feel guilty.

...as long as you are guided by the Lord, you never have a reason to feel guilty.

Her mind paused, and she smiled. Even now, after all the events, reality still held itself together.

"Look's like everything's in order," said Mahran with a grin, looking up from his spot nearby on a rolling chair, a long data link

strung from the back of his head. "All damaged systems had redundancies and have been restored."

And the tightness seemed to edge from her stomach just a little.

"I just confirmed Floreina's mental state," Pari said as he disconnected the network cable from the back of her head and let her rest back on the pillow, the visions of the ship's internals fluttering away. "The injury caused some disruption in her brain patterns, but she seems to be compensating well enough that she should survive the transfer into the capsule."

"Excellent," said Doctor Addeilon. "I don't have the equipment to reattach the arm, Floreina, as I'm sure you've already gathered... nor do we have the time... but it's not going to make a difference when you're in the pod..."

And the doctors began the intricate process of connecting fluid and data lines to various parts of her body. She lay back and attempted to relax.

Mahran came closer, carefully wheeling himself to a vantage behind the busy doctors.

"Master Floreina..." he started.

She held out her left hand and smiled. "You don't need to ask," she said. "I considered you free the moment I shut down my implant... you don't need to call me 'Master' any more, Little Buddy."

His eyes gleamed as he took her hand.

"How did you know they were going to double-cross me?" Floreina asked. "Marteen told me that you were talking trash about me the moment you made contact with him."

Mahran nodded. "They contacted me first, realizing you were in trouble, they offered to come and 'help' you, and it just didn't make any sense why they would want to help you, so I assumed it was a double-cross, and decided to see if they'd let me in on it, so I started saying nasty things about you the moment I met them... and the things I found under the 'not slave appropriate' category gave me a lot of fodder..." He shook his head. "...which is something I'd like to talk to you about... some other time..." He took a deep breath and looked at the floor.

"I just have one question." Floreina glanced at Pari as he sliced a tiny hole in her stomach to feed yet another tube, applying more nanites to properly seal the opening.

Mahran carefully adjusted himself and placed an elbow on the armrest to meet her eyes, clearly mindful of the wound on his stomach.

"How did you fool everyone?" she asked. "When you were screaming and crying I didn't see any indication of falsehood on your face or your voice or your body language... you had me fooled, Buddy... how'd you do it? I have liars assistant applications and I can't put on a performance like that..."

Mahran's eyes raised and his lower lip curled suddenly. "You..." he stared. He cocked his head, his face contorting. "You didn't realize I was faking it?"

She shook her head slowly.

And Mahran took a deep breath and sat back in his seat to stare at her for a long moment. "How could you..." he said.

"I didn't know -"

"But it's me... It's Mahran... you know me... how could you think that about me..."

She squeezed his hand and he looked away, her scans finally revealing an inconsistency in his features.

"And now you're lying," she said.

And Mahran remained silent.

"You meant those things you said to me..."

Mahran simply sat, holding her hand.

"That's how you fooled all our scans... you actually meant all those things you said ..."

"Please, Master Floreina... can we..."

"No," Floreina replied. "It's okay, Mahran... I want to hear it from you... but I can see in your eyes that it's true... everything you said was from your heart..."

He looked back. "I have two sides to my personality," he said. "...one that I hide very deep..."

She nodded and gently tapped his wrist.

"...and you told me to embrace that darker side," he continued. "...that once after we had spoken with the abolitionists and we were standing in the street... you told me to embrace the dark side... to feel it... to enjoy it... and use it to my advantage... because the darkness is as much a part of God as the light..."

She nodded. "I see..." She watched for a long while until he finally looked up to meet her eyes. "I've been thinking about something..." she paused to shoo away a nagging warning from her tactical systems. "When you were saying all of that to me... Mahran..." She took a deep breath. "It didn't feel like you were my slave..."

And Mahran cocked his head in question.

"It felt like you were more than that... like an Amarrian... like you weren't truly Minmatar... and when you said those things to me, it didn't feel like a disobedient and ungrateful slave... it felt like another... Amarrian... simply talking about his feelings... and I felt guilty..."

Mahran simply stared back, nearly motionless.

"And when I look at you... I see the Mahran I remember when I would take you onto the station... with the Amarrian alterations." She paused again to think a quick moment. "What I'm saying is that I don't believe you are Minmatar... I believe that deep down inside, you're as Amarrian as any of us... there's too much depth to you, Mahran... too much intelligence... too much of a soul... you couldn't possibly be a Minmatar deep down inside..."

She took a deep breath as she watched the initial blood tests, her fluid running from a new connection on her arm into a small analyzer, then back through another connection on a nearby artery.

"Mahran, I will never give you another order as a master to slave... but if you so choose... I would like to be able to continue giving you orders... as a captain to an officer."

Mahran smiled a twisted grin, cocking his head. "How is that possible?"

"You can have permanent alterations to your features and you can become a true Amarrian..."

"What about my need for Vitoc?" he asked.

"You can say you were accidentally infected... or you can simply tell the truth. You used to be a Minmatar slave, and now you're an Amarrian starship officer and slave overseer, with all the prestige, glory and holy grace that goes with it. In twenty minutes I'm going to be joining the ranks of capsuleers, and if I say you're Amarrian, then you're Amarrian."

Mahran's eyes gleamed, but his lips curled downward tightly in a conflicting grimace. "I don't know..." he started.

"You know Amarrian starships as well as most Amarrians and know slave management as well as anyone... and have a unique perspective..."

He shook his head questioningly. "It's my dark side... I still have conflicting... questions..." he started, "...about the core values of Minmatar protection..."

She smiled and gripped his hand. "Come on, Buddy. You know how much you want this..." She smiled. "I think you'll understand the system a lot better when you see it from the other side."

Mahran looked back with a sudden gleam in his eye, and broke a sharp grin.

The End



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