

Theodicy

An EVE Online Novella

By

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“I give to you the destiny of Faith, and you will bring its message to every planet of every star in the heavens: Go forth, conquer in my Name, and reclaim that which I have given.”

- Book of Reclaiming, 22:13, The Scriptures

“And so we watched, those of us who had survived, from afar as our home world burned and the legions of evil marched before their sign, herding our people like so much cattle into transports. A life of slavery awaited those cursed souls; it would have been better for them had they never been born. How, dear God, did it come to this? Were these invaders not of flesh and bone like us? What evil is this that compels men to commit such horrors against each other?”

- Sebiestor Tribe Chronicles, Minmatar Archives, “The Path of Krogan”

Derelik Region – Aguh Constellation
The Hahyil System: Diemnon Planetesimal
Diemnon Mining Complex

23216 AD

A normal man would have screamed at the scorching agony unleashed by the shockwhip. Instead, the slave merely picked his mining laser off the ground and switched it back on, continuing with his work as though nothing happened. The Amarrian guard, staring at the fresh wounds on the man's back, considered delivering a second blow. A slave numbed to pain was difficult to control, and besides, replacements were due to arrive at any moment should this one perish. The Reclaiming had conquered the planet Eanna yesterday, and hundreds of thousands of repentant pagans were taken prisoner. Those heathens who refused to embrace the Faith were dealt swift justice by the Emperor's Holy Paladins.

The guard wound his arm back and struck again. Sparks exploded from the slave's back, and this time he crumpled to the ground in a heap. The cauterized wounds intersected the previous marks, creating an approximate visage of the Sign. *The beauty of the Faith*, the guard thought, *is that it offers a path for the unborn*. Paradise was the exclusive birthright of pureblooded Amarrians, but for all others—including the Matari wretch lying at his feet—salvation had to be earned. Only through suffering can the unborn rise from the shadow of death to gain the blessing of immortality. *I might yet walk in heaven with this one*, the guard thought. *His subservience speaks mountains of his quest for forgiveness*.

Just as his arm drew back to strike for a third time, the guard's earpiece squawked. A slave transport was about to land, and he was to assist with processing the new arrivals. There were Glaive-collars to be fitted; labor tasks to be assigned; and mining equipment to be issued. He looked downwards at the slave, now crawling along the dirt and gravel. *Yes, this one will see paradise soon enough*. Sheathing the shockwhip, the guard turned and started back towards the section lifts.

Reaching against the cavern walls for support, the slave struggled to pull himself back onto his feet. Waves of excruciating pain pulsed through his wiry frame. He was terrified of each surge—not for its physical torment, but for the cruel reminder that death continued to elude him. If there was a time in this man's life that was not plagued by anguish, then its memory had long since been lost. Besides pain, all he knew was that he was damned for the crime of not being Amarrian by birth, and that the equipment now in his hands was the key to salvation. *The escape from hell lies beyond these walls*, the Paladin had told him. *Use the laser to burrow*

through them, saving the hemorphite that the cavern yields as an offering to God. Switching the device on, he plunged the laser into the rocks before him, working the beam from left to right, searching for the precious ore and praying for forgiveness...

A searing heat erupted from a mysterious device that until now had lain dormant inside the slave's stomach. The pain swelled suddenly and then exploded in all directions at once. The mining drill fell to the ground as the slave clutched his abdomen and dropped to his knees. Then a second source of scathing heat originated from deep inside his skull, as if molten metal was injected behind his eyes. Writhing on the gravel in convulsions, he could feel the scalding liquid course through his bloodstream, incinerating everything in its path.

At the peak of his agony, a blinding flash overwhelmed the slave's vision. He unleashed a deafening scream, and its fevered pitch caromed throughout the pits and catacombs of the mines. But the reverberation assaulting the eardrums of countless slaves was not the shriek of a man in pain; it was the fiery shrill of a battlefield war cry. The fire that flowed through his veins had become the source of pure, exhilarating strength. Rising to his feet, the slave patted his skull and stomach down for wounds, but found none. He knew that he was just transformed into something inhuman, something stronger and more powerful than he could ever imagine. His hands latched firmly onto the Glaive-collar gripping his neck. Immediately, he could feel the device puncture his skin and inject its lethal toxins into his arteries. But the poisons that should have crippled and then killed him had no effect.

With a sharp, metallic *crack*, the collar shattered from the sheer strength of the man's hands. Slaves gathered and watched in amazement as he removed broken syringe needles from his neck and cast them harmlessly aside. Now keenly aware of his powers, he heard the voice of someone he had never met, but commanded his devout, absolute obedience:

Awaken, Minmatar! They have our Elders!

The slave shook his head in despair, clutching at his own skull as though it were about to break apart. There was an immediate clarity of purpose for his life. The voice came from inside, and he knew that he was born for a single mission.

They have taken them here, Minmatar! They are hidden among the ones who just arrived!

Immediately, he felt the presence of the Elders nearby and knew that the voice was truthful. His memory reached backwards in time to the exact moment when the Amarrian guard was poised to strike him a third time, to the radio squawking in his earpiece. The slave's mind amplified the sound, processed the words, and learned in that instant that the Elders were being held in the landing bay just beyond the mines.

You must go to them now!

The urgency of the voice betrayed the presence of a shockwhip's charged lace screaming towards his back. Time slowed down to a crawl. Sidestepping the whip, he pivoted on one foot towards his attacker and lunged with an outstretched arm in a single, blurred motion. The slave felt his own tightened hand rip through the throat of his assailant. The Amarrian guard fell, his life spraying through the gruesome wound in his neck. No time was wasted savoring this delicious moment of revenge; instead, the slave turned and started to run. The inspired crowd, recognizing the opportunity, erupted into frenzy and ran after him.

Hurry, Minmatar! Time runs out for us all!

Three more guards died instant, violent deaths as they tried to stop the rogue slave. Behind him, the crowd had grown into an uncontrollable riot. Shedding their mining drills and running blindly onwards, the mob sought Amarrian blood to spill but found only the mangled remains left by the powerful one who had gone ahead. Reaching the great doors of the landing bay, the slave crushed the sternum of his next victim with a single strike. The radio on the corpse announced a terse warning:

"His Glaive-collar has been removed; disperse rifles to your squads and fire at will!"

Open the doors, Minmatar!

In a whirl of motions, he pressed the dead man's palm against the glass console and typed a five-digit sequence. The slave never considered how he could have possibly known what that code was. The mighty doors opened, and there before him stood hundreds of Minmatar men, women and children. The Elders were among them!

Come to us, Minmatar!

A bolt of fire slammed into his chest with terrific force. The sound of the shot caused the crowd to scream and panic. Feeling no pain, he took another step forward. Again, a powerful impact pushed him backwards, but

instead of falling into open space, he was swept forward as the wrathful crowd of rioting slaves rushed past. Staggering through the fray, the slave ignored the madness, desperately seeking the Elders who had summoned him from his sleep. Death was everywhere, but his eyes locked onto the frail figure of a hooded man moving in a slow, ethereal glide through the struggle.

Everything hangs in the balance; the destiny of worlds rests with the outcome of these days. Warn the others that the remaining Elders must not perish. Send this message with haste! Immortality awaits, Minmatar! Go!

And the slave could feel pain again, but not from the bullet wounds in his chest. The searing torture originating from the pit of his stomach returned, and the Elder disappeared into the chaos. Suddenly aware of his own mortality, the slave broke towards the lifts that would take him to the surveillance posts at the surface of the mines. He ran through crowds of flashing knives and spilled blood; past men clutching at their Glaive-collars with one hand and bashing Amarrians with the other. With abdominal pain intensifying every step, he hurled himself into a lift and shut the door. The elevator began rocketing upwards amidst a hail of bullets. Guards filed into a second lift and gave chase.

The pain spread upwards to his solar plexus, and tinges of agony began radiating from the gaping wounds in his chest and back. A computerized voice announced a warning as the lift shot past the gravity zone. Then came the nausea, and in a violent heave dotted with blood and serum, a small metallic sphere was forcefully expelled from his mouth just as the lift stopped. Summoning as much strength as he could for this final effort, the slave grabbed the tiny device and pulled himself out.

Bullets scorched overhead as he bounded towards the airlock entrance. The inner doors opened, and with the press of several keys, he ensured they would not close behind him. Air pressure alerts echoed throughout the cavern, amber-colored warning lights flashed, and sirens wailed as he waited until the exact moment to open the outer seal.

The slave heard a deafening *whoosh*, then silence. As his lungs imploded, the last image to be processed by his failing brain was the sight of Amarrian guards hurled through an opening in the surface below. The tiny device, encased in the death grip of this nameless slave, flashed once before converting every atom of its mass into an immensely powerful energy pulse that traversed light years of space-time in an instant.

The celestial event registered on the instruments of exactly four ships. In that single moment, the course of history was altered forever.

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“I will not hesitate when the test of Faith finds me, for only the strongest conviction will open the gates of paradise. My Faith in you is absolute; my sword is Yours, My God, and Your will guides me now and for all eternity.”

- The Prophet Kuria, “Paladin’s Creed”

“It is said that cowardice lurks behind power; that every tyrant ruler fears the day when his subjects learn where the source of real power lies. What better way for an emperor to hide that truth than by claiming the will of deities and threatening divine consequence to those who question it!”

- “The Elder’s Tome”, Matari Chronicles

Derejik Region – Joas Constellation

The Ubtes System: Planet IV

A darkened path, littered with charred bones and glowing embers, weaved through the smoking remnants of a dead forest. The mark of evil was everywhere in this forsaken place, and the whisper of demons taunted its sole visitor to turn away. Suppressing her fear, she pressed onwards through the blackened, shattered tree trunks and emerged into a vast field. A single object broke the emptiness of this desolate expanse: A stone crypt with its heavy lid resting alongside, waiting to be sealed for eternity. The sky overhead boiled with thick, black clouds that warned of the apocalyptic storm coming to destroy this world once and for all. But she had come too far to turn back now, and after taking a deep breath for strength, dared to venture one step closer.

Immense grief seized her instantly, the kind of suffocating misery that only the loss of a loved one can elicit. A great hero was laid to rest inside that crypt, struck down on the brink of vanquishing the curse of this land. Approaching the tomb of this unknown champion, she realized that she was no longer alone. Beside her walked countless other souls whose number filled the field for as far as she could see. They too were stricken with grief, and had braved the treacherous landscape to bid this great hero farewell.

She reached the open crypt, but was unable to gaze upon the corpse that lay inside. Looking elsewhere, she found that the people surrounding her were faceless. They stood silently, shoulder to shoulder, as if waiting for her to speak. But it was the demons that spoke first, as their sinister murmurs reached across the wasteland to her ears. A flash of lightning lashed out from the wicked clouds overhead. The spirits suddenly vanished from the great field without a trace. Only the crypt—and the greatest fear that she had ever known—remained.

Without warning, the corpse lunged at her with outstretched arms and shouted:

“Viola!”

Pulling her firmly into the depths, the corpse screamed again as they fell deeper and deeper towards oblivion:

“Viola! Pull up!”

With a gasp, she awakened to the blare of warning klaxons and flashing instrument lights. The cockpit’s canopy was filled with the swirling, reddish-brown cloud bands of Ubtes IV’s upper atmosphere. Viola pulled back hard on the flight stick and jammed the throttle all the way forward. The massive gas giant dropped from the canopy’s view and was replaced by the blinding light of the system’s sun. The Allotek engines behind her roared to life, and the spacecraft started to rattle violently.

The earpiece in her helmet shouted again: *“You dropped below the grav deck, use more thrust!”*

Viola’s left thumb depressed a switch on the throttle. The afterburners erupted, and the rattling subsided as the Atron-class frigate accelerated safely away from the powerful grip of Ubtes IV. *These dreams are going to kill me someday*, she thought. Switching the engines off, she took in several deep breaths of oxygen and tried to calm down.

“What the hell is wrong with you? That’s the third time this month!”

Still shaking, she unclipped the mask and reached for the vial of painkillers resting below the MPD (Multifunction Projection Display). Her face was moist with perspiration and tears. She popped the lid off and let two of the pills roll into her mouth.

“Viola!”

After swallowing the pills, she tried to forge a harsh edge to her voice. “Baer, shut up already!” she yelled. “Could you mind your own business for once when I’m out here?” The drugs started to take their effect. The high was not as potent as she had hoped, but the effects were welcome just the same.

The voice in the earpiece matched her harshness. “I just saved your life again! God-*damnit*, Viola! Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t take that ship away from you right now!”

Through her watery eyes, the bluish-black canvas of Ubtex space came into focus as she turned the craft away from the sun. “Because you’ve made a career of riding on the success of my work, and you’re not going to do anything to jeopardize that.”

“You should remind DIVCOM of that more often,” Baer sneered. “They seem to forget about the success of your work all the time.”

Viola ignored the veiled threat. *If those fools want my resignation, all they have to do is ask. But they’re not going to do that now, not since the Hror System was taken by Emperor Heideran, as I predicted.*

“Listen to me,” Baer continued, his voice more subdued. “I’m speaking to you as a friend now: You’re burning yourself out, and it’s going to draw attention from the wrong people. They’re going to start auditing the flight recorder logs, Viola. I can’t cover up these mishaps forever.”

Especially if anyone finds out about these pills. “Baer, this ship is the only shelter I have from Federation politicians,” she answered. Leaning forward against the harness straps, she tapped on the MFD. The cockpit’s instruments bathed her flight suit in a greenish hue as data scrolled down the screen. “Do you have the latest casualty estimates for Eanna?”

There was a pause. “At last pass, sixty-three million dead, mostly from orbital bombardment directed at population centers. One million or so killed during the surface landings; another million in subsequent ground combat. At least two million were taken as slaves, but we won’t know exact numbers for some time.”

The faceless souls of her dream returned to the forefront of her memory. She closed her eyes and tried to push them away. “And the Elders?”

“Viola, please—”

“*The Elders, goddamnit,*” she yelled, angered now. “Have you heard any reports at all?”

“Nothing,” Baer answered tersely. “And no word from your mysterious ‘Order’, either.”

“Then make sure the ELINT technicians retask any local assets to monitoring the transports that leave the surface,” she responded, reaching forward for the painkillers again.

“That’s a waste of time and you know it,” he argued. “We’ll never learn the identities of anyone who was down there, let alone—”

Two more pills rolled into her mouth. “I don’t want to hear your opinion, Baer.” She felt the drugs work over her muscles, relaxing them. “Just get it done. Do you have anything else for me?”

“Actually, yes, *Viola,*” he retorted. “DIVCOM wants a report detailing your estimates on which systems the Amarrians will attack next.”

The crypt in the barren field was beckoning her to walk forward, and the demons started to whisper again.

“Have them tell the politicians that Luminaire is next,” she breathed.

Viola switched off the commlink before Baer had time to protest.

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Essence Region – Crux Constellation

The Renyn System: Planet IX – Moon 4

Federal Intelligence Office Headquarters

Lieutenant Colonel Baer Gesdeneau slammed his fist against the desk. *That miserable bitch*, he thought, trying to raise her again on the commlink. There was no answer. His eyes scanned the display of live telemetry broadcasting from Viola’s frigate. The toggle switch for the subspace comm had just been switched off from the inside. *Why do I bother*, he asked himself. *If she wants to kill herself, there’s nothing I can do to stop her.*

With a sigh, he leaned back in his chair and stared at the holographic information dancing before him. Viola Antionnes had been with the Federal Intelligence Office for almost twenty years, and in that time became the F.I.O.’s leading expert on the Minmatar-Amarrian conflict. Her expertise was driven by her passionate—and extremely unpopular—opinions about the moral responsibilities of governments. The Amarrians, with their embracement of slavery and expansionistic ambitions, became the natural target of her intellectual wrath. The Gallente Federation was still embroiled in a bitter war with the Caldari State, yet she continued to lobby tirelessly for direct military intervention on behalf of the beleaguered Minmatars. *Political suicide*, Baer thought. *Whatever the moral purity of her beliefs, the Federation was too weary from war to listen.*

Viola ruined her career when she portrayed the F.I.O. as being critical of government policymakers, accusing them of collectively failing to uphold the Federation’s “implicit obligation” to safeguard human rights beyond Gallente borders. It was not the opinion that infuriated Agency superiors and alienated her from colleagues—after all, she was paid to have opinions. It was the manner in which she decided to make them publicly known.

Tasked by the F.I.O. to produce a routine intelligence briefing for the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, Viola secretly produced two separate reports. One such report detailed what Division Command *thought* she would

say. The other copy—worded much differently—is what would eventually make its way into the hands of Gallente Senators.

Baer still grimaced whenever he thought about the Committee’s reaction. In her report, Viola cited “the utter lack of foreign policy backbone” as bearing partial responsibility for the Amarr Empire’s aggressive push into Minmatar space. She decried the “political cronies” whose “gross incompetence was evident in their belief that rational dialogue was even possible with fanatical zealots” and the “deadly failure of publicly elected imbeciles to recognize the Reclaiming for what it is: State-sponsored genocide, by far the gravest threat ever faced by humanity, let alone the Federation”. The resulting political fallout put so much pressure on the agency that DIVCOM (Division Command) contemplated taking legal action against her, except for the fact that doing so would deprive them of a valued resource whose contributions to the Federation were uncontested.

The F.I.O. ultimately decided that incurring the wrath of politicians was worth the price of keeping Viola around, but only under the condition that her visibility—both publicly and internally—be reduced to nothing. Despite more than twenty years of professional experience, she was stripped of her rank and made the hierarchal equivalent of a first year associate. Viola’s life was the agency; she had devoted little time to developing a social life, and had no friends or family to lean on. *She was crushed*, Baer thought. *And she has never been the same since.*

Baer lit a cigarette and slowly exhaled a plume of smoke through the visual telemetry floating over his desk. The agency wanted her out of sight, but they still wanted her talents; what better way to reconcile those needs than by giving her a ship. The electronics on Viola’s Atron-class frigate were modified to broadcast her location to the agency at all times, and her security clearance was adjusted so that she could only access restricted information if she was physically onboard. On stations or planets, her clearance was blocked. Division Command was taking every precaution to avoid a repeat of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee fiasco while still getting productive work from her, and could care less if they crushed her ego in the process.

It was cruel, Baer thought, *but it was working...until she started looking for ghosts*. Despite the magnitude of the fall of the planet Eanna, Viola was investigating nonsense about secretive ‘Orders’ and hidden figures of power within the Minmatar tribes whose importance to Gallente interests she deemed as paramount. Yet she could produce no evidence of their existence, and still insisted on devoting precious intelligence-gathering resources to investigate her wild suspicions. *I’m losing her, and it’s just a matter of time before all of this ends badly*, Baer thought. The intelligence business was costly enough to the psyche, but it was especially hard on those assigned to the Amarrians. Viola would not be the first analyst to lose her mind because of them.

He stamped out his cigarette and pushed himself away from the desk, giving the telemetry one last look: Ubtes System, fourth planet, geosynchronous orbit, all systems green, and all ambient signal strengths at zero. *She’s completely alone out there*, Baer thought. *A fitting picture for the life she chose*. Straightening his uniform, Baer left his office to attend a meeting with the other task officers.

As soon as the door closed behind him, the telemetry graphic depicting ambient signal strength flashed bright red and held for a few seconds before returning to normal.

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Metropolis Region – Tiat Constellation

The Hror System, Planet VI: “Eanna”

Armageddon-Class Battleship “Impervious”

As seen from the vantage of ships patrolling high above, the swirling cirrus clouds of the planet Eanna still bore long, dark streaks that spanned the width of continents.

Speak to me, God.

The screen cycled through different views provided by Imperial warships surrounding the former Minmatar world. Approximately twenty-four hours had passed since the last guns stopped, but uncontrollable firestorms still raged all over the planet. The occasional break in the clouds revealed green landmasses pockmarked with wide swaths of blackened scars.

Tell me that the millions of people I killed yesterday deserved to die.

Commodore Faus Akredon tapped the console, and the images disappeared. He swiveled the chair so that he faced the window of his quarters. The Hror System's sun gleaned off a section of the Impervious's hull, illuminating the darkened room with an eerie, gold-tinted aura. He put a hand to his forehead and closed his eyes, fighting back tears that threatened to reveal sympathy for an enemy of God.

"I...will not...hesitate...when the test of Faith...finds me..."

Faus broke down into sobs as he tried to recite the prayer which, hours earlier, compelled him to follow the Grand Admiral's orders to bombard the planet Eanna from space. The Impervious was just one of hundreds of Imperial Navy battleships in the armada sent to take control of the planet, and Faus was likely to receive special military honors for his role in the attack. The fleet under his direct command was one of the few that encountered serious Minmatar resistance. By the time the Impervious was training her deadly tachyon beams at the cities below, Faus Akredon had coordinated the systematic destruction of dozens of enemy warships. Not one Imperial ship was lost in the engagement. The decisiveness of the victory carried divine implications that inspired his crew, further strengthening their belief that he was a true Paladin: An executor of God's Will.

My God, I beg you...speak to me, please!

Faus wiped away the tears and ran his hands along his bare scalp. Dozens of military awards and religious artifacts lined the walls of his quarters. Most of the distinctions were presented by Emperor Heideran himself during elaborate ceremonies attended by the most powerful figures in the Amarr Empire. Commodore Akredon was already a legend in the Imperial Navy, renown for crushing pockets of Minmatar resistance throughout the Empire and requesting the most dangerous combat assignments for his fleet.

The Emperor treated Faus like a son; he placed more faith in his abilities as a Navy commander than he did in his own Admirals. It was publicly known that there were shared bloodlines between House Akredon and the royal Kador family, but in truth there was little contact between them. Emperor Heideran loved Faus not for his ancestry, but for his relentless dedication to the Reclaiming and deeply devout faith. They both envisioned a day when New Eden became the glorious paradise it was meant to be, when the faithful of every world within the cosmos lifted their universal praise to God.

But now his faith was rattled to the core. Grand Admiral Mekioth Sarum—the supreme commander of all Amarrian military forces—never asked Faus to participate in a surface bombardment before Eanna. Perhaps it was simply a tactical necessity; a military requirement to maximize the firepower directed against such a vital target. Or, it was the Emperor administering a final test of faith, one that would ultimately determine his ascension to the rank of Admiral. Faus was a man whose success in combat was driven by his belief in the divine righteousness of his actions. Yet today he found himself unable to rid the images of Eanna from his mind.

This burden is more than I can bear, My God... Was it not your divine will that these pagans be burned for their sins? Why do I not rejoice at the slaughter of your enemy now?

A soft tone broke the silence. Faus looked towards his desk.

You have listened, and now you speak to me...

The tone resonated a second time.

“What is it, Lieutenant.”

The voice sounded apologetic. “My lord, I’m sorry to disturb you, but we have a situation.”

“Go on.”

“Comms detected a powerful burst of gamma and x-ray energy that was not generated by any known celestial objects. When they checked the recorders, they found that subspace ambient signal strength spiked at the same exact time, and...there was structure embedded in the transmission. It was a distress signal, but hugely amplified.”

“From whom?”

“Some of our own high priests, my lord. The message is distorted, but we can confirm the voiceprint of the Apostle Taj Rukon. There are other voices in the recording, but we cannot identify them. It sounds like they were ambushed.”

Another test of my faith? Faus’s hands rolled into tight fists. “Rebels?”

“Correct, my lord. The message is explicit.”

“Where did the burst originate from?”

“My lord, this will sound unusual, but the originating source is Diemnon.”

Anger formed on the brow lines on Faus’s expression. “The mining complex in Hahyil?”

“Yes, my lord. The comms officers checked several times.”

I am your humble servant, my God, and I will show no mercy to the animals responsible for this atrocity.

“Lieutenant, hail the other captains and instruct navigation to set course for Diemnon. Best possible speed. I’m on my way to the bridge.”

“Yes, my lord.”

The battered planet Eanna moved out of sight as the Impervious started its turn. Faus stood upright and caught his reflection in the window.

I am your humble servant...

With a deep breath, he collected himself and moved towards the door.

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There were no dreams this time. Only blackness prevailed.

Chirp.

Viola slowly opened her eyes, wondering for a moment how long she was asleep for and then realizing that she had barely slept at all. She felt so numb that she was having trouble focusing on her surroundings. The high was still there, sort of, only it was just as painful as it was relieving. *Like trying to quench thirst by drinking seawater*, she mused.

She blinked several times. Her mind was working slowly, drudging through fogged memory trying to remember how to interpret the myriad of readings and instruments on the MFD. The warning that had saved her from plummeting into the atmosphere of Ubtes IV had a different tone, she realized. This one was a signal.

Chirp.

She leaned forward and tapped the screen. *Gamma and x-ray*, she said aloud. The fog suddenly evaporated as she realized the significance of the signal type.

The Order!

She started tapping quickly on the screen, coaxing the Atron's sophisticated electronics to find the source of the signal. Frowning at the computer's first answer, she ran the analysis again. This time, it displayed a much different response. Viola's eyes opened wide, and she slowly moved her hands away from the controls. The screen read:

VIOLA ANTIONNES

WE HAVE BEEN WATCHING YOU

COME TO DIEMNON

BEFORE GRUUL SHATAN STRIKES

I'm not dreaming this, Viola thought as a chill ran the length of her spine. The literal translation of “Diemnon” in the Amarrian language was “Demon’s Stone”, and its location was deep inside of territory controlled by the Imperial Navy. Known as an infamous labor camp for Minmatar slaves, Diemnon was a planetesimal—a titanic asteroid that could be considered a failed planet. At just over 1,300 km in diameter, it was still geologically active and featured constant volcanic events on the surface.

The most pronounced danger to Diemnon was its highly elliptical orbit. One revolution took 238 standard EVE days, but its path intersected a dense asteroid belt—the remnants of the planet Diemnon used to be—that rained epic destruction on the surface every 119 days. The Amarrians called this cataclysmic meteor storm “Gruul Shatan”, and it transformed the space around Diemnon into lethal kill zone for spacecraft.

But deep beneath the surface of this hellish world were vast deposits of hemorphite. Too deep for the cutting power of ship-mounted mining lasers to reach, the Amarrians drilled and blasted some 30 kilometers into the crust to access the precious ore. To sustain mining operations, a sprawling complex was constructed deep inside of the massive cavity. Billions of cubic meters of material were excavated and hauled away, sometimes only to be replaced by magma vents welling upwards from the mantle or deposited from above by the wrath of Gruul Shatan.

Only Amarrian arrogance—and slave manpower—could make such an impractical venture possible, Viola thought. Without question, if there was such a thing as hell in New Eden, then its doorstep was Diemnon. And it was Minmatar slaves that converted this underworld into a precious resource for an Emperor who considered himself an ambassador to God. The thought enraged Viola, but the chills returned as she realized that the 119th day of Diemnon’s orbit was just a few hours away.

The Order has eluded me at every turn, Viola thought, reaching for more painkillers. A clue here, something unexplained there...Now this—an offer to meet them in the most dangerous region of space during its most dangerous time of the local year. She chewed the pills instead of swallowing them, but hardly noticed the bitter taste.

“Before Gruul Shatan strikes,” Viola recalled from the message as the drugs ran their wicked course through her veins.

Why not? The Atron shuddered as the warp drive engines powered on. I’m dead already.

~

Viola was right. Again.

Baer’s mind was racing as he rushed back towards his office. He hated to admit it, but the task officer’s meeting had touched on everything that she asked him to look for. All diplomatic channels between the Federation and the Minmatar tribes were still severed because of the invasion. But information continued to flow from intelligence assets observing Amarrian and Minmatar movements, and the implications of the latest data were extremely unsettling to DIVCOM.

The meeting focused on an industrial believed to be carrying the first Minmatar prisoners taken from Eanna. Shortly after that ship’s arrival at the Diemnon mining complex, a riot erupted which claimed the lives of several Paladin guards—a completely unheard of occurrence given the brutal effectiveness of slave control methods used by the Amarrians. Most interestingly of all, Diemnon was about to make an orbital pass directly through the Hahyil System’s largest asteroid belt. No ships would be able to approach the complex until the resulting meteor storm passed.

That was just too much of a coincidence, Baer thought, wincing from the stench of cigarettes and sweat as the front door to his office opened. The ELINT task officers at the meeting stated that ‘chatter’ on known Minmatar military frequencies spiked right after that riot took place, and the amount of chatter was already elevated because of the Eanna invasion. Viola had asked about the Elders several times, and this series of events implied that someone extremely important to the Minmatars—“elder” or otherwise—was taken to Diemnon.

The desk console buzzed the moment he reached his seat.

“This is Baer.”

“Lieutenant Colonel, we just isolated a voice intercept from a Matari Tribe military channel that you need to listen to,” the voice said. It was one of the junior analysts from the ELINT desk. “It’s about an hour old. Parts of it are missing, but the conversation triggered some keyword alarms. Standby.”

Baer made sure his own electronics were recording before the playback started.

“...brought to Diemnon...care about the risks anymore, we don’t have time for...rapid-response team we have...Valklears...back from their current...Talon squad—...as quickly...death sentence...what choice do we really have...”

The recording stopped abruptly with a burst of static.

“That’s all of it,” the analyst said. “We’re working on the voice print now. Call you if we get a match.”

“Alright, thanks.” The line clicked off.

Holy shit, Baer thought as he fumbled for a cigarette. *They're really going to try and get someone out of there!* The Valklears were a legendary special operations force composed of the best warriors from the Minmatar tribes, and their involvement all but guaranteed that a rescue mission was either in the late planning stages or already in progress. *And that mission would certainly fail, no matter how good those Valklear commandos think they are*, Baer thought as he brought up the telemetry data from Viola's frigate. *Replacements for the Amarrian guards killed during the riot are probably already on their way to Diemnon, and...*

Baer stopped in mid-thought when he saw the destination locked into the Atron's navigation system. The unlit cigarette fell from his mouth.

"*Fuck*," Baer muttered as he tapped furiously into the console to remotely disable the Atron's engines. But it was too late. The holographic display flickered as Viola's frigate entered the stargate that would take her into the Hahyil System.

The Federation intelligence officer stared in disbelief. *How the hell could she know about this already*, he wondered. *There are more subtle ways for her to chase a death wish.*

~



“Zakara saw the danger to his brother, and did not hesitate; without weapon or armor, he hurled himself at the beast, attacking with his bare hands. Enraged, the beast turned and struck Zakara, opening a terrible wound in his side. Seizing the moment, Garum ran his sword through the beast’s heart, thus ending the battle victorious. But Zakara, mortally wounded, cried out in pain. ‘You sacrificed yourself for me,’ Garum said, taking his hand.

'We are brothers,' Zakara answered, just before breathing his last. 'And in God we shall remain brothers for all of time...'

- Book of the Prophet Junip, 10:25 - 30, The Scriptures

"I will tell you how this madness is born: A man peers over the edge of chaos, into the event horizon, where light can never escape. Then he turns and sees the remnants of his shattered life, of what was taken from him without pause or remorse. The soul decides, because the man is already dead, and it craves chaos for this purpose: To kill the god who did this to him."

- The Thukker Testament, excerpt from Volume III

Derelik Region – Bedaleya Constellation

The Irshah System: Valklear Talon Squadron Rally Point

Typhoon-class battleship “Hellwraith”

My son...

Decades of unremitting guerilla warfare carved severe lines into the face of the Valklear Admiral known as Karth Mutana. The long, narrow mane of hair that grew from the center of his scalp was streaked with bands of gray, but his muscular frame still possessed the size and strength of a Krusual tribesman half his age. Today his eyes were darker than usual, and his expression betrayed both anger and sadness instead its prevailing fortitude.

They killed my only son...

The crewmen seated in the trenches alongside the bridge took note of his grim demeanor, and felt the heavy burden on their shoulders grow unbearable. The reality that Eanna was lost to the Amarrians was just too difficult to absorb, and many were receiving news of loved ones lost—or worse, not hearing anything at all. The Admiral was always a pillar of strength for them, but seeing him like this was bitterly demoralizing and added to the depth of their own sorrows.

My hatred of them is all that remains now...

All of the Hellwraith’s officers stood beside their Admiral, listening to the Valklear mission planners explain the roles of each squadron in the rescue operation. A large screen built into the bulkhead above the forward bridge windows was divided into four sections, one for each commander in the briefing. Karth heard his name mentioned several times as the planners talked, but his mind never wandered from the memories of his son.

Before he was a soldier, he would watch as I spilled the blood of Amarrian sons...the blood of Amarrian fathers...and he would say to me, 'You are what I want to become...'

“Admiral?” The planner mentioned something of the mission to him directly, but was ignored once more.

I am Karth Mutana, freedom fighter of the Krusual Tribe, Valklear warrior of the Minmatar people, wretched father of a dead son...

All eyes focused on the grizzled veteran seated in the captain’s chair of the mighty Hellwraith. The scowl on Karth’s brow deepened, but he remained transfixed on the space directly in front of him. No one dared to press for his attention. The mission planner cleared his throat, and then continued.

This will be my final battle...

“...Talon Squadron will warp into the CZ first to engage all Imperial forces in the area. Surface-based defenses must be neutralized before any spaceborne threats. You’ll only have a few seconds to declare a ‘go, no-go’ for Omicron, and anywhere from three to five minutes to egress from the CZ before the meteor storm pulverizes everything in the area...”

My last vendetta...

“...the jump-in point will put you directly on top of Diemnon, matching her orbital velocity and trajectory around the Hahyil System’s sun. Omicron must be protected at all costs. If Omicron fails to enter the primary vent cavern within two minutes of your arrival, the odds of this mission succeeding—”

History will remember me as a godslayer.

“Omicron will reach the cavern,” Karth interrupted, snapping out of his haze. “The Hellwraith and her Talons will see to that. My crew and I are prepared to give our lives so that Omicron may succeed. The question is what *odds* are you giving Minmatar to succeed?”

The mission planner shifted his weight. “I’m sorry Admiral, but—”

“The Valklears could not help Eanna, Colonel. All the strength assembled here was powerless to stop the Paladins from laying waste to one of our civilization’s most sacred planets. Did we not have a plan to defend the world that most of us here called ‘home’?”

Karth’s officers remained at attention, making every effort to hide their shock at the Admiral’s words. The mission planner was flustered, and tried to answer the question candidly.

“We did, sir, but the sheer size and strength of the invasion force overwhelmed—”

“Colonel,” the Admiral interrupted again, as the lines in his face deepened. “They killed millions of us. *Tens of millions!* Please tell me that the plan to defend those people was the best that the Valklears could offer. Tell me how that plan accounted for the *odds* of facing a larger than expected attack force.” His voice lowered to a whisper. “Or the *odds* my son faced as tachyon beams fell from the sky above him.”

The mission planner was speechless. Every precious second that passed brought the deadly meteor storm closer to Diemnon, and the window for rescuing the Elders—if they were even alive—was closing fast.

“Admiral, you have my deepest sympathies for the loss of your noble son, but the Amarrians must have secured below the surface by now, they won’t detect Omicron’s entry if we attack just as the first meteors impact—”

Karth flew out of the captain's chair in a rage. Thick veins bulged from his neck and temples as he roared.

“We failed to save Eanna because of a miscalculation of ‘odds’, Colonel. The Elders are all that remain of that world, perhaps of our entire culture. And you dare to speak of ‘odds’ like this is some sort of game? Navigation!”

One of the officers besides Karth snapped his boots at attention. “Yes, sir!”

“Set your course for the Hahyil System, and make sure your final jump point is set against the coordinates that the Colonel has provided!”

The officer's expression beamed sheer determination. “Nav course to Diemnon, yes sir!” He leapt into the trench and started barking orders to the crewmen seated inside. Karth glared at the cameras above the screen.

“Omicron, you have your *go*. Lock in your course and meet us at Diemnon.”

The Omicron flight leader stared quizzically at the screen.

“*Now!*” Karth screamed. “Move it!”

The mission planner tried to speak, but was cut off again by the furious Valklear Admiral.

“You mention the word ‘*odds*’ one more time, and I swear, I’ll crush your skull if I live to see you again. There is nothing left to chance! Do you know what we are fighting for now, Colonel? *The right to bury our own children*. Because of *odds*, saving them is no longer an option!”

The Hellwraith started its turn as dozens of Minmatar warships positioned themselves alongside. Omicron wing—comprised of two Rifter-class frigates loaded with one squad of Valklear commandos each—moved away from the main fleet. The group was just seven jumps from Hahyil, and although most of the crew did not yet know their destination, they sensed that fierce combat was imminent.

Another bridge officer approached Karth and spoke quietly. “Sir, I have the information you requested.”

Karth turned towards the officer. “Tell me.”

The man hesitated before answering. “The Gallentes provided us with real-time information as the Imperial fleet moved into position above Eanna. Comparing it with reconnaissance data of damage placement on the surface gives us a high level of confidence that—”

“I trust your information, Lieutenant,” Karth interrupted. The floor grating underneath both men’s feet shook as the Hellwraith’s warp drive engines powered on. “Just give me a name.”

“Yes, sir,” The man was beginning to sweat. “The Imperial flagship positioned over the city where your son was lost...it was the Impervious, sir. It was Commodore Faus Akredon.”

~

Derelik Region – Bedaleya Constellation

The Irshah System: Valklear Talon Squadron Rally Point

Rifter-class frigate “Omicron-One”

The Valklear squad captain focused on the sound of the Rifter’s engines, allowing its steady hum to drown out the replay of the Operation Tempest mission plan. Years of combat experience taught him to seize these precious moments of rest whenever he could. He leaned back, closed his eyes, and allowed his mind to wander back to the hopeless days of his youth, and to a moment that he revisited often:

“I see that you used a Kri’tak to murder them. Why use this weapon?”

“Because it’s quiet.”

“Slitting the throats of four Nefantars is hardly quiet, boy.”

“I set them down gently so that no one would hear.”

“Not gently enough. I tracked all of your movements. I saw everything. And when their master discovers what happened to them, the Paladins will come looking for you.”

“Let them come. They won’t take me alive.”

“Do you enjoy killing, Vlad?”

“How the fuck do you know what my name is?”

“I said, do you enjoy killing, Vlad?”

“I’m indifferent to it. Who are you?”

“Were you being ‘indifferent’ when you murdered those men?”

“I’m indifferent to killing traitors that betray us to the Amarrians.”

“I’d believe that if you didn’t rob them as well.”

“Pull the trigger or stop wasting my time.”

“You’re not intimidated by this gun I’m pressing into your forehead?”

“The only thing that intimidates me is being alive long enough to become a slave. Now pull the fucking trigger or get out of my face.”

“You’re going to do well as a soldier, Vlad.”

“What are you doing—”

“We’re going to make you a better killer, Vlad. For Minmatar’s sake. Sweet dreams.”

The excited voice of the Rifter pilot blared through the speakers, breaking apart a distant memory that was as painful as it was treasured to the elite soldier.

“Valklears, we are a ‘go’, repeat, we are a ‘go’. ETA to CZ nine minutes, seven seconds...six...five...mark. Flight engineer, secure all gear and fix for battle stations, this ingress is going to be hot.”

The cabin lights switched to red, and Captain Vlad Kintreb snapped fully out of his daydream. The flight engineer entered and began working his way along the two benches of soldiers facing each other, helping to snap their four-point harnesses into place. He worked silently, mindful of the relative peace that these men were enjoying. He knew that it would not last for much longer.

Twenty years, Vlad thought, running through a checklist of the equipment strapped all over him. *Twenty years since I was taken out of those filthy alleyways by that crazy Valklear recruiter. I wonder what he would have to say about this suicide mission.*

The engineer approached and pulled the straps firmly over the combat pack fastened to his shoulders. Captain Kintreb, along with every other Valklear commando, was bristling with weaponry. Each one was armed with an assault rifle, pistol, extra ammunition, grenades, and a combat knife known as a “Kri’tak”. Some carried additional equipment and weapons for more specialized roles, but for this mission—which favored stealth over brute force—traveling light was mandatory. The flight engineer checked to make sure that the rifle was fastened securely across Vlad’s chest, and then padded down the rest of the gear strapped to his legs and sides. Satisfied that everything would remain in place, the engineer moved on to the next commando.

The soldiers were quiet, each one handling the pressure a little bit differently. Some sat serenely with their eyes closed in meditation; others were concentrating on the holographic mission briefing hovering before them. *How many of us will be here for the trip home*, Vlad wondered. *If there even is a trip home*. A three-dimensional map of the Diemnon mining complex was projected on the floor grating at the center of the cabin. The vent cavern entrance that Omicron wing would descend into was labeled “Hell’s Gate”.

“Study the map,” Vlad instructed. “Know every detail of it. There are copies in your mission packs, but you should commit those schematics to memory.”

One of the soldiers spoke up: “Any last minute changes to the plan?”

“Negative, Thumgar,” Vlad answered. “As of now, *Tempest* has no changes.”

“What about the Elders that are missing,” another soldier asked. “Any word on their status?”

“Negative, Krughan,” Vlad answered. “But the assumption right now is that they’re still alive.”

Some of the soldiers exchanged looks, and Vlad made a mental note of the ones that did. He decided to address their unspoken concerns before they could cause more doubt.

“I know what you’re thinking, but if there’s even a chance that they still breathe, it’s worth giving up our lives to find out,” Vlad said. “Without those Elders...I don’t think I have to explain what the consequences are.”

All of the soldiers agreed, except for Thumgar. *This one is going to be trouble*, Vlad sensed. *I must take care with him in front of the others.*

“We are Minmatar’s blade,” Vlad started. “And the spirits of Eanna are with us. This mission will be difficult, but *Tempest* is *not* a desperation effort. We *will* succeed.”

Thumgar was still defiant. “Success even without the Elders?”

The uncertainty in this one will kill him faster than Amarrian bullets. “Tempest’s primary mission is to determine if the Elders taken from Eanna are still alive, Thumgar. If they are, then our secondary mission is to bring them home.” Vlad paused for a moment and then added: “Are you up to the task?”

“I’m a Valklear,” Thumgar growled, reacting as if insulted. “Of course I’m up to the task.”

The soldiers felt a slight lurch to their side as the Rifter accelerated to warp speed.

“So am I,” Vlad answered, this time with more resolve in his voice. “And so are all the warriors on this ship.”

~

Derelik Region – Aguh Constellation

The Hahyil System: Diemnon Planetesimal

The planets of the Hahyil System shot past the bubble canopy as the Atron accelerated into the final leg of the journey to Diemnon. Adrenaline overwhelmed the drugs coursing through Viola’s veins as she contemplated the extraordinary risks of the situation. *It’s all worth it*, she thought, slowly crushing another pill in her mouth. *Especially if the fall of Eanna explains why the Order is making direct contact with us.* She double checked that the recorders were functioning properly, running tests on frequencies across the electromagnetic and subspace spectrums. Viola did not know what to expect, and for reasons that included everything except proving the Order’s existence to the F.I.O. or anyone else, she wanted to be certain that the full details of the encounter were preserved.

Viola skipped a breath as the warp engines started to power down. A tiny, reddish dot appeared at the center of the warp core, growing steadily until the hideous face of Diemnon completely filled the bubble canopy. *The*

Demon's Stone, she thought, staring at the lava flows slicing fiery pathways across the elongated, shattered world. Immediately, the frigate's sensors warned of the incoming meteor storm, and Viola noticed that the space beyond Diemnon was sparkling with sporadic pinpoints of brilliant light. *Gruul Shatan*, she thought. *Sunlight reflecting off the tumbling faces of countless boulders traveling at hundreds of meters per second.* One of the commlink lights was blinking wildly, indicating Baer's desperate efforts to reach her. She contemplated answering, then decided against it. *Why bother with him at all*, she asked herself. *The recorders alone will answer all of his questions...*

Viola suddenly felt herself float off the seat into the shoulder straps, and every electrical system on the Atron shut down without warning. The panels, screens, and indicator lights inside the cockpit went dark, and the temperature inside the frigate started to drop. Fearful for her life, Viola scrambled to strap the oxygen mask over her mouth, then looked downwards to check that all of the seals on her survival suit were properly fastened. A flash of light illuminated the ship, and her eyes instinctively darted towards the view outside.

A Bestower-class transport was adrift just a few dozen meters in front of the Atron, so close that Viola could read the Amarrian religious inscriptions etched into the ship's hull. The vessel appeared abandoned; no navigation lights were active, no portholes were illuminated from the inside, and the entire ship was rotating slowly along its axis. *Two dead ships out here*, Viola thought, desperately trying to coax her own frigate back to life. *What the hell am I supposed to do now?*

She suddenly felt a strange sensation erupt from deep within her skull, which spread quickly to the base of her ears. Releasing the controls, her hands reflexively snapped back to grab at her helmet.

"Two deaths with sublime purpose, Viola Antionnes."

Viola's body twitched in terrified reaction to the wicked voice that assaulted her eardrums. Without electrical power, it was impossible for anything inside the ship to generate that kind of audio. And yet the voice sounded like it was spoken from inside of her.

Her eyes locked onto the weightless vial of pills floating against the canopy shielding.

"Addictions," the voice hissed. *"You and the hopeless addictions of your species."*

Viola tried to calm herself, accepting that the Order was fully in control. She could sense biting anger in the voice, and decided that it would be unwise to interrupt.

"Addictions to power, to greed, to lust, to gods...all drugs that falsely satisfy a need. Do you understand what that need is?"

The temperature inside of the Atron continued to plummet, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Viola abandoned her attempts to restart the ship's systems and stared at the Bestower drifting outside.

"The need to be free of fear and uncertainty, child. The Minmatar Elders controlled their fear of the unknown by nurturing patience in their quest for understanding. That quest united an entire people! Their tribes were acting as one, even without the awareness of a single nation to define them. No other race was on a surer path towards achieving what we have than they. But the Amarrians..."

An inscription on the Bestower's hull caught Viola's eye: "The Will of God: Amarr Invincible."

“The Amarrians and their fear, the Amarrians and their addiction, the Amarrians and their ignorance! Eanna was all that remained of the example that humankind desperately needed to evolve, to rid itself of fear once and for all, and to embrace the enlightenment that has preserved us for millennia!”

It sounded like grains of sand striking metal at first, and then the occasional pebble smashed into the bubble canopy. *That storm is close*, Viola thought, craving a painkiller more than ever. She could see that the glitter beyond Diemnon was starting to take on the distinct shape of asteroids.

“Too many times. Too many times have the addictions of man destroyed the progress of ages. History is about to fail us again, and deny us the right to walk among you once more.”

The vial of painkillers crashed against the console and spilled its contents everywhere as the Atron suddenly powered back on. Tiny ripples of light pulsed throughout the bubble canopy as the frigate’s shields absorbed the impact of debris from Gruul Shatan.

“Not since before the New Eden gate collapsed have we seen darker days than these! Will you find the strength to restore what was lost with Eanna?”

With a shrill alarm, the sensors onboard the Atron registered the arrival of seven Imperial Navy warships. Viola watched in horror as each of them began to actively target her ship.

“Or will this be the legacy of humankind forever...”

Viola shrieked as the Bestower exploded in a blinding flash that showered the Atron with shreds of scorched wreckage. Alarms warning of danger screamed with relentless urgency while she fumbled to locate the controls that would activate the frigate’s warp drive.

The ghastly visage of eight corpses floating among the Bestower's remains caused her to hesitate for a few seconds too long.

~

Derejik Region – Aguh Constellation

The Hahyil System: Diemnon Planetesimal

Armageddon-Class Battleship “Impervious”

Faus Akredon could not believe his eyes. The corpses of eight Amarrian high priests were all that remained of the Bestower that he took upon himself to protect. One of them belonged to the beloved Apostle Taj Rukon, the man who had pleaded for help in the distress call. *And the Gallente Federation is responsible for this treachery*, he thought. *My God, I have another enemy to slay in your name!*

The weapons officer spoke in a voice tinged with anger: “Range to target, fifty-eight kilometers, radio crystals loaded, designate November-One. Your orders, my lord?”

Before Faus could answer, the tactical officer interrupted. “New contacts at three-five-zero, z-plus 17,000 meters, range 71 kilometers! Minmatar rebels, my lord!

Faus looked at the tactical display and counted thirty enemy warships. Regardless of the odds, he made a decision to avenge the murdered holy men before pulling his fleet out. There was time for just one shot.

“Weapons command, assign turrets one and two, track November-One and open fire.”

~

Derelik Region – Aguh Constellation

The Hahyil System: Diemnon Planetesimal

Typhoon-class battleship “Hellwraith”

The crewmembers on the bridge all saw it at the same time: Two red beams slicing across space, impacting the aft section of the Atron and sending it into a violent spin. Without any sign of provocation that they could see, the Amarrians had just shot down an unarmed Gallente Federation ship.

But Karth was not interested in the tiny frigate spiraling out of control towards the surface of Diemnon. He was fixated on the long, golden contours of the Armageddon-class battleship on the tactical display. *The mighty Impervious*, he thought to himself. *Perhaps fate is not as unjust as I once thought.*

~

Essence Region – Crux Constellation

The Renyn System: Planet IX – Moon 4

Federal Intelligence Office Headquarters

Baer watched in horror as the telemetry readings foretold of Viola Antionnes’s imminent death. *The Amarrians*, he thought incredulously, reaching his trembling hand towards the intercom switch. *The goddamn Amarrians attacked her!*

“What’s the problem,” the sharp voice asked. Baer spoke quickly as he monitored the telemetry.

“An Amarrian battle fleet just attacked Viola’s ship over Diemnon, Colonel.”

“What was she doing there?”

“Most likely investigating the same rescue mission theory that we discussed earlier.” *Her ship is on fire*, Baer noticed. *And spinning so fast that she has to be unconscious by now.*

“‘Most likely’, Lieutenant Colonel?”

“She switched off comms before I could ask her,” he answered, staring in horror at the data. “A Minmatar strike force witnessed the attack on Viola’s ship. They’re engaging the Imperial battle fleet as we speak.”

“Right now? At Diemnon?”

“Correct. But we’re about to lose telemetry, Viola’s ship is just moments away from—”

Baer never finished his sentence as the proximity sensors on the Atron registered two Jovian Wraith-class frigates uncloak within meters of the doomed frigate.

~



“War is not the dreadful end to all things as mankind fears. Conflict brings balance to nature as it adapts, mutates, and transforms itself into something stronger than before. Mankind is the master of nature because we can choose those mutations on our own accord. We can accelerate the inevitable dominance of a species. Through war, we can make ourselves stronger at the time and place of our choosing. War is not hell, far from it. War is beautiful. War is divine.”

- Grand Admiral Mekioth Sarum, excerpt from a commencement speech to Paladin graduates of the Imperial Academy, 23215 AD

“It took the indifferent cruelty of a Glaive-collar to make us forget which tribe we came from, and the horrors of war to unite us as Minmatars.”

- Isinnur Urlbrald, Vherokior Council Historical Archives, 23217 AD

Derelik Region – Aguh Constellation

The Hahyil System: Diemnon Planetesimal

A single point of light broke through the shroud of darkness that fell over Viola's bloodshot eyes, dilating slowly into an elongated tunnel. Every muscle in her body was contracted tightly, battling against the dangerously high G-forces induced by the Atron's spin. A dizzying blur of orange and black filled the growing lens at the end of the tunnel as the frigate careened towards the surface of Diemnon; the blare of alarms and the smell of smoke forewarned of the fiery death that awaited her.

Viola fought through the immense pressure driving her into the seat and managed to squeeze the flight stick in her right hand, moving it side to side. There was no response from the frigate's systems, no way to eject from the doomed spacecraft, and no means to call for help. Letting go of the controls, she wondered if her death would even be noticed by anyone, and found in these final moments that her intrigue for the Order had been replaced fully by a seething hatred of them.

But then the orange-black blur changed to bluish-white, and the tunnel vision effects started to fade quickly as the Atron's rate of spin slowed. The alternating view of Diemnon and space leveled off into a distinct horizon, and Viola's tightly contracted muscles started to relax. The spacecraft's alarms continued to blare ominous warnings of damaged or inoperable systems, and yet the frigate was somehow flying straight and level in a controlled descent towards the planetesimal's surface.

In a final conscious effort that drained the last remnants of her physical strength, Viola turned her head slightly and saw a Jovian Wraith flying just meters away from the bubble canopy.

~

“How did they do that,” the pilot of Omicron-One muttered, toggling a switch on the throttle control. Her heart was beating faster than it would be if she were running. “Talon command, this is Omicron lead, be advised, the Jovians have stabilized the Atron and are towing it in.”

A static-laced voice answered in the headpiece. “...again, Omicron, did you say...were towing it?”

An asteroid the size of a cargo container tumbled past the canopy. *“Shit!* I mean, affirmative, I just overshot them, the whole rear quadrant of that frigate is gone, and it’s still keeping up with the Wraiths. Omicron-Two, can you confirm?”

“Talon Command, this is Two, confirmed...Atron...crippled...the Jovians are using...kind of tractor beam tech...towards the surface...Goddamn asteroids, this is...ing edge...storm...”

The pilot of Omicron-One grimaced, understanding exactly what the pilot of Omicron-Two was trying to report despite the interference. The leading edge of Gruul Shatan was upon them, and her peripheral vision spotted the expanding shockwaves of meteor impacts on Diemnon’s surface dozens of kilometers below.

Another asteroid tumbled by, triggering a proximity alarm on the Rifter. The canopy was shimmering in a red aura as thousands of smaller stone projectiles started peppering the frigate’s shields. Hell’s Gate was still over 100 kilometers away, and their approach put the incoming storm at an angle that was almost directly in front of them. The idea, the mission planners thought, was to align Omicron headfirst with the obstacles to reduce the possibility of being blindsided. *That was a flattering assumption,* the pilot thought as she nudged the throttle up to gain more speed. *Thinking that actually seeing these fucking things makes them any less avoidable.*

The radio broke the pilot’s concentration again. “...one, check your six, those Jovians...”

The Omicron pilot dared to glance off-center from the canopy towards the rear-view camera display. In her determined effort to avoid colliding with the incoming asteroids, she had lost track of the space behind her ship. And in combat, that was almost always a deadly mistake.

~

“Admiral, the Jovians are directly behind Omicron-One,” the tactical officer said, incredulously. “And the Atron is flying in tight formation with them!”

Karth paced the bridge impatiently. *Why the hell are they here?* The Wraiths and the crippled Atron were all within range of his fleet’s guns, but that was changing by the second. *There can be no witnesses to this rescue effort!*

“Send orders to the cruisers *Al Haquis* and *Sarkos*. Target the entire group, but hold fire until I give the word.”

“Yes sir, designate Wraith targets Sigma-One and Two, Atron target designate Gulf-One.”

Goddamn Jovians, Karth fumed. *If they aren’t shooting, then what are they doing?*

“Navigation!”

“Yes sir!”

“Close range on the Impervious, best possible speed! Tacklers!”

Another static-laced response echoed through the bridge speakers: “Tackler squadron, standing by.”

“Your primary target is the battleship *Impervious*,” Karth hissed. The tactical display indicated that the storm was almost on top of the Amarrian battle group, and that their escape window was narrowing quickly. He was never more bloodthirsty in his entire life than he was right this moment.

“Get into scramble range as quickly as possible. Our gunners will neutralize their cruisers in just a few moments. I want that ship’s momentum stopped, do you understand?”

“Affirmative. On our way.”

The six Slasher-class frigates that made up the Tackler squadron broke away from the main group, heading directly towards the *Impervious*. Their progress was marked with six black triangles on the tactical display.

“Admiral,” the tactical officer interrupted. “The *Sarkos* and *Al Haquis* report null targeting solutions for Sigma or Gulf—the Jovians are too close to Omicron-One!”

~

“Rifter captain, this is the Jovian frigate at your six,” the voice started. “You cannot navigate this approach. Requesting permission to commandeer your flight controls.”

The pilot of Omicron-One was just as furious as she was terrified. “Back off or I’m opening fire!” she shrieked. The crippled Atron was flying alongside of her, and a Jovian Wraith was easing towards the front of the formation, perfectly matching the Rifter’s speed when its tail section was positioned over the canopy. The second Wraith remained directly behind the group. Every ship in the pack was ten or less meters away from each other. It was, unequivocally, the most skillful flying the pilot had ever seen, but this was not the time for compliments.

The voice spoke again, in an eerily calm tone. “Rifter captain, we have the skills and technology to safely navigate your ship through this storm and into the Amarrian compound. Allow us to help you.”

“I said get the fuck out of here!” she ordered. “You’re going to get us all kill—” The pilot gasped and yanked backwards on the flight stick as a giant asteroid rolled into view. The Rifter barely cleared it, and as she pointed the nose back towards the vector indicator on the canopy, the Atron and Wraiths immediately took the exact same positions around her ship as before.

The same voice spoke again without urgency or emotion. “Captain, you cannot do this, and you have no choice but to trust us. We are taking your flight controls right...*now*.”

She flipped open the safety that would activate the frigate’s gun turrets, and then screamed as more asteroids tumbled towards the canopy on a direct collision course. The Rifter ignored her frantic yank backwards on the flight stick and instead rolled downwards, smoothly averting a catastrophe.

~

Domain Region - Throne Worlds Constellation

The Amarr System: Planet Oris

Emperor Family Academy Station: Imperial Navy Virtual Command Center

Grand Admiral Mekioth Sarum rested his hands on the circular table, observing a holographic tactical display of the situation above Diemnon and listening to the report from Commodore Akredon.

“...the Jovians interfered with my...justice...saved the Gallente...the Minmatar battle group warped in...the same time, my lord.”

An interesting opportunity presents itself, Mekioth thought, focusing his eyes on a small cluster of dots moving away from the main Minmatar force. “Where are those frigates going, Commodore?”

“Directly towards...complex main port. We cannot raise anyone on the inside...warn them because of the meteor impacts on the surface...My lord, my fleet is...great danger because of Gruul Shatan...permission to disengage...return when the storm passes.”

This opportunity shall not be wasted. “Permission denied, Commodore. The Gallente ship must be destroyed, as with the Minmatar frigates heading for Diemnon’s surface.” Mekioth thought for a moment. “And the bodies of the priests must also be recovered, no matter what the cost.”

A loud burst of static resonated throughout the darkened chamber, and the tactical display on the table flickered. Mekioth looked around the room and allowed himself a smile. *Divine protest, perhaps? I think not.* “Did you hear me, Commodore?”

“Yes, my lord, but what about the lives...my crew?...must understand that what you’re asking—”

Mekioth became enraged. “Are you *questioning* me, Commodore?”

There was a pause. “No, my lord.”

“Good,” Mekioth answered. “I shall inform Emperor Heideran of the Federation’s treachery, and of your heroic promise to return the corpses of our holy men for proper burial.”

The display flickered again. “It will be done, my lord.”

The cluster of red circles on the display marking the densest concentration of asteroids in the belt was closing in on Akredon's battlegroup.

"It had better be, Commodore."

~

Faus Akredon could not believe his ears. The officers on the bridge were ghastly pale, understanding just as well as he that Grand Admiral Sarum had just ordered their deaths. Faus stared at the tactical display and silently acknowledged the hopelessness of what he was just asked—or rather ordered—to do. There was no longer enough time to warp the ship out of harm's way.

My God, Faus thought, have I just been sacrificed? Or betrayed?

"Navigation."

"Yes, my lord?" The officer—a younger man in his late twenties whose last name was Derovan—snapped to attention. Faus could sense that he was afraid to die, but would remain committed to his duty until the end.

Have faith, lad. Paradise is waiting.

"Turn forty-five degrees to port and put us broadside to the asteroids. Sound the evacuation alarms. All non-essential personnel are to abandon ship immediately." Faus paused for a moment, observing the shocked expressions of his officers. None of them ever imagined a day when their blessed Admiral would give such an order. "Instruct the crew that only starboard-facing life rafts and escape pods will be jettisoned. They'll stand a

much better chance of survival by ejecting towards Diemnon than they will into that meteor storm.” Lieutenant Derovan’s eyes glassed over. Then he started barking orders to his own subordinates.

Alarm klaxons rang throughout the Impervious as the ‘abandon ship’ orders were announced across all decks. Thousands of crewmembers left their battle station posts and started the evacuation procedures that none of them ever imagined they would need for real. Lights were starting to appear along the right-hand side of a schematic detailing the Impervious, projected on the forward bridge screen. The first life rafts—each one holding up to fifty crewmembers—were already away.

Faus grimaced at the line of cruiser-sized asteroids bearing down on his fleet. “Engineering!”

A gruff voice responded: “Standing by, my lord.”

Ah, Donuvus...you will be missed. “I’m giving you two-thirds of the capacitor reserves to generate as much shield strength as you can. The more punishment they can absorb, the more time we have to get people off this ship.”

“Anything for you, my lord.”

Faus fought back tears. As more lights began dotting the schematic, only a skeleton crew remained to man their stations for the Impervious’s final battle. *These men are prepared to die for me, and this is where I lead them to!* He turned his attention to the Minmatar attack frigates speeding towards his battlegroup. “Maller One, do you copy?”

“...by, my lord.”

“Send your fastest ship to recover the bodies of our priests in the wreckage. Then they are to disengage and return immediately to the Throne Worlds. Send the remaining cruisers to intercept the Minmatar attack frigates—you are weapons-free, engage at will!”

“Roger...engaging.”

Faus watched the display as a solitary cruiser broke away from the main fleet while the remaining ships moved towards the Minmatar battlegroup, filling the space in between with missiles. “Weapons, range to November-One!”

“Sixty-eight kilometers, my lord!”

Too far away for a direct hit, Faus thought, running mental calculations as he concentrated on the tactical display. *Unless the salvo is perfectly placed...* “Assign November-One to turrets one through seven, radio crystals, dead-reckoning solution *plus* a three-second look-ahead. One broadside only, do you understand?”

“Affirmative, dead-reckoning plus three ticks, one broadside only...”

“Weapons, as soon as you fire, swing your guns to port, switch to multispectral and target the largest asteroids bearing down on us. You are weapons-free after this shot, understood?”

“Yes sir, weapons free after broadside to November-One...”

The officer directed the men and women below him as the enormous tachyon cannons mounted on the Impervious began tracking slowly in the same direction. “Tracking, my lord!”

“*Fire!*”

~

The terrified pilot of Omicron-One watched as seven bright red beams lanced across the space directly in front of the lead Wraith. Five of them struck an asteroid the size of a cruiser and broke it into three main chunks plus a hail of smaller debris. The Rifter rolled and dived, just barely avoiding a collision with the two largest fragments as they careened past the canopy. Then a brilliant flash illuminated the asteroids in front of her as the same fragments slammed into Omicron-Two, destroying the frigate instantly.

~

“Admiral, Omicron-Two is down...” the Hellwraith’s tactical officer said.

“Ignore it,” Karth growled. *It was over for them before this even started.* “Range to those Mallers?”

“Forty-seven kilometers, designate Mike-One through five,” the weapons officer answered.

“Put the turrets on Mike-One and the launchers on Mike-Two. Give each two salvos and work your way through the others as necessary. All guns open fire, all cruisers engage at will!”

“Yes, sir, engaging...”

The floor underneath the bridge shuddered as the Hellwraith’s artillery cannons hurled 1400-millimeter shells at the first Maller, easily overwhelming the cruiser’s shields and pulverizing the Amarrian vessel on the first salvo. As his weapons officer changed targets, Karth turned back to the Impervious.

“Tacklers, range to target?”

“Activating stasis webs...warp scramblers now, sir.”

From his vantage point on the bridge, Karth could see the Impervious glowing in a bluish-white aura. All of the battleship's forward momentum was quickly negated as it passed through the stasis webs, slowing down steadily until it was completely stopped. The turrets along the warship's portside hull were arcing white multispectral beams across the massive asteroids hurling towards her, and the contours of her shields were clearly visible as smaller meteors and fragments broke through the tachyons in an epic fireworks display. The Impervious was in her final moments, and it was just a matter of time before she became the victim of a fate worthy of the Amarr Scriptures: Literally being stoned to death.

All Karth could see were those same exact tachyon beams incinerating his son on the planet Eanna. His enormous hands curled into tight fists, and he became so angered that he began to tremble. The destruction of the Impervious could not happen soon enough. *Die, Akredon*, he thought. *Die the horrible death that you deserve, you fucking Amarrian coward!*

The voice of a Tackler pilot broke his vengeful fixation on the Impervious:

“Sir, we can't hold this orbit for much longer...incoming asteroids will kill us...”

Karth was indifferent to the pilot's plea. “You are prepared to die a good death like the rest of us, *Valklear*. Hold that stasis web on your target until I say otherwise.”

He had barely finished speaking when four signals disappeared from the tactical display. Two of them were Amarrian cruisers, the latest victims of the Hellwraith's awesome firepower. The other two were Tackler

frigates, blotted out of space by asteroids more than twice their size. But Karth was oblivious to their loss. His sharp eyes—wide with sadistic delight—were locked onto the Impervious’s deathblow, now just moments away from impact.

~

Faus saw the behemoth asteroid—more than 3,000 meters across, in his estimation—and started to prepare his soul for the afterlife. The seven tachyon beams converging on its gray surface did little more than burrow deep craters and ravines as the weapon’s officer tried desperately to ward off the inevitable. Faus realized that it was time to clear his conscience.

“Save yourselves! Get to the escape pods, now!”

The officers—all drenched in sweat and sharing a desperate disposition—exchanged glances that raised an alarm in Faus. None of them moved towards the bridge’s exit. Lieutenant Derovan took a step towards him.

Faus withdrew his pistol. “Did you hear what I said? Please! Save yourselves! You have at most thirty seconds...my place is with this ship—”

The officers all rushed towards Faus, who was so unprepared for their actions that he merely dropped the gun. Grabbing him firmly by the arms, they started to rush him off the bridge.

Clamping his hands firmly around Faus’s wrists, Lieutenant Derovan spoke first. “Forgive us, my lord, but this must be done...”

Faus struggled against them, but they were just too strong. “Stop! You are my responsibility, you have a chance to go on—”

Donuvus was waiting for them at the bridge’s exit, pointing towards the officer’s ejection pods located just aft of the bulkhead doorway. Another officer returned the pistol that Faus dropped, forcibly thrusting it back into his holster.

“Tis you that must go on, my lord,” Donuvus said. “These orders come from the Emperor himself. If anything were to happen to you on our watch, he would certainly have us killed. You are like a son to him, and to us you have been a father.”

The men shoved Faus headfirst into the escape pod and sealed the doorway. Getting back to his feet, he lunged back into the seal, banging his fist on the portal. “No! Save yourselves, I beg you!”

Donuvus clicked the intercom button. “We’re nearly on top of Diemnon’s main port. Your escape pod will autopilot there—may the hand of God steer away any asteroids in your path. The guards inside the complex will look after you until help arrives, after the Gruul Shatan passes. It has been an honor to serve with you, Commodore Akredon. For the sake of Amarr, live on!”

Darkness engulfed Faus as the outer seal closed.

~

The lead Wraith abruptly veered upwards, slipping in between a cluster of asteroids and then tipping back over into a vertical dive towards the surface. The entire canopy view was filled with the site of an enormous crater some twenty kilometers wide, with steep ridges along the perimeter that jutted upwards from the surface for at

least three kilometers. The pilot could not tell how deep it was, but far below the surface were tiny orange pools of magma, and the frigate group was descending directly towards them. *Finally, Hell's Gate*, the pilot thought. *And only half of us survived.*

“Talon command,” she said. “This is Omicron-One, we’re inside, repeat, we’re inside Hell’s Gate...”

The pilot suddenly regained control of the Rifter, but then saw the two Wraiths abruptly reverse directions and accelerate back out of the cavern. Struggling to keep her eyes on the pair through the rear view display, the twisting, turning Jovian frigates vanished into the meteor storm.

~

Faus watched in horror as the goliath asteroid slammed into the forward section of the Impervious, crushing the bow superstructure and breaking the battleship’s keel cleanly in half. For a moment, the two segments of dashed vessel drifted away from each other, spraying a stream of fiery debris into space like gushing arteries before exploding in a blinding flash of light. Faus, his eyes stinging from the brightness of the blast, turned away from the disaster and collapsed to his knees. He whispered a prayer for the helpless souls who were left onboard, and lamented to God that he should have met his fate on that ship as well.

A loud, metallic *clank* turned the blood in Faus’s veins to ice. Scrambling to his feet, he squinted through the portal, expecting to see asteroids but instead finding the greenish-black hull of a Jovian Wraith.

~

'Impervious', Karth mused, spitting towards the forward bridge portals as the explosion faded. My work here is finished.

Two more Tackler frigates disappeared from the tactical display as the meteor storm intensified. He toggled a switch on the captain's chair. "Attention all ships, this is Talon Command. Warp to fifth moon of Hahyil Four. Regroup there and wait for my command. Tactical! Any word on the status of Omicron-One?"

"Yes, sir, they just entered Hell's Gate."

One last detail to take care of before we leave this forsaken place. "Quickly, patch me through to them..."

~

Vlad could not believe that he was still alive. Glancing around the cabin, he could tell from the other soldier's expressions that they shared his amazement. But their eyes also betrayed sorrow for the Valklears who met their sudden fate aboard Omicron-Two. *It was instantaneous for them, he thought. What a tragic waste, losing them like that. Warriors such as these deserve to die with weapons in their hands, not strapped across their chests.*

The radio earpiece buzzed. It was Admiral Karth Mutana. The transmission was barely audible with all the static, but the instructions were clear.

"..cron-One, make sure that you secure...landing pad first...Captain Kintreb, I want the Jovians killed...be no witnesses to this operation...your discretion with the Gallente pilot...gets in the way...authorized to terminate...as well...Elders...top priority...make myself clear?"

The transmission was lost before Vlad was able to answer. The frigate lurched forward with a light burst of speed, and the cabin lights turned red as the harness straps securing all of the soldiers unlocked. *Objective One:*

Kill the Jovians, Vlad thought, motioning quickly with hand signals for the soldiers to fix silencers to their weapons. *I don't think that's ever been done before.*

~

Domain Region - Throne Worlds Constellation

The Amarr System: Planet Oris

Emperor Family Academy Station: Imperial Navy Virtual Command Center

The tactical display fizzled and then abruptly vanished. As the words “Signal Lost” hung over the console, Grand Admiral Mekioth Sarum contemplated the consequences of his actions. *A martyr's death for the beloved Commodore*, he thought. *Killed while attempting to rescue a Council Apostle. Amarr will mourn, but in time his memory shall pass.* Faus Akredon's bloodline connection to the Kador family made him a legitimate candidate to succeed Emperor Heideran. Alive for more than four centuries, the Emperor's death could happen at any time, even if the machines sustaining his life were capable of doing so for hundreds of years more. Time would catch up with him eventually, and whenever it did, Mekioth wanted the Sarum family prepared to seize power.

Akredon would have been Kador's most worthy champion, Mekioth thought, toggling a starmap of the Aguh Constellation. *Even in martyrdom he is dangerous.* Several Imperial battle groups were converging on Hahyil, guarding the stargates leading in and establishing blockades in the neighboring systems. The hunt for the Minmatar strike force responsible for the death of Amarr's greatest hero was on, and once Gruul Shatan passed, a battalion of Paladins would raid the mining camp to deal with any rebels inside.

Martyr or not, the Sarum Family will claim the throne someday, Mekioth thought. The map panned out, then moved across to the vast expanse of stars beyond the Jovian border. He ran his hands through the image,

imagining the riches waiting to be tapped there. *Faus Akredon helped me to conquer the Minmatar. In death, he will help me to conquer the Jovians as well.*

~



“Which test reveals more of the soul—the test that a man will take to prove his faith, or the test that finds the man who believed his faith already proven? If you know this answer, then you also know which of these challenges bear the greatest penalty for failure. The gates of paradise will open for you one time only; woe to the soul who dares to knock twice.”

- Book of Missions, 5:14, The Scriptures

“Throughout history, the militaries of civilizations have created soldiers from the ranks of the able-bodied in their societies. The Minmatar, having lost most of their able-bodied to death or slavery, tried this approach and

found the results unsatisfactory for their own special needs. Instead, they took their most notorious villains—their thieves, schemers, and murderers—and turned them into soldiers. They called these men ‘Valklears’.”

- Federal Intelligence Office Archives (classified), Document NJ-F22, “History of Minmatar Infantry Development”

Derelik Region – Aguh Constellation

The Hahyil System: Diemnon Planetesimal

Diemnon Mining Complex: Main Hangar Bay

Jumping down from the ramp, Vlad sprinted away from the Rifter's landing skids and moved towards the rock outcrops along the tarmac's edge. Behind him, the other Valklears spread outwards in groups of two, seeking cover that would give them a clear line of sight with the immense tunnel leading back outside to the docking vent. Some began darting up the steep rock face of the hangar's walls, quickly nestling into ledges and disappearing in the shadows cast by the floodlights high above them.

Vlad found a spot behind some rocks well above the tarmac, across from the hangar seals leading into the complex. The Rifter was resting on the pad with its boarding ramp intentionally left open. The hope was that the Jovians would assume they had already entered the complex, thus drawing them out from the safety of their own ships and into the crosshairs of Valklear rifles. Several *clicks* in his earpiece indicated that each of the soldiers was in place, waiting for his orders.

They were more than thirty kilometers below the surface, yet Vlad could still hear muted rumbles from the crash of meteors high above. To conserve resources, the Amarrians were not replenishing any of the air that escaped whenever the outer airlock opened for a ship to enter the hangar. For now, a man could still breathe inside without the aid of a mask, but any exertion would wind him immediately. The next time the seal opened—which it would at any second to allow the Jovian frigates inside—what little air remained would escape.

Peering through the scope of his rifle, Vlad scanned the area. The hangar was an enormous cave carved into Diemnon's mantle by Amarrian explosives and the backs of Minmatar slaves. Three sets of stabilizer rigs spaced about 700 meters apart were built into both walls, one for each of the Bestower-class industrials that could dock

here to unload cargo and haul unprocessed ore back outside. The hangar's dimensions were designed specifically to accommodate this ship; it was impossible for anything larger to get inside.

Moving the crosshairs towards the Rifter, Vlad noticed bloodstains scattered all over the tarmac. *That prison riot must have ended here*, he thought, taking note of the different kinds of patterns. There were darkened pools marking the graves where maimed victims bled to death; the fine mist spray patterns caused by gunshot wounds; the heavier droplet patterns indicating blunt impacts delivered by fists or heavy objects. Without question, this place was the scene of gruesome violence that claimed the lives of dozens of people. *A good death for these slaves*, Vlad thought, attaching the scope back onto his rifle. *To meet death while killing Amarrians was the most those people could ask for.*

A gust of air blew some dust up from the ground as two sets of lights pierced the blackness at the end of the tunnel. Vlad spotted Thumgar a short distance from him in the ledges, swinging his CLAW (Combat Light Assault Weapon) over the side and propping it against a stone. *He better handle himself well early on*, Vlad thought. *Or else we're just going to become another stain on the tarmac.*

~

"Time to awaken, Viola."

The voice came from one of the faceless souls surrounding her in the barren field. The crypt was just ahead, with the corpse of its unidentified hero waiting inside. A hand from the crowd reached out and touched hers. Terrified, Viola took a step backwards.

"Open your eyes, slowly..."

She turned in the direction that the hand reached out from, and as she opened her eyes, a face began to take shape on one of the spirits standing beside her: Jet black eyes surrounded by pale white flesh, marred with dark veins that originated from the scalp and branched all the way down to the jawbone. Viola startled, taking a short breath. The creature's hand moved gently over her mouth.

“Your first encounter with a Jovian, I see.” His voice had a synthetic tone to it, with a pitch that was as eerie as it was soothing. “A difficult sight for your breed to absorb. It is understandable.”

Viola realized she was lying on her back, and that the Jovian was standing over her. As he removed his hand, she noticed that his skin did not feel like organic tissue. *Glass*, she thought. *It looks and feels like wet glass!*

“My name is Grious, and I am here to protect you and to assist the Minmatars with their mission to rescue the Elders.”

What the hell, she thought. *Protect me?* Taking a quick inventory of her body, Viola felt some mild soreness in her chest and legs. But it was her eyes that hurt more than anything else.

“You were subjected to enormous G-forces when your ship lost control,” Grious said, helping her off the table.

“Some of the capillaries in your eyes burst, which explains your appearance. I lack the equipment needed to repair them here, but I was able to repair numerous ruptures to the muscle lining along your diaphragm, abdominal wall, and the blood vessels in your legs.”

“What's wrong with my appearance?” Viola asked, getting to her feet slowly. The room was small, but packed with strange equipment that was unlike anything she had ever seen.

Grious waved his hand, and a screen materialized from the wall. “I know this obsession your kind has with appearance. Come this way, please.”

Viola took a few hesitant steps forward. The Jovian was slender, and stood less than 180 centimeters tall. His entire body, save for his head and hands, was covered in an armored suit. She began to feel uncomfortable at the sight of those bottomless orbs staring through her. Turning towards the screen, Viola gasped when she saw her reflection: The whites of her eyes were blood red.

“They will heal with time, and your vision should remain unaffected,” Grious said, taking her gently by the hand once more. “You have the pilot of this ship to thank for saving your life.”

I’m on a ship? she asked herself, resisting the urge to pull her hand away. “You mean you’re not the pilot?” Viola asked, running a finger along her eyelids.

“No, but he is listening,” Grious said as several doors slid open in front of them. “You can speak to him if you wish.”

This is crazy, she thought, looking up towards the hallway lights. “Thank you?”

A voice just as eerie as Grious’s resonated through the hall as the door behind them closed: “You are welcome, Viola.”

“May I speak with him directly?” she asked. “I feel like I should express my gratitude in person.” Another door opened, leading into a cabin with higher ceilings than the hallway. The room was illuminated with red lights, and the metallic walls were covered with ominous markings and electronics.

“Not here, I’m afraid,” Grious said, tightening his grip slightly. “Step where I step, Viola. This chamber is different from the others.”

The back of her neck began to tingle as something caught her eye. The walls, she realized, were distorted. *Either I’m still high*, she thought, *or I swear we’re not the only people in here.*

The pilot’s voice echoed through the cabin. “Prepare to disembark.”

Grious handed her a mouthpiece with two small cylinders attached to the sides. “Put this in your mouth and breathe through it. Avoid taking air in through your nose for the time being. Speak through it as you normally would—it will stay in place unless you use your hands to remove it.”

“Where are we?” Viola asked, dreading the answer. A seal of light appeared at the end of the cabin, growing wider until the grayish-brown surface of a landing pad was clearly visible. Grious led her towards it as she put the mouthpiece in.

“Diemnon,” he said, stepping onto the surface. “Inside the Amarrian mining complex.”

“What? Wait—” Viola hesitated, but was gently pulled towards the tarmac by Grious. *I was just on a goddamn Wraith*, she thought, recognizing the distinct hull shape above her as she was herded down the boarding ramp. *No one has ever been this close before, let alone inside of one!* Two hundred meters in front of them was a Minmatar Rifter, also resting on the tarmac. Viola noticed immediately that its boarding ramp was lowered as well, but did not see anyone else nearby. She sensed that the air was thin, and took several deep breaths to become adjusted to the mouthpiece.

“You don’t need one of these to breathe?” she asked.

Grious was staring at the rocky cavern wall far beyond the Minmatar ship, his head tilted slightly to one side. “Our anatomy differs from yours in more ways than just appearance,” he answered. “Come with me. I have something else to show you.”

As they walked around the boarding ramp section of the frigate’s hull, Viola saw the remnants of the Atron about one hundred meters away. The aft segment of the ship was gone, and the rest of the hull was blackened. Some sections of armor plating were missing; others hung from the crippled ship by a few strands of twisted metal. The only part of the battered frigate that appeared intact was the bubble canopy.

“How the hell did I survive that?” Viola’s voice was enhanced through a speaker in the mouthpiece. Grious was leading her along the length of the Wraith, away from the Rifter and towards the direction of the tunnel. She suddenly felt a sharp longing for one of her painkillers.

“The odds of surviving a direct hit from a tachyon beam in that ship are exactly zero,” he answered. Viola could see the fuselage of a second Wraith a few meters ahead. “You survived because the Amarrian gunners were inaccurate.”

The Amarrians took a shot at me! Viola remembered the Imperial Navy battle fleet that showed up right after...

“I didn’t kill those people,” Viola blurted, recalling the gruesome visage of the corpses floating in the debris of the Bestower. “My ship wasn’t even armed—”

“We know you did not,” Grious interrupted. “But it was made to look that way by design.”

The Order, Viola thought. But do the Jovians know—

She stopped dead in her tracks as the second Wraith came into full view. Like the one they had just emerged from, its boarding ramp was also open. But lying at its base was a full-grown man, bound with his hands behind his back. His head and shoulders were covered in cloth, and he was resting on his knees.

“Grious, who is—”

“He has not been harmed,” Grious said, ushering her forward. “Tell me, what do you call *them*? The cryptic ones who lured you to this place?”

Viola paused. “‘The Order’. I’m not even sure what they call themselves.”

“We have been pursuing them for some time,” Grious said. “They are elusive, and extremely dangerous. Is there anything more you wish to tell me about them?” The question sent a chill up Viola’s spine. *That was a command, not a question.*

“There’s nothing more to tell,” she answered, looking towards the captive. He seemed unaware that they were standing so close to him. “They first contacted me years ago, giving me perfect information about Amarrian movements and operations in Minmatar space.” Viola heard a distant rumble that sounded vaguely like thunder. “Ever since then, they would contact me randomly with leads that were priceless—”

“Priceless for whom?” Grious was facing her directly, staring with those soulless black eyes.

“For the Minmatar,” she answered nervously. *He already knows the answers to these questions.* “I passed along everything that I felt could help them to avoid this ‘Reclaiming’ debacle.”

Grious turned towards the Rifter again as more rumbles echoed through the hangar. “The man kneeling beside you is the one who gave the order to destroy your ship. Would you like to know his name?”

Viola was caught off guard by the question. “I’m sorry?”

“Commodore Faus Akredon of the Imperial Navy,” Grious said. “I imagine that you know much of him.”

“*What?*” Viola exclaimed, whirling around towards the hooded prisoner. “That’s impossible! How could—”

“The Elders are also here, somewhere in the catacombs below, and hidden in those rocks are the Minmatar soldiers sent to rescue them.” Grious paused. “As we speak, they have their weapons trained on us, and are waiting for the right chance to kill us both.”

The blood left Viola’s face. “*Kill us?*”

“Do not fear,” Grious said, clasping his hands behind his back. “At no point since arriving in my care have you been in any danger.”

“But shouldn’t we get back inside of the ship?” Viola asked, taking shallow breaths through the mouthpiece.

“Someone needs to tell them that we’re trying to help!”

“That is the plan,” Grious answered. “But it will take more than negotiation skills to convince them of our good intentions.”

Viola looked towards the rocks. There was absolutely nothing obstructing her line of sight with the Rifter or the massive cavern walls surrounding them.

“Well, then who’s going to do it? You?”

“Viola,” Grious said, again turning his black eyes toward her own. “You and I were not alone when we left the ship.”

~

Vlad heard a series of *clicks* in his earpiece, each of them a separate request to open fire. The Jovian and the woman were standing out in the open, talking casually and seemingly oblivious to the danger surrounding them. *But who the hell is that prisoner*, Vlad wondered, clicking back an order for the soldiers to wait. Just a few minutes earlier, two Jovians had descended the boarding ramp of the second Wraith, deposited a prisoner onto the surface, and then walked back up. *There has to be more of them*, he thought, moving the scope’s crosshairs back towards the first Wraith. *Patience is key, but we have to get inside of the complex soon!*

As the crosshairs moved across the boarding ramp, Vlad saw something dart across the viewfinder that made him flinch. Looking off the scope towards the tarmac, he saw four separate distortions that reminded him of roiled air over a hot surface. *Danger*, Vlad sensed, just as Thumgar’s CLAW fired several rounds that kicked up debris from the surface below. The earpiece erupted with shouts as Vlad snapped his rifle towards Thumgar’s position.

“*What the fuck is he shooting at?*” Krughan demanded.

“*There’s something coming right towards me!*” Thumgar screamed, putting the CLAW into full automatic and spraying rounds wildly in front of him. Vlad spanned his rifle left and right, desperately seeking a target but finding none. More machine gun bursts illuminated the cavern wall as the other soldiers shouted and fired their silenced weapons into the shadows. Just as Vlad took a breath to speak, he saw Thumgar’s CLAW

inexplicably throw itself from his hands. The giant man appeared to freeze for a moment, then drop—gently, as if hands were guiding him—face down onto the ground.

Then Vlad felt it—a draft of air on the back of his neck that shouldn't have been there—and reacted solely on instinct. In one fluid motion, he thrust the rifle backwards as hard as he could, and felt the stock slam into a man. Ignoring the strange sounding grunt, Vlad whirled 180 degrees to his left, unsheathing the Kri'Tak in mid-spin with his right hand and exploding forward in a lunge. There was nothing in front of him that his eyes could see, but Vlad's senses told him otherwise. His left forearm caught something heavy on its way up to block an invisible counterstrike, but his right hand—clenching the knife tightly and keeping the blade parallel to the ground—continued unobstructed in a wide arc until it punctured something thick, right where a man's rib cage would be.

An ear-piercing howl filled the cavern as a Jovian soldier materialized at the hilt of the knife. Just as Vlad commanded his wrist to twist the blade, he felt something strike his lower back, and then all of the muscles in his body went numb. Panic overwhelmed him as he fell backwards, completely paralyzed. He did not feel himself hit the ground, but saw the silhouette of a second Jovian standing over him a moment later.

~

Domain Region - Throne Worlds Constellation

The Amarr System: Planet Oris

Emperor Family Academy Station: Saint Kuria the Prophet Cathedral

Grand Admiral Mekioth Sarum moved past the Royal Guards and entered the great cathedral. Its vaulted ceilings stood more than fifty meters high, supported by dozens of massive columns lavishly carved with scenes depicted from the Scriptures. Seated at the center of the cathedral was Emperor Heideran, adorned with

religious pageantry and affixed permanently to his throne. Numerous cybernetic devices were visible on his head, neck and shoulders, all of which were required to keep him alive. *More than four centuries old and he still lives*, Mekioth thought, approaching the altar. *With any luck at all, Amarr will not have to suffer under the incompetence of his rule for much longer.*

“My lord,” Mekioth said, kneeling before Heideran and bowing his head as hooded priests looked on.

“Arise, Grand Admiral,” Heideran said, motioning with his ancient hand. The priests moved silently towards the antechambers at each corner of the floor.

“You summoned me?” Mekioth asked, standing slowly.

Heideran’s voice was old, but steady as he spoke. “I have heard terrible news about the Impervious, Mekioth. Why was she sent to that dreadful place?”

Mekioth took a deep breath before speaking. “My lord, surely you know of the disappearance of our Apostle Taj Rukon and his disciples?”

“Of course,” Heideran answered. “Have you found them?”

“I loathe bringing you such bad news, but they are dead,” Mekioth replied, feigning dismay. “Commodore Akredon received a distress signal from their ship, and set out immediately to rescue them.”

“Ahh, Faus,” Heideran breathed. “Tell me what his role was in this!”

“He followed the signal to Diemnon, where he witnessed their murder firsthand.”

“*What?*” Heideran nearly coughed. “Who *dared* to do this? The rebels?”

“The act is inconceivable, my lord, but this savagery was committed by the Gallente Federation.”

Heideran paused, his eyes widening in shock. “You have proof of this?”

“We have the footage taken from the Impervious,” Mekioth said, disciplining himself to convey shock and anger. “It clearly shows a Federation frigate in attack position just as the Apostle’s Bestower exploded. Moments later, Minmatar rebels appeared—their so called ‘Valklear’ fleet—escorted by Jovian ships.”

“Jovians!” Heideran’s throne detached from the locking braces and floated down from the altar. “You are certain of this?”

“Yes, my lord. The Impervious successfully attacked the Gallente ship, but the Jovians intervened and prevented its outright destruction. I ordered Commodore Akredon to retreat immediately, but he...”

“He *what*, Admiral? Tell me!”

Mekioth looked downwards. “He insisted on recovering the bodies of the priests, saying they deserved a proper burial in preparation of their passage to heaven. He was hopelessly outnumbered, and the Gruul Shatan storm was upon him...”

“No,” Heideran said. “Don’t tell me...”

“My lord, the Impervious was destroyed, along with her escorts. We cannot launch a search and rescue mission until the storm passes.”

Heideran was devastated. “Faus...my *son*...”

“We have not abandoned all hope, but given the violent nature of the storm and the number of rebel ships involved, it seems...unlikely that...”

Mekioth did not have to finish the sentence. Emperor Heideran wept, taking shallow breaths and convulsing intermittently with wheezes. There were no tears, as his ancient body was no longer capable of producing them.

“My lord, I am sorry. He was a hero of Amarr, and the best captain I have ever known. We *must* avenge his death.”

“What...do you think must be done?”

“We are hunting the rebel fleet as we speak, and the Hahyil system is quarantined. But I must ask your permission to fire upon any Gallente or Jovian ships that we encounter around Diemnon.”

Emperor Heideran flinched. “I object to that. The Gallente could have been a rogue, and we must not haste—”

“My lord, the Federation is engaged in a full scale war with the Caldari State that they are *winning*. This act, rogue or not, is in itself an act of war, and your subjects will demand action. We cannot afford to tolerate such aggression within our own borders.”

The throne turned away from Mekioth and faced the great statue of the Prophet Kuria, surrounded by angels in a depiction of paradise. “And what of the Jovians? How do you propose we deal with them?”

“I am preparing battle plans, and once I can determine the full extent of Jovian involvement with this massacre, I shall make them known to you.”

Emperor Heideran turned to face Mekioth again, looking him over slowly. “Very well, Grand Admiral. You have your permission to fire upon Gallente ships, but *only* in the immediate vicinity of Diemnon, and only against any ships that attempt to run your blockades.”

Mekioth bowed his head. “Thank you, my lord. I will not rest until the murderers are brought to justice.”

“Find him, Mekioth,” Heideran whispered. “Bring his body back to me.”

“I will do everything that I can, my lord.”

~

They bounded down the cavern walls, effortlessly carrying the incapacitated Minmatar commandos across the tarmac and setting them on their knees at the base of the first Wraith. Viola stared in amazement at the pure strength and conditioning of these Jovians—she still could not bring herself to call them ‘men’—as they made trip after trip to recover the bodies. In little more than a few minutes since the first shots were fired, there were now eight Minmatar commandos bound shoulder to shoulder, hands behind their backs, and kneeling directly across from the Amarrian captive.

Grious disappeared with the wounded Jovian into the Wraith. Viola stared at the captives, all of which were slowly regaining sensation in their limbs. *Valklears*, Viola thought, looking over their faces and studying their appearance: Overly muscular, no identification or rank insignia, tribal markings strewn across the arms, neck, and face. *Minmatar’s best soldiers, each of them a converted sociopath or murderer.* The only woman among

them was the pilot—several years younger than herself, with dark hair, light colored eyes, sharp features, and just as physically robust as the others. She was breathing through a device provided by Grious, as was one other soldier in a flight suit. The rest were still wearing their own masks.

“What happened to your eyes?”

The deep voice startled her. The strongest of the group—the one who had somehow managed to stab a cloaked Jovian—was staring at her.

“They were injured when my ship was shot down,” Viola said, turning to face the Valklear. Even kneeling, his head was level with her chin. The man was enormous. “The Jovians saved my life—and yours as well.”

The man grunted. “So you were the pilot of the Atron,” he said, raising himself more upright. “It seems we share a common enemy. What is your name, Gallente?”

Viola looked the man over before answering. “Viola Antionnes, and I’m with the Federal Intelligence Office. Do you have—”

“I know that name,” he said, narrowing his eyes. Other Valklears were beginning to squirm against the restraints. “You are the one they call ‘Jarua Kil’tra’...”

Viola’s eyes opened a little wider. She understood the translation well. “‘Seer of Horrors’,” she breathed. The soldier appeared surprised.

“You speak our language,” he said. “What they say of you is true, then.”

“Va’nachr, kra tua chinak?” she asked. *What is your name, Valklear?*

The man paused, and the slightest beginnings of a smile formed on his lips. “You can call me Vlad. We are all in your debt.”

Then it’s time to go on the offensive. “I’ve spent almost my entire life trying to help your race,” Viola said, raising her voice slightly. “And yet you were prepared to kill me just a few moments ago. *Why?*”

Some of the soldiers looked towards Vlad. “I did not know who you were, and was unsure of your intentions.”

“I know about the Elders,” Viola snapped back, suddenly feeling another sharp pang for drugs. All of the soldiers fixed their stares on her. “As do the Jovians. It’s no secret to us how important they are to you. We are all here for the same reasons—to help you to get them out.”

The pilot of the Rifter spoke up. “We don’t need your help, just release us and leave this place—”

“*Ziara!*” Vlad shouted, glaring at the pilot. She shot the glare back, then slumped back down and turned her frown towards Viola. “Please forgive her tenacity,” he said, lowering his voice. “She should not take that tone with you, but with all due respect, we prefer to go alone from here.”

“Such a proud race,” Grious said, emerging from the Wraith. He was holding Vlad’s Kri’tak, and three of the four original Jovian soldiers who had subdued the Valklears flanked him as he walked. “I see now why the Elders are so crucial to the survival of your kind.”

“We’re here because of what happened to Eanna,” Viola said, looking towards the hooded Amarrarian. *Best to keep his identity quiet for now,* she thought. *Even though I’d love to leave him alone with these Valklears for a*

few minutes. “This is the endgame for the Minmatar, and the Elders were on the brink of uniting *all* of the tribes into one Republic. You need them now more than ever, so stop being so goddamn stubborn and let us help you!”

“Viola, a word with you in private, please.” Grious said, motioning for her to walk up the ramp. Puzzled at her own outburst, she complied, leaving the surprised Valklears to themselves. *I need a fucking pill right now,* she thought, contemplating asking the Jovians for something, *anything,* to satisfy the need. Grious peered into her eyes as he spoke.

“You are addicted to painkillers,” he said matter-of-factly. “Are you even aware that your hands are shaking?”

Viola looked at her hands. A visible tremor was running through the both of them.

“The Serpentis lace their drugs with chemicals designed to enhance addictive properties,” Grious said. “Typically, withdrawal symptoms for someone with your physical characteristics would not begin for several hours at least. But in your case, with your repeated ingestion due to habit, they have begun already.”

Well, shit. “Look, we don’t have time for this, but if you do happen to have any more pills—”

“We do not, Viola. You are already at the threshold level of drugs that I can safely administer to treat your pain without risking incapacitation, and we cannot detoxify your bloodstream here.”

“So what are my options?” she asked.

“You are a liability now, as you will continue to display increasing agitation until you reach psychosis—assuming the high blood pressure and heightened body temperature do not cripple you first.”

“Then leave me with Akredon,” Viola answered. “I want to have a few words with him.”

Grious tilted his head to one side. “What do you expect to gain from doing so? You are not a trained interrogator, and he will only repeat his name, rank, and prayers when addressed.”

Viola looked behind her at the slumped figure under the cloth, and could see that the Valklears were becoming impatient. “I can’t explain why,” she said, rubbing her forehead. “I just want to get inside the mind of this...*zealot*, to try and understand the thinking that goes into the decision to bombard a planet.”

The Jovian stared at her for a moment, thinking about what she said. “So this too is also by their design—the ones you call the ‘Order’. A confluence of events orchestrated to produce an outcome desirable to *them*.” He paused for a moment to look down the ramp towards Akredon. “No coincidence at all that we were permitted to save him. He has a role in this scheme. And so do you, apparently.”

“Grious, what are you talking about?” Viola asked, craving the soothing rush of a painkiller. “This is about the Elders, about helping the Minmatars. Everything the Order has ever given me was intended to help them.”

“Only because it suits their interests to do so,” Grious said, starting down the ramp. “At least for now.”

“What do you mean?” Viola asked. “The Order is threatened by the Amarr Empire?”

Grious stopped. “The ‘Order’—we call them ‘Enheduanni’—do not fight their own wars. They have the Empires fight for them, which they achieve by controlling the influence of those who rise to power. But the Minmatars were not supposed to collapse so quickly, and it appears they have also underestimated the impact of Ammarian religion on society. So now they have successfully involved *us* to reset the balance that is most favorable to *them*.”

Viola became angered. “So sympathy for the Minmatar has nothing to do with your involvement here at all?”

“The Enheduanni are our greatest enemy, and that makes them *your* greatest enemy as well. We cannot sit idly while they selfishly interfere with the history that is yours to decide, no matter how destructive, or how often you wish to repeat it.”

Grious and his three companions walked down the ramp as Viola glared at their backs, trying to ignore the tremors jostling her hands. *He used the word ‘yours’, she thought. He sees no distinction at all between any of the races, except for his own.*

“Hey, Grious,” Viola called. The four Jovians stopped and turned. “What does ‘Enheduanni’ mean?”

The Jovian thought for a moment. “There is no translation in your language.”

~

“...for you are a merciful God, the sole devotion of my life, true to your most faithful servants in their time of need. Amen.”

Faus completed the prayer for the hundredth time, and listened once more for an answer from above. Hearing none, he started to recite the prayer again, and then stopped as the images of Eanna seared through his concentration. He shut his eyes, opened them again to the black shroud over his face, and still could not shake himself free of the torment assaulting his soul.

This punishment must be deserved, Faus realized, arching his back and trying to dismiss the pain radiating from his knees. *The loss of my ship, my crew, becoming a captive of this monster Jovian—all of it, rightful punishment for...*

He could think of nothing else to warrant this destiny, except for not believing deeply enough in Grand Admiral Mekioth Sarum's orders to bombard the planet Eanna. His actions merely reflected the wishes of Emperor Heideran, and thus the will of God. *Those sinners deserved their fate, and I have no right to question it.* The Scriptures warn every Paladin of this test, that it always comes when the faithful least expect it. *My faith will be rewarded*, he thought, searching for inner spiritual strength and finding it. *For this is a test that I shall not fail—*

The cloth covering his head was suddenly removed, and the sight before his eyes made him cry out in horror. Minmatar rebels—eight of them—were standing just a few meters away. In the blink of an eye, one of them unsheathed a knife and hurled it towards him. It was deflected in a bright flash, repelled at the last moment by a protective energy field. The man broke free of his comrade's attempts to restrain him, and onwards he charged, banging his massive fists against the bubble of energy and screaming.

Faus could not hear him, nor could he hear anything else. He simply stared back at his attacker, mesmerized by the hatred radiating from him. *Who could blame him*, Faus thought, cursing himself for allowing the thought to enter his mind. He watched as they argued amongst each other, then as they pleaded with a slender Jovian who walked to them—the same one who had taken him from the escape pod and rendered him unconscious.

This is what you don't see from space, Faus thought, trying to read their expressions. *You just cannot expect these people to believe in a god capable of inciting such profound hatred in men.* Again, Faus cursed himself—did he just think that out loud? He closed his eyes, trying to shut the rebels out of his mind. But instead of

finding inner peace, he found the images of incinerated cities bellowing out the thick, black smoke of burning flesh and bone.

I must not lose my faith, for this is a test...

Faus commanded himself to remain calm, taking comfort in the shield surrounding him. He watched as his captor handed one of the rebels a strange looking knife, which he accepted and sheathed immediately. Three Jovian soldiers approached and began distributing weapons to the Minmatars. Words were exchanged within the group, but then they shifted their attention towards something directly behind him. Some nodded their heads approvingly; others shook them in disbelief. Six of the rebels, now heavily armed and wearing protective armor, ran off to follow the lead of the Jovian soldiers. The other two rebels—pilots, by the look of it—glared at him one last time before running towards their ship.

He watched as the blast doors in the distance slowly opened, and then as the group of rebels filed inside one by one. The Jovian captor remained behind, standing with his hands clasped behind his back and staring with those otherworldly black orbs. The pleasing figure of a female walked past, desperately soothing to his eyes at first, but again he forcefully dismissed the thought as another secular distraction. The two spoke briefly, and then the female turned. Faus noticed that she was holding something in her hand, and was overwhelmed with horror once he recognized what it was:

My God, why have you forsaken me?

Faus gasped as the woman, with her angelic face and demonic eyes, approached and kneeled so close that he could feel her warm breath. Suddenly, his ears felt as though a stone was rolled away from them, and he could hear once more.

“Commodore Akredon,” the woman said, placing the Glaive-collar around his neck and switching it on. The points of six needles pressed lightly into his skin. “It’s time that we discussed your sins.”

~



“Every crime, no matter how trivial, owes its roots to temptation’s murderous stab. The wound left behind by this act is never more devastating than when used as the prelude to betrayal. It bears the mark of the unholy; the wretched; the very bane of all things good and righteous in this universe. God help me, the temptation that exudes betrayal is the uncontested triumph of evil...”

- Emperor Heideran, 23216 AD, “Address to the Empire”, after the Battle of Vak’Atioth

“I doubt that history will record how fiercely we fought for our freedom. There will be no chronicles detailing the courage of Minmatar warriors or the unity of our tribes during the Rebellion. But historians will go to great lengths to make sure that other Empires take credit for ensuring our survival, and that before we were anything else, we were slaves first. On that point, future generations will be certain.”

- The Nefantar Paradigm, Unijja Krur

Essence Region – Crux Constellation

The Renyn System: Planet IX – Moon 4

Federal Intelligence Office Headquarters

The officers filed into the room quietly, taking their seats as the polarized conference room windows darkened. Baer took a moment to glance up from his datapad to take inventory of the attendees: Ten officers were present, each of them a colonel or higher in rank. Eight were from Division Command, two of which held advisor posts that reported directly to the Senate Intelligence Committee. The last two were from the War Department. *They look especially annoyed*, he observed. *I would be also if I was pulled from the Caldari war effort for this.* Everyone shared the same haggard, sleep-deprived appearance that warned of short tempers. Baer was the lowest ranked officer in the room; the wrong answers in here would cause irreparable damage to his career.

Baer's superior, Colonel Tilda Siertro, was sitting to his right. A formidable woman within the agency, she was calmly scanning her own datapad while waiting for everyone to arrive. As soon as the War Department representatives took their seats, she gestured without looking up. Baer understood her cue and inhaled deeply before speaking. She had been very clear about what he was allowed to say.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice,” he started. “Approximately 60 minutes ago, one of our scout frigates was shot down by Imperial Navy forces in the Hahyil System. The vessel was unarmed and traveling through unrestricted territory, as stated in the Gallente-Amarr Free Trade Agreement of 23210.”

The two colonels advising the Senate Intelligence Committee leaned forward, but no one else reacted to the news. Baer continued his briefing.

“For the time being, we’ve listed the pilot’s status as MIA. We have telemetry recordings of the attack, which crippled the ship but did *not* destroy it. The pilot was attempting to land the vessel on Diemnon’s surface before we lost contact. No other crew or passengers were onboard.”

The War Division officers appeared disinterested in everything Baer was saying. One of them—Brigadier General Talin Falgenreau—actually stifled a yawn.

“In addition to the telemetry, we know that several Minmatar ships witnessed the event, although we still haven’t been able to reach their government since the bombardment of Eanna. The reason why we brought all of you here is to—”

“Oh, good,” Talin interrupted. “I was starting to wonder if you had a point.”

Baer felt the surface temperature of his face surge. Colonel Siertro shook her head just enough to be noticed, but kept her gaze locked on the datapad in front of her.

“The reason why we brought all of you here,” Baer repeated. “Was to seek consensus on a search and rescue effort for the pilot.”

“Who was the pilot?” asked the other War Division officer—Major General Silus Bruce.

Shit, Baer thought. *Tilda was specific about not discussing this.* “The pilot was in the Hahyil area investigating a possible lead into—”

“That’s not what I asked you,” Silus growled. “*Who* was the pilot?”

Baer threw Tilda a desperate look. She casually looked up from the desk and spoke in a steady tone. “Answer the General’s question, Lieutenant Colonel.”

“Viola Antionnes, sir.”

“I knew it,” Talin scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Just a matter of time.”

“I’m sorry, General?” Baer asked, losing his temper. “Exactly *what* was ‘just a matter of time?’”

Talin was about to unleash verbal fury on Baer, but Silus waved him off. “Lieutenant Colonel, do you know how many search and rescue missions are currently underway?”

“No, sir?”

“Twenty six, all because of the *war* we happen to be in.”

“I understand there are resource constraints, but—”

Silus cut him off. “There are no resource constraints when it comes to rescuing our downed pilots, Lieutenant Colonel. All of the Federation’s assets are devoted to the war effort. But I will *not* put rescue crews into harm’s way to pick up junkies who get themselves into trouble, either.”

The bottom fell out from Baer’s stomach. “Sir, I don’t understand what you’re—”

Talin produced a datapad and slid it across the desk. “Picture’s worth a thousand words, Baer,” he sneered.

“Not to mention life in prison.”

The images were as nauseating as they were shocking: Camera footage capturing Viola taking receipt of vials from a man whose face registered with the F.I.O.'s criminal database as a member of the Serpentis drug cartel. Interactions with known felons or their affiliate organizations carried penalties that were twice as harsh during war than in peacetime. The fact she was also a federal agent meant that she could technically be charged with treason.

“There’s a lot more where this came from,” Talin said. “That scumbag in the picture is going to get some leniency in exchange for his cooperation. Can’t say the same will be the case for your heroine.”

“She deserves some respect, sir,” Baer said, trembling as he spoke. “Her contributions to the agency are profound, and I won’t stand for her—”

“Sit down, Baer,” Silus ordered. “And don’t open your mouth again until you’re asked.”

Goddamn it Viola, Baer thought, sliding into his chair. *I could have helped you! Why didn’t you tell me?*

Silus scowled at the stunned faces around the table before addressing Baer again. “Now I have some good news for you, and a lot of bad news. The good news is that you somehow managed to *not* fuck up since we started our surveillance on you—which, in case you were wondering, began as soon as we learned about Viola’s drug habit.”

Baer turned towards Tilda and stared with an expression that screamed “*You knew about this?*” She turned to meet his stare with a bone-chilling coldness.

“The bad news,” Silus continued. “Is that we now have sufficient grounds to label that woman’s ‘contributions’ around here as wholesale bullshit. And that, Lieutenant Colonel, means your value to this agency is even less than hers.”

Silus leaned forward, pointing a finger as he continued to hammer away. “For your information, that loud-mouthed junky *bitch* was going to be arrested the next time she docked anywhere in Federation space. And then I was going to see to it personally that she was thrown in jail for the rest of her life. Now, I’m only going to say this once: There will be no search and rescue for that woman. The Amarrians get a free pass with this one, because I really don’t give a damn what GAFTA has to say, she had absolutely no reason to be anywhere near Diemnon or anywhere else in Amarrian space, period. Is that clear?”

Baer just blinked back at him: Half stunned, half furious, and wholly incapable of speaking.

“I’ll take that stupid look on your face as a ‘yes’. Now—does anyone else in here have anything important to say, or can we go back to fighting the Caldari?”

There were no answers from anyone.

“Meeting adjourned,” Silus said, getting up from the table. “Thanks for nothing, Lieutenant Colonel.”

~

The shaking in Viola’s hands was getting worse, but she could not tell if the cause was from anger or withdrawal. Akredon had said nothing to her; his eyes remained shut, even with the Glaive-collar pinching his neck, and the only words out of his mouth were Amarrian prayers. Sweat was pouring down her face and neck; a slight fever had flared up just as Grious predicted. She tore off the upper section of her flight suit in disgust,

followed by the dermaprene endoskeleton underneath. A sleeveless base layer was all that remained to cover her chest and back.

Grious approached with water and a headpiece. “Drink this,” he said. “And put those on. The camera feed is ready.”

She took the device and fitted it over her face. A glass lens extended below the brow strap that covered one eye.

“The eye cam will project imagery directly onto your retina,” Grious said. “You can adjust the size of the image using the controls on the rim, plus how much of your cone of vision is obstructed.”

“Don’t tell me that you don’t need one of these to see what’s going on,” she muttered.

“Our anatomy was genetically altered to accommodate cybernetic devices that enhance our senses,” he answered. “Future generations of Jovians will not need them. I have another eye cam for your Amarrian friend. Do you want him to have one?”

Viola reached out and grabbed it from his hands. “Definitely. Maybe I can use it to get this bastard to open his eyes.”

~

“We’re going to split up into two teams,” Vlad said quietly. “Krugar, you take Velios and Makkar and set up to defend this corridor. Keep the blast doors at your back and place charges every fifteen meters from this point forward. Hold this position until I tell you to leave or all of us get killed. Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” Krugar replied.

“Thumgar and Dramis, you come with me. We’re going follow the Jovians until they spot the guards. Do *not* make contact unless you have to defend yourself. Let’s move.”

“Roger,” both soldiers answered.

They started down the corridor, moving quickly without making a sound. Thumgar’s CLAW was leveled in front of him; Vlad and Dramis were advancing with their weapons held at eye level. The ground was paved and featured two sets of embedded mag-rail tracks that ran down the centerline for the entire length of the corridor, but the ceiling and walls were pure rock.

We’ve advanced three hundred meters into the complex and have yet to see a single guard, Vlad thought, watching the Jovian’s progress through his eye cam. Every fiber of his nerves was screaming that something terrible was about to happen.

~

Baer sat alone in his office with the shades drawn and the lights turned off. The ashtray was smoldering with the putrid remnants of an entire pack of cigarettes, the last of which was seconds away from burning itself out in his fingers. A torrent of thoughts raced through the beleaguered officer’s mind, all of which were marked by despair and humiliation. *Viola is dead or in deep trouble*, he thought, taking in the last puff. *And there isn’t a goddamn thing I can do about it.*

There was still just enough lighting in the office to identify shapes. Baer reached out to the desk and found the picture frame that captured the day when he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. Tilda was pinning the new rank's insignia onto his uniform, while a General stood nearby at attention.

Tilda...

Baer slammed the frame onto his desk, leapt out of his chair, and started beating the picture with his fist. When the glass shattered, he swept everything from the desk onto the floor with a single motion; then he grabbed the furniture's edges and heaved it over onto its side. It fell to the floor with a thunderous crash, sending the two chairs sailing across the room. Breathing heavily and feeling somewhat better, Baer collapsed into his seat. Moments later, there was a sharp knock on the door.

"Sir? Is everything alright in there?" It was one of the MPs stationed in the concourse.

"Yeah, everything's great," Baer answered. "Just doing a little cleaning."

"I have to let myself in, sir. Please move away from the door."

Before he could tell him to wait, the door slid open and the lights were thrown on. Two MPs barged into his office, surveying the mess inside.

"Thanks for coming over," Baer said, gesturing towards the overturned desk. "Did you come here looking for any vials?"

The MPs exchanged serious looks, and then took positions at either side of the door. Baer's glib demeanor changed when he recognized the two men who walked into his office next: Colonels Marc Beatrix and Liam

Caille. They were the advisors who reported to the Senate Intelligence Committee, and were present at his briefing. Tilda Sierstro was standing behind them.

“Lieutenant Colonel,” Marc started, wincing from the stench of cigarette smoke. “Mind if we have a few words with you?”

Baer alternated glances between the two officers. “Am I going to need legal counsel for this?”

Liam spoke up. “We’re not here to arrest you, and General Bruce already said that you haven’t done anything wrong. But we need to talk to you about some things.”

“Well, then have a seat,” Baer answered. The two officers stepped over shattered glass and debris, pulling the chairs in front of the overturned desk. When Tilda followed them into the office, both Liam and Marc looked over their shoulders.

“Colonel, please excuse us,” Marc said. “MPs, wait outside—we are not to be disturbed.”

“Yes, sir.” An MP gestured with his hand for Tilda, who gave the two a dismissive look and slinked back outside. *Bitch*, Baer thought, still admiring her hourglass figure as the door closed.

“Before we begin,” Marc started. “There are two more people I need to conference in.”

Liam got off his chair. “Help me to lift this back over.”

Baer blinked, moving opposite of Liam. “Conference into what?” Both men grunted as they heaved the desk into its upright position.

“General Bruce was out of line,” Marc said. “He had no business humiliating you like that. Viola might be unpopular, but she was right about a lot of things.”

“The war machine has changed the bureaucracy around here for the worst,” Liam explained. “All this focus on killing Caldari separatists is making us lose sight of the bigger picture, and the populace is keen on that now with Eanna gone.”

Marc was tapping instructions into the desk’s console. A woman’s voice resonated through the speakers.

“GalNet Center.”

“This is Colonel Beatrix. Senator Desirou, please.”

“One moment.”

“Let’s get this out on the table right now,” Liam said. “We know that you’ve been given some leeway to run your intel gathering ops. Now we need to see what you’ve accomplished with that privilege.”

“Lieutenant Colonel Gesdeneau,” the gruff voice said. The Senator’s wrinkled face was projected over the furniture. “You lost someone important today, and I want to know the details. And I mean *everything*.”

The woman’s voice interrupted: “Senator Garrett is joining the conference.”

“Good afternoon, gentlemen. Lieutenant Colonel,” the younger voice said, nodding. “I’m aboard the Federation cruiser *Venture*.”

Baer was dumbfounded to find himself facing two prominent members of the Gallente Senate so soon after the disaster in the conference room. Senator Desirou noticed the bewildered expression on his face and chuckled.

“Relax, Baer,” he said. “We know what kind of day you’re having. Believe me, we’re going to deal with General Bruce separately. While you gather your thoughts, let me tell you what’s been going on with the masses. If you don’t already know, there are vast numbers of displaced Minmatars living in Gallente space, and both of our districts have significant concentrations of naturalized citizens from Minmatar origins. When you consider that we’re drafting from this same population to fight in the Caldari War, you can see how failing to support the tribes directly hurts morale for us here.”

“There are also serious economic consequences to contend with,” Senator Garrett said. “The Hror System is a huge trading partner for the eastern regions of the Federation. I can’t tell you how many requests we’ve received from people begging for information about what happened there. The Minmatar government has been offline for days, and hundreds of thousands of people have stopped their daily routines just to try and get information on their own. Shipping ports are overloaded with goods that should have left last week, and businesses are scrambling to replace inventory that never arrived, which in turn is creating regional inflationary pressures...I could go on, but suffice it to say that the economic ripple effects are significant.”

“We are winning the Caldari War,” Senator Desirou said. “And the populace has already become complacent about our success. The Amarrians are taking center stage in the media now, and people are finally starting to realize just how much of a threat they really are.”

“We want to help the Minmatar directly,” Senator Garrett said. “And for now, I’ll define ‘help’ as everything short of sending troops. General Bruce was only half right when he implied that all of our resources are devoted to the war. That’s definitely true with our spaceborne assets, but not with planetary equipment. We have excess

supply due to overbudgeting, and we have an abundance of brand new, state-of-the-art weaponry that the tribes could be using to liberate themselves.”

“What kind of weaponry?” Baer asked.

“Small arms, artillery, body armor, tanks, air power, you name it,” Senator Desirou said. “And we have plenty of ‘advisors’ to lend who can show them how to use that gear to maximum effect.”

The Senator paused, then narrowed his eyes at Baer. “But before any of that can happen, you need to tell us everything you know about Viola’s work, beginning with what she was doing at Diemnon.”

Baer looked at everyone seated across from him. *Politicians were always the enemy...until now.* He took a deep breath, wishing that he had more smokes.

“Let me start by saying that I think Viola is still alive,” he said, tapping on the desktop console. “And this telemetry playback will show you why.”

~

“He won’t fucking talk,” Viola said. “All he keeps repeating are those *goddamn prayers!*” she screamed, directly into Faus’s ear.

“Try to remain calm,” Grious said, keeping his eyes focused on the blast doors. “Remember, he was trained to withstand interrogations much more severe than this.”

“Well, why don’t you give it a try?” She slumped down to the ground besides the shackled Amarrian, who continued to rock back and forth, quietly chanting scripture.

“I have no desire to do such things to him,” the Jovian replied. “Nor is there a compelling reason why I should.”

Viola wanted to claw her eyeballs out, which throbbed with each breath she took. Everything about her physical existence was tortured in the absence of painkillers. Looking away from Faus, she noticed bloodstains all over the tarmac for the first time, and remembered the gory events that had started everything.

“Grious,” she panted. “Do you know anything about the riot that happened here?”

The Jovian remained motionless for a moment, as if to consider whether or not to tell her. “I know that it was the Enheduanni’s creation.”

Viola was trying to keep her voice steady despite the shivers. “How did they start it? Was it because of the Elders that were brought here?”

“They activated a sleeper agent,” Grious answered. “One with Matari genetics that was allowed to be captured and imprisoned here years ago.”

“Sleeper agent?” Viola looked over at Akredon, and took note of the Glaive-collar around his neck.

“They were placed throughout all of the empires, and none of them are aware they are agents.”

“How is *that* possible?” Viola exclaimed, easily irritated at everything Grious said.

“Their mastery of genetic engineering unlocked the precise workings of the human brain,” he answered, manipulating a datapad as he walked back towards the ramp. “They can create minds with memories and skills burned into their medial temporal lobe, and set mnemonic devices to trigger them.”

“Well, who are these agents? How do we find them?”

“You can’t,” Grious answered. “They are untraceable. They are born as adults, from cloning vats with complete memories of fabricated backgrounds and accompanying identification with the empire they are created for. These agents are bred with specific purposes programmed into their minds, and although it may take years for them to reach the stature or position they were intended for, they have yet to fail.”

“Invisible,” Viola muttered. *And right in front of us all the time.* “But what about that subspace burst? How could the sleeper agent do that?”

“Hyper-advanced implants,” Grious said. “Many are self-assembling, so they cannot be physically detected until the agent is activated. They are designed primarily to stimulate adrenaline production, deaden pain receptors, and accelerate healing processes, among other functions. But in the past they have also been used as transmitters.”

“Did the sleeper agent activated here use one of those transmitters to contact us?”

“Not only us,” Grious answered.

~

“According to Viola, the Elders are literally the wisest members of the seven tribes,” Baer continued. “They allegedly possess intimate knowledge of every other tribe including their own. But their existence is officially denied by the Minmatars. Instead, they’re treated as legends, like mythical beings, all for the singular purpose of keeping their real identities secret.”

“But someone must know who they are,” Senator Desirou said. “Or else they wouldn’t have sent in their Valklears to rescue them!”

“They were tipped off,” Baer replied, tapping into the console again. “By *this*.”

The men watched as the recorded ambient readings detected by Viola’s Atron spiked across the subspace, gamma, and x-ray bands, then faded back to normal. “Look at the time on the mission clock. That burst originated from Diemnon, and it occurred within minutes of two key events: One was the prison riot inside the mining complex, and two was the reported disappearance of the Apostle Taj Rukon and seven other high priests. Care to guess where they eventually found their bodies?”

“Don’t tell me Diemnon...” Marc said.

“Correct. And here’s the worst part—”

“The Amarrians think Viola is responsible for their deaths,” Senator Garrett said, leaning back and rubbing his temples.

“Exactly,” Baer said. “Viola’s ship wasn’t even armed. But the burst is what lured her to Diemnon, probably thinking it was a clue about the Elder’s location. It seems likely that the same burst was recorded by the Amarrians *and* the Minmatar, but as completely different messages.”

“But who sent it?” Senator Garrett pleaded. “And that still doesn’t tell me who else knows about these Elders!”

“That,” Baer answered. “Is where Viola’s theory about the ‘Order’ becomes relevant.”

“The Order?” Senator Desirou asked. “Who the hell are they?”

~

“How did they take control of my ship,” Viola asked, shivering as though freezing, but glistening with sweat.

“And those voices in my head, when they were talking...I felt so *violated* by it...”

“We also have the technology to commandeer ships,” Grious answered, placing his hand on her forehead.

“Empire vessels—such as the Minmatar’s Rifter, for example—are not yet equipped to defend themselves from such attacks. But the Enheduanni’s ability to remotely stimulate neural pathways assigned to the audio functions of a human’s brain...that is science beyond our comprehension, at least for now.”

“Beyond *your* comprehension?” asked Viola. “You Jovians are supposed to be the goddamn technical geniuses of our age!”

“The technology of the Enheduanni is much more advanced than our own, Viola. They possess absolute mastery of quantum physics and particle science, and the telltale sign of their presence is non-linear teleportation.”

“What?” Viola asked.

“Transporting matter instantaneously across space without the use of wormholes, stargates, or jumpdrives,” Grious answered. “It can be done, but not by us.”

“I don’t care what *you* can or can’t do,” Viola pleaded, becoming desperate. “I just want to understand those *voices*, Grious. What *science* gives them the ability to just invade my consciousness like that?”

He paused before answering. “A mutation.”

Viola thought about his response for a moment, then found the Jovian’s pitch black eyes staring at hers. “Grious...are the Enheduanni human?”

“Not anymore.”

~

“What about the Jovians?” Liam asked. “The telemetry clearly showed Wraiths uncloaking just before the recording stopped.”

“If Viola has been in contact with them, she never told me about it,” Baer answered. “But it doesn’t surprise me that they have a hand in this.”

“Do we have any diplomatic channels with the Jovians?” Liam asked.

“Our contact with them was always tenuous, but they completely disappeared once the Caldari War started,” Senator Desirou said. “None of us understand why.”

“Reach out to them,” Senator Garrett said. “They came to her aid, so they might be willing to answer our questions.”

“If that’s the case,” Baer said. “Then you won’t have to worry about contacting them. They’ll come to us on their own time, *after* they get whatever it is they want from Viola.”

“I’ve heard enough,” Senator Garrett said. “I’m going to Diemnon right now, and I’m not leaving there until I find out what happened to her.”

“Bad idea,” Baer said. “The Hahyil system is blockaded by Amarrian warships, and they’re hunting down the remnants of the Valklear fleet. You’d be flying into a firing range. Don’t do it.”

“I concur,” Senator Desirou said. “Right or wrong, Viola is a wanted criminal over there, and any Gallente ships in the area are likely to be considered hostile.”

“I don’t care,” Senator Garrett said. “The information that she has is priceless to the Federation, and we have to do everything we can to protect it. And let’s face reality here—the Amarrians aren’t going to fire on a Gallente Senator.”

“Senator, with all due respect, I think you’re wrong,” Baer said. “Viola is accused of killing *priests*, not to mention one of their sacred Apostles. There isn’t an act more despicable than that in their culture, and your presence at Diemnon would imply Federation involvement, if not actually endorsing the act. It’s a bad idea no matter how you look at it.”

“As opposed to General Bruce’s solution of just walking away?” Senator Garrett asked. “I don’t think so, Baer. I’m going to confront the Amarrians on this and get answers.”

“Stop trying to be a hero,” Senator Desirou grumbled. “Let’s reach out to them through the ambassadors, they’re the ones who—”

“Absolutely not,” Senator Garrett retorted. “We just don’t have the time to go through that process. I’m already on my way to Diemnon. If there’s even a small chance that Viola is alive, then we have an obligation to do everything in our power to get her back. As far as I’m concerned, her survival is a matter of national security.”

“So is yours, Senator,” Baer said. “And the stakes are a lot higher now with you involved.”

~



“The violence that scars the history of civilization is testament to the fact that all men are born slaves to different masters. The Empire’s strength flows from the absolute recognition that there is but one true Master; peace will always elude those who deny Him.”

- Amarrarian Ambassador Oturus Feinz, Caille Summit, 23220

“Religion is a terminal illness whose symptoms include the loss of common sense, humility, rational thinking, and in your case, moral decency.”

- Gallente Ambassador Jacques Allirou, Caille Summit, 23220

Derelik Region - Aguh Constellation

The Hahyil System: Unknown deadspace location

The Hellwraith decelerated from warp, trailing long streams of plasma that coalesced into crimson spheres of fire as the crippled battleship slowed to a halt. Moments earlier, an Amarrian cruise missile detonated against the unshielded structure below the main bridge, hurling men and equipment across the command center like insects caught in a storm. Karth, stunned and unsure of his surroundings, found himself lying on the floor grating. The moans of wounded and dying crewmembers brought him back to his senses.

The bridge was thick with the acrid-smelling smoke of burning electrical cables and littered with the debris of shattered bulkhead fittings. Karth slowly pulled himself off the deck, ignoring the throbbing pain at the back of his head and the wet sensation along his neck and shoulders. Since the first battle at Diemnon, the Hellwraith had survived five separate engagements with the Imperial Navy. Hundreds of warships were hunting the Valklear task force, routing them from deep space locations with relentless fury. Of the thirty Minmatar ships that first entered the Hahyil system hours ago, the Hellwraith was all that remained.

“Engineering...” Karth stammered. Coughing erupted from several men as they staggered throughout the bridge to man their posts again.

There was a pause before a static-laced voice responded. “Yes, sir...”

“How many men were still outside when we warped?”

“Forty seven,” the voice creaked. “The warp core generators probably killed them before we accelerated to FTL speeds.”

Karth remembered how cruel the decision was to warp, having been forced by an Amarrian attack to trade the lives of the men attempting repairs outside for the thousands of crewmembers still onboard. “Did they repair the comm arrays in time?”

Another pause. “No.”

“And the fires?”

“Contained, but many decks are inaccessible now.” The engineering officer took a deep, labored breath. “The main engines cannot be repaired and had to be taken offline. Attempting to power them back on will destroy the ship.”

Karth was feeling faint, but resisted the temptation to collapse. “What about the warp drives?”

“Operational, but with no armor left to protect the generators, one direct hit...”

“I understand. Thank you, Lieutenant.”

“Admiral, you’re bleeding,” the navigation officer said, approaching him.

Aren’t we all, Karth thought. “I’ll tend to it later. Weapons status!”

“One turret is operational; the rest are damaged or destroyed,” the weapons officer answered. “Launchers two through four are online, but we jettisoned ordnance to prevent secondary explosions once the engines caught fire.”

“Sir, that gash on your head is serious,” interrupted the navigation officer again. “Let the medics have a look.”

“I said I’d tend to it later!” Karth snapped, falling to his knees while trying unsuccessfully to support himself against a shattered console. Several men rushed to his aid.

“The Hellwraith will hold together,” the officer said, rushing to Karth’s side as the medics entered the bridge.

“But only if her captain stays in one piece.”

No comms, no weapons, no engines, no place to run... “Keep the ship in hyperspace as much as you can,”

Karth muttered as his vision started to blur. “A window for our escape will present itself sooner or later...”

They knew as well as I that we would die out here, he thought. *The Elders are gone, and so is Minmatar.* He watched as the medics knelt to lift his shoulders off the metal grating.

I have what I came here for, Karth thought before blacking out again. *The killer of my son is dead. Nothing else matters.*

~

Derelik Region - Aguh Constellation

The Aranir System: Waypoint track to the Hahyil System

Celestis-class cruiser “G.F.S. Venture”

Senator Garrett understood the source of his impassioned desire to confront the Amarrians. The reckless act that he was about to commit was fueled by moral outrage, which outweighed all other considerations, including the safety of the Venture’s crew. *The Amarrians would not dare attack a Gallente Senator,* he

reminded himself. The notion was inconceivable, and so his conscience was at ease, knowing that the risks were negligible.

He stood impatiently on the bridge, watching the warp tunnel dissipate while his officers stared nervously at the tactical display. Exactly fifty Imperial Navy warships were in the Aranir system, and by the time the Venture's warp drives shut down, half of them were plainly visible through the forward bridge windows. Several Amarrian frigates immediately left their orbit around the Hahyil stargate and turned towards the Venture.

"They're hailing," the navigation officer said. "Linking to intercom."

"This is Vice-Commodore Armenus Teides of the Imperial Navy. The Hahyil System is quarantined by order of the Holy Emperor. Stop your engines immediately and prepare to be scanned."

"This is Senator Vale Garrett of the Gallente Federation, and I will *not* stop my engines. You have no jurisdiction over this ship and cannot restrict the passageway of—"

"Senator Garrett, if you come within ten kilometers of this gate, I am authorized to destroy your ship and imprison any survivors. Shut down your engines and prepare to be scanned."

The Amarrian frigates flew directly behind the Venture. "Navigation," Senator Garrett fumed. "Set your course for the Hahyil gate, ahead two-thirds."

The officer hesitated. "Sir, I think that—"

"I said ahead two-thirds!"

Senator Desirou's voice boomed through the intercom. "Vale, that's enough. You've taken this stunt too far, and it has to stop."

Senator Garrett remained defiant. "Did you hear what they said? They just threatened us with lethal force! *Us!* And this after they shoot down an unarmed Federation pilot! We will *not* back down, and I will not cede to their outrageous demands. Navigation, set your speed to two-thirds of maximum velocity or I'll come over there and do it myself!"

"Vale, this is insane—"

"My ship, my command!" Senator Garrett interrupted, just as the ship started its acceleration. One by one, the four Amarrian frigates started to target lock them. Then the rest of the Imperial Navy ships—mostly battleships and cruisers—did the same.

"Senator Garrett, this is your final warning. Stop your engines and prepare now to be boarded."

"*Boarded?* Now you listen to me very, very closely," Senator Garrett growled, watching the range counter on the forward display start to decrease. "I am a Gallente Federation Senator, and I am here to recover the Federation pilot that your forces shot down over Diemnon. That was an unprovoked act of war, and this is *your* last chance to salvage the peaceful relationship that exists between our two nations. Now you will let me pass, and you will assist me in the search for the pilot you attempted to murder in the Hahyil System!"

Every crewmember on board the Venture held their collective breaths, waiting for an eternity to pass as the range counter decreased to the ten kilometer mark, and then continued onwards to nine kilometers.

The four frigates trailing the Venture suddenly activated stasis webs, instantly forcing the cruiser to a dead stop and sending the occupants of the bridge crashing forward. A new voice spoke through the intercom.

“You bear the title of ‘Senator?’”

“*Who is this?*” Vale screamed, getting back to his feet.

“Your presence here acknowledges complicity of the Federation government in the murder of the Apostle Taj Rukon and his disciples. For that heinous crime, His Holiness Emperor Heideran condemns you to death.”

Senator Vale Garrett’s last living act was opening his mouth to object. He, along with all three hundred and forty two crewmembers of the G.F.S. Venture, died within the next few seconds as the Imperial Navy executed the forged death mandate of Emperor Heideran.

As his corpse was mutilated by the same forces that were tearing the cruiser apart, a tiny device embedded in the late Senator’s stomach detonated a split second before the Venture’s reactor exploded.

~

Viola turned quickly to her left, swearing again that someone or something rushed past her. But there was nothing there except for the cavern walls far across the tarmac. Shivering uncontrollably, she continued to rock back and forth, seated on the ground across from Faus Akredon with her arms wrapped around her knees. Then she saw movement again, this time to her right, and shrieked as she caught a fleeting glimpse of her stalker: One of the faceless souls from her dreams.

“Grious!” she screamed in between gasps for air. “Are any more of you invisible freaks walking around out here?”

“You are hallucinating,” he answered. “And your withdrawal symptoms are worsening much faster than I anticipated.”

“No, Grious, you’re wrong...I swear, something else is down here!”

“It is just the three of us, Viola,” he answered. “The Minmatar pilots are with their ship, and the injured Jovian remains in medical stasis onboard my own. The rest are deep inside the complex.”

The rumbles from far overhead reminded her of thunder. *Just like in my dream, right before the corpse takes me inside.* She looked at Faus, and her eyes welled up with tears. The man was still on his knees and slumped forward, barely able to support the weight of his upper body. *I feel pity for this monster, she thought. I’ve tormented him every way I can think of, and in the end all I feel is remorse.*

Viola moved closer to him, and lowered her voice to a quivering whisper. “I can’t blame you for what you’ve done any longer, and I hate myself for that. We can’t choose our beginnings, or the experiences that define who we are...”

“Contact,” Grious said suddenly. “We have just moved past several Amarrian guards undetected and are moving into a series of caves. Our search for the Elders will begin there.”

She reached out for the radio device that would unlock the Glaive-collar around Faus’s neck. “I put this collar on you, and I’ll regret that I did for the rest of my life.” The device hissed and clicked. Faus wheezed, but still kept his eyes shut. Viola leaned forward and pulled the collar off, casting it aside. “I didn’t kill those priests,”

she said, as the shaking worsened and more ghosts darted across the corners of her eyes. “I can’t hurt anyone, I just can’t...” She slumped to the ground, curling up tightly. “I forgive you, Faus...for what you’ve done, for who you are...I forgive you.”

Faus remained silent, but was breathing heavier than before.

“Grious,” Viola whimpered. “Let...let him go. Take off his bindings and just let him go.”

The Jovian did not answer.

“Grious?” Viola asked, laboring to turn herself over. “Please, just take off his—”

The sight of Grious startled her. He looked as if he was frozen, and his face was contorted into a ghastly expression that she could not interpret.

Then she toggled the switch on her headpiece.

~

“Why’d they stop signaling,” Thumgar whispered, approaching Vlad quietly. The Amarrian guards were chatting near a cavern entrance two hundred meters downhill, unaware of the three Valklear rifles aimed at them. The Jovian squad leader had been signaling every few meters to keep Vlad informed of what to expect ahead. But ever since moving past the guards, the signals had ceased.

“I don’t know,” Vlad answered, shouldering his weapon and producing the headpiece that Grious had given him. “I’m not going to hail them until I have a look.”

“Roger,” Thumgar answered, settling prone and lining up his own sights with the guards.

Vlad removed his helmet and slipped the headpiece on. He felt a slight tingle in his right eye as the device powered on, and again as the imagery was superimposed over his view of the guards. Resisting the urge to reach out and touch the picture, Vlad adjusted the dials on the headpiece, unsure of what he was looking at. The image looked like a series of sand dunes as seen from high above, like alternating bands of light and dark ridges that ran parallel to each other.

“What do you see,” Thumgar asked.

“I’m not sure,” Vlad asked, fiddling with the dials some more. “It almost looks like...”

His fingers found the zoom controls and panned the image back.

“Like what?”

The dark ridges that Vlad was looking at gradually formed into the gaunt rib cage of a starving Minmatar child, whose hollow eyes were staring directly at him.

~

“*No!*”

Viola exhaled in a gasp of horror, shutting her eyes and wishing all of her might that this was just another nightmare. But her experience with the cruel reality of war, having seen the images of rampant death and destruction throughout her entire career, told her that this was as real as the tears rushing down her face. The

corpses of dozens—perhaps hundreds—of children and elderly Minmatars that had died of disease and starvation were strewn all over a cave. Some of the carcasses were still alive, crawling among the foulness and stench to find their own place to die. Grious appeared utterly incapacitated, as if what he was seeing struck something deep inside that he was completely unprepared to deal with.

Viola slowly got up to her feet.

“Grious,” she asked, stumbling towards him.

The Jovian opened his mouth and moved his jaws as if to speak, but no sounds emerged from his throat. *He thought he had all of the answers*, Viola thought. *Until he saw this.*

“Please say something,” she said, reaching out with a trembling hand to touch his petrified face.

It took several attempts, but Grious finally managed to heave a single word from his lungs.

“...why...”

“Slaves exist for one purpose, Grious,” she said, trying to ignore the whispers of ghosts in her ears. “If they cannot fulfill that purpose, for any reason at all—lack of strength, sickness, anything—then they are disposed of.”

Grious convulsed through several more attempts to say another word.

“...children...”

Viola pursed her lips, resisting the urge to sob. “Yes,” she whispered. “They’re too small to help in labor camps, and only healthy Minmatars are permitted to breed outside of them.” She remembered hearing that Jovian embryos were grown in fetus tubes, and that the embryos were the closest approximation of divinity in their society. The tubes represented the lifeblood of their race, without which they could not reproduce. To see children intentionally left in this state, malnourished and dying, was likely something that the Jovians had never seen in their entire history.

“Do you understand now, Grious? Do you see why I want him to open his eyes?”

Grious looked over towards Faus.

“He does not want to face what his soul knows he is partially responsible for,” she continued. “This is what I’ve spent my entire life trying to make others see for themselves.”

With a tremor, the Jovian’s head rolled ominously upwards, and Grious stared at the sky for a moment before marching directly towards the Glaive-collar on the tarmac.

~

“Two of them started moving again,” Vlad said, hoping that the tears resting on his eyelids stayed put.

Dramis and Thumgar remained silent. Of all the indecency and outright cruelty that the Minmatar race was subjected to, this was by far the most horrific scene these men had ever witnessed. Vlad watched as two of the Jovian soldiers finally moved away from the cave, carefully sidestepping rotting corpses and moving silently around the masked guards standing outside.

But the third Jovian soldier stayed where he was.

~

Grious's hands worked with swift precision, locking the Glaive-collar back into place around Faus's neck and adjusting the dials on the headpiece strapped to his scalp. The Amarrian was breathing quickly through his nose, as if to brace himself from the pain he sensed was imminent.

"You are going to open your eyes," Grious said, manipulating the controls on the radio transmitter. "Whether you want to or not."

Faus screamed as all six syringes broke the skin on his neck.

"The Glaive-collar has six different chemical compounds that can be administered, none of which require an actual injection to apply," Grious said. "But the Amarrians still prefer to use the threat of pain as their primary means of intimidation."

Faus started to pray again, at which point Viola heard the syringes withdraw, rotate slightly, and then reinsert into his neck. Droplets of blood formed at the old wounds as another ear-curling scream echoed throughout the hangar.

Grious continued as though nothing happened. "Amarrian guards wear these transmitters, which can be set to administer any combination of the drugs based on proximity. If a slave gets too close to a guard, then *this* needle—" A syringe withdrew from Faus's neck and reinserted in quick succession three times. "—will inject a toxin that will kill the wearer of this collar instantly."

Viola became very afraid of the animal that had been unleashed in Grious, and her damaged heart started to beat even faster.

“The collar is primitive but effective for its purpose,” Grious continued, repeating the gruesome act for each syringe. “For example, *this* syringe injects a generic anti-infective to help curb the spread of disease within the mines. *This* one injects a pain-control agent to quickly subdue the screams of those who are maimed in accidents or beatings. *This* one is a truth serum so that no secrets can be kept, and *this* one is a serum that induces euphoria, to make slaves more compliant to their master’s wishes.”

Faus’s screams became sobs, but he still refused to open his eyes.

“One syringe remains, Viola. Do you know which one it is?”

Shivering uncontrollably and feeling faint, Viola sat besides Faus and started to rock back and forth again. *I am going to die down here*, she thought. *Buried in the graveyard of an asylum.*

“*Fear*,” Grious said. “The sixth syringe injects an agent that induces fear. When used prior to applying a pain stimulus like a shockwhip, this agent also briefly paralyzes the muscles and hypersensitizes nerve endings, making the victim especially vulnerable to—and fearful of— *pain*.”

Viola leaned over towards Faus, who was moaning in between quick gasps for air.

“Tell me, Faus...Where is your god now?”

~

The soothing sound of her voice, coupled with the blasphemy of her words, combined for a diabolical contradiction that seemed sadistically appropriate for the wicked hell of his existence. In truth, he wanted to open his eyes so badly, if for no other reason than to gaze at the only beautiful thing left in the remnants of his mortal life. But to do so would condemn him to fail the most important test of his soul.

The needles piercing his neck delivered bolts of lightning across the back of his eyelids, reminding him of the cataclysmic explosions that blossomed beneath the beams of a tachyon surface bombardment. *Thousands of prayers*, Faus thought. *And still I cannot escape from the memory of what I have done, of what I was commanded to do! One brutal act of cruelty after the next, delivering and receiving agonizing pain all to demonstrate my eternal devotion to you! Deny a man water for three days and the foulest water will taste like the sweetest elixir; saturate us with death and destruction and a mere painless existence becomes the dream of paradise! Is this the promise you have for us, Father? Is your grand plan just a sadistic scheme to lower our expectations enough to make the end of life seem like your greatest gift? Is this what I am to worship? Death and suffering? Is it, Father?*

Faus cried out, scraping his head against the rock tarmac. *That is the devil talking, tempting me to abandon Him. I will not give in! Forgive me Father, for I know that this will pass!*

“If you will not open your eyes,” the demon’s voice said. “Then *fear* will open them for you.”

Oh dear God no, don't let him—

Faus felt the needle thrust deeply into the back of his neck and push a hot liquid through his veins. Sheer panic engulfed him, and his eyes opened wide in horror. Still face down on the tarmac, a gruesome image started to materialize on the stones beneath him.

~

Viola watched as Faus writhed against the restraints and threw himself over onto his side, trying desperately to escape the apocalyptic vision projected onto his retina.

“Look at it, Faus,” she said. “Goddamn you, *look at it!*”

His eyelids were peeled completely back, his mouth locked open in terror beneath the breathing apparatus, gasping for air that his lungs refused to allow him to take in. She could see his limbs trembling, and could hear faint garbles coming from his throat. It was the sight of a man breaking, of a man scared out of his mind, of a man faced with a bitter truth that he had hoped to never discover.

“No!” he said, his eyes darting back and forth.

Two horribly malnourished Minmatar slaves were stacking the corpses of children onto a mag-rail car as Amarrian guards watched, shockwhips dangling ready at their sides.

“There are your sacred Paladins,” Viola said. “Defending the will of God.”

“No...no, no!” Faus said, flipping onto his back.

“This is what you’ve dedicated your life to defending,” she said, bursting into sobs as one of the slaves collapsed from exhaustion. The sparks from two sets of shockwhip strikes against his raw flesh followed. “So look at it, goddamn you...look and accept the monster that you’ve become!”

“*No! No! No!*” Faus screamed louder than he ever had before, shaking himself back and forth as though someone were physically attacking him. Viola broke down at the sight, while Grious stood by impassively, his cold, black eyes not showing any trace of pity or remorse.

Then Faus uprighted himself, leaned back and arched his neck at the sky.

“I renounce you!” he bellowed. *“I renounce you and your wretched kingdom! You are dead to me! Do you hear me? Dead to me!”*

The collar hissed as Grious approached Faus and removed the device, smashing it into the ground with terrific force. As it shattered into pieces, Faus started to mutilate his own face, smashing and scraping it against the tarmac surface. Viola reached over, straining to pull him over onto his back.

“What have I done,” he sobbed, repeating the question over and over as blood poured from the jagged cuts and scrapes on his face. “For the love of all things good, what have I done...”

“Viola,” Grious said suddenly. “Switch channels on your eye cam.”

~

Vlad watched as the imagery moved past several teams of slaves blasting away at cavern walls with their lasers, off the main pathway and into a labyrinth of half-completed metallic housing structures. Stalagmites hung

from the rock ceilings in this part of the complex, and unfinished power cable tracks were set into the walls. The Jovians were moving in complete darkness, aided by night-vision optical equipment that yielded imagery with better clarity than anything the Valklears ever used.

The movement slowed suddenly, and the lead Jovian soldier with the camera turned back a few steps. The image panned left into one of the structures, and then stopped.

Eleven motionless figures were standing inside, but the image did not advance any further. The soldier produced a UV flashlight and placed the beam on the figures. Vlad realized that they were corpses tied upright to steel posts.

“Shine on their faces and zoom in,” he whispered.

Vlad’s heart sank as he recognized the decomposing faces of the Nefantar, Starkmanir, and Thukker tribe Elders.

“That’s them,” he said. “Can you inspect the bodies?”

“Negative,” the Jovian soldier replied. “Pull your team out right now.”

“Say again?”

“The entrance to this room is set with trap charges. The Amarrians know we are here. If you want to live, move your team back up to the hangar immediately.”

Vlad was about to ask why when the distant howls of slavers—carnivorous, canine beasts trained by the Amarrians to watch over Minmatar slaves—turned his blood into ice.

“Captain, look!” Dramis said. The two guards downrange from them suddenly crouched and ran inside the cave entrance.

“Fall back,” Vlad said, pulling on Thumgar’s backpack. “The Elders are gone, back to the ship ASAP, move, move, move! Krugar, do you copy?”

Vlad could see muzzle flashes illuminating the caverns through the eye cam as the Jovians fought for their lives against the powerful four-legged predators charging at them from every direction.

“Standing by.”

“We’re coming back up, get ready to blow those charges!”

“Roger.”

Through the eye cam, Vlad saw one of the beasts rip the arm off of the lead Jovian soldier as if it was his own. The last image to filter through was a set of razor-sharp slaver fangs descend onto the camera.

“Run!” he shouted, standing up and firing two grenades from his rifle launcher downrange into the cave entrance. The three Valklears turned back up the hill in a full sprint as they heard a muffled *thump...thump* followed by the sounds of collapsing rock behind them.

Distant shouts, gunfire, and the growl of beasts followed. Vlad figured they had less than a minute before the first pack of slavers made it past the debris and caught up with them.

~

Grious muttered a word in the Jovian language that sounded like a curse.

“What’s wrong?” Viola asked.

“I said *betrayed*. The Enheduanni betrayed us to the Amarrians,” he answered, moving towards the ramp of the closest Wraith. “And the meteor storm outside will end shortly. Captain Kintreb!”

Viola recognized the Valklear captain’s voice on the device in Grious’s hand.

“Not now, Grious,” he panted.

“Order your Rifter crew to board my ship immediately if you want to save them,” Grious said, pausing at the Wraith’s ramp.

“Omicron-One, abandon ship and follow Grious,” Vlad said. “Leave the Rifter now!”

“Abandon ship, yes sir,” the Valklear pilot answered. Viola looked across the tarmac and saw two tiny figures descend down the frigate’s ramp.

“Look out!” a voice yelled, followed by the staccato of automatic gunfire. Grious switched channels on the device and started moving upwards quickly, speaking tersely in Jovian. Viola could hear two other voices in the conversation, presumably those of the two Wraith pilots.

“Stay here,” Grious said from inside the ship. “I’m not leaving. I will return in a few moments.”

Before she could answer, the ramp suddenly closed, leaving her alone with Faus. The Imperial Navy Commodore had not spoken in some time.

~

Thumgar was mowing down slavers with his CLAW when the first Amarrian guards got close enough to return fire accurately. Vlad loaded his last three grenades into the rifle launcher.

“Both of you get ready to move!” he shouted, as bullets ricocheted against the rocks over his head. Vlad got up to one knee and fired his grenades in quick succession, aiming for the cavern ceilings above three separate spots downrange. As soon as the first one detonated, Dramis and Thumgar jumped up and ran.

Vlad counted only two detonations as he turned to run uphill. An Amarrian guard directly beneath the spot where the dud should have exploded launched his own spread of grenades.

“Get down!” Vlad shouted, throwing himself face first into the ground as three deafening explosions buried him under rocks and debris. Fighting through the ringing in his ears and ignoring the pain in his back and legs, he flipped over and fired several bursts from his rifle back downrange.

“I’m hit!” Thumgar shouted, pouring machine gun fire back at the Amarrians. “Fuck me, I’m hit...”

Vlad pulled himself off the ground and limped towards the sound of Thumgar's CLAW as it continued to thunder away. Momentarily puzzled that he was sitting upright on the ground, Vlad dropped down besides him and helped to return fire.

"We have to keep moving," he said. "I'll cover, you go."

"I'm not going anywhere, Captain," Thumgar said, looking downwards.

Vlad finally noticed that Thumgar was sitting in a pool of his own blood, and that both of his legs had been severed. More bullets ricocheted overhead as the dying Valklear dumped all the grenades from his own belt in front of him.

"I think they got Dramis, too," he muttered as blood flowed from his mouth. Then he pulled the pin from one of the grenades.

"Run, Captain. Run like hell."

Vlad leapt upwards and sprinted as fast as he could, nearly tripping over the shredded remnants of Dramis as he did. When he saw Krugar waving at him from the top of the hill, now just 100 meters away, Vlad dived into the ground once again.

Thumgar's CLAW stopped firing for just a moment, and Vlad thought he could hear the growl of more slavers when the grenades finally detonated.

~

The explosion startled Viola, and the blast doors across the tarmac opened. She could see three Valklears crouching in the doorway, their rifles spitting out fire.

“I can’t help you until I see them,” Faus said suddenly.

Viola was starting to feel sharp pains in her chest. “What are you talking about?”

“I want to help you,” he said, looking into her eyes for the first time. “You and the Minmatars. But I can’t unless I make contact with the guards!”

Another explosion—much louder than the first one—startled the both of them.

“There’s nothing I can do,” she said. “Grious might be able to, but—”

“Viola, listen to me,” Faus said. “Whatever happens out here, I swear on my life that I will do everything I can to protect you. I know what must be done now, and I have you to thank for it!”

The Wraith’s ramp suddenly descended to the tarmac. Grious stumbled down, collapsing onto the ground and then quickly picking himself back up. The Jovian was bare-chested, and his skin color had changed from its original pale complexion to a muddled gray that reminded Viola of rotting meat.

“What the hell happened to you?” she asked, just as another explosion rocked the hangar. Viola turned and saw four Valklears running towards them from the direction of the blast doors. One of them had a noticeable limp.

“They won’t make it,” Grious stammered, ignoring Viola’s question. “And neither will the Rifter pilots.”

Gunfire erupted as all six Minmatars dropped to return fire at the doors. Several packs of bloodthirsty slavers sprinted through the opening.

The bolts around Faus's legs and wrists suddenly detached, and Grious grabbed the kneeling Amarrian by his uniform and yanked him up to his feet. Then he handed Faus back his own Imperial Navy service pistol.

"Grious!" Viola shouted.

The ramp on the Wraith retracted, and the engines on both Jovian frigates roared to life.

"Viola...Antionnes," Grious said, taking her by the shoulders and speaking just inches away from her face. "If what Faus said to you is true, then I will see you again. When that day comes, do not tell me how I met my end. Do you understand? *Do not tell me how I met my end!*"

The Wraiths lifted off from the tarmac and flew into the tunnel, disappearing within seconds. Viola was too stunned to answer.

"Kill me," Grious said as he turned towards the bewildered Faus. "In plain view of the guards, quickly. Do it!"

Bullets kicked up chunks of tarmac around them, and the screams of Valklear soldiers being torn apart by slavers filled the hangar.

Before Faus could react, the Jovian grabbed his wrist and thrust the pistol into his own chest. "You could save the lives of at least some of them if you act now!"

Faus squeezed the trigger once, and Grious stumbled backwards as the bullet passed through him.

“*Kil nat tra fahule!*” Faus screamed. All of the slavers stopped dead in their tracks—some of them with chunks of human flesh hanging from their mouths—as they recognized the command from an Amarrian master to heel. Then Faus extended his arm, pointed the pistol directly at Grious’s sternum, and fired six more times.

“No!” Viola cried, as the Jovian fell to the ground dead. A pack of slavers trotted over to the corpse, growling as they sniffed the remains of Grious before snarling at Viola.

A group of armed guards approached, and upon recognizing the uniform and rank emblazoned on Faus’s sleeve, snapped to attention.

“Are you alright, sir?”

“I’m fine,” Faus said. “Are there any survivors among the rebels?”

“One for sure,” the guard scoffed. “Although it doesn’t look like that will last for very long.”

Faus narrowed his eyes at the man. “Do you know who I am, Paladin?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Then you will listen to these orders very carefully: Any Minmatar survivors, in addition to this Gallente woman, are to be given the best medical treatment that you have available here. They are *my* prisoners, to be treated as *my* personal property, and they must be kept alive at all costs until help arrives. Is that understood?”

The sight of Faus barking orders to the Amarrians guards, coupled with the ferocious slavers sitting obediently at his side, suddenly melted away. Viola was once again surrounded by faceless souls, but the demons that usually whispered to her were no longer speaking.

~



“Nothing could have prepared us for that battle. No prophecy foretold of that destiny, and no sage or priest could find meaning in its cursed aftermath. Ever since that dreadful time came to pass, a powerful demon has come to haunt the faithful of Amarr, and its name will always be Vak’Atioth.”

- Rear Admiral Galvrek Konst, ret., “The Wake Behind”, 23270 AD

“In my dream I was visited by a warrior spirit, who said nothing but pointed towards the gate, where I saw daylight when I knew there should have been darkness instead. The next morning, the slaver that guarded the barracks we lived in lay dead at the entrance, and the Glaive-collars around our necks had been mysteriously removed. Then we noticed the weapons arranged on the dirt upon which we slept, begging to spill the blood of the one who made us call him ‘master’.”

- Anonymous, “Glaive Wars”, Krusual Archives

Domain Region - Throne Worlds Constellation

The Amarr System: Planet Oris

Emperor Family Academy Station

From the darkness of his personal chambers, Grand Admiral Mekioth Sarum observed the procession of Imperial Navy warships as they approached the hangar. Against all odds, Faus Akredon had survived both the ambush by Minmatar rebels at Diemnon and the deadly meteor storm that should have finished him earlier. Akredon's triumphant return to the Throne Worlds so soon after the loss of the *Impervious* was being hailed by the Navy as a miracle, and Emperor Heideran was anxious to hear about his ordeal firsthand.

As a man who had faced danger countless times before, Mekioth Sarum was unaccustomed to fear, especially when considering the outcome of his decisions. For the first time that he could remember, fear was stabbing at his soul, penetrating deeper and deeper with each warship that disappeared into the station. *It was a calculated risk*, he kept reminding himself. *Worth the opportunity to secure the power of my lineage forever.*

But the harsh reality was that Faus still lived, and it seemed inevitable that the truth of what happened over Diemnon would be revealed. The real danger was whether or not the two accounts became public knowledge, thereby pitting his own word against the much more popular Akredon's. The Council of Apostles would undoubtedly side with Akredon because of his well-known piety and devotion to the Reclaiming. At best, that scenario would raise concern over the House of Sarum's allegiance to the Emperor, and tempt the other royal families to conspire against him.

"My lord, the Emperor is waiting."

The Paladin's words turned his blood to ice. Without acknowledging, he turned and walked past the guards to make his way towards the cathedral. Behind him, the last ship of the procession taxied into docking position outside the hangar entrance. The warship was, appropriately enough, an Omen-class cruiser.

~

Essence Region – Crux Constellation

The Renyn System: Planet IX – Moon 4

Federal Intelligence Office Headquarters

Baer took a long pull from a cigarette, his head screaming with a vicious headache, as the men and women in the conference room stared dumbfounded at the monitors arranged high along the curved walls. Moments earlier, the scene was a cauldron of heated, vehement exchanges between politicians and military officials as they argued bitterly over how to deal with the Amarrians. There was only one point that the participants reached consensus on: Under no circumstances was news of the attack to be released until they agreed on the appropriate response. The Federation could not afford to appear weak or disorganized during wartime, not to its own citizens and certainly not to the Caldari State.

There were eight large screens in the conference room, one for each news network in the Federation. Every one of them was broadcasting the recorded camera footage of the Venture's destruction, taken from the perspective of a ship that was there when the attack occurred. With the exception of Baer and Senator Desirou, there should not have been any non-Amarrian eyewitnesses to the event that were still alive. And yet that footage—including a full audio transcript of the exchange between Senator Garrett and the Imperial Navy—was now on public display for every Gallente citizen to judge for themselves.

One of the news anchors was midway through delivering a scathing commentary on the “barbaric, unprovoked assassination of Senator Garrett” when Baer’s messenger buzzed. He nearly choked when he saw who it was. Abruptly excusing himself from the room, Baer stepped outside and ran as fast as he could down the hall. Bounding into his office, he closed the door behind him, ignoring the shouted demands for an explanation by Colonel Sierto.

Taking a moment to compose himself, Baer took a seat and inserted the messenger into the desk console. The most recognizable face in the Gallente Federation appeared in a holograph before him.

“Yes, Mr. President?” Baer asked.

~

Domain Region - Throne Worlds Constellation

The Amarr System: Planet Oris

Emperor Family Academy Station: Saint Kuria the Prophet Cathedral

“How could you be so foolish!” Emperor Heideran demanded, flanked on either side by hooded archbishops and military advisors. “Do you realize what you’ve done?”

Mekioth forced himself to repress the utter contempt he felt towards Heideran. No one dared to take that tone with the Grand Admiral of the Imperial Navy. “My lord, I acted in strict accordance to the instructions you gave to me.”

“You murdered a Gallente Senator!” the Emperor wheezed. “One ship, clearly immobilized and outnumbered fifty to one was no threat to your blockade, Admiral!”

The blood flowing through Mekioth's veins turned to fire, and he was slowly losing the battle to control his temper. "He was instructed to stop his engines several times, and—"

"We needed *time*, you fool! Time to consolidate our gains and convert the masses in the new territories to our faith! Instead you handed a formidable adversary due cause to interfere directly with the Reclaiming!"

Mekioth was about to shout, when a familiar voice called out from behind him.

"The Reclaiming grows stronger with each passing moment, Your Holiness," Faus said, walking past the mighty rows of columns behind them. "If anything, Grand Admiral Sarum has demonstrated that the strength of our conviction to God will not be deterred by butchers."

"Faus, my son!" Emperor Heideran gasped, his throne brushing against Mekioth as it floated past to meet the Commodore. The ancient man reached out with two quivering arms.

Faus leaned forward to return a delicate embrace. "It's good to see you again, Father."

"What have they done to you, son," the Emperor asked, grimacing at the sight of his mutilated face. "Who is responsible for this abomination?"

Faus took the old man's frail hand, leading his throne back up the aisle towards the altar while Mekioth looked on impassively.

"The Gallenteans," Faus answered. "With direct assistance from the Jovians. They killed our priests and tortured me, all in a foolish attempt to force me to deny my faith...in many ways, those two despicable races make the Minmatar seem more civilized."

Faus turned away from the Emperor and approached Mekioth, standing before him at attention. “And to you, Grand Admiral Sarum, I apologize deeply. My insubordination cost me my ship, the lives of my crew, and my entire fleet. If only I had obeyed your orders to retreat from Diemnon, the Impervious would still be intact. I take full responsibility for my actions, and I am prepared to face the consequences.”

Mekioth was caught off guard, and could find no words to answer him with. *What are you doing, Faus? Why are you not seizing this opportunity to slay me?*

“Pardoned,” Emperor Heideran said, moving up the altar. “There will be no disciplinary action by order of *my* decree. Is that understood, Admiral?”

Mekioth decided to go along with this most unexpected turn of events. “My lord, if ever there was a test of faith so harrowing and cruel as the one that this man just passed, then who am I to question him?”

“Well spoken, Grand Admiral,” Emperor Heideran said, as his throne anchored back into place at the top of the altar. “Tell me, Faus, what you think of the Admiral’s decision to kill the Gallente Senator?”

“A fitting response for the murder of an Apostle,” Faus answered. “They are animals, Father. Barbaric, scavenging animals that prey on the defenseless. And the Jovians! They are barely human, and not nearly as powerful as we were led to believe.”

The comment surprised Emperor Heideran. “Is that so? What makes you say this?”

“Throughout my incarceration, they kept challenging my faith, insulting everything that I believe in,” Faus said, looking downwards as he spoke. “They are godless creatures, Father, just like the Gallenteans...blind to

God's creation even as it surrounds them. And they are weak, so much so that I was able to kill one of my captors with surprising ease.”

“You killed a Jovian?” Mekioth asked. “How did you do this?”

“They bleed as easily as any other creature. When the opportunity presented itself, a bullet was more than enough to dispatch my Jovian captor.”

“So I have heard, Faus,” Emperor Heideran said. “The guards on Diemnon reported how easily the slavers were able to rip the Joves to pieces, despite their cloaking technology.”

“The guards also reported that you are holding prisoners,” Mekioth said, his eyes narrowing. “What are you doing with them?”

“Purification,” Faus answered. “Purging their demons and cleansing their souls, in preparation for their eternal service to Amarr.”

Emperor Heideran chuckled. “Excellent! Faus, seeing you here now and listening to your words reinvigorates my faith. Grand Admiral Sarum, share with us now your plans for reclaiming the Jovians!”

Mekioth hesitated. “My Lord, they were completed such a short time ago, are you certain that—”

“Have you heard nothing that this man said?” Emperor Heideran interrupted. “The Jovians are much weaker than we thought! For weeks the Council has been proclaiming the urgency to purge the regions alongside our borders of the heathen Jovians and their diabolical ways. At last, we are poised to rejuvenate the Reclaiming by ridding humanity of them once and for all!”

“Grand Admiral, there has never been a better time,” Faus said. “Have faith in your plans, for they will shatter the myth of Jovian power once and for all.”

The influence of this man on the Emperor astounds me, Mekioth thought. One moment Amarr must consolidate her gains, the next she must expand her borders faster!

“You are so certain of this,” Mekioth said, studying Faus’s swollen eyes and lacerated face. “For years, the Jovians have avoided direct contact with us, revealing little of themselves or their capabilities. Yet you can stand here before us, on this very altar, and say with unquestioning faith that you believe—that you *know* in your very soul—that we possess the strength to reclaim them?”

Faus dropped to one knee and set his gaze on the great statue of the Prophet Kuria behind the altar upon which Emperor Heideran sat. “Mekioth, my brother, my faith has never been stronger. The Jovians will fall before the might of Amarr, embrace the Lord our Father, or be struck down mercilessly by His wrath.”

~

Vlad forced himself to open his eyes, a simple act that required an alarming amount of exertion. After a few moments, the soldier realized that he could do little else. The slightest movement produced unbearable pain everywhere throughout his upper torso, which he actually welcomed. What terrified him was that he could feel nothing in his legs, not a single hint of sensation to indicate if they were even still attached. The markings on the ceiling above him were Amarrian, triggering the awful memory of how he had been reduced to this physical state.

The soft sound of a woman’s cry filled his ears, followed by heaves of shallow breathing. Summoning as much strength as he could gather, Vlad spoke.

“Who’s there?”

There was a pause as the breathing stopped. “You’re not real,” the quivering voice answered. “The whispers stopped hours ago.”

Vlad’s heart sank as he recognized Viola’s voice. “It’s me, Vlad...we met on Diemnon...”

“Yes...yes, I remember now. You survived...”

“Where are we? What place is this?”

“They killed everyone, except for you and I...and then Faus took us in...I don’t know where we are.”

A bolt of pain shot through Vlad’s midsection. “Akredon? The Amarrian?”

“Yes,” Viola answered. “He’s...looking after us, trying to smuggle us out, to get us...help.”

Vlad breathed as deeply as his punctured lungs would allow. *The utter indignity of failure*, he thought. *What tragedy that those slavers missed the jugular in my neck.*

“The Elders are lost,” he gasped, staring at the markings of his mortal enemy on the ceiling. “What have we gained from all this...”

“Closure,” she answered weakly. “And new beginnings all at once.”

~

Colonel Siertro was still shouting outside of Baer's office, bellowing various threats of punishment for his abrupt departure and blatant insubordination when the door suddenly flew open.

"Back into the conference room," Baer said. "*Now.*"

"If you're withholding information from me," Colonel Siertro started. "Then you just better consider telling me right—"

"Tilda, shut the fuck up and do what *I* tell you to for once," Baer snarled. "And until this knife is taken out of my back, you'd better start watching yours. Keep your mouth shut when we go back into that conference room. Got it?"

Baer turned away from his dumbfounded boss, stormed down the hall and threw open the glass doors. As everyone inside turned their attention towards him, Baer noticed that all but two of the large screens were blackened. Of the two monitors that were still on, the President of the Gallente Federation was visible on one, and a Jovian on the other. Colonel Siertro walked in behind Baer, saw the images on the screen, and turned pale. Without saying a word, she took a seat.

"Welcome back, Lieutenant Colonel," the President started. "I'll get right to the point: The Jovians have approached us with a 'retribution' plan for the Amarrians. Senator Desirou and the late Senator Garrett have been lobbying for a similar idea, and I think you'll find their recommended course of action highly appropriate. After you, Mr. Grious."

"Thank you, Mr. President," the Jovian started. "As indicated to us earlier, your Defense Appropriations Committee overbudgeted for the ongoing war with the Caldari State. Senator Desirou and the late Senator Garrett once proposed that the surplus of military equipment be awarded to the Minmatars. On behalf of the

Jovian Directorate, I am offering the full services of our armed forces in the delivery of that equipment to the rebels. I believe they will know exactly what to do with it. No additional involvement from us should be necessary.”

“Excuse me,” interrupted Major General Silus Bruce. “But Senator Desirou was out of place for commenting on any matters related to the war effort, and there is no surplus of equipment as far as I’m concerned. This matter is an internal affair, and I think we’ve got it from here.”

The President’s face contorted into a scowl. “General, this isn’t the war room, and the Jovians are here at my personal request.”

“Mr. President, with all due respect, I strongly object to allowing the Jovians to participate in these discussions, and I think that the notion of pursuing a joint operation with them is absurd.”

“General Bruce, you are exactly one comment away from being asked to leave,” the President growled.

“Mr. President, the Jovians have been completely absent throughout this war and removed entirely from the political process. But you’re still receptive to letting them guide us right into a second war? Have you lost your mind?”

“*Get out.* MPs, escort the General out of that room right now!”

“I’ll excuse myself,” General Bruce said, getting up from his seat. “I’m not participating in this stupidity. You’ve all lost sight of the big picture, and it’s going to come back to haunt you.”

“I beg to differ,” Grious said, his black eyes glaring at General Bruce through the screen. “The big picture has never been clearer.”

~

“They are dying, my lord,” the Nefantar physician whispered, nervously looking back and forth. “The blood vessels around the female’s heart and brain are so constricted that ruptures are imminent; she needs medication to control her blood pressure and withdrawal symptoms, which is only available through the medical bay!”

Faus inhaled deeply, also taking a look around to make sure no one was listening. “What about the Brutor?”

“I’ve never seen a man take such punishment and survive,” the physician said. “I removed as much of the shrapnel along his back and legs that I could, but I can’t reach the deeper fragments. Both of his lungs are partially collapsed, and he’s paralyzed from the waist down because of the slaver bites near his lower spine. All I could do was give him anti-infective agents, painkillers, and fluids, but that just prolongs his suffering...”

“Lucian, you have my thanks,” Faus said, taking the man by the shoulders and looking him square in the eyes.

“You have family in Kazna?”

The Nefantar man became confused. “My apologies, sire, but I don’t understand—”

“Lucian, old friend, you’ve been my physician for how long now—twenty, maybe thirty years?”

“Yes, but—”

“Do you want to see your family again?” Faus tightened his grip on the man’s bony shoulders, shaking him slightly. “Yes or no, Lucian! Answer me honestly!”

“Of course I do,” he answered, trembling. “God help me, I miss them so...”

“Listen,” Faus said. “The Emperor has commissioned a new ship for me—an Imperial Issue Apocalypse—and my last medical officer was lost with the Impervious. I have designated you as his replacement.”

Faus pressed a card with the Imperial Navy insignia emblazoned on it into the man’s hand. “Take this card and bring it to Deck 43 East, to the Naval Armaments Desk. Present the card, and you will be given a uniform and unrestricted access to every part of the ship. The vessel’s name is the *Redemption*, and she’s being prepped for departure this very moment.”

“Is this a test of faith, my lord?”

“*No, man!*” Faus nearly shouted, tightening his grip and resuming his forceful whisper. “The god who made you my servant is dead to me! What I ask of you I do on my own free will, and not because some ancient text compels me to!”

The man looked both horrified and amazed all at once. The implications of what Commodore Akredon was doing were now clearly understood by the physician. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because everything in my life has been a lie,” Faus answered. “And failing to recognize that earlier is something that I’ll regret for the rest of my life. This single act won’t atone for the evil that I willfully embraced. I’ve been wrong about everything, Lucian. Everything.”

The Nefantar was about to speak, but Faus quickly placed a hand over his mouth. “You need to understand that there is no turning back now. If you attempt to betray me, I will destroy you. A slave’s word will never win merit over my own, Lucian. Never.”

Faus removed his hand. Lucian considered all of the facts quickly, like a good physician always does before committing to a decision that would have drastic consequences, regardless of the outcome.

“Tell me what I must do to see my family again.”

~

“So then it’s settled,” the President said. “We’ll provide you with a list of stations containing the equipment to be transported within the hour.”

“Good,” Grious answered. “Jovian industrials are already approaching your nation’s borders and will hold until they receive final destination waypoints from you.”

“Harbor Control at each of these stations will be instructed to pass your industrials through as our own Iterons,” Baer said, checking his notes. “The yard engineers will load the equipment onto the re-designated industrial types and clear your departure as soon as they finish. After that...” Baer exhaled, tossing his datapad onto the table and leaning back into his seat. “...the rest is up to you.”

“I would like a word with the President, Senator Desirou, and Lieutenant Colonel Gesdeneau in private, please,” Grious asked, as the rest of the people in the room exchanged glances. “We have some personal matters to discuss that do not concern anyone else.”

“Certainly,” the President answered. “If your name wasn’t mentioned by Mr. Grious, please excuse yourself and get to work on your assignments right away.”

Baer watched as the group gathered their things—some with urgency, others with reluctance—and made their way towards the exits. After a few moments, Baer was alone with Senator Desirou.

“Viola Antionnes was alive as of two hours ago,” Grious started. “But her physical condition was grave, and we have not been able to determine her whereabouts since. The three of you should know that it was her efforts which convinced us to intervene on behalf of the Minmatar, and that despite her imperfections, she is by far one of the most impressive individuals we have ever worked with of any race. She has...restored certain beliefs we once held about humanity. Our concern for her well-being is as sincere as your own, and we will do everything we can to return her to you safely.”

Baer felt a mix of emotions assault him as the words of the mysterious Jovian set in: relief, amazement, admiration, and above all, vindication.

“You also need to know that the Elders taken to Diemnon are dead, and that a Minmatar Republic consisting of all seven united tribes will be impossible. All of the Elders representing the Starkmanir, Nefantar, and Thukker tribes are lost. We have been in direct contact with the remaining Elders, discussing with them how the weapons that you procured will be distributed. They share our sentiment for Viola Antionnes, and they asked me to relay their indebtedness to the Gallente Federation for the dedication of her talents to their cause.”

“Who killed them?” Senator Desirou asked. “The prison guards?”

“It appears that the Elders were murdered either during or immediately after the riot was put down, but not by the prison guards. They did not discover the bodies until after the Valklear rescue operation was compromised.”

“But then who tipped off the guards to their presence?” Baer asked, realizing the answer right after finishing the question.

“The Order,” Grious answered. “Like the Ammarian priests they murdered just to incriminate Viola, the Elders on Diemnon were murdered by the Order, despite all of their visible indications that they were trying to help them.”

“Wait a minute, what’s this ‘Order’ all about?” the President asked.

“I’ll brief you afterwards,” Senator Desirou said. “It’s the biggest state secret you’ll wish you never knew about.”

Baer was stunned. “Why would they do such a thing?”

“To draw the Gallente Federation into a war with the Amarr Empire,” Grious answered. “The Order’s immense power is a menace even to us, and yet the expansion of the Amarr Empire appears to have threatened them directly—”

Grious stopped in mid-sentence, tilting his head to one side.

“Please excuse me,” the Jovian said. “We’ve located Viola.”

~

Faus leapt backwards from the screen, recoiling from the image that his soul refused to accept.

“You should not be living, Grious,” he stammered. “I saw you—”

“*Stop.* Do not tell me how I met my death, Faus,” Grious warned. “In time, reanimation science will reveal itself to the other races. But until then, we will seem as demons to those who hold religion accountable for immortality.”

Those beliefs are dead to me, Faus reminded himself. “I have Viola Antionnes, and the Valklear soldier known as ‘Vlad’,” he started.

“My notes indicate that your intent was to help them,” Grious said. “Has this changed?”

Faus’s head was starting to spin as he struggled with the reality of having a conversation with someone that he executed just a few hours earlier.

“Faus?”

“No...no, Grious, I’m trying to help them. But they’re not doing well, and I can’t get them the medical attention they need without revealing to all of Amarr what I intend to do.”

Faus produced a tiny disc and inserted it into the console. Pausing for just a moment, his fingers hovered over the control that would send Grand Admiral Sarum’s complete battle plans for the Reclaiming of the Jovian Directorate to Grious. *Event horizon,* he thought. The words he spoke to Lucian rang through his memory: *No turning back.* He studied his reflection on the screen for just a moment.

Amarr is dead to me. The encrypted data was transmitted.

“Read that.”

Grious appeared to be reading quickly, his pale face moving back and forth in twitching motions.

“Vak’Atioth?” the Jovian asked. “When?”

“It has begun already. Warships are en route to the rally points along our side of the Geminat border. The Emperor himself has asked me to lead the attack. Right this moment, the docking gantries are being removed from my ship. Once I reach the Odebeinn rally point, my orders are to jump into the Atioth system and destroy everything in our path...your outposts, your stations, your planetary settlements, all of it.”

Grious’s black eyes seemed to stare through him for a moment before he spoke again. “How will you save yourself when the time comes?”

“A Nefantar physician is aboard doing what little he can to keep both Vlad and Viola alive. All I ask is for your fleet to spare my ship until near the end, to maximize the illusion of divine leadership. When you see the cargo container jettisoned from my ship, we’ll be inside,” Faus took another deep breath. “And then our lives will be in your hands.”

Grious continued his devious, cold stare. “My associates have just confirmed the movement of Imperial Navy warships in precise accordance with the plans that you delivered. We are convinced that you are being truthful.”

“I don’t know what that means anymore,” Faus said, as the lines in his brow deepened. “You take what I’m telling you however you like. I’ll be at Vak’Atioth within the hour.”

“As will I, Faus. To give you the thanks of Jove in person after we move you to safety.”

“There’s one more thing I need.”

“Ask, friend.”

“A Minmatar battleship is stranded in the Hahyil system. Her name is the ‘Hellwraith’. I know they’re still being hunted, and that it’s just a matter of time before the Navy destroys them.”

Faus thought back to the relentless attack that ship had unleashed, remembering how determined the Valklear force was to destroy the Impervious no matter what the cost. *It was personal*, he realized. *Ship captains don’t put their crews at risk like that unless it’s personal.*

“Please, Grious...do what you can for them.”

~

Far below the entrance to Emperor Heideran’s cathedral, powerful beams of light broke through the plane of the hangar doors and pierced the dark veil of space beyond. Behind those beams, the goliath warship *Redemption*—more than 1600 meters long from bow to stern—slowly began to emerge from the station. From the perch of his personal command center, Grand Admiral Mekioth Sarum admired the majestic vessel for a moment, and then turned his attention back to the holographic star map. The locations of 200 ships—the total number of vessels that his Atioth battle plan called for—were displayed as a myriad of golden dots scattered

across the command center. One by one, the dots were converging on a point that sat directly on the Jovian border in Metropolis.

From here, he thought, I shall secure my family's place at the head of all tables.

Mekioth could not remember a time when he felt more certain of the outcome of a battle. The exuberance of the crews, the blessings of the Church, and the excitement of the Amarrian populace was overwhelming. And, of course, there was the irony that the man he tried to destroy would now be handing him the key to an Empire.

Perhaps I misjudged him, he thought. Or his faith blinds him so completely that he fails to consider all of the possibilities, including the unthinkable.

Fully clear of the station's main structure, the Redemption started its turn into history.

~

Baer found himself wandering through the great halls of the station, passing aimlessly through every section that his clearance level would allow him to. More than 26 hours had passed since he last slept. Considering the magnitude of the events he'd helped set into motion, sleep was the furthest thing from his mind.

Already there were reports of "unidentified spacecraft" arriving at various stations across the Federation, all of which were casually dismissed by government officials as the imagination of drunks. There was nothing more that could be done, except to wait and find out if the culmination of years of struggle—of proving to the Federation just how dangerous it was to ignore the evils of mankind—finally proved worthwhile.

Pausing in a great corridor lined with windows, Baer took in the majestic view of the bluish-green gas planet of Renyn-Nine and its celestial background of distant nebulae and countless stars. His thoughts kept wandering back to Viola, of the tumultuous past they shared and the differences they'd failed to reconcile until this moment, when everything they believed in hung in the balance.

I'm sorry that I ever doubted you, he thought.

~

Lightning fired across the blackness again, and Vlad could feel the muscles in his face reflexively wince from the pain that awakened him. Struggling past the drug-induced haze of his consciousness, Vlad managed to open his eyes.

The blurred image focused into the unmistakable outline of an older Nefantar standing above him. The man caught his cloudy stare, and then reached forward to place a gentle hand on his forehead.

“Be calm, Vlad. I'm changing your wound dressings. We're going to get you help very soon.”

The Valklear warrior remembered that he was supposed to hate Ammarian corroborators. “Ne...Nefantar?”

The elder man looked up for a moment, then continued his work. “Yes.”

“I once...I once killed...Nefantar traitors...” Vlad remembered the images, of his knife passing cleanly through the necks of the men who had betrayed his tribe to the Paladins.

The man lifted a bloody bandage, tossed it to the side and then examined the wound with an electronic eyepiece.

“Traitors...” Vlad was starting to realize that hatred was all that remained for him to draw strength from.

With delicate hands, Lucian began to place fresh nano-gauze strips onto the slaver wounds gouged into Vlad’s abdomen. Then he asked a simple question:

“Do you have any children?”

The image of the corpses in the Diemnon mines came back, and Vlad felt pangs of sadness piercing his heart.

“...traitor...”

Lucian stopped working for a moment. “If you did, then you would understand that as a father, you would be prepared to do *anything* to make sure that they outlived you.”

Vlad was barely clinging onto consciousness as Lucian cut away the excess strips of dressing. “Even if it meant a life of servitude. You would sell your soul, Brutor. As a father, you would understand that. *You would.*”

The Valklear’s eyes closed again. “No...not like...this...”

Lucian checked the soldier’s heart rate. It was weak, but steady.

~

“Attention Hellwraith, this is the Jovian cruiser Listhos broadcasting from ten-fifty-nine megahertz. Do you copy, over.”

Karth looked up from his haze, stared at the mangled bridge and wondered if he was hearing things.

“Hellwraith, we see that your subspace comm arrays are disabled. Please acknowledge on ten-fifty-nine megahertz, over.”

The navigation officer scrambled to his feet. “Admiral, that’s a radio frequency broadcast! *Look!*”

Just a few hundred meters from where Karth was slumped over, four Jovian Phantom-class cruisers were unclocking within plain view of the forward bridge portal.

“Hellwraith, we are here to evacuate your crew. Please respond.”

The navigation officer made a conscious decision to overstep the well-defined boundaries of naval command rules. Karth saw the officer reaching for the console-based radio transceiver and became enraged. He opened his mouth to scold the man, but it was too late.

“Listhos, this is the Hellwraith,” the officer said. “We are standing by to receive your assistance, over!”

~

“Lucian,” the intercom squawked. “I’m coming in.”

The cargo door seal hissed open, and Faus strode into its darkened confines.

“How are they?” he asked.

The physician was about to answer when Viola awakened with a loud shriek. “No! I have to warn him!”

Lucian moved quickly towards Viola, who was struggling against the restraints attaching her to the stretcher. He pressed his fingers into her wrist, feeling for her pulse. “Easy, Viola...don’t exert yourself.”

“I need to see him,” she breathed. “Where is he? I know Faus is in here!”

Faus approached her, placing his hand on hers. “I’m here, Viola. It’s going to be alright—”

“No, no,” she gasped, hysterical. “I know who it is now, in the nightmares I have! I know who lies inside the crypt!”

It was becoming difficult for Faus to retain his composure, seeing her like this. “Viola, you need your rest, it will all be—”

“*Listen to me!*” she screamed. “All this time I thought the person in there was me, all those times when I was pulled inside, but now I know it’s not me at all, and I’m scared of what they’ll do once I tell him!”

“Shhh...be still, Viola,” Faus said, feeling such strong compassion for her that it was nearly unbearable. “It will be over soon, we’re going to get you some help...”

“*The demons!* Can’t you hear them? They’re whispering again, Faus, they don’t want you to know...”

“Don’t want me to know what, Viola?”

“They don’t want you to know it’s you. All this time... *you.*”

~

Faus stood on the bridge of the Redemption, observing the perfect formation of Imperial warships stretched across a staggered line nearly sixty kilometers long. His bridge officers stood at rigid attention by their posts, while junior officers in the trenches below him remained fixed on the screens before them. *This is their great moment*, Faus thought. *Men who dreamed of the day when they would serve under command of the greatest Navy hero in Amarrian history. Paladins whose faith in God blinds them to the fact they are following the orders of a fallen angel, of a traitor whose betrayal will eclipse all others in the history of our race.*

Though outnumbered two to one, the Jovian fleet amassed directly across from them remained motionless. *Defiant*, Faus thought, repressing the urge to smile. *Daring us to strike first. Those Jovians have much more heart and emotion than the Empires give them credit for.*

“Weapons!” Faus commanded. *On this day, God will abandon Amarr’s side...*

“Yes, my lord!”

...and stand firm with the Minmatar.

“Assign turrets one through seven, radio crystals, designate target Omega-One!”

“Target Omega-One locked!”

Faus allowed himself a smile. “For the Emperor!”

The entire bridge replied in emboldened unison. “For the Emperor!”

For Viola, Faus thought. For restoring my sight.

“*Fire!*”

~

A. I. II. III. IV. V. VI. VII. Ω

“Some look back at the worlds we lost, at the places where great cathedrals once stood, and grieve for the glory that could have been. To them I say this: Reclaim your faith. As God is my witness, those worlds which were taken from us shall be ours again, and on holy ground I shall build cathedrals that no heathen can tear down!”

- Jamyl Sarum, Amarr Succession Trials, 23342 AD

“Civilization looks away while we deploy ships to guard borders beyond which Minmatar slaves still toil for Amarrian masters. How else are we to interpret this complacency as anything but indifference? How long are we to exercise restraint, in accordance to your definition of decency, while this evil is allowed to exist?”

- Karvour Thorel, Brutor Representative to the Minmatar Republic Council, CONCORD Assembly, 23343 AD

Essence Region – Crux Constellation

The Renyn System

Unknown deep space location

Baer emerged from the shuttle ramp into an alien world that inspired him with fear and awe. The massive cavern was host to dozens of Jovian warships, suspended or perched in docking bays that reminded him of larvae inside a great insect hive. Every structure had a distinctively organic appearance; there were no sharp angles or defined edges to any surface that he could see. If not for the pinpoints of navigation beacons and soft glow of idling ion engines, the vista would disappear into a darkish-green labyrinth of endlessly spiraling curves and ridges. The entire base seemed to breathe as if it was one, single living organism.

Almost, Baer thought, like a slumbering beast.

“Come this way, please,” said one of the Jovian guards waiting at the bottom of the ramp.

Baer hustled the rest of the way down to catch up. The two guards studied him for a moment before turning towards the main structure.

“What station is this?” Baer asked, craning his neck to follow the path of a frigate docking high above him.

“The shuttle didn’t jump through any stargates...”

“Not a station,” Grious said, emerging from the opposite side of the walkway. “A mothership. This one just returned from Vak’Atioth to collect the remaining industrials in Gallente space. Then it will depart for Amarrian territories to assist with the armament of Minmatar rebels.”

Baer blinked. *This hangar is inside a ship?*

“We must hurry,” the Jovian said, motioning with his arm. “The commanders want to move as soon as the jump drive capacitors are fully recharged.”

Baer followed Grious into the structure as a door sealed behind them. He was making every effort not to stare at the Jovian’s pitch-black eyes.

“How is Viola?”

“Alive,” the Jovian answered. “And in the process of being transferred to medical personnel at the Renyn F.I.O. base, under the direct supervision of Senator Desirou.”

“What is her condition?”

Grious paused for a moment as the door reopened to a darkened chamber with several views of space. Baer was not even aware they had been moving. “Physically, we did everything we could. But I suspect the emotional wounds will take much longer to heal.”

Baer’s heart sank. “Do you think she’ll ever recover?”

“For now, let us focus on what we know for certain,” Grious answered, walking to the middle of the chamber. A holographic image of an Imperial Navy battle line formation filled the entire space of the room. Baer could see hundreds of the gold-tinted Amarrian warships facing down a much smaller group of Jovian ships. An Imperial Issue Apocalypse-class battleship was firing its tachyon beams towards them.

“This is how it began,” Grious said. The stationary image panned back so that Baer could see the beams striking a Jovian cruiser. “The name of the ship firing those tachyons is the Redemption, commanded by Commodore

Faus Akredon. These were the opening shots of the engagement, and the signal for our own forces to begin their attack.”

The battle imagery moved quickly, playing forward at five times normal speed. Baer flinched as an enormous, bright green beam sliced through the room, passing directly in front of where he was standing and slamming into an Apocalypse. His stomach turned to ice as the beam—at least 80 meters in diameter, in his estimation—passed cleanly through the massive battleship.

Grious paused the image and zoomed in on the doomed vessel. Green fire was erupting along the seams where the beam was exiting through the hull. “Observe, Lieutenant Colonel, that the use of this weapon was not required to establish battlefield superiority. We want you to have this imagery in case Emperor Heideran attempts to suppress the truth of what really happened at Vak’Atioth.”

The image panned back again and resumed play. Baer had to cover his eyes as explosion after explosion blossomed beneath the awesome destructive power of the Jovian superweapon.

“I understand,” Baer said. “What of Faus Akredon? Is he alright?”

“We do not know for certain, but we fear the worst for him,” Grious answered. “Observe the following sequence of events.”

Baer could see that the Amarrian formation was breaking apart. As battleship hulls engulfed in flames drifted away from the main line, many of the remaining ships were turning away from the Jovian attacks and attempting to escape.

“Keep your eyes on the Redemption,” Grious said as the image focused on the Imperial Issue Apocalypse. The gun turrets on the mighty battleship were firing at Jovian warships when it was suddenly hit by several white beams.

“*Oh, no...*” Baer breathed. “Did the Amarrians fire those shots?”

Grious remained silent as the image panned back. Baer watched in horror as several Amarrian warships turned against the Redemption, hitting the battleship from close range with multispectral laser fire.

“We know that just before this attack occurred, there was some kind of disagreement between Emperor Heideran and Grand Admiral Sarum,” Grious said. “It appears that conversation triggered a mutiny aboard the Redemption.”

The image froze and then zoomed all the way in to a close up view of the Redemption’s midline superstructure. The windowed frames of several decks were plainly visible. “Focus on the portals while I play the footage at normal speed,” Grious instructed.

Alternating flashes were illuminating the window frames on several decks. Baer cringed, recognizing immediately that he was watching a running gun battle on board the Redemption. Suddenly, an explosion from inside the ship blew out several of the portals. Dozens of bodies were tumbling through the gaps into space.

“*Dear God,*” Baer muttered, turning away from the image. “He told them, didn’t he...”

“That, or he was betrayed by the Order,” Grious answered. “We may never know.”

The image panned back again, and Baer saw a container eject from one of the battleship’s cargo bays.

“Right after the explosion, this container was jettisoned. We were then faced with a difficult choice: Faus instructed us not to destroy the Redemption until this explicit point in time, with the understanding that he would be aboard the container. But after observing the mutiny, we could no longer be certain of his safety. Then the Amarrians made the decision for us.”

The Redemption’s turrets abruptly turned towards the tiny container and opened fire, narrowly missing. Three Phantoms uncloaked, shielding the fragile structure from a torrent of multispectral pulse fire directed by nearby Amarrian cruisers.

A bright green beam impaled the Redemption, and the Phantoms and container both disappeared.

“Faus Akredon was not inside,” Grious said. “Only Viola, the last surviving Valklear from the Diemnon raid, and a Nefantar physician were onboard. It is highly probable that Faus was dead before the Redemption’s guns attempted to destroy them.”

Baer shuddered as the Redemption exploded in a blinding flash, its shattered remnants hurling towards the murky atmosphere of the planet below.

“Who was the Nefantar on board?”

“A medical practitioner named Lucian, one of Faus’s most trusted servants. We are honoring his wish to be transferred to the Kazna System. He asked that you be given information on his whereabouts, with the condition that it not be shared with anyone.”

“And the Valklear?”

“Currently in surgery to restore the use of his legs,” Grious answered. “We are in awe of his physical conditioning. Nothing else explains his survival, and I intend to monitor his recovery closely.”

Baer watched the final explosions of the epic battle, unable to deny feeling pity for the Amarrian crews as the brutal slaughter came to an end. The Jovian fleet flew back towards their deadly mothership, leaving behind a graveyard of charred wreckage ominously set against the backdrop of distant nebulae tinted the color of blood. As the burning remnants of Imperial dominance fell towards the roiling atmosphere of Vak’Atioth I, Baer realized that the memory of this fateful event—a miracle for some, a nightmare for others—would become a legend, never to be forgotten.

“We will keep you informed of the armament operation’s progress,” Grious said as the holographic imagery disappeared. “The first rebellions are intended to draw the bulk of the Paladin invasion force away from the Hror System and scatter their divisions throughout their Empire. By then, the Minmatars will be ready to take Eanna back from Amarr, and we will lend our assistance to the rebuilding process if the remaining Elders wish it.”

Baer looked at the mysterious Jovian and studied his alien-like features, wondering what secrets the man knew.

“Will the Jovians ever send official representation to any of the governments?”

“No,” Grious said, handing Baer a small disk. “The war against the Order demands all of our efforts. And to restrict their manipulation of power within the races, we are going to withdraw from the Geminata and Vale of the Silent regions. Then we will destroy the stargates bridging faction space with our own.”

Baer was stunned. “You’re going to withdraw *and* destroy the gates?”

“Amarr’s thirst for power is far too easy for the Order to exploit. This is the only way to remove that option from them, and to ensure they can no longer use *us* in their schemes against you.”

“But what is their motive?” Baer asked. “What do they want from us?”

Grious thought for a moment before answering. “Their interest lies in reshaping the course of mankind according to their own design.”

“Their *design*?” Baer said, angered. “Why not just conquer us outright by use of force?”

“Because they desire for you to embrace them on your own free will,” Grious replied.

“And they hope to accomplish this by forcing us into wars with each other?” Baer scoffed.

“If need be, yes,” Grious answered.

Baer was deeply troubled by the answers that Grious was giving him. “But waging war against something so powerful—”

“They are not without weaknesses,” Grious said. “But for now, all we can do is work to thwart their efforts at operating within the empires as best we can.”

Baer turned his weary gaze towards one of the portals, staring into the endless expanse of space surrounding the colossal Jovian mothership.

“Evil with no boundaries,” he murmured. “From within and without, everywhere and nowhere. How can we face this enemy without your help?”

“By finding the strength to face the evil within first,” Grious answered.

~